1-1-2015

Turning The Page: Fandoms, Multimodality, And The Transformation Of The 'comic Book' Superhero

Matthew Alan Cicci
Wayne State University,

Recommended Citation

TURNING THE PAGE: FANDOMS, MULTIMODALITY, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE "COMIC BOOK" SUPERHERO

by

MATTHEW ALAN CICCI

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

2015

MAJOR: ENGLISH (Film & Media Studies)

Approved By:

_____

Advisor   Date

_____

_____

_____

_____

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my wife, Lily, and my three children, Maya, Eli, and Samuel. Without my wife's ceaseless support, patience, and love, I would have been unable to complete this work in a timely manner. And, without the unquantifiable joy my children bring me, I am positive the more difficult parts of writing this dissertation would have been infinitely more challenging.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all of my committee members—Dr. Jeff Pruchnic, Dr. Steven Shaviro, and Dr. Suzanne Scott—for their time and willingness to be a part of this project. However, I would like to offer a special thanks to my advisor on this project, Dr. Chera Kee. Dr. Kee went above and beyond in this capacity. More than a just a mentor or an editor, Dr. Kee was passionate about the project and brought a wealth of information, questions, and challenges to the dissertation that strengthened not only the writing but the writer, as well. Her feedback was invaluable to the project, but so to was her insight into professionalization, my work's relationship to other fields, and her overall enthusiasm. It is an understatement to say she helped mold this particularly absent-minded graduate student into someone confident and prepared for his impending appointment. For all this and more, I am truly, deeply appreciative.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

"From day one, one of the superhero's greatest powers was to be able to leap across different media channels in a single bound." – Henry Jenkins ("Multiplicity" 304)

Henry Jenkins, a well-regarded media and fan scholar, isn't wrong, but one should probably add that superpower has definitely strengthened over time. Today superheroes are more ubiquitous and prevalent than they've ever been before. Take Spider-Man, for example: while he has long been a commercially viable, and thus fairly visible intellectual property, he can now be found mugging on the front of increasingly geek-chic apparel, protecting iPhones as a decal or skin, and popping up on any number of internet forums as the central character of a popular meme; he is immediately accessible to the growing number of casual gamers thanks to the wildly successful tablet game *Spider-Man Unlimited* (a game with over ten million downloads), and, most visibly, he has consistently swung across your local cinema's theater screen over the past fifteen years thanks to five summer blockbuster films.[1]

Spidey's prominence is not a sole, character-specific incident. Nor, as Jenkins contends, is his, and other superheroes', multimedia success particularly surprising. Both Marvel and DC, the top two publishers of comic books, have long looked to turn their four-color pages into technicolored movies, cartoons, and televisions shows.[2] In fact, comic books' inspiration of animated or live-action material is quite staggering. These two publishers alone have inspired over 130 live-action films or serial films starting with 1941's *Superman* and culminating with, to date, a slate of films scheduled out to 2020. Throw in an additional 46 (and counting) feature-length animated films, starting with 1993's *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm*, and another 127 television series (42 live-action, 85 animated), and the comic industries' relationship to the film and television industries becomes much clearer.

---

[1] Not only has the character headlined multiple films, his recent inclusion in Marvel's slate of upcoming films suggest he will be onscreen at least that often in the next fifteen years.

[2] Marvel Entertainment is an asset owned by the Walt Disney Corporation. DC Comics, Inc. is the publishing unit of DC Entertainment, a company of Warner Bros. Entertainment, which itself is owned by Time Warner.

According to historian Sean Howe, this multimedia output is a natural result of these companies longstanding attraction with moving their characters onto the silver screen. In his thorough history of Marvel Comics, *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*, Howe chronicles Marvel front-man Stan Lee's unyielding interest in film; Lee spent much of the '60s and '70s in Hollywood hobnobbing with directors, like Alain Resnais, and executives while pitching scripts for popular Marvel properties like the Silver Surfer. Despite a number of poorly-produced and poorly-conceived projects, Lee kept pursuing movies and television.[3] As Howe put it, "Stan Lee wanted nothing more than to change Marvel's Hollywood fortunes, to *get out of publishing*, to get his vision of Marvel on television" (3725, emphasis mine). Of course, focusing on how badly Lee wanted to get his heroes out of comics and into people's living rooms undermines how capable superheroes had been at doing just that since their inception. Superman made his debut in *Action Comics #1* in 1938. Within in two years, *The Adventures of Superman* radio program began an 11-year run. Within 10 years, a serialized film, *Superman*, depicted his origins story and early exploits. And, only 14 years after his original appearance in the comics, actor George Reeves portrayed the character in the television show, *Adventures of Superman*. Batman (1939) and Captain America (1941) are also early examples of comic characters spreading to other mediums rapidly; both characters headlined their own film adaptation within 10 years of initial publication. Superheroes, no matter how tied to the comic book page they may have seemed, have always been pushed into other media.

All of this confirms Jenkins claim above. This history of adaptation often gets obscured as the recent blockbuster success of the superhero film genre engenders a sense of novelty or newness—*we've never seen superheroes like this*! This claim can be forgiven, despite the legacy of adaptations, because so much is different about today's superhero adaptations. We haven't seen non-comic versions of superheroes garner such widespread media attention or sustained commercial success. We haven't seen the genre so fully preoccupy Hollywood execs' thoughts, inform new fans, and present in such

---

[3] Most notable flops? *Dr. Strange* (1978), a made-for-TV film that has been hidden away and the unreleased Roger Corman *Fantastic Four* that is so notoriously bad it's warranted a forthcoming documentary entitled *Doomed!*

force across multiple outlets simultaneously.[4] Just totaling the numbers above, since 1941 there have

been 303 filmic adaptations of DC or Marvel comics. But an overwhelming number of those adaptations,

some 207 (68%), have screened since 1998.[5] In other words, the first 50 years of the superhero genre

saw less than one hundred adaptations; the preceding 22 years, counting forward to 2020, have seen

and will see over two hundred. Superhero films' contemporary dominance of the box office has been so

overwhelming, and the pace of superhero films' releases so rapid, that the filmic image of the superhero

is becoming omnipresent across media, not just in comic books. Looking at the Marvel Cinematic

Universe alone there have been eleven films.[6] These films have grossed over $8.5 billion worldwide;

eleven more films are slated to run between 2015 and 2019. And, these eye-popping numbers only

reference Marvel, not their primary competitor, DC, and their slate of very successful Superman and

Batman franchises. Nor does it include the other similar films released such as *Scott Pilgrim vs. The

World* (2010) or *Watchmen* (2009), which are also based on superhero comic book stories.[7]

Such a boom in the ubiquity of these characters has, not surprisingly, sparked a surge in

scholarship – the films are analyzed, the characters' races, genders, or political positions are increasingly

addressed, and the field of comic studies itself is in process of codifying itself.[8] And, thus I too feel

compelled to address this rapid, commercially successful, and seemingly sustained explosion of

superheroes out of comics and into, primarily, the filmic. While my concern, and thus this dissertation,

inevitably tackles notions of how we can read these adapted stories and characters critically, I am most

deeply invested in the root issue I see unfolding, the unique element that makes this era of adaptation

unlike any before it—the success of superhero adaptations is fundamentally unhinging the superhero

---

[4] As evidenced, respectively, by the 2014 Sony leak memos, rash of film-driven fandoms, and promotional pushes.

[5] 1998 is the beginning of the contemporary superhero film era. That summer's release, *Blade,* signaled Marvel's first, sustained adaptation to film. Every year but two since then has seen at least one Marvel adaptation.

[6] The Marvel Cinematic Universe refers to the slate of Marvel Studio produced films since *Iron Man* (2008).

[7] Data regarding the amount of adaptations and their financial success is largely culled from the online databases of comichron.com and boxofficemojo.com

[8] The clearest examples of this is Angela Ndalianis's article "Why Comics Studies?" which offers historical and artistic validations, but also notes "It only took a hundred or so years, but the medium is finally coming into its own. Its public prominence has been felt most overtly in the adaptation of comics to films…" (114).

genre, and many of its fandoms, from its fifty-plus years of being primarily associated with the comic book medium. This decoupling of genre and medium that have so long been processed by consumers as one entity is invariably caught up not only in adaptation success stories, but the nature of how media spreads today. The fallout of this decoupling is one that is reconstructing notions of a long-established, if loose and amorphous, fandom—that of the invested superhero comic book reader. The superhero fan object is increasingly available to those who access the genre outside of its original medium, the comic book, in a sustained, accessible, and stable form. In many ways, this era is the first in which people can interact with superheroes as invested fans in just as connected and ongoing a manner as comic readers have long; but, they can do so without ever opening a comic book.

Admittedly, my initial concern over this topic was my affiliation as a superhero comic book reader…an avid one. I've felt superheroes were outgrowing the comic book for quite some time. While they've been subject to adaptations since their inception, for most of their history superheroes have been part and parcel with the comic book form. I recall purchasing my first comic book off the spinner rack of Stan's Market in Tustin, MI (*Spectacular Spider-Man* #157, Gerry Conway, 1989). And, although, I saw Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) shortly thereafter, not to mention the host of early '90s Marvel superhero cartoons, they never supplanted my desire to read comics. More importantly, they never seemed to supplant the comic book as the primary home of superheroes. Until now.[9]

I still go, once a week, to my local comic book shop to pick up my pull list—the comics I ask the shop-owner to set aside for me. But, my relationship to the superhero genre has changed because I've begun to assume the mantle of the aca-fan, the "hybrid of academic and fan critics that acknowledges and interweaves both intellectual and emotional cultural engagements" in their work? (Mittell) I was forced to balance my enjoyment of superhero comics and engaging with superhero fandoms with an

---

[9] While I delve into this in more detail in the following chapters, these adaptations were always too casual and lacked the ongoing, never-ending seriality of comic books (and today's superhero films).

increasingly eye-opening realization that all around me I saw battle lines being drawn.[10] Comment sections of comic book fan sites I frequented openly bashed seemingly benign changes to characters in light of their filmic adaptations, certain fans shared resentment over the influx of new fans who they claimed affiliated with the films more than the comic books, and, at its ugliest, sexist or racist diatribes were spouted in the name of defending canon or some perceived sanctity of the superhero comic book. While not all, or even most, superhero comic fans shared these lines of thoughts, the output was prevalent enough to be both uncomfortable and a clear signal of a certain fannish resentment regarding the genre and medium's ongoing upheaval.

Concurrently, I saw clear changes in the superhero comic books' form and output—primarily, changes of format, narrative, and representations of comic book characters and plots to better synchronize with their filmic iterations. And, in the groundbreaking success of these films, particularly the Marvel Cinematic Universes', I saw an immeasurable uptick in the amount of fan produced discourse of and engagement with superheroes as a concept. Mainstream media covered the films in ways it had never covered comic books, stars like Robert Downey, Jr. and Samuel L. Jackson, movie stars to be sure, were presented to audiences in new roles that have come to characterize their careers to date. Others like Tom Hiddleston, Chris Hemsworth, and Chris Evans saw their careers made by appearing in superhero films. Fandoms cropped up around their portrayals so quickly and prodigiously that it challenged the decades-long accrued weight of the fan material surrounding the comic book iterations of the same heroes.

Noticing films gradual supplanting as the preferred medium for superhero content, the ongoing fan discontent, and the changes in superhero comic stories and superhero fandoms' focuses, I've been driven to characterize the phenomena of superheroes today—to encapsulate all I see by answering simply, "What is happening?" On a certain level, junior high school me would have been delighted to see

---

[10] My primary ongoing engagement with superhero comic books is constituted not only of reading them, but a voracious appetite for comic news sites, forums, and comic book shop talk.

his fan objects get such sustained and consistent attention. On another level, I wasn't necessarily surprised. Once cinematic techniques caught up to the assumed spectacle of the comic book superheroes' powers, it stood to follow they could well be the next big summer blockbuster genre of film—a fantastical form of mid-year escapism. And, to be honest, I felt a moment of hipster-ism as "I was into these guys way before they became popular." But, of course, it would have been impossible to characterize the interplay between the ongoing decoupling of superheroes from comic books and the resurgent broadening of superhero fandoms by taking the position of the comic book reader reacting to perceived slights. I've done everything possible, instead, to make this dissertation an honest scrutiny of superheroes as mediated (and remediated) objects today. I've attempted to position my aca-fandom in a way that mirrors Ian Bogost's take on the aca-fan. He says, "The fact that something feels pleasurable or enjoyable or good (or bad) need not be rejected, of course, but it ought to issue an itch, a discomfort. [Media Scholars] ought to perform that hesitance often and in public, in order to weave a more complex web around media—not just to praise or blame particular works" (8). Bogost claims reveling in our fan desires should be conjoined to a healthy, ongoing, and critical skepticism of what feelings our fandoms elicit. The dissertation here is a product of me being unable to ignore the 'itch'—my fears that continued relationship between the comic book medium, the superhero genre, and the fans who enjoy that particular combination is somehow in jeopardy. Instead of lashing out at that discomforting notion, this project seeks to examine it closely and from different access points to determine what processes are actually at play.

This approach also freed my dissertation from solely addressing how certain fans were responding to the rapid evolution of superheroes as mediated fictional characters, so it could understand the processes and mechanisms at play that are changing how we think of superheroes and superhero fandom today. This, in turn, opens up into wider questions regarding the processes of change in contemporary multimodal storytelling. That is to say, both being within the fandom and objective

about it hopefully generates further discussions of how fan genre objects today are constantly remediated and, therefore, asking fans to cope with medium as an increasingly fundamental aspect of fandom. This line of thinking leads, most obviously, to an exploration of media convergence, which Jenkins defines as, "the flow of content across multiple media platforms" (185). Superhero content typically draws from the same well of stories, the ongoing comic book canon, but it is adapted across multiple platforms.[11] For example, there are Batman comic books, novels, films, television shows and animated series, and video games. Each of these is independent from the others, insomuch as they tell their own stories and, more often than not, those specific stories are not picked up and transferred into another medium. The successful *Batman: Arkham* series of video games tell a narrative that unfolds over the course of four video games, but it doesn't get picked up in *Beware the Batman* (2013), the most recent animated series featuring the character. Nor do the stories there get picked up in the canonical comic book series of *Batman* or *Detective Comics*.

These types of stories are examples of multimodal narratives—all of these iterations happen more or less concurrently and operate in their own sphere of influence. Multimodal narratives are stories that contain the same characters or settings but that cross different mediums and actively seek to play to each medium's strengths, but, and this is the key difference from a transmedia narrative, they do not continue the story across each medium. Jenkins says the multimodal narrative acknowledges, "Each medium has different kinds of affordances — the game facilitates different ways of interacting with the content than a book or a feature film. A story that plays out across different media adopts different modalities" (Jenkins, "Transmedia," 14). The multimodal narrative operates from the premise that each medium is best suited to certain forms of display, engagement, audience, etc., and the narrative caters to that medium-specificity. But, it also shares a narrative foundation that makes it

---

[11] Comic book canon is intricate, malleable, and dense. At times, throughout this dissertation, I will refer to a superhero canon. In these instances, I am referring to either DC's Earth-One or Marvel's 616 Universe—both of these fictional universes serve as the prime shared world for the respective publishers' stories.

familiar, despite the different stories told, across the varied media. In both the film and the comic books, Peter Parker is a picked-on young man with an aptitude for science. Inevitably, he is bitten by a radioactive spider granting him great power, and inevitably his dear Uncle Ben is killed via an action Peter could have prevented –thus making sure our hero, Spider-Man, understands great power carries with it great responsibility. From this core, the stories spring into their respective modes and media to carry on their own narratives.

Understanding the ongoing flux of superhero adaptations as multimodal narratives is the first step of the dissertation here. That, by the above definition, we can claim these superhero works to be different iterations of a shared narrative base that do not usually tell overlapping stories makes it easier to understand some of what Jenkins says is 'afforded' by each iteration: the style of story, the production of the story, but also the audience interaction with the story. With so many versions of slightly varied superhero stories being told today, medium-specificity becomes a key component of superhero fandom. It's not just that one relates to a character or superhero series, it often is a question of how they perform that relation that codes their fandom in a given way. As the general public, non-superhero comic readers or fans, increasingly envision superhero stories as primarily produced on film, certain pre-existing fans' desire to cultivate a "sense of ownership over the text" seems to be a key motivational factor for the current refiguring of superhero fandom (Sullivan 198).[12] The film is displacing the comic book for superhero genre stories, as evidenced by commercial success, cultural penetration, and audience sizes. This mainstreaming is perceived by segments of the superhero fandom as a marginalization of their investment and engagement with the superhero text, but also that comic reading, by virtue of being first and niche, is the more valid entry into superhero fandom. Appreciating a certain fannish drive to master a text or assert authority over it, helps position this dissertation's

---

[12] I use term traditional or pre-existing fandom as to refer to those fans who affiliate most strongly with superhero comic reading. While the terms traditional or pre-existing rhetorically imply a certain validity to the fandom, I use them only in the sense that their fandoms relate to a form of superhero engagement—the comic book—that pre-dates the current spate of movies.

examination of the tensions arising out of superhero fandom by bringing it back to a concern of multimodality. The fan rancor and defensiveness that seems to be on the rise, while inexcusable often times, can be read as an insecure outburst against the superhero industries gradual realignment of modalities—those unique affordance of the superhero comic book—to better compliment their more successful filmic counterpart.[13]

This dissertation bridges two broad streams of scholarship, then—fan studies and media studies. Specifically, it addresses the superhero industry's multimodal narratives as a practice not only reshaping how a superhero is mediated, but also it contends that increasingly making the superhero filmic has reconstituted superhero fandoms by integrating an important element of medium-specificity to fan interactions with superhero characters. While I believe this approach opens up interesting questions regarding the nature of media convergence, multimodal narratives, and fandom formation and interaction, as I progressed I became increasingly hopeful my work was also addressing a shortcoming of contemporary media scholarship in this area. Namely, I quickly became dissatisfied with the scholarship on how mediated narratives move across multiple platforms characterizes the nature of the fan and spreadable media. In its most basic, 'spreadable' is a categorization of media that is designed and intended to be used and reused after its production—fan recirculation and potential remixing, that is reworking, being a particularly obvious channel of this practice. One way of looking at the concept of media spreadability is to relate it to convergence—convergence is the process of media flowing across multiple media platforms and spreadable media is media that converges really, really well. The issue, however, is that related maxim "if it doesn't spread, its dead" places an onus on making content that is *designed* to flow outwards (Ford 293). This emphasis on design has so shaped the admittedly still-young discussion of convergence and media spreadability that the discourse cannot escape analysis of *how things get circulated and how they can be primed to do so*. In short, much of the work seems to be

---

[13] The term superhero industry is not media-specific. It refers to the production, marketing, and sale of superhero content regardless of medium.

written with the producer in mind…*how can the producer tap into this media phenomenon*? *How can they make spreadable media?* Two things troubled me about that approach. One was simply that much of this media spreading, especially as it pertained to superheroes, was self-evident. The adaptations, the new fandoms cropping up, the circulation of more recent superhero materials by these fandoms all suggested that the superhero industry had understood their content was spreadable or, if they hadn't known, they quickly found out. More problematic, however, was that the emphasis on spreadability as a desirable goal meant it often positioned the consumer as labor-yet-to-be-exploited.[14] In other words, media designed to spread is taking in to account that fans will reuse it, recirculate it, and potentially repurpose it—it is media designed to piggyback on the fan's productions.

Instead of emphasizing how spreadable media affects *modes of consumption*—that is addressing how consumer's habits change as content travels more and more freely—the scholarship is caught up in positioning media spreadability as an applicable goal of production. This in turn often posits the fan as another producer. In their aptly named book, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green say this process leads to an "erosion of traditional boundaries---between fan and activist, creativity and disruption, niche and mainstream…fan and producer" (646). So as consumers spread media, regardless of how, they increasingly take on a role of a producer…an effect spreadable media designs and plans for. The scholarship is so intent on breaking down spreadable media and its blurring the line between producer and fan that the scope of the enquiries have begun to reconfigure the fan as less than autonomous. Eleanor Stribling's article on spreadable media, "Valuing Fans," is a methodology on how to analyze fans to understand their potential economic value; the article, like many similar academic inquiries into this field, concerns itself with utility—which fan communities best move entertainment material?

---

[14] I am not discounting how useful it is to consider media as an object designed to evolve post-production. I simply find it fascinating that the discussion has, largely, found more traction in discussing production and circulation than consumption.

> Fans have always gone beyond the consumption behaviors that advertisers and producers have used as the predicator of the ultimate value of the audience. However, by broadening the framework and digging deeper into how people actually show their affinity for a media property and what drives them to do so, we can gain a more thorough understanding of which communities are fast and fleeting and which are here to stay (23).

The piece values fans as a laborer since their worth is tied up in "helping producers, creators, and advertisers assess how to increase the effectiveness of their investments of time, money, talent, and reputation" (2). This framing of the fan isn't wrong or misguided, necessarily. However, it does hold a narrow view of how spreading media and today's multimodal production affects the fan and consumer. My dissertation addresses the fringes of this view; I position the fan as evolving *because* media spreads and engages in multimodal output. This dissertation directly addresses the fan not just as laborer who spreads media but as a consumer who must constantly deal with the fact it is spreading.

My work here is a reminder of how useful it can be to see fans not just as fans, but as agents of change—both in the repurposing of works but also in the reformation of themselves in light of changing fan objects. Fandoms have always been positioned as co-producers. As Jonathan Gray says of early fan studies work, it dealt in turning fandoms' "very activities and practices—convention attendance, fan fiction writing, fanzine editing and collection, letter-writing campaigns—that had been coded as pathological, and attempted to redeem them as creative, thoughtful, and productive" (168). In short, initial forays into scholarship on fandoms were equally mired in the fans' productive prowess—the contemporary media scholarship relevant to this dissertation has simply inverted that production's coding from resistant to labor. This inversion of the fan as someone who aligns, wittingly or unwittingly, with the official producer's intent because of their planned-for circulation of the material seemed to overlook both the tensions and productions I was noting in my own engagement with superhero fandoms. While the superhero films of the past fifteen years have been an unmitigated success, the spreading of this media and the abdication of the comic book as the primary signifier of superheroes has produced tensions across the varied superhero fandoms. And, many of these fandoms work against easy

categorization of fan-as-laborer and instead seem both critical of the superhero industry and reverent for it—a nuanced dichotomy that suggests one can't simply lump fans as monolithic recirculaters of spreadable material.

The following chapters will pick up on these threads not because I want to undermine the notion that fans do free labor; I, in fact, think much of the work Jenkins, Ford, and others are doing is smart and on-point. I want to pull at the loose threads, however, because the act of being a superhero fan today is innately tied up in the success of superheroes' spreadability and multimodal success. Moreover, the superhero fan today does more than just free labor for the superhero industry—they get angry, defensive, and, seemingly appositely, increasingly more politically progressive. This has, at least for superhero comic books, marked a new era of inclusiveness that has been much needed for the superhero genre and the comic book medium.

My dissertation contends, then, that multimodal superhero storytelling has not only begun to replace the notion of the comic book superhero with that of the film superhero, but that the process of doing so has fundamentally fractured the fandom along media-specific lines. Consequently, superhero comic books and stories have begun a steady process of mimicking filmic modalities—both in narrative structure and assumed audience interaction. While the work here speaks to larger trends in media convergence and circulation practices, superheroes are a rich site for this type of examination because current media distribution constantly recrafts superheroes. In so doing, new fans and fan productions have been forged concurrent with an entrenching of certain established superhero fans feelings of authority and ownership of the material. The spreadable nature of multimodal superheroes not only demarcates different types of superhero fans—based on preferred media as opposed to preferred character or series—it also shifts the public-at-large's perception of superheroes and superhero fandoms towards one primarily attached to the filmic rather than that of the comic book. Furthermore, multimodal iterations of superheroes have been so commercially successful as to fundamentally

influence the form of superhero narratives themselves, which further exacerbates the tension between the increasingly varied media-specific superhero fandoms. This dissertation convenes at the intersection, then, of fan studies and understanding spreadable media. It suggests the former must become reacquainted with its roots—political discussions of resistance and hegemony—to fully understand how fandoms respond to the shifting nature of their fan attachment. For the latter, it demands relevant examinations treat the consumer more than an entity that engages in labor if it wishes to comprehend the unintended outcomes of the contemporary multimodal storytelling. And, argues in full that examing how the fan evolves alongside its constantly reproduced fan object better elucidates how fans form, interact, and attach to fandoms.

Chapter One, "Reel Comics: How Films Borrow from Comics and How Comics are Becoming Films," unveils the historical process by which comics books have become the secondary medium associated with superheroes after the film. As a result of this shift and to capitalize off of it, superhero comics are parroting their more successful filmic counterparts in number of ways. Digital comics have increasingly offered fans an easier point of entry into reading while also asking readers to engage with the product in a manner that is less like reading a traditional comic book and more like viewing a film. Narrative and production practices have followed suit – emulating the big stories of the films and abbreviating comic's unwieldy seriality in favor of a 'seasonal TV model.' Such changes may come across as evolution and necessary for the medium to progress, but such changes so fundamentally change the experience of reading comics that the unique sense of play and visual language the fandom has long hinged on is changing. This process is reconstructing what interaction with superheroes is.

Chapter Two, "Marvel Team-Up: Hawkeye, Loki and the Resistance of the Female Superhero Comic Fan" contends that female superhero fans are innately resistant. It is innate because the industry and fandoms associated with superheroes have long ignored the female fan (both real and potential). This resistance is a motivating factor in an ongoing, slow deregulation of the perceived male coding of

superhero fandoms—that is the perception that superheroes are the domain of male fans. To this end, the chapter details the last few years increasingly impactful presence of the female superhero fan—a presence now unavoidable to the industry because of media circulation and filmic adaptation success. In particular, the characters of Hawkeye and Loki, and their respective fandoms, are positioned in this chapter as overt and covert forms of resistance to the male power bloc of superhero comics—the former is used to directly challenge the status quo, and the latter subverts it. Moreover, these characters and their fandoms' resistance forces the superhero industry to more willingly engage with their characters and fans while also serving as a site for the industry and the fandoms to explore and experiment with ways of courting female fans.

Chapter Three, "Flame [War] On! The Superhero Genre's Invocation of Race to Address Adaptation Anxiety," examines the ongoing trend of racebending superheroes from white iterations in comic books to actors of color in the film adaptation, with a particular focus on the fan discourse surrounding the casting of Michael B. Jordan as Human Torch in *Fantastic Four* (2015). The dialogue surrounding racebending superhero characters is, at face value, a discussion of the superhero industry's desire to contemporize their catalog and be more inclusive and representative of their reading/viewing audience versus the occasional fan outcry of paying lip-service to political correctness at the cost of tradition, canon, character, and/or story. However, much of this discussion is just a thin veil for longstanding fans and the industry to hash out the ramifications of superheroes' contemporary infatuation with the screen and vice versa. In short, while truly meaningful discussions of race take place, so too has race increasingly become a means by which fans attempt to articulate the validity of superhero comic fandom and canon in an era where those concepts mean less and less.

And, lastly, Chapter Four, "Uncanny Fandom: Media Spreadability and the Reframing of the Superhero Comic Fan," serves as a summative take that concludes superhero fandom is factionalized and prone to a form of infighting that largely is inspired by a public perception that commercially

reveres superheroes but remains, at best, culturally indifferent to the superhero comic book itself. As the superhero has increasingly become divorced from the medium of comic books, so too has the perception and reality of what constitutes a superhero fan. The mediascape paints cosplayers, conventioneers, and recent multimodal success as representative of superhero comic fandom; and, these representations indicate both a broadening superhero fandom and coverage of superhero comic culture. However, such heavy emphasis on superhero fans as they relate to non-comic mediums fuels a certain antagonism of 'traditional' superhero comic fans against newer fan. It is important to understand this fan divide, both because it better deconstructs the stereotype of certain superhero fans but also because it examines the mechanism by which a fandom, in this case superhero fandom, deals with an evolution of its fan object and the injection of new fans. This chapter frames fandom as both media-specific but also partially sculpted by the perception of non-fans and highlights how fandoms evolve as their fan objects are increasingly remediated by the official producers.

Collectively, these chapters address some of the myriad ways that superhero fandoms and the ongoing spreading of superhero content collide. That terms 'fan' and 'media' are broad concepts means the dissertation, naturally, can't collate all the permutations of how superheroes' increased interaction with non-comic mediums affects fandoms of superheroes. But, what can be taken away from these chapters is an increasingly evident media-specificity to superhero fandoms, or, at least that media is increasingly becoming a way for superhero fans to identify their particular fandom. While the classic old paradigm—are you a DC fan or a Marvel one—still exists, increasingly these chapters suggest new superhero fandoms are instead caught up in a question of if you are interested in the films, television or comics. Stemming from this more recent paradigm of fandom classification, these chapters, collectively, suggest that the fan dialogue is inundated with rhetoric of defensiveness and insecurity on the part of a certain vocal segment of superhero comic readers. The chapters, in their own ways, show where this insecurity stems from—all the minute ways in which superhero comics are becoming usurped by

superhero films—while acknowledging such insecurity is defended by fan productions steeped in very mutable concepts of canon and continuity. At its core then, this dissertation is titled "Turn the Page" both as a reference to the decreasing practice of doing that with real, physical comic books, but also as a nod to the fact that as the superhero spreads, we are leaving one era of the genre and its fandom behind—one that hinges on the classical comic book—for one that embraces a wider spectrum of fandoms and a form of engagement that equates the superhero to the screened instead of the read.

CHAPTER ONE "Reel Comics: How Films Borrow from Comics and How Comics are Becoming Films"

"The promise of Marvel and DC superhero comics is "Everything Changes"…then nothing changes." –

Josh Flanagan discussing what he calls every superhero comic fans' 'existential crisis.'

*"They put that philosophy in the tagline of the 'first' superhero…It's a **never-ending battle** for truth,*

*justice, and the American Way. Right? It's a **never-ending** battle…it's never going to end. In Marvel and*

DC comics there is never going to be a third act." – Conor Fitzpatrick, responding.

In their brief back and forth, the co-hosts of *iFanboy*, a popular comic book news and review

podcast, have essentially summed up both what is unique and enjoyable about superhero comics—their

bottomless continuity and endless stories—and what frustrates many readers of the superhero genre—

nothing every really evolves. While other media may present narratives in a serialized form, there isn't

really a serialized story form like the ones that superhero comic books present. Decades upon decades

of accumulated story allow the industrious fan a rich and detailed engagement with the characters in

way that other media can't mimic. Some of this inimitableness stems from the fact real bodies are

never displayed; narrative events keep happening but the characters, aside from a cosmetic alteration

or two, rarely age or grow. A result of this is the superheroes' astounding longevity.[15]

That Spider-Man, for example, has been written as the hero of an ongoing story, one that

weaves across his primary series *Amazing Spider-Man* but also smaller offshoot titles and guest

appearances in many, many other titles, for over fifty years implies the fan has access to a wealth of

nuanced, detailed, and consistent story details that many other fictional characters in other media

cannot hope to amass. Not only does the fan have the opportunity to possibly read these decades of

accumulated stories, he has the opportunity to interact with the accumulation of fan material amassed

over that time-letter pages, blogs, books about the character, wiki entries, etc. Despite all the things

---

[15] Of course, other genres utilize the comic medium. But, superheroes have, for a long, long time, dominated the medium. Other genres in comic books often have a '3rd act'—a closing. The never-ending nature I am referring to here is born of the longstanding hybrid of genre and medium…the superhero comic book.

that have happened in Spider-Man's fictional life, he is still a young man who embodies the maxim "With Great Power Must Also Come Great Responsibility." Furthermore, although introduced as a 15-year old boy in 1962, today's Spider-Man is not a nearly 70-year old man. He's 30 at best.

"Everything Changes," we are promised, but nothing, or at least very little, does when it comes to superhero comics.[16] But, outside the four-color world of the comic book page, a lot has changed.[17] Superheroes have been adapted for a wide variety of mediums and audiences; they've been licensed on almost every type of consumer product you can imagine. They've become the foundation of a variety of fandoms. And, as of very recently, thanks to a steady stream of successful adaptations, they've needed the comic book medium less than they ever have before. Throughout the 60s, 70s, 80s, and early-to-mid 90s, superhero comic stories and characters were adapted, but not on any real scale. Since 2001, a DC or Marvel superhero adaptation has hit theatres every single year, and in many years, there has been more than one adaptation. Bombarded with superheroes in such a sustained manner, the characters have become increasingly visible and relevant to entertainment culture, discussions of media economies, and, of course, fans and audiences.

Academics have, as such increased visibility would demand, followed as well. The past fifteen years has seen a spike in scholarship on comic books, superheroes, and the place of both the genre and the medium in the contemporary world. Much of the work on this connection between film and comic, then, is interested in the filmic – How are comics influencing films? What makes them profitable? How do they serve as means to better explore the uses of and our engagement to CGI? What do they teach us about the nature of adaptation to film? What can be addressed regarding the ethics and economies of licensing? Rarely is the question flipped, what are the superhero films doing to the superhero comic?

---

[16] There are of course alternate versions of Spider-Man that posit him in different genders, races, and ages as well as having made different decisions from his canonical version. But, all of these are defined against the core version that readers met in 1962's *Amazing Fantasy* #15. This is the Spider-Man people are reading today in greater numbers than any other alternate version.

[17] Four colors being a reference to the early age of comic books when everything was printed by mixing cyan, magenta, yellow, and black (Booker 6).

The answer, I contend, is that as superheroes gain ever-increasing viability and profitability from their filmic adaptations, their original medium, the glossy pages of DC and Marvel comics, are undergoing seismic shifts. These shifts are directly influenced by both the accessibility and widespread appeal of the films. They are a move towards something clearly post-blockbuster – a style of comic design, presentation, and engagement that is slowly divorcing itself from the traditional modes of comic reading in favor of appropriating filmic processes of production and consumption. These new modes hinge on the linear structure of the Hollywood blockbusters that have brought so much attention to the superhero genre recently. The more work-intensive style of comic reading and its reader-controlled viewing is being replaced by the consumer-as-spectator model of Hollywood film where the medium controls the pace and allotment of story. In short, superhero comics are becoming more and more like superhero films both in the way they present and are consumed.

This chapter will offer a brief historical and empirical account of how the superhero film has usurped the superhero comic book as the primary outlet for the genre. Afterwards, it will address the reciprocal sharing of structure that superhero films and comics have begun to share. This structure, on one hand, covers superhero films' use of the unique serial nature of comic books to keep viewers invested. The other side of this structure sees superhero comic book's imitate both the seasonal model of T.V. shows and the widescreen, mass appeal of blockbuster films to make their messy canon less daunting to new and casual readers. As these shared strategies are examined, I'll discuss how the comic industry's burgeoning digital offerings draw most strongly on this new model; the end result being that digital comics are beginning to offer a more filmic and novelistic engagement with the superhero material than a purely comic engagement—that is to say the user-controlled pace, exploration, and construction of the initially non-linear comic page is being replaced by a medium-controlled, directly linear feeding of these stories. Such a sea-change in the mode of interaction with the medium and its narratives is evolving the fandom towards a looser and more open consumption style than the comic-

dependent core fandom the industry has long relied on. This chapter doesn't suggest that superhero comic fandoms are dying. However, they are evolving because the previous way of interacting with their fan object—materially and with an invited sense of constructing the comic page as it was read—is being replaced by a less-intensive, interaction that is more akin to screening a film. Nor is it to suggest that print comics are immediately disappearing, but that as they tell stories aimed for digital readership and under a filmic influence increasingly, the print comic mode of engagement is changing. This newer form of interaction won't invalidate fandoms, but it will likely, eventually, rearrange what readers consider a comic book to be and how it operates and such a rearrangement will clearly influence the future formation and production of superhero fans who read comics.

THE BUSINESS OF SUPERHEROES

Marvel and DC superheroes are extremely profitable, particularly as licensed products and blockbuster films.[18] The amount they earn in comic book publication is considerable, but falls well short of the revenue generated by the aforementioned venues. Filmic versions of superhero stories are influencing comic books because they are the driving financial force in the broad superhero entertainment genre and also reach a large, multinational audience—thus, they also extend and elevate licensing revenue.[19] The profit of publishing comic books pales in comparison to the profit (and widespread attention) of the films, thus filmic superhero stories are granted a certain primacy both in the producer's hierarchy and the general consumer culture. The snatching up of comic industries like DC, Marvel, and Comixology by profitable longstanding conglomerates Warner Bros., Disney, and Amazon, respectively, suggests a certain financial cache to comic book publishing, but the numbers themselves make the picture even clearer. Looking at superheroes as non-comic entities allows their

---

[18] Licensed products being those material goods which, for a fee, are allowed to use the visual components and likenesses of a given character

[19] Superhero films have long been more profitable than a given comic book publication run; however, it is the multinational success coupled with the much quicker production of these films that really accentuate their profitability and, thus, influence today.

profitability to be addressed in two broad categories: film revenue and licensing revenue. The former is best compared with Hollywood at large; according to statistics at BoxOfficeMojo.com, over forty of the 167 films to have ever grossed $50 million on their opening weekend are superhero films, nearly 25% ("Weekends"). Moreover, four of the top five highest opening films of all time are superhero adaptations. Setting aside this remarkable dominance in Hollywood, contemporary licensing and merchandising rights make superheroes some of the most profitable intellectual properties outside of athletic logos. Business analysts Nicoleta Panteleva and Justin Molavi speak to the viability of licensing intellectual properties and argue "[They] experience high profit margins due to strong demand from buying industries. The low costs associated with granting intellectual property rights, coupled with the large amount of revenue derived from existing high-value brands seeking the industry's services, allow companies to keep about 40.0% of their sales as income" (3). In part of a larger piece on the profitability of the licensing industry, Molavi and Panteleva suggest the dominance is in part because these characters are affordable for other industries to license but also drive sales due to their immediately recognizable branding. This analysis coupled with a recent article by the *Hollywood Reporter* showing that the licensing revenue from Spider-Man alone is worth $1.3 billion dollars (with Batman, Avengers, and Superman each hovering around $500 million) suggests the industry of superhero ownership is highly lucrative (Block).[20]

But, more than just a matter of cents and dollars, the positioning of superheroes into other mediums and their lucrative status in them speaks to some of the inherent logic of broader media practices—the companies that own superheroes make more than comic books, and spreading superheroes to these other productions is simple synergy. Ronald Perleman, CEO of investment firm MacAndrews and Forbes, who owned Marvel from 1989-1997, acknowledged the company saw itself differently in the '90s—a rethinking of itself based on what actually drove its profits: "[We're] a mini-

---

[20] Ad Age trade magazine suggests Marvel's franchising profit is close to $6 billion ("Avengers Bulk Up").

Disney in terms of intellectual property. Disney's got much more highly recognized characters and softer characters, whereas our characters are termed action heroes. **But at Marvel we are now in the business of the creation and marketing of characters**" (Rhoades 172, emphasis mine). The distinction between marketing and creation might be fine, especially since Marvel's most marketable, successful characters were created in the '60s; in fact, it might have been more truthful for Perleman to say they were primarily into marketing pre-existing characters while using the comic book medium to test the waters for potential new characters who might gain traction.[21] Despite that understanding, Perleman and his compatriots would likely be astonished by the numbers listed above. These profits suggest that these characters' ubiquity is quite real; these characters, as licensed products, outpace even the sale of the country's most visible entertainment brand, the NFL.[22]

Supporting Perelman's claim, Chris Tolsworthy, a comic historian and economist, contends over a number of infographics and snippets on his website, *The Fantastic Four (1961-89) was The Great American Novel*, that the story of comic book economics is one in which the money from branding outpaced the money from creating, in turn leading companies, like Marvel, to think of themselves more as purveyors of intellectual properties than publishers. He pinpoints this change as happening in the early 2000's, a bit after Perelman's claims, but, in truth, Tolsworthy is simply noting the first tastes of success. It is the early 2000s, Tolsworthy reminds us, that saw licensing royalties start to come in from the popularity of films like *Spider-Man* (2000) and *Daredevil* (2003). This money rescued the company from bankruptcy. He also points to investment numbers that reveal the company's 2007 profits—pre-

---

[21] The 4th-wall breaking, off-kilter, and humorous Deadpool is a good example. Created in 1991 by Fabian NIceza and Rob Liefeld, the character quickly changed from villain to anti-hero to one of Marvel's best-selling properties.
[22] The NFL raked in $2.1 billion in merchandising sales during the same year as the four biggest superheroes raked in roughly $2.5 billion. Also, revenue granted from these characters is still 75% in favor of a single company, Disney's Marvel Studios. NFL merchandise is split via 32 individual franchises and the league itself.

Marvel Cinematic Universe—were driven by merchandising and licensing instead of publishing by a 2-to-1 ratio. [23]

Contemporary figures only continue to bear out Tolsworthy's thesis. In the stuffed pie that is superhero profit, it is important to note how little the comic book medium itself offers to the bottom line. In 2013, the entire North American comics market netted just under $520 million dollars gross sales, and the highest selling comic sold just over 300,000 copies ("Overall").[24] Both of these industry-wide numbers fall well short of *The Avengers* (2012) take of over $650 million and 20 million+ first weekend American viewers and, of course, the billions generated by licensing the IPs.[25] While the profitability of superheroes isn't new, their increasing independence from comic books as the primary medium or narrative form is—as the films succeed, entry into a superhero narrative is more accessible via the filmic and, gradually, fan involvement follows. The sharp rise in licensing profitability and company value (from Perelman's purchase of Marvel for $82.5 million in 1989 to the $4 billion Disney purchased it for only 20 years later) is a trend that runs contemporaneously with the boom in the superhero film market (Miller). It is a trend that reifies the characters' marketability and film presence and, consequently, diminishes the importance of the superhero comic book. One way to look at this data, a view Disney holds, is that Marvel is about intellectual properties not about publishing superhero comic books, per se. Disney CEO Rob Iger's statements post-purchase definitely seem to suggest they considered Marvel as a way to reach a new audience—boys—but also the world's largest library of fictional characters, "This is perfect from a strategic perspective. This treasure trove of over 5,000 characters offers Disney the ability to do what we do best" (Goldman). And, what Disney does best is market their characters extraordinarily well and make sure their likenesses are ubiquitous.

---

[23] Pre – MCU is before Marvel Studios took their gamble to produce *Iron Man* (2008) in house which eased their eventual $4 billion sale to Disney and the slate of movies to follow.

[24] This doesn't account for digital or international sales. However, it is unlikely such outlets make up the difference in a significant way . . . especially since considering box office numbers are also North American only here.

[25] 2013's *Marvel's The Avengers* currently holds the second largest opening weekend ever.

Superheroes are now, more than ever before, bigger than comic books. This context is important. Accepting how much more revenue film and licensing generate and acknowledging the industry's infatuation with getting their characters to exist outside comics should ensure investigations of mediated superhero narratives don't preoccupy themselves with questions of viability or success. Simply said, the fact they've lasted 80, relatively profitable, years suggests viability pretty loudly. Instead, the investigation must seek out what it means that the mode of engagement superheroes are most traditionally associated with, comic reading, is now an increasingly distant third element of their profitability. And, it is profitability this hinges on because profitability helps situate most materially how people actually engage with superheroes and thus opens up better paradigms for the study of these characters. While it would be nice to simply assert the intrinsic artistic legacy of superhero comic book as making them the most relevant form for superheroes still, such an endeavor would be backwards-looking—this chapter is determined to examine where superheroes are now and ponder where they, and their fans, might be going soon.

Of course, context and history are important; without looking backwards it becomes difficult to fully appreciate the multi-media impact of superheroes today as outlined above. After all, superheroes have long been viable in platforms outside of comics if not more culturally tied to these outside propositions. But, over the past 20 years broadly, and the last few specifically, that viability has become the dominant way to consider superheroes in popular entertainment. In his article, "Cultural Logic of Media Convergence," Jenkins sees a possible framework for this explosion over the past few years – he chronicles an increasingly savvy use of technology that allows for constant recirculation that arises simultaneously with a significant few corporations laying claim to more and more entertainment venues (a la Disney's purchase of Marvel and Perleman's and Iger's take on superheroes above); it is not a stretch, Jenkins suggests, that industry would master the "proliferation of channels and the portability

of new computing and telecommunications technologies" to get superheroes out of comic books and

into every other entertainment venue possible (34). And, Jenkins smartly notes

> Fueling this technological convergence is a shift in patterns of media ownership. Whereas old Hollywood focused on cinema, the new media conglomerates have controlling interests across the entire entertainment industry. Viacom, for example, produces films, television, popular music, computer games, websites, toys, amusement park rides, books, newspapers, magazines and comics (34).

In relative terms here, Disney's purchase of Marvel means there is both an increased opportunity for

and an increased incentive to spread the characters across myriad platforms. Licensing is one thing; but,

to propagate, say Spider-Man, across video games, theme parks, comics, films, cartoons, and kids'

fashion that the parent company has a vested interest in is powerhouse capitalism.

A natural response to this might be to simply suggest that today's simultaneously media-

drenched and media-hungry environment, is simply producing more than *could* logistically be produced

in earlier eras of the superhero genre. And, while of some of that is likely true, what most crystallizes

superheroes' exodus from comics as industry convergence practices see them better utilized elsewhere

is the stagnation of superhero comic sales as the comic book market diversified. While the data on the

boom in superhero film and licensing paints a fairly clear picture of the evolving industry, contrasting

that data with a comic book market that has actually shrunk 3.1% in the past ten years vividly suggests

the primacy of film and other media over comic books (comicchron "Yearly").[26] After all, films like

Superman (1978) and *Batman* (1989) were very successful.[27] Cartoons such as *X-Men* (1992-97) and

Batman: The Animated Series (1992-95) were very influential on comic readers and creators.[28] However,

during those eras, the comic market was healthy enough to be buoyed by these adaptations, not

---

[26] Thanks to a rapid inflation of the price of comic books, despite selling a few million less copies of comics in North American markets since 2005, the dollar sales of the industry has almost jumped 18%. More than one outlet has suggested such prices actually harm readership numbers.
[27] Both the top grossing movies of their particular years.
[28] As evidenced by both publishers going back to mine the cartoon for comics, such as 2015's *X-Men '92* and the prevalence of creator's, like current Batman scribe Scott Snyder's, admission that the 90s animated Batman is the archetype they shoot for (Ching).

overshadowed—nor did adaptations come out so rapidly as to make superheroes omnipresent in a number of non-comic venues. Since the late 90s, the multimodal market for superheroes boomed, and it seems to be getting stronger. Inversely, the comic book market has been in a period of slight decline and stagnation since the late 90s. In 1991, Marvel sold 8.1 million copies of *X-Men*, *Vol 2. #1.* 2013's biggest seller? *Walking Dead #115* at 329,000 copies sold. That is a decrease of 96% over 22 years! Comparing today to other eras still reveals today's superhero sales as a pittance. 1969 saw DC sell over 510,000 copies of *Superman* a month—one of 9 superhero titles that regularly sold more than 2013's most purchased title—and note the *Walking Dead* isn't superhero fare (Comicchron.com "Yearly").[29] While the comics publishing industry has made up some of the cash by increased cover prices, hardcover and paperback collections, digital comics and so on, the loss of assumed readership is staggering.

The boom of the comic industry in the 1990s—a sharp uptick in sales fueled by a speculation market that was presented as a profitable investment—drove media attention to the comic industry; this is personified best by the 1991 *New York Time* piece, "Boom in Comic Books Lifts New Marvel Stock." This piece and others marveled at the seeming explosion in comic publishing while all other forms of publishing languished. Additional mainstream reports about collectors, conventions, and the sudden rise of Image Comics coupled with business reports on the successful stocks and industry of comic books, made the comic book superhero, and therefore the comic book superhero fan, as relevant to non-comic book readers as they had been in the '60s and '70s when superhero comics were seen as an underappreciated form of pop art that gripped college campuses and youths alike;[30] it was an era

---

[29] And the *Walking Dead* defines another clear point in superhero's exodus to film…while overall comic book sales are still decent, the diversification of the market, largely driven by Image Studios, has incrementally allowed other genres to steal market share from superheroes.

[30] A 1966 Esquire article centered on comic books infiltration of college campuses as an indicator they were more intellectual and savvy than the common perception of them would suggest. The same article also noted their popularity, "*The Princeton Debating Society invited Stan Lee, author of Marvel's ten super-hero comics, to speak in a lecture series that also included Hubert Humphrey, William Scranton and Wayne Morse. Other talks were given at Bard (where he drew a bigger audience than President Eisenhower), N.Y.U. and Columbia. Some fifty thousand American college students, paying a dollar a head, belong to Merry Marvel Marching Societies and wear "I Belong"*

that saw superheroes taken seriously and first begin the move out of the just-for-kids stigma the genre's long had to battle. And, while superhero films like the aforementioned *Batman* (1989) and *Superman* (1978) did well at the box office, the superhero genre was still considered a risky venture for Hollywood investors. This was largely because the films failed to supplant the comic books, leaving the superhero to be still considered a character created primarily *for the comic book reader*. Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Michael Hiltzlik explains, "when Marvel put the [Spider-Man] feature film rights up for sale in 1985, there were few takers. Hollywood was bored with superheroes. The Superman franchise, launched to huge success in 1979, appeared to have suffered premature arteriosclerosis with the release of the dreary "Superman III" in 1983" (3). Even after the success of the Batman films of the late '80s and early '90s hinted at the profitability of superhero films, Marvel, after fighting to re-obtain the rights to Spider-Man,[31] was only able to garner $7 million from Columbia Pictures (Sony) for Spider-Man's film rights in 1999; they had to battle the perception that superheroes couldn't offer sustainable profits outside of simply selling comics.

However, just two years later, Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002) became the first film to rake in $100 million during its opening weekend. This period, from 1998's *Blade* and including 2000's *X-Men* (sold by Marvel for a similarly cheap price to Fox), may have kickstarted the superhero film rush, but up until this point the sales figures, media coverage, and fan discussions often centered on superheroes primarily in their state as characters born of and tied to the comic book medium. Of course, as documented here, this is no longer the case, the superhero comic market has stagnated, the film and licensing has exploded. This role-reversal is what drives not only the industry but the shifting styles of narrative and 'reader' engagement the genre is experiencing.

SUPERHERO FILMS AS SERIALS, SUPERHERO COMICS AS WIDESCREEN TELEVISION SERIES

---

buttons on more than a hundred campuses. Bundles of mail pour into Marvel's offices every day from more than 225 colleges" (Pearl).

[31] Part of Lee's planned exodus of characters from page to screen involved Marvel selling off, throughout the 70s and 80s, film and television rights to companies as wide-ranging as CBS and Cannon Pictures (Howe 195, 394).

The progression of filmic superheroes from the risky venture of the late '90s to the powerhouse earners of today took more than the inevitable fall of the 90s comics' speculation boom and the cheap selling of character's film rights to motivate the eventual acquisition of Marvel by Disney and ignite a film studio's dominance. Marvel's cinematic fortunes were largely born of the company's desire to, after decades of failures, actually have some creative control and presence in the filmmaking process. Former head exec, Avi Arad, summed up the comic company's frustrations pre-success, "When you get into business with a big studio, they are developing a hundred or 500 projects; you get totally lost. That isn't working for us. We're just not going to do it anymore. Period" (Hass 6). However, if the origin of the films can be attributed to a bold decision to operate without direct studio interference, no small measure of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Phase One film slate's continued success should be attributed to directly co-opting the way that Marvel Comics have long told stories.[32] Kevin Feige, executive producer and official overseer of much of Marvel Studio's film planning, understood what made comic books work. Feige, long a fan of the comics, thought that imitating the guest-star nature of superhero comic books—that is the constant possibility that any superhero or villain could crop up in another character's title—would be a novel hook for movie-goers. While the shared universe of Marvel would obviously appeal to established superhero comic fans, Feige "[hoped] the mainstream [film] audience will able to follow as well" (Philbrick). Thus, with the plan in place, Feige and the Marvel Studios crew began piecing together the sequences that would model comic book's seriality and intertextuality. Success on the big screen would capitalize on the familiarity of their brands, clearly evident in their licensing revenue, by eschewing the perceived roadblocks of monthly comic reading in

---

[32] *Iron Man* (2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), and *Marvel's The Avengers* (2012) constitute Phase One.

favor of wide screen accessibility;[33] however, the tropes of comic book narratives would keep audiences more engaged in the franchise than normal.

The plan manifested with each of the Phase One films possessing a unique, post-credits teaser for what the Marvel Cinematic Universe story had in store. In *Iron Man* (2008), Tony Stark is approached with the information that there are other superheroes in the world. Using this information, he appears in *Incredible Hulk* (2008) and approaches a disgraced general, Thaddeus Ross, to inform him of the impeding formation of a superhero team. A mysterious falling hammer in the end-credit sequence of *Iron Man 2* (2010) signals the arrival of Thor. A bit character from Thor's first feature film, *Thor* (2010), is recruited by S.H.I.E.L.D. (Marvel's premier spy agency) to help understand the Tesseract—a mysterious and powerful plot device. The next film, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), sees the titular character recruited to undertake an important mission—join the Avengers. Then, in 2012's blockbuster *The Avengers*, a movie which picks up on all of these threads, viewers are treated to a post-credit scene that teases a cosmic character named Thanos and implicates him as a villain to watch out for—essentially, restarting the cycle and teasing Marvel's next phase of films.

Figure 1.1 Final Page of Infinity #1 (Cheung, 2013)   **Figure 1.2 End Credit Scene *Avengers* (2012)**

Not only were these teasers reminiscent of classic cliffhangers and final page reveals that the comic book industry used to entice readers to return month after month, they also relied on the

---

[33] Some of these perceived roadblocks are the amount of time investment one must make in order to read anything week-to-week and month-to-month as compared to the two hour investment for a film. Others are, of course, the stereotypes surrounding comic books and comic shops as well as the perceived unfriendliness of these cliques to the uninitiated.

aforementioned guest-star practice.[34] Glued together by the presence of Samuel L Jackson's erstwhile

character, Nick Fury—Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D., each of these films provided snippets for the characters to

interact with each other and hinted at the formation of the wider universe and cohesive world for which

these superheroic characters to interact in and with. Based on the box office returns of each of these

films, the plan was a success—one Marvel continues to use to seed future cinematic story arcs.[35] Even

beyond film, Marvel has seen a measure of success with television shows *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and

Agent Carter, programs that give viewers an extended dose of continuity by allowing the television

stories fill in the less bombastic goings on in the Marvel Cinematic Universe currently and predating the

canonical time of the films. Even Marvel's competitor, DC, has seen success in building a shared universe

of television programs that allow popular characters Green Arrow and the Flash to exist in the same

'world' via crossover episodes while primarily sticking to their own, titular programs.

　　While any number of variables likely contribute to Marvel's filmic dominance, the fact that the

films' box office and mainstream appeal continues to grow from film to film—even to the point of

cashing in on obscure properties like *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) and *Ant-Man* (2015)—suggests that

there is a core audience that moves from film to film so they may experience the whole of the narrative

universe. This audience, a large one at that, is following the hooks that cap each film.[36] For every film

they finish, another is teased; this is the essential comic book way—issue x is always succeeded by issue

y, and knowing character b could show up in character a's series compels me to pick that issue as well.

This perpetual seriality, and its pull on audience members, mirrors that of comic books because it is

"machinic" (Mayer 186). It is an interconnection of stories that cannot be reduced to a single "author,

---

[34] Without the interconnectedness of the franchise—that Iron Man can turn up in a Hulk film, that is—it might be easy to see the cliffhanger end-scenes as nothing more than an homage to television serials. However, that mixing of franchises clearly reveals the roots in comic book narrative structure.

[35] 2014's *Guardians of the Galaxy* references Thanos –a wildly powerful entity bent on gathering 5 magical Infinity Stones that can rewrite reality. Coupled with Marvel's recent announcement that 2018 and 2019 would see a 2-part epic Avengers movie entitled *Infinity War*, it is not hard to see Feige is still planting the seeds.

[36] Even odd asides, like *Guardian's of the Galaxy's* post-credit sequence which featured a lesser known character entitled Howard the Duck does some work–Easter egg for comic reading fans, something cute for children, and, potentially if improbably, setting up some future use of the duck.

author collective, or instigator" and instead unfolds of its own ongoing and increasing momentum (Mayer 186). Ruth Mayer, an American Studies scholar, applies this lesson of seriality fairly broadly, though she does touch on certain comic books; yet, her application seems very focused on the comic medium. The X-Men, the Avengers, Spider-Man, Batman, and nearly every culturally significant superhero to date has seen their stories penned by and their depictions rendered by innumerous writers and artists respectively. Their seriality is not the ongoing tales of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes nor J.K. Rowlings' Harry Potters stories. Superhero stories have accumulated seriality under the weight of their ongoing processes during which countless authors, editors, and creators contributed. Literature scholar, Ed Wiltse has built off pre-existing inquiries to the success of Doyle's Sherlock serials to conclude that "unique fan cultures seem to me precisely a function of ideologically complex seriality—their interconnectedness and independence, their particularity and endlessness, and above all their variability and their plenitude" (119). These adjectives not only adhere to serial magazine stories, they are foundational terms of the comic book. Superhero stories never-end, they interconnect constantly, and they offer a variety of genre mash-ups (i.e. variability) to be run through their own particular tropes. Superhero comic fans have long found pleasure in these concepts. And, this interconnectivity has also served to entrench their fandom against interlopers, like a gatekeeping device, because the superhero backstories are so woven together. But, now, in a much easier to process form without the weight of five decades of accumulated narrative baggage, they are migrating to film. The interconnectedness is obvious, the independence—that each individual hero's film stands on its own—is obvious, and increasingly the way that each of these films play to a different genre—*Ant-Man* (2015) is a heist film, *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) is space adventure, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) draws on the spy thriller, etc.—than the other is becoming more and more obvious. They are offering the interconnectivity and complexity that makes them subject to fan attachment without the decades of accrued weight that makes superhero comic books seem impenetrable.

As Marvel Studios becomes more adept at luring audiences with these pleasures of seriality, so too must they become more adept at utilizing the tools of the comic book narrative. Executive producer Jeremy Latcham acknowledges the innate tension of creating these post-credit scenes that are supposed to support the story, prime the next film, and hook readers, "Marketing-wise, people say, 'Oh, we can set up the next film!' And we go, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, we're gonna just have fun with it, you know?' (Eisenberg). Latcham admits it is a push and pull between marketing and creators, but also realizes despite the difficulty of getting the pitch-perfect closer, they can't just abandon the concept, "Everyone goes back to that first one on *Iron Man.* And it did so much world building. It kind of paved the way for this entire universe to kind of exist, and said, 'We're part of a big universe, you don't even know it yet.' And that was such a rallying cry for the whole idea of MCU" (Eisenberg). That rallying cry hasn't just resonated with fans;[37] it's shaken the industry as well. Christopher Nolan and Zachary Snyder, ostensibly the architects of DC publishing's burgeoning film universe, have both had to delicately deal with multiple fan questions regarding if they would or wouldn't rely on post-credits scenes.[38] And, Sony, holder of the Spider-Man film rights, has struck a deal to let Marvel Studios fold the character into their ongoing world largely because they acknowledge the narrative techniques of the studio may be better than their own.[39] Sony's willingness to share a film franchise that had grossed over $4 billion dollars across five films suggest there is a professional acknowledgement of Feige's success and, therefore, a real hunger for getting the entire story of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. That the films are inscribed with the serial narrative concepts of superhero comic books is likely what compels such hunger – Marvel films, like Marvel comic books, are not just followed by sequels, they share a horizon with the other films. Eagle-eyed fans noted Captain America's Shield in the teaser scene from *Iron Man* (2008); if one was a fan of

---

[37] Latcham notes that if the post-credit scenes are not followed up on, like *Thor: The Darkworld*'s (2013) giant rampaging monster, the studio is inundated with calls and criticisms.

[38] Their dilemma is particularly interesting. Nolan is considered a modern-day auteur—a label that runs counter to some of the seriality, Whedon's influence aside, bubbling up in Marvel's films.

[39] Simply put, Sony Pictures President "Doug Belgrad wanted a Marvel-produced Spider-Man movie…" (BBC).

that character (or any character for that matter), it was evident that each film *might* speak to another film (already out or forthcoming). In this manner, fans were invited to see every film, not only to keep abreast of the wider plot, but also to better understand the characters or track their particular favorite as they interacted with a host of others.

In the adaptation to film, there are these clearly identified markers that contribute to the success of the movies – the widespread recognizability of the characters, the bombast of their blockbuster format, and, as outlined above, their reliance on a long-tested narrative maneuver. Via these markers, Marvel films may be borrowing ingrained comic book narratives and seriality to great effect, but the superhero comic book industry seems to be mirroring filmic techniques, as well. The past decade has seen superhero comics become preoccupied with formats that mimic the widescreen accessibility of blockbuster films as well as adopt the seasonal model of television shows—a narrative concept that suggests to the reader no matter how involved the canon is, every 10-12 issues will introduce a new arc or primary story, thus keeping comics invested in complex stories but also consistently granting entry points to new or lapsed readers. More than the reshaping of comic characters to better resemble their filmic counterparts or amping up certain plots to more cohere with wider-seen film or television plots, these changes represent superhero comics excising its traditional narrative structure—a comic page littered with panels that separate time, action, locale and more that is navigated by the reader's eye—in favor of one that is more akin to film's steady, pre-ordained, unable-to-be-altered-by-the-viewer stream of images. Film, being a broader and more popular medium than comic books, thus has a 'reading' style more audiences are practiced in.

This change is most manifestly visible in Marvel Comic's preoccupation with the concept of comic series as seasonal. When asked about the rash of ongoing superhero series that only go, at best, a few dozen issues before renumbering back at number #1, Marvel EIC, Axel Alonso, responded by

acknowledging series like Hulk are dealing with new problems that warrant the restructuring of the narrative:

> [Hulk faces] a significant, life-changing event that sets in motion a new *season*. With *Hulk* #1, you're going to meet a Bruce Banner you've never encountered before. When Bruce gets shot in the head at the conclusion of *Indestructible Hulk* it jumpstarts a whodunit murder mystery and introduces a new era in the Hulk history. Not only will Banner change dramatically; Hulk will, too. The adjective "indestructible," well, it's not exactly appropriate anymore. Last **season**, we focused on Banner's attempt manipulate and control Hulk's action. This **season**, well, without giving too much away, let's just say the tables might turn" (Ching,"Axel," emphasis mine).

Alonso speaks of the series in terms of seasons, acknowledging a break in the narrative that creates an opening for new readers to get in. Often in the past, superhero comic book series retained numerical sequencing throughout their history regardless of plot complications or new creative teams. As a brief example, *Avengers* (Vol 1) ran from issues 1 to 402 (September 1963 – September 1996). Since then, it has seen four volumes with none of them breaking the 50-issue mark before renumbering.[40] The company has struggled in trying to maintain its tradition of long running series with also making the product new-reader friendly. Most of their attempts have been confusing: new #1 issues beg the question of what came before and high numbers make new readers feel as if they are missing out on the bigger story.

Before outright copping to approaching their comic series as seasonal models, they would number comics as, say #25.1, an indication that issue #25 could serve well as a jumping on point (like a new series' #1 issue). In an interview with news outlet *Comic Book Resources*, Alonso admitted, however, the publishing side would be moving forward with simply thinking of each volume of an ongoing series as a season of a long-running television show:

> Comic books are part of the spectrum of pop culture, and we'd be foolish not to take note of the different ways that people are absorbing stories right now. With so many TV shows structured and, indeed, packaged as "seasons," and so many of us "binge-viewing," comics publishers

---

[40] It should be noted that often times when the culmination of a series' issues, regardless of volume, total a significant number, Marvel and DC often use the larger number before returning to the regular numbering. A current example would be James Robinson and Lee Kirk's current *Fantastic Four* (Vol 4. 2013-2015) which started with an issue 1 but now, only 14 issues in, is being marketed as the 640th issue of the series.

would be foolish not to take note, and see if any of these trends – if they are, indeed, just trends -- apply to our medium. So, yeah, we're experimenting. If a new creative team or new story line represents a clean enough break that it could be viewed as a new "season" in a series, putting a big #1 on the cover is one way to announce that . . . In a world of where characters created on the comic book page pop up on the silver screen, in video games, on TV, we're always looking to drive people to the comic books where it all began. And for the layperson, seeing "Daredevil" #1 on the shelf is a lot friendlier than, say, "Daredevil" #34. Apologies to fans whose long boxes sport a few more cardboard dividers . . . (Ching, "Welcoming").

Aside from stating the obvious—that a #1 on a book is more appealing to new readers than a #34—, Alonso is admitting Marvel is restructuring their serial nature. Not stopping the unique-to-comic's never-ending accumulation of a superhero narrative but breaking it up into smaller, bite-sized chunks that tell a definitive story with a beginning and an ending. And, in so doing, creating more points for readers to jump in (or, of course, jump off). The most overt representation of this reconfigured model is Marvel's *Season One* graphic novels, a series of 18 hardcovers that tell the early tales of their most popular properties and positions the term 'season' right in the branding. Alonso goes on to note that he believes a seasonal model serves the story first, which he argues is the only thing of importance, but it should be acknowledged it may serve the creators as well. Established Marvel writers like Brian Bendis, Matt Fraction, and Kelly Sue Deconnick have all dabbled in or outright signed development deals with television studios to aid in writing and developing their own, non-Marvel properties in recent years. DC has seen some of their comic book writers like Andrew Kreisberg and Marc Guggenheim make the transition to their television properties, as well.

This industry-wide progression towards borrowing the narrative schema of the television format can be seen as a maturation of superhero comics 15-year dalliance with 'writing for the trade'—a trade paperback being a collection of a single 'season' or story arc of a series (and, Alonso might suggest a way for the savvy reader to 'binge-watch' Marvel comics). As superhero comic sales have stagnated or diminished, publishers have increasingly made up profits by selling story arcs as these attractively formatted trade paperbacks or hardcovers. While such moves have made it possible for comics to move

into the bookstores,[41] they've also enabled and encouraged a shift from thinking of comics as long,

never-ending sagas (the kind that could see a series grow to 400 or more issues) towards 6-issue stories

that might sell well on the backend instead. The format has been criticized in many superhero fan

corners for giving rise to the technique of 'decompressed storytelling'. This is a form of narration that

lengthens the traditional plots of superhero stories, or, according to more cynical fans, it is a storytelling

process meant to bleed page count and give the reader in 6 issues what used to be done in 12 panels

(McFad).[42] Decompressed storytelling is modeled after manga (a form of Japanese comic books). Fans of

the style argue it allows more character depth and nuanced narratives by not concerning itself with

overt action; detractors of its use in superhero stories argue it diminishes the action inherent in

superhero tales (Carl). It is not a stretch to suggest the popularity of manga, amongst readers and

creators, also led to American superhero comic publishers to gravitate towards decompressed

storytelling. Regardless of its specific origin, decompressed storytelling is a move towards offering more

manageable trade paperbacks which are not unlike Alonso's seasonal model—they tell a complete story

yet link the character to a broader, ongoing narrative, and, because of this linking, trade paperbacks may

be followed up by other sequential narratives (like a new season).

The television model aside, the process is not dissimilar from an ongoing movie franchise;

stories are told and completed within a smaller, more precise format. The stories told are stretched out,

given more room for character beats and the traditional moves of 3-Act structures. Gone, then, are the

tropes of the comic serial like b-characters and plots that won't unfold for dozens of issues. In are

---

[41] Though again here evidence suggests the superhero books mean little without the films, "*"It's easy to assume from this that Marvel's growth in bookstores has largely hit a brick wall -- but then, you could come to the same conclusion simply by visiting a Barnes & Noble graphic-novel section, where the shelf space allotted to Marvel books has at best held steady and at worst actually lost precious space. (One bookstore manager described Marvel's sales at her location for me as "okay when there was a movie out, but otherwise negligible)"* (Tolowosky).

[42] A sample complaint - "Amazingly, at a time when new comic titles are lucky to survive beyond 12 issues, we are seeing comics where an entire month is devoted to the protagonist talking to his girlfriend. Most of us have had relationships that didn't last that long. It is only a matter of time before we will see a superhero title get cancelled before the hero even makes his first appearance in costume. Imagine "Superman" getting the axe just before the rocket lands in Smallville" (McFad).

widescreen comics, comics with larger and wider panels purposefully meant to mimic the dimensions of a movie theatre that simultaneously allow for more nuanced works from the art team but also add to the decompressed nature of comics by offering fewer panels per issue. As one disgruntled ex-Marvel EIC, Jim Shooter, notes of Marvel's Ultimate Comics Spider-Man, a series written by Brian Bendis, the author most often tied to decompressed stories, " This thing is the decompression gold medal winner. Three pages to get the kid accepted at a high school by random drawing? Which has precious little bearing on whatever the Hell is going on? Three? Of 21? Really?" ("Ultimate"). Shooter here is speaking to decompressed stories stretching out of narrative content. In the first 36 issues of Brian Bendis's *Ultimate Spider-Man*, young Peter Parker goes through his famous "With Great Power Must also Come Great Responsibility" origin story. What took only part of an issue to accomplish in *Amazing Fantasy #15* (1962) takes up the bulk of 6 issues (i.e. the first collected trade paperback) of the Ultimate comic run. In Spider-Man's original run he encounters all of his formative foes over the course of his first dozen issues; and, each one of those stories is a self-contained story that not only sees Spider-Man find a way to overcome his foe, but also for Peter Parker to grow into the acclaimed fictional character he is. Conversely, while Bendis's *Ultimate Spider-Man* run is also acclaimed for its depth and contemporary update to the Spider-Man mythos, over the course of those first 36 issues, Spider-Man confronts roughly the same amount of villains as the original run introduced in only a 3rd of the time. Furthermore, instead of dealing with one-and-done stories (that is comics that told a complete tale in a single issue) like *Amazing Spider-Man #3,* which gave the origin of and first confrontation with Doctor Octopus, the decompressed version introduced the villain over the course of 8 issues (*Ultimate Spider-Man* #14-21). Regardless, if fans prefer one version to the other, there has been a very significant and real change to the narrative structure of comics, and that evolution is becoming more and more synchronous with a seasonal, made-for-the-trade model.

In short, the comic book influence is inherent to the adapted films—after all they are playing with characters, plots, and arcs that are culled from decades of published material. Thor's home of Asgard is not solely a creation of a film team's visual effects artists, it is inspired by the fantastical world created by Jack Kirby in the '60s—Asgard and the Rainbow Bridge are dazzling, colorful worlds adapted from the pages of *Tales to Astonish.* That the X-Men have to joke about how unpractical it would be to wear spandex is a direct, 4th wall-breaking acknowledgement of how the film has had to adapt the comic page. Heroes come in four bright colors. Villains like purple or green. And, so forth. The films, simply by nature of adaptation, are indebted to the superhero comic book. Closer scrutiny reveals they've also begun to skillfully utilize the narrative and serial tropes of the superhero comic book to great effect. However, recent narrative shifts and reconfigurations suggest that comics are packaging and designing their outputs under an increasingly evident filmic influence. While the individual issue as a concept isn't lost per se, trade paperbacks, the discourse of comic series as seasons, and the reader-friendly configuration of fewer, larger panels suggest that superhero comic books envy the immediate and accessible nature of film. Alonso himself even concedes that when new seasons of comics hit, "we hope the amazing cover art and the big #1 on the cover provide a big welcome mat for readers who know [the character] and those who don't" (Ching, "Welcoming"). A sentiment not unlike the hope that Marvel's big, summer tentpole films reach out and grab people who may otherwise ignore superheroes as a genre.

THE EFFECTS OF A FILMIC SUPERHERO COMIC

While the mimicking of the filmic narrative concepts addressed above obviously affects the practice of reading comics, recent technological shifts may be even more dramatic. The way that audiences consume, and thus engage with, superheroes as they are depicted on film is markedly different than the work of reading them in a comic book. As people increasingly engage with them in a sustained fashion in their filmic form instead of their comic form and as the comic industry continues to

explore the digital comic book space, it is worthwhile investigating how this more filmic mode of engagement might affect the construction of future superhero narratives, and consequently, its fans. This section lays out how the digital changes in comic books most clearly represent the shifting modes— away from comic book's user-control towards films' medium-control of narrative consumption. Such a move may threaten the future formation of superhero fans who've long shared a visual language derived from the mechanisms of comic books as well as serious time-investment in a medium that is diminishing those aspects. To unfold the difference in engagement between film and comic, there is no better starting point than Scott Bukatman's 2012 book, *Poetics of Slumberland*. Using his work as a springboard, a through-line regarding how comics engage readers can be established; this, in-turn, informs what is lost in the adaptation from the comic page to the screen, and, most importantly, how film's style of engagement is influencing contemporary superhero comics and leading to the loss of shared visual language and reading processes that, I contend, have been integral to formation of the superhero fandom to-date.

The final chapter of Bukatman's book can be read as something of a love letter to comic books. Hinging much of the chapter on the most lauded and ambitious comic creators (like Grant Morrison), Bukatman argues the superhero comic book genre carries with it much of the energy and fantastical, plasmatic possibility that imbues the best of the comic strip and cartoon form. This is Bukatman borrowing from Eisenstein to praise those media characters that "represent a freedom from "once and forever allotted form" and mediums that "can themselves be considered disobedient in relation to other media such as the chronophotographic sequence and the live-action film" (Bukatman 118).[43] Bukatman here is praising mediums that can surprise audiences by nature of their mutability; he marvels at the ability of the comic book medium to make illustrations of superheroes both vibrant, kinetic, but also

---

[43] Chronophotographic sequencing being a more specific and nuanced term than my medium-controlled allotment of plot, but amounting to the same notion—the user is subjected to a predetermined course of imagery.

deeply personal. He points to how the most prolific scholars of comic books intertwine their autobiographical selves in with their scholarship:

> David Carrier's *Aesthetic of Comics* features a charming kid on the cover absorbed in a comic book; it's a picture of Carrier in earlier days. Will Brooker's dissertation on Batman is partly a saga about writing a dissertation on Batman. Henry Jenkins has discussed the death of his mother in his world of comic reading. And my own writing on superheroes remains heavily invested (*over*invested they tell me) in an autobiographical questing—discovering new territory, taking flight, moving (if not moving on) (4649).

The personal is intertwined with the comic and Bukatman says the deep reader of comics feels a "phenomenology of escape" – a feeling of being invested in the infinite that is hard to reproduce. Thus, and not surprisingly, while Bukatman's conflation of cartoon and comic characters (and mediums) works well, his argument, one which stresses how the infinite possibilities of movement and physics in these mediums engage an audience uniquely, it also frets the increasing viability of the superhero genre in other mediums.

In short, Bukatman revels in superheroes as comic book characters while condemning the films that give these heroes actual motion; he asks, "What of the superhero film? One can see them occupying the intersection of comics and cartoons—they do, after all, depend to a large extent on CG animated bodies to replicate the bodies in the comics. And yet the superhero film feels, for the most part, like something less than the sum of its parts (4660). " Bukatman acknowledges that superhero films may not have yet found their voice (alluding to the length of time it took musicals to produce meaningfully—for Bukatman this is the genre's "ineffable lightness"—on the screen (4722). Yet, as he continues to express his dissatisfaction with the superhero film, he starts to articulate a loss of *something*. What Bukatman seems to be driving at with his criticism is the split between the frantic bodies moving across superhero films and their psychological meaning for viewers; he finds the films pleasurable in so much as that is all they offer—pleasure derived solely from the "vertiginous kineticism" of action sequences (4705). There is nothing else, nothing "at stake" Bukatman claims (4705). In a sense, Bukatman finds the motion of superheroes on film lacking because they so rarely can

be considered a real body that carries with it any real consequences.[44] He borrows Roger Ebert's words regarding *Spider-Man 2* (2002) to sum up his critique of the genre, "Not even during Spidey's first experimental outings do we feel that flesh and blood are contending with gravity. Spidey soars too quickly through the skies of Manhattan; he's as convincing as Mighty Mouse" (4722). Bukatman is disenchanted with the current state of the superhero film because instead of offering a *passage* between states of being via movement, it only offers a rupture—our enjoyment of the breathtaking fight scene between the filmic Doc Ock and Spider-Man and the inescapable realization of its unreality inherent in CGI's "vaguely rubberoid action" that signifies the distance between a real body and what passes for one on the screen. They are bodies in movement without actual bodies, and thus, audiences are not swept into sharing said movement with the heroes.[45]

In a certain fashion, Bukatman is presenting a monolithic concept of spectatorship that means no one could possibly be swept up in the CGI body as it mimics a real one. However, I think it is best to contextualize his dissatisfaction in comparison to the superhero comic. Bukatman is noting, I contend, the loss of play comics generate by inviting, or demanding, a reader take on a shared space with the book's characters. This process comes from the comic book's panel-by-panel construction:

Figure 1.3 Panel as Action, Time, & Space (Romita, *Amazing Spider-Man* #88, 1970)

[44] Bukatman contends in this chapter, the inherent 'plasmatic possibility' of comics is not having to encounter that dissonance as forcefully as you might in a film.
[45] Lev Manovich's "Image Future" suggests each film will attempt to outdo its predecessor, so it is likely Bukatman will always encounter non-real bodies in cinema. However, Manovich also notes CGI isn't meant to allow plasmatic possibility; it is meant to reconstruct reality, "In 3-D computer-generated worlds, everything is discrