

The Comics Other:
Charting the Correspondence Between Comics and Difference

by

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A thesis
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
English

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2010

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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ABSTRACT

My research demonstrates how Othering practices affect the cultural status of the comics form. Comics frequently rely upon Othering practices such as stereotype when representing minority characters. This tendency contributes to the low cultural status of comics throughout the better part of the last century. In recent years, however, comics artists have cultivated revisioning techniques that challenge the use of Othering practices in comics. These efforts represent an important step in the push toward what is now known as the comics-as-literature movement, which Scott McCloud believes will allow the next generation of comics readers and artists to accept the idea that “comics can yield a body of work worthy of study and meaningfully represent the life, times and world-view of its author” (*Reinventing* 10).

Even as Othering practices in comics create negative perceptions, these same practices, ironically, provide comics artists with the necessary mechanisms to undermine or revise these negative perceptions and to move comics into the literary arena. The primary mechanism that I focus on in this project is the denotation/connotation relationship. In “Rhetoric of the Image,” Roland Barthes -- speaking about advertising images -- suggests that “the denoted image naturalizes the symbolic message, it innocents the semantic artifice of connotation” (“Rhetoric” 45). Building on Barthes’ work, I demonstrate how the comics image uses the denotative component in visual representations of minorities to naturalize symbolic messages (connotations) that project inferiority. This is how comics create and perpetuate Otherness. At the same time, by interrogating the denotation/connotation relationship, contemporary comics artists have

been able to undermine this naturalization process and expose the misconceptions that are inherent within representations of the Other in comics.

When comics commonly adopt Othering practices, they create what Charles Hatfield refers to as “encrusted connotations” (4), where the reader’s experience of a comics work is deeply affected by the social perceptions that surround comics in general. When the treatment of minorities in comics is based upon outdated stereotypes, for example, readers may assume that comics are a popular art form without literary aspirations, and the readers then treat these comics accordingly. Conversely, when comics artists challenge the encrusted connotations of the form, they undermine these connotations and open the comics readers’ eyes to the possibility that comics can indeed yield a body of work worthy of study. As I demonstrate, this revisioning work of contemporary comics artists is an important component of the comics-as-literature movement.

In order to prove this, my work isolates three distinct forms of Othering that comics speak to in a prominent way. By studying the manner in which comics represent women, racial minorities and geeks, I develop the pattern by which Othering practices contribute to the cultural status of comics art. Each chapter isolates touchstone texts with regard to minority representation (Wonder Woman as gender representation, Happy Hooligan and Luke Cage as racial representation, Clark Kent as geek representation, etc.) in order to establish the formation of encrusted connotations that can then be seen across the medium as a whole. I then show how some of the most prominent and critically acclaimed comics literature of the past twenty years (*Maus*, *Jimmy Corrigan*, *Persepolis*,

etc.) enters into a self-reflexive dialogue with these encrusted connotations in order to move beyond them and to help transition the form toward a higher cultural status.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project could never have been completed without the patience and support of my family, friends and colleagues. I must gratefully acknowledge Randy Harris, Victoria Lamont, Ken Hirschkop, Kevin McGuirk, Katherine Acheson, Ted McGee, Gary Draper and Norman Klassen for their assistance and guidance throughout my PhD program. Finally, I need to thank my supervisors Heather Smyth and Andrew McMurry, both of whom went well beyond the call of duty in their dedication to this project. “Thank you” hardly suffices.

To all of my colleagues in the graduate studies program, thank you for your selflessness. My efforts on this project could not have been sustained without the collaborative and collegial atmosphere that you created. Special thanks to Veronica Austen, Julia Munro, Kevin Magri, Diana Lobb and Cara Dehaan for their assistance and their friendship. Thanks also to Josh Chong, Kevin Ziegler and Scott Stevens of the Waterloo Comics Reading Group for providing a much needed outlet for my excess thoughts and ramblings.

To my parents and my grandmother, to whom my academic pursuits did not always make sense, thank you for your unwavering, blind faith in me.

To my wife, Andrea, the biggest sacrifices were always yours. They did not go unnoticed.

DEDICATION

For Andrea.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	ix
INTRODUCTION	
The Impositions of Othering.....	1
CHAPTER ONE	
The Sexual Imperative: Representations of Gender in the Comics Form.....	25
CHAPTER TWO	
Visual Minorities: Representations of Race in the Comics Form.....	111
CHAPTER THREE	
A Squinkie Disguise: Representations of the Geek in the Comics Form.....	173
CONCLUSION	
The Continuity of North American Comics.....	241
REFERENCES.....	246

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

All images are used here in full accordance with the *Canadian Copyright Act* and the *Fair Dealing for the Purposes of Criticism* exception outlined in section 29.1

(note: Figures 1-3 in Chapter 2 are public domain images).

Introduction

Figure I.1 – Kane, Bob. *Batman* No. 1. New York: DC, 1940.

Chapter 1

Figure 1.1 – Marston (n.p.)

Figure 1.2 – Marston (n.p.)

Figure 1.3 – Azzarello, Brian and Jim Lee. *Superman* No. 211. New York: DC, 2005. (front cover).

Figure 1.4 – Englehart, Steve and Marshall Rogers. *Detective Comics* No. 475. New York: DC, 1978. 7.

Figure 1.5 – Gould, *Dick Tracy* No. 26. New York: Harvey Comics, 1950. 14;
Gould, *Dick Tracy* No. 26. New York: Harvey Comics, 1950. 12.

Figure 1.6 – Miller, Frank. *The Dark Knight Returns*. New York: DC, 2002. 136.

Figure 1.7 – Claremont, Chris and John Bolton. *Classic X-men* No. 7. New York: Marvel, 1987. 18.

Figure 1.8 – Young, Chic. *Blondie*. New York: King Features Syndicate. 1931.

Figure 1.9 – Sabin, *Comix*. 45.

Figure 1.10 – Crumb, Robert. *R. Crumb Sketchbook*, vol. 10. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2005. 36.

Figure 1.11 – Kieth, No. 2 1

Figure 1.12 – Kieth, No. 2 13

Figure 1.13 – Kieth, No. 2 14

Figure 1.14 – Kieth, No. 3 19

Figure 1.15 – Tomine 118

Figure 1.16 – Tomine 131

Figure 1.17 – Tomine 132

Figure 1.18 – Gloeckner 70

Figure 1.19 – Gloeckner 73

Chapter 2

Figure 2.1 – Little Nemo the imp 2.jpg. [Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Little_Nemo_the_Imp_2.jpg). 2006. 28 Jun. 2009
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Little_Nemo_the_Imp_2.jpg>.

Figure 2.2 – Happy Hooligan.jpg. [Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:HappyHooligan.jpg). 2007. 28 Jun. 2009
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:HappyHooligan.jpg>.

Figure 2.3 – Nemo1.jpg. [Winsor McCay: The Real McCay](http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/054_mccay/054_mccay.htm). 28 Jun. 2009
<http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/054_mccay/054_mccay.htm>

Figure 2.4 – Goodwin, Archie and John Romita Sr. *Luke Cage* No. 1. New York:

Marvel, 1972. (front cover).

Figure 2.5 – Lee, Stan and Jack Kirby. *Fantastic Four* No. 52. New York: Marvel, 1966. 9.

Figure 2.6 – Lee, Stan and Jack Kirby. *Fantastic Four* No. 52. New York: Marvel, 1966. 4.

Figure 2.7 – Wein, Len and Dave Cockrum. *Giant Sized X-men #1*. New York: Marvel, 1975. 7-9.

Figure 2.8 – Claremont, Chris and Bill Sienkiewicz. *Uncanny X-men Annual* No. 6. New York: Marvel, 1982. (front cover); Claremont, Chris and Dave Cockrum. *Uncanny X-men* No. 147. New York: Marvel, 1981. (front cover).

Figure 2.9 – Katchor 90

Figure 2.10 – Sacco 157

Figure 2.11 – Spiegelman, *Maus* I.51

Figure 2.12 – Spiegelman, *Maus* I.155

Figure 2.13 – Spiegelman, *Maus* II.41

Chapter 3

Figure 3.1 – Siegel, Jerry and Joe Schuster. “Superman.” *Action Comics #1*. Ed. Vincent A. Sullivan. New York: DC, 1938. 6.

Figure 3.2 – Miller, Frank. *Daredevil #181*. New York: Marvel, 1981. 24.

Figure 3.3 – Siegel, Jerry and Joe Schuster. “Superman.” *Action Comics #1*. Ed. Vincent A. Sullivan. New York: DC, 1938. 12; Azzarello, Brian and Jim Lee. *Superman* No. 211. New York: DC, 2005. 24.

Figure 3.4 – Siegel & Schuster 7-10

Figure 3.5 – Lee, Stan and Jack Kirby. *Fantastic Four* No. 51. New York: Marvel, 1966. 7.

Figure 3.6 – Ware, *Jimmy* (n.p.)

Figure 3.7 – Ware, *Jimmy* (n.p.)

Figure 3.8 – Ware, *Jimmy* (n.p.)

Figure 3.9 - Ware, *Jimmy* (n.p.)

Figure 3.10 - Ware, *Jimmy* (n.p.)

Figure 3.11 - Ware, *Jimmy* (n.p.)

Figure 3.12 - Ware, *Jimmy* (n.p.)

Figure 3.13 - Ware, *Jimmy* (n.p.)

Introduction:

The Impositions of Othering

In fact, the cultural connotations of format, if accepted uncritically, can obscure or mystify the development of the art form itself.

-Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics* (5)

Comics often use stereotype to represent minorities. This tradition has helped in establishing and validating the low cultural status that comics have been treated with for the majority of the 20th century. In recent years, however, a number of comics artists have effectively challenged these traditions in order to advance what is now known as the comics-as-literature movement, which Scott McCloud believes will allow the next generation of comics readers and artists to accept the idea that “comics can yield a body of work worthy of study and meaningfully represent the life, times and world-view of its author” (*Reinventing* 10). Even as Othering practices, such as stereotyping, in comics create negative perceptions, these same practices, ironically, provide comics artists with the necessary mechanisms to undermine or revise these negative perceptions and to help move comics into the literary arena.

Comics scholars have devoted a great deal of time and attention to the pursuit of an explanation for the low cultural status of comics art. In a 2000 article entitled “Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization,” Thierry Groensteen addresses some of the historical factors that have defined the low cultural status of comics art. Groensteen argues that comics were condemned for their popularity, which made them appear to be a form of vulgar art (5); for their capacity to supplant text-based literature,

which crystallized Western confrontations between the word and the world of images (5); for their use of irreality or fantasy, which became associated with escapism (7); and for people's inability to perceive the rich diversity of the comics field, which created "an extraordinarily narrow image" of comics art (3). There are other theories as well. Roger Sabin argues that format is the culprit since the context created by disposable pulp magazines created the perception that the artwork itself was disposable (*Comix* 1). W. J. T. Mitchell suggests that the problem comes from a "kind of resistance to visuality in literary discourse" (119). Douglas Wolk blames economic demands placed on artists (11), Carter Scholz blames academic and critical neglect (2), Chris Ware blames expectations of comedy ("Introduction" 11) and Charles Hatfield blames "anodyne conventions" (Intro. ix). In short there are many factors at play, each contributing to the low cultural status of comics art. My work seeks to add to this critical mass by elucidating the manner in which Othering practices contribute to the cultural status of comics art.

The *OED* defines "Othering" as "the perception or representation of a person or group of people as fundamentally alien from another, frequently more powerful, group." An Othering process, then, is one that creates this perception of alterity. The nature of Othering processes is explored in a wide variety of fields such as phenomenological philosophy, cultural studies, women's studies and anthropology. Jacques Derrida, for example, spent much of his career studying the Othering processes of language. He came to believe that difference precedes presence, that our experience of ourselves and our world is based upon Otherness in general (Kearney 104). My use of "Othering," however, is most closely aligned with that of Edward Said, as employed in *Orientalism*. Said sees

Othering as a process by which literature (or other cultural forms) can create imaginary perceptions of Selfness and Otherness that emphasize the superiority of the Self and the inferiority of the Other, usually for the sake of solidifying and extending some form of hegemony. Othering creates a distinction between “us” and “them” that expresses and validates attitudes of disregard or even disdain which the Self holds toward the Other. For example, Said identifies the Western view of the East as a sort of consensual hallucination that is not based upon actual experience but upon mass-disseminated representations, primarily in literature. According to Said, this imaginary treatment of the East is not accidental.

My whole point about this system is not that it is a misrepresentation of some Oriental essence — in which I do not for a moment believe — but that it operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting.

(273)

Said sees Othering as inherently political, a means of validating the position of power that the dominant group enjoys while simultaneously reifying the inferiority of the Other (204).

Where, though, does Othering come from? Does Othering reflect a conscious decision by an author, a cultural imperative, or some combination of the two? While theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault approach Othering from a more cultural perspective, Said’s work is distinct in that he allows for greater agency on the part of the author. Said recognizes the influence of cultural imperative in creating Othering practices but he still maintains that Othering is something which can be

unsettled when approached by a talented artist operating against the grain of his or her culture. Said's emphasis on authorial agency opens the door to the possibility that an author can choose either to create representations that Other a minority group or to create representations that resist cultural tendencies toward Othering. In keeping with Said's theories, I perceive Othering in comics as the result of both deliberate authorial intent and cultural imperatives. Said allows for the possibility that an author, working against the grain of their culture, can affect or even alter the cultural imperative in a way that Derrida or Foucault thought impossible. With this in mind, I will demonstrate how comics have accomplished such an adjustment.

In this project, I will explore the development of three distinct types of Othering practices within the comics form and demonstrate how these Othering practices promulgate stereotypes and thus create perceptions that can surround and limit the cultural spheres within which comics art is accepted. I will then demonstrate the processes by which comics artists, in each of the three cases, have called these Othering practices into question, thereby undermining the limitations imposed upon the form. As I will demonstrate, these revisioning processes are a major component of the comics-as-literature movement.

Accounts of the development of the comics-as-literature movement have been charted in a number of works of comics scholarship. Historical accounts (some brief, some extensive) are rendered by Scott McCloud in *Reinventing Comics* (26-55), Rocco Versaci in *This Book Contains Graphic Language* (10-12) and by Stephen Weiner in *The Rise of the Graphic Novel*, to name a few. Each author describes a slow process of progressive shifts in social attitudes toward comics. These shifts were largely the result of

high quality comics works that defied the expectations of the form. Some common examples include George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* (1913-1944), Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* (1950-2000) and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* (1986). Perhaps the biggest impact came from the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986). According to Scott McCloud, *Maus* "raised the bar for all subsequent efforts, both in its seriousness of purpose and the uncompromising dedication of its execution" (McCloud, *Reinventing* 29). The result of this comics-as-literature movement is a conclusion that Douglas Wolk reaches in *Reading Comics*: "The Golden Age Is Right Now" (3). Wolk elaborates:

It's no longer news that comics have grown up. A form that was once solely the province of children's entertainment now fills bookshelves with mature, brilliant works by artists like Chris Ware, the Hernandez brothers, Dan Clowes, and Charles Burns, discussed in the sort of tone that was once reserved for exciting young prose novelists. Cartoonists' work is hung on the walls of galleries and museums; there's an annual anthology of *Best American Comics*. A character in a 2004 *New Yorker* cartoon spoke for a lot of people: "Now I have to pretend to like graphic novels, too?" (Wolk 3)

Rocco Versaci takes a more analytical approach. He identifies three key forms of evidence that comics and literature can be mentioned in the same sentence: 1) that comics are capable of challenging our way of thinking, 2) that comics are emphasizing their own unreality and thus acting self-consciously and 3) that the graphic language of comics constitutes a unique poetics (12-14). Appropriately, my readings will demonstrate how

each of these elements of comics literariness function within the contemporary graphic novel.

In *Alternative Comics*, Charles Hatfield suggests that the comics-as-literature movement depends upon comics moving beyond the preconceived notions that readers have of comics. Hatfield argues that the comics reading experience is complicated by the reputation that comics have earned for themselves. “As social objects they come to us encrusted with connotations--rather *we* come to them with associations and habits inculcated through repeated use” (4). In this sense, the reader’s experience of a comics work is affected by the social perceptions that surround comics in general. In keeping with the work of Charles Hatfield, I will refer to the associations and habits that I speak of as the “encrusted connotations” of the comics form. Hatfield notes that comics, as social objects,¹ are defined more by how they are commonly used than by what they are capable of doing (4), and he perceives a body of preconceptions that play a defining role in the reader’s interpretation of a comics narrative. As Hatfield demonstrates, these preconceptions are so inculcated that comics creators themselves have, for decades, drawn on them to create such effects as self-reflexivity and irony (7-8). In order to accomplish these effects, comics creators must demonstrate an understanding of both comics history and, in particular, the cultural perceptions of the comics form. Hatfield further suggests that “To understand the recent move toward critical acceptance of comics as a literary form, we need to re-examine the development of this much-despised ‘comic book’ as social object and marked commodity” (6).

¹ His use of the term “social object” is informed by the work of Lucien Goldmann, a Marxist social theorist. Both Hatfield and Goldmann see social objects as cultural nodes that are greatly affected, even defined, by their popular usage within a social context.

My work builds upon that of Hatfield by exploring the manner in which some comics have taken advantage of this capacity for self-reflexivity and irony by engaging in a dialogue with comics' past in order to reform the broad connotations of the form as a whole and thus alter its perceived limitations. Where Hatfield sees irony and self-reflexivity as the bases for the alternative comics movement, I see these same tools as part of a more extensive revisioning project across multiple comics genres. I argue that comics in general have had to directly address their relationship to Othering as part of a larger push to escape from the connotations of the past and to achieve the cultural legitimacy at the heart of the comics-as-literature movement. In this sense, my project is, like others, historical in nature, but it is also semiotic. In *Multimodal Discourse*, Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen suggest that we cannot "hope to understand fully the shaping and the availability of modes and discourses without a clear sense of the embeddedness of semiosis in the social, and of its historical shaping" (8). Similarly, I perceive an important link between semiosis and social and cultural history in comics. In charting the history of comics Othering and the revision of comics connotations with regard to Othering, I cannot help but chart the unique process by which comics Othering occurs.

In order to demonstrate the process by which comics Other, I turn to a foundational text on the subject of visual and multimodal² semiotics: Roland Barthes' landmark 1964 essay "Rhetoric of the Image." Here Barthes tackles the fundamental questions surrounding the image's capacity to signify particular messages to an audience.

² This term refers to any form that incorporates more than one mode of representation. Comics are considered multimodal due to the shared partnership of text and image in constructing meaning. An individual image or an all-text book, in contrast, would be considered monomodal.

Barthes demonstrates the manner in which the image can be impregnated with meaning and the unique qualities that the image possesses in its capacity to signify.

Barthes chooses to analyze advertising images because of a certain purity of intention within these images, but his conclusions are intended for the broader field of visual and multimodal semiotics in general, and these conclusions hold particular relevance to the comics form.

Because in advertising the signification of the image is undoubtedly intentional...If the image contains signs, we can be sure that in advertising these signs are full, formed with a view to the optimum reading: the advertising image is frank, or at least emphatic. (33)

Because comics are a form of narrative art, designed for the purpose of telling a particular story, the comics image is likewise composed with a view to the optimum reading, i.e. the reading that most closely resembles the author's intended message.³ Furthermore, many of the multimodal relationships between text and image that Barthes describes within advertisements can be located in comics as well.

Barthes separates the meanings and messages of his advertisement into two types of sign: the denoted (literal or common sense) sign and the connoted (symbolic or indirect) sign. These signs co-exist within the same image, but function as opposite extremes across a spectrum of meaning. The denoted sign is what the image represents. A picture of a tomato, for example, denotes a tomato. Barthes sees denotation as the "first degree of intelligibility (below which the reader would perceive only lines, forms, and colours)" ("Rhetoric" 42). When these lines, forms and colours assemble in such way that

³ Barthes theory of anchorage ("Rhetoric" 38-40), for example, outlines the manner in which the "text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others; by means of an often subtle dispatching, it remote-controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance" (40).

they signify “tomato,” a denotative sign is created.⁴ Connoted signs are the symbolic messages brought to the denoted sign through the very process of signification. In *Elements of Semiology*, Barthes defines connotation as a second-order of signification.⁵ Connotation uses denotation as its signifier and attaches additional signifieds (89-94). Barthes offers the example of the tone of a novel, for instance, which is expressed through multiple words (each with a denotative value) but is not directly signified by any specific word. This definition of connotation from *Elements of Semiology* is consistent with Barthes’ use of connotation in “Rhetoric of the Image,” where Barthes points, for example, to the red, yellow and green colour scheme of a pasta advertisement as a connotation of “Italianicity” (34). While some tomatoes are more literal or more symbolic than other tomatoes, all representations of a tomato contain both denotative and connotative signs. By isolating the denotative or connotative component, however, Barthes is able to make important distinctions between the literal interpretation and the symbolic interpretation of an image.

The denotation/connotation relationship is the subject of much debate amongst semioticians. Valentin Voloshinov, for example, suggests that the distinction between denotation and connotation is essentially an illusion since no sign, regardless of how seemingly direct, could exist outside of the realm of ideology (105). In spite of such voices within the field, semiotic analysis has, for years, found value in making the

⁴ Barthes further suggests that “the denoted image can appear as a kind of Edenic state of the image; cleared utopianically of its connotations, the image would become radically objective, or, in the last analysis, innocent” (“Rhetoric” 42). Of course, the idea of an image that is without connotation is impossible, and Barthes himself retained an interest in the distinction between denotation and connotation throughout his career.

⁵ It must be noted that Barthes’ definitions were based primarily on Louis Hjelmslev’s work in the field of linguistics.

distinction between denoted and connoted meanings.⁶ Barthes work in “Rhetoric of the Image” is a good example of one such analysis. My work too will rely upon this distinction between denotation and connotation. By employing Barthes’ somewhat simplified (compared to other streams of semiotic thought) perception of the relationship between denotation and connotation, and his distinction between literal signs and symbolic signs, I can easily apply my approach to numerous comics readings.



Figure I.1: Batman fights the Joker.

Bringing these ideas into comics reading, let us take the example of an early image of the popular comic book hero Batman, seen here fighting his arch-enemy, the Joker (figure I.1). The denoted image is a man in a bat costume, punching another person. The reader is meant to assemble the forms, lines and colours of the image into “man in

⁶ It should also be noted that there is an equal amount of debate surrounding what the distinction between denotation and connotation is. For my part, I stick with Barthes’ structuralist approach in “Rhetoric of the Image” which treats denotation as the literal meaning and connotation as the symbolic meaning.

bat costume, punching person” at the very least. This interpretation is not, however, the end limit of meaning intended by the author. Batman’s inhumanly square jaw connotes hypermasculinity. The absence of pupils in his eyes connotes the supernatural and the transformative power of the costume. The stark red background connotes anger, violence and, through the absence of background detail, the epic, almost supernatural atmosphere of the confrontation between Batman and the Joker. This epic quality is further enhanced by the framing of the dialogue box, which resembles an unrolled scroll or roll of parchment. All these connotations contribute to the meaning of the scene that unfolds, and here we see a great deal of the communicative work of the image left to the connotations. Thus, much of the meaning to be taken from this image is found on the connoted side of the spectrum. John Fiske suggests that “denotation is what is photographed, connotation is how it is photographed” (91). In this example, a man in a bat costume, punching person is what is drawn. How he’s drawn, however, is at least equally important to the signifying processes of the image.

This idea of placing a signifying burden upon connotations is consistent with Bohun Lynch’s theory of caricature (caricature being the most prominent form of comics illustration). Lynch suggests that the skilled cartoonist can move well beyond simple denotation and that the ability to represent ideas without utilizing direct signifiers of those ideas is the distinction between a good and bad caricaturist.

A greedy man, for example, is plainly and easily indicated if he is represented as sitting at a table “groaning” under masses of fine food.

Such a drawing may be very funny, but the good caricaturist can suggest lips that are smacked at dishes left out of the drawing. (2)

We can locate this level of connotation in Bob Kane's drawing from above. The power, heroism and epic nature of Batman is greatly enhanced by the connoted messages of the image.

Comics are not always single images, however. By McCloud's definition-- "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (*Understanding* 9) -- there must be more than one image to even call something a comic. If the single comics image is the micro-semiotic structure of comics, a sequence of images is the macro-semiotic. Thierry Groensteen, speaking primarily about bande dessinée (Franco-Belgian comics), suggests that

Comics exist only as a satisfying narrative form under the condition that, despite the discontinuous enunciation and the intermittent monstration, the resultant story forms an uninterrupted and intelligible totality...The first statement, issued from a dialogue between two or three juxtaposed panels--and naturally, forged under the control of the preceding ones--may be nothing but a provisory one that must undergo, under a stroke of unforeseeable retroactive determination, a correction in moving toward the adoption of a new, more inclusive statement. (*System* 114)

In other words, each individual comics section (or panel, or image) is continually shaped and reshaped through the reader's progressive experience of the "intelligible totality" of the greater comics whole. Groensteen outlines the manner in which the macro-semiotic structures of comics can play an equally important role as the accompanying text in steering the reader toward the optimum reading. The comics image exists not in isolation

but within a continuity of multiple images, a continuity that creates juxtapositions and correspondences that extend throughout the entire comics narrative.

McCloud takes a similar approach to macro-semiotic structures, describing how the comics image exists both independently and within the “context” (*Making* 100) of the rest of the story. The reader’s ability to retroactively determine (in Groensteen’s terms) the meaning of an image is accounted for within McCloud’s concept of closure, which he defines as “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (*Understanding* 63). In comics, closure functions like this:

Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar. And since our definition of comics hinges on the arrangement of elements then, in a very real sense, comics is closure. (*Understanding* 67)

Returning to the image from figure I.1, the question then becomes: what image came before or after that particular drawing of Batman fighting the Joker and how does the subsequent juxtaposition of images affect the meaning of that single image? For example, the red background becomes symbolic because we know from the previous panel that Batman is actually standing in front of a grey building. Furthermore, Batman has the Joker at his mercy in the prior panel (dangling from a ledge). Thus, the Joker is already defeated and helpless at this point. When Batman strikes the Joker, Batman is administering corporal punishment on the Joker for his crimes, not defeating him in hand to hand combat (as we might think if we took the image out of context). Finally, lest we

see the punch in figure I.1 as immoral, earlier sections of the story show the Joker sadistically killing people. A pummeling at the hands of Batman, therefore, is not entirely unjust.

It is important to note that closure does not just unify the comics text. Closure also engages the comics reader in a collaborative experience. McCloud describes comics as “a medium of communication and expression which uses closure like no other, a medium where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and motion” (*Understanding* 65). Throughout my readings of comics texts, I will demonstrate the manner in which the collaborative element of the comics reading experience is used to enhance the Othering of comics and to assist in the revisioning tactics of particular comics authors.

With a comics vocabulary and grammar in place we can now turn to the relationship between the denoted and connoted components of the image (both within context and without). Barthes concludes that “the denoted image naturalizes the symbolic message, it innocents the semantic artifice of connotation” (“Rhetoric” 45). The modality⁷ of the denoted image lends credibility to the connotations as well. Barthes suggests that “the viewer of the image receives at one and the same time the perceptual message and the cultural message, and it will be seen later that this confusion in reading corresponds to the function of the mass image (our concern here)” (“Rhetoric 36-37). This is how the denotation naturalizes the connotation in what can be crudely described as a piggyback effect. The reader interprets the literal message of the image and through this interpretation the reader authenticates the representation. If he or she sees a tomato,

⁷ This is a term used by semioticians to refer to “the status, authority and reliability of a message, to its ontological status, or to its value as truth or fact” (Hodge and Kress 124).

then the representation must be a reasonably good representation of a tomato. The connoted messages of the image are then internalized as valid components of the reader's concept of "tomato."

It is this naturalizing relationship between denotation and connotation that makes the image-driven comics form so effective at Othering. I would suggest that the comics image commonly uses the implied authority of the denoted sign to naturalize connotations of difference. As I will demonstrate through a series of readings of key touchstone comics texts, comics of the past (and even of the present) make active use of this Othering process in order to perpetuate and disseminate a series of messages that create the sort of encrusted connotations that Hatfield speaks of.

The unique qualities of the comics form take this naturalizing process to a greater extreme than that envisioned by Barthes in his analysis of advertisements. Unlike most advertisements--and clearly unlike the now iconic "Panzani" advertisement that Barthes uses as his example--the construction of the comics image employs stylistic drawings (caricatures) that offer the artist a greater capacity to create the symbolic messages which Barthes speaks of, as a result of the malleable quality of the comics image. Simply put, there is more room for authorial manipulation with regard to how a comics image is drawn (to return to Fiske's terminology) than there is with regard to how a photograph is taken. Consider the Batman image from figure I.1 once again. As I mentioned, Batman's hypermasculine jaw-line is somewhat inhuman. The artist has moved beyond representing what a human jaw looks like. Similarly, the absence of pupils in the eyes (connoting the supernatural), and the red and detail-less background (connoting blood,

violence and epic conflict) all depart from strictly literal representation for the sake of creating symbolic meaning.

Like Barthes in his later work, McCloud rejects the possibility that a purely denotative sign could ever exist “for even the most straightforward little cartoon character has a “meaningless” line or two” (51). The “meaningless” details add new messages to the image, messages that are created (by intention or even accidentally) by the author. This abstraction allows the author to create and project symbolic messages in a way that photography cannot.

It must here be noted, however, that Barthes identifies a key difference between the modality of the drawing and the modality of the photograph. He argues that “the denotation of the drawing is less pure than that of the photograph, for there is no drawing without style” (“Rhetoric” 43).⁸ This is not, however, to suggest that comics images are without denotative authority. On the contrary, Barthes himself acknowledges that in order for any visual sign to be interpreted, “denotation has to remain on some level” (“Rhetoric” 50). If the sign makes sense, if the reader can perceive more than just forms, lines and colours, then denotation has occurred. The comics image, traditionally a drawing, thus retains a level of denotational authority and the resultant power to naturalize connoted messages. At the same time, because the comics image is so malleable, it provides the artist with a high level of agency, which in turn allows the artist to steer the reader toward the “optimum reading” that Barthes describes. This means that the comics sign can produce messages that convey whatever the author wishes to convey while still retaining a level of modality that has the capacity to naturalize these messages.

⁸ Similarly, McCloud argues that “the most bland ‘expressionless’ lines on earth can’t help but characterize their subject in some way” (*Understanding* 125).

For example, a hyper-sexualized drawing of a woman still denotes “woman” but can be easily sexualized through extreme distortions of the human anatomy and proportions.

The multimodality of comics further assists in the push toward an optimum reading. Barthes outlines a number of ways in which the textual components of a multimodal form, such as an advertisement, can guide the reader toward the optimum reading and keep the image from “proliferating, whether towards excessively individual regions (it limits, that is to say, the projective power of the image) or towards dysphoric values (“Rhetoric”³⁹). The accompanying text within a comics image can be seen to have the same effect: steering the reader toward the author’s intended message. Comics utilize this same image/text relationship for such purposes, as most notably defined by McCloud, who identifies seven distinct forms of image/text interaction, each with its own predictable effect upon the reader’s interpretation (*Understanding*, 152-155). In comics, connotation and denotation exist on three levels: through the image, through the text and through the interplay between image and text.

Returning to the image itself, McCloud defines the cartoon image as “amplification through simplification” (*Understanding*, 30). He explains this concept as follows: “When we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning,’ an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (*Understanding*, 30). Simplification, however, can cause problems when employed as a means of representation. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes argues that

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and

eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. If I *state the fact* of French imperialism without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and *goes without saying*: I am reassured. In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (143)

Comics art itself can be seen to embody this simplifying project when it comes to the threat of Otherness. If a comic states (or rather shows) the *fact* that women are sexual objects, this fact is naturalized and the male reader is reassured.

In the same text, Barthes identifies caricature as a particularly effective vehicle for the transmission of myth, writing that “in general myth prefers to work with poor, incomplete images, where the meaning is already relieved of its fat, and ready for a signification, such as caricatures, pastiches, symbols, etc” (127). Caricature, the dominant visual mode of comics, is therefore a “preferred” medium for creating myth. By employing the stylized comics image, a comics artist can take a more active approach to creating visceral effects within the perceiver. This image is more malleable, controllable, and thus potentially more manipulative (though less authoritative) than the simple photograph. McCloud argues that “the ability of cartoons to focus our attention on an idea is, I think, an important part of their special power, both in comics and drawing

generally (*Understanding* 31). A comics artist can politicize the comics image by creating a series of connotations that reflect the ideology that the artist wishes to project.

The result of malleable art working at the level of myth is a greater ease through which the creator can establish this blissful clarity Barthes describes with regard to Othering. Comics artists are then able to organize a world without contradiction by creating representations of race, of sex and of geeks that serve the immediate interests of the artists. This predisposition toward Othering is internalized by the individual reader, through practice, and then becomes an encrusted connotation of the comics form.

In order to move beyond such encrusted connotations, certain comics creators have undertaken a process of reassessment and revision, most notably within the contemporary graphic novel, which consistently demonstrates an interest in the Othering practices of the comics form. By exploring such practices, these revisioning comics artists expose the problems that arise within representations of the Other in comics. As a result, revisioning comics also expose the inherent misconceptions at the heart of these Othering processes. Through this revisioning work, comics have been able to move beyond certain encrusted connotations of comics past, a process which has contributed to the increased cultural status that comics now enjoy.

My project takes an issue by issue approach. Chapters are centred upon the manner in which comics represent women, the manner in which comics represent racial minorities and the manner in which comics represent geeks. Thus, each chapter deals with one particular manner in which comics speak to the idea of Otherness. These particular issues have not been chosen at random. Each represents a key component of

the social stigma against comics. Comics have, for years, had to fight against their own reputation for containing sexist imagery, racist stereotypes and geek fantasies.

Although the methodology behind all forms of comics Othering can be generalized (and indeed some attention will be paid to overall Othering techniques), I wish to look at the subtleties and nuances behind different forms of comics Othering and each respective form of revision. With this in mind, each chapter is centred on touchstone theories on the subject of Othering with regard to each respective minority group. As I will demonstrate, the revisioning techniques of contemporary comics artists are driven and informed by these same subtleties and nuances, and just as no two forms of Othering are wholly the same, so too are no two methods of revision wholly the same. Therefore, in order to fully understand how comics artists have been able to revise these connotations, it is necessary to understand the unique qualities of each form of Othering.

My first chapter tackles the issue of sexism by exploring how the cultivation of a particular archetype of femininity in comics has contributed to the assertion of male superiority in Western culture. This archetype projects connotations that sexualize women in general and promote sexist values with regard to female sexuality. These values are then naturalized (and internalized) by the reader's necessary interpretation of the denoted sign of "woman." The end result is a representation that privileges what Lauren Mulvey refers to as "visual pleasure," a mode of representation which fetishizes and dehumanizes women.

I begin with a close reading of Wonder Woman and the denotation/connotation relationship at play within *Wonder Woman* narratives. In these texts, the female superheroine is imbued with a number of connotations that create a stereotypically sexist

representation of women in general. I will then demonstrate how the archetype that Wonder Woman establishes has been destabilized through the intervention of revisioning artists who have sought to complicate the image of femininity in comics by calling attention to the misconceptions that arise within this archetype. From the superhero genre, I look at Sam Kieth's *The Maxx*, a text which continually explores the role of visual pleasure in comics by portraying a highly sexualized woman (in a visual sense) alongside textual interrogations of her sexuality within a narrative that unfolds around a story of post-rape trauma. From the alternative comics genre, I explore Adrian Tomine's "Bomb Scare," a text which implicates the reader in both visual pleasure (through representations of exhibitionism) and in the human consequences of visual pleasure. Finally, I look at representations of sex in the work of Phoebe Gloeckner, a female author who seeks to provide an alternative sexual context for the sake of de-romanticizing comics sex and thus reinterpreting the sexist encrusted connotations of the comics form.

My second chapter turns to the issue of racism in comics. Where the sexist Othering practices of comics depend upon the construction of a singular archetype of femininity, the racist Othering practices of comics produce or perpetuate a wide array of stereotypes of various racial and ethnic groups. Even across this wide array, however, the basic strategy is to create denotative symbols of race and apply a series of connotations that signify inferiority. These connotations are then naturalized by the implied authenticity of the denotative sign. The ultimate goal of this form of Othering is also the same: to reify the supremacy of a dominant social majority.

I first demonstrate the extent to which early American newspaper strips established racism as a common comics practice and the key role that comics played in

creating images of racial difference within a context of white supremacy. I then explore the successes and failures of comics' early experiments with racial progressivism with a close reading of Luke Cage, the Black Panther and *X-men* comics of the mid 1970s (and the character of Storm in particular). Through these readings, I demonstrate the manner in which these early experiments with racial progressivism tended to fall back upon stereotype in order to characterize individuals. From there, I conduct a brief survey of the contemporary graphic novel field as a whole in order to demonstrate the racial consciousness of several comics artists and the role that revision of Othering traditions has played in attempts to reform comics' racist tendencies. I then show how certain comics works actively question the stereotyping processes of the past and produce a new model of racial complexity within the comics form. Finally, I conclude with a look at the revisioning work of the graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. I show how Spiegelman uses a hyperbolic system of representation to create a sense of dissonance between visual style and subject matter for the sake of calling attention to the arbitrary quality of particular racial signifiers.

My third chapter analyzes the representation of the geek in comics. Here I take a slight departure from the structure of my first two chapters. The encrusted connotations that I address in this chapter are not that comics have been anti-geek, but that the highly symbolic early representations of geeks in comics have created the encrusted connotation that comics cater to geek fantasy. In spite of the obvious differences between this argument and those of my first two chapters, the mechanisms at play here are largely the same. It is, again, the treatment of the Other that impacts the cultural status of comics art. Beginning with Superman, the first superhero, comics sought to valorize the geek through

a series of messages that were symbolic, simplistic and often contradictory.⁹ This revisioning extends across seventy years of comics work and can be located even as comics were still Othering the geek through the divide between geek and superhero.

By speaking to the geek demographic on the symbolic level alone, these comics establish the encrusted connotation that the form is comprised of an endless series of adolescent power fantasies, geared specifically toward a geek demographic. This early form of revision can thus be seen as a hindrance to the literary aspirations of the comics form rather than a push toward the comics-as-literature movement. In this sense, geek-Othering plays a slightly different role than racist or sexist Othering within the development of the comics form, but nonetheless demonstrates, once again, the correspondence between the revision of comics Othering past and the push toward the comics-as-literature movement.

As comics develop, however, the presence of purely symbolic geek fantasy slowly subsides and the heroes become more and more openly geeky. The result in the contemporary graphic novel is a hero who is no longer just symbolically geeky, but one who could be said to denote “geek.” Through such heroes, the mature, complex humanity of the geek condition is represented directly and such comics thus move beyond the encrusted connotations of geek fantasy in comics.

I begin with an in-depth analysis of *Superman* comics and the layers of geek connotations (both positive and negative) that Siegel and Schuster embed within their Herculean muscle-man. From there I move into the Marvel Age of comics in order to demonstrate the manner in which Stan Lee and the Marvel Bullpen created a market revolution in the 1960s by portraying superheroes with a number of openly geeky

⁹ As I will demonstrate, this treatment reflects the social tensions surrounding the figure of the geek.

qualities. Finally, I conclude with a look at Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* graphic novel which reassesses the relationship between early superhero comics and the geeks while at the same time advancing a sophisticated argument for the overall humanity of the average geek.

Throughout these chapters, I will demonstrate how Othering practices form the sort of encrusted connotations that Hatfield talks about, connotations that alter people's perceptions of what a comic book can do, what issues it can speak to, what discursive spheres it can penetrate and, ultimately, what literary qualities it is capable of possessing. By revising these connotations, comics artists have opened the doors to a new era for the comic book.

Chapter 1

The Sexual Imperative: Representations of Gender in the Comics Form

I wanted to go to my brother and say: look, you sometimes like to look at drawings of really stacked women wearing buttfloss and boob-slings and high heels and contorting themselves into impossible positions, you know it and I know it, and it's okay. Really, it's okay. That's what you like, and that's what the people who made this comic know people like you like. But there's something sort of not-okay about thinking that it's more acceptable if it happens with a story to justify it, especially if the story's as stupid and lame as this one. The monsters aren't scary at all, they're just symbols of stuff that used to be scary when we were little. And maybe the women aren't actually sexy to anyone either--they're drawn so badly that it's hard to imagine it--but just symbols of pictures, or ideas, that the people who this is made for used to think were sexy.

–Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics* (70)

What does one think of when asked to picture a comic book heroine? Is it a rebellious Iranian artist defying her cultural heritage? Is it a classically educated scholar using bits and fragments of canonical literature in order to come to terms with her deceased father's secret life as a homosexual? Is it a confused recent graduate facing the uncertainty of the world before her and retreating into her own internalized world of sarcasm and cynicism? Perhaps it is but probably it is not. Comics have such heroines¹⁰ but the encrusted connotations (to re-use Hatfield's term) of the comics form suggest a very different idea of the comics heroine or, for that matter, the female comics character in general. Wolk's discussion of "really stacked women wearing buttfloss and boob-slings and high heels and contorting themselves into impossible positions" is a disturbingly accurate description of what readers might expect from mainstream female

¹⁰ Those mentioned above appear in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, and Daniel Clowes' *Ghost World*, respectively.

comics characters. Still in keeping with Hatfield's theory, this expectation is not wholly unearned but is, rather, the result of the reader's repeated exposure to a pervasive process within the comics form.

In American society, the representation of women in the comics form, as with other forms that operate largely through popular culture, caters to male fantasies of social and sexual power by creating an idealized vision of women. I will refer to this construction as "the comics feminine." My close semiotic analysis of comics works reveals the manner through which the comics feminine has taken shape over the past century and how the impositions it creates are now being challenged by comics artists who are willing to reassess how comics represent women. Through such analysis, I will reveal how comics have historically Othered women in general and how moving past the comics feminine is a key objective for the comics-as-literature movement.

More precisely, I will conduct a close reading of the superheroine, as centred upon the figure of Wonder Woman, in order to demonstrate how the encrusted connotations that constitute the comics feminine are created and naturalized. I will then read Sam Kieth's *The Maxx* and Adrian Tomine's "Bomb Scare" as revisioning enterprises which call attention to sexist practices at play within the comics feminine. Lastly, I will examine the contribution of women's voices in the comics form while focusing on the highly sexual yet anti-sexualizing comics of Phoebe Gloeckner.

Let me begin by stating that the history of women in comics has not been entirely bleak. In *Women are Wonderful*, William Cole and Florett Robinson use comics (primarily newspaper cartoons) as a valuable historical record of the evolution of imagery of women and a record of the evolution of attitudes toward women. "Through all these

years the American cartoonist has wittily, and unwittingly, made a graphic record of the immense change that has taken place in her status” (Intro, 1). Even more direct political influence has been exerted by comics within the women’s suffrage movement. In “Image, Rhetoric, and the Historical Memory of Women,” Elisabeth Israels Perry proves that cartooning played a powerful role in securing the vote for women in early 20th century America: “In their own time, suffrage cartoons helped convince the American public of the need for a reform now widely taken for granted in modernized countries” (13).¹¹ As these scholars make clear, the comics form has, at times, been used to advance the social status of women.

While comics are frequently criticized for excluding or alienating female readers, they were not a boys-only form from the moment of their creation. Prior to the 1950s, comics had a strong female following, but that following dropped off dramatically in the 1950s when, due to a series of factors, the female comics readership was pushed out. One potential culprit is the CCA (Comics Code Authority)--a comics censorship bureau which placed strict limitations on what could be expressed in comics in the 1960s and 1970s. The formation of the CCA was largely a response to concerns about the effects that comics were having on children--a concern raised most prominently by Fredric Wertham in the 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent*. Amy Kiste Nyberg’s *Seal of Approval* recounts how parental concerns in the 1950s led to inquiries such as Wertham’s book and even a series of senate hearings. The end result was the CCA, a censorship board that comics publishers agreed to put in place. In this sense, the CCA is comparable to the Production Code of the American film industry, which ran from 1930-1968 and regulated

¹¹ Perry suggests that the feminist movement actively utilized comics to depict the “oppression and the heroism of the pursuit of equality” and to convey the sense that “civilization lost ground by not including women” (81).

“systematically and scrupulously, the content of Hollywood motion pictures” (Doherty 1). Gregory Black argues that “this system of censorship, which the film industry not only accepted, but embraced, encouraged, and enforced, was a major reason for the failure of Hollywood to develop film beyond the “harmless entertainment” label that has been firmly fixed on it” (5). The CCA is perceived to have had a very similar effect on comics. “It all added up to disaster. For parents and educators, the Code meant peace of mind, but for kids it signified little except insipidly ‘safe’ entertainment” (Sabin, *Comics* 68).

Prior to the CCA, one of the most popular genres of comic books in America was romance comics aimed at women. Titles such as *Young Love, Lovers* and *Young Romance* were industry top-sellers that filled the demand of young female comics readers across the country. Even Jack Kirby--who played so large a role in defining the macho, alpha-male mentality of superhero comics--worked extensively on romance comic books. While numerous comics genres were already targeting an exclusively male demographic, there were also genres like romance comics that targeted a female demographic. In *The Comic Book Makers*, Joe and Jim Simon account for how the CCA pushed romance comics out of the market by creating a series of impossible requirements for approval that could only be met by the superhero genre (123-125). Similarly, Sabin notes that Romance comics were “virtually destroyed” (*Comics* 68) by the CCA. As a result, female readership declined.

At the same time, the anti-CCA resistance movement utilized sexist representations of women as well. The underground comics movement arose from a desire to break taboos. As limiting as the comics code was, it nonetheless offered some

protections against overt sexualization. Much of the censorship imposed by the comics code was designed to prevent representations of sex, nudity, or even sexual discussion. These protections and restrictions prompted the underground comics movement, which arose as a direct challenge to the CCA and took the female sex object to new extremes for the sake of undermining the censorship that the CCA had imposed upon comics. Douglas Wolk recounts that “the underground cartoonists were interested in self-expression above all, although they tended to conflate self-expression with breaking taboos” (39). During the heyday of the underground comics movement in the 1960s and 1970s, an image of a female sex object was considered revolutionary, even progressive. Moreover, the fantasy and burlesque elements of the underground comics movement were decidedly sexist. The men and women were not objectified equally. The underlying pathology was always heterosexual male fantasy. Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs argue that “[t]he hideousness of man and his sexual complexes are the main elements in the underground comix” (219). Thus, the underground comics movement failed to provide an alternative to the sexist conventions of mainstream comics.¹²

How, though, does one define sexism within a visual form? For my part, I turn to what is perhaps the most foundational work on sexism in visual culture. In her landmark 1975 essay entitled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey radically redefines the way that feminists approach visual representations of women in Western culture. Mulvey defines the pleasure that the male spectator derives from visual

¹² As my later reading of Phoebe Gloeckner attests, however, the underground comics movement was essential in cultivating a number of tools that would later be used by prominent female artists. Most notably, underground comics developed a confessional style that is quite evident in the works of Gloeckner and others.

representations of women as “scopophilia” (a term originally coined by Sigmund Freud).

Mulvey writes:

Originally, in his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exists as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this point he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. (16)

Building upon this foundation, Mulvey (through an analysis of Western cinema) establishes how visual pleasure serves to reinforce patriarchal hierarchies in Western culture. “Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order” (16). Mulvey suggests that this process works by either demystifying the represented woman or by fetishizing her.¹³ In order to demystify, cinema invites voyeurism. The audience is made to see the represented female in her most private and personal spaces. Accordingly, the represented woman is completely ignorant of the audience’s presence. The voyeuristic perspective that film endorses thus exposes any and all mysteries which the object of male affection may potentially withhold. The audience member comes to know her in a way that is intimate yet completely anonymous, in the sense that the represented female is seen by the audience but the audience is not seen by the represented female. Through surveillance, the male audience member holds total power over the highly exposed female object. Furthermore,

¹³ It must be noted here that Mulvey, in keeping with Freudian thought, sees visual pleasure as a defense mechanism in response to castration anxiety caused by the fundamental “lack” of the represented women. I do not, at this point, agree with the theory of castration anxiety as the root of all sexism in comics, but I recognize the potential merits of such an approach. It may be the case that a fear of castration is at play in comics texts, but that is not the subject of this project. As a literary scholar, I focus upon the effect that Mulvey identifies, not the cause that she supposes creates it.

because the audience is invited to watch the film (this being the basic purpose of the film-to be seen), the film endorses voyeurism and naturalizes this aspect of visual pleasure as something that is socially acceptable.

Fetishism occurs when the staging of the film leads the male audience member to perceive the female character as no more than an object of fantasy.

The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (19)

The female characters are used for spectacle to such an extent that the diegesis of the film is often broken and simply functions as a framing mechanism to justify the spectacle of the woman. “[F]etishistic scopophilia builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself” (21). The objectified female provides the pleasure of looking for the male audience member. That is her function, even at the expense of verisimilitude or the illusion of the fourth wall.¹⁴

In comics, visual pleasure is common practice. Mulvey’s observation that the erotic impact of the image of women in film connotes *to-be-looked-at-ness* can be easily applied to comics as well. Comics have, from the outset of the comic book/periodical in the 1920s and 1930s, maintained a tradition of exhibiting women in a manner that is inherently fetishistic, voyeuristic and sexist.

¹⁴ In film parlance, this refers to the imaginary boundary between the audience and the fictional world represented.

If anything, mainstream comics have demonstrated a more overt and pervasive use of visual pleasure than that which Mulvey locates in Western cinema. The most obvious explanation lies in the inherent maleness of mainstream comics.

The history of gender imbalance in comics is one of the most striking examples of comics' squandered potential. To the extent that comics has been a 'boys' club' in the U.S., it has blundered away half of its potential power (and potential audience) with a single swipe. To a fourteen year-old, male, mainstream comics fan in the mid-70s, the very idea of women making comics was exotic. The few popular titles read by girls were created primarily by men--and if ever there was a genre tailor-made for adolescent boys, the market-winning superheroes were it.

(McCloud, *Reinventing* 100)

The danger that McCloud identifies is in the scarcity of "entry-level girls' comics" (104). Just as most children start with something like *Curious George* before reading something like *Hamlet*, readers of the more literary comics' representations of gender also typically gain a sort of initiation through entry-level comics texts. The vast majority of comics readers enter the field through the popular genre (superheroes), and with the popular genre still reflecting outdated sexist attitudes toward women, many readers and creators of feminist-friendly comics work are being immediately put off of the form altogether.

The problem does not end there. As more female readers give up on comic books, the few female readers that still make their way to the comic book store--a fitting microcosm for comics culture in general--feel alienated as a result of their obvious minority status within the comic book store/culture.

Unsurprisingly, the maleness of comics culture has been self-perpetuating: if reading (or collecting) comics is understood as 'something that guys do,' then the woman in the comics store is an anomaly. If you'll forgive a little grad-school speak, either she's performing womanhood wrong, or she's performing comics reading wrong. (Wolk 70)

Neither option, of course, is particularly inviting to a female comics reader.

As McCloud argues, the problem begins with the content of the comics themselves and with the messages these comics convey about women. A 1972 essay by Gloria Steinem describes the manner in which these messages impose boundaries upon the ambitions or aspirations of a female reader:

The trouble is that the comic book performers of such superhuman feats--and even of dimly competent ones--are almost always heroes. Literally. The female child is left to believe that, even when her body is as grown-up as her spirit, she will still be in the childlike role of helping with minor tasks, appreciating men's accomplishments, and being so incompetent and passive that she can only hope some man can come to her rescue...But dependency and zero accomplishments get very dull as a steady diet. The only option for a girl reader is to identify with the male characters--pretty difficult, even in the androgynous years of childhood. If she can't do that, she faces limited prospects: an 'ideal' life of sitting around like a Technicolor clothes horse, getting into jams with villains, and saying things like 'oh, Superman! I'll always be grateful to you,' even as her hero

goes off to bigger and better adventures. It hardly seems worth learning to tie our shoes. (2)

The lack of positive female role models in superhero comics is enough to permanently alienate would-be comics readers who happen to be female.

As Steinem acknowledges, there was however an attempt to address this gap and it came in the form of Wonder Woman. As the first female superhero to have her own title, Wonder Woman establishes the paradigm for all other superheroines to follow and she remains, to this day, the most popular superheroine in all of comics. Wonder Woman is exemplary in terms of her capacity to project messages of feminine empowerment. As I will demonstrate, however, the superheroine paradigm established by Wonder Woman has connotations that contradict Wonder Woman's message of feminine empowerment and which help to establish visual pleasure as a common practice of the comics form.

She was the brainchild of Dr. William Moulton Marston. In addition to being an author and illustrator, Marston was also a feminist, psychologist and the inventor of the original lie detector. In 1941 Marston, with the aid of his wife Elizabeth, envisioned Wonder Woman's feminist leanings as an alternative to the masculinist tendencies of male comics heroes. She was a character rooted in feminine mythology, an advocate for women's independence and a symbol of social movement within the comics form. Or so it would seem.

The Wonder Woman back-story centers on the mythical figures of the Amazons and gestures toward the modern (and feminist-oriented) ideal of the Amazon Woman.¹⁵

¹⁵ The school of feminist thought known as "Amazon feminism" emphasizes the strength and accomplishments of women throughout history and frequently utilizes Wonder Woman as a paradigm. Ironically, the most famous practitioner of Amazon feminism is Camille Paglia whose theories have often

In this sense, Marston is adopting what Barthes refers to as a “system of connotations.” Barthes defines this concept as “a system which takes over the signs of another system in order to make them its signifiers” (*Image* 37). In the Wonder Woman example, Marston’s incorporation of Amazon mythology associates Wonder Woman with connotations such as strength, independence, sorority and disregard for male-oriented societies.¹⁶

In Marston's version, the Amazon tribe separated from Greece in ancient times in order to forge a women-only society upon a retreat known as “Paradise Island.” Wonder Woman herself was not born from the union of man and woman but is the result of Queen Hippolyta breathing life into inanimate clay. This form of parthenogenesis enables the all-female society to exist. The feminist utopia of Paradise Island is not, however, the primary setting of Wonder Woman’s adventures. Wonder Woman falls in love with a stranded pilot and leaves for America to return him to safety. From there, she takes up the cause of the United States during World War II.

Apart from the Amazon heritage, the main mythological source for Wonder Woman is the Greek goddess Artemis/Roman goddess Diana. “Diana” is a name frequently invoked in all manner of feminist discourses ranging from the mainstream (such as ecofeminism) to the marginal (such as Wicca cults). Fittingly, Wonder Woman is known as “Princess Diana” on Paradise Island and as “Diana Prince” off-island. In Greek and Roman lore, Artemis/Diana is a fierce warrior-woman (the twin sister of Apollo) who shuns male companionship in favor of a wild-life in the forest, accompanied

been perceived to be oppositional to those of Steinem. Paglia has frequently criticized the manner in which feminist movements (and those of Steinem in particular) treat women as victims.

¹⁶ A thorough exploration of the role of Amazon mythology in *Wonder Woman* comics is provided in Clare Pitkethly’s “Recruiting an Amazon.” Here, the author identifies how the Amazon is traditionally a conquest figure who reifies the supremacy of a dominant ideology. Wonder Woman, Pitkethly argues, is in keeping with this role through her submission to Western culture and her abandonment of the Amazon sorority.

by nymphs and bacchae. Naturally, this system of connotation transfers to Wonder Woman whose association with Artemis/Diana signifies sorority and self-sufficiency amongst women.

Of course, these historic associations are significant but Wonder Woman is also frequently praised for her ability to speak to contemporary feminist issues. Steinem describes her as follows:

Wonder Woman symbolizes many of the values of the women's culture that feminists are now trying to introduce into the mainstream: strength and self-reliance for women; sisterhood and mutual support among women; peacefulness and esteem for human life; a diminishment both of "masculine" aggression and of the belief that violence is the only way of solving conflicts. (4)

Similar praise can be found in *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes*, in which Lillian S. Robinson suggests that Wonder Woman pioneered "a kind of feminist questioning" that was rarely seen within the comics field (23). Finally, Trina Robbins--the editor of the landmark *Wimmens Comix* anthology and one-time Wonder Woman scribe--writes that "William Moulton Marston provided a safe place for girls in the pages of his comics, away from Man's World" (n.p.).

Yet despite numerous such appreciations of Wonder Woman's contribution to feminist-friendly comics, there are limitations to the positive message conveyed by Wonder Woman, particularly within the context of second and third wave feminisms. In contrast to the praise of Robbins and Steinem, Richard Reynolds suggests that Marston's intentions with the first superheroine were notably less progressive. "The appearance and

costume of the original superheroine, Wonder Woman, was developed as a frank appeal to male fantasies of sexual domination, as disingenuously set forth by Wonder Woman's creator, psychologist Dr. William Moulton Marston" (34). Here we have a radically different interpretation of Wonder Woman. Reynolds sees her as an inherently eroticized female character disguised as a positive female role model.

Close analysis of the superheroine supports Reynolds' view. Wonder Woman's boots are high-heeled, knee high and made of leather. The connoted message that they transmit could therefore be interpreted to signify the attire of a dominatrix (the dominatrix being a popular figure within male fantasies of sexual subordination). Wonder Woman's skin-tight, one piece costume does little to contradict this association. Reynolds suggests that by dressing their eponymous superheroine in a dominatrix-like outfit, *Wonder Woman* comics reveal a sexual subtext aimed at the heterosexual male reader while still maintaining the outward appearance of being progressive, feminist-friendly, child-safe comics. The result is that "the sign of pornography (never explicitly delivered) comes to stand in for an entire pornographic subtext, a series of blanks which readers remain free to fill in for themselves" (Reynolds 34). This subtext compromises Wonder Woman's ability to serve as a progressive female character because, according to Reynolds, the male audience is pushed to read the female superheroine as "an object of desire" and not as a relatable hero (37).

A more overt signifier of domination fantasy within *Wonder Woman* comics can be found in Wonder Woman's weapon of choice. Her enchanted lasso forces whomever it binds to do the bidding of Wonder Woman. Thus, those who are faced with the golden lasso are turned into helpless slaves. Ironically, Wonder Woman frequently finds herself

subjected to the power of her own lasso, forced to do the bidding of whomever holds the end of her enchanted leash.

The lasso represents a less violent tool of crime-fighting than firearms or even super-powered fists. In this way the lasso is very much in keeping with Wonder Woman's commitment to rehabilitation and reform as opposed to violence and punishment. The lasso can be seen as a symbol of the diminishment of masculine aggression and violence that Steinem identifies. While this argument provides a pro-feminist interpretation of the lasso, it does not negate the sexual connotations that nonetheless surface as a result of the lasso's use within *Wonder Woman* comics.

Even if we choose to ignore the golden lasso altogether (a huge concession) and only look at other forms of restraint, there is still an extremely pervasive theme of domination fantasy running through Marston's *Wonder Woman* comics. To be fair, Wonder Woman's weapon of choice is a rope; it is therefore only natural that the rope would be used to tie people up. Looking beyond the lasso, however, the reader finds that the lasso itself is not suitable justification for the excessive amount of images of people being tied up. Of the 13 Marston Wonder Woman stories reprinted in the pro-feminist 1972 *Wonder Woman* collection, I count 10 stories which feature images of Wonder Woman either tied up or chained. Of the same 13 stories, 10 feature images of other women tied up or chained. All together, five of these comics feature visual representations of tied up human beings in at least 25% of the total number of comics panels. One story, entitled "When Treachery Wore a Green Shirt" features images of tied up human beings in 40% of the total number of comics panels. In this particular story, Wonder Woman gets captured, tied up and nearly torn apart by four horses, one bound to

each of her limbs and moving in opposing directions (figure 1.1). Two restaurant owners are also tied up and nearly hung. Also, four of Wonder Woman's female friends get tied up and gagged. Then Wonder Woman gets captured a second time, tied at the legs and chained at the wrists. All of this occurs within a single 12-page story.

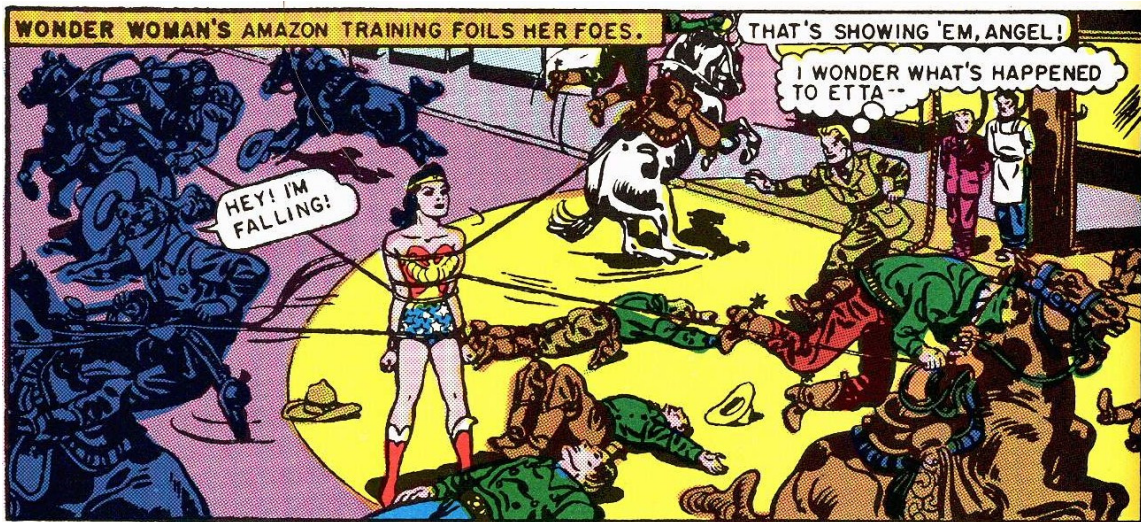


Figure 1.1: Wonder Woman bound.

The image in figure 1.1 is telling of the manner in which restraint is depicted in *Wonder Woman* comics. At the denoted level (the literal level in Barthes' terms), Wonder Woman is seen successfully enduring attempted torture at the hands of her enemies and thus defeating them. At the connoted level (the symbolic level in Barthes' terms), the image projects a series of sexual messages that have little to do with advancing the plot of the story. What the reader sees is an image of a half-naked woman, surrounded by men, tied up and pulled in every possible direction. The vectors created by the multiple ropes and, to some extent, by the off-centre beam of light present Wonder Woman to the reader as an object of spectacle that clearly connotes (in Mulvey's terms) to-be-looked-at-ness. In this image the reader looks at both a spectacularly heroic feat and also a visually idealized, highly sexualized woman, bound.

As noted above, this spectacle of restraint is a major theme in *Wonder Woman* comics, and the pervasiveness of this theme suggests that the restraint images have a purpose that operates beyond the denotative level. These images of restraint throughout the text (involving both men and women) suggest an overarching concern with bondage or disempowerment.

Marston's personal life, as detailed in Les Daniels' *Wonder Woman: The Life and Times of the Amazon Princess*, reveals Marston's deep personal connection to bondage fantasy. "A glance at almost any Wonder Woman story of the period would show numerous images of women in bondage, a concept that Marston claimed cut down on violence, but which he certainly knew was sexually stimulating to some people" (59). In evidence of this, Daniels chronicles Marston's long history of personal and professional interest in what Marston referred to as "pleasant captivity emotions" (16). Daniels points to Marston's study of pleasant captivity emotions in sorority initiation rites that required pledges to dress up as babies, have their arms tied behind their back and be wrestled to the ground by sorority members.¹⁷ As Daniels notes, Marston's conclusions were met with skepticism by academics, as were the conclusions he reached during his time as a consultant for Universal Pictures in 1923 (16-18).

Marston's study of Universal's output led to high praise for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, a very successful 1923 silent film starring Lon Chaney. Its scenario reminded him, he said, of sorority baby parties.

Citing scenes in which the title character is bound and whipped, while the female lead appears 'dressed only in a chemise, with her hands tied

¹⁷ This ritual would find its way into *Wonder Woman* comics through Wonder Woman's sidekick, Etta, a sorority leader who regularly stages such initiations throughout Marston's run on *Wonder Woman*.

behind,' Marston concluded that such scenes caused “a strong, disguised captivation emotion in the minds of the audience. Without a doubt, this accounts for the remarkable popularity of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.” (17)

Marston’s interest in bondage fantasy and restraint translates into his intent with *Wonder Woman*. As Daniels notes, Marston was a skilled self-promoter (18) and master of manipulation (20). Daniels quotes a letter by Marston in which he describes his use of bondage fantasy in *Wonder Woman* comics specifically.

Women are exciting for this one reason - it is the secret of women's allure - women enjoy submission, being bound. This I bring out in the Paradise Island sequences where the girls beg for chains and enjoy wearing them...because all this is a universal truth, a fundamental subconscious feeling of normal humans, the children love it. (63)

Despite his assertion of normalcy and universal truths, Marston’s personal interest in bondage reveal the personal desires that he channeled into the creation of *Wonder Woman*.

The overriding theme of restraint creates an environment where sexual domination fantasy can easily take root. The bondage imagery throughout the text strongly suggests that Marston’s creation projects connotations of sexual domination fantasy. According to Daniels, these sexual connotations thereby undercut the pro-feminist readings of authors such as Steinem, Robinson and Robbins.

Some feminists who are uncomfortable with the theme insist that there was no special emphasis on bondage in *Wonder Woman's* adventures, but

Marston knew it was there, and so did his publisher, his editor, and his public, not to mention the other advisers who had been hired along with Marston to supervise the content of the comics. (61)

The politics of bondage fantasy are beyond the scope of this project. I really cannot say whether bondage imagery is universally demeaning, disempowering or exploitative toward women. However, I can suggest that Wonder Woman's potential as a positive female portrayal is undermined by the fact that she was not created to be "a safe place for girls in the pages of his comics, away from Man's World" (Robbins n.p.). She was created in the service of heterosexual male fantasy. "It's an open secret, however infrequently acknowledged, that Wonder Woman's readers have always been predominantly male (estimates run as high as 90%)" (Daniels, *Wonder Woman* 33). Richard Reynolds asks "how can women who dress up in the styles of 1940s pornography be anything other than the pawns or tools of male fantasy?" (126). This question has relevance to Wonder Woman, but a better question might be: how can women who repeatedly stage scenes of sexualized bondage be anything other than the pawns or tools of male fantasy?

Moreover, Wonder Woman's strength and power are not merely a veneer over the sexual fantasy at play in the narrative, but are in fact an important part of the fantasy. Sexual domination fantasy involves receiving sexual pleasure from disempowerment. To a comics reader, Wonder Woman symbolically demonstrates such an exchange of power with her very existence. She successfully inverts the Superman story, and thus disempowers the masculine reader, just as she disempowers the male characters that are either heroically rescued by her or soundly defeated at her hands. Marston himself acknowledges the sexual appeal of the domination fantasy at play within *Wonder Woman*

comics: “Give them an alluring woman stronger than themselves to submit to and they’ll be proud to be her willing slaves” (qtd. in Reynolds 34). Marston’s application of sexual domination fantasy within *Wonder Woman* comics serves to complicate--if not compromise--the texts’ feminist leanings, while simultaneously further establishing the prominence of visual pleasure within mainstream comics.

Domination fantasy is not, however, the only sexual connotation at play within the early *Wonder Woman* comics. Wonder Woman’s strapless top and leg-baring short shorts establish the tradition of the superheroine costume in its resemblance to undergarments. Reynolds refers to superheroine outfits as “an uncompleted striptease” (37) because the change from mild-mannered woman to superwoman is always marked by a reduction in clothing. In the transition from Diana Prince to Wonder Woman (illustrated in figure 1.2), the heroine gains power, stature and importance by stripping off her clothing but she also can be seen to lose things like modesty, dignity and decency at the same time (particularly in contrast to contemporary social expectations). These moments of transition are always rising points in the narrative. The heroes are going to win, of course, but the central tension emerges from a delay of gratification: when will Clark Kent finally become Superman and take action against his foe? With Wonder Woman, the anticipated gratification is mingled with scopophilic gratification through the striptease. The reader may be waiting for the heralded arrival of the superhero, or the reader may simply be waiting to see Wonder Woman’s bare shoulders and legs. If the latter is the case, then the story will have been merely a framework for the highly drawn out striptease. In this sense, the voyeuristic quality of *Wonder Woman* comics is perfectly

in keeping with Mulvey's theory that women frequently serve as sexual spectacles in visual media.



Figure 1.2: Wonder Woman undresses for action.

Furthermore, Wonder Woman's costume establishes a tradition of similarly clad superheroines whose integrity as superheroes is undermined by the fact that their attire always seems to promote fashion over function.¹⁸ Wonder Woman alone has saved countless lives and narrowly escaped from the most perilous situations time and time

¹⁸ This same phenomenon can be observed in male superheroes as well, though far less prominently. The cape would be a good example of non-functional hero attire. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons famously point this out in *Watchmen* by recounting the fate of a hero named Dollar Bill. "While attempting to stop a raid upon one of his employer's banks, his cloak became entangled in the bank's revolving door and he was shot dead at point-blank range before he could free it. Designers employed by the bank had designed his costume for maximum publicity appeal. If he'd designed it himself he might have left out that damned stupid cloak and still be alive today" (II.30). Similarly, the fashionable quality of the superhero cape is more about publicity (selling comics) than function.

again. Yet from the outset, Wonder Woman has been continually drawn in a costume that raises a number of questions regarding functionality. For example, the only purpose of her knee-high, high-heeled boots is to create a sexually appealing visual representation in the comics form by allowing the illustrator to draw Wonder Woman with an arched back and extended leg. Wonder Woman's attire undermines her characterization as a guardian of the people. Just as we would question a firefighter who ran into a burning building while wearing high heels, we likewise have to question Wonder Woman for fighting crime in an outfit that is so obviously impractical.

Wonder Woman's costume clearly has an aesthetic purpose that takes priority over the costume's function. This implied value judgment reiterates the conflict between Wonder Woman's role as a positive female icon and her role as a sex object. High-heeled, knee-high boots are extremely common in the costumes of superheroines since Wonder Woman, as are skin-tight leather cat-suits, skin-exposing outerwear (even in climates such as New York City and Chicago) and long flowing hair, worn down. Superheroines do not wear pony-tails. Fashion over function, again, is the rule of thumb with regard to the superheroine. This message reaffirms that superheroines are shallow and self-obsessed, particularly when compared to their heroic, self-sacrificing male counterparts.

Of greater significance, however, is the fact that Wonder Woman is defined in opposition to a male hero archetype, as established by Superman. Lillian S. Robinson argues that "the female superhero originates in an act of criticism--a challenge to the masculinist world of superhero adventures" (7). The names of Wonder Woman and Superman demonstrate this reactionary relationship. "Super" and "Wonder" are

approximate synonyms with the other half of each character's name created by a simple gendered noun ("man" or "woman"). Steve Trevor--Wonder Woman's love interest and constant subject of rescue--functions in a manner virtually identical to that of Lois Lane. As with Superman, Wonder Woman adopts a "mild-mannered" alter ego, only to find that she must compete against her superheroic alias for the affections of her beloved.

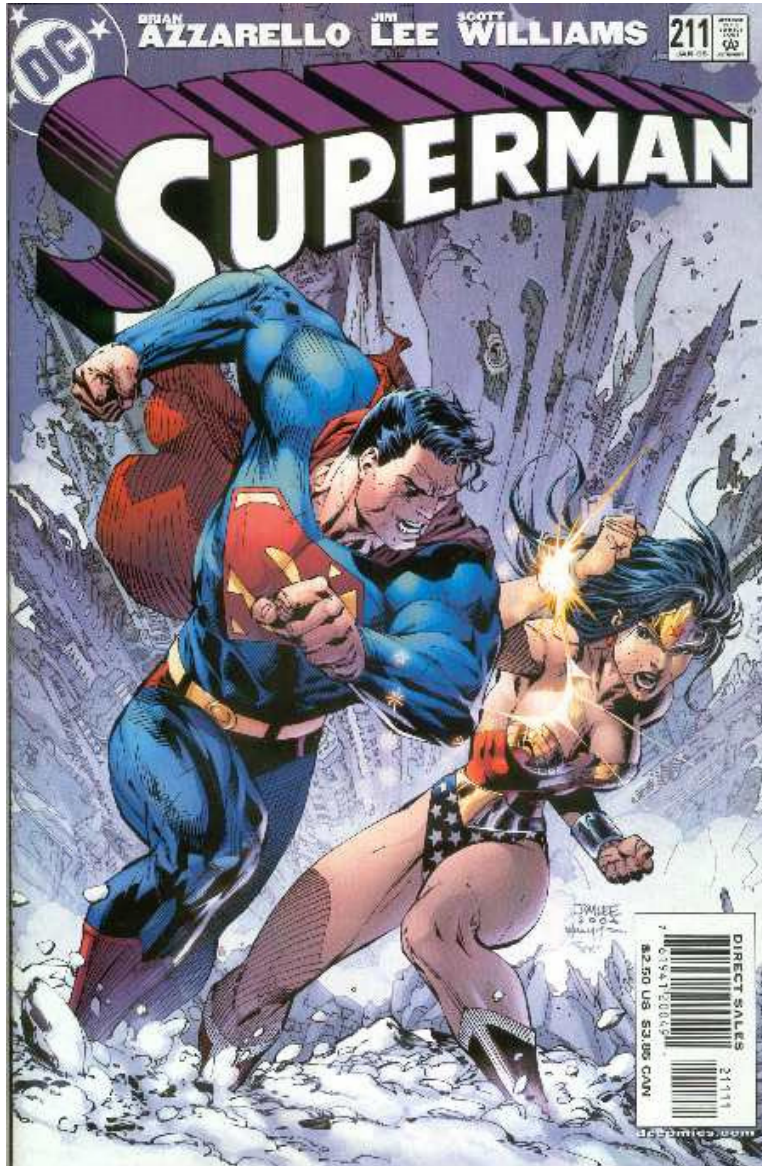


Figure 1.3: Superman vs Wonder Woman.

Even the costume colour scheme is basically the same as that of Superman (this contrast is depicted in figure 1.3). Red and blue colours connote American-ness¹⁹ alongside some gold trim to add a sense of regality. Thus, even though she is an icon of femininity, Wonder Woman is highly derivative of a masculine precursor. She is so derivative that her existence constantly gestures towards Superman. Just as heroine spin-offs such as Spiderwoman or Batgirl cannot help but reinforce the superiority of their masculine precursor, and just as the Christian Eve is forever overshadowed by the man whose rib she was born from, Wonder Woman offers constant homage, even fealty, to Superman.²⁰

In spite of all these problematic components of her identity, Wonder Woman remains a poignant symbol of womanhood in general. Superman has long been interpreted as a symbol of idealized masculinity.²¹ Likewise, Wonder Woman could easily be interpreted as a symbol of idealized femininity, something that women aspire to become. As noted earlier, Gloria Steinem's praise for Wonder Woman singles her out as a female comics character who can, and should, be idolized by young girls and women alike. As I have established, however, Wonder Woman's ability to serve as a positive female role model is compromised by a number of connoted messages that her character projects. Thus, when the reader accepts Wonder Woman as the perfect woman, they also accept a number of sexist connotations as components of the perfect woman.

¹⁹ Reitburger and Fuchs point out that Wonder Woman's "breasts were supported by the wings of the American Eagle" (125).

²⁰ In Wonder Woman's defense, this fealty to Superman is a convention of the genre (most superheroes are derivative of Superman), but this convention is particularly problematic for Wonder Woman, a female character deriving from a male character.

²¹ Reitburger and Fuchs compare Superman to Hercules, Samson and Achilles in his capacity to serve as a paradigm of masculinity for a particular culture (100).

Barthes' theory of how denotation naturalizes connotation can be seen within such interpretations. Wonder Woman denotes "woman" and the reader must accept that sign-function in order to interpret the text. By denoting "woman," Wonder Woman creates an implied trust between reader and author. This sense of trust, in turn, implies that the connoted signifiers that the artist imbues Wonder Woman with are not made up but are in fact accurate interpretations of "woman." If these connoted messages are indeed as sexist (under Mulvey's terms) as I have here suggested, then Wonder Woman can be seen to mass-disseminate an overall message which naturalizes the idea that women themselves exist for the purpose of providing visual pleasure. In her implied function as a symbol of idealized femininity, however, Wonder Woman takes this naturalization a step further by suggesting that visual pleasure is itself an ideal component of femininity--not just something that is, but something that ought to be. Women exist to be looked at. Women should aspire to be looked at.

Lest we should think that Wonder Woman merely reflects the ideals of her time, it is important to note that the paradigm which Wonder Woman establishes has shown little in the way of development over the past sixty years. Female characters in mainstream comics art today are still depicted with enormous breasts, unnaturally long legs and waistlines that are often thinner than their own necks. As such, their bodies are as impractical as their costumes when it comes to crime-fighting. Thus, the superheroine (including the contemporary Wonder Woman) continues to serve as a form of visual pleasure. If caricature is indeed a form of overloaded representation, as Bohun Lynch suggests, then the caricature of women in superhero comics is overloaded sexuality

(through emphasis on visual pleasure).²² Douglas Wolk argues that “the stereotype of the top-heavy bombshell being the only body type superhero artists know how to draw is frighteningly close to true” (Wolk 72). While the character's actions, thoughts and words may all help to define her, the visual image dominates her characterization and affirms that she is a sexual object.

Essentially then, *Wonder Woman* comics (and all similar superheroine comics) are divided across modal lines. The visual and textual components do not operate in harmony. With respect to the micro-semiotic level, McCloud defines this type of multimodality as “parallel combinations,” where “words and pictures seem to follow very different courses without intersecting” (*Understanding* 154). The frequent result of such combinations is “something wildly incongruous” (158). If we extrapolate McCloud’s terms to the macro-semiotic level, we see a similar incongruity in the superheroine in general. The narrative empowerment of female characters is sharply undercut by their visual portrayal.

This incongruity pits the visual elements against the narrative elements and leads to the question: which elements have the greater power over comics readers? According to Susan Bordo, the visual elements have the greater power to define feminine behaviour. In *Unbearable Weight*, Bordo traces the visual representations of women throughout Western culture (film, television, periodicals and advertisements) and concludes that visual representation is now the key component in the creation of feminine paradigms.

With the advent of movies and television, the rules for femininity have
come to be culturally transmitted more and more through standardized

²² Chuck Tate adds an interesting nuance to this interpretation. In “The Stereotypical (Wonder) Woman,” Tate argues that the superheroine has to be hypersexualized in order to balance out her heroic traits, which might be perceived as unfeminine (155-6).

visual images... We are no longer given verbal descriptions or exemplars of what a lady is or of what femininity consists. Rather, we learn the rules directly through bodily discourse: through images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and behaviour are required.

(170)

Under Bordo's theory, we would then say that the superheroine's role model function comes from her visual representation far more than it does from the pro-feminist narrative elements that emerge from the heroic stories which frame her. This application is appropriate, as many of the elements that Bordo identifies in Western visual representations of women are elements that can be seen in my reading of superheroines. Bordo singles out hyper-slenderness, sexual passivity, domesticity, fragility and sexual objectification as the key components of visual representations of women in Western culture (170-171). Wonder Woman alone demonstrates all of these components on the visual level, even while the narrative seems to demonstrate the exact opposite in many cases.

Furthermore, Bordo's study concludes that visual representations ultimately serve to reinforce existing gender hierarchies.

Viewed historically, the discipline and normalization of the female body – perhaps the only gender oppression that exercises itself, although to different degrees and in different forms, across age, race, class, and sexual orientation – has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control. (166)

The superheroine's visual representation (clothes, body shape, facial expression and movements) projects a paradigm of femininity that embodies a number of stereotypical perceptions of women's place within the social hierarchy. Most notably, the superheroine projects the idea that women exist for the sake of providing visual pleasure to men, an obviously subordinate role.

The connotations of the comics feminine are further complicated by the persistent association of sex with violence in mainstream comics. The signifiers of sexual domination that Reynolds identifies suggest that the empowerment of the superheroine is channeled toward a sexual signified, just as my interpretation of Wonder Woman suggests. Because of comics' predominantly male readership, it is not much of a leap to say that while the empowerment of female characters offers the potential for pro-feminist meanings to be identified (such as those identified by Steinem, Robinson and Robbins), the optimum reading (in Barthes' terms²³) of the texts is still violent sexual fantasy.

Nor do the superheroes contradict these signifiers of violent sexual fantasy. Rather, they further it by projecting signifiers of another violent sexual discourse which "include[s] the rubber or leather masks associated with rapists and serial sex killers" (Reynolds 32). The presence of such signifiers in comics is problematic and all the more so as a result of the relationship between male readers and superheroes. According to Mulvey, the male characters who appear alongside the sexualized, objectified female characters she describes in film are not sexualized or objectified themselves, but rather they are positioned and manipulated in such a way that the audience comes to identify

²³ Barthes himself speaks to the idea of "discontinuous signs" and multiple potential readings (39-41) but ultimately settles on the idea that, within a given culture, constructed images reveal a dominant meaning.

with these male characters so that the audience can live, vicariously through the male characters.

According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man's role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen. The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralise the extradiegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. This is made possible through the processes set in motion by structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify. As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. A male movie star's glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror. The character in the story can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator, just as the image in the mirror was more in control of motor coordination. (20)

Here, Mulvey describes a complex double standard in the relationship between audience and screen characters. The female characters are objectified while the male characters embodied. Mulvey then argues that, in cinema, the conventional male conquest over the female sex object represents a vicarious conquest on the part of the viewer. “By means of identification with him, through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too” (21). According to Mulvey, this identification pushes the male audience member to internalize aspects of the relationship between male and female characters, including the perception that women are objects of conquest.

Before applying Mulvey’s theory of identification to comics, it has to be noted that theories of reader-identification are somewhat controversial in comics circles. Martin Barker devotes an entire chapter of *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* to a critical study of the assumptions surrounding reader-identification within the media in general and within comics specifically. Barker describes the implications that identification has as “vulnerability to messages, loss of our own identity, [and] submergence in the identity of a media character” (96). Barker notes, however, that these implications are really assumptions, which he feels are based in ignorance. “A review of the literature reveals very few which investigate the meaning , validity and applicability of the claim that audiences typically relate to TV, comics, films by ‘identifying’” (95).

In this sense, Mulvey’s theory of identification, as well as that of Scott McCloud, would certainly fall under scrutiny in Barker’s eyes. Nonetheless, Barker acknowledges a complex and meaningful correspondence between represented participants and interactive participants. In place of “identification,” Barker offers other viable terms to describe this relationship. “Try substituting any of the following: ‘absorption’, ‘concentrated

attention', 'suspension of disbelief', 'intense involvement', 'deep interest'" (96). The implications of such terms vary drastically from that of identification, but when a superhero exhibits connotations of rape and serial sex killing (as Reynolds suggests), then the absorption, concentrated attention, suspension of disbelief, intense involvement or deep interest of the audience are all problematic. If Barker is wrong and identification is occurring, as Mulvey suggests, then the problem is even greater.

Applying the idea of identification to the comics medium, one example of an embodied male figure can be seen in a common superhero comics topos that sees Spider-Man, Superman or Batman entering women's homes through a window. Unlike normal people, Superheroes do not often ring doorbells before entering young women's apartments. Instead, the process that they undertake in order to get through the window typically involves a super-human feat of some kind (scaling a wall or flying through the air, for example). While exhibiting superhuman strength, resilience or even ingenuity in getting to the window, the superhero also typically exhibits stealth as well. By sneaking up to the woman's window, the hero can be seen to function in a manner that is quite similar to that of a voyeur or peeping tom. This scene tends to have connotations of stalking that are difficult to miss and difficult to reconcile with the moral uprightness that the hero typically exudes.

This window-intrusion theme can be seen as a symbolic violation of both the female character's private space and also her illusion of personal security. Furthermore, by serving as the accomplishment of a goal (getting to the window using superheroic means) the private space of the female character can then be seen as a sort of trophy,

something that the superhero has achieved or earned and something that the superhero is therefore entitled to.

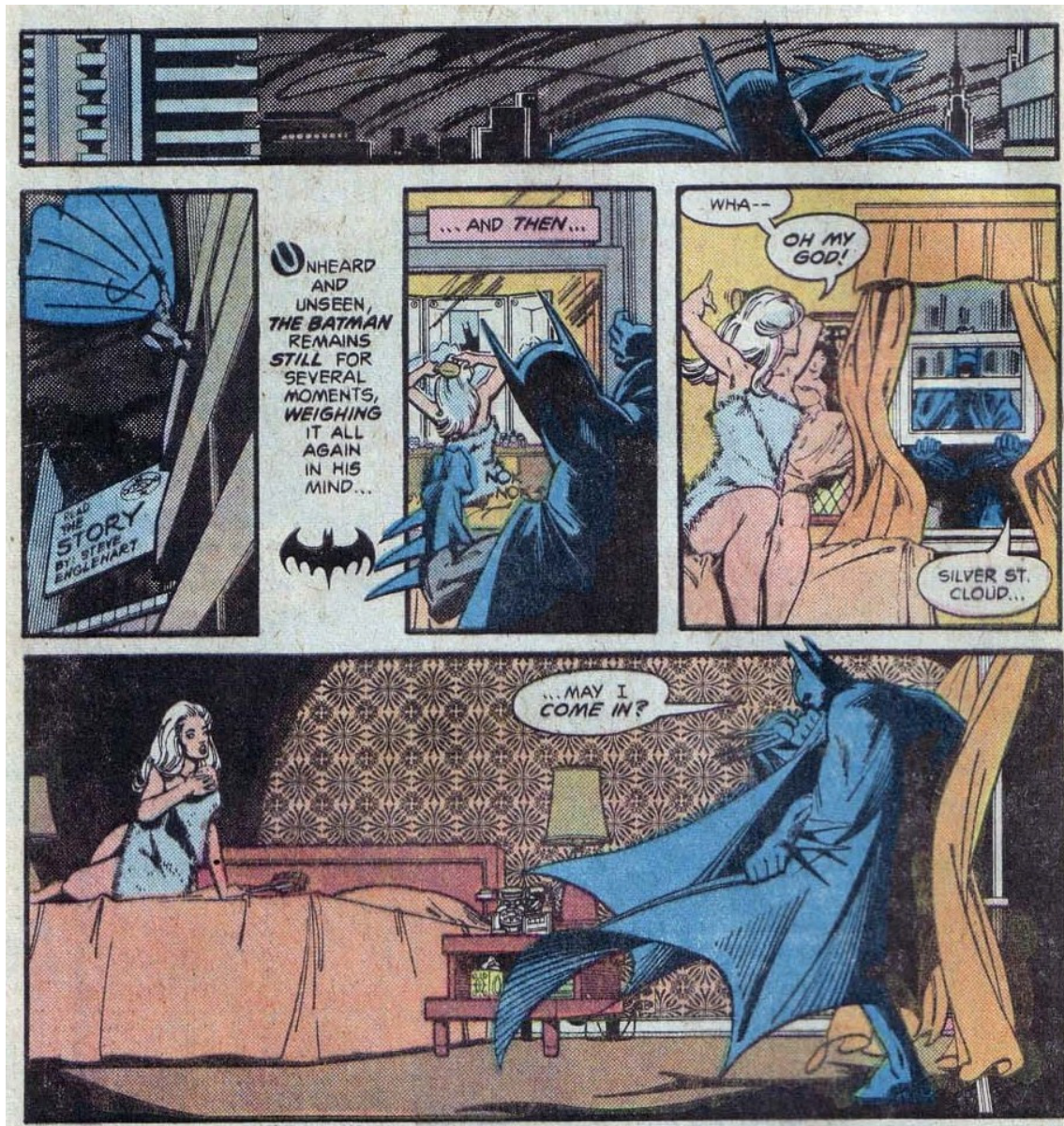


Figure 1.4: Batman's entrance.

In the example from figure 1.4, Batman scales his way up a high-rise, watches a woman in an intimate moment (on a bed, dressed only in a towel) and pulls open the window to step into her apartment. His polite request to enter is meaningless: he has already let himself in. With regard to this same sequence, comics historian Robert C.

Harvey describes how Batman's entrance creates a "vaguely threatening atmosphere" (*Art* 10). Because of the intimacy of this moment, the visually appealing rendering of the woman and the power and ability expressed through the hero's forceful and resourceful intrusion, the threatening atmosphere clearly contains violent sexual connotations.

The body posture of Silver St. Cloud is our first clue. As she combs her hair, unaware that Batman is peeping through the window, she holds her arms high above her shoulders in an open, vulnerable posture which reflects her sense of comfort and security. Batman steps through the window and assumes a menacing, nightmarish stance straight out of a Dracula film (expressed through the billowing cape, his hunched posture and concealed face). As he does so, Silver St. Cloud's arms descend to a defensive posture which protects both her body and her sense of modesty (by holding the towel around her body). These subtle details enhance the sense of intrusion and vulnerability within the scene.

The question then becomes to what extent is the male comics reader driven to identify with or embody Batman and to what extent is the female character (in contrast) rendered as an object? Essentially, there are two actions occurring in figure 1.4. The first is Batman resourcefully reaching Silver St. Cloud's balcony. The second is Batman identifying her and entering her window. Each action begins with an image that invites some form of reader-identification. In the first image, the angle of perception places the reader directly behind Batman, peering over his shoulder and seeing the world almost exactly as he sees it. The third image, which initiates the second sequence of action, is almost identical. As Batman peeps through the window at Silver St. Cloud, so too does the reader. Furthermore, the entire sequence occurs without showing Batman's face.

While this detail can be explained as part of the supernatural and “vaguely threatening” tone of the sequence, it also aids in allowing the reader to see themselves as the man behind the mask, the man who is breaking into the woman’s apartment.

In contrast to Batman, Silver St. Cloud is consistently illustrated with her full body (or very nearly her full body) in view of the reader. The transition from image 3 to image 4 is particularly noteworthy in this respect. Here the narrative switches from Batman’s point of view and circles a full 180 degrees in order to show Batman entering the apartment. Essentially, this is what Silver St. Cloud sees. Yet instead of depicting Batman’s window entrance through Silver St. Cloud’s eyes, or even from a vantage point looking over her shoulder (as was twice done with Batman) the image is completely non-narrativized, capturing the scene from a random perspective that keeps Silver St. Cloud’s body (including her vulnerable posture and her obvious state of undress) foregrounded.

What we see in this sequence then, is a comics example of Mulvey’s concept of identification and the distinction between woman as spectacle and man as a sort of ideal ego. Mulvey’s theory suggests that power and control are the key narrative components which enable this distinction and both are clearly present in this sequence. Batman’s resourcefulness and assertion of will over the vulnerable and impotent Silver St. Cloud contribute to a strong message of masculine power and feminine helplessness. Furthermore, Mulvey suggests that, in film, “The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action” (21). This is exactly what Batman does in this sequence by directing the reader’s gaze and by maintaining complete control over the actions of the scene. The setting is Silver St. Cloud’s home, yet Batman is clearly the one commanding the stage.

As noted, the superhero as masked intruder is a recurring motif throughout superhero comics. That the superhero is not a literal sexual predator in this situation is irrelevant. The hero's choice of entryway, in denying the privacy of feminine space, functions as a clear indication of gender hierarchy. Vicariously, through identification with Batman, the male reader has violently and heroically (as conveyed through the Herculean efforts of Batman to ascend the skyscraper) conquered the female character.

While the designation of female character as spectacle and male character as ideal ego implies a uniform representation of female sexuality in comics, it is important to note that not all female comics characters are sexualized in the same way. Sexual signifiers are commonly used to define the morality of a female comics character and thus project a series of messages that seek to discipline and normalize female sexuality in a manner that is somewhat contradictory and perhaps hypocritical. This process can be related to a more general use of visual characterization: comics have a tendency to visually mark characters with signifiers of virtue. For instance, the muscular, well-kept, conventionally handsome man is the hero while the ugly, physically deformed man is the villain.

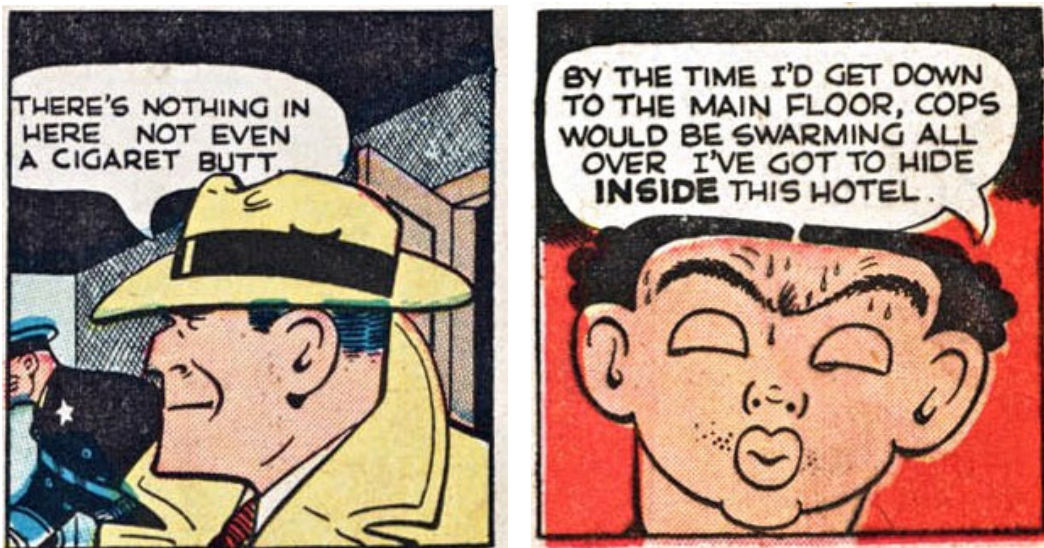


Figure 1.5: Dick Tracy and Flat-Top.

A good example can be seen in Chester Gould's *Dick Tracy* comics. Here, the hero is drawn as a conventionally handsome, physically attractive man. In contrast, Gould's detective is opposed by an assortment of disfigured villains such as Pruneface, Flat-Top and B.B. Eyes. In evidence of this contrast, figure 1.5 shows an image of Dick Tracy alongside one of Flat-Top.

The female comics villain, however, is rarely ever disfigured. Rather, she is drawn to be physically indistinct from the heroine (in terms of body type) and equally desirable. The difference, however, is that the villainess demonstrates signifiers of sadomasochism (leather, chains, dark colour schemes, etc.) which are most often expressed through the appearance of her costume. The important difference here is that the female comics villain is still visually desirable. Reynolds argues that the reader is "called upon to read both heroines and villainesses as objects of desire--good girls and bad girls maybe, but objects of the same rhetorical logic" (37).

Frank Miller plays upon this idea in *The Dark Knight Returns*. In order to send a message to Batman, the Joker violently assaults Catwoman (a well-known villainess) and leaves her to be found by the hero. As part of this message, however, he dresses her up as Wonder Woman (figure 1.6). This action is meant to humiliate her, but meta-textually Miller is also asking readers if Catwoman, when tied up, gagged and lying on a bed for Batman to find, is really any different from Wonder Woman. Because both female characters are ultimately serving the same function as objects of spectacle, the answer, of course, is no.

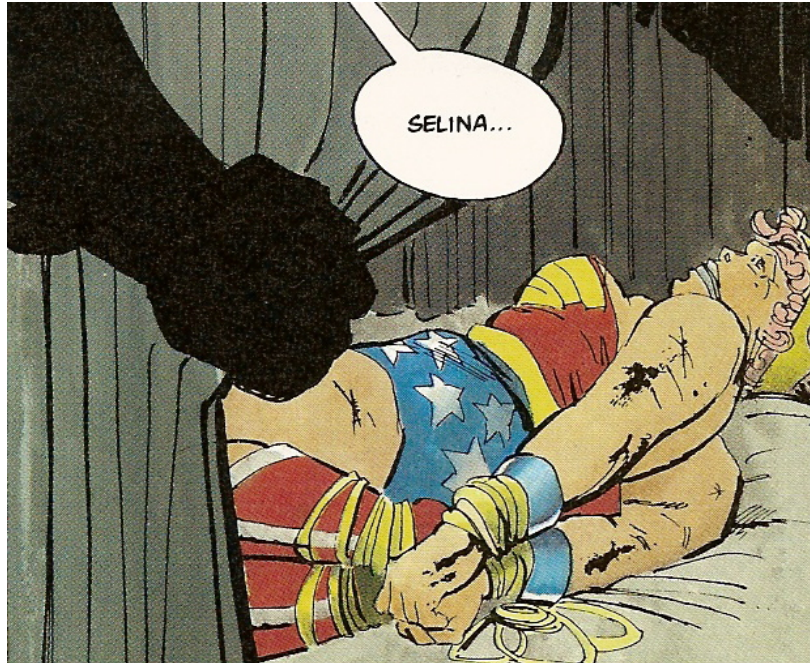


Figure 1.6: Catwoman as Wonder Woman.

The superheroine and villainess do differ, however, in how they express their sexuality. As Reynolds argues, the superheroine's sexuality is domesticated in order to appeal to the key demographic of comics readership: the white, male, middle-class, Christian, of early or pre-adolescent age (80). Reynolds uses the example of the Scarlet Witch, a popular superheroine from *The Avengers* comics. He argues that her sexuality is "presented blatantly the more firmly to deny it: the frisson of fetishistic sexuality is adduced with one hand only to be dismissed with the other" (80). The superheroine, despite containing so many obvious sexual signifiers (such as the Scarlet Witch's revealing costume), is sexually passive within the narrative itself, often virginal, and none of her cohorts ever seems to so much as remark that her outfit is revealing.

The superheroines offer a reconciliation of all the conflicting demands of adolescent male sexual desire. Sexuality is domesticated (i.e. made safe)

and yet remains exceptionally exciting. Women are visually thrilling, and yet threatening only to outsiders and strangers. (Reynolds 81)

By ignoring the “elephant in the room,” such comics narratives are able to domesticate the potent sexual connotations of the imagery. In controlling the sexuality of the depicted female character, the reader is meant to vicariously participate in a feat every bit as fantastic and romantic as jumping over a tall building in a single bound. As Reynolds suggests, such power fantasy is indelibly rooted in the young male’s fear of the sexual Other (82). In this vicarious capacity, the young male reader is able to experience an ideal of female sexuality in a controlled environment that is wholly removed from the awkwardness and angst of the real-world encounter between genders.

It is this same intense psychological fear of sexual Otherness that is utilized to signify the villainy of the female antagonist in mainstream American comics. In an afterword to *Batman: Year One*, David Mazzuchelli argues that “[i]f there is a ‘no girls allowed’ sign on [Batman’s] batcave/clubhouse, it’s because girls are icky. That’s why Catwoman is dangerous. She represents a maturity the boys aren’t ready for” (3). Thus villainesses such as Catwoman, Poison Ivy, The White Queen (figure 1.7), The Dragon Lady, Star Sapphire, and countless others all utilize an overt expression of sexuality--in contrast to the repressed or domesticated sexuality of their heroic female counterparts--as a means of defining their own wickedness and the extent of the threat to the superhero. This sexuality is expressed most often through the “femme fatale” archetype, in which the female character comes to represent a form of sexual temptation which the hero must overcome in order to assert his individual strength of character.

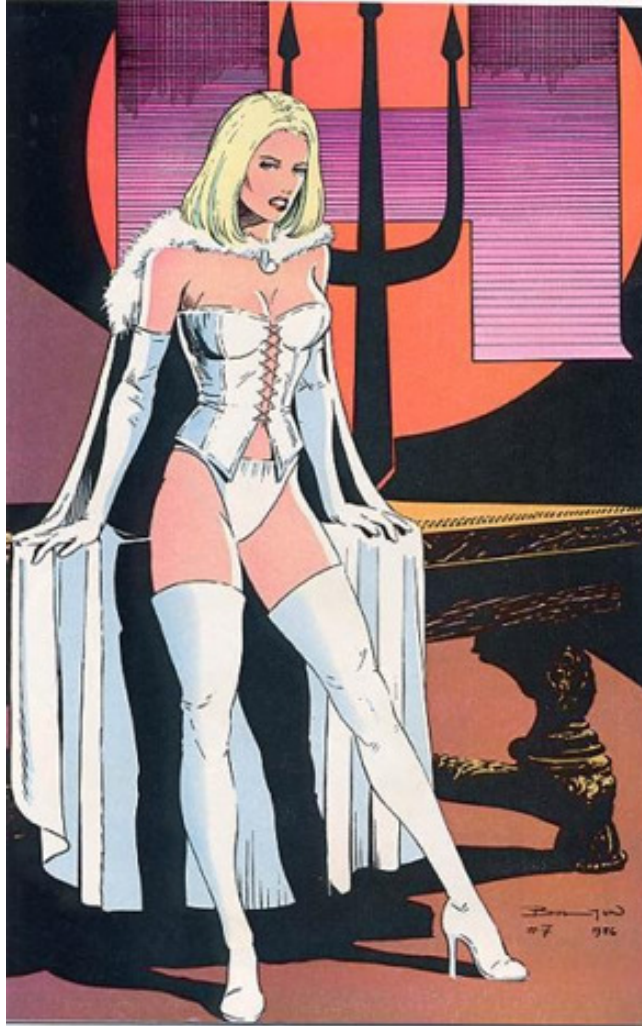


Figure 1.7: The White Queen.

As a persistent element in superhero comics, this depiction of sexuality signifies that the deliberate expression of such sexuality is a form of deviant behavior. Female sexuality is portrayed as a trial to be overcome by men, while any woman who actively expresses this sexuality--as opposed to superheroines who passively (often naively) express their sexuality-- is portrayed as a deviant from societal norms who must be both disciplined and punished. For the average female reader--even at the height of superheroine characters in the 1970s these numbered only 6-10% of the overall comics readership (quoted in Lambkin 126)--this depiction is even more damaging. Female

comics readers are taught by the superheroine/villainess binary that the active expression of sexuality is a signifier of evil (as seen with the villainesses listed above) in the same manner in which the disfigurement of the male supervillain is a signifier of evil.

After the superheroine and the villainess, the third type of female representation in the comics form is the stock female character devoid of superpowers. This character is the girlfriend, the wife, the object of the hero's desire and the instigator of heroism through her persistent need of rescue. This is another comics paradigm established through *Superman* comics--this time through the Lois Lane character who will be explored in depth in a later chapter. Generally speaking, this type of character functions as a plot device within the story. Visually, she appeals to scopophilia, but she also conveys passivity in a manner that is much in keeping with Bordo's findings in teen-oriented magazine periodicals. "A dominant visual theme in teenage magazines involves women hiding in the shadows of men, seeking solace in their arms, willingly contracting the space they occupy" (166). As my later reading of Lois Lane reveals, these are exactly the sort of visual (and narrative) themes that this type of stock female character projects.

This is the state of women in entry-level comics: the superheroine is sexualized in a way that undermines her integrity as a hero while the supervillain/superheroine distinction teaches that sexuality must be passive (yet ever-present) in order to be righteous, and the non-central female character is basically a structural component that also happens to be visually sexualized. This sorry state is a major stumbling block for the comics-as-literature movement. Readers coming to the movement do so with a sense of the encrusted connotations of the comics form. These connotations dictate how to

interpret the image of a woman in a work of comics art. She is a sexual object conveniently rendered for the visual pleasure of a primarily male readership.

That, however, is just the superhero side of things. More generally, the historic ties between comics and pornography have entrenched notions of parallel cultural practice between pornography²⁴ and comics. In the early part of the 20th century, the family-friendly veneer of comics was undercut by the so-called “8-pagers” or “Tijuana Bibles.” These pornographic comic bootlegs (comic books, instead of strips²⁵) depicted favorite comic strip characters such as Blondie and Tillie the Toiler in various states of undress and graphic sexual activity. The industry behind these comics was both clandestine and extremely well-organized. Will Eisner claims to have once been offered the opportunity to draw 8-pagers by “a Mob type straight out of Damon Runyon, complete with pinkie ring, broken nose, black shirt, and white tie, who claimed to have ‘exclusive distribution rights for all Brooklyn’” (quoted in Spiegelman, *Dirty* n.p.). Eisner turned the man (and a lucrative payday) down.

The true history of the 8-pager is largely irretrievable due to the secrecy of its production and the offensive nature of its material, which played a large part in the lack of 8-pager preservation projects. Nonetheless, the history of the 8-pager holds particular relevance for the development of the comic strip into the comic book:

While no accurate documentation of this clandestine enterprise will ever be possible, internal evidence suggests that at least a few of these

²⁴ In order to simplify the politics of this argument, I use the term “pornography” as it is defined by the *OED*: “printed or visual material intended to stimulate sexual excitement.”

²⁵ Comic strips came first at the turn of the century, followed by comic books (which are actually periodicals between 8 and 32 pages in length) in the 1920s and 1930s, followed by the graphic novel in 1978.

eight-pagers were in print during the twenties, thus giving them a claim to the title of the first comic books. (Daniels, *Comix* 165)

The historical precedent is significant here and speaks to the deep tradition of sexuality in comics. The 8-pager overtly demonstrates the pornographic potential of comics. The 8-pagers express a unique sexual pathology by using existing wholesome comics heroines as characters in pornographic works. The distinction between wholesome and pornographic is illustrated in figure 1.8 (a 1932 *Blondie* comic strip) and figure 1.9 (an unsigned and undated *Blondie* 8-pager, reprinted in Roger Sabin's *Comix, Comics and Graphic Novels*). Both feature the popular character Blondie, but while the first image was printed for King Feature's Syndicate and would have been serialized in newspapers across the country, the second image was printed in the clandestine method described above and would have only been available through black market distribution.



Figure 1.8: Chic Young's *Blondie*.



Figure 1.9: Blondie as an 8-pager character.

The original *Blondie* comic strip depicts a physically attractive female character behaving in a manner that could be described as irreverent but wholly innocent. The 8-pager version, in contrast, depicts the same character within a clearly pornographic context. These bootlegs are designed to inspire titillation by sexualizing existing characters like Blondie. The fact that readers like to see their favorite female comics characters engaging in pornographic acts reflects an underlying sexual tension within the non-pornographic comics from which these characters originate. The overt sexualization of the 8-pager can be seen as a response to the subversive sexual appeal of the original comic strips.

Another notable tie between comics and pornography comes through Robert Crumb and the underground comics movement of the 60s and 70s. As noted by comics authorities such as Les Daniels, Douglas Wolk, Roger Sabin and Robert C. Harvey, Crumb's depiction of sex is highly satirical but violent nonetheless and particularly demeaning to women. Sabin describes Crumb's work as follows:

His weak spot was sexism. Like just about every 1960s icon (with the possible exception of John Lennon), he thought of women as 'chicks', second-class citizens whose function was the entertainment of men (ideally in a sexual sense). To say he was slow to recognize the aims of Women's Liberation would be an understatement: his strips are crowded with misogynist images, often involving violence. (*Comics* 95)



Figure 1.10: Artwork by Robert Crumb.

Figure 1.10 illustrates the sort of misogynistic and violent images that Sabin speaks to. As the caption and dialogue make clear, Crumb is acutely conscious of how his image may be received. This consciousness brings the grotesque quality of the image to the foreground and thus suggests a satirical intent. At the same time, however, the reader (male or female) cannot wholly ignore the violent sexual connotations of the image. In typical Crumb fashion, this image stands on the threshold between insider and outsider art. His work is satirical but not wholly insincere in its misogynistic attitudes toward women. "It's weird to me how willing people are to overlook the hideous darkness in Crumb's work. What the hell is funny about rape and murder?" (Robbins, qtd. in Sabin, *Comics* 95). Furthermore, Crumb himself has held a lifelong association with various pornographic magazines and publications.

Through Crumb's extensive influence on the underground comics scene, his personal views on women transcend his own work. "Despite his flaws, every would-be underground cartoonist in the land wanted to copy Robert Crumb. So many tried to, in fact, that Crumb's style is indelibly stamped on the era: he both invented and shaped the movement" (Sabin, *Comix* 103). As the key artist behind the underground comics movement, Crumb's work is widely emulated, and such emulations often include the negative treatment of the female comics character.

Overall, the ties between comics and pornography create a correspondence between the connotations of the two genres. As comics adopt the signs of pornographic discourse--to use Reynolds' terms--they become more closely aligned with pornography itself and more closely aligned with preconceived notions regarding the portrayal of women in pornographic works.

As I have argued thus far, the encrusted connotations of the comics feminine are produced (largely) through comics' tendency to emphasize visual pleasure. As this tendency becomes entrenched, established and expected by the reader, the result is the further denigration of the comics form as a whole. Furthermore, these connotations are naturalized through the denotative authority of the comics image. Wonder Woman, as example, signifies "woman," and her denotative function lends credibility to the connotations that the image projects, no matter how arbitrary these connotations might be.

Ursula Le Guin notes a similar case of encrusted connotations leading to marginalization within the American science fiction genre of the 1970s. In "American SF and the Other," Le Guin--the foremost female author of American science fiction and daughter of famed anthropologist Alfred Kroeber--suggests that science fiction has been culturally marginalized, in part, because of the manner in which science fiction represents women.

One of the great early socialists said that the status of women in a society is a pretty reliable index of the degree of civilization of that society. If this is true, then the very low status of women in SF should make us ponder about whether SF is civilized at all. The women's movement has made most of us conscious of the fact that SF has either totally ignored women, or presented them as squeaking dolls subject to instant rape by monsters - or old-maid scientists desexed by hypertrophy of the intellectual organs - or, at best, loyal little wives or mistresses of accomplished heroes. (97)

According to Le Guin, the result of these masculinist tendencies is the failure of the genre to maintain verisimilitude with society in general (100). Le Guin speaks specifically to the social changes brought about by second-wave feminists such as Beauvoir, Friedan, and Millett. Where society had changed, SF of the 1970s continued to reflect a prior cultural value system as part of the escapist reading experience. Le Guin refers to such nostalgic tendencies as "brainless regressivism" (99). She concludes with the demand for SF authors and readers to "remember that about 53 percent of the Brotherhood of Man is the Sisterhood of Woman" (100).

In *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes*, Lillian S. Robinson offers a variation on Le Guin's argument. Robinson takes issue with the lack of progression in comics' representation of women. As noted earlier, Robinson is amongst those who praise Wonder Woman for her pro-feminist messages, but Robinson also notes that later incarnations of Wonder Woman failed to reflect the changes in women's social status throughout the latter half of the 20th century.

For more than half of Wonder Woman's long life, intersected as it has been by the creation and flourishing of other superheroes, there has been an activist women's movement that is part of both the realistic and the mythopoeic landscape in which the narratives unfold. Part of the critical task, therefore, is to consider the extent to which the comics have and have not embraced and taken off from new possibilities. (23)

Robinson's extensive inquiry into this question leads her to conclude that, for the most part, comics have not embraced or taken off from the activist women's movement and, as such, they continue to reflect outdated attitudes toward women in a manner that is

generally nostalgic and fairly consistent with what Le Guin refers to as “brainless regressivism” (99). As my own work suggests, I am inclined to agree with this assessment. By embracing visual pleasure and perpetuating the social stratification that visual pleasure creates, comics established encrusted connotations that the form was outdated with regard to its representation of women.

These sexist encrusted connotations are not a thing of the past. Overall, it is safe to say that the comics feminine is alive and well today. Particularly in mainstream American comics, the sexualization of female characters is more overt than ever.²⁶ In the past twenty years, however, comics artists have added new layers to these encrusted connotations by employing tactics of self-reference and self-reflexivity. By reassessing the comics feminine, these artists open the form to new representations of women that move beyond the sexist qualities of comics in general.

Charles Hatfield notes the presence of a resistance movement within the comics field. “In short, comics are clearly in the process of being repositioned within our culture. This is not because all comics are changing (such is never the case) but because *some* comics have stimulated profound changes in the ways the form is received and understood” (Introduction xi). Aligning myself with this movement, I wish to look at “some comics” that have stimulated profound changes in the way that the comics feminine is received and understood.

Mulvey suggests that “analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it” (16) and claims that her article functions as one such form of analysis. She also sees the alternative cinema as an active critique of visual pleasure in mainstream cinema, a form of analysis that interrogates the conventions of both the films and the audiences who watch them.

²⁶ Douglas Wolk speaks to this extensively in *Reading Comics*.

The alternative cinema provides a space for the birth of a cinema which is radical in both a political and an aesthetic sense and challenges the basic assumptions of the mainstream film. This is not to reject the latter moralistically, but to highlight the ways in which its formal preoccupations reflect the psychological obsessions of the society which produced it and, further, to stress that the alternative cinemas must start specifically by reacting against these obsessions and assumptions. (15-16)

In keeping with this theory, the comics texts that I have isolated for study in the second portion of this chapter all take an oppositional (or alternative) stance toward the mainstream practice of visual pleasure and do so by challenging the assumptions surrounding mainstream comics' use of visual pleasure and by highlighting the preoccupations of the comics audience.

As a part of a broader reassessment of comics connotations, the comics feminine has itself been subject to sporadic reassessment throughout the years. Comics in general underwent a radical change in the mid 1980s. Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* each demonstrated that comics could appeal to an adult audience and also that comics could incorporate tactics such as self-reference and self-reflexivity in order to explore the relationship between comics author and comics reader. Each of these three texts actively critiques a number of entrenched comics connotations in order to call them into question. While Spiegelman, Miller and Moore and Gibbons' respective masterpieces offer numerous attacks on past characterizations of women in mainstream American comics, gender

inequity is not the primary focus of their works.²⁷ It is not until 1993 that American mainstream comics readers are confronted with a comic that utilizes self-reflexive, self-referential tactics to denaturalize the connotations of the comics feminine and to, ultimately, call these connotations into question.

Sam Kieth's *The Maxx* is an experimental, surrealist superhero comic that presents a female character who actively (and quite consciously) resists conforming to the model of the typical female comics character. Through the fissures and contradictions that result from Julie's non-conformity and self-reflexive analysis, Kieth's Julie Winters character calls the comics feminine into question.

Maxx is the name of a misshapen, purple-clad muscle-man with large yellow claws. Despite his superhero physique and bright colour scheme, Maxx fails to conform to the model of the typical superhero. Cowardly in nature, Maxx is more likely to run from a conflict than he is to fight. He has no batcave to call home and lives, instead, in a cardboard box in an alley. He obsesses over his social worker (Julie Winters) and spends most of his time watching cartoons on her couch. He also clings to the reality around him but he continually departs into what appear to be psychotic episodes in which he envisions himself as the warrior champion of a strange jungle-world. Over the course of the series, this alternate reality slowly reveals itself to be the physical manifestation of Julie's psychological mindscape.

Julie is a young woman who has recently dropped out of architecture school and devoted herself to a sort of freelance social work. Her drastic change of direction in life is a response to a violent sexual assault. Public outreach is shown as a positive channel for

²⁷ It must be noted, however, that Moore's "Silk Spectre" character in *Watchmen* speaks to the emotionally damaging effects of over-sexualization.

Julie's post-traumatic anxieties. It is not, however, Julie's only response to the sexual violence that she has endured. Julie sexualizes herself in terms of dress and conduct. She also becomes rigid toward other people and even comes to condemn other rape victims. "If you don't act stupid, you don't get raped" (No. 1, 13). Lastly, she engages in criminal activity and sexual promiscuity. Kieth's story thus depicts a human being who is profoundly affected by sexual violence.

Throughout *The Maxx*, Kieth peppers his story with feminist subtext, including Julie's affinity for the feminist teachings of Camille Paglia. Julie is often made to defend her particular branch of feminism against others. Another of Julie's social cases recounts one such encounter:

Finally, Mom showed up. They had the same old argument.

Steinem!

Paglia!

PAGLIA??!

STEINEM?!?

MISOGYNY disguised as liberalism!

HUMORLESS TOTALITARIANISM!

You're buying into the same old MACHO posturing that's holding us
back!

YOU'RE buying into the culture of VICTIMIZATION and staying
HELPLESS!

(No. 4, 10)

In this scene, the characterization of the two female characters depends upon some understanding of the opposing feminist viewpoints of Steinem and Paglia. Such references to the internal divisions of contemporary feminism are a rarity amongst superhero comic books.



Figure 1.11: Julie Winters, ideal and real.

Beyond the text and plot elements, Kieth also complicates the visual depiction of his heroine. In figure 1.11, Julie is shown with an hourglass form, back arched, breasts thrust outward, all in a manner that is consistent with the typical images of the female form that tend to populate comics in general. The next panel shows Julie allowing her stomach to return to its normal position, which is consistent with Kieth's typical depiction of Julie as a woman with a rounded stomach, large thighs and slumped posture. This representation marks a departure from the hourglass Barbie dolls that make up virtually every other female character in the Image line of comics (publishers of *The Maxx*). Indeed, it is the sense of expectation that drives the humour of the scene, which

functions as a sort of self-examination that supplies and then subverts the reader's expectations. The reader assumes that Julie will look like the Barbie Doll type established by comics in general and by Image Comics in particular. Julie does so for a moment, but then she exhales and returns to normal.

Another intriguing scene occurs as Julie and a friend are in their swimsuits sunning themselves on a dock (No. 6, 1). Kieth devotes half the page to a large silhouette shot of Julie's entire body in the swimsuit, again showing Julie's untraditional physique (in terms of the comics feminine). It is the text here, though, that calls into question another key aspect of the comics experience. "I mean here we are, just hanging out, getting a tan--hardly glamorous, but someone could read pin-ups just in the way I'm standing here." Kieth questions the idea of the panel-as-window and the sort of invitational voyeurism that comics art can suggest. Such voyeurism, of course, is consistent with Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure. Mulvey suggests that the power relationship in voyeurism involves demystifying and watching the woman without her knowledge or consent. As demonstrated earlier, comics often create portrayals that accomplish such a feat, but Kieth does not do that here. As noted, Julie's body resists sexualization through a series of imperfections.²⁸ Her dialogue, meanwhile, suggests self-awareness on some level. Julie is conscious of the fact that someone might be watching her. Moreover, the dialogue reveals that she is conscious of the fact that someone may be sexualizing her. The uncommon (and impossible) sense of consciousness that Kieth allows Julie to experience thus removes the voyeuristic quality of the scene by gesturing toward the reader and toward the reader's involvement in constructing meaning from the

²⁸ Here I use this term only within the context of what the comics feminine has established as perfection. Wonder Woman might once again be used as a paradigm of comics' image of the "perfect" woman.

text. Kieth forces his reader to question their own gaze and thus their own role within the sexualizing practices of the comics form in general.

Julie actively resists being defined by her body alone. Instead of simply supplying the pin-ups that the contemporary comics reader may be desiring, Kieth calls attention to the sexual politics surrounding Julie's body. In her discussion of the photography of Francesca Woodman, Abigail Solomon Godeau argues that a "theme in Woodman's photography is the constant insistence on the woman's body as both a sight (a spectacle) and a site (of meaning, desire, projection)" (435). The result of Woodman's body consciousness is "that through strategies of defamiliarization and disruption--excess, displacement, disordering--Woodman exposes the overdetermination of the body as signifier, thereby significantly altering the spectator's relationship to it" (435). It is this same type of defamiliarization and disruption, represented by the depiction of Julie's body in *The Maxx*, that allows the author to call attention to the overdetermination of the comics female body as a signifier of sexuality and to call into question the place of the female body in the overall comics feminine.

This meta-textual effect is taken to a further extreme in an earlier episode featuring Julie and the archetypal supervillain, Mr. Gone. Gone is the antithesis of Maxx. Where Maxx represents the protective coping mechanism that Julie employs, post-rape, Gone is the embodiment of Julie's worst fear: a serial rapist who (in an intriguing parallel to Maxx) likewise obsesses on Julie, calling her on the phone to recount the details of each of his violent attacks on local women. He tells Julie such things as "I did it for you, Julie. The pain... the sex... it was all for you" (No. 1, 12). Throughout early issues of the comic, Kieth floats the possibility that both Gone and Maxx are components of Julie's

post-traumatic imagination, with Gone representing the paranoia and cynicism that Julie develops as a result of her violent encounter and Maxx representing the naïve and fantastic defensive mechanisms that Julie develops in order to enable her to continue living her life. Mr. Gone captures Julie in the second issue of *The Maxx*. Kieth first presents Gone at the sink in a towel, shaving his face for what he perceives as the culmination of his obsession. The imagery here is familiar to the reader. We see the bachelor talking to himself in front of the mirror while shaving, clad only in a towel. Gone is getting ready for a date. We then see what form this “date” is meant to take as Gone tells Julie “I can do anything to you I want” and Kieth reveals the adjoining room which shows Julie, captive in a state of hyperbolic sexual objectification (figure 1.12).

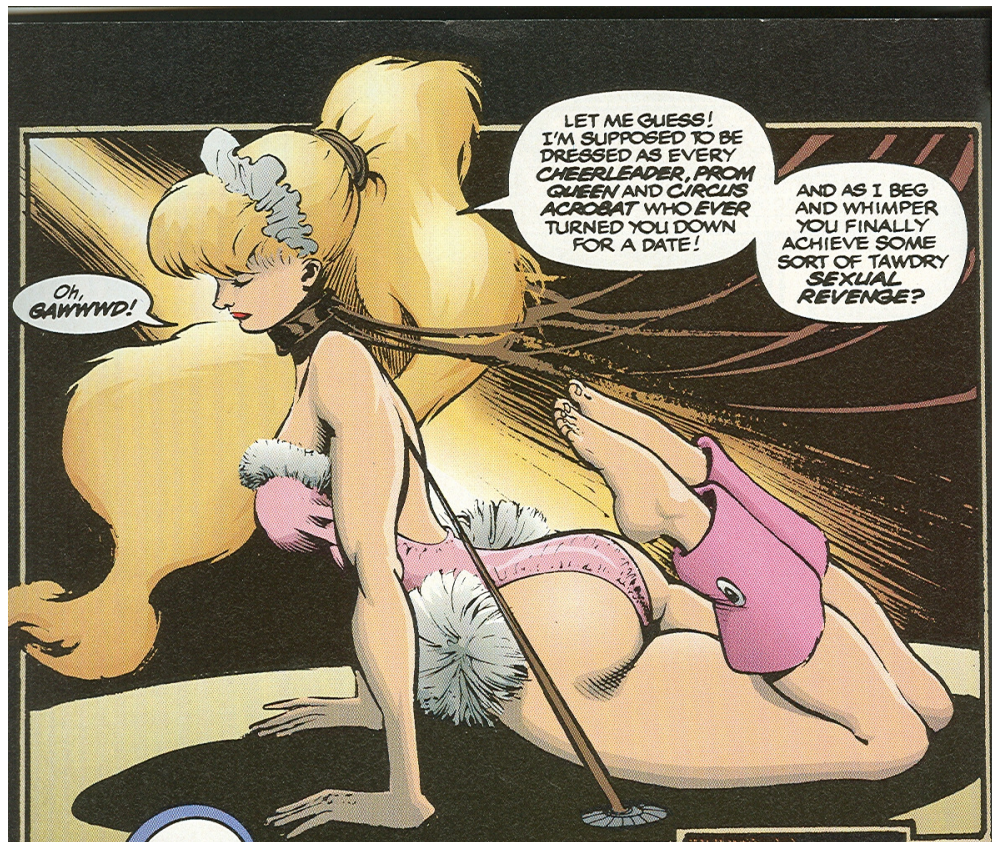


Figure 1.12: Julie held captive.

Kieth overloads the image with all manner of sexual connotations. The bondage element is signified through the fact that Julie is on her stomach, tied to the floor and walls by leather straps that are tied to a choke chain around her neck. Her outfit is a pink one-piece, identical to that of the iconic Playboy Bunny garb. In her hair is the lacy fabric headband of the equally iconic 'French maid' and around her ankles are the leg warmers of an archetypal aerobics instructor (No. 2, 13-14).

Julie's response to Gone's threat, however, completely deflates his ambitions: "Oh, gawwwd! Let me guess! I'm supposed to be dressed as every cheerleader, prom queen and circus acrobat who ever turned you down for a date! And as I beg and whimper you finally achieve some sort of tawdry sexual revenge?" Julie's derision and mocking show her non-compliance with the staging that Gone has put so much work into producing. The deflation of Gone's fantasy is evident in his immediate reaction: "well, so much for that plan" (No. 2, 14). The scene further progresses as Gone tries to assure Julie that "You will fear me!" with Julie replying "I doubt it," and then "You see me as some little miss perfect... some Madonna to be seduced and absorbed! Actually, I'm pretty flawed. I've got a fat stomach and chaff marks where my jeans cut in and bad breath from eating the wrong stuff! And my underarms are stubbly!" (No. 2, 15). Here Julie humanizes herself, thus deconstructing the fantasy of her would-be attacker. She establishes further non-compliance with his fantasy by allowing the intrusion of reality and the re-establishment of the natural order against that of the imaginative order.

Gone here becomes an extreme metaphor for the comics reader in terms of how the reader experiences the comics feminine. Gone intends to use Julie for pleasure, just as comics readers are taught to use female comics characters for visual pleasure. He is

willing to see the female character as less than human in order to achieve sexual pleasure. Julie, however, refuses to play along. In doing so, she resists both Gone's staged sexual fantasy and, potentially, the reader's expectations of how a female character should behave within a comics narrative.

The meta-textual intrudes with Kieth's suggestion that Gone's fantasy is that of the reader as well. The tone of the sequence invites a symbolic or meta-textual reading through the sequence's surreal atmosphere which alternates between gothic nightmare and vaudeville slapstick. Visually, Kieth's depiction of Julie, with numerous connotations of sexual fantasy, is difficult to ignore as an invitation to objectify. Julie is first drawn highly sexualized. In the initial image (figure 1.12), her body appears to be toned and muscular. Her posture has her feet up in the air with her hands pressed against the ground and her back arched in order to accentuate her breasts and buttocks. Then, as she subsequently removes herself from the fantasy construction, Kieth allows her thighs to enlarge, her shoulders to slump and her stomach to expand. The culmination of this imagery-deflation (or inflation) is a close-up of Julie's abdomen in costume, complete with roll-lines across her stomach.

Further enhancing the meta-textual effect is the layout of the pages (figure 1.13). Kieth initially sets up a visual conversation between Gone and Julie. Although the respective characters appear alone in individual panels, Gone is drawn, in profile, on the left side of the page, facing right, while Julie, also in profile, is drawn only to the right of the panels featuring Gone, facing left. The visual arrangement establishes that they are talking to each other, even though they do not initially appear in the same panel together.

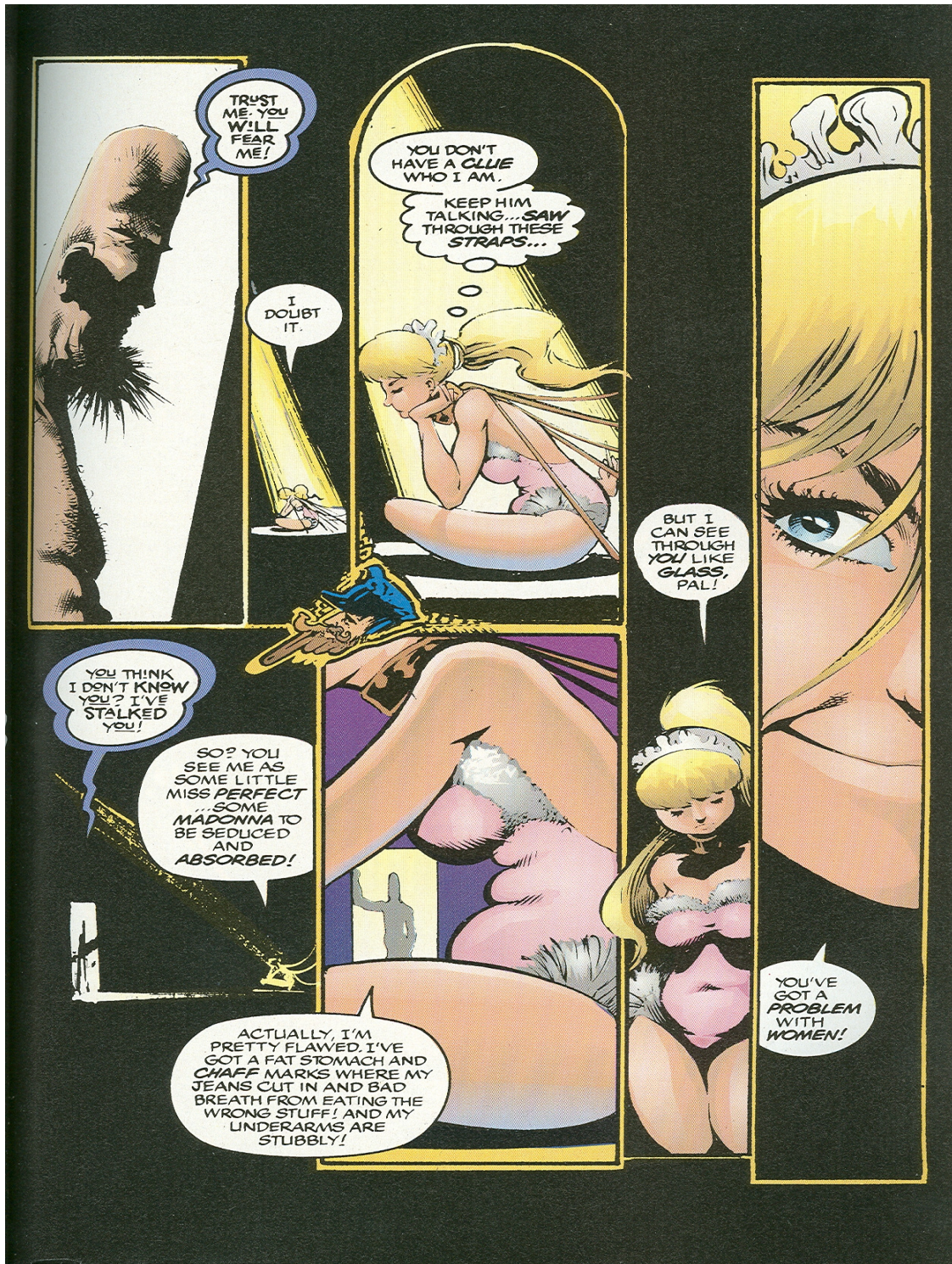


Figure 1.13: Kieth, *The Maxx* No. 214.

Immediately following her description of her own physical shortcomings, Julie is shown in the following panel in a near full-body shot, facing not at Gone, but directly at the

reader as she says "But I can see through you like glass, pal!" Note that although Julie faces the reader here, her eyes remain down (I will come back to this point momentarily). The meta-textual reading is further suggested by a break in the continuity of the scene. In this panel, Julie is seen standing up, which is impossible due to her bindings. This is followed by the last panel of the sequence, an extreme close-up of Julie's eye, now wide-open, as she concludes "you've got a problem with women!" (No. 2, 15). Here the gaze moves from within the narrative to without, as Julie stares right at the reader in a moment of key revelation.

Kress and Van Leeuwen suggest that when a represented participant looks into the reader's eyes the visual configuration has two related functions:

In the first place it creates a visual form of direct address. It acknowledges the viewers explicitly, addressing them with a visual 'you'. In the second place it constitutes an 'image act'. The producer uses the image to do something to the viewer...the participant's gaze (and the gesture, if present) demands something from the viewer, demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relation with him or her. (117-118)

The alternative to a demand, in Kress and Van Leeuwen's terms, is an offer, which "offers the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case" (119). By looking at the reader, Julie makes a demand upon the reader and the reader comes to recognize that Julie's words are directed as much at the reader as they are at Mr. Gone.

The transitional panel is the one, mentioned above, where Julie turns to face the reader but is not yet looking at the reader (thus blurring the line between offer and

demand in Kress and Van Leeuwen's terms). This transition is important. If Kieth did not show Julie turning away from Gone before addressing the reader, then the image of Julie's gaze might be interpreted as a narrativization of Gone's perspective (seeing through his eyes), and thus the dialogue would still be directed toward the villain alone. But by having Julie turn to the reader in this scene, Kieth again forces his reader to consider his or her preconceived notions of the comics feminine. Through the accompanying dialogue between Gone and Julie, Kieth forms a dialogue between the reader and the represented woman. This is the demand that the image places on the reader: to recognize that the words are being spoken to both the represented participant (Mr. Gone) and the interactive participant (the comics audience). Through this address, Kieth suggests that the lascivious gaze of the comics reader derives from some psychological failing on the part of the would-be objectifier (in this case, the reader). Like Gone, they too must have a problem with women.

What follows in subsequent pages is Gone's admission that he does, of course, have a problem with women, and Julie's explanation that "[t]his has to do with the fact that you're twisted as a corkscrew and looking to find someone: women, feminism, Paglia, me... to blame it on!" (No. 2, 17). Here Kieth is once again questioning the hyper-sexed role of women in comics, and suggesting that the comics feminine is the simple expression of adolescent fantasies.

Where, though, is Maxx during all of this? He is on his way to save the damsel in distress, but Kieth again alters the formula. Before Maxx can save her, Julie frees herself and cuts Mr. Gone's head clean off of his neck. This departure from the typical superhero paradigm is further enhanced by a later scene in which Julie and her knight in purple

tights are reunited. There is no love scene between them and no real or symbolic transaction of sex in exchange for security. There isn't even a kiss. Instead, the next scene has Maxx sitting on the rooftop with Julie, clipping her toenails for her. Even in this subordinate role, the hero fails and Julie takes matters into her own hands again, saying "Here, let me do it. You're too careful!" (No. 3, 19). In this scenario, Maxx's treatment of Julie is too delicate and thus ineffectual. This scene interrogates another connotation of the traditional hero-female relationship: its tendency to place the female on a pedestal. Julie, of course, rejects this tendency and inverts the stereotype of the strong man/weak woman. The inversion of gender roles in this scene is effectively illustrated in figure 1.14, which depicts the superhero covering his eyes out of squeamishness while the damsel in distress does the dirty work.

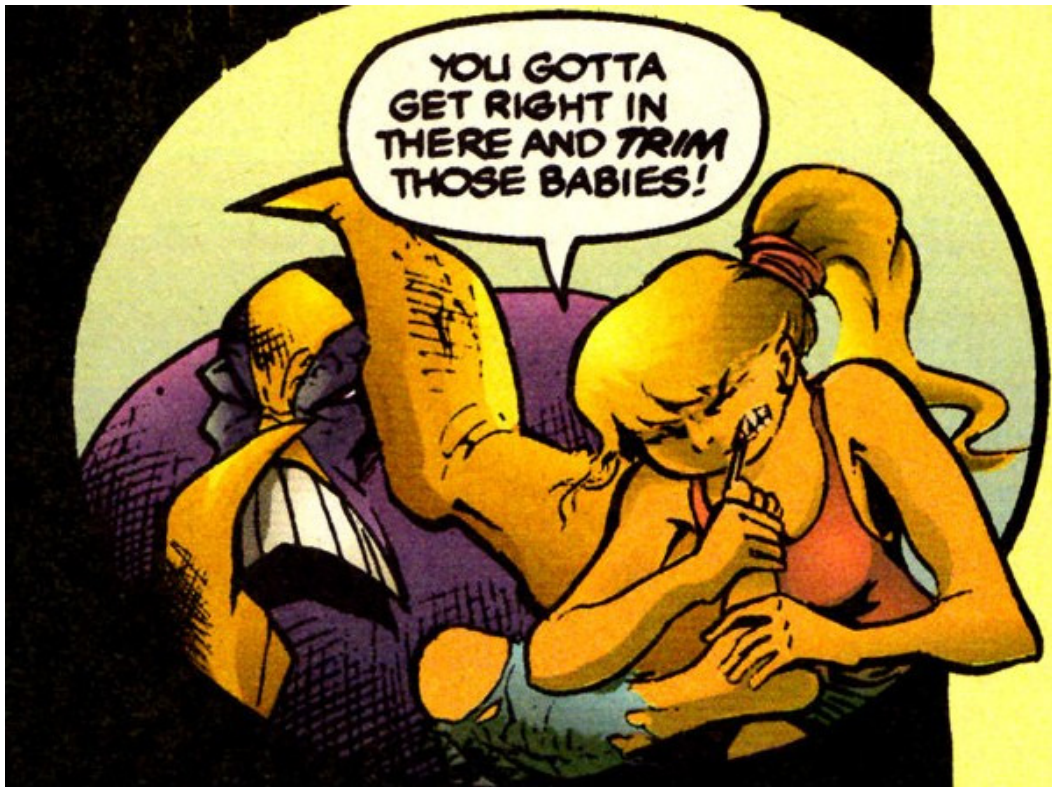


Figure 1.14: Julie and Maxx reunited.

It is important to remember, however, that this is more than simple role reversal. Julie is not “the man” and thus retains her denotative function as a “woman.” Julie is represented as a complex, multi-dimensional character who is capable of embodying a number of social roles. The alternate dimensions of the story (which represent Julie’s psyche) reveal a wide variety of Julies, intended to represent different aspects of her personality. These various Julies include a child unable to grow up as a result of tragedy, a jungle queen (the embodiment of Julie’s confidence) separated from herself as a result of the rape trauma, and a huddled figure living inside a giant egg watching the world from within her fortress. The strong Julie is just one aspect of her personality that becomes dominant as a result of the rape. The story is not a celebration of Julie the defiant, but a complex quest narrative in which the heroine is searching for herself, that which is taken from her, and that which she must develop anew. Kieth offers no happy ending for Julie. She never fully overcomes the violence that was done to her, and the process of reconstruction is forever ongoing.

Through the complexity of Kieth’s female character and her defiance of the sexualizing imperative of both villains and readers, the author subverts visual pleasure. All things considered, Sam Kieth’s *The Maxx* represents a rare and powerful portrayal of a strong, complicated female character who challenges both the expectations of the world around her and the encrusted connotations of the form in which her story appears.

A similar example of a comics text that interrogates the connotations of the comics feminine is Adrian Tomine’s story “Bomb Scare,” which achieved acclaim by becoming the only comics text to be included in Houghton Mifflin’s *The Best American Non-Required Reading 2002*. Tomine is amongst the best-selling alternative comics

authors in the world (Hung 1). Like Kieth, Tomine breaks down the barrier between reader and character in order to generate a sense of the consequences of visual pleasure and to actively reassess the encrusted connotations of the comics feminine. Tomine suggests that visual pleasure hurts women, men and the relationship that exists (in a generalized sense) between the two sexes.

“Bomb Scare” centers on two characters. Scotty is a social outcast who believes that he is superior to his sex-obsessed peers. Cammie is a socially accepted young woman who finds herself drawn into the role of exhibitionist as a result of a combination of bad circumstances and bad choices. The story revolves around Cammie’s relationship with Scotty and, in particular, his attitude toward the sexual exploitation which Cammie suffers at the hands of her male peers. Cammie and Scotty operate in different social spheres but both find themselves drawn into sexual maturity before they are ready. Scotty becomes increasingly aware that his friendship with another male student is leading the school rumour mill to speculate that Scotty is gay. In order to protect himself from further humiliation, Scotty distances himself from his only true friend. At the same time, Cammie finds herself performing a series of degrading sexual acts in order to be accepted into the upper echelons of high school society.

Cammie serves as a source of visual pleasure to the men of Tomine's fictional high school but she also serves as a potential source of visual pleasure to the readers of the story. Tomine uses the relationship between his story’s represented participants (Cammie and her male peers who frequently serve as her audience) to comment upon the relationship between the interactive participants in a comics narrative (the artist who renders images to provide visual pleasure and the reader who expects to receive visual

pleasure when reading a comic). Cammie here represents any comics image which is intended to provide visual pleasure to the reader. The male characters who exploit Cammie within the story represent the broader male comics audience which indulges in comics visual pleasure.

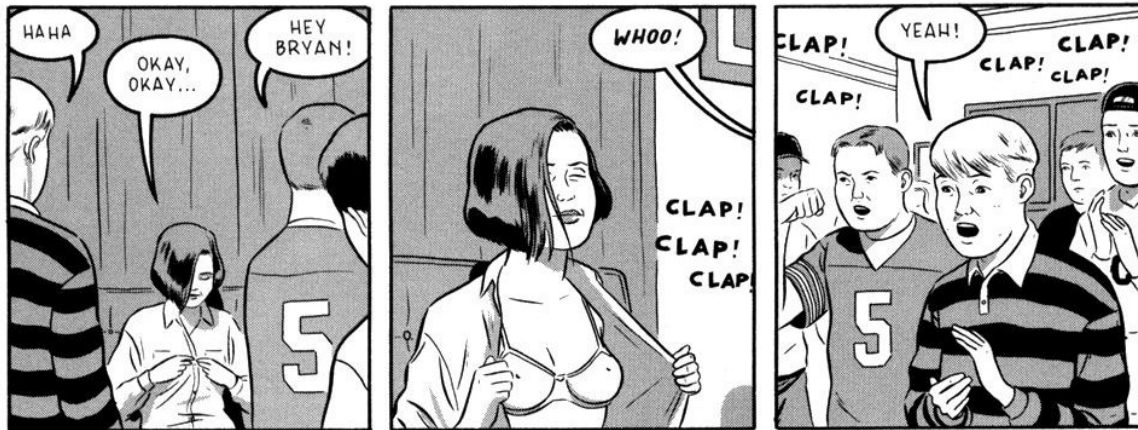


Figure 1.15: Cammie exposed.

This correspondence is demonstrated in the simple three panel sequence from figure 1.15. In the first panel, the reader is situated amongst the crowd as if the reader were one of the young men who are watching Cammie undress at a party. The second panel features a shorter distance between Cammie and the reader than that seen in the first panel. This narrowing of focus in the scene suggests a particular interest in focusing on Cammie's partially exposed breasts. The third panel of the sequence portrays the mob, and here the reader is made to perceive the sort of people that the reader was aligned with in the first and second panels (through a shared position of spectatorship). The reader moves, quite suddenly, from embodying a generalized represented participant (in the form of the mob) to once again perceiving things from a non-narrativized position. The sequence thus places the reader within the mob and then shows the reader what the mob (and by extension the reader) looks like. This transition creates a jarring effect and forces

the reader to perceive what it is that they had become, so to speak, in the earlier panels. The image of the mob shows what can only be described as single-minded, sexually obsessive, insensitive boys. The portrayal of spectators here is far from flattering. Through this moment of perception, "Bomb Scare" suggests that the visual pleasure of comics is rooted in a cultural practice which is--like the mob of spectators that Tomine depicts--single-minded, sexually obsessive and insensitive. In keeping with Mulvey's theory of the audience's inhabitation of represented male characters (a key component of visual pleasure), the reader does not--contrary to what they might expect--get to vicariously participate in conquest. Instead, they are made to become sleazy, sex-obsessed boys.

This reflection on the role of visual pleasure in comics surfaces again in the climax of "Bomb Scare." Cammie asks the virginal Scotty: "Do you want to see me naked?" (131). At this point, Scotty must choose what he wants. As Cammie's friend, he is acutely aware of the damage that her exhibitionism has caused to her own sense of self-worth. Scotty is also, however, a horny young teenager with a crush on Cammie. Here, Cammie is once again representing the female comics character in general. This time, however, the representative of the male audience is Scotty. He is the character with whom the reader is made to have the strongest identification and he is also the character who claims to be above the sexual compulsions of his male peers. Will he be the better man and form a deeper, more profound relationship with Cammie and appreciate her in all of her human complexity, or is he simply interested in reducing her to a sex object (just as the other men in the story were) so that he can see a naked woman?



Figure 1.16: Cammie's question and Scotty's response.

Scotty stalls and thus expresses his desire to treat Cammie as a subject rather than an object. He demonstrates a deeper concern for her than do the men who simply wanted to see her with her shirt off. He functions as a moral compass within the story by transcending the sexual compulsions demonstrated by the other men in Cammie's life. Unfortunately, the situation is not that simple. Scotty answers Cammie's question with a yes, but only after Cammie suggests that "Maybe we were right about you after all" (131) in reference to rumours of Scotty's sexual orientation. Thus, Scotty's true motive remains somewhat ambiguous. He may be giving in to his sexual urges (desire to see Cammie naked) at the expense of his sense of empathy for his friend or he may be expressing his own insecurity about his masculinity (with regard to the rumors that he is gay) and

aligning himself with hegemonic masculinity by staging the sexual compulsions that he has witnessed in the socially accepted male characters who routinely exploit Cammie (the same sort of characters that the reader is made to embody in figure 1.15). Either possibility suggests a potential answer for the question of why men enjoy and perpetuate the practice of visual pleasure. They may do so because of the primacy of sexual desire over all other concerns or they may do so because these sexual compulsions are socially constructed as important factors in defining masculinity.

In the sequence of panels which occur between Cammie asking the question and Scotty answering it (as seen in figure 1.16), Tomine's framing moves from a close distance in one panel to a medium close distance in the next panel to a medium distance in the panel after that. This movement creates a growing physical distance between reader and character which expresses the growing emotional distance created by Cammie's question. The reader's withdrawal from the action symbolizes the loss of intimacy between Scotty and Cammie. This loss reflects upon the story's theme of sexual confusion amongst teens. In "Bomb Scare," sexuality is characterized as an intrusive factor upon intimacy, one that distances the participants from any potential emotional connection. By choosing to treat Cammie as an object of sexual desire--despite his clear knowledge of the damaging effect that exhibitionism has had on her--Scotty destroys any chance of true emotional connection with Cammie.

The result of Scottie's decision is that Cammie once again removes her clothing. As seen in figure 1.17, her process of undressing and approaching Scotty is rendered across nine panels with nine distinct (and disparate) vantage points. Tomine's uncharacteristic use of incongruity in this sequence signifies the sense of confusion and

ambiguity that Scotty and Cammie experience in this pivotal moment. The effect simulates a whirling motion which is capable of inducing the sort of nausea in the reader that Scotty is experiencing as a result of his internal conflict.



Figure 1.17: Scotty and Cammie embrace.

The image in figure 1.17 is the final page of the story. It features no dialogue and thus further signifies the ambiguity of the scene. At the same time, this uncharacteristic silence helps to create a sense of emotional climax. Topless, Cammie embraces Scotty in a manner that is more cathartic than sexual. Tomine ends his story by fixing his characters in a permanent, silent embrace. The final two images of the text offer a poignant juxtaposition by showing the embrace from two distinct vantage points. The first panel shows Cammie with closed eyes and an intense, loving expression upon her face. The image suggests that Cammie is still confusing sexuality with emotional intimacy. She sees her sexuality as a way to connect with other human beings. As her friendship with Scotty becomes more intimate, she seeks to reciprocate in the only way that she knows how. The result is, ironically, the destruction of their shared emotional bond. This is seen most particularly in the face of Scotty in the next panel. Scotty is shown wide-eyed, confused and possibly guilt-ridden. In the last image of the text, Scotty seems to understand exactly what sort of bargain he has made and also the consequences of that bargain.

If we selectively remove the final pages of “Bomb Scare” from the context created by the rest of the story, these pages can be broken down as such: a young man walks into his room to find the object of his desire lying on his bed reading his pornography. She teases him, he gets embarrassed and upset and she asks him if he would like to see her naked. He says “yes” and the woman stands up and removes her clothing. Without the context of the rest of the story, this scene’s sexual tone is perfectly consistent with 8-pagers or with some of the more simple-minded underground comics from the 1960s or 1970s. If we take this out of context, however, we distort it. We know

that there are mitigating factors which severely undercut the sexual tone of this scene. Specifically, we know that Cammie is a complex human being and that her sexual offer is largely the result of her own sexual confusion and deflated sense of self-worth. Through the recurring self-reflexivity of the text, Tomine explores the dangers of the eroticizing processes at the heart of comics' common use of visual pleasure. In a manner that is in keeping with Mulvey's theory, Tomine demonstrates how visual pleasure drains the subject of her humanity and damages the relationships between men and women, both in the general sense and in the sense of individual relationships.

Furthermore, Cammie's idea to disrobe is first generated in response to finding Scotty's pornographic magazines; she seeks to play the same role in Scotty's life as the women who occupy the pages of Scotty's pornographic magazine. In this sense, Cammie may be subconsciously seeking to align herself with hegemonic femininity based upon her interpretations of these magazines. This subconscious alignment is an example of normalization²⁹ within the text. Thus, Cammie is demonstrating how mass-disseminated images of women can profoundly affect how a woman acts. As I have argued, comics do the same thing, and so it is fitting to have Cammie call attention to a young woman's susceptibility to cultural representations in this scene.

Scotty--a self-confessed subscriber to pornographic publications--is initially put off by Cammie's offer. He knows Cammie as more than just a visual object and he does not wish to degrade or exploit her. Tomine suggests that the visual pleasure of comics is based upon fetishistic representations which deny the complex humanity or subjectivity

²⁹ In *Unbearable Weight*, Bordo defines normalization as the process by which media representations encourage women to bring themselves in line with a popularized notion of what a woman is and should be. Similarly, Annette Kuhn suggests that "Representation can be understood, then, as regulation" (407) in reference to the normalizing practices of cinema.

of the represented women and instead use women for the sake of creating an erotic spectacle. Under anonymous circumstances, this process can be rationalized by the male spectator but, when confronted with an actual human being, Scotty (and by extension male readers in general) is less capable of participating in a process which he (and they) recognizes as degrading and exploitative. Cammie's humiliation, confusion and emotional trauma suggest the damaging potential of the comics feminine. Her emotional injuries can be seen to represent a broader form of injury to women in general. Finally, Scotty's confusion, desperation and subsequent emotional distance suggest a broader form of injury to men in general. Women are not the only victims of visual pleasure. Tomine suggests that what we are dealing with is a broader social ill.

Like Kieth, Tomine uses self-reflexivity to reinterpret and denaturalize the connotations of the comics feminine. These works challenge a number of the encrusted connotations that arise from the comics feminine by subjecting these connotations to a greater level of scrutiny than that which is seen in typical comics works and by offering (or counter-offering) representations of women which move beyond visual pleasure in order to create a more complex and more human image of women in comics.

Where Kieth and Tomine operate within the dominant (and masculinist) comics movements (superheroes and alternative comics, respectively), the formation of a feminist sub-genre of comics has provided an important site of more direct resistance to the encrusted connotations of the comics feminine. As with the works of Tomine and Kieth, the feminist comics movement has worked through self-reflexivity, but, in this case, with particular regard for life-writing that deals with the experience of being a

woman. The primary target of this movement has been the oversexualization of women in comics and the visual pleasure that these female characters are so often made to provide.

The first major experiment in post-CCA feminist comics was *It Aint Me Babe*, a 1970 anthology of feminist-friendly comics assembled by Trina Robbins. During this same period, Robbins formed the Wimmen's Commix collective, a group of primarily female comics artists who worked together toward the common goal of establishing a female presence in the comics form. This work was noteworthy but failed to reach a wide audience. "The individual comix did not command anything like the sales of *Zap* and *Bijou Funnies* [other alternative comics being produced at the same time] but nevertheless they were successful enough to inspire others" (Sabin, *Comics* 105).

Two members of the Wimmen's Commix collective left the group over internal tension and formed an anthology of their own. Assembled by Diane Noomin and Aline Kominsky-Crumb, the *Twisted Sisters* comics were far from financially successful. "My publisher told me he used it to insulate the walls of his barn. It did nothing. Hardly anybody read it. But over the years we gradually got a response from people" (Kominsky-Crumb quoted in Juno 167). This delayed response has since become an upwelling of sorts and *Twisted Sisters* is now considered to be a landmark influence on the current generation of female comics artists. Where the Wimmens Comix collective employed overtly political stories of oppression and resistance, the *Twisted Sisters* approach emphasized individuality, complexity and difference.

On the cover of its first issue, *Twisted Sisters* features a cartoon of Kominsky-Crumb sitting on the toilet. The cover sets the tone for the material contained

within. The comics feature stories of frank and brutal honesty, conveying a different side of women's experience.

We were just fed up with women's comics. We felt they published a certain type of work--pseudo-feminist idealized goddess bullshit. Aline and I were both interested in personal comics which were self-deprecating, ironic, crude, in-your-face, 'fuck you' stuff. (Noomin, quoted in Juno 179)

In order to translate this interest into comics stories, *Twisted Sisters* drew on standard underground comics devices such as irony, personal confession and a counter-culture mentality.

Phoebe Gloeckner is one of the most prominent artists to come out of the Twisted Sisters collective. Upon being exposed to the first issue of *Twisted Sisters* she found her artistic calling.

When I was around 15, my mother got a copy of *Twisted Sisters*, Aline Kominsky and Diane Noomin's first comic. I was so incredibly influenced by it. First of all, it was by women, and second, Aline's story was autobiographical. It was about her life as a teenager. It occurred to me that I could do the same thing. Here I am. I have this life with so many secrets. Many things were happening that I couldn't tell anyone about. I kept a diary, but *Twisted Sisters* inspired me to start drawing comics as well.

(Quoted in Juno 150)

Gloeckner soon began publishing within the collective that first inspired her, and she has since received higher praise than any other *Twisted Sisters* artist. Gloeckner's approach is quite similar to that of Kieth and Tomine, but she distinguishes her work from other self-

reflexive reinterpretations of the comics feminine through the uniquely confessional nature of her highly personal stories and, perhaps just as importantly, through the fact that she is seen as a strong woman's voice within a male-dominated, male-oriented art form.

Gloeckner's graphic stories are among the most sexually explicit comics in circulation yet also the least erotic. Her work complicates the encrusted connotations surrounding the comics feminine by removing the fantasy ideal of consequence-free physical expressions of lust. Gloeckner instead demonstrates the potentially damaging effects of using women as sex objects in comics. *A Child's Life and Other Stories* (1998) is Gloeckner's autobiographical record of her sexual experiences in life. Gloeckner--having earned a Masters degree in medical illustration--uses her intricately realistic style to render images of graphic sexual activity. There is nothing abashed about the artist's approach. The erotic quality of such imagery, however, is severely undercut by the comics narrative. In each of the encounters depicted, sex becomes the violation of some form of trust--trust in parents, in friends, or in boyfriends. The male objective in each of these encounters is physical gratification, while the female character (most often an alias character for Gloeckner herself) is instead seeking love and companionship. In each instance, the result is the gratification of the male and the disillusionment of the female. Thus, the tragic cycle that Gloeckner depicts is based primarily upon men using women as sexual objects (the same process that is perpetuated in the visual pleasure of comics). By rendering the story from the woman's point of view, however, Gloeckner is able to assert her own subjectivity and the reader is able to experience the collateral damage that accompanies sexual objectification.

Gloeckner's reinterpretation of comics visual pleasure is intricately tied to her chosen form. In the past decade, the rise of the graphic novel has dramatically increased activity in the field of comics memoir and created what is now comics' most heralded genre. "By the early Nineties, autobiographical comics were becoming common enough among independents as to almost deserve their own section in comic book stores" (McCloud, *Reinventing* 112). Award-winning graphic works such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan*, Craig Thompson's *Blankets* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* are all autobiographical to varying degrees. Comics memoir has established an important niche within the broader field of comics and within the broader field of memoir as well. This is partially because of the unique artistic opportunities that the form provides. As I will demonstrate through my reading of Gloeckner's work, such opportunities can play an important part in the re-assessment of the comics feminine.

The loose term currently in circulation for comics memoir is "autographics." Rocio Davis suggests that "the potential of the graphic narrative as a highly dynamic text, as opposed to the more static single-image narrative painting or plain text, determines the dialectic between text and image, providing creators with a wider range of artistic and imaginative possibilities" (267). Davis suggests that comics memoir exists in a constant state of substantive juxtaposition. The interplay between visual and textual elements becomes an element in itself and interpreting the comics narrative, or interpreting the life it recounts, often depends upon the interpretation of this relationship between text and image. This argument is quite similar to other arguments on the semiotic nature of comics in general but autographics scholars have argued that the multimodality of comics, along

with other semiotic capacities of the form, hold a particular value to the field of memoir. I will discuss comics' affinity with memoir in greater depth later but turn now to the manner in which Gloeckner employs multimodality to reassess the encrusted connotations of the comics feminine.

As a result of the multimodality that comics memoir affords, Gloeckner is able to arrange text and image in such a way as to create an intensive interrogation of visual pleasure in comics. Contradiction becomes the driving force of this interrogation. The visual elements fulfill the sexualization of character (so typical of the comics heroine) while the story itself--a memoir--creates an image of horrific psychological and emotional abuse. The result of this contradiction between text and image is outright dissonance. Through dissonance, Gloeckner's comic calls attention to the problems that arise from the use of visual pleasure in the comics form. Thus Gloeckner's work is very much in keeping with what Charles Hatfield identifies as the self-reflexive, ironizing imperative of the contemporary graphic novel, and also with what Leigh Gilmore identifies as the capacity for women's autobiography to challenge conventional conceptions of genre (7).

The most famous story from *A Child's Life and Other Stories* is "Nightmare on Polk Street" which chronicles the life of 15 year-old Minnie. Gloeckner has repeatedly acknowledged in interviews that Minnie is a pseudonym and that this experience was taken from her own life. Minnie is sexually and emotionally abused and exploited by her mother's boyfriend. As a result, she becomes sexually promiscuous at school (in part to please him) and alcoholic. She eventually drops out of school and runs away from home. On the streets of San Francisco, Minnie falls in love with a drug addict named Tabatha

who draws Minnie further into drugs and prostitution. This relationship culminates with Tabatha drugging Minnie and selling her unconscious body to drug dealers in exchange for a fix.

Gloeckner's story takes place at the centre of the tension between visual pleasure and the assertion of humanity (against the fetishizing impulse). Each of the atrocities that she experienced is fully rendered, often in a highly sexual manner. Gloeckner's illustration emphasizes the sexual organs and places the female subject in suggestive poses and postures. The images are loaded with sexual signs. Through this technique, she invites the reader to reduce the female character to a sexual object, one that is readily available to produce visual pleasure. In each case, however, the narrative context actively resists any potential visual pleasure by emphasizing the humanity of Minnie and the corresponding dissonance that arises as a result. Adding to this humanizing effect is Gloeckner's self-portrait which appears as the first image in this and many of her other comics narratives (figure 1.18). This image shows the author as an adult, seemingly staring directly at the reader, thus creating an image act (returning to Kress and Van Leeuwen's terms) which places a demand upon the reader. A closer analysis of the image, however, reveals that the image act is personal, rather than interpersonal. Gloeckner is drawing herself while looking in the mirror, as revealed by the inversion of the tattoo on her bicep. Here the visual configuration signifies that the story is itself an act of self-reflection, and the reader is thereby made acutely aware of the presence of a narrating "I."

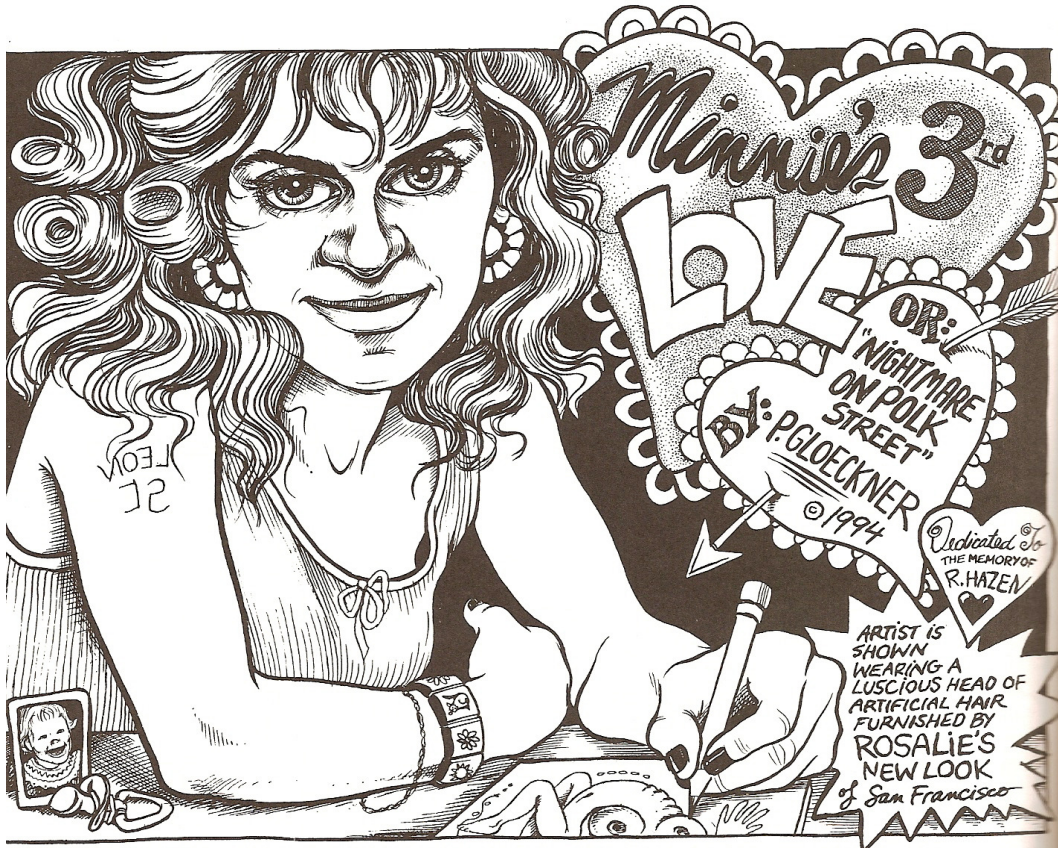


Figure 1.18: The narrating “I” in Gloeckner’s story.

In this sense, the author’s use of a pseudonym would seem to be irrelevant. Minnie, after all, is a flimsy disguise. So too is the “artificial hair” which Gloeckner is wearing in her self-portrait and which she makes a point of calling attention to in a caption. As disguises, these details are not particularly effective. They exist, rather, to signify the author’s simultaneous and conflicting desires for disguise (through the presence of such signs) and for revelation (through the aforementioned obvious flimsiness of these disguises). On the one hand, it is possible that Gloeckner uses these minor alterations to comment upon the inherent fictionality of memoir in general. On the other hand, it is possible that these flimsy disguises reveal Gloeckner’s personal conflict with the act of reconstructing (through the comics form) her trauma. As noted, the author

is very present within this narrative, deliberately so, but in these half-hearted disguises the reader locates a distancing imperative on the part of the author. This is her story, but she is not yet fully capable of embracing it as her story. Instead, Gloeckner's minimal distancing signifies a sense of apprehension which sets a tone of painful confession throughout the story.

Other stories from the text feature Gloeckner in a series of unfulfilling, sexually based relationships. For example, Gloeckner is abandoned by a boyfriend who claimed to love her after she tells him about her sexual abuse at the hands of her father--"I was a good student, a good athlete? I had good parents? There was no room for Penny's problem in my world?" (92); and in another story, Gloeckner is subjected to a sexual assault at the hands of a near-stranger. All of these events can--in some way--be related back to Gloeckner's initial abuse at the hands of her mother's boyfriend. This first negative sexual experience functions as a tragic turning point in a sex-life that is characterized by objectification and abuse.

The significance of this turning point leads me to discuss the micro-semiotic structures that emerge from Gloeckner's careful composition of her abuse at the hands of her mother's boyfriend. Gloeckner chooses not to depict her story of abuse in a narrative sequence. Instead, this entire part of the story is told in a single image. The abrupt nature of this approach injects a sense of catharsis to the image that is much in keeping with the conflict between revelation and disguise. Gloeckner wants the reader to know this but cannot dwell in recounting these events. As the centrepiece of her comics memoir, this image (figure 1.19) is invested with a tremendous number of signs that contribute to the

greater meaning of the story as a whole and also to the larger reassessment of comics visual pleasure.

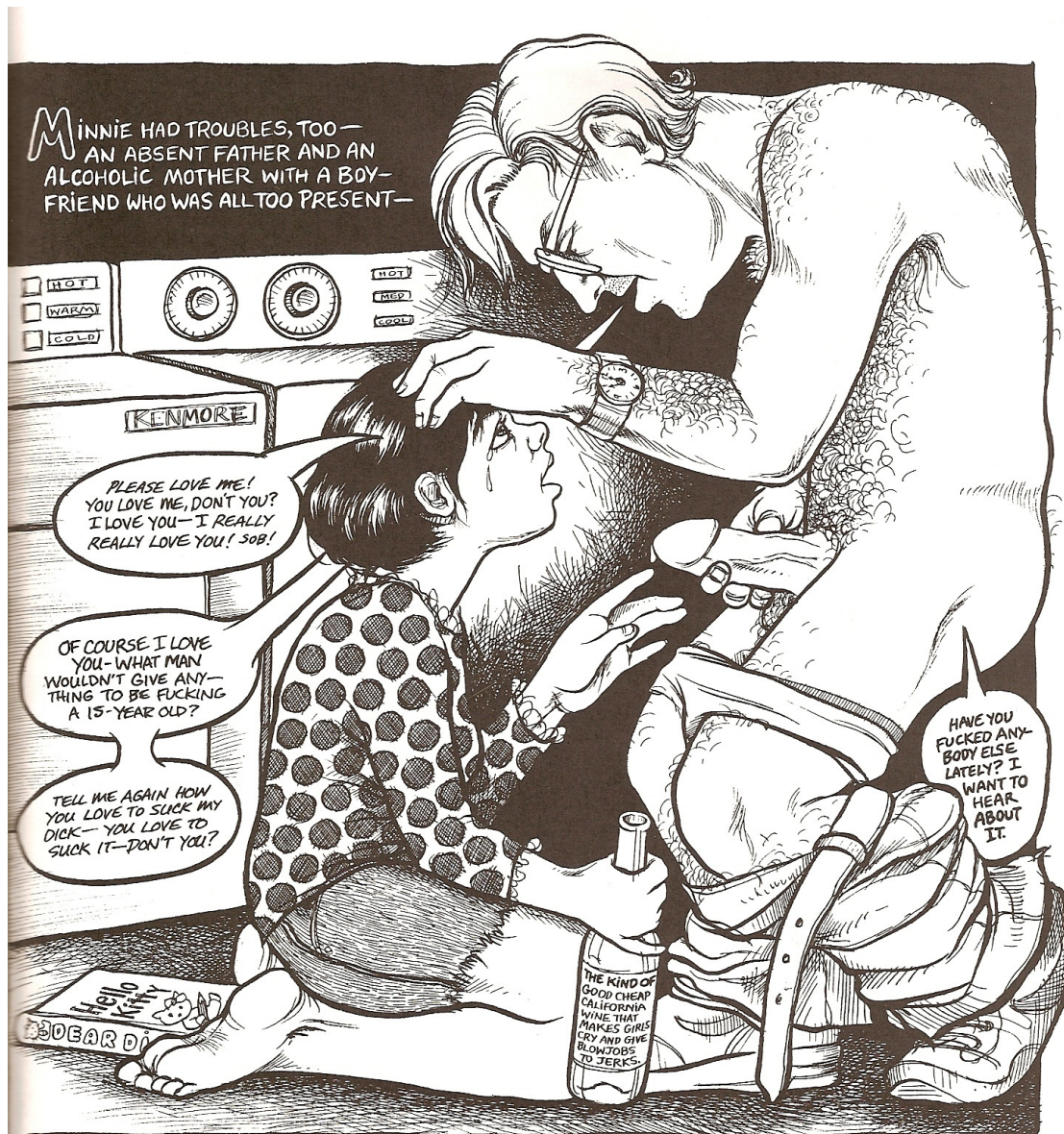


Figure 1.19: Sexual abuse in *A Child's Life and Other Stories*.

The image shows Minnie on her knees in a basement laundry room, crying and drunk on “The kind of good cheap California wine that makes girls cry and give blowjobs to jerks” while her mother’s boyfriend presses her head toward his erect penis. Minnie pleads for his love and affection while he pleads to hear about her other sexual exploits.

As the dialogue makes clear, Minnie and her mother's boyfriend are experiencing drastically different fantasies. Minnie just wants to be loved--desperately. Her mother's boyfriend, meanwhile, emphasizes a series of values that are diametrically opposed to conventional, monogamous romance. Minnie's tears in this scene, and her mother's boyfriend's deliberate ignorance of her trauma, further signify the abusive nature of this relationship.

As I noted earlier, the image here is presented in isolation and not as part of a sequential arrangement. The isolation helps to emphasize the singular power of this one image. Rocio Davis suggests that:

Interestingly, this approach to understanding graphic art [as amplification through simplification] is structurally related to one of the constitutive elements of the memoir of childhood, where specific details acquire heightened meaning. The process of memory often involves the symbolic interrogation of particular artefacts, sensory detail like the taste of specific food or the smell of a childhood home, brief conversations or episodes that resound emotionally in the author's memory. (268)

The isolation of the image on page 73 helps to amplify the importance of this particular incident as something of a keystone for understanding the overall meaning of Gloeckner's story. Furthermore, the image is the largest single panel in the story and thus holds greater significance than the images surrounding it. It would perhaps be simplistic to measure the weight of memories by the size of the panels in which they are rendered but, in this particular story, the idea that this one image is the largest memory is an effective approach to deciphering the text. The tragedy, of course, is that this episode is

indeed resounding emotionally in the author's memory and the fact that the image carries such weight within Gloeckner's visual memoir implies that it also carries such weight within Gloeckner's childhood recollection.

The angle of perception in this image places the reader at ground level, watching both abuser and victim from a medium distance. Here the outsider position of the reader is tested, and the voyeuristic act of the reader moves from providing visual pleasure to inflicting visual pain. The demystification of the represented female reveals a series of ugly truths that almost advocate the old adage that "ignorance is bliss." Again, there is a quality to Gloeckner's artwork that seems to invite exhibitionism through an overload of sexual signs. In this sense, the sexual nature of the visual material can be perceived as a sort of bait within a greater cognitive trap.

The conflict between visual pleasure and human consequences is signified within the visual argument. Gloeckner presents two perspectives in her illustration: male sexual fantasy and female victimization at the hands of it. That these two depictions are inseparable is the true accomplishment of the narrative. Gloeckner's caricature chooses to distort/enhance two key elements of human anatomy: the genitalia and the face--the sexuality and the effect of it (as seen through the emotive face). Her characters are drawn with unnaturally big heads and unnaturally big sexual organs. This distortion is made all the more prominent in contrast to the aforementioned realism of Gloeckner's illustration style. The result is a style of drawing that isolates the cause and effect elements of a sexual abuse. Gloeckner's visual style is thus ideal for telling a story of sexual atrocity.

With regard to atrocity in general, Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* suggests that visual representations of atrocity (she speaks specifically of war

photographs) can hold a variety of different meanings and must be contextualized by the caption. As multimodal texts, comics cannot help but contextualize. For example, Richard Reynolds argues in *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* that the visual sexuality of the superheroine is undercut by the impotence of the narrative accompanying it. There is nothing sexual going on and the heroine is oblivious to her own domesticated sexuality. Nobody even points out that her outfit is extremely revealing. In many underground comics, violent, abusive sex is often contextualized as humorous and, ultimately, what the woman secretly desires. Gloeckner's sex is different. Through the persistent reiteration of a human presence within the sexual scenes depicted, the visual sexual acts are contextualized as cruel, manipulative, depraved and damaging.

Gloeckner loads her image with visual metaphor. Figure 1.19 is contained by a thick black frame line which functions only on the left-side of the panel and along the bottom. The right and top panel boundaries are surrounded by dark shading, and there the border line is indistinguishable from the shadow. Transgressing this boundary, however, is the body of the mother's boyfriend whose foot, text balloon, posterior and back all push into the white margins outside of the right border while his head transgresses the top panel border. Thus, the framing itself signifies that the mother's boyfriend will not be contained by the panel or by the author's chosen mode of representation. He is larger than both. Scott McCloud refers to the transgression of panel boundaries as "bleeds." He defines the effect as such: "Time is no longer contained by the familiar icon of the closed panel but instead hemorrhages and escapes into timeless space. Such images can set the mood or a sense of place for whole scenes through their lingering timeless presence" (*Understanding* 103). In this sense, Minnie's mother's boyfriend's resistance to the mode

of representation is testimony to the lingering traumatic effect that he has over her childhood. In contrast, Minnie is herself cornered by panel boundaries and thus trapped. The functional panel line encloses her on the left and along the bottom while the right and top borders of Minnie's space are created by the abusive male. Thus, the panel generates a series of very clear power hierarchies with particular relevance to the narrative themes of the story. Minnie is partly trapped by circumstances and partly trapped by her mother's boyfriend.

While Minnie kneels, resting on the floor behind her is a "Hello Kitty" diary, a signifier of the childhood innocence that is now--spatially and symbolically--behind her. Instead of holding the diary in her hands, her right hand is on the bottle of wine that partly enables her abuse while her left hand is shown reaching for the phallus of her mother's boyfriend. Thus, the diary operates as a symbol of what should have been, providing a deeper sense of the tragedy at hand. Adding greater meaning to this particular symbol is the form in which it appears. Gloeckner's story is a visual diary. The reader's ideal diary of a fifteen year old girl should be "Hello Kitty" as opposed to a chronicle of sexual/psychological abuse, and by having the "Hello Kitty" present within this image, Gloeckner creates a greater sense of dissonance in the story. Through this technique, the scene actively resists the potential for any visual pleasure to be taken from this scene.

This dissonance between genre (childhood memoir) and content (sexual abuse) is enhanced by the unique qualities of the comics form. Both Davis and fellow autographics scholar Gillian Whitlock acknowledge that the very act of comics reading connotes a childhood experience. Whitlock refers to "the association of the comics with juvenilia and nostalgic memory work" (967). To some extent, the act of reading comics evokes the

same associations as jumping rope or playing tag. One can do these things as an adult, but there is a nostalgic quality to revisiting such experiences from your childhood, including comics reading. Gloeckner's use of the comics form, with its juvenile associations, thus furthers the dissonance expressed in her narrative. Whitlock also argues that the process of assembling a comics narrative--constructing a linear narrative based upon fragmented images--bears a remarkable similarity to the act of recollection (particularly childhood recollection). By utilizing the comics form, Gloeckner simulates the memory work process of the author herself and draws the reader toward greater identification with Minnie.

Conventionally, of course, the reader who is experiencing visual pleasure is made to identify with a male counterpart within the story. Mulvey's theory of the male proxy character is once again relevant here. Gloeckner's depiction of sexual abuse, however, creates a significant obstacle to the identification of the male character who seeks to possess the female. To "possess" Minnie in this particular context is to become--indirectly--a sexual abuser. If the male reader is able to remain distant from Minnie's narrative and approach the images strictly as a source of visual pleasure, then he is perpetuating (symbolically) the same violent sexual action that is performed by Minnie's mother's boyfriend. This is also an obviously unappealing option and the reader is instead forced to identify with Minnie (the only viable identification figure) and to experience, vicariously, the trauma of sexual violence.

Through this process, the relationship between Minnie and the reader is strengthened, as is the reader's sense of empathy for Minnie and for Gloeckner (by extension). At the same time, however, the reader is forced to reassess the role of visual

pleasure in this and other comics narratives. As I have argued, comics have built an industry by catering to masculine fantasies of sex and power. In Gloeckner's comic, however, the only one indulging in this type of fantasy (in contrast to Minnie's fantasy of love and affection) is the abusive male. By pushing the reader into the position of a morally and legally abhorrent character (that of someone who, like Mr. Gone in *The Maxx*, clearly has a problem with women), Gloeckner forces the reader to consider the exploitative nature of visual pleasure in comics.

As Mulvey discusses, mainstream cinema works hard to rationalize the experience of visual pleasure. Mulvey looks at factors such as the darkness surrounding the audience while they watch a film and the obvious spectacle of the giant, brightly lit screen. She argues that these factors "portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy" (17). In contrast to cinema's rationalizing imperative, Gloeckner's work seeks to make the reader conscious of the manner through which visual pleasure is derived and the symbolic violence that arises from such processes.

Gloeckner is not the only female artist to push for a feminist reassessment of the comics form, nor is she the only artist to utilize autobiography as a tool for such reassessment. Alison Bechdel, Lynda Barry, Diane Noomin, Marjane Satrapi, Julie Doucet and Aline Kominsky-Crumb (to name but a few) have all advanced feminist arguments through autobiographics. Gloeckner's unique contribution to the field lies in her treatment of visual pleasure within a sexually explicit but self-reflexive context. More than any of her contemporaries, Gloeckner embraces the conventions of visual pleasure

in comics for the sake of undoing them. Mulvey's idea that analyzing visual pleasure destroys it is relevant here. As a memoir of psychological and emotional trauma, Phoebe Gloeckner's art uses the multimodal capacity of the comics form to analyse the role of visual pleasure within comics. Gloeckner taints the sexualized comics image and denaturalizes the encrusted connotations of the comics feminine. Kieth and Tomine undertake similar processes and, in all cases, the result is the interrogation of visual pleasure.

What we see in this chapter are a number of overt examples of how encrusted connotations can limit the accepted spheres of a particular form. Comics are often perceived to be inherently sexist--a perception that is not unfounded, as my readings attest. This sexism has become an encrusted connotation of the comics form in general and can limit people's ability to take comics seriously. Recent comics artists have, however, directly revisited these connotations. By reassessing the connotations of sexism in comics and the semiotic process by which these connotations have been naturalized, such artists have helped to elevate the cultural status of comics art. Thus, this revisioning work has to be considered an essential component of the ongoing comics-as-literature movement.

CHAPTER TWO

Visual Minorities: Representations of Race in the Comics Form

I felt terrible, and when I examined it, I realized a great part of the “visual rush” of comics is at least partially, if not almost entirely, founded in racial caricature.

—Chris Ware, in *Dangerous Drawings* (41)

As with the sexist encrusted connotations of comics, the racist encrusted connotations of comics represent a potent obstacle to the comics-as-literature movement. Comics have played a large role in constructing, reinforcing and disseminating racial hierarchies that posit the superiority and authority of a white majority. Racial minorities in comics have not, traditionally, been represented in a positive manner. Instead, the representations of racial minorities often project messages of inferiority, exoticness and Otherness. These racist messages (as with the sexist messages explored in the last chapter) are naturalized by the denotative power of the comics image.

In *White on Black*, Jan Nederveen Pieterse conducts an extensive study of the visual history of black stereotypes in the Western world. Pieterse establishes that “the legacy of several hundred years of western expansion and hegemony, manifested in racism and exoticism, continues to be recycled in western cultures in the form of stereotypical images of non-western cultures” (9). Pieterse suggests that this iconography of race forms what he describes as “cultural baggage” (9). Comics, of course, play a prominent role in American visual culture and their treatment of race can be seen to create the cultural baggage that Pieterse describes.

The racism of early American comic strips is not difficult to identify. As Charles Johnson notes, “in American comic art we find risible yet demeaning (and often dangerous) images of *all* racial Others” (9-10). The ongoing racism of comics, however, is far more difficult to assess due to the extent to which it has become embedded in the form in a manner that is far more subversive than the obvious sexism of comics. Ware’s assertion that the “‘visual rush’ of comics is at least partially, if not almost entirely, founded in racial caricature” (qtd. in *Dangerous Drawings* 41) is damning but not entirely unfounded. As I will demonstrate, however, the creative potential of revisiting the racist encrusted connotations of the comics form has provided comics artists with a unique opportunity to comment upon racist practices in general. As such, the revisioning work of particular comics artists with regard to racial connotations has led to some of the comics form’s most highly acclaimed masterpieces.

In this chapter, I will first demonstrate the manner in which early American newspaper comic strips utilized stereotypes to denigrate particular racial and ethnic minority groups and create a tradition that lasted for over half a century. Then I will move into a close reading of early experiments with minority superheroes in the 1960s and 1970s. I will begin with a look at Luke Cage and the Black Panther, followed by the minority superhero team found in *X-men* comics circa 1975 (and the character known as Storm in particular) in order to demonstrate how the racism of comics, in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, became less direct, somewhat contradictory and extraordinarily complicated. I will then explore the work of contemporary graphic novelists who utilize the comics form (and the racist encrusted connotations thereof) to comment upon racist practices in general. I will conclude this chapter with a thorough

examination of Art Spiegelman's landmark graphic novel, *Maus*, in order to demonstrate how Spiegelman exposes the inherent misconceptions and political motivations behind visual racial distinctions.

Racism is a difficult concept to define. For my part, I will base my discussions on the work of David Theo Goldberg, a well-renowned racial studies expert who sees racism as a result of cognitive processes of categorizing and classification.

Categorizing simplifies the complexity of the surrounding world: It condenses potentially overwhelming data to manageable proportions, it enables identification, it serves ultimately as a guide to action, and in modernity it extends to human beings a sense of social control, of being in control. (*Racist* 121)

Categorizing, in Goldberg's eyes, is essentially a cognitive sorting system that stems from a human tendency to classify data ("Social" 301). Combined, this categorizing process and this impulse to classify form what Goldberg refers to as "the preconceptual grounds of racist discourse" ("Social" 301). It is these human tendencies, he argues, that lead to racism.

At the same time, Goldberg acknowledges the role that these processes and impulses play in our everyday lives. "Classification, order, and value are fundamental to the forms of rationality we have inherited" ("Social" 303). Simply put, this is how we think, how we engage with and understand the world around us. The problem, for Goldberg, is that "racial classification--the ordering of human groups on the basis of putatively natural (inherited or environmental) difference--implied a hierarchy of races" ("Social" 302). Once races are neatly defined, they are then arranged in terms of

superiority and inferiority. From there, racial hierarchy boils down to two things: “it purports to furnish the basis for justifying differential distributions or treatment, and it represents those very relations of power that prompted them” (“Social” 308). It is here that racial hierarchy--as a political tool that justifies various Othering practices--becomes a form of prejudice, and can thus be considered racism.

I return now to the most pressing question: are comics racist? Goldberg defines racists as such:

Racists are those who explicitly or implicitly ascribe racial characteristics of others that they take to differ from their own and those they take to be like them. These characteristics may be biological or social. The ascriptions do not merely propose racial differences; they assign racial preferences, and they express desired, intended, or actual inclusions or exclusions, entitlements or restrictions. (“Social” 296)

This process of ascribing racial characteristics and the subsequent usage that Goldberg describes can be located within comics, which also propose racial differences, assign racial preferences and disseminate racial knowledge. Thus, under Goldberg’s terms, comics can be said to express racist values.

Though Goldberg does not speak specifically to comics, he suggests that media in general has the effect of interpellating its audience, hailing individuals or calling them to subjectivity through the recognition of racial determination as either Self or Other (“Social,” 309).³⁰ This produces what Goldberg refers to as “Racial Knowledge.”

³⁰ Other scholars on the subject of race, such as bell hooks and Anne McClintock, have come to the same conclusion.

Production of social knowledge about the racialized Other, then, establishes a library or archive of information, a set of guiding ideas and principles about Otherness: a mind, characteristic behavior or habits, and predictions of likely responses...The set of representations thus constructed and catalogued in turn confines those so defined within the constraints of the representational limits, restricting the possibilities available to those rendered racially other as it delimits their nature.

(“Racial Knowledge” 155)

Once produced, perpetuated and disseminated by the media, this library or archive of racial information becomes a stereotype, which Goldberg argues has the power to “define and colour those social facts considered relevant” (*Racist* 126). Visual caricature possesses this same power to define relevant social facts. It produces racial knowledge by presenting characters that are drawn (literally and figuratively) from this catalogue of racial knowledge. As a result, comics disseminate the “set of guiding ideas” that mark the “representational limits” of particular races.

In keeping with Goldberg’s ideas, I will argue that comics have played a profound role in shaping the contemporary landscape of Western racial identity by mass-producing a version of racial knowledge (a set of broadly accepted racial stereotypes) that supports the interests of the white majority. It is through this role that comics have made racism an encrusted connotation of the form, one that has proven ripe for reinterpretation in the hands of a number of contemporary comics artists.

Historically, comics have not been commonly used as a space for the expression of progressive views on race.³¹ Instead, comics have often been used as a key site for the establishment and enforcement of the racial divide in popular culture. The Othering capacity of such enterprises establishes racism as an encrusted connotation of comics in general. Readers of early 20th century comics came to expect racial stereotypes, and these stereotypes have thus become strongly embedded within the form. These early comics presented racial difference as a clear-cut and hierarchical phenomenon. For the early 20th century comics audience, race was easy to identify in such comics³² and the superiority or inferiority of a given race was equally simple to ascertain.

This Othering process, as it existed at the time, is consistent with the manner in which comics have perpetuated sexist ideals (as discussed in my previous chapter). Again, the comic presents an image of a minority group; then the comic projects a series of complex connotations that signify--ultimately--inferiority. In keeping with Barthes' theory of the denotation/connotation relationship, the connotations piggyback on the reader's acceptance of the denoted sign and the connotations are thus naturalized and added to the individual reader's archive of racial information. In order to interpret the image, the reader is forced to accept the denotative relationship between signifier and signified, even if the myriad connotations attached to the image do not necessarily ring true.

³¹ A poignant exception can be found in some EC Comics titles of the 1950s which played with racial stereotypes in an ironic and socially progressive way. The series *Shock Suspenstories* in particular devoted many stories to racial injustices.

³² It is important to note that visual distinction between characters is an essential component of comics character design. As McCloud notes: "On a purely practical level, they [visual distinctions amongst characters] help the reader keep track of who's who" (*Making 70*).

Though the racist Othering process of comics is roughly the same as the sexist Othering process of comics, it is important to note that there are key differences within the context that surrounds the transmission of these Othering messages. For one thing, the spatial and cultural segregation of race in North America is problematic for comics creators. As Scott McCloud argues:

For all the ongoing oppression and biases against women, it's a rare man who doesn't interact with the opposite sex on a daily--if not hourly--basis. Even when the interpretations of that discourse are distorted, the information is at least available for those willing to listen. But in parts of North America, as elsewhere, it is possible for members of the majority to go for months or even years, without engaging persons of color in conversation. Thus the cultural isolation of minorities can be an order of magnitude greater. (*Reinventing* 105)

Within situations of racial isolation, the power of the comics image to project and naturalize racist ideas is often greater than its power to project and naturalize sexist ideas.

In the mainstream comics genre, which aims sales at a white majority, the representations of Otherness have often had less to do with what is real and more to do with what is comfortable, what is exotic³³ or what is capable of perpetuating racial hierarchies and power structures. Furthermore, when such representations of Otherness are encountered by the racial minority, they can have a powerful effect on their sense of position within the racial hierarchy. Racial representations in comics create an image of

³³ In *Mythologies*, Barthes suggests that exoticism takes the Othered human subject and turns it into an object of spectacle that is devoid of humanity and therefore non-threatening (though still appealing)(152).

what is expected for members of minority racial groups by clearly delineating boundaries of social and cultural tolerance and “restricting possibilities” (as Goldberg phrases it).

Such racist messages are evident in the origins of American comics and continued, according to Frederick Stromberg, until the 1950s (228). Many of the early American newspaper comic strips derived their visual punch-lines from ridicule of racial minorities. This practice was not uncommon and can be located in several different avenues of American culture. For example, Pamela Brown Lavitt recounts how American vaudeville audiences of the early 1900s were “weaned on minstrel mirth and Hebrew impersonation” (253). Similarly, Daniel Foster finds that African-American stereotypes formed the basis of the humour in the wildly popular radio serial *Amos ‘n Andy*, which began its broadcast run in 1928 (13).

Produced primarily in New York City, and primarily for a popular audience with low levels of literacy and education, early twentieth century comic strips used racially based humour to draw in readers. At the same time, the turn of the century influx of European immigrants to America (the vast majority of whom entered through New York City) combined with post Civil-War anxiety (particularly in regards to African-American integration and the military exploitation of Irish immigrants) to create a high level of racial tension in American society. This tension resulted in a viable market for comics that depicted visual minorities, an early comics infatuation with racial stereotype and an audience that was accustomed to the existence of racial stereotypes within the comics form.

One of the more prominent examples of comics’ role in perpetuating racial stereotypes can be seen in the way that comics have worked to preserve and disseminate

minstrelsy. Often considered the original form of American theatrical art, a minstrel show consisted of white actors dressing up in black face makeup and portraying African-Americans as slapstick buffoons within a pastoral setting. “Minstrel shows contained not only explicitly pro-slavery and anti-abolitionist propaganda; they were in and of themselves a defense of slavery, for their main content came from the myth of the benevolent plantation” (Pieterse 134). Despite the progressive decline of minstrel shows in America leading up to the 20th century, the tradition of minstrelsy holds a strong place in the history of the comics form.



Figure 2.1: A Slumberland Savage

It can be as overt as “The Slumberland Savages” (as seen in figure 2.1), who are drawn with white areas around their mouth and eyes (in imitation of blackface) or it can be as subversive (and pervasive) as Mickey Mouse. About the latter, Chris Ware points to the white gloves of Mickey Mouse as a signifier of minstrelsy (qtd. in Juno 41). In keeping with the minstrel tradition, both Mickey and the Savages act, appropriately, like buffoons.

Minstrelsy projects clear messages of black inferiority with profound cultural implications. For example, the common minstrel character of Jim Crow has become a cultural symbol of the inferior status that the white American majority enforced upon the African-American minority. This symbol extends into political practice of the late 19th and early to mid 20th century when “Jim Crow Laws” referred to political policies of segregation. This unequal division of public resources (transportation, schools and even water fountains) remained in existence until the civil rights movement of the 1960s. By adopting a racially charged system of connotations and by carrying on the minstrel tradition in a subversive manner, comics align themselves with the racist messages that minstrelsy endorsed.

Though often its most common victims, African-Americans are not the only victims of racism in the comics form. Comics have also helped to build and distribute visual stereotypes of many other racial groups. In many cases, the comics form goes so far as to render non-visible minorities visible by creating visual stereotypes that make an Irishman, Scotsman or Jewish person immediately identifiable to the eye. Ware points to Abie the Agent (1914-1940) as an obvious Jewish stereotype, and Happy Hooligan (1900-1932) as an obvious Irish stereotype. He concludes that “If you look at many early

comic strips, they're endemically 'ethnic'" (qtd. in Juno 49). This concern with ethnicity reflects the desire of the American majority to stabilize identity through the creation and dissemination of fixed racial identities (visually identifiable) within fixed racial hierarchies.

This type of racial representation in comics posits the authority of the white majority Self over the Other, which, in this case, constitutes anyone and everyone who is not in the white majority. By representing race in terms of us versus them and by utilizing race as a definitive marker of identity (often *the* definitive marker of identity), comics establish and perpetuate racial hierarchies. The minority becomes a gross simplification that reflects the ease of visual determination (a clear form of categorization and classification) over the complexity of racial and cultural differences. The image of the racial minority character in comics is immediate, easy to grasp and easy to distinguish. Thus the visual Other is readily available for subordination in the comics form.

Take Happy Hooligan for example. The image in figure 2.2 shows a typical scene from the comics strip: Happy Hooligan being humiliated. In keeping with visual stereotypes of the Irish, Hooligan is drawn with a slim build, a simian mouth and tattered clothing that is crudely assembled in the style of a gentleman. In *White on Black*, Jan Nederveen Pieterse traces these visual stereotypes to 19th century tensions between England and Ireland (212-214). Pieterse establishes how the Irish were typically drawn as "repulsive ape-like creatures" (213) in order to emphasize their inferiority to the English. We see this ape-like quality manifest itself in the form of Hooligan's simian mouth. Pieterse also suggests that the Irish are typically shown to be very slender (even gaunt) in contrast with the iconic (and very plump) John Bull in order to emphasize a class

distinction between the impoverished Irish and the prosperous English (214). Hooligan is again consistent with this visual stereotype and his lack of prosperity is further enhanced by the tattered clothing that he wears. Furthermore, Hooligan's tiny pupils within his large eyes create a vacant stare that connotes sub-human levels of intelligence and emotional sensitivity. He makes no effort to escape his situation. He simply dangles, helpless, from his own coat. Thus, the visual representation of Happy Hooligan reinforces Irish stereotypes and establishes the subordinate position of the Irish within American culture.



Figure 2.2: Happy Hooligan humiliated.

The mass-production of racial stereotypes in the comics form uses more than just visual determination, however. The narratives themselves also help to establish the

position of the minority group within the hierarchy of North American culture. For example, Happy Hooligan's repeated efforts to penetrate high society are literally laughable. The idea that an Irishman could be anything other than a low class bum is so improbable that it becomes an ongoing joke throughout the series.³⁴ Also, most minority characters in early American comics speak in broken English, and their inability to grasp formal English language--in terms of both spelling and grammar--further connotes their inferiority. This hierarchy is made more evident by the fact that characters belonging to the racial majority, who appear alongside the racially marked characters, demonstrate a significantly higher level of linguistic skill while occupying the social roles to which the minority characters aspire.

Additionally, the interactions between minority and majority characters connote racial subordination. In most--if not all--cases, the minority is treated like a child and forgiven for his or her transgressions but also dismissed as a result of a presumed inferiority (Happy Hooligan is again a good example of this phenomenon). Pieterse suggests that rendering the minority as a child-like figure is typical of the "colonizer's enemy imagery of the colonized" and Pieterse specifically locates this technique within representations of African-Americans and the Irish (214). Similarly, Abdul JanMohammed identifies such treatment as infantilization (21), a key means of characterizing racial hierarchy as a positive, parental structure. When the minority is treated as a child-like inferior, the imposition of racial hierarchy is justified as a noble enterprise.

³⁴ This joke is effectively reflected in Hooligan's attire. He strives to mimic the clothing of the high-society gentlemen that he admires, but clearly he fails.

In comics which feature minority characters as supporting players, the racial minority figures are invariably led, conquered, or saved by the heroic, morally and intellectually superior, white character. A classic example of this is the “Slumberland Savages” of Winsor McKay’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland* strip, who follow around Nemo (despite his young age) as if he were a god. Pieterse suggests that in American iconography of this time, black characters could only appear alongside white characters when “a clear relationship of superiority-inferiority is maintained” (130). One such example is illustrated in figure 2.3. Here, a Slumberland Savage is seen functioning in a wholly subordinate role, silently following the infantile Nemo around on a typical adventure.

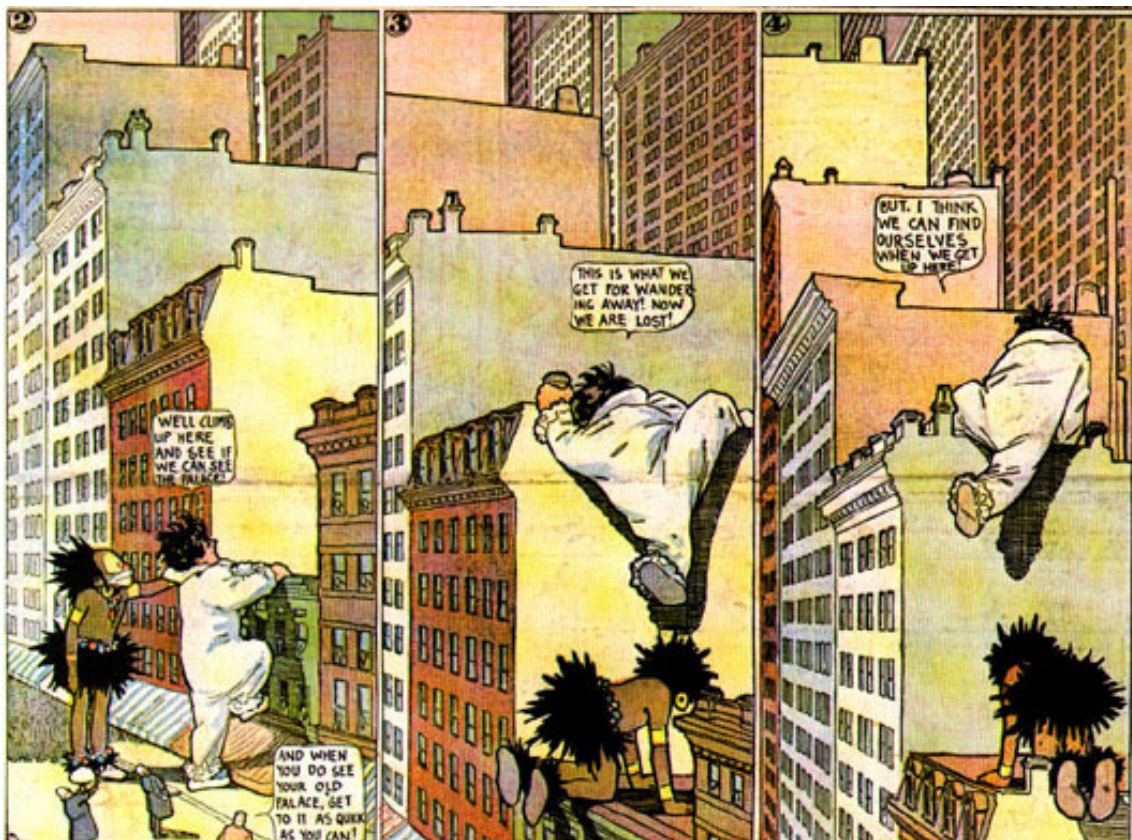


Figure 2.3: Mimicry in Slumberland.

For minority characters in early 20th century comics, the majority racial group was looked up to as an ideal. The minority characters continually seek a state of sameness with the majority. In many comics, this is not only a recurring theme, but a central plot device. In post-colonial theory, the pursuit of sameness with the colonial power is known as “mimicry.” In mimicry, the colonizer rewards the minority’s pursuit of sameness because it enforces/reinforces the notion of the colonizer’s superiority. Happy Hooligan’s desire to be admitted into the high society of the racial majority, for example, is obvious flattery to a readership that is largely composed of that same majority. At the same time, in mimicry the colonizer must preserve difference in order to maintain the very distinctions upon which the colonized-colonizer relationship is based. It is for this reason, of course, that Hooligan cannot ever achieve his goal, and it is the persistent reassertion of impossibility that makes Hooligan’s attempts so hilarious to his readership. By using mimicry as a consistent topos of minority characters in American comics, comics further connote the superiority of the racial majority.³⁵

Representations such as those described above helped to establish racism as an encrusted connotation of the comics form in general. During this period, comics became an effective form for the transmission of racism in the Western world. Charles Johnson notes that “as a black American reader my visceral reaction to this barrage of racist drawings from the 1840s through the 1940s was revulsion and a profound sadness” (7). He concludes that comics of the time were products of a “WASP imagination completely unmoored from reality” (8). Yet despite the offensive quality of early comics representations of race, the accessibility of the form to the semi-literate helped to build an

³⁵ Homi Bhabha asserts that the colonizer’s need for mimicry is a sure sign of their weakness. Thus, a sense of insecurity on the part of the racial majority can also be read into the use of mimicry in early American comic strips.

audience that was composed--in large part--of the immigrant minorities that were so often the subject of comics' ridicule. This idea is put forth by a number of comics critics and historians such as Ian Gordon, M. Thomas Inge and Martin Barker. Each points to the visual aspects of the form, which transcended language barriers and provided instant access to American culture.

The establishment of an immigrant readership for early comics attests to the role that comics have played in North American racial politics. As a form of immigrant instruction, these early comics represented race in a prejudicial manner, which made it very clear to the new generation of American immigrants that they were inferior and perhaps unwelcome. Ironically, the popularity of *Superman*, which literary critic Werner Sollors identifies as "the ultimate immigrant saga" (62), may also be the result of this immigrant audience. As an alien struggling to adjust to the social and cultural mores of contemporary New York City, Superman was able to speak to the immigrant experience in a way that was both identifiable and fantastic.

Art Spiegelman suggests that the early immigrant readership of comics may have been another contributing factor to the low cultural status of comics. Spiegelman describes the situation this way: "They're [comics] the part of the newspaper that's luring in people who are semi-literate--the new immigrants to America. Urban immigrants are flocking to the papers, and the kinds of things they laugh at are looked down upon as vulgar by the more genteel class" (qtd. in Juno 7). Under Spiegelman's terms, the mere fact that immigrants enjoyed comics may have been enough to justify high-culture's deprecation of the form. If this is true, then the initial stigma against comics was, in large part, racially motivated.

According to Charles Johnson (10-11) and Fredrik Stromberg (226-228), the racist patterns of early American comics dominated the form for over half a century. They only began to change in the post-war period of the 1950s, when racial characters and ethnic issues in general “more or less vanished from the comics” (Stromberg 227). Johnson supports this view and attributes this vanishing to “relentless agitation by the NAACP and Civil Rights workers” (13). As Stromberg suggests, this vanishing was perhaps a predictable response on the part of comics’ predominantly white creative teams who did not know how to represent racial minorities without offending people so they simply did not represent minorities at all (227). Racial diversity did not return to comics until the 1960s and 1970s, when mainstream comics publishers began to reintroduce African-American characters, most notably in Superhero comics (Stromberg 159-165).

The results were mixed at first. “Black superheroes began appearing occasionally but their white creative teams often seemed unsure how to present positive role models without draining their subjects of their humanity” (McCloud *Reinventing* 107). Characters such as Luke Cage and The Black Panther were emblematic of this problem. Both characters demonstrate a tendency to conform to stereotypes.

Luke Cage was created at Marvel Comics by Archie Goodwin and John Romita Sr. in 1972. At the time, Marvel would typically introduce new characters by having them first appear as a guest character within an already established comic book, such as *The Fantastic Four*, *Spider-Man*, or *The Avengers*. This was not the case with Luke Cage, however, who debuted in his very own title. In keeping with McCloud’s assertion, Cage can be seen as a racial subject that has been drained of humanity. As I will

demonstrate, this lack of humanity is a result of the character's continuity with contemporary stereotypes of the African-American male.

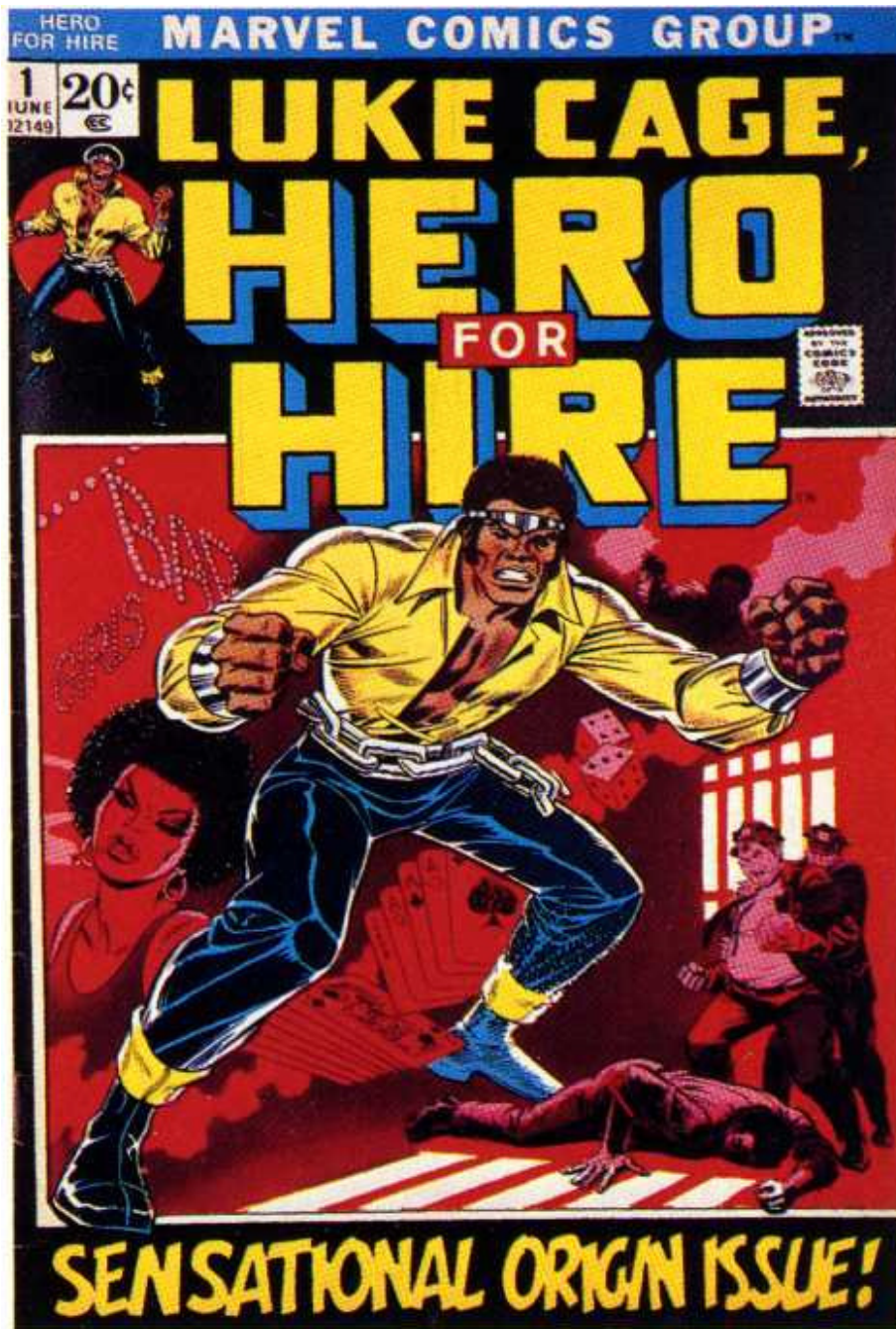


Figure 2.4: Cover for *Luke Cage* No. 1.

Consider, for example, the cover of the first issue of *Luke Cage* (illustrated in figure 2.4). At center, Cage is depicted with a sense of primal (almost savage)

physicality, as signified by his clenched fists, aggressive posture and facial expression. Around his waist is a chain, and he wears manacles around both of his wrists. These details function as signifiers of slavery and, more specifically, the continued haunting presence of the slavery experience within the African-American community. The chains, of course, are broken and thus they also signify that Luke Cage has overcome slavery but not forgotten it. His open-buttoned shirt exposes his central chest and abdomen. This exposure signifies masculinity (through musculature) and sexuality (through partial undress). Cage thus fits into what Pieterse describes as the stereotype of the “black man as brute, the ‘brute nigger’ (virile to the point of bestiality)” (178).

Surrounding Luke Cage, there are a number of images that signify stereotypical perceptions of the African-American. At bottom-right, an African-American is seen lying on a prison floor as an archetypal “fat southern sheriff” is pulled off of him. Thus, the appropriate nemesis of the African-American on this cover is a signifier of racial oppression. At top right, there is an image of a faceless criminal firing a handgun. The facelessness signifies random violence and rampant criminality. At top left are a pair of neon signs, one reading “BAR,” and the other “GIRLS.” These signs can be seen to represent the vices of alcohol and the sex-trade respectively. The cover also contains images of gambling in the form of dice and cards (another popular inner-city vice). Finally, the entire background is rendered in the colour red, thus signifying passion and rage, but also the “red-light district” that is a symbol of vice and urban decay.

Combined, the elements of this image constitute the world that Luke Cage occupies. Clearly, this world is wholly consistent with stereotypes of the urban African-American community. These stereotypes are here used for their comfortably simplistic

qualities. The cover page is a potent advertisement for the comic itself, and this particular comic is advertising a reading experience that promises a walking, talking, crime-fighting stereotype. As a final note, the subtitle “Hero for Hire” places Cage on a lower moral order than that of Superman, Spider-Man, or Batman, none of whom would ever accept money in exchange for heroics. Greg M. Smith identifies Cage as the first superhero who works for money and notes the importance of the fact that a “black character” is the first to do so (136).³⁶

Smith also identifies Cage as an attempt at “intermingling blaxploitation and superheroes” (136). This sentiment is echoed by cartoon historian Don Markstein who writes that “[i]n the larger context, however, he [Cage] was just like the hero of a typical '70s blaxploitation movie, merely translated into the superhero idiom” (“Luke Cage” n.p.). The term “blaxploitation” is a portmanteau of “black” and “exploitation.” It refers to a controversial film genre that was popular in the 1970s for its representation of African-Americans as violent inner-city warriors. In spite of its popularity, the blaxploitation genre was not look upon favourably by many civil rights leaders of the time. In 1972--the same year that Luke Cage debuted in Marvel Comics--Junius Griffin of the NAACP declared the following:

We must tell both white and black movie producers that we will not tolerate the continued warping of our black children’s minds with the filth violence and cultural lies that are all pervasive in current productions of so-called black movies. We must tell black and white movie producers that the transformation from the stereotyped Stepin Fetchit to super-nigger

³⁶ Smith also notes the significance of the fact that the first major superhero to “relinquish her secret identity” is Wonder Woman, a female (143).

on the screen is just another form of cultural genocide” (qtd. in Lawrence 95).

The rhetoric here is extreme, but Griffin’s interpretation of the blaxploitation genre holds significance to Luke Cage, a character created in imitation of blaxploitation film heroes. Furthermore, Griffin’s use of the term “super-nigger” is of particular relevance to Cage who is both super-powered and predominantly characterized through his racial identity. Thus, the same critiques that emerged from the blaxploitation film genre are directly relevant to Luke Cage and again suggest that he is a character based in stereotype and thus drained of his humanity (to reiterate McCloud’s claim).

In sharp contrast to Luke Cage, urban warrior, Marvel’s other major black superhero is an African tribal prince. The Black Panther debuted as a supporting character in *Fantastic Four* No. 52 in 1966 and became a popular Marvel character in the early 1970s when he was the focus of a comic book series called *Jungle Tales*. He would later serve as a member of the Marvel superhero team the Avengers and in 1977 he was awarded his own series, which was short-lived despite the involvement of comics legend Jack Kirby.

As with Luke Cage, the Black Panther’s characterization depends upon stereotype. Although the Black Panther was named approximately one year before the founding of the Black Panther Party, the black panther animal was already at that time a prominent symbol of the black power movement, dating back to the Black Panthers (all-black) Tank Battalion of World War II fame (“Origin” n.p.). Thus, Marvel’s Black Panther was given a name and costume that project clear messages of racial identification.

On the narrative level, Marvel's Black Panther is an African tribal prince whose father was killed by white treasure-hunters seeking to plunder a valuable mineral from land that is sacred to the Black Panther's people. As the Black Panther recounts his origin story to the Fantastic Four in *Fantastic Four* No. 53, one member of the team twice interjects to point out the lack of originality in his tale. Ben Grimm, AKA "The Thing," lets out a loud yawn during the story, at which point Reed Richards, AKA "Mr. Fantastic," shouts "Ben! Cut that Out!" The Thing replies "Aww, I can't help it! I saw this in a million jungle movies" (5). The Black Panther continues his story only to be interrupted again by Ben. "Yer talkin' to a guy who seen every Tarzan movie at least a dozen times! And I can recite half'a the Bomba the Jungle Boy books by heart! So yer little bedtime story aint impressin' me! Let's git to the punchline, huh?" (6). Here Lee and Kirby conduct a bit of autocriticism, by calling attention to the deficiencies of the story. This story has been told many times before.

Pieterse devotes an entire chapter of his book to the stereotypes surrounding African adventure stories from *Robinson Crusoe* to *Tarzan*. It is appropriate then, that the Thing connects the Black Panther's story to Tarzan (among other jungle tales). Pieterse outlines the manner in which such stories oscillate between fear of the primitive (often cannibalistic) African and dominance over the servile African (108). The Black Panther narrative contains both representations. First, the Black Panther lures the Fantastic Four into a trap and stalks them like prey in his jungle. This behaviour, and the predator/prey relationship that it seeks to establish, project connotations of cannibalism. Once the Black Panther is defeated (a clear indication that he is inferior in terms of superhero status), he surrenders, unmasking himself and promptly provides the Fantastic Four with food,

lodging, and a guided tour. Eventually, at Mr. Fantastic's suggestion, the Black Panther devotes himself to the same cause as the Fantastic Four: "I shall do it! I pledge my fortune, my powers – my very life – to the service of all mankind" (*Fantastic Four* No. 53, 20). Thus, the narrative provides readers with what Pieterse identifies as the two most central themes in the African adventure story: fantasy of fear (through depiction of the primitive and savage African) and fantasy of power (through the white heroes' dominance over the African hero)³⁷ (108).

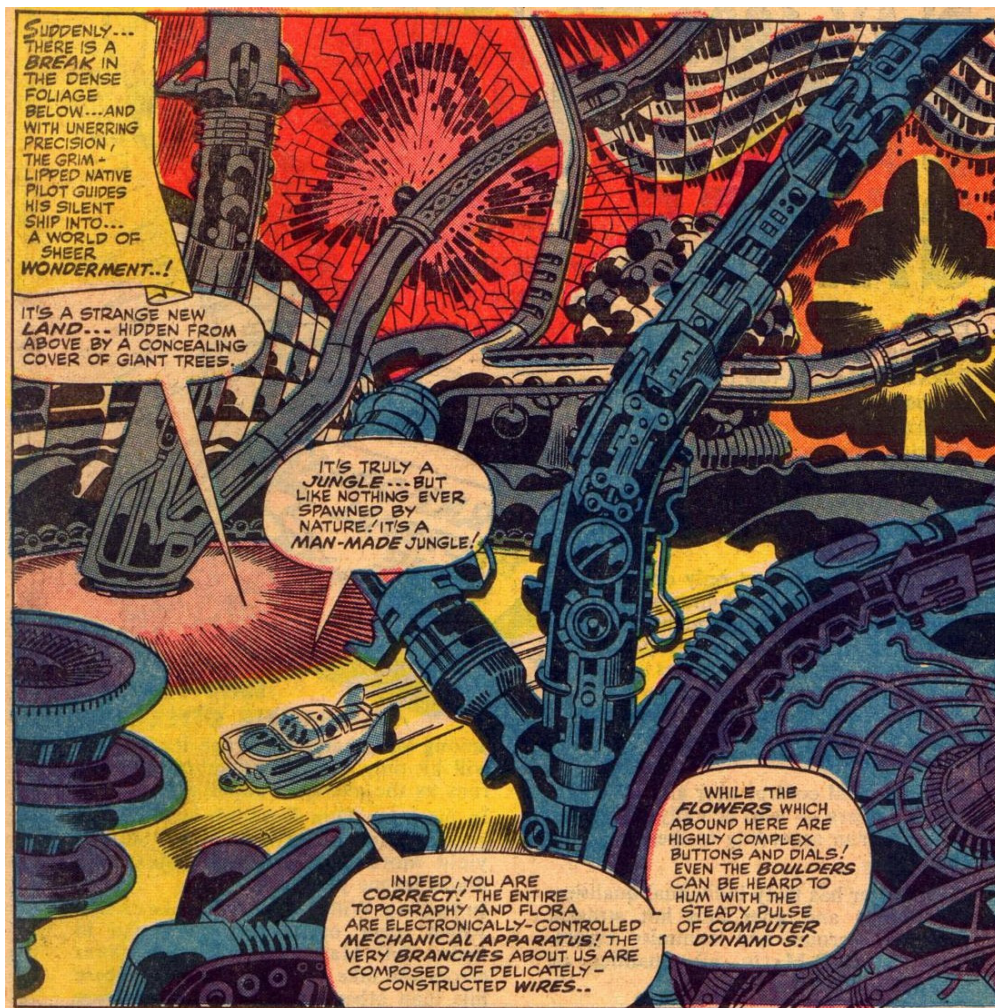


Figure 2.5: The Black Panther's technological jungle.

³⁷ In some ways, the Fantastic Four's journey through a dark mysterious jungle and defeat of the Black Panther conforms to the idea of safari, which Pieterse calls a "crucial symbolic episode in the colonization of Africa – the 'dark continent' is manageable" (112).

In spite of the Thing's criticisms, there are elements to the Black Panther's story that are original, and might seem to operate against African adventure story stereotypes. For example, the valuable mineral found on the Black Panther's land allows him to have great wealth and resources, which he translates into advanced technological innovation. Yet, what does he do with these resources? As revealed in *Fantastic Four* No. 52, the Black Panther builds a technological jungle, complete with electrical wire branches, dial flowers and computer-dynamo boulders, in order to test his hunting skills against the Fantastic Four (figure 2.5). Thus, the introduction of extreme wealth and technology is simply absorbed into existing stereotypes of the African adventure story.

Another example can be seen in figure 2.6, which depicts a scene from the Black Panther's tribal life. While there are technological advancements visible in Kirby's illustration (mostly just guns), these details are only present for the sake of novelty. Otherwise, this scene conforms to stereotype. The tribal garb, the grass and stone architecture, the god-like authority of the chief, the urns, jars and platters as containers and the wildly inconsistent climatic conditions (the village appears to be in an arid or desert climate while the entire surrounding area appears to be a tropical jungle) all establish a correspondence between this scene and other scenes from the typical African adventure story. Apart from the strange guns, this could easily be something from a Tarzan movie or Alan Quartermain story. The guns thus stand out for their novelty but have no real power to transcend stereotype. They might as well be spears, as evidenced by the fact that the tribe members seem to use spears and guns interchangeably.

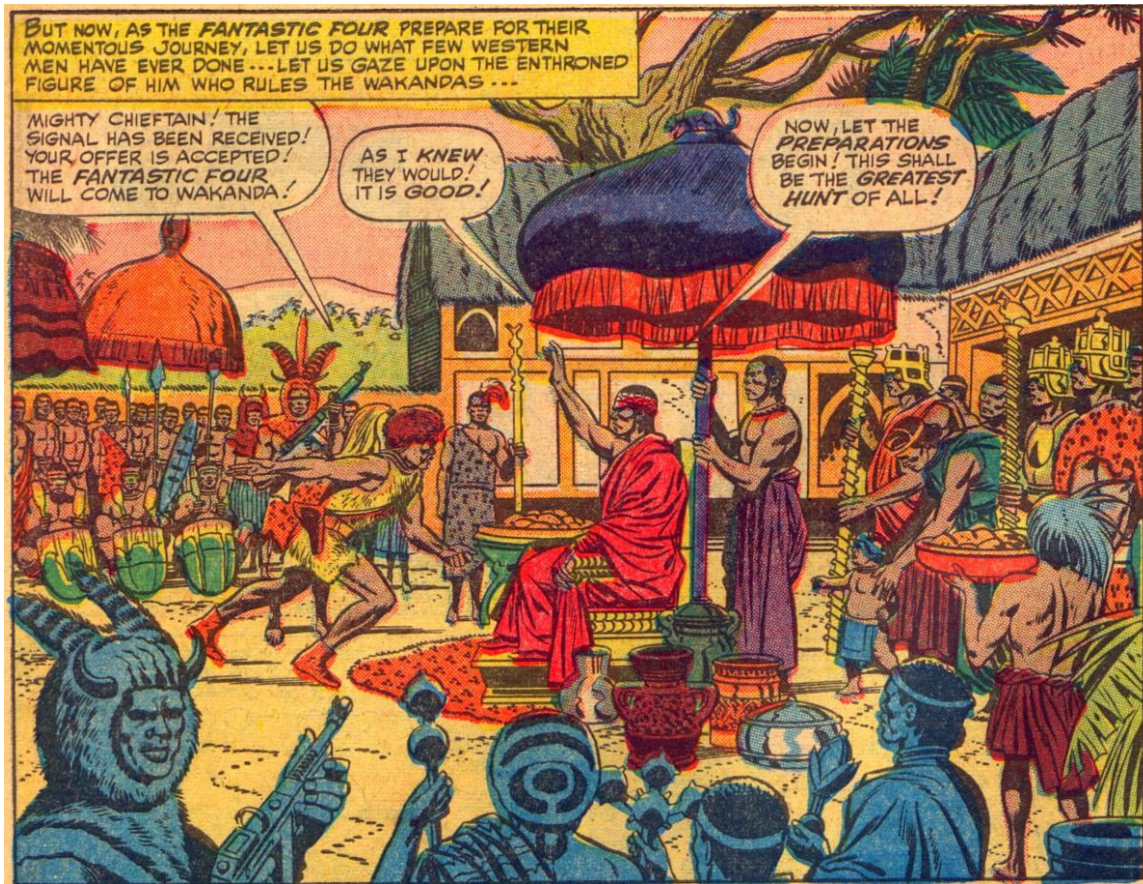


Figure 2.6: The Black Panther's tribal life.

Furthermore, Pieterse describes similar portrayals of technology in representations of African people as “techno-cannibalism” (122). He points to European cartoons that show tribal Africans using advanced technology to carry on cannibalistic practices. Pieterse references a German newspaper cartoon that shows two white men being cooked in a giant toaster in the middle of an African village. The caption reads “Now you see what they’re doing with all those things for the Third World” (qtd. in Pieterse 122). According to Pieterse, “[w]hat this type of humour wants to suggest is that Africans haven’t changed in all that time. What it really demonstrates is that Europeans haven’t” (122). Similarly, the Black Panther’s story seeks to conform (in spite of its novelty) to stereotypes surrounding the African adventure story in order to demonstrate

that Africans have not changed. What it really demonstrates, of course, is that American comics--in their depictions of African peoples--are the ones that have not changed. These comics are still conforming to racial stereotype.

Following these early experiments with racial minority heroes, Marvel comics created the first financially successful representations of racial minority superheroes in 1975. Marvel replaced their existing all-American X-men (who had fallen out of public favour) with a new globally assembled X-men team, which included an American, a Canadian, an African, a Russian, a Native-American, an Irishman, a German and a Japanese character. The re-vamped *Uncanny X-men* comic series was not created out of racial sensitivity, however, but out of a desire to expand the Marvel Comics lineup to appeal to a burgeoning international market (Daniels, *Marvel* 168).

Despite the fact that they were motivated by a marketing ploy, the stories nonetheless reflected the creative team's desire to create progressive representations of race. To helm the series, Marvel hired writer Chris Claremont to replace Len Wein (who created many of the new *X-men* characters). Claremont (along with later collaborator John Byrne) portrayed his version of the X-men as a metaphor for global disunity. In non-battle scenes, the X-men struggled to adjust to each other's cultural mores, which often resulted in personal rivalries and social mishaps. In battle sequences, the inability of the global team to work together as a unit became a dominant theme. The leader of the X-men (the American named Cyclops) frequently states that the new X-men are far more powerful than their predecessors. Their lack of ability to work as a team, however, puts them at a constant disadvantage, even against villains that the earlier, less powerful, all-white, all-American X-men were capable of vanquishing. The difference between the two

teams, according to Cyclops, is the synergy amongst the team members. As such, the metaphor that emerges here speaks to the dangers of global disunity and to the potential benefits of global harmony across racial and cultural barriers.

Despite the progressive aims that *X-men* expressed through this global disunity metaphor, an analysis of the series reveals a simplistic depiction of race that undermines the establishment of a global comics community. *X-men* relies upon racial stereotype to build distinctive characters and thus these comics privilege race as the most important element of individual character. Members of the team often embody some stereotypical perception of their respective national and racial identities. Colossus, of Russia, is a naïve but industrious farm-boy; Sunfire, of Japan, is pompous, arrogant and devoted to ritual; Thunderbird, of the Apache tribe, is prone to an excess of pride and an unwillingness to work within the team dynamic. In this manner, the representations of race within *X-men* are consistent with the same second-order semiological function that Roland Barthes identifies in popular European travel guide books.

For the *Blue Guide*, men exist only as ‘types’. In Spain, for instance, the Basque is an adventurous sailor, the Levantine a light-hearted gardener, the Catalan a clever tradesman and the Cantabrian a sentimental highlander. We find again here this disease of thinking in essences, which is at the bottom of every bourgeois mythology of man (which is why we come across it so often). The ethnic reality of Spain is thus reduced to a vast classical ballet, a nice neat commedia dell’arte, whose improbable typology serves to mask the real spectacle of conditions, classes and professions. (*Mythologies* 75)

Similarly, the ethnic characters created by *X-men* gloss over the politics of difference by creating racially marked characters who operate entirely within the existing system of stereotypes that existed in the mid 1970s.

Furthermore, as with early 20th century comics strips, the manner in which these characters are drawn determines race through visual stereotypes. Sticking with the three characters mentioned above, Colossus is drawn with a large, block-shaped head and a Joseph Stalin style haircut (Stalin being perhaps the most iconic image of “Russianness”³⁸ in the collective American consciousness); Sunfire is drawn with narrow eyes, squinting in every panel; and Thunderbird is drawn with dark, sunken cheeks, long hair contained by a headband and an abnormal amount of fine line detailing around his face in order to create the effect of leathery skin texture.

The process of stereotype-embodiment is taken to a further extreme through the representation of superpowers in the comic. Colossus’s super-power is the ability to turn his body into solid steel, thus signifying the industrial image of the U.S.S.R. circa 1975. Sunfire’s power is to channel solar energy into ray beams that scald his opponents. He becomes the rising sun (a prominent symbol of Japan) to those who oppose him. Thunderbird is gifted with exaggerated primitive skills: strength, speed and agility. He thus signifies the stereotype of primal physicality that is associated with Native Americans. Thunderbird’s lack of strategic intelligence in *X-men* does nothing to contradict this primal characterization. Furthermore, the costumes of the majority of the team members utilize national colours and symbols in their design in a manner that is similar to Barthes’ description of the “italianicity” that emerges from the red, yellow and

³⁸ Though Stalin very much served as an iconic “Russian”--particularly to an American audience-- it should be noted that he was born in Georgia.

green colour scheme of the Panzani advertisement (“Rhetoric” 34). While nationality does not translate directly to race, the connection is still important here, particularly in *X-men* comics, where the vast majority of characters are members of a longstanding majority within their respective countries. Such details seek to emphasize difference and to employ race as the definitive marker of character. Thus, by building character through stereotype, *X-men* comics created and disseminated a concrete mapping of racial identity through the comics form.³⁹

According to a number of comics scholars, the greatest achievement of the revamped *X-men* is the character of Storm, the African tribal princess who can command the weather around her. As the first mainstream African-American superheroine, Storm is the paradigm--the Wonder Woman even--of all subsequent African-American heroines, and she has become something of a focal point for discussions on Otherness in the comics form. As I will demonstrate, the characterization of Storm is strongly representative of mainstream comics’ early experiments with progressive views on racial identity. In their successes, these depictions of race in comics reflected a burgeoning global consciousness and helped to further establish a racially diverse audience for the comics form. In their failures, these same depictions are equally valuable (if not more so) to students of racial studies. Such depictions reflect contemporary cultural attitudes of mainstream American society toward racial Otherness.

Both David Lambkin and Richard Reynolds have devoted particular attention to Storm. Reynolds perceives her as a sexualized figure, intended to reconcile conflicting discourses (94-95). Storm is maternal but sexual, violent but nurturing, accessible but

³⁹ Goldberg identifies “rigidity” as a major component of racial stereotypes (Racist 122). As racial stereotypes are consistently reiterated, they become more entrenched and harder to see beyond.

idealized. Lambkin perceives her as a positive role model who has a sexual veneer intended only to “sucker” the lascivious reader into socially relevant discussions on race and gender (275-78). From my point of view, Storm is a transitional figure in the representation of race in comics. She represents an attempt at cultural diversity in the comics form but her creators are prone to falling back upon racial stereotype to characterize her in a manner that is identical to that of her less critically heralded teammates. What I find remarkable about Storm, however, is the manner in which her sexual Otherness intersects with her racial Otherness in order to create an exotic/erotic appeal to her readership. Where the racial representations of the other X-men are designed to make race comfortable, the representation of Storm is designed to make race a sexual commodity. As such, I see her as a noteworthy intersection between racist and sexist comics connotations, and I have thus singled her out for more extensive analysis.

Just as characters such as Sunfire, Thunderbird and Banshee all have their faces drawn in keeping with visual stereotypes of their respective races, Storm too is drawn with large full lips, a bulb-shaped face, dark shadows around her eyes and thin, sharply up-turned eyes and eyebrows in order to give her a look that signifies “Africanness.” The predominant method of visual racial determination in Storm, however, is the fact that her skin is brown. This visually-striking detail keeps Storm’s racial identity at the forefront of her visual representation, and Storm is thus more racially marked than any of her teammates.

The effect of Storm’s overt Otherness are consistent with a pair of Roland Barthes’ views of Otherness. Firstly, Barthes suggests that the dominant treatment of Otherness is the trope of difference reduced to sameness. Within this process, the Self

seeks to emphasize the familiar in the Other while de-emphasizing the unfamiliar in order to preserve the stability of the Self (*Mythologies* 151). We see this transpiring in *X-men* comics: the Russian Colossus begins to behave more and more like a Kansas farm boy; the Canadian Wolverine, at times, demonstrates a strong sense of American patriotism; and innumerable characters of multiple religions come together to celebrate Christmas. Storm, however, resists this movement toward sameness, in large part as a result of the brown colour that defines her Otherness so persistently. This resistance pushes her into Barthes' second view of Otherness. Barthes suggests that under circumstances where sameness is impossible, the fallback mechanism is exoticism. "The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown. Relegated to the confines of humanity, he no longer threatens the security of the home" (152). In the case of Storm, the confines of humanity amount to a colonial/neo-colonial perspective of Africanness, and a perspective of the racially marked woman as a sexual object. The sexual component is the spectacle here, while the clown element (keeping with Barthes' terms⁴⁰) is expressed through Storm's consistency with the racially and politically charged Western view of Africans in general.

In a famous post-colonial critique of *Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe argues that:

Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in this book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it.

For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization

⁴⁰ In my interpretation, Barthes uses the term clown somewhat loosely. He does not mean that the object is meant to be laughed at, but simply that the object creates a distancing effect that dehumanizes the character and removes the reader's sense of identification or empathy with the character.

and to have need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa.

(qtd. in Huddart 52)

I would argue that Storm functions as an ambassador from this same imaginary Africa that Achebe identifies in Conrad's novel.⁴¹ The racist connotations that Storm projects (both initially and progressively) can be seen to reflect the reassuring imperative that Achebe identifies. As with the other members of the X-men, Storm's superpower is strongly tied to her racial identity. Her power is the command of weather. She can summon lightning bolts, disperse fog and even fly upon the currents of the wind. As such, she comes to represent the sort of primordial power that is so often associated with Africa in general. As such, her primordial nature--through the manner in which it defines her character, powers and even costume--provides constant reassurance to the Western reader that Africans are indeed primitive beings when compared to their Western counterparts. This relationship between Western audience and African character is established very early on in *X-men*.

In America, Storm is an immigrant. In her first appearance, however, she is an indigene, and, as such, she signifies the values and social attitudes that American culture holds toward Africa. In *Giant Sized X-men* No. 1, the original, all-American X-men team has been defeated in battle and are being held captive by an unstoppable and mysterious foe. In order to save his students, Professor Charles Xavier (the founder and mentor of the X-men) must scramble around the globe to recruit a new team of X-men to replace and rescue the old all-American team. With this in mind, Xavier comes to Kenya where

⁴¹ Pieterse supports this idea of the imaginary, arguing that "as with 'blacks', the concept of 'Africa' is in many ways a Western construct" (10).

he finds a seemingly prehistoric monument. The scene that unfolds is brief, but very telling of the nature of Storm's Africanness. I include it here in full as figure 2.7:





ONCE MORE,
THE HOWLING
WINDS
COME UP--

--AND SWEEP
THE STORM
GODDESS AWAY!



SHE SOARS ALOFT
LIKE AN EBON BIRD,
LIGHTNING LANCING
FROM HER FINGERTIPS,
THE GLOW OF LIFE
SHINING FULL UPON
HER FACE.

SHE IS HAPPY HERE-- ONLY
TRULY HAPPY HERE AMONG
THE ELEMENTS--



--AND THE RAGING SKY,
TOUCHED BY HER HAR-
PINESS...

...WEEPS.



WHEN THE STORM
GODDESS RETURNS
TO EARTH AT
LAST, HER JOY
IS SHARED
BY ALL.

A MOST
IMPRESSIVE
DISPLAY, ORORO...
TRULY
BEAUTIFUL.



WH-WHO ARE YOU? WHAT
BUSINESS HAVE YOU IN
ORORO'S LAND?

I AM CALLED
XAVIER--

--AND I HAVE
COME TO MAKE
YOU AN OFFER
I PRAY YOU
WILL NOT
REFUSE.

AN... OFFER?
WHAT HAVE
YOU TO OFFER
A GODDESS?



Figure 2.7: Storm's first appearance.

In the sequence above, Storm is not portrayed as an immigrant but as an indigenous member of a foreign community. Her tribal background and primitive lifestyle play a valuable role in defining the Self of the American racial majority by providing reassurances and justifications for the colonial enterprise. In “The Representation of the Indigene,” Terry Goldie defines the commodities provided by the indigene.⁴² In the context of Goldie’s argument, a commodity is an aspect of Otherness in the indigene that is politically and psychologically valuable to the non-indigenous consumer, something that the non-indigenous audience wants to see in representations of the indigene. The audience consumes these commodities in order to reinforce the audience’s sense of superiority over the indigene. Goldie identifies “sex, violence, orality, mysticism, [and] the prehistoric” (236) as particularly appealing aspects of the

⁴² It must be noted that Goldie speaks specifically to Canadian, New Zealand, and Australian colonialism, but suggests that these are unified because “the signmaking is all happening on one form of board, within one field of discourse, that of British imperialism” (232). While Kenya is not one of the examples used in Goldie’s essay, the country’s rich history of British imperialism justifies the application of Goldie’s theory. Furthermore, Storm is represented in a manner that is more in keeping with stereotypes of the Native figure in general (indeed, her story could easily unfold on a Native reserve in any of the three countries that Goldie identifies) and thus I feel it’s appropriate to apply Goldie’s theories here.

indigene. Without exception, connoted signs of all the various commodities of the indigene can be located in Storm. She is drawn as a physically attractive young woman, who also happens to be topless. Her powers are easily the most devastating of the new X-men. She is summoned by her worshippers through the invocation “Ororo, great Goddess of the storm come unto us and ease our burden” (7). She appears at the top of a “great stone portal” that features an archway with a carving of a non-descript deity above it. She wears only a primitive wrap around her waist, held on by a beaded belt. By signifying the commodities of the indigene, Storm helps to perpetuate American stereotypes of the African. When she comes to America, these connotations continue to play a significant role in her characterization. She is frequently naked (sex), her powers reach unfathomable levels of devastation (violence), her Goddess role is never wholly abandoned (mysticism) and her primitive nature (pre-historic) all continue to define her.

The sexual commodity, however, is most persistently employed. Storm’s racial identity is continually channeled toward a sexual purpose throughout her early run in *X-men*. Storm is sexually naive throughout the early issues of the series, and thus her sexuality is domesticated. This naivety is persistently linked to her Africanness and to her consequential inability to appreciate American sexual politics. The earliest example of this appears in *Uncanny X-men* No. 109. Storm is sunbathing in a bikini next to her teammate Colossus. She complains that “The sun feels so good. It reminds me of home. Gods, I wish I didn’t have to wear these absurd scraps of cloth.” Colossus replies: “You remember what happened when you went uh, swimming in the mansion’s pool?” Storm answers: “I remember, my friend. I will never understand. It is only for the Professor’s sake that I endure this land’s strange taboos” (13). Earlier in the same issue, Storm is

rendered naked (covered by hair) flying through the sky and showering in a rain of her own creation while in conversation with the plants of her own rooftop garden. As these examples demonstrate, Storm's cultural heritage and primordial nature (both of which are strongly linked to her Africanness) are channeled towards expressions of her sexual appeal. Simply put, the fact that Storm is identified as African could be used to express all manner of cultural misconceptions and racial divides. It is instead most prominently used to allow the *X-men* creators to justify Storm's nakedness for the sake of creating sexual fantasy.

A good historical example of a similar practice can be found in *La Revue Nègre*, a 1925 Paris song and dance show at the Champs-Élysées, featuring African-American performer Josephine Baker. The show became immediately successful and infamous as a result of Baker's portrayal of exotic sexuality. Baker performed topless, with a skirt made of either feathers or bananas. In spite of the fact that she was born and raised in the slums of St. Louis, Baker portrayed herself on stage as a sort of tribal African princess.

Baker, who was light brown in colour, had to be kept by the French manager from powdering herself a lighter tint: what would have been recommended in America would have disappointed the public here, where dark skin colour appealed to latent fantasies. Baker's talent and energy were her own, but her so-called wildness was a quality carefully constructed by impresarios and avant-garde artists: 'primitivism' as an artifact, 'wildness' as artful illusion, a new gimmick of Paris café society (which at the time was also experimenting, as we have seen, with

orientalism as a theatrical effect). Taking her leopard for a stroll in a Paris park, Josephine Baker played herself with this imagery. (Pieterse 142-3)

Pieterse further notes how “this ambivalent sexual exotism that was racist and at the same time biologized by what was, allegedly, ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’, was characteristic of the epoch” (143). Like Baker in 1920s France, Storm in 1970s America channels her savage, primitive and exotic character elements toward a complex eroticism that is rooted in the audience’s fascination with her Otherness.

Storm’s sexual naivety and ignorance of American sexual politics leads her into a series of situations that are sexual to everyone but her. Storm is kept out of the loop and thus her Otherness is emphasized and she is further “relegated to the confines of humanity” (Barthes *Mythologies* 152). She can receive no sexual pleasure from these moments that provide sexual pleasure to other characters and to the comics reader simultaneously. By portraying Storm as sexually naïve or perhaps just sexually innocent, the authors deny her access to the “adult” discourse of sexuality and she is thus infantilized. At the same time, the mark of inferiority that keeps Storm out of the loop is, again, her racial identity.

Storm’s representation of Africanness is made even more complicated by a particularly unique and problematic facet of her visual representation. She is illustrated throughout the series with blue eyes. The *X-men* writers explain the colour of Storm’s eyes by arguing that they are the result of the same genetic mutation that bestows superpowers upon Storm. Similarly, the character of Nightcrawler has blue fur, fangs and a tail. Indeed, it is these very features that result in persecution for Nightcrawler who is

chased through the streets of Winzeldorf by a torch-wielding mob. In contrast, Storm seems to have suffered no persecution whatsoever as a result of her blue eyes.

The first description of her blue eyes comes at a key point in Storm's first appearance in *X-men* comics. Storm, still serving her role as an indigene, refuses a tribute in the form of animal sacrifice (probably due to her sympathy toward all living creatures),⁴³ thus demonstrating her compassionate nature and heroic character early on. In doing so, however, she rejects the cultural practices of her people, practices that would be considered savage to a white readership. It is at this key moment of cultural distance that the narrative first describes her eyes: "Her eyes are crystal blue and older than time" (7). By aligning this text with the moment of Storm distancing herself from tribal practice, Storm's blue eyes are complicit in defining this removal. Her eyes signify to the reader that Storm is something different from her fellow Africans, something better. This distinction comes in the form of a feature that is associated with the white majority. Thus, Storm's blue eyes suggest that her superiority stems from a similarity to her predominantly white readers. In contrast with her fellow Africans, Storm's blue eyes make her worthier of Western interest (through mimicry) without wholly erasing the markers of difference that make her racial representation exotic to Western readers. Lambkin supports this view, arguing that the "text may talk about her origins and culturally 'other' belief structure, but the visual depiction is of an idealized white woman with light black skin to add exotic sex appeal" (129). In the same page 7 panel, Storm describes her followers as "children" and thus overtly infantilizes them, in contrast to the

⁴³ It is worth observing that this sacrifice is intended to provide relief for a drought. As Pieterse notes "the dominant images of Africa are of famine, disaster, war or military coup; an imagery of danger, ill fate and apathy" (208).

more subversive infantilization accomplished by the fact that she is worshiped as a maternal goddess.

The unique interest that Storm generates within the *X-men* readership is mirrored by the typical narrative arcs of these comics. A conspicuously common storyline revolves around the X-men's need to rescue her from villains, gods, aliens, demons and even Dracula, all of whom attempt to force Storm to be some sort of trophy wife. In each case, of course, the X-men intervene--thus these narratives further infantilize Storm for her persistent need of rescue--before the chastity of their most prized sexual trophy is compromised but never before the villain manages to dress Storm up in a revealing costume (usually white in order to symbolize her purity) that is intended to gratify the sexual desire of the readership (figure 2.8). Through this repetitious process, Storm's sexuality is both contained and domesticated.



Figure 2.8: Storm enthralled by villains.

During this same time span, virtually every other member of the team--Cyclops, Colossus, Wolverine, Banshee, Nightcrawler, Beast, Phoenix and even Professor Xavier-- is given a love interest with whom they engage in relationships that are both romantic and physical. With few exceptions, these romantic and physical relationships become a key component in the domestic lives of these characters. Most notably, the love triangle between Cyclops, Wolverine and Phoenix serves as a pivotal source of tension, conflict and drama throughout the Claremont and Byrne run on *Uncanny X-men*. Storm, of course, is not given such a love interest, and as the X-men continually rescue her from the sexual advances of an adversary, they are really rescuing her chastity and thus preserving her domesticated sexuality.

Overall, Storm perpetuates the racist practices of the comics form such as mimicry, infantilization, visual determination and, above all, stereotype. Though not as overtly racist as early 20th century comic strip characters, Storm still connotes racist values. Furthermore, as McCloud suggests in *Understanding Comics*, the reader cannot help but humanize the comics icon (32-33). Brown colour becomes brown skin in the eyes of the reader and all of the connotations attached to the brown colour become a part of the individual reader's archive of racial Otherness (as defined by Goldberg) through the denotative power of the image. The connotations that Claremont et al. attach to Storm can then be seen as characteristics of the African in general when encountered by the racially isolated white comics reader that McCloud speaks of.

In the mass-publishing world of Marvel Comics, Storm reached millions upon millions of young, impressionable, predominantly white readers. If we take a primarily exegetic view of her characterization, Storm's contribution to the archive of racial

Otherness has a capacity to promote existing racial hierarchies. At the same time, we cannot forget that Storm is a powerful, altruistic, self-sacrificing, commercially successful superheroine. This character has not remained static, but has changed drastically over the years, particularly in the treatment of her racial identity, which becomes progressively less central to her characterization (Lambkin 131-2). Even Luke Cage and Black Panther have shown similar movements away from stereotype. This is consistent with general trends in racial iconography. Pieterse notes that since the 1970s “there are more ads featuring blacks in which ethnicity plays no significant part, in which blacks are represented in ‘normal’ ways, or in which white cultural norms are side-stepped” (210). If nothing else, the early incarnation of Storm represents a step toward cultural diversity in comics, a movement that established a foundation for other artists to build upon.

The biggest developments in this building process occurred in the late 1980s with the publication of the so-called “Big Three,” a trio of comics texts that challenged various cultural practices of the form and paved the way for more serious work to be done in the field. The first is Art Spiegelman’s Holocaust chronicle, *Maus*, the book that would eventually claim fame as the first graphic novel to win a Pulitzer Prize. The other two major works operate within the superhero genre to contradict many of the encrusted connotations of superhero comics. Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* challenge the superhero genre’s lack of realism or complexity. While each of these works demonstrates a wide array of self-reflexive subject matter, only Spiegelman’s text shows a particular devotion to the issue of racial representation in the

comics form. Because of its relevance to my thesis, I have singled *Maus* out for more extensive analysis.

The first thing to note is the effect of Spiegelman's work on the comics field. The sophisticated exploration of racial representation in *Maus* opened the doors for a new rhetoric of difference in the comics field, and before I analyze *Maus*, I wish to examine some of the common approaches that Spiegelman's followers are now taking toward racial issues. I will examine--in brief--a number of graphic novels that exhibit the capacity for comics to reinterpret the racist encrusted connotations of the form. Specifically, I have singled out works by Ben Katchor, Marjane Satrapi and Joe Sacco. Building upon Spiegelman's work, these artists demonstrate the creative and political potential such revisioning strategies create and also show the manner in which the reinterpretation of these encrusted connotations is central to the comics-as-literature movement.

Ben Katchor's *The Jew of New York*, for example, makes full--and frequently radical--use of the comics form to comment upon the concept of racial performance.⁴⁴ These performances all involve complex individual characters acting according to the preconceptions placed upon their respective races. They are playing to racial stereotypes for social, political and--above all--financial reasons. Set in 1820s New York, Katchor's story follows a diverse body of Jewish characters through their various business, social and cultural dealings. The novel focuses upon three performances. The first is a play--of the same title as the novel--composed by a raving anti-Semite and intended as a comedy. The second performance is given by Eliminopee, an opportunistic Native-American who,

⁴⁴ Katchor's text uses an unconventionally raw visual style (as seen in figure 2.9) alongside a number of non-comics forms, including maps, historical pamphlets and even a board game.

with a great deal of coaching, reads Hebrew scripture before a paying audience as evidence that Native Americans are in fact “the lost tribes of Israel.”⁴⁵ The final performance is less voluntary and concerns Moishe Ketzelbourd, a man driven savage by isolation and ritual masturbation. Upon his death, Moishe’s body is manipulated by a shiftless taxidermist and put on display at a museum as “The Bowery Behemah.” In each case, the active manipulations and deceptions of the individuals behind the performances reflect upon people’s desire to create simplistic racial classifications and hierarchies.

The play within the story seeks to create the same form of fixed stereotypes that early American comic strips sought to create. The contradiction that comes out of this process is best expressed in a scene in which the theatre company’s lead actor conducts research for his role by spending time with the company’s only Jewish member, Samson Gergel (a set designer). Gergel introduces the actor to innumerable Jewish members of the community with a wide variety of characteristics and backgrounds. From this experience, the only contribution that the actor brings to his performance is the creation of a device that fills the theatre with the smell of pickled herring.

The actor’s decision is symbolic of caricature itself and of the problems that caricature creates by constructing stereotypes based upon the selection of specific details over a complex whole. Thus, this particular performance reflects the racist encrusted connotations of the early comics form. It is this same method of representation that enabled early comics characters such as Happy Hooligan to exist. Furthermore, the manner in which the actor’s desire to understand Jewishness is fulfilled (through distortion, reduction and, essentially, caricature) reflects upon the motivations behind racial categorizing in general. The actor’s search for truth is, at best, superficial. At worst,

⁴⁵ This was a popular urban myth at the time and is most prominently reflected in *The Book of Mormon*.

it reflects a deep-seated psychological need to reduce complex phenomena to palatable, simplistic, delusional understandings, all in a manner that is very much in keeping with the theories of David Theo Goldberg who suggests that racial categorizing is a way to simplify the world and to create a feeling of control on the part of the categorizers (*Racist* 121).

In the case of *Eliminopee*, by merging the Native Other with the Jewish Other, the New York audience is able to simplify their concept of Selfness by simplifying their concept of Otherness. The broad designation of “them” gains greater validity when two distinct forms of racial difference are homogenized. This simplification process makes the distinction between Self and Other that much clearer to the white audience. Their desire to simplify is reflected in the overwhelming popularity of *Eliminopee* as a stage act.

With *Moishe Ketzelschneider*, Katchor’s graphic novel becomes overtly symbolic. As seen in figure 2.9, the stuffed and posed body on display at the museum is clearly human to the reader, but apart from Ketzelschneider’s closest friend, Nathan, no one in the novel can see the humanity of the Bowery Behemoth. *Moishe* is simply seen as an animal as a result of the performance that his body becomes through the posturing and manipulation of the taxidermist. Nathan can perceive that the representation is a fraud because he knew *Moishe* and is thus capable of recognizing the individual behind the representation. Similarly, *Eliminopee*’s friend knows that the Native-American’s performance is false, just as Samson Gergel, as a result of his tour through the Jewish community, knows that pickled herring does not represent the Jewish community in general. Katchor suggests here that racial performance has an innate tendency to simplify, fictionalize and

misrepresent. This message is reiterated through the very manner of Ketzelsbourd's death. He intrudes upon a rehearsal of the play and confuses an actor playing a real Jewish historical figure for the figure himself (whom Ketzelsbourd holds a grudge against) and Ketzelsbourd attacks the actor. Assuming that Ketzelsbourd is a savage animal, the various members of the theatre group respond by killing Moische.



Figure 2.9: Moische on display.

The line between performance and reality becomes dangerously blurred here. “Ketzelsbourd is a victim of his own failure to distinguish the actor from his role, and his

mistake is repeated in the crew's belief that this bestial man was actually an animal” (Wenthe 5). The reader, of course, knows otherwise, and much of the message that Katchor seeks to express depends upon an exaggerated dramatic irony, which emphasizes the ridiculous quality of the novel’s many performances and also the ridiculous quality of comics’ racist practices in general.

In each of these cases, the desire for performances of racial Otherness reflects social anxiety, the basic human desire for belonging and definition (categorization) and the need for hierarchical boundaries. In short, these cases reflect all of the reasons behind the racist practices of early 20th century comics. To the characters of Katchor’s novel, however, categorizing race and stratifying society are secondary concerns behind a more basic desire. This, of course, is money, which likewise has to be considered as a major force behind the racist conventions of early 20th century comics. The performance of race in Katchor’s novel is false, dangerous and inhuman, but to the capable business-person, it is also profitable. Thus *The Jew of New York* dissects the racist practices that other comics artists have employed and calls into question the social, cultural and financial motivations behind racism in comics. Katchor is a student of the comics form and revisiting these racial strategies marks an important step in the progression of his art form.

Where Katchor speaks to the inherent misconceptions of racial performance, Marjane Satrapi destabilizes the concept of fixed racial identities through the use of dissonance. Satrapi’s *Persepolis* is the memoir of young Marji coming of age amidst the Islamic revolution in Iran. The exotic (culturally and politically) setting of *Persepolis* features veiled women, desert climates and the ever-present threat of torture or murder at

the hands of a theocratic state. As the subtitle informs us, *Persepolis* is ultimately “The Story of a Childhood.” Satrapi has achieved a great deal of acclaim for her ability to represent Iranian history, but history is a secondary concern for the novel. *Persepolis* is, at heart, a Bildungsroman that is more interested in chronicling a childhood that is informed and affected by Iranian historical events than it is in chronicling Iranian historical events. Nothing in *Persepolis* is external to Marji, and the reader’s understanding of the complex political and social history of Iran is mediated through the consciousness of the pre-teen Marji, with the occasional intervention of an adult Marji. The text presents disinterest, curiosity, exaggeration, romanticism, idealism and naivety as but a few forms of interpretive biases that arise from Marji’s narration. If *Persepolis* is indeed a historical artifact, it can only be considered a localized history. This is not Iran; this is Marjane Satrapi’s Iran. More accurately, this is Marjane Satrapi’s childhood. “For Satrapi, the changes in her country are the changes in her family and her life--there is no difference among the three” (Davis 272).

Through this localization of history, Satrapi’s narrative undermines the dominant image of Iran in the Western imagination. Theresa M. Tensuan argues that *Persepolis* is able to “complicate the simplistic scripts Westerners have assigned to the region labeled “the Middle East”” (952). The major source of complication is Marji herself. As Fredrik Stromberg notes, “[t]he inclusion of people from different ethnic minorities [in comics] without being representative of their whole group is still relatively unusual” (231), but Marji can be seen as a good example of a character who is more than just representative of a racial group. Unlike Storm, for example, Marji challenges stereotypes, instead of reaffirming them. Marji is extremely rebellious and resists the archetype of an Iranian

woman just as she resists most authority figures that she encounters in the novel. She was not raised in a fundamentalist household. Her parents are royally descended, very wealthy, liberal-minded socialists. These details are not consistent with what we might call the Iranian imaginary (building upon Achebe's concept of the African Imaginary). By operating outside of the Iranian imaginary, Satrapi's characters contradict stereotypes. In the case of Storm, the stereotypes were not commonly challenged but generally reaffirmed.

At the same time, the vivid visual representation of Iran creates a denotative sign that demands correspondence with the reader's sense of the Iranian imaginary. The story that unfolds within this setting, however, powerfully subverts the existing "scripts" (or racial knowledge) of Middle-Eastern society that Tensuan identifies as existing within the Western cultural imagination. Marji does not conform/perform to Iranian stereotypes. Nor, for that matter, do any of the characters within the text. The dissonance between the setting and the reader's preconceptions of what should be going on within that setting undermines the authority of the Iranian imaginary and thus forces the reader to reconsider what they thought they knew about Iran and about the people who live there.

Where *X-men's* Storm is very much in keeping with racial stereotype, Marji is simply Marji. The determinative power of the "Iranian" label is undermined through her ability to contradict connotations of "Iranianness." Throughout the text, Marji appears in a variety of different outfits and a variety of different situations, but her Iranian identity is clearly established through the hijab and various other racial signifiers, such as consistency with the visual caricature of "Iranian" that Satrapi establishes in opposition to a very different style of drawing for East Indians, Russians, or the British. Even in images

in which Marji does not appear obviously Iranian, the “intelligible totality” (Groensteen 114) of the text maintains her racial identification. Once her Iranian identity is visually established, the reader brings that understanding to each new image of Marji.

Furthermore, the textual narrative also establishes Marji’s Iranian identity and thus anchors the images in a way that prevents the reader from losing sight of this identity when interpreting images of Marji that are less racially marked.

By visually establishing Marji’s racial identity, and then contradicting the connoted messages that Western culture has so frequently attached to Iranians, Marjane Satrapi is able to destabilize racial stereotypes of Iran. We see Marji as Iranian--Satrapi makes sure of that--but we do not see the Iranian imaginary take shape. That particular archive of racial information is not employed. Its absence, alongside the presence of signs of Iran, creates a sense of dissonance and thus exposes the arbitrary nature of Iranian stereotypes.

Where Katchor focuses on performance and Satrapi on dissonance, Joe Sacco, the pioneer of “comics journalism,” pushes visual racial determination to extremes and inverts the Self/Other hierarchy to poignant effect. Sacco makes potent use of caricature, developing an individual visual style for individual racial identities such as Israeli, Palestinian, Bosnian, English, American, etc. While such a clear act of visual determination could be seen as inherently racist, Sacco’s exaggeration of racial distinctions is used to highlight the absolute importance of racial identity within war-torn Palestine. Sacco questions the validity of visual racial determination by taking this process to such extremes. This visual technique portrays a polarized world and, in doing

so, forces the reader to question whether such distinctions are necessary, valid or worthwhile.



Figure 2.10: Sacco in self-caricature.

Figure 2.10 illustrates a scene in which Sacco appears alongside two Palestinians and a British aid worker. Within the world that Sacco renders, no-one is more cartoonish

than Sacco, who is drawn with comically large lips and cheeks, completely opaque glasses that hide his eyes and a head that is disproportionately small for his body and disproportionately large for his pencil-thin neck. Also, Sacco's facial expressions and body postures are consistently cartoonish in contrast to the less exaggerated expressions of other characters in the novel. "Sacco draws himself in a much more cartoonish manner than the others around him, and this strategy causes him to stand out as someone who doesn't quite 'fit' into this landscape or with its native inhabitants" (Versaci 119). Sacco's self-caricature helps the thematic aim of this book: to challenge racial preconceptions.

The purpose of Sacco's self-caricature can best be explained through McCloud's concept of reader-identification. In speaking about manga, McCloud suggests that Otherness may be a function of realism: "While most characters were designed simply, to assist in reader-identification--other characters were drawn more realistically in order to objectify them, emphasizing their 'Otherness' from the reader" (*Understanding* 44). This is exactly the technique utilized by Sacco. In contrast to his own cartoonish self-caricature, Sacco draws the racially Othered Palestinians in a significantly more realistic style and thus emphasizes their Otherness in order to drive the Western reader toward identification with the more cartoonish Sacco character. This effect is also consistent with McCloud's theory of embodiment, which suggests that reader's can more easily identify with less-realistic characters (*Understanding* 27-33).

Once compelled to identify with Sacco alone, Western readers experience the Self as a sort of grotesque. The intent is to make the American reader feel like a tourist. More specifically, the American is characterized as an obnoxious tourist. Sacco's self-

renderings show strong links to the satirical work of Robert Crumb. This intertextual gesture toward Crumb, for whom obnoxiousness and alienation are pivotal themes, further emphasizes the difference between the Self and the Other that Sacco seeks to express. The message is clear: the American does not belong here, is not embedded or situated in this world.

The various racially-determined caricatures confront the reader with a palpable sensory expression of racial division. Where Satrapi shows the Other at home, Sacco shows the American as the Other. Sacco is characterized in the novel (both visually and narratively) as an alien. Within the exotic setting that Sacco renders, the reader thus vicariously experiences what it is like to be a foreigner, a racial Other in the eyes of a Palestinian majority. Sacco removes all comfort, all sense of belonging, and completely reverses the order of racial hierarchy. This, of course, is a drastic departure from typical comics, which tend to use visual determination to establish the Otherness of non-white or non-American peoples.

The works of Sacco, Satrapi and Katchor all demonstrate the ongoing exploration of racial representation in comics. Each, however, owes a great debt to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and to the techniques that Spiegelman cultivates within his pages. Like Sacco, Satrapi and Katchor, Art Spiegelman mines the racist encrusted connotations of the comics form as a well-source of creative potential. In *Maus*, Spiegelman presents a hyperbole of racial difference in order to call attention to the manner in which racial categorization and racial hierarchies take shape. In *Maus*, Spiegelman reconstructs his father's experiences in the ghettos of Poland and the death camps at Auschwitz. The Jews in the story are drawn as mice, the Germans as cats, the Polish as pigs and the Americans

as dogs. More accurately, the characters are drawn as half-human, half-animal (as seen in figure 2.11). All characters stand erect, wear clothes and generally do all things that human beings do; it just so happens that their faces are those of animals. This animalization is the only fantasy element in the text. The rest of the novel is completely realistic in every possible way. Moreover, the characters themselves demonstrate no awareness of the animals that they resemble. The mice do not eat cheese. The dogs do not bark. Everyone acts quite human. This detail makes it clear that the animal element is wholly symbolic.



Figure 2.11: Animalization in *Maus*.

By visually marking his characters, Spiegelman is able to convey the determining value of race within Holocaust-era Europe. Whatever the distinction, if any, between a

Polish person and a German person,⁴⁶ one could not say that this distinction is more pronounced than the distinction between a cat and a mouse. Thus the hyperbolic quality of the signs of race within *Maus* satirizes racial visual determination in general. In *Maus*, visual racial determination is a device that the author constructs to further his critique of racial distinctions in general. Through this technique, Spiegelman suggests that visual racial determination is simplistic, totalizing and political.

The multimodality of the text, however, deliberately contradicts the simplicity of visual determination in order to create a poignant sense of dissonance. The mice have names, families and ambitions. Like Marji in *Persepolis*, they do not acquiesce to the connotations that are traditionally associated with racial determination. Most notably, the narrative consistently resounds with the humanity of Vladek Spiegelman, a heroic but flawed individual. Thus, the visual element of *Maus* reflects the simplistic racial perceptions that enabled the Holocaust while the narrative element conveys the human tragedy of the Holocaust. Spiegelman's simplistic reduction of human racial interaction to a cartoonish food chain is nothing short of offensive (and indeed had the effect of offending many) but, in its offensiveness, this approach reflects the reductive and offensive nature of the racial prejudices at the heart of the Holocaust.

Spiegelman consistently represents racial identity as an exclusively visual phenomenon. As Vladek attempts to escape arrest by pretending that he is Polish, he is shown to be wearing a pig mask. When he is discovered, the mask comes off. Thus visibility is portrayed as the constitutive force of racial identity. It is significant to note that, outside of the symbolic realm, there is no real device utilized by Vladek to *appear*

⁴⁶ Several racial theorists such as Matthew F. Jacobson and David Theo Goldberg have suggested that arguments on the physical distinctions between European races are pure fantasy arising from the fallacies of certain racial studies endeavors.

Polish. There is no facial putty, false mustache or any form of real-world disguise. As illustrated in figure 2.12, Vladek is seen wearing a pig mask because he is *claiming* to be Polish. The mask itself is a device created by the author to visually signify that Vladek is pretending to be Polish. In this case, the device conveys a deception. The officer determines that Vladek is Jewish because of inside information provided by an informant and not because he can visually recognize that Vladek is Jewish. Despite the mask strings that Spiegelman uses to distinguish the real Polish from those pretending to be Polish, Vladek is invisible amongst his real Polish counterparts,⁴⁷ and easily passes as one of them.



Figure 2.12: Vladek unmasked.

⁴⁷ It should be noted that, in terms of citizenship, Vladek is Polish, but the fact that he is a Polish Jew pushes his racial identity from Pig to Mouse. Here we see another example of how ineffectively these visual distinctions of race hold-up when interpreted or scrutinized.

Similarly, a sequence in the second volume of *Maus* shows a caricature of the author as a human being who is wearing a mouse mask. In this sequence, Art Spiegelman is conflicted by the success of the first volume of *Maus* and he expresses his anxiety to a psychiatrist. By rendering himself in mask here, Spiegelman suggests that he too was hiding behind a mask of racial identity when he represented himself as a mouse in the first volume of *Maus*. In the sequences of the novel in which an aging Vladek tells the story to his comics artist son, both Vladek and Art are rendered as mice. From the outset then, Spiegelman signifies that his Jewishness is an integral part of his identity. As a narrative technique, this declaration of identity provides Spiegelman with the necessary credibility to speak on the subject of the Holocaust. In a text that asks the reader to imagine genocide through the eyes of cartoon animals, credibility is a paramount issue. Beyond this, Spiegelman's self-rendering as a mouse also emphasizes a sense of heritage and lineage. In such a context, the Holocaust, the events leading up to it and even the history of Jewish racial identification can all be seen to play an important role in informing the present through Art Spiegelman's ongoing sense of identity. As such, *Maus* is also a story about the far-reaching effects of racial prejudice. The clearest examples of such effects are the irreconcilable gap that exists between Artie and his father, and Artie's constant struggle to come to terms with his own Jewishness.

Spiegelman's renderings are not obvious caricature in the sense of exaggerating visible characteristics. The choice to render Germans as cats, for example has nothing to do with any sort of physical resemblance between Germanic visual racial stereotypes and the feline species. Spiegelman chooses these animals solely for their perceived place in animal hierarchies. The analogy is fairly simple. Cats eat mice but are afraid of dogs

while pigs are somewhat neutral. Thus, Germans commit genocide on Jews but are defeated by the Americans while the Polish have a more complex and ambiguous relationship with Germans and Jews. Spiegelman's visual determinations utilize symbols that are entirely arbitrary, though symbolically important. The recognition of the reader is not stimulated through visual identification (through caricatures that the reader can identify as Jewish or German). Instead, Spiegelman must establish a new paradigm for the visualization of race. Through progressive experience, narrative intervention (i.e. *telling* the reader that Vladek is Jewish) and other visual signs (i.e. Gestapo uniforms on cats) the reader comes to perceive the visualization of race as Spiegelman intends it (Germans are cats, Jews are mice, etc.).

At the same time, however, Spiegelman's drawings continually assert their own artificiality and thus contradict the very idea of visual racial determination. Spiegelman establishes, quite clearly, that the sign systems behind visual racial determination can be actively constructed. The reader might expect a story in which Germans are seen as cats and Jews as mice to be distancing or perhaps just silly, but by accepting the sign system and allowing the narrative to unfold around it, the reader becomes complicit in demonstrating how easily these sign systems can be created and accepted. Spiegelman thus deconstructs the very processes through which comics perpetuate racist ideas by undercutting the implied authority of the denotative comics sign.

In *Playing the Races: Ethnic Caricature and American Literary Realism*, Henry B. Wonham suggests that early American caricature exists in a state of paradox when it comes to racial representation. By creating fixed identities, caricature simultaneously asserts its own fictitiousness.

Against the unwelcome homogenization of the melting pot, caricature inscribes ethnic markers as inflexible features of identity, which only become more pronounced with every comical step the irreparable alien takes toward the fantasy of perfect assimilation. In affirming ethnic identity as a permanent birthright of the “mick,” the “coon,” the “kike,” and the “wop,” however, caricature reifies those categories so thoroughly that an alternative model of identity inevitably emerges as a dimension of the caricatured image, an improvisational, fluid, cosmopolitanism that understands ethnicity as nothing more substantial than a comic performance. (38-39)

Thus the birthrights identified by Wonham are so fixed that they collapse the very possibility that they are anything other than a fiction. Spiegelman’s text can be seen to utilize an extreme form of the same reifying process. Is the “mouse” really any less viable than the “kike” as a performance of Jewishness in general? Spiegelman’s text openly acknowledges that the representation is arbitrary. By extension, *Maus* can be seen to point to the arbitrary quality of racial stereotypes.

The first volume of *Maus* was, for its time, an unparalleled critical success for the comics medium, but it is clear that Spiegelman experienced some misgivings about his work. This self-doubt becomes a consistent theme throughout the second volume of *Maus*. By rendering himself in a mouse mask during part of the second volume, Spiegelman is creating a sort of qualifier statement intended to convey to the reader the sense of guilt that Spiegelman experiences in his new role as a celebrated Jewish artist. The visual metaphor that Spiegelman employs is drastic but very effective.



Figure 2.13: Spiegelman at his drafting table.

Illustrated in figure 2.13, Spiegelman draws his drafting table surrounded by a mound of dead mice-men. Spiegelman himself sits at the table smoking a cigarette and drawing what we can only presume is the next installment of *Maus*. Ironically, it is the mice beneath him (as cartoonish as they are) who have a greater claim to “authentic Jewish identity” in the eyes of the author. Spiegelman is simply wearing the mouse mask and, from what we can see, beneath that mask is a human face. In writing his story, he has taken on an outdated sign-system that is somewhat foreign to him. He has proclaimed himself as Jewish and he has visually rendered himself in a manner that is consistent with the visual signifiers that he uses to convey the racial overdetermination that existed at the time of the Holocaust. Yet the level of determination placed upon racial identity in Vladek’s time is different from the level of determination placed upon racial identity in

Art's time--or so Spiegelman believes, as evidenced by his conversations with the psychiatrist. "My book? Hah! What book?? Some part of me doesn't want to draw or think about Auschwitz. I can't visualize it clearly, and I can't BEGIN to imagine what it felt like" (II.46). Spiegelman thus places himself in the position of trying to understand racism from a perspective that has been significantly less traumatized by racial determination. This understanding continually eludes him throughout both volumes of *Maus* and his attempts at reaching it lead to the obvious distortion of history that we see when he represents races with animals.

Spiegelman's internal conflict is consistent with the novel's thematic concerns with historical distance and the failure of representation. Spiegelman does not resolve this contradiction in the episode with his psychiatrist, nor does he reform the method of self-representation in the second volume of *Maus*, which (after this brief episode involving the mouse-masked man) continues to depict Art as a mouse-man (no mask) when in conversation with his father. Because Spiegelman includes this self-questioning episode in his narrative, I would suggest that the author is simply not concerned with compromising the integrity of the sign of Jewishness that he has created for himself. Rather, Spiegelman needs the reader to recognize that his projected identity is--at least to some degree--a construction. The guilt that the author expresses for taking up a racial identity is itself a poignant argument for the self-loathing that can come with racial identification of any kind. Spiegelman has profited (financially and creatively) from the suffering of the Jewish people and from his own birthright as a member of these people. This aspect of the text again calls into question the validity of racial identification and the meanings that people invest in racial signs.

With Spiegelman, and with the other contemporary artists discussed in this chapter, we see a strange and interesting trend where comics artists utilize the racist encrusted connotations of comics past (a past that clearly continues to haunt comics in general) in order to project anti-racist messages. The implied modality of the denotative sign--and its relationship to the connoted signs accompanying it--is destabilized to such an extent that the very concept of racial stereotypes is likewise destabilized.

This revisioning work by Spiegelman and others is an important component of the comics-as-literature movement. As my readings demonstrate, the racist tendencies of comics are deeply embedded in both the history and the semiotic structures of the form. In order to move beyond these encrusted connotations, certain comics artists have entered into a dialogue with the past, looking backward in order to reinterpret history and semiotics simultaneously. As I have demonstrated, this revisioning project has been popularly embraced by the current generation of comics artists and, instead of being a burden, it has provided a well-source of creativity for some of the most acclaimed comics artists to date.

CHAPTER THREE

A Squinkie Disguise: Representations of the Geek in the Comics Form

Once I got older, a friend introduced me to Spider-Man--basically the same loser feeling as *Peanuts*, but staged with teenagers thrown into superhero costumes. In a sense, Spidey was a more accurate picture of my emotional life, maybe of the emotional life of a lot of his readers, because unlike Charlie Brown, Spidey had it both ways: He was enormously competent and self-assured when he was Spidey, as many of us were in little areas of our lives. But he still managed to live under a cloud. Persecuted. Misunderstood. A failure even when he was a success. And of course, most important of all, very very sad....And sad, barely read losers like me--we need art too.

—Ira Glass, Preface to *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* No. 13(7)

The idea of treating geeks as a minority class can be contentious, but it is safe to say that geeks represent an important minority group within the history of comics Othering. Because comics frequently target the geek demographic and because of a strong cultural correspondence between geeks and comics, the geek may actually be the most significant minority figure to the comics form. For this reason, geek-Othering in comics and the revisioning strategies that challenge this type of Othering have played and continue to play a crucial role in defining the cultural status of comics art.

By looking at racism and sexism in comics, I have thus far explored the manner in which comics have limited their literary potential by aggressively supporting majority interests. The treatment of the racial Other in mainstream comics very much supports the white majority while the treatment of the sexual Other is equally skewed in favor of the men within a highly patriarchal culture. In the case of the geek, however, comics have never projected consistent anti-geek messages but have, instead, projected many symbols

that speak directly to the geek subject position, even within comics that are Othering geeks.

Beginning in the early era of the superhero, comics Othered the geek figure by positioning geekiness as the counter-figure to the superhero. At the same time, however, these superhero comics contain a number of geek connotations that offset this Othering process and thus establish geek fantasy⁴⁸ as an encrusted connotation of the form. Yet over the course of seventy years, comics have moved from making subversive appeals to the geek community, through geek-friendly connoted signs, to telling stories of the geek condition directly, in a manner that is tragic, serious and anything but simplistic. This development has led to the breaking of new ground for comics and the breaking of old encrusted connotations at the same time.

In this chapter I wish to analyze how comics represent the geek, the nerd, the dork and all other approximate synonyms for this type of social outcast.⁴⁹ I will focus initially on the figure of Superman, an elaborate and symbolic geek fantasy (in spite of his obvious anti-geek qualities) of power, sex, revenge and self-punishment. I will then turn briefly to the so-called “Marvel Era” of comics in order to demonstrate how Marvel comics directly targeted the geek demographic in the early 1960s and drew parallels between geeks and racial minorities. Finally, I will explore how the figure of the geek has been imbued with a tremendous sense of tragic pathos in Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan* graphic novel in order to legitimize the idea of the visually and emotionally identifiable geek hero.

⁴⁸ This type of fantasy reflects the geek’s desire for power, sex and revenge in a manner that is specifically geared toward the geek subject position.

⁴⁹ It is important to note that the geek is a social outcast in spite of the fact that they are typically male (gender majority) and white (racial majority).

The structure of this dissertation might raise certain questions regarding the merit of the geek underclass as an object of study alongside racial minorities and women. Are these comparable social groups, given the lack of critical and theoretical interest in geek persecution and the wealth of study surrounding sexism and racism? In keeping with some recent texts on the subject of the geek subject position, I assert that this parallel is not only valid, but also essential to our understanding of the Othering practices of comics.

Lori Kendall, for example, finds that the geek identity is tied up with racial and gender identity, as well as class and sexual orientation (265). Kendall identifies the manner in which the nerd identity has created a “reconfiguration of civil rights discourse” (266). By aligning geek persecution with that of other minority groups, such as African-Americans, homosexuals, Asian-Americans and women, Western culture has reconfigured the geek as a viable minority figure. Kendall points to popular media such as the *Revenge of the Nerds* film as the site of these reconfigurations. Kendall does not expressly say whether elevating the geek to this level of minority consideration is a good thing or a bad thing, but she demonstrates how this reconfiguration creates the social perception that geeks are an important minority group within Western culture.

In “Race, Sex, and Nerds” Ron Eglash goes further than Kendall by demonstrating that racial identity, sexual identity and nerd identity are all part of a deeper complex: “Primitivist racism and orientalist racism maintain their power through mutually reinforcing constructions of masculinity, femininity, and technological prowess” (60). In Eglash’s theory, race, sex and geekiness are more than just comparative forms of Otherness. They are also equivalent constructions within a system of social stratification, a system that provides power to two key forms of racism. Eglash, who links

technological prowess to geekiness, suggests that, to Americans, Africans are perceived as oversexual, hypermasculine, anti-geek hipsters and Asians are perceived as undersexual, hyperfeminine geeks (52). Whiteness is perceived as the “perfect balance between these two extremes” (52). What Eglash identifies, then, is a complex system of difference in which the white, only minimally geeky male is the norm and everyone else is characterized as a distorted extreme. For the purposes of this project, the most useful component of Eglash’s argument is the manner in which he uses race, sex and geekiness interchangeably in order to identify difference from an accepted social norm.⁵⁰ Eglash’s work puts these three forms of Othering on an equal plane.

These studies establish a correspondence between geekiness and other forms of Otherness. More important, however, is the fact that geeks are generally treated within comics as a significant underclass--a fact that will become readily apparent throughout this chapter. Within the comics community, being a geek is very much a valid form of Otherness, though the term itself is difficult to define.

A suitable definition of “geek” is elusive. Currently, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “geek” as “[a]n overly diligent, unsociable student; any unsociable person obsessively devoted to a particular pursuit.” This definition conforms with the *OED*’s definition of “nerd” as “An insignificant, foolish, or socially inept person; a person who is boringly conventional or studious.” Both of these terms are traced back to the 1950s: a 1957 letter by Jack Kerouac differentiates the term “geek” from its older meaning as a carnival freak while a 1951 Newsweek article coins the term “nerd” as the neologism for what was formally known as a square or a drip (terms which also clearly

⁵⁰ Eglash suggests that these stereotypes can be challenged through variation of just one of the Othering components. For example, a geeky black person (male or female), or a masculine Asian person would undermine what Eglash refers to as “normative roles” (52).

referred to the geek subject position). The definitions of “geek” and “nerd” both suggest a combination of social inadequacy and excessive studiousness. In truth, however, a demonstration of either quality is often enough to earn an individual the geek label. For this reason and others, the *OED* definition of geek is insufficient. It fails to account for the broader derogatory use of the term, which Lori Kendall identifies as the “loser and outcast status of the nerd” (266). Kendall again points to the iconic *Revenge of the Nerds* film, which features “an effeminate black gay man, an amoral slob given to displays of disgusting physicality, and a stereotyped Japanese immigrant” (266) all under the label of “nerd,” in spite of the fact that none of these characters are overly studious or even unsociable. Kendall sees geeks as “masculine improprieties” (264), meaning that geeks are men who do not perform masculinity well and are therefore pushed to the margins of society.

For my part, I will use “geek” or “nerd” as umbrella terms to cover a wide spectrum of socially isolated individuals and groups. This broad use treats geek as a by-product of social stratification. “Outcast” works quite well in this sense. The geek is, in some ways, the ultimate Other--the being that does not fit into any acceptable social group. Of course, the geek has slowly progressed from this limbo status through the formation of geek community, which made “geek” into a viable in-group. As I will demonstrate, comics have played an important role in the construction of this community and also, therefore, in the cultural status of geeks. My readings will draw upon multiple definitions of “geek” or “nerd,” according to the needs of the subject matter. The understanding that I wish to foster here is that all the definitions used can be contained within this idea of the geek as a generalized reflection of social stratification.

I believe that geekiness is best perceived as a social construction that is produced by competing power structures, which operate through a large number of social and cultural permutations. Just as race and gender boundaries have been used to define an authoritative Self, so too have social boundaries been used to further define some concept of social normalcy. There are no bathroom signs that distinguish which door is for geeks and which for non-geeks, and there have never been any seats on Alabama buses that were specifically designated for non-geeks alone. There are, however, lunch tables in millions of school cafeterias that seem to signify the domain of the geek, and there are walls along dance halls where the geeks bunch together, and more, there are *Star Trek* conventions and fantasy RPGs and 15 hour *Firefly* marathons. In short, geeks have a unique space within Western culture.⁵¹ They occupy a unique discursive sphere. This sphere is commonly known as “geekdom.”

It is also important to note that “geek” is not a fixed term, but one that exists in a state of constant flux. Firstly, the geek subject position exists long before the terms “geek” or “nerd” come into the English language. The idea of the geek comes *avant la lettre*, so to speak. Secondly, the few histories of geekdom in current circulation all suggest that people who displayed geek characteristics were not always socially Othered. Prior to the 20th century, many geeky qualities were considered socially desirable. Many of the “geek icons” identified by Neil Feineman in *Geek Chic* lived without the stigma of social Otherness. Archimedes, Benjamin Franklin, and Galileo were, in their time, perceived as popular, famous, worthy of respect and even sexy.

⁵¹ Matthew J. Pustz’s *Comic Book Culture*, as example, is a thorough account of the comic book store’s role as a “site for culture as well as commerce” (Introduction, xi).

It is in the 20th century that overly studious people (again, one potential form of geek) became socially maligned and the geek subject position comes into being. This is largely the result of ongoing social tensions that were created by technological innovation (the same tensions that produced the myth of Superman). Surfacing tensions from the industrial revolution, the modern era and the emerging global economy combined to radically alter the landscape of the human/technology binary. Roslyn Haynes notes that this period sees a major change in the representation of the scientist. It is in this period that the scientist moves from being seen simply as overly-studious to overly-studious and “impersonal,” in the sense of pulling away from interpersonal relationships (211-235). This impersonality then contributes to the man versus machine/science binary, in which an individual with poor social skills and advanced technical or scientific skills is perceived to be “with” the machines and sciences and “against” mankind (Kendall 263, Haynes 2-5).⁵² As a result of such perceptions, the social alienation of the geek began and continued through the better part of the 20th century. The beginning of the end of geek alienation occurs in the mid-1980s. According to Lori Kendall and Lars Konzack, the birth of the information age and the rise of geek culture have played a large role in reversing this trend of alienation to such an extent that, in many spheres, the geeks are no longer an underclass at all.⁵³

Neil Feineman’s *Geek Chic*, subtitled “The Ultimate Guide to Geek Culture,” places a heavy emphasis on the role of comics within the sphere of geekdom. Feineman divides all geek cultural artifacts into 16 categories, one of which is “Geek Comics.”⁵⁴

⁵² Furthermore, Eglash and Lars Konzack both connect “geek” and “scientist” as somewhat interchangeable terms within 20th century culture.

⁵³ Kendall 262-264, Konzack 4

⁵⁴ Other categories include “Geek Sci-Fi,” “Geek Computers,” and “Geek Gadgets.”

Not coincidentally, the geek comics that Feineman singles out are among the most famous comics in the world and include Superman, various early Marvel Era series and the graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan*, all of which are discussed in depth in this chapter.

My work moves beyond recognition of these comics as geek artifacts and situates them within the development of the form itself, identifying the semiotic techniques at play with regard to the Otherness of the geek. Where Feineman identifies the correspondence between geeks and these particular cultural artifacts, my work focuses on how these two parties interact with each other and how their ongoing interaction has shaped the Othering practices of comics and the push toward the comics-as-literature movement. As I will demonstrate, superhero comics have, for decades, targeted the buying power of the geek demographic by representing the geek experience, first through the adolescent power fantasy that has become an encrusted connotation of the form and later through progressively more complex and challenging works of comics art which speak directly to geekiness as a part of the human condition. This development has led, in part, to the contemporary graphic novel, which uses the tragic quality of geekiness as a particularly persistent theme (most often in an attempt to humanize the geek).

I will begin by demonstrating the formation of geek fantasy in early superhero comics. With this goal in mind, I turn now to Superman, the first superhero and the most prominent paradigm for the superhero genre in general. He is also the most prominent comics paradigm for the geek fantasies that became a part of the encrusted connotations of the comics form. Superman was created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster as early as 1933, but due to the fantastic and surreal nature of Superman's world, no one would

publish the comic until 1938 when the first Superman story was printed in *Action Comics* No. 1.

At the time of his creation, Superman could not be identified within the geek subject position and still be considered a hero. I will first show how Superman uses geek disguise to comment upon preconceived ideas about the geek. I will then illustrate how Superman's relationship with Lois Lane enacts symbolically violent sexual fantasies that express a desire for sexual revenge and sexual conquest that is consistent with other works of geek culture. Finally, I will demonstrate how Superman's conflict with Lex Luthor simultaneously condemns, punishes, rationalizes and valorizes the geek experience by staging (on an epic scale) the internal conflict of geek self-identity. All of these elements combine to create the geek-valorizing fantasy that has become an encrusted connotation of the comics form.

Clark Kent (Superman's alter-ego⁵⁵) is a mild-mannered reporter who is consistently ignored and dismissed by the society around him. Kent is bullied by his boss and his co-workers. The woman he loves, Lois Lane, is put off by his apparent cowardice and frequently tells him so outright. Thus, Clark Kent's identification as a geek works well with Kendall's idea of geekiness as a form of badly performed masculinity, though Kent also demonstrates social ineptitude and even over-studiousness at times. Spin him through a phone booth, however, and Clark Kent becomes Superman, the antithesis of the mild-mannered reporter. Superman is America's greatest champion and most powerful individual. He is admired by all and loved by Lois Lane. It is not difficult to see how

⁵⁵ The Clark Kent identity is somewhat complicated, and it should be noted that Superman was actually born and raised as Clark Kent before discovering his true origins. The Clark Kent identity that he assumes once he becomes Superman is still very much a disguise, however. Prior to becoming Superman, Clark Kent did not act timid or meek the way that he does in his later life.

Superman serves as a fantasy outlet for the meek. As Umberto Eco writes, “any accountant in any American city secretly feeds the hope that one day, from the slough of his actual personality, there can spring forth a superman who is capable of redeeming years of mediocre existence” (145).



Figure 3.1: The Clark Kent disguise.

As illustrated in figure 3.1, the basic components of Superman’s Clark Kent disguise are a business suit, glasses and slicked back hair. That is it. The suit is not constantly present within the Clark Kent sphere (he does not wear it to the beach, for example) and the representation of his hair is visually inconsistent (occasionally it is identical to that of Superman). Thus, to a reader searching for clearly definitive signs, Clark Kent is distinguished from Superman by his glasses. Tom Morris describes these glasses as a uniform (equal in function to the cape, emblem and tights of Superman) that signifies the sphere of Clark Kent, as opposed to the somewhat more sensational sphere of Superman (255). It is the function of these glasses as a signifier of geekiness that I wish to interrogate further.

Of course, it is somewhat ludicrous to suggest that anyone with poor eyesight is a geek. In this sense, glasses are a somewhat arbitrary sign of geekiness. Spectacles are a fairly simple piece of medical technology that corrects a common human defect. The diligent study associated with geek culture, however, is often perceived to result in the need for corrective eye-wear. Glasses have thus become a simple (and simplified), visually apparent means of signifying geekiness. This simple form of visual determination is exactly what Superman desires when he puts on his glasses disguise. To the people who Superman interacts with, Clark's obvious resemblance to Superman is less meaningful than the fact that Superman could never ever be a geek. In the comics language (as with other forms of popular culture), glasses are a transparent sign of geekiness, and thus function as a denotative sign of the geek. But to denote "geek"--to visually determine Superman as a geek through the language of comics--is to raise a wide number of anti-heroic connotations such as weakness, timidity and ineffectiveness. For this reason, Clark Kent is a perfect disguise. "To conceal the fact that Clark Kent is secretly Superman, the Man of Steel has endowed his Clark Kent persona with an array of qualities and traits which are diametrically opposed to the ones he displays in his role as a super-hero" (Fleischer 319). When creating the Clark Kent disguise, Superman utilizes the social group that is the most directly opposite to the very concept of superheroism (and therefore the most functional secret identity). This group, of course, is the geeks.

At the same time, however, Superman's glasses mock the very premise upon which the disguise is based. Superman is not a geek--he does not even need the glasses. The world, however, is incapable of seeing past the simplicity of the signifier. Thus it is

the world that is blind; the hero sees just fine. In allowing the reader in on this joke, both visually and narratively, Siegel and Schuster align themselves with the geek demographic by suggesting that glasses do not, in fact, define one's geekiness. Thus, the *Superman* creators undermine the integrity of the denotative sign with regard to its capacity to naturalize connotations.

Through geek disguise, *Superman* comics further speak to a socially Othered readership. As a reporter, Clark Kent receives access to the most up-to-date information possible on things that are happening in the city around him and the world beyond. This is frequently cited as a key motivation behind the maintenance of the Clark Kent identity. Superman constantly fears the exposure of his secret identity because he does not want to lose the crime-fighting advantages that Clark Kent provides him. As Clark Kent, however, Superman repeatedly experiences some of the lowest moments in the life of the average geek. Clark is rejected by women, disrespected and marginalized by his peers and physically bullied by men. In order to preserve his disguise, however, Superman endures all of these things. Siegel and Schuster thus create a strong heroic message which is associated with the very state of geekiness. Superman's heroic tolerance of geek-persecution plays a crucial role in his greater mission to protect humanity. The message then is simple: there is nobility in the suffering of the geeks.

Furthermore, the Clark Kent persona enables Superman to participate in society as an ordinary human being. Tom Morris suggests that the Clark Kent persona is "a crucial part of a real quest to live the human adventure" (261). The domestic value of the alias is a common theme within the superhero genre: the god-like status provided by super-powers is characterized as a wholly unappealing way of life. It is important that the

superhero not be covetous of power for obvious reasons (reasons which are most prominently developed through the depiction of the megalomaniacal supervillains that Superman opposes). Rather, the superhero wants to experience some sense of communal belonging. Ironically, his geek disguise--a necessary component of his heroic quest--deprives him from this sense of belonging. The desire to fit in is a persistent theme within the superhero genre, and it has particular resonance within the socially Othered geek community.

Superman is very much a story of alienation and of the subsequent desire to be a part of a community.

The basic desire to belong is a fundamental aspect of human nature. As defined by psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), our need to connect to others is paramount to our well-being, prioritized just below our physiological needs (which have virtually no significance to Kal-El [Superman's alien name], whose cellular structure derives its nourishment not from food but from solar energy) and our need for safety (an instinct that is also likely to be slightly foreign to a man who can survive a direct nuclear blast). (Waid 8)

As Waid notes, Superman has no need for food and is virtually indestructible. Socially, however, he has no such advantages, and he is, in fact, severely disadvantaged by his powers, his crusade against wrong-doing and the fact that he is from another planet.

Siegel and Schuster (and all the Superman creative teams to follow them) consistently utilize this desire for social acceptance in order to create tension within the Superman narrative. Superman is going to triumph over evil, he is going to survive the

evil designs of Lex Luthor and he is going to overcome the crippling application of kryptonite. His success in the social sphere, however, is not nearly so assured, and it is here that Superman stories are often most dramatic. Superman's most interesting successes and failures have largely been within the social sphere. Most prominent among these exploits is his somewhat star-crossed love for Lois Lane and the Shakespearean complications that arise within their romance. Superman cannot be with Lois Lane because Superman does not exist within a domestic sphere. Superman does not go to bed wearing his cape. At the same time, Clark Kent cannot be with Lois because Lois is disgusted by his un-masculine qualities (qualities that are an act which helps to sustain and preserve the existence of Superman and to safe-guard everything in Superman's human life), and she is also preoccupied with her infatuation for Superman. As a result, Lois and Superman are kept apart. Despite his god-like prowess, Superman is denied the sense of belonging, community and romantic and sexual fulfillment that so many of his socially Othered readers are likewise denied as a result of their geekiness.

In this sexual aspect, Superman serves the interests of his geek readers. Indeed, understanding the connection between the geek and the fantasy elements of superhero comics is an important step toward understanding the historical oversexualization of women in the comics form. Through a combination of visual and narrative signs, *Superman* comics (and the genre that arises from them) repeatedly stage a cycle of symbolic sexual revenge and sexual conquest that speaks to the geek experience.

For the sake of contrast, I wish to compare Superman to another prominent geek cultural artifact. The 1984 film *Revenge of the Nerds* is considered by Feineman, Kendall and other theorists of nerd identity to be a monumental geek artifact. In the climax of the

film, the nerd hero seduces a cheerleader away from her jock boyfriend. The nerd accomplishes this feat by disguising himself as her boyfriend and sleeping with her in a manner that she finds to be far more pleasurable than prior sexual experiences with her quarterback boyfriend. Thus, the geek tricks her and overpowers her pre-conceived notions. He achieves conquest, but he also achieves a sort of revenge by fooling the woman (who had considered him beneath her) and by establishing his sexual superiority over the socially accepted male (as symbolized by the popular, handsome, athletic boyfriend of par or sub-par intelligence). As the nerd removes his disguise, the cheerleader is astonished and instead of calling the police, she asks, “are all nerds as good as you?” The triumphant geek hero responds with the film’s most famous line: “All jocks think about is sports. All we think about is sex.” The sexism here is fairly obvious-- Kendall specifically notes that, up until recently, geeks and nerds are always male (262)⁵⁶--and the violent undertones of this scene speak volumes to some of the more disturbing elements of the sexual fantasy that arises from the geek condition. As I will demonstrate, these same sexual messages--and thus the same geek sexual pathologies--are all connoted through Superman’s relationship with Lois Lane.

Appropriately, the true origins of Superman may lie in the sexual thoughts of two particular socially disenfranchised geeks. In Tom De Haven’s recent Superman book, *Our Hero*, De Haven notes that Siegel and Schuster “[d]idn’t date much. Didn’t date period. Zero dates” (34). In fact, in Jerry Siegel’s own account, the first superhero is the product of a repressed sexual desire that directly corresponds to the geek subject position.

⁵⁶ In evidence of this, Kendall points to the use of specific female variations of “geek,” such as “nerdette,” which Kendall suggests are the equivalent of terms such as “female doctor” in their capacity to define the masculine as the normative case (262).

As a high school student, I thought that someday I might become a reporter, and I had crushes on several attractive girls who either didn't know I existed or didn't care....It occurred to me--what if I was real terrific? What if I had something special going for me, like jumping over buildings or throwing cars around or something like that? Then maybe they would notice me. That night when all the thoughts were coming to me, the concept came to me that Superman could have a dual identity, and that in one of his identities he would be meek and mild, as I was, and wear glasses, as I do. The heroine, who I figured would be a girl reporter, would think he was some sort of a worm; yet she would be crazy about this Superman character....In fact, she was real wild about him, and the big inside joke was that the fellow she was crazy about was also the fellow who she loathed. By coincidence, Joe [Schuster] was a carbon copy of me." (Quoted in Harvey, *Art*, 19)

In this account, Siegel suggests that Superman is the product of socially repressed sexual desire and an elaborate revenge fantasy that inverts the social hierarchy. The geek in this situation is not the fool because of the Superhero dual-identity, which valorizes the geek, even while this duality Others the geek. Lois Lane, in failing to perceive the Superman behind the glasses, is consequently characterized as a fool herself. Lois's foolishness is dramatically enhanced as a result of the obviousness of Superman's disguise and as a result of Lois's close relationships with both Clark and Superman. These factors also undermine Lois's integrity as a big-city reporter. How could she be so blind? At the same time, the dramatic irony of the narrative makes Lois even more foolish. The reader is continually aware of Superman's dual identity, and thus the "inside joke" that Siegel

speaks of is at the expense of Lois Lane, the symbolic representation of the “several attractive girls” who ignored Siegel as a teen.

At the time of Superman’s origins, sex in mainstream comics was wholly indirect but nonetheless prolific in its symbolic presence. While much of Frederic Wertham’s reading of sexual symbolism in comics⁵⁷ was inherently sensationalistic and highly dubious, his contemporary, Gershon Legman, was much closer to the mark on this particular subject.

Like all other forms of dreaming, literature operates under a censorship. And this censorship--in both its legal and internalized expression--does not allow any direct, total attack on the frustration that elicits the dream. It offers a choice. Either the attack must restrict itself to something less than an attack, to partial and symbolic aggressions, or its object must appear in disguise. (28)

Legman goes on to explain how comics have thereby created a subtle and subversive sexual experience. Through the use of symbolism and disguise in comics, the two forms of censorship that Legman identifies are circumvented without negating the appeal to the sexual frustrations of the target audience. Jerry Siegel’s “dreaming” connotes a sense of sexual virility and capability at the same time that it portrays the absence of actual sexual desire on the part of the asexual superhero. Superman could have any woman he wants, even the geek-hating Lois Lane, but Superman chooses to remain celibate.

Siegel’s sexually-rooted fantasy never takes the form of literal sexual conquest. Despite Lois Lane’s obvious interest in Superman, the hero never gives in to her advances throughout the entire Golden Age⁵⁸ run of Superman stories. In refusing her,

⁵⁷ As discussed in Chapter 1.

⁵⁸ Early 1930s to Late 1940s.

Superman symbolically disempowers the Lois Lanes of the world by dismantling the desire that they inspire within the Clark Kents of the world. This heroic abstinence becomes a near-ubiquitous element in the world of superhero comics. Prior to the 1980s, superheroes do not have sex. How is it then that in a form with innumerable ties to pornography, with a sexually frustrated and sexually awakening demographic and with an archetype that is born out of sexual frustration, superheroes nonetheless remain chaste?

Umberto Eco attributes the problem of superhero sexuality to a matter of consumption. In *The Role of the Reader*, Eco suggests that Superman exists in a “temporal paradox” (116) in which the hero must remain fixed in time (never age, never change) in order to maintain his mythic quality.⁵⁹ The counter-balance is the reader’s ability to relate with Superman, which is compromised by the fact that most characters from the *Superman* comics series have not aged a day in over 70 years. Eco sees sex (or marriage, or childbirth) as steps toward “final consumption” (114) or death. In order to remain timeless, Eco believes that Superman has to avoid such pitfalls. Like Eco, Richard Reynolds identifies the sexless quality of superheroes as a structural technique (14). Reynolds points to historical warrior cultures in which abstaining from sex created taboos “designed to isolate and protect the ‘masculine’ in their characters” (15). He further suggests that “[s]uch concern with what amount to the rites of passage from adolescence to manhood is clearly of interest and concern to a teenage audience” (15).⁶⁰

⁵⁹ As Eco himself argues, a being as powerful as Superman is somewhat antithetical to stability and should be capable of producing “the most bewildering economic, technological and political upheavals in the world” (163).

⁶⁰ It is worth noting here that male superheroes are traditionally drawn as what Reitburger and Fuchs refer to as “hermaphrodites who lack the primary sexual organs” (120). This is simply to say that the male superhero’s groin is drawn flat, with no bulge whatsoever. By visually omitting the male sex organ in such drawings, these comics further establish the conspicuous absence of direct sexuality in superhero comics.

By speaking through symbols, the authors are able to resolve the paradox of representing sex without sex. From professional critical forums to internet chat rooms, innumerable readers and thinkers on the subject of superhero comics over the years have pointed to specific sexual symbols in superhero comics. These elements include Spiderman's webbing emissions, Wonder Woman's lasso, Daredevil's baton, Superman's X-ray vision, etc. In most cases, the sexual reading of the artifact is based upon the combination of visual resemblance and narrative usage. Even in comics of the late twentieth century, this tradition can still be seen.

A good example occurs in Frank Miller's early work on the comic series *Daredevil*. In an interview for the documentary *Comic Book Confidential*, Miller characterizes the death of the female anti-hero assassin Elektra, which he wrote and illustrated in *Daredevil* No. 181, as a deliberately scripted symbolic penetration. Elektra's knife has a phallic shape. It takes on greater symbolic meaning, however, through the fact that Elektra has transcended gender boundaries by becoming an elite assassin. Miller continually characterizes her as a woman who desires to be treated like a man in many different ways. Her failure to place value on "the feminine" may be her tragic flaw (her namesake, of course, reflects some variant of this perspective). By taking a phallic-shaped instrument as her weapon of choice, Elektra is enacting Freudian models of penis-compensation. When the villain stabs Elektra with her own knife, he asserts the domain of the masculine by violently penetrating the gender usurper, thus ending her gender coup and also asserting her ineffectiveness within a "masculine" realm. In typical Miller fashion, the symbolism here is grotesque and based on very fixed ideas of gender but

nonetheless highly effective in generating discourse. Elektra's death remains a potent site of discussion for feminist-minded comics thinkers.



Figure 3.2: Elektra's death.

Figure 3.2 illustrates the death-blow. Miller creates a division of space by framing Elektra in a pink rectangle (pink being a colour that is traditionally associated with the feminine) while Bullseye occupies white space. As he steps into the lethal thrust, Bullseye aggressively enters Elektra's space. His successful intrusion is further indicated by the bleed effect which Miller creates by having the white space (Bullseye's domain) penetrate the pink rectangle all around Elektra's body. Appropriately, Bullseye's body posture reveals that he is thrusting with his hips. His eyes are closed in what can only be

described as euphoria (as emphasized by his smile). Elektra's body, in contrast, has gone completely limp. Combined, these elements create and project a series of complex sexual messages within a story that—on the surface—is simply about a fight to the death.

In order to demonstrate similar sexual connotations in *Superman* comics, I first turn to a frequently repeated image. Illustrated by two examples in figure 3.3, the image of the hero mid-flight, holding the rescued damsel within his arms is one of the most commonly repeated images in superhero comics.⁶¹



Figure 3.3: The mid-flight embrace.

At the denotative level, this image shows the superhero rescuing the woman. At the connotative level, however, certain components of the image send a message that is more about sex than rescue. Symbolically, this image represents the sexual conquest of the

⁶¹ Bridwell's *Superman: From the Thirties to the Seventies*, for example, contains multiple examples of this image across forty different decades of *Superman* comics.

object of the hero's (and readership's) desire. The nature of the image makes this clear. The first and foremost sexual suggestion lies in the image's obvious resemblance to an embrace. The hero and damsel meet eye to eye and are somehow entangled in order for him to support her and keep her from falling. Depending on the position of the damsel's legs, the image either resembles that of a groom carrying his wife across the threshold (an image that has a clear trajectory toward sex) or a visualization of sex itself. At the same time, the hero holds the woman entirely at his mercy, often several thousand feet above the earth. This vulnerability--particularly in contrast to the rough-edged exteriors of characters such as Lois Lane--creates a sense of intimacy while simultaneously creating a sense of dependence on the part of the rescued woman. The symbolically powerful Lois Lane (as a representative of the unattainable woman) is wholly stripped of her power in such situations.

Adding to the sexual quality of this image is the manner in which it traditionally appears at the end of a sequence and thus suggests finality and the accomplishment of an objective. Most often, the next panel will begin an entirely new sequence. Appropriately, what happens after this embrace is often left to the mind of the reader. McCloud's concept of closure (*Understanding* 66-69) suggests that comics work most prominently through suggestion and that the reader is an active participant in meaning-making by filling in the spaces between the panels. In light of this fact, comics can create trajectories toward sexual activity without actually showing or narrating a literal sexual encounter. What happens after the mid-flight embrace is up to the reader to decide, but, as I have demonstrated, the comics creators provide a number of clues that might lead the reader to achieve closure through a sexual interpretation.

Body language and vectors also factor into the sexually suggestive quality of these images, but these factors tend to vary and take particular forms in particular images. Occasionally, more overt details will be added such as an open mouth or a sigh on the part of the rescued woman. Sometimes she will call out the superhero's name mid-embrace ("Oh, Superman"). Finally, the sexual quality of the image is often enhanced through the symbolic associations of flight. In *Interpretation of Dreams*, for example, Freud links the fantasy of human flight with unconscious/subconscious sexual pleasure (272). Thus, when the superhero embraces the object of the geek's desire mid-flight, the sexual connotations, and sexual fantasy, are difficult to miss.

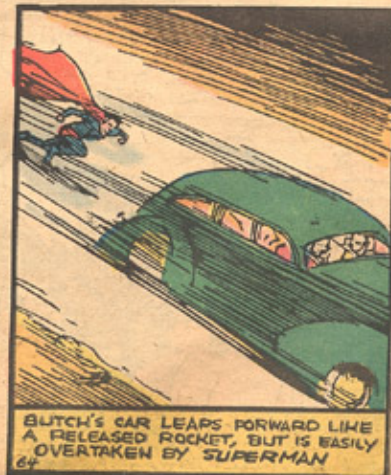
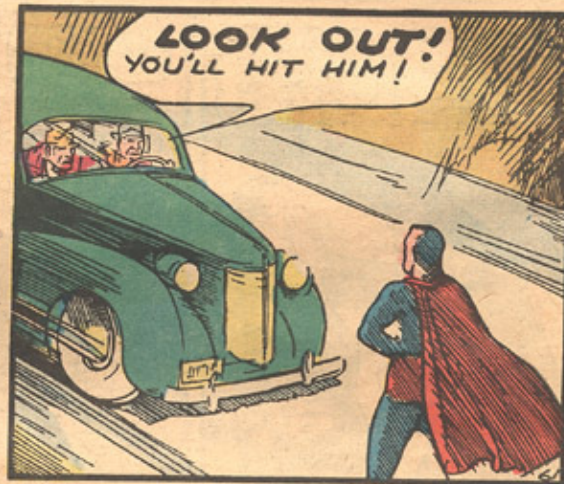
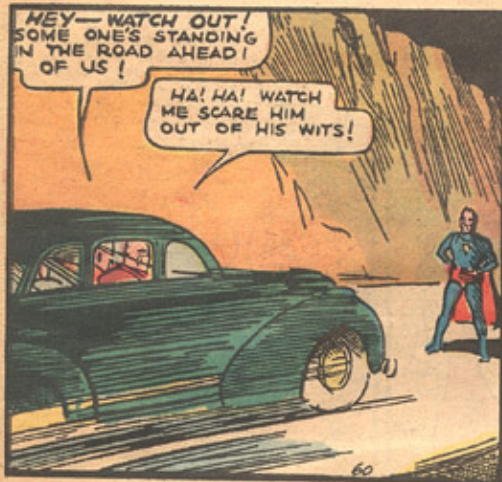
This repeated image throughout Superman comics functions as a continual climax in terms of the narrative. The story will build tension through the woman's need of rescue and the villain's execution of some sinister design. As the situation reaches its inevitable breaking point, Superman intervenes, overcomes the villain and saves the woman at the last possible second and then swoops her into the mid-flight embrace. The scene that next follows is typically the denouement. This pattern repeats itself extensively throughout *Superman* comics and, when the narrative patterns are analyzed in depth, we find symbols of sexual violence and revenge that are similar to those found in the climax of the *Revenge of the Nerds* film.

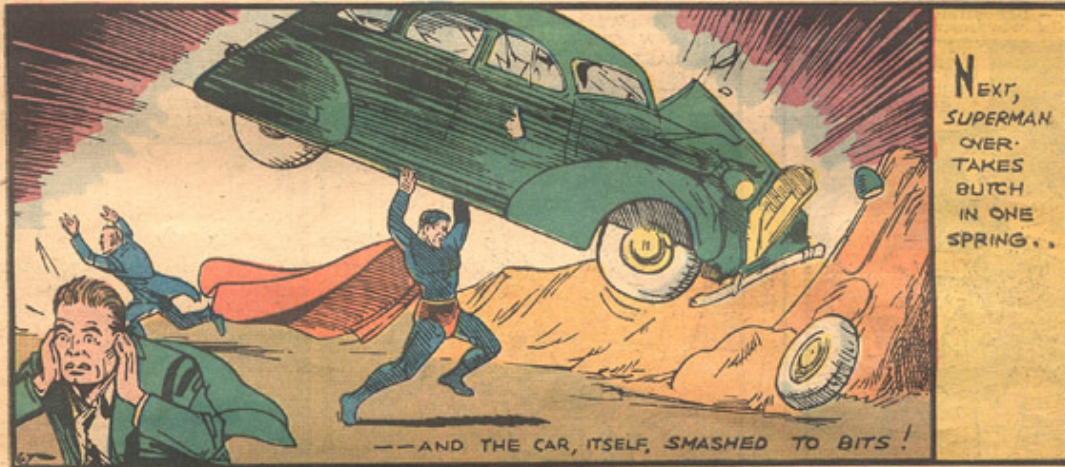
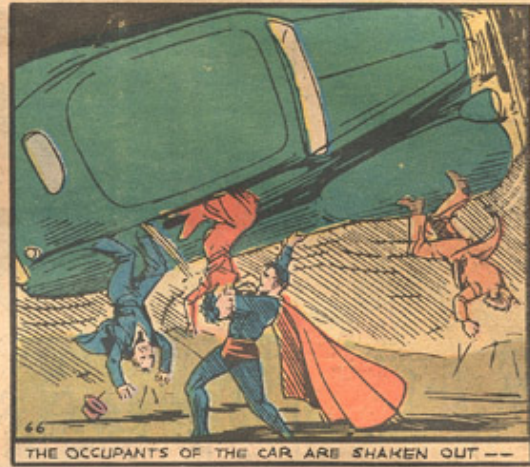
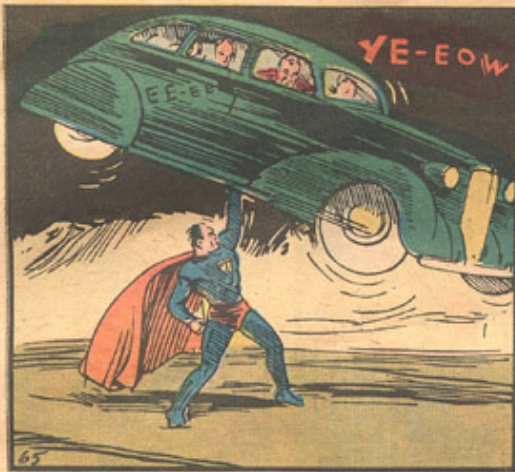
To better illustrate these symbols, I turn now to an episode from the first ever Superhero comic. Provided in the following pages, this episode represents Lois Lane's first comic book appearance. She makes her debut at the same time as Superman in *Action Comics* No. 1 (1938).



A FEW MINUTES LATER







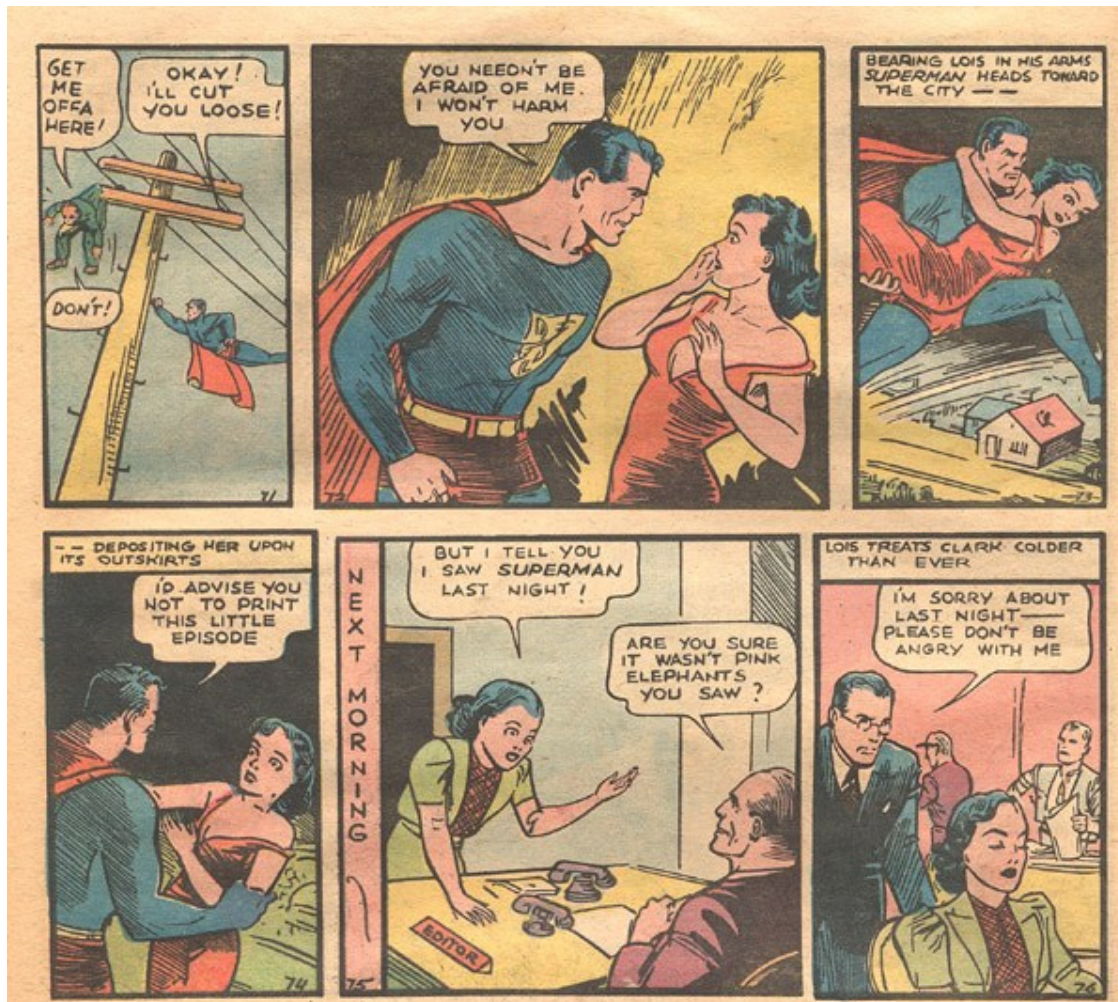


Figure 3.4: A scene from *Action Comics No. 1*.

In the story that unfolds, Lois has grudgingly accepted a date from Clark Kent. While they are at a roadhouse dance, a goon named Butch decides to cut in on Clark and Lois. Butch threatens Clark, who steps aside in order to maintain his geek disguise. Lois, repulsed by Clark's cowardice and by Butch's aggressiveness, slaps Butch in the face, calls Clark a coward and leaves. As Lois walks out on Butch, she puts on a coat, thus visually covering up her sexually revealing outfit. The labial symbolism of the coat has the same function for the reader as it does for Butch. By wrapping it around her sexually suggestive attire, Lois asserts her freedom to choose and her freedom from sexual

aggression. Consequently, Schuster's rendering of the sexually suggestive attire is ended. Butch follows her with some of his friends. "Let's get out of here! I'll show that skirt she can't make a fool out of Butch Matson!" (Quoted in Bridwell 31). Butch and friends violently abduct Lois and drive off with her prisoner. Schuster's illustration of this scene shows Lois frightened and held with her arms behind her back, thus emphasizing her plunging neckline and breasts. As Butch's friend grabs Lois, her coat falls open and is held open before Lois's attacker. Thus, Lois is once again exposed to her readers as well. The act of forcibly opening the coat is a symbolic penetration that is particularly sexualized within the context of her revealing outfit and the sexual function that it holds for the comic book's readership.

Superman then intervenes to save the day. Lois is rescued, Butch's car is smashed to pieces and Butch himself is left hanging from a telephone pole by his belt.⁶² The comedic tone of Butch's fate is enhanced by Superman's witty banter. "Just a minute, Butch! Do you mind? This will take but a few seconds" (33). Suspended from the pole, Butch pleads "Get me offa here!" Superman glibly replies "Okay! I'll cut you loose!" Recognizing the implication, Butch shouts "Don't" (34). The comedic fate that befalls Butch severely undercuts the trajectory of his intended crime. Clearly, there is a strong implication throughout the scene that Lois was very nearly raped. Through the use of comedy, Siegel and Schuster defuse the tension of the situation. This tension, of course, is both violent and sexual, and the shift in tone acts as a validating cue to the reader that everything is okay, that the situation was not that serious in spite of the clear presence in

⁶² The phallic imagery of the pole, the fact that Superman snatches Butch from behind and Butch's posture while dangling from the pole may all in fact suggest that, symbolically, Butch himself has been raped. This would certainly be an ironic inversion of his intentions with Lois. It is also significant that Butch is humiliated, taunted and hung from his underpants in a manner that might be deeply satisfying to a geek reader who had suffered through a similar experience.

this scene of the sort of sexual symbolism that Gershon Legman identifies in comics in general. Legman specifically refers to “the squinkie disguise: that the woman is being tortured so the hero can rescue her” (45). Legman uses the term “squinkie” to refer to the manner in which comics appeal to the reader’s libido through the merger of sex and horror (33). Legman believes that the torture of the female comics character is one such example of how comics use squinkie elements to create erotic undertones while still avoiding censorship (45). Under Legman’s theory, the symbolic rape of Lois Lane can thus be seen as a sort of sexual spectator sport that gratifies the reader by portraying the violent sexual disempowerment of the woman while also appeasing any guilt that this experience might engender by punishing the perpetrator and rescuing the woman in the end.

The very next panel contains Superman’s first ever encounter with Lois Lane (34). Schuster has a reputation as a bare-bones (some say sub-par) illustrator, yet he shows an uncommon amount of detail in this particular image. Superman, surrounded by shadow, leans across the median of the panel and aggressively enters Lois’s half of the image (and her personal space). He assures her “You needn’t be afraid of me. I won’t harm you.” Lois is surrounded by light. There are, however, two shadows that enter her space. The first is behind her, seemingly wrapping around her by extension of the darkness from which Superman is emanating. This first shadow presses directly against her upper back and her backside, and seems to visually hold her in place before Superman (just as Butch’s friend held Lois in front of Butch). The second shadow is a dark, triangular phallus that comes directly from Superman’s groin and points up at Lois. Superman’s right arm creates a vector that moves toward his groin area. Lois’s left arm

creates a vector across her cleavage while her right arm creates a vector toward her mouth. Her coat is completely removed (Superman whisks her home without bothering to retrieve it for her) and the left strap of her dress has fallen partially off-shoulder. The sexual connotations of this image are evident, and the aggressive posture of Superman before the now less-concealed Lois suggests sexuality. Furthermore, Superman's assurance that he "won't" harm Lois implies quite clearly that he could.

The next panel presents the first appearance of the ubiquitous image of Lois Lane in Superman's arms. Her arms are around his neck, her left shoulder strap is even further off her shoulder and Superman's legs are spread wide in a fantastic leap that has them flying over the city. Thus, in rescuing Lois from actual rape, Superman is rewarded with symbolic sex. As he drops her off, the next panel has him undermining his own promise not to hurt her from two panels earlier. Superman clasps a wide-eyed Lois in a tight-grip and threatens "I'd advise you not to print this little episode" (34). Lois's strap remains off-shoulder. Emphasizing the sexual quality of this scene, the transition to the next is a caption reading "Next Morning." McCloud's concept of closure is again relevant here. The comics artist supplies the necessary before and after information in order to steer the reader's imagination. In the gutter between Superman's threatening sexual embrace and "Next Morning," it is not hard to imagine the possibility that the reader could project a sexual encounter.

As with the *Revenge of the Nerds* film, Superman's symbolic sexual conquest features the use of disguise, misapprehension on the part of the woman, the assertion of one man's sexual superiority over others (as seen in Superman "going home" with Lois while Butch hangs from a pole by himself) and undertones of rape. Furthermore, the

abduction of the woman is sexually symbolic and provides ample opportunity for the comic's illustrator to render suggestive images in an open appeal to the sexual frustrations of the comics' readership. The violent undertones of this representation serve to further eroticize violence against women.

These violent sexual connotations serve an additional purpose beyond the immediate gratification of the reader. *Superman* comics, and the entire superhero genre which develops from them, also provide a staging ground for the assertion of geek heterosexuality. Kendall argues that "the nerd stereotype includes aspects of both hypermasculinity (intellect, rejection of sartorial display, lack of 'feminine' social and relational skills) and feminization (lack of sports ability, small body size, lack of sexual relationships with women)" (264).⁶³ Kendall points to another key scene from *Revenge of the Nerds* in which a want-to-be fraternity composed entirely of geeks is only accepted into the University fraternity system (an obvious symbol for what Kendall herself calls "hegemonic masculinity" (261)) because they set up video cameras in a sorority house and spy on the women within. The geeks thus prove that they are equal with other fraternities because "they too want to survey and control women as sexual objects" (Kendall 269).⁶⁴ Through this disturbing criminal practice, the geeks of the film overcome the perceived "feminization" of the geek stereotype and gain a higher level of social acceptance by aligning themselves with the sexist practices of non-geek males.

In spite of the fact that *Revenge of the Nerds* was written in a specific time period and in a different medium, the same desire to "survey and control women as sexual

⁶³ Similarly, Ron Eglash argues that "the opposition between the more abstract technologies and normative masculinity keep nerd identity in its niche of diminished sexual presence." (51-52)

⁶⁴ This practice of survey and control holds a strong resemblance to the practices that Mulvey observes in her analysis of visual pleasure.

objects” that this film demonstrates can be located in a large number of comics texts. By expressing this desire, such comics assert the heterosexual libido of the geek underclass. This assertion of libido emphasizes the distinction between a “lack of sexual relationships with women” and a lack of sexual interest in women. Thus the hypersexualization of women within comics may simply be, in large part, the result of geek overcompensation.

Clearly this vein can be located in Superman, the “terrific” man that Jerry Siegel wishes that he could be as a result of sexual frustration. Superman’s hypermasculinity borders upon the ridiculous. His exaggerated physique, his adoration by men and women alike and the countless number of women that he whisks away in his arms all point to a compensatory gesture on the part of his creators. The sexist depiction of women in superhero comics--as described in my first chapter--reflects a similar tone of overcompensation. This tone, of course, contributes to the idea that comics are a series of geek fantasies.

Interestingly, the connoted sexual messages of superhero comics can be closely related to the overt sexual messages of the underground comics movement of the 60s and 70s. Reitburger and Fuchs identify “the hideousness of man and his sexual complexes” (219) as the most prominent elements of the underground comics movement.⁶⁵ I would argue, however, that there is a strong tie between social Otherness and these same sexual complexes in both genres. Robert Crumb, as an example, is the most prominent and most influential artist of the underground comics movement. His childhood and adolescence (from a social perspective) were remarkably similar to those of Jerry Siegel. Robert Harvey describes Crumb as follows:

⁶⁵ A thorough chronicle of the sexual messages at play in underground comics is provided in Patrick Rosenkranz’s *Rebel Visions*, a detailed, chronological history of the movement, which includes a section on the chauvinistic tendencies of the movement (154-156).

Beak-nosed and slightly buck-toothed, he was tall, alarmingly skinny, and wore glasses. The classic adolescent nerd. He had been this gangling clod, it seemed, all his life--but particularly in high school, when, like any healthy teenager, he began to notice girls. Alas, they didn't notice him. (*Art* 198)

In his own words, Crumb describes how his situation led to sexual frustration: "How I hate the courting ritual! I was always repelled by my own sex drive, which in my youth, never left me alone. I was constantly driven by frustrated desires to do bizarre and unacceptable things with and to women" (*Handbook* 387). Harvey further calls attention to the manner in which Crumb's sexual frustration prompted his comics art to "plumb a personal well of sexual hang-ups" (*Art* 205). These hang-ups are explored in depth in Terry Zwigoff's award-winning documentary *Crumb*. Specifically, Crumb harbours intense sexual fetishes for piggy-back rides and for being bounced on women's knees. Interestingly, Freud links both of these actions to the sexual associations of the flight fantasy (Freud 272). On some essential level then, Robert Crumb and Jerry Siegel may be telling the same story of sexual frustration as a result of geekiness. In each case, these frustrations are sublimated into comics art through sexual connotations in the superhero genre and through explicit sexual content and confession in the underground comics genre.

Having looked at Superman's relationship with himself, his alter-ego and the love of his life, I now wish to turn to Superman's relationship with his arch-enemy. Through Superman's conflict with Lex Luthor, Siegel and Schuster represent the internal complexity of the social Other's understanding of the geek label. As an allegory of the geek psyche, Superman's relationship with Lex Luthor connotes a series of conflicting

geek messages that border upon paradox and contradiction. As I will demonstrate, this allegory is firmly connected to the social transformations that are behind both Superman's popularity and the geek's lack of popularity.

According to a number of theorists on the subject of the Superman myth, the very idea of the superhero--as first represented by Superman--is necessitated by the advent of the modern industrial age. Aldo Regaldo, Marshall McLuhan and Umberto Eco all suggest that Superman is the product of mounting social frustrations created by the dehumanizing practices of the modern industrial era. Globalization, industrialization and urbanization in particular are perceived to create a world that treats human beings as cogs within a soulless machine. Superman is therefore a predictable response: a human being (so he seems) who is able to transcend the impositions of the modern industrial era. Superman defeats all manner of technological marvels, political corruption and even social prejudice. Thus, Superman overpowers these dehumanizing systems and reasserts the primacy and supremacy of mankind.

While I agree with this theory of Superman's cultural origins, I think it is important to reconcile this heroic view of Superman's origins with the countervailing geek connotations. As I have argued, the geek underclass also develops out of these same broad social tensions. Lori Kendall writes that geeks are often perceived as individuals who, through an avid interest in technology and a corresponding lack of social skills, have seemingly allied themselves with the machines (263). By policing the boundary "dividing the human from the not-human" (Kendall 263), the geek stands in the way of Superman's superhuman, anti-industrial/urban crusade. Furthermore, through proximity with the technologies and systems that Superman seeks to overcome, the geek becomes

the human face of everything that Superman opposes. How, then, can Superman appeal to a geek demographic?

The answer can be located in the duality of the superhero/supervillain dynamic. Lex Luthor is an evil genius who has become almost as iconic as Superman himself. Lex can be located within a robust discourse of the mad scientist. The mad scientist is a familiar archetypal figure (particularly within the Science Fiction genre), one which embodies many of the social tensions I have spoken of here. The mad scientist typically demonstrates the techno-prowess that Eglash associates with geekiness (50) alongside the social ineptitude described in the *OED* definition of geek. He also serves as an important figure within the human/not human divide discussed in Kendall (263). In her in-depth survey of representations of the scientist in literature, Roslyn Haynes suggests that the mad scientist is a singular and corporeal manifestation of the underlying social and theological tensions that resulted from the publication of Darwin's theory of evolution (Haynes 104). The mad scientist is thus a sort of physical avatar of abstract social forces that are intricately tied to scientific advancement and, by 20th century associations, to geeks. Just as Superman is the spirit of humanity, the mad scientist is the human embodiment of all the dehumanizing forces that Superman opposes.

At the time of Lex Luthor's first appearance in Superman comics in 1940, Western culture's infatuation with the mad scientist archetype was well underway. In a variety of media, the mad scientist served as a primary source of villainy. Haynes attributes the villainous potential of the scientist to the public's perception of the power provided by twentieth century technology. She suggests that the mad scientist was "perceived as equivalent to, if not surpassing, whatever supernatural efficacy had been

attributed to their magic-dependent fictional forbears” (188). Haynes argues that science supplanted magic as the source of villainy in general. Where the forbears of the mad scientist had required mystical fictions to become stirring villains, the twentieth century demonstrated the very real power of the sciences, thus creating a more plausible form of villainy.

Lex Luthor has no superpowers. He is simply a human being with an extraordinary intellect and unlimited ambition. By making full use of the power of science for entirely personal gain, and with no concern for human consequences, Lex Luthor is clearly very much in keeping with the mad scientist archetype. In evidence of this, I turn to one of his earliest appearances (*Superman* No. 4). Here, Lex Luthor matches wits against Superman for the purposes of stealing an earthquake machine. The story that unfolds is representative of Luthor’s role in the Superman narrative, and I will thus explore it in depth.

Luthor first works through henchmen who are sent to do the dirty work while he advises from afar. In this manner, Luthor shows his prudence, if not his cowardliness, in contrast to the direct approach of Superman. Luthor acts as a sort of upper-management super-villain, one who is closely aligned with the white collar capitalist system. As a foil, of course, the contrast between Lex and Superman serves to further define Superman as a true man of the people. Superman does not work through tools or by proxy. He is always right in the middle of the conflict.

In this particular story, Luthor is first seen on a video screen, communicating with an evil henchman who believes that he has just killed the meddling reporter, Clark Kent. The henchman reports this crime, to which Luthor replies “Splendid” (53), thus

characterizing himself as a sociopath with no sense of human sympathy. As Superman intervenes, Luthor attacks by using advanced technology. The narrative caption reads as such: “Shortly after--a weird plane appears in the sky and releases a deadly bomb down toward the man of steel’s figure” (53). The use of the term “weird” speaks to the idea that technology is seen as an alienating force by Superman’s readership, and it goes without saying that the further villainous connotations of aerial bombardment would be on the minds of the readers in 1940. In response to this attack, Superman asserts his opposition to this use of technology. First, he catches the bomb and reflects upon the value of human life: “This has got to stop before bombs fall on innocent people in the street” (53). He then asserts his power over technology by hurling the bomb back at the plane, destroying it. The caption here emphasizes Superman’s superiority by noting that it requires only “a flip of Superman’s wrist” to defeat the plane.

Superman next seeks to locate Luthor by following one of his stooges as he escapes in an autogyro. Once again showing his emotional callousness, Luthor chooses to destroy the plane remotely (and with it the pilot) rather than run the risk of being found by Superman. Luthor next appears to Superman in some sort of projection by which his face shows up on a nearby tree. He issues Superman a challenge: “Here is my proposition--and challenge! If your muscles can surpass my scientific feats, I will admit defeat. But if I can outdo you, then you are to retire and leave me a clear path” (55). Superman, confident in his superiority, accepts.

The first Herculean challenge is a race around the world between Superman and more of Luthor’s strange airplanes. Superman wins, and Luthor demonstrates his astonishment. “A human being outdistance one of my Super-Strato-Liners? Impossible”

(56). The second challenge is to see who can rise the highest above the Earth and still safely return. Superman succeeds, while Luthor's plane (and pilots) drifts helplessly into outer space toward "certain doom" (57). Superman (who appears both flippant and indifferent to the pilots' demise) asks "can't you think of anything tougher" (57)? The third contest requires both men to lift a gigantic boulder. For this task, Luthor employs a machine that uses the somewhat non-descript "forces of electricity" to "nullify the weight of this huge object" (58). Superman, in contrast, simply picks up the boulder and a plane at the same time. The final challenge is "to see who is the most vulnerable" (59). Luthor heaves a grenade at Superman, then fires a cannon at him, then gasses him. Nothing affects the hero and, before Superman can take his turn at testing Luthor's invulnerability, the villain admits defeat and turns over his hostage. This encounter makes it clear that Luthor puts his faith in technology and that, in turn, he embodies the power of technology. Superman, on the other hand, represents the spirit of humanity, which will always prevail over artificial things.

This perspective of the relationship between Lex Luthor and Superman is problematized, however, through their respective functions in the narrative. Although he is clearly an archetype of the mad-scientist, the Luthor character also provides Siegel and Schuster with the opportunity to imagine and illustrate fantastic innovations designed to thrill the reader. The narrative described above contains a number of speculative technologies that enhance the escapist quality of the narrative even if the technologies are no match for Superman. The fact that Superman keeps these technologies from hurting civilization actually enhances the fantasy by containing the potential danger presented by technological innovation. Superman creates a safe environment for scientific enjoyment

through his innate superiority over any potential technology and his capacity to safeguard the world against devastation at the hands of technology. While Lex seems to demonstrate the dangers of science without responsibility, he actually demonstrates just the opposite. There is no danger because there is Superman. Knowing this, the reader is able to identify, somewhat, with Lex's ambition and enjoy the fantasy of earthquake guns, death rays, giant robots and weather machines. Interestingly, Superman's powers can be most closely actualized by a reader only through technology. The things that Superman does are impossible, but the close approximations created by Lex Luthor are, for the most part, achievable through the sciences. In fact, many of Luthor's devices that were fictional at the time have since been invented.

As a representative of the mad scientist branch of geekdom, Luthor's very presence in the Superman narratives valorizes geeks in general. Here is an ordinary human being who has made himself worthy of the attentions of the most powerful being in the universe. Superman's greatest nemesis is not an alien, a god or even a magician. Lex Luthor is just a man who is armed with the extraordinary powers of science. The fact that Lex Luthor is somehow important to Superman holds tremendous symbolic ramifications. This geek is a worthy opponent to Superman. Through that achievement alone, the geek state is aggrandized, even as it is vilified. Thus, through the Lex Luthor/Superman dynamic, Siegel and Schuster are able to condemn the state of geekiness--in a manner that borders upon self-flagellation--while simultaneously indulging in various geeky fantasies of discovery, power, revenge and self-importance.

Beyond Lex, Lois and Superman himself, *Superman* comics contain many other elements that possess geek connotations: people like Jimmy Olsen, the JLA and Mr.

Mxyzptlk, places like the fortress of solitude and Bizarro world, and items like kryptonite all have their own symbolic attachment to the geek experience.⁶⁶ The greater point I wish to make, however, is that the first superhero comic establishes the presence of geek power fantasies as part of the encrusted connotations of the comics form. As I have demonstrated, these comics were clearly speaking to the geek demographic through connoted signs and messages that provided the geek reader's imagination with key things that the geek lacked: physical power, sexual experience and the valorization of their geek identity.

In the 1960s, the so-called "Marvel Age of Comics" took the idea of representing the geek in a different direction. Instead of speaking to the geek experience in a positive way through symbols alone, Marvel comics began a tradition of using more overt signs of the geek as well, and of more direct appeals to the geek community. As the Marvel universe developed, comics began to play a far more significant role in establishing geekdom as a discursive sphere and in many ways opened the door for the consideration of the geek as a viable social minority group.

Behind the creative talents of comics legends such as Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, Jim Steranko and others, the Marvel comics lineup directly targeted the geek demographic by producing a series of geek superheroes such as Bruce Banner, Mr. Fantastic, Cyclops, Dr. Strange and Spider-Man. Unlike the connoted geek messages conveyed by Superman, the geekiness of Marvel superheroes was direct and not a constructed disguise (as with Superman's glasses). Spider-Man, for example, does not

⁶⁶ Jimmy Olsen, for example, is played as a geek for comic relief, yet his presence in the inner circle of Superman's compatriots is valorizing, particularly for a teenager. Mr. Mxyzptlk, for a second example, introduces riddle-solving to Superman's adventures (a geek connotation) within a very non-geek context: Superman must solve the riddles in order to save the world, not because he enjoys solving riddles.

have to maintain a geek exterior for the sake of protecting his superhero identity. He is already a geek; it comes naturally. Moreover, the most potent component of Superman's Clark Kent disguise (the improbability of a geek superhero) is dismantled in Marvel comics. Mr. Fantastic, for example, wears no disguise whatsoever. He lets the world know that his real name is Reed Richards, a prominent and highly geeky scientist who is also a publicly admired superhero. The spheres of geek and hero are not mutually exclusive in Marvel comics where the stories often feature narrative resolutions that depend on intellectual reasoning instead of violent confrontation alone.



Figure 3.5: Reed Richards.

It is important to note here that the valorizing imperative is still very much present in Marvel Age comics. While Reed Richards and Peter Parker (Spider-Man) are both

geeks, this portrayal is offset, somewhat, by complementary fantasy elements. Note the musculature of Reed Richards in figure 3.5, the beauty of his fiancée (Sue Storm, seen to his left) and even just the simple fact that the geek is employing his intellect within a fantastic (excuse the pun) series of adventures. In short, the Marvel Age's vision of the geek continues to employ geek fantasy; it just happens to do so with a far more open acknowledgement of its efforts to valorize the geek experience.

As editor at Marvel, Stan Lee created appeals to the participatory aspects of geek culture. Lars Konzack argues that “Geeks are incredibly creative minded. They like to contribute artistically to the geek culture, not just consuming [sic] it. That is their distinctive way of having fun” (5-6). Lee capitalized on this predisposition by creating a number of fan forums within the Marvel comics universe. The Marvel letters page, which was printed at the back of each Marvel comic, became a communal space for fans of the comics to interact with the creators.⁶⁷ Lee in particular became well-known for his lengthy, humorous replies to letters from fans. Lee also paid very close attention to his readership's wants and desires. Marvel comics covers frequently featured the caption “Because you asked for it!” or alternately “Because you demanded it!” followed by a brief description of the narrative within (for example, “Human Torch vs. The Sub-Mariner”). In 1965, Lee went a step further by creating the “Bullpen Bulletin” page, which featured behind the scenes information on Marvel publications, creative talent and upcoming storylines. Bullpen Bulletin was basically an industry trade magazine within a comics magazine.

⁶⁷ Both EC Comics and DC comics had experimented with similar fan interaction pages in the 1950s, but it was the Marvel fan pages that achieved the greatest popularity and established conventions for all future fan interaction pages.

In his writing to the fans, Lee's rhetoric falls under the category of camp, which the *OED* defines as "[o]stentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical." This can be seen in the example below.

But fear thee not, O Faithful One! Let not a single wrinkle of apprehension furrow thy noble brow! As you can see, we're trying to give you the best of both worlds. We're keeping the world-famous Marvel line-up as intact as possible, so that you can enjoy favorites month in and month out without interruption--while, at the same time, we've got dozens of brand new projects on the drawing board--new themes, new titles, new plans and ideas! After all, our own writers and artists are just like you! While they still enjoy the Marvel roster of the world's best-selling super-heroes, they too wanna sink their teeth into exciting new and different projects! (Bullpen Bulletin, *Uncanny X-men* No. 111)

The campy quality of this sort of writing helps to identify Lee as a geek himself. Through it, he openly projects an exuberant enthusiasm for comics books (and thus geek culture). Furthermore, when Lee claims that his writers and artists are just like the reader in their love of superhero comics, Lee aligns his creative team with geekdom (after all, they read comics). Essentially, Lee marketed Marvel comics as a geek community, and he achieved tremendous financial success as a result. The so-called "Marvel Age of Comics" remains something of a golden age for geekdom.

As the civil rights movement of the 1960s continued to call attention to the social divisions that existed in American culture, Marvel comics adapted in order to portray a geek underclass. Marvel created a fan club entitled "The Merry Marvel Marching

Society,” which helped to further establish a sense of geek community amongst Marvel comics readers. The use of the term “marching” in the fan club name is wholly symbolic. Marches were never a part of the fan club mandate. The term, however, speaks to the civil rights movement of the time and seeks to align the geek population with this more prominent social movement. Furthermore, while utilizing characters that denoted “geek,” Marvel comics incorporated key elements of civil rights discourse in order to characterize geek heroes as victims of social prejudice. Various Marvel characters became feared and hated for having superpowers. Popular characters such as the Hulk, Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four and innumerable other Marvel icons were subject to such racially-loaded acts as propaganda, public spitting, segregation and even the occasional lynching attempt.⁶⁸

This alignment of the geek underclass with the civil rights movement can be seen as another “system of connotations,” in Barthes terminology, where one system “takes over the signs of another system in order to make them its signifiers” (*Image* 37). The manner in which Marvel comics adopt such a process is perhaps most apparent in *X-men* comics. The fundamental conflict in *X-men* is philosophical in nature. In a world where genetic mutation has led to the creation of a new species of super-beings (sometimes called “homo-superior”) two factions have developed. The “*Brotherhood of Evil Mutants*, [emphasis added]” led by Magneto, seeks to use violence in response to the racial prejudices that the mutants are encountering from non-super-powered beings. In contrast, the X-men are assembled by Professor Charles Xavier who believes in moral authority and fights only to protect humankind from the aggressions of “evil” mutants,

⁶⁸ The Incredible Hulk, for example, is routinely chased around by Lynch mobs in early issues, and many of Spider-Man’s personal trials were created by a disingenuous newspaper editor who vilified Spider-Man out of fear and misunderstanding.

such as Magneto. In a 1993 interview, *X-men* illustrator John Romita Jr. suggests that “the theme was racism. It’s been that way for 30 years” (qtd. in O’Neill, “Future”). This view is supported by Mikhail Lyubansky who describes the situation as follows:

A variety of critics have compared Xavier’s (and Magneto’s) fight for mutant rights to the U.S. Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Indeed, there are important parallels, including mob violence and familiar hateful slogans, such as “The only good mutant is a dead mutant.” In addition, the X-universe is populated by a variety of anti-mutant hate groups such as *Friends of Humanity*, and *Stryker’s Purifiers*, which represent real oppressive forces like the Ku Klux Klan and a variety of other Christian Identity and White Supremacy groups. (83-84)⁶⁹

Lyubansky notes that this commentary on Otherness in *X-men* is evident from “the very first issue when Charles Xavier, a mutant telepath responsible for creating the X-men, observed that human beings are not yet ready to accept super-powered individuals in their midst” (76).

Even while drawing parallels to the American Civil Rights Movement, *X-men* comics maintain the geek symbolism that, as I have demonstrated, is central to the Marvel Age formula. Each X-man is shown to be socially alienated at some point in their lives as a result of their mutant powers. Stories frequently demonstrate this fact with

⁶⁹ As noted by comics historian Patrick Daniel O’Neill, Stryker’s Purifiers did not appear in *X-men* comics until 1982, at a time when writer Chris Claremont broadened the scope of the racial allegory (69). Nonetheless, O’Neill notes that the “allegories of racism” were present in *X-men* from the start (69).

shows of *X-men* characters being ostracized, bullied or persecuted at the hands of non-mutants.⁷⁰

Marvel's geek characters thus become further associated with an underclass that was far more recognized and discussed at the time. This association, in turn, allows geek readers to experience a highly stylized representation of the fight for social recognition against an unjust and unequal system at a time when more directly relevant concepts such as geek oppression were severely undertheorized. The result is a narrative that aligns the geek underclass with the racial underclass. It is difficult to say whether this was an intentional marketing technique or a conscious/subconscious belief of the Marvel creative team that manifested in their art. Either way, this alignment occurs frequently in the Marvel Age of comics, and it had the effect of raising a number of interesting questions with regard to the social and cultural status of the geek.

Though perhaps ironic or manipulative in nature, Marvel's various representations of the geek created a powerful sense of sympathy for the geek condition. This allowed geek readers of these comics to see their subject position reflected and even valorized within stories of their favorite fantasy heroes. Marvel's message seemed to be that geeks mattered. The Marvel Age allowed for the possibility that the geek himself could be heroic, that the hero could directly denote "geek" and that comics could serve as an important site for the establishment of geek community.

Many of the most-acclaimed graphic novels have utilized geekdom as a central theme.⁷¹ Within the longer form of the graphic novel, these artists have been able to

⁷⁰ The team's leader, Cyclops, is perhaps the best example of this. His backstory reveals that he suffered a traumatizing amount of bullying in the orphanage where he spent much of his childhood. Even as an adult superhero, Cyclops is continually haunted by his memories of the experience. It is also significant that Cyclops' nickname is "slim," implying the sort of departure from hegemonic masculinity that could identify him as a geek.

render character with greater depth and complexity than that which is found in the comic strip or traditional comic book (which is usually approximately 30 pages long). For the geek character in particular, the canvas-expansion created by the graphic novel has led to a number of poignant geek character studies with deep resonance amongst the geek community and beyond. Building upon the tradition of geek representation in comics, these artists have demonstrated the full progression of comics representations of geeks. The geek is no longer heroic through symbolic disguises or through elaborate fantasy but is now the hero simply for being human. As a result, the graphic novel may be the single most important cultural site for geek discourse and for the greater movement toward understanding what it means to be a geek.

One of the best examples of geek character study is Chris Ware's epic generation-spanning graphic novel, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. As noted by Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, Corrigan is one of a handful of graphic novels that have "become standard items on college and university syllabi for courses on memoir, cultural history, postmodern literature and area studies" (xi). *Jimmy Corrigan* is also the only graphic novel to win the Guardian Fiction Award. Ware is an admitted geek, and his work has always demonstrated an autobiographical quality. His intense exploration of his own geekiness had garnered him a committed cult following even prior to the initial production of *Jimmy Corrigan*.

Ware's novel merges Post-Modern technique, Kafkaesque disillusionment and a Romantic sensibility to create a densely rendered commentary on the effects of introversion and social ostracism. It is a story of inheritance and entitlement and an in-

⁷¹ Though not dealt with in this project, Alan Moore's Nite Owl character from *Watchmen* can be seen to function as an important bridge between Lee's vision of geek heroes and the contemporary graphic novel's vision.

depth portrait of the life of a geek as a middle-aged man. I will demonstrate how Ware transitions the geek from superhero to powerless protagonist and how the symbolic sexual appeals of early comics become depraved sexual fantasy in Ware's novel. I will also show how Ware's representation of the superhero within the novel explores the psychological effect that superheroes have on the lives of the geeks who idolize them. Through this representation, Ware demonstrates the limitations of geek fantasy. Combined, these various elements form a dialogue with the geek representations of comics' past in order to humanize the geek by bringing geek-valorizing (or at least geek-sympathizing) connotations in line with a visual image that clearly denotes "geek." Simply put, Ware is able to make the geek human, relatable and even heroic (in a tragic way) without dressing the geek in tights and having him save the world from certain doom (as Marvel does with Reed Richards or Spider-Man).

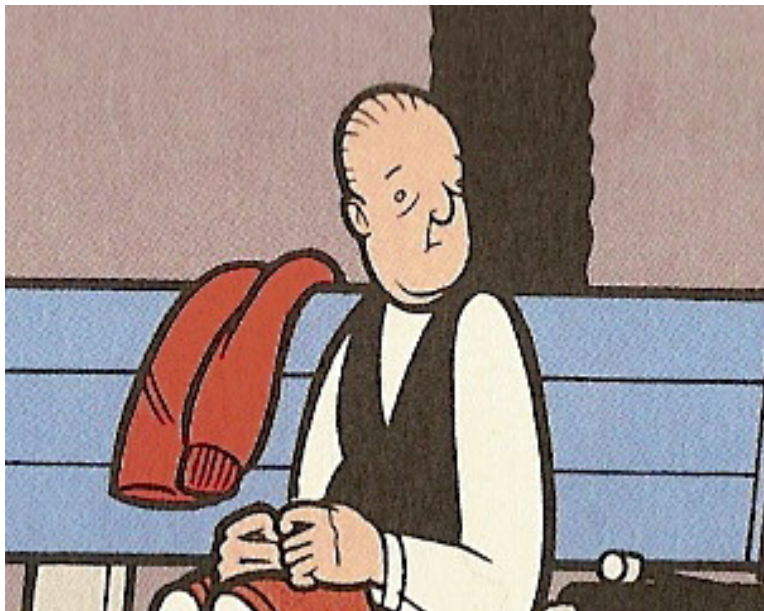


Figure 3.6: Jimmy Corrigan.

As seen in figure 3.6, Ware's rendering of Jimmy clearly indicates the character's geek status. Though not depicted with glasses, Jimmy is portrayed with a hunched

posture (conveying timidity), tiny eyes (conveying introversion) and outdated attire, particularly a pair of pants that barely cover his knees and reveal knee-high white socks (all combining to convey his arrested development). His mannerisms also suggest his shyness and lack of charisma. As such, he is performing masculinity badly, in keeping with the definition of geekiness that Kendall provides (263), while also demonstrating social ineptitude, in keeping with the *OED* definition of geek.

Unlike Marvel Age geeks such as Reed Richards or Peter Parker, Jimmy's vision of geekiness lacks complementary power fantasy elements such as toned musculature or a beautiful fiancée. The reader is forced to perceive Jimmy the way that the rest of the world sees him, in all his geekiness. This is the contemporary geek hero, and there is a grotesqueness to Jimmy that invites the reader to be repulsed. Jimmy lacks the flash and appeal of a Superman. He has no bright colors, cool hair, bulging muscles or dashing smile. His favorite color is brown, his hair is thin and sickly looking, he has a bulging stomach that Ware makes frequent use of in illustrations and he hardly ever smiles, except when it is forced. Visually, Jimmy pushes the reader away. At the same time, however, the in-depth character study that the novel advances pushes the reader to sympathize with Jimmy. Ware's novel makes a committed argument for the humanity of Jimmy Corrigan. This is accomplished through narrativization (seeing through Jimmy's eyes), compositional technique and symbolic representations of psychological anguish.

Ware's use of narrativization is at times direct and at times indirect. Directly, Ware illustrates vivid landscapes, natural scenery and picturesque architecture through the eyes of Jimmy. The care and quality of Ware's illustration is thus transposed, to some extent, upon the perceptive apparatus of Jimmy himself. Many of the most beautiful

panels in the novel are established by the narrative as scenes that Jimmy is watching. Thus, the reader comes to locate a silent sense of beauty and an appreciation for the natural world within the consciousness of Jimmy Corrigan. Despite his status as a socially marginal geek, Jimmy demonstrates that he has an eye for beauty and thus a very human sensitivity.

What Jimmy does not look at is equally important as what he does look at. Jimmy rarely makes eye contact with other human beings. Ware represents this phenomenon by consistently drawing characters in a manner that keeps their eyes out of the frame, as demonstrated in figure 3.7, which depicts 7 panels of a conversation between Jimmy and a fellow airplane passenger without once showing her face.



Figure 3.7: Jimmy avoiding eye contact.

Through this process, Ware creates a very subtle form of narrativization that allows the reader to experience Jimmy's inability to make eye contact with people. The idea of the geek as someone who is unable to look people in the eye comes to life for the reader. This technique is used to convey a sense of what Jimmy's world is like. The notable exception is, of course, Jimmy himself who is frequently illustrated with full facial

features. Otherwise, only characters who Jimmy feels comfortable with are given full facial illustration. In many scenes, it is actually quite remarkable what lengths Ware goes to in order to hide a character's face. This authorial effort enhances the idea that Jimmy is living as a liminal social being, and his inability to make eye contact with other people symbolizes his inability to make basic human connections.

The reader is also made to experience Jimmy's perspective through a series of elaborate fantasy sequences that take the comic into more abstract territory. Ware creates a number of vignettes--often involving complex narratives, characters and character relations--in order to represent Jimmy's state of mind. In one such series, Jimmy sees himself as the emotionally and physically abused son of a cruel farmer. In the miniature narrative that unfolds, Jimmy's imaginary father becomes angry because Jimmy's pet horse, which is about the size of a rat, has been trying on the father's pants. Jimmy's dad hands Jimmy a revolver, saying "James, you know what you must do." A sobbing Jimmy takes the horse outside and shoots it. Immediately prior to doing so, Jimmy had stood up resolutely and said to his brother "Avery, I is ready. Avery, a man got his principles an I got mine an I know whut is it I must do now" (n.p.). Thus, the conflict here is between the emotional investment in the horse and the principles that Jimmy (and perhaps Ware) seems to associate with manliness. Appropriately, in the main narrative, Jimmy has just met his father and is alternating between fantasies of murdering his father and fantasies of sailing yachts with him into the sunset. The miniature horse sequence conveys the sense of emotional ambivalence and confusion that Jimmy is experiencing when meeting his father.

The fantasy also conveys the sense of obligation and “principles” that drive Jimmy to go through with meeting his father. The significance of the horse being condemned for trying on the father’s pants cannot be missed either. On a very small, surreal and almost Oedipal level, the horse was trying to usurp the father by laying claim to his pants (a symbol of identity and masculinity). He fails and is condemned for the effort. If we read further into the horse, we could also say that it represents Jimmy’s sense of arrested development. Jimmy is no more able to fit into his father’s pants than a miniature horse would be. This inadequacy then reflects Jimmy’s need to destroy the horse; he has to kill the trappings of his past in order to become a man.

Jimmy is discovering a father/son relationship for the first time, and the experience frequently infantilizes him. Ware makes this clear in a number of scenes where Jimmy suddenly appears to be a child for a brief moment before returning to his more familiar adult incarnation. Furthermore, the image of the horse recurs throughout the novel and continues to function as a symbol of childhood trappings such as fantasy, naivety and even the notion that the world is a place of wonder. In killing the horse out of necessity, Jimmy declares his desire to face reality.

The melodrama of this and other sequences contributes to Ware’s greater picture of Jimmy as a highly complex, emotionally sensitive human being. By the end of the novel, the readers cannot see Jimmy the same way that they saw him before, and the repulsive, emotionally distant visualization of Jimmy Corrigan changes into something else entirely. The contradiction created through the combination of visual distancing and narrative empathizing forces the readers to reconsider the hideousness of a particular geek image.

Ware furthers his argument on the humanity of the geek by providing a parallax view of the geek in general. The story of James Corrigan, which occupies a substantial portion of the *Jimmy Corrigan* novel, is perhaps even more tragic than Jimmy's and bolsters the idea that the geek can serve as an identifiable hero. James is Jimmy's grandfather. Ware sets this second section in a time and place that represents a powerful moment of collective fantasy, hope and aspiration for the American people: the 1892 Chicago World's Fair. James' mother has passed away and he is raised by his alcoholic, excessively proud father who frequently takes out his worldly frustrations on James.

Like Jimmy, James is clearly an awkward and socially inept outcast. In one incident, some bullies slam James' head into a wall while calling him a "stupid little sissy." They explain to him that "one of these days your daddy won't be taking you home from school and we'll be waiting for you, right?" (n.p.). That night, as James recalls the traumatic incident, the threat has grown in his recollection to "and then we're going to kill you, right?" Later that same night the threat is recalled by James as "We're gonna kill you! We're gonna kill you!" (n.p.). There is a strong sense of dramatic irony in this scene. The reader knows that James has exaggerated the situation in his own mind, and the reader also knows that the bullies are not likely to murder a fellow student, even if they had threatened to do so. Ware develops the intensity of James' emotional reaction by visually conveying the abject terror of the situation upon the nine-year-old's face (figure 3.8) and by portraying the seriousness of James' contemplations on what he perceives as the last night of his life. "I lay awake in my bed, staring at the underside of the table, reviewing my tragically short life. The few short years wasted--tossed aside. And for what? Why was I even alive at all?" (n.p.).



Figure 3.8: James Corrigan contemplating his demise.

After considering the idea of bringing his father's gun to school, and then the idea of running away altogether, James decides to instead face his destiny. He convinces himself that he is not afraid to die. He brings with him a picture of his mother. "I just want to make sure that I remember what you look like, so I can find you up there... You'll recognize me, won't you, Mother?" (n.p.). He picks flowers for her and brings both of these articles out with him to meet his doom after school. But instead of doom, he meets reality.

I don't think my 'executioners' even showed up at all that afternoon. They surprised me, instead, two or three days later with a somewhat unenthusiastic pounding (I suppose they'd sort of lost interest in me, and only beat me up out of a sense of duty). Nevertheless, I patiently waited outside the school that day for many hours, holding a fading photograph and a handful of weeds. (n.p.)

By exploring this bullying narrative in a drastically different time and place, Ware emphasizes the universality of the geek experience. The idea is that there are, and have been, many Jimmy Corrigan in our world.

Moving chronologically from Clark Kent to Marvel heroes to Jimmy and James Corrigan, comics progressively reveal the seriousness, complexity and humanity of the geek. We see the Other becoming less and less Othered. In order to chart the extremity of this development and the correspondence between comics geekdom of the past and comics geekdom of the present, I wish to look at the deconstructive stance that *Jimmy Corrigan* takes with regard to sexual fantasy in superhero comics and with regard to superheroes in general. As I will demonstrate, Ware's novel itself performs critical work by interrogating the encrusted connotations that the geek fantasies of sex and power within the superhero genre have established.

Like the underground comics of the 60 & 70s, Ware's work demonstrates a preoccupation with sex in a manner that is highly confessional in nature. Unlike the underground comics artists' use of sex, however, Ware's use of sex in *Jimmy Corrigan* is significantly less hyperbolic or satirical. Sex in the novel is a persistent preoccupation of the mind and a source of endless yearning and frustration for the sexually repulsive Jimmy. In this sense, Ware's work moves beyond the distanced symbolism (Legman's squinkie disguise) of the superhero genre's concept of sexuality and beyond the confrontational extremes of the underground genre's concept of sexuality.

Jimmy is fixated upon the mail-clerk, Peggy. He longs to talk to her at work, to call her on the phone and even to marry her. In an early episode (figure 3.9), he daydreams of sitting before a fireplace with his head between her legs while she

massages his brow and laughs at his suggestion of planting a peach grove. This fantasy implodes when the real Peggy yells “Jimmy!! Take your mail and get your fat ass out of here! I’ve got work to do!” (n.p.).



Figure 3.9: Jimmy and Peggy.

This sequence is littered with sexual connotations. Jimmy’s initial placement between Peggy’s legs is the first such message. His desire to plant a “peach grove” is equally suggestive, in that Ware persistently uses the image of the peach as a symbol of female genitalia. Having an entire peach grove represents a fantasy of complete and total sexual fulfillment, bordering on excess. As the fantasy transitions to reality, Jimmy is seen with images of peaches circling his head (suggesting that sex is really the central focus of his fantasy) and a box that is filled with peaches. In reality, it is Peggy’s job to fill this particular box (this is the mailbox and she is the mail clerk). Jimmy’s subconscious suggestion that she could fill it with peaches, of course, establishes Peggy as the solution to Jimmy’s sexual frustration (in his eyes, at least). Instead, she provides him only with his mail and some insulting remarks.

The text later reveals that Jimmy has an obsessive tendency to harbor intense sexual feelings for virtually any woman who speaks to him, including Peggy, his nurse, a fast-food restaurant cashier and even his own adopted sister. Ware characterizes Jimmy’s

pervasive lust as the product of sexual frustration resulting from his geek status. This characterization is mirrored in the life of young James Corrigan as well. Like Jimmy, James develops elaborate sexual fantasies from unrequited love.

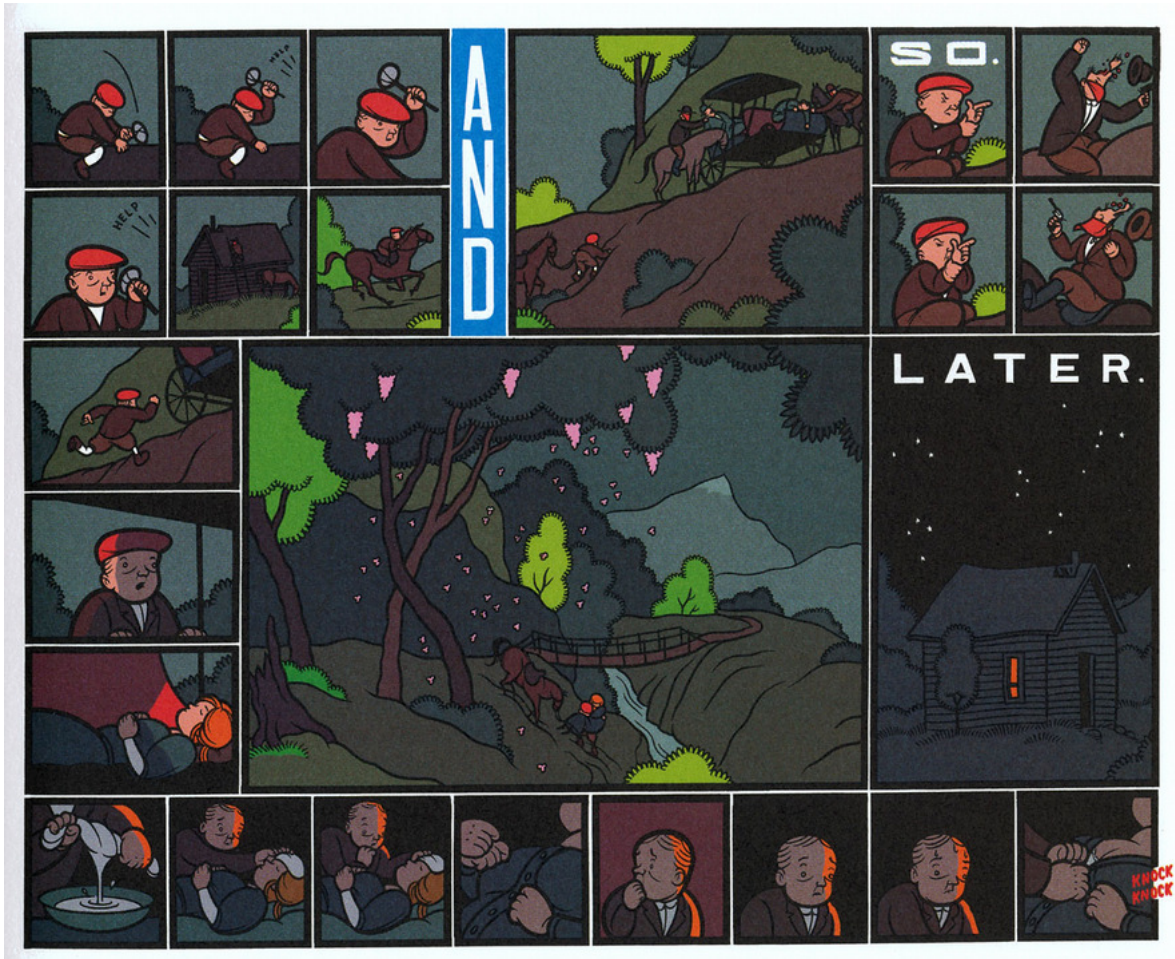


Figure 3.10: James' fantasy.

In one particular fantasy, illustrated in figure 3.10, James imagines himself performing the role of a superhero by rescuing a schoolmate from bandits. He simply makes the shape of a gun with his hands, and the bandits fall down dead. Thus, there is a supernatural quality to the fantasy that connects it to the more fantastic elements of the superhero's elaborate rescue procedures (James's fantasy, of course, takes place some forty years before the invention of the superhero). James then takes his unconscious

friend home and lays her in his bed so that he can nurse her back to health. Next, the fantasy quickly degenerates: James, who is supposed to be an upright, moral hero, looks over his shoulder and, with a sweaty brow, unbuttons the girl's shirt. Before anything more can happen, however, a knocking at the door awakens him. The fantasy that Ware depicts clearly illustrates the connection between the adolescent sexual desire of the geek and the symbolic staging of rescue. This connection lies at the very heart of the success of the superhero genre, which caters to a geek audience by providing symbolic sexual expressions--the indirect "dreaming" that Legman identifies--in order to compensate for the sexual frustration that the geek's liminal status engenders.

This leads me to *Jimmy Corrigan's* commentary on the role that the superhero plays within the life of the geek. Amidst Ware's representation of a geek, the author interweaves a surreal deconstruction of the Superman mythology and the fantasy that it provides to a geek demographic. Here we see another contemporary comics artist challenging the out-dated conventions of comics, and again the result is a reassessment of the form. For Ware, and for Jimmy, the fantasy provided by Superman is something of a false promise. It is very much an escape, but the fragility of the escape is such that it ultimately leads to disappointment and disillusion. The alternative, however, is worse, and thus the superhero is portrayed as a sort of damaging but necessary fantasy for geeks.

The novel opens with Jimmy (as a child) dressing up to go see his favorite superhero. On the car ride there, Jimmy is seen extending his hand out of the window pretending that it is flying in the breeze like his hero flies over cities. He and his mother then arrive at a classic car show and Jimmy desperately searches for his idol. At last he finds the stage where a sweaty, out of shape and elderly actor is dressed up in costume

before a very unenthusiastic audience (save Jimmy, of course). The poster before the auditorium reads “Meet the Super-man.⁷² Famous star of TV’s big show” (n.p.).

Obviously, the show has long since been cancelled. Ware’s Superman mounts the stage, makes a number of cheesy jokes that only Jimmy laughs at, and then takes a seat behind a makeshift desk in order to sign autographs. An eager Jimmy stands in line, but, once he reaches the front, the Super-man is far more interested in Jimmy’s mother. The result is a dinner invitation, a coffee invitation and then a one night stand with Jimmy’s mom while Jimmy lies in his bedroom with a perplexed look upon his face. In the morning, Jimmy is up alone eating a bowl of Cap’n Crunch while the Super-man makes his daring escape. On his way out, the Super-man whispers to Jimmy that the child should tell his mother that the Super-man “had a real good time.” As a parting gift, the Super-man gives Jimmy his mask. Jimmy is wearing the mask still when his mother wakes up and Jimmy exclaims “Mom! He said to tell you he had a real good time!” (n.p.).

As a prologue, this first episode makes potent use of the Superman mythology to establish the text’s theme of the inherent conflict between life and fantasy. Ware’s use of fantasy is somewhat more complex than simple wish-fulfillment. It is also promise-fulfillment. Jimmy naively believes that, as a human being, he is entitled to a loving family, caring friends, sexual fulfillment and the outward expression of his innermost character. As a result of his geek status, however, Jimmy receives none of these things. His desire for them only makes him more miserable.

Superman next appears in the novel in a very different form. At his cubicle at work, Jimmy finds a note saying “I sat across from you for six months and you never once noticed me! Good bye” (n.p.). This suicide note, in keeping with the theme of

⁷² A name that obviously alludes to Superman.

reality versus fantasy construction, is written on memo paper that features the image of a cartoon teddy bear smiling while talking on the phone next to a header that reads “A message for you.” Jimmy looks out the window and sees, in the distance, a figure dressed up as Superman standing on the roof of an adjacent building. The figure waves at Jimmy who, confused, cannot help but smile and wave back. This is, after all, an important piece of his fantasy life manifesting in Jimmy’s least fantastic space--the office. As seen in figure 3.11, this new Superman--presumably the author of the note--then boldly lunges off the building, as if to fly, but instead falls to his death on the concrete below.



Figure 3.11: Superman falls.

The image is presented in a simple two part sequence in order to emphasize the abruptness of the moment and anti-romantic quality of the events. Superman is shown about to fly, then dead on the pavement, with no other images in between. Jimmy is then seen awkwardly lowering his hand and speaking to himself: “b-but...” (n.p.).

Furthering the sense of awkwardness and image deflation is the fact that Superman is left lying on the street as innumerable passersby stop only to briefly gaze at the spectacle and then walk on about their business. Soon the rain starts, and Superman remains lying on the concrete. The sun goes down, the passersby have all left and Superman is still there until, at last, an ambulance shows up and cleans Superman off of the pavement.

Superman fails. This is the message that Ware seems to convey through this surreal event. Superman, despite Jimmy’s attention, interest and desperate longing need, falls flat amidst the urban reality that oppresses Jimmy. As the hero fails, Jimmy is left in the awkward position of holding up his hand, vainly expressing his sense of betrayal and irony in the “b-but....”

In his next appearance, Superman becomes even more aggressive toward Jimmy. At this point of the novel, Jimmy has been awkwardly reunited with his long-lost father. This reunion is the closest thing to an adventure that Jimmy has had in a very long time. In his imagination, he pictures one day telling his own son (who he identifies as “Billy”) about the first meeting between Jimmy and Jimmy’s Father. The scene is idyllic in its representation of family life, with Jimmy sitting at the bedside of his attentive son. An eager Billy prompts his dad for more information about this fabled meeting. The child asks if Jimmy was scared and the father replies “Scared? Ha ha... oh no I wasn’t scared.

Because if I had been scared I never would have met your mother and we never would have had you” (n.p.). As he says this, Jimmy leans in toward his son, smiles and makes the pointing gun gesture with his hand. As Jimmy then narrates the story of how babies are made to young Billy, there comes a tapping at the window and a miniature Superman appears on the window sill. Jimmy is in awe and encourages Billy to participate in the sense of wonder. “Billy! Why, Billy look! Look who’s on the windowsill! It’s Superman! It’s Superman and he’s really small and he’s waving at us! Ha ha! Why, isn’t that wonderful, Billy? Look!” (n.p.). Jimmy then gasps as Superman grows to the size of a skyscraper and picks up the house in his hand. Leaning out the window as Superman lifts the house far above the ground, Jimmy continues to marvel “Ha ha! Look! We’re...” and then Superman throws the house onto the ground roof-first (figure 3.12).

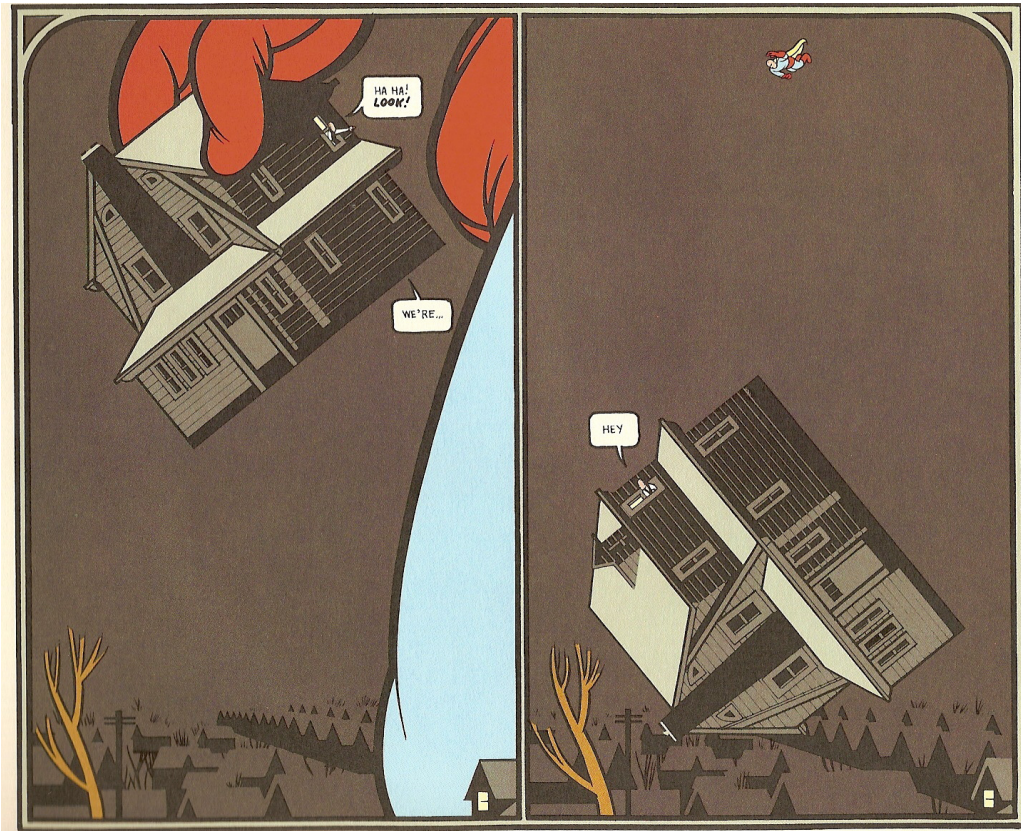


Figure 3.12: Superman attacks.

Once again, the image is presented as a two part sequence in order to create an abrupt and jarring transition from fantasy to reality. During the descent, the again disillusioned Jimmy can only utter “Hey” (n.p.). The result of the crash is the complete destruction of the house and the complete dismemberment of Billy. Jimmy wanders around, in horror, collecting pieces of his mutilated son. The last thing Jimmy finds is the head. Billy’s decapitated head pleads for mercy: “Dad...Dad it hurts. It hurts so much. Make it stop. Dad it hurts so much. Dad are we home yet? Are we there, I’m tired? Dad it hurts, it hurts. Make it stop Dad, make it stop. I’m so tired. Dad where are you Dad. Don’t leave. It hurts” (n.p.). This horrifying string of pleading, which can be seen as a hyperbolic representation of Jimmy’s own pain over *his* father’s abandoning of him, only ends as Jimmy picks up a cinder block and hurls it upon his son’s head, squashing him dead.

In this scene, Jimmy’s fantasy is directly assaulted and brutally destroyed by Superman. Through this particular nightmare, Jimmy expresses his sense of betrayal at the hands of his hero. In crushing his son, Jimmy is forced--as a result of Superman’s actions--to euthanize his own fantasy and to accept the barbarity of the world and the falsity of the promises provided by fantasy figures such as Superman. This occurs at a key point in the novel, when all of the promise of a meeting with his long-lost father has led to little more than awkwardness and frustration.

Jimmy’s world is a world of disappointment. In reflecting that sense of disappointment, Superman becomes a symbol of false promise. This scene also demonstrates disenchantment with the notion of the benevolent protector fantasy that Superman provides. Jimmy is at first delighted to be gathered into Superman’s arms and--

despite the obvious dangers--shows no fear that Superman would harm him. Jimmy's trust, however, is quickly betrayed, and he must now, presumably, reassess the faith that he has placed in Superman, just as the reader is made to reinterpret the social role of the fantasies that superhero can provide.

As Jimmy continues to experience the awkward reunion with his father, Superman disappears from the narrative for a very long time. The last act of the novel, however, shows Jimmy dressed in a blue sweatshirt with the iconic Superman "S" logo across the chest. His first appearance with this shirt occurs while he is sitting on a toilet, struggling to defecate. By wearing Superman's logo, Jimmy reveals his desire to identify himself with Superman. This is the nature of the power fantasy that Superman provides. The reader, however, is not looking at Superman, Kal-El, or even Clark Kent. They see a pathetic Jimmy Corrigan on a toilet wearing a shirt with a sign that conveys a clear message of heroism. Having experienced the life and internal consciousness of Jimmy for the better part of the novel, the reader is acutely aware that Jimmy is no Superman. The incompatibility of the two signifieds--Superman and Jimmy Corrigan--articulates the divide between fantasy and reality and this, of course, is ultimately Jimmy's tragedy. He is still wearing this shirt at the novel's climax when Jimmy's father dies and Jimmy's sister rejects Jimmy's offering of comfort in the form of an outstretched hand. Offering his hand is a heroic feat for the introverted Jimmy. Yet, by rejecting the hand, Jimmy's sister rejects Jimmy as a brother, and his attempt at heroism leads to yet another disappointment.

The final appearance of Superman occurs at the very end of the novel. Ware creates two panoramic pages depicting snow falling through a darkened sky (a recurring

image throughout the novel). On the right-hand page, “The End” is written in sprawling, cursive text (n.p.).



Figure 3.13: Jimmy in Superman’s arms.

As seen in figure 3.13, the left-hand page features a miniature image of Superman flying through the snow, smiling and waving, with a young Jimmy Corrigan in his arms. The image is very small and is easily dwarfed by the size of the snowy night and by the size of “The End” on the adjacent page. This flying image occurs just after the text has given Jimmy the faintest glimpse of hope. The novel ends with a disillusioned Jimmy alone in the office building at night, contemplating suicide (in a manner that exactly copycats the Superman suicide at the beginning of the novel). In the midst of his despair, he meets the

woman who will be filling the vacant cubicle next to him. “M-my name’s Tammy. I-I’m starting here on Monday...” (n.p.). Visually, verbally and eponymously, Tammy seems to be the female incarnation of Jimmy. This time, he notices the people around him, unlike his earlier failure to notice the last occupant of Tammy’s desk (the superman who commits suicide at the start of the text).

Tammy’s eyes are clearly depicted, thus suggesting that Jimmy has made eye contact with her. Jimmy even shakes her hand, and the touch is reciprocated as opposed to rejected (as in the case with Jimmy’s sister). Thus, the simple eye-contact and handshake with Tammy becomes loaded with significance. Jimmy has made a connection. Tammy looks out the window and notices the snow. “Gosh...it sure is pretty...isn’t it?” (n.p.). Thus, she demonstrates further similarity to Jimmy by noticing and admiring the natural beauty of the world around her. Jimmy is then seen pondering. He raises his brow in apparent realization of something profound, and the next page has him as a child in Superman’s arms once again.

Superman here is restored as a hopeful fantasy. The hope he provides is a small one in the context of the storm that is all around Jimmy, but it is still hope. That Jimmy is once again a child connotes a restoration of innocence and establishes a strong connection between hope and naivety. The alternative, after all, is to give up hope, and for Jimmy--and perhaps for all geeks--that amounts to self-destruction. As mentioned, Jimmy’s weakness (his kryptonite, even) is persistent hope and a naive belief in romance and fantasy. The text continually advances a message of disillusionment and disappointment but, by the end, the reader is made to see that the alternative is worse, and that every now and then something good can happen. The fantasy world--which is

symbolized by Superman--betrays, hurts and, at times, seemingly destroys Jimmy but it also sustains him.

Ware shows the essential role that superhero comics play in the life of the geek reader, but also the dangers that superhero fantasy creates for these same geeks. Through Jimmy Corrigan, however, Ware provides an alternative: a truly identifiable geek hero, one less likely to collapse when embraced by the average geek. James and Jimmy Corrigan both indulge in geek fantasy (sex, power, status, revenge) and ultimately suffer at the hands of this fantasy. Through them, Ware creates a dialogue with comics historic treatment of geekiness and he uses this dialogue to move beyond the perceived limits of the form. James and Jimmy Corrigan are, to the reader, an alternative form of geek representation. Through them, Ware accomplishes something that Siegel and Schuster or the Marvel bullpen never could with Superman or Marvel heroes, respectively: Ware creates true geek heroes without employing simplistic power fantasy. In so doing, he also challenges the encrusted connotations of the comics form.

In this sense, in spite of obvious differences, the treatment of the geek minority is similar to the treatment of the racial or sexual minority in the comics form. Once again, comics developed a series of fixed tendencies and attitudes with regard to the representation of a particular minority group. The repetition of these tendencies created expectations, and these expectations formed the encrusted connotations that contributed to the low cultural status of comic art in the 20th century. In order to move beyond these limits, contemporary comics artists revisit them and expose the misconceptions at the heart of both the Othering processes and of the encrusted connotations that these processes create. Ware's reinterpretation of the geek interrogates the old model of geek

representation (which employs hidden connotations and squinky disguises). At the same time, Ware offers a new model for geek representation, one that pushes beyond the encrusted connotations of the comics form.

Conclusion:

The Continuity of North American Comics

This dissertation represents a push towards a greater consciousness of the role that Othering practices have played in defining the cultural status of the comics form, particularly with regard to the comics-as-literature movement. The encrusted connotations created by comics Othering practices have clearly impaired the development of the form. At the same time, however, the revision of these practices has not only helped to enable the comics-as-literature movement, but has also been a primary theme of those comics texts that are at the forefront of this movement. In this sense, the continued study of Othering within comics unveils more than just the *context* of the comics-as-literature movement; it also unveils, to some extent, the *content* of this movement. For this reason, the study of comics Othering at both the semiotic and historical level is an essential component of contemporary comics scholarship.

Comics emphasize difference. The very nature of caricature brings this point to light. The men in comics look more manly than they do in other visual media, the women more womanly, the geek more geeky and the different racial groups more obviously different. As my readings and theoretical samplings have demonstrated, comics are a very efficient form of Othering. The malleable quality of the comics image allow the artists to actively control how they represent particular minority groups. At the same time, as Roland Barthes notes in “Rhetoric of the Image,” in order for the reader to make sense of the signs before them, the reader must accept the authority of the image, even in the face

of the image's obvious distortions. This implied trust, in turn, naturalizes the connotations that the image projects, regardless of how stereotypical these connotations may be.

Once these connotations begin to circulate throughout comics texts, the connotations have a tendency to become associated with all genres of comics artwork as a result of the strong intertextuality that exists within the comics field. Despite the obvious differences between, say, a Disney comic strip and a holocaust chronicle, if both are created within the comics form, they have a tendency to speak to each other within a relatively cohesive discourse. Scott McCloud's second comics critical text, *Reinventing Comics*, bases a potential industry revolution in the belief that comics exist in a state of continuity, which can be described as a complex system of intertextuality. Robert Harvey's *Children of the Yellow Kid* supposes--as even the title makes clear--a parental relationship between the current incarnation of comics art and a historical origin point which Harvey locates in early 20th century American comic strips. Even texts devoted to non-traditional comics, such as Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics*, suppose a sort of counteractive movement (on the part of the comics underground) which itself points to a sense of overarching continuity. Comics continuity is also assumed within the vast majority of comics critical texts, including key works by Will Eisner, Roger Sabin, M. Thomas Inge, Les Daniels, Stephen Weiner, Matthew Pustz, Douglas Wolk and others.

This level of continuity differs from what we find in other forms, such as the novel or film, where the field is large enough that exclusivity between genres is possible. An action film, for example, is not likely to be readily compared to a documentary on ocean life, just as the latest Harry Potter novel need not be burdened by the reputation of

Harlequin romance novels. In comics, however, exclusivity is not nearly so advanced. Many of the comics scholars mentioned above see this perception of comics continuity as a burden upon the creative potential of the form,⁷³ but the perception is quite sound. Comics do speak to each other.

As I have demonstrated throughout this project, the majority of contemporary comics artists possess a strong awareness of comics history and employ this awareness within their works. Many of the most famous and highly-acclaimed graphic novels allude to other comics works in order to express or enhance meaning. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, for example, are both largely dependant upon the superhero conventions of Marvel and DC comics. Understanding these conventions (which is to say having experienced them) helps the reader perceive the layers of satire and irony that are so central to Moore and Gibbons' and Miller's works. Similarly, much of the narrative technique displayed by Art Spiegelman in *Maus* depends upon expectations established by various old funny animal comic strips. Even Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* relies upon comics continuity to establish the correspondence between mythic fantasy and disillusionment that I identified in my third chapter.

In spite of the challenges that arise from comics continuity, artists such as Sam Kieth, Adrian Tomine, Phoebe Gloeckner, Ben Katchor, Marjane Satrapi, Joe Sacco, Art Spiegelman and Chris Ware have all managed to take advantage of a creative potential in comics continuity, particularly with regard to the Othering processes that have become entrenched within the form. Reassessing the Othering processes of comics' past is now a

⁷³ McCloud in particular advocates the need for comics to be seen as a limitless form instead of a unified genre (*Reinventing* 54).

common technique in the contemporary graphic novel, particularly with regard to issues of racism, sexism and social isolation. In each case, comics are writing (and drawing) the future with an eye upon the past.

As my readings of comics history and of key historical comics texts have demonstrated, comics' capacity to Other has been so actively employed over the past century of Western comics art that comics developed a reputation for taking an aggressive ideological and political standpoint with regard to particular minority groups. While this project isolated women, racial minorities and geeks as the key minority groups of interest to comics, my approach could easily be applied to representations of homosexuals, the poor or the disabled, to name but a few.⁷⁴

Although, my project does not focus on the full impact that comics Othering has had upon Western culture, it is clear that comics have played a profound role in perpetuating Otherness. By uncovering the Othering practices at the heart of the comics form, my work may have value to more sociologically-centred studies in the future. My interest here is more internal than external, exploring the manner in which the Othering processes of comics have impacted the development of the form itself, both as a hindrance to the comics-as-literature movement and, through the work of revisioning artists such as those described in this project, as a key component of the comics-as-literature movement.

As comics artists and comics scholars alike continue to refine our understanding of how comics Other and what effect this process has on the form as a whole, our

⁷⁴ Homosexuality has been thoroughly tackled by Howard Cruse in *Stuck Rubber Baby* and by Alison Bechdel in *Fun Home*. Economic class division is effectively explored in Alan Moore's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and in Craig Thompson's *Blankets*. Finally, disability is a key subject of David B.'s *Epileptic* and Justin Green's *Binky Brown*.

understanding of the form, its processes and, perhaps most importantly, its role within Western culture--in terms of what it has done, what it does and what it can do--will continue to expand. Furthermore, as comics artists continue to push the form toward high-art legitimacy, the encrusted connotations that I have spoken of will naturally diminish. Indeed, the gains of the comics-as-literature movement have already radically altered the comics landscape in terms of what exactly one expects when encountering a comics text. A person picking up a new comic for the first time may well expect to find sexist images of women, racial stereotypes and geek fantasies. It is also now possible for such a reader to expect something more than that when picking up a new comic. These alternative perspectives are perhaps the greatest testimony to the gains of the revisioning artists discussed in this project and to the gains of the comics-as-literature movement as a whole.

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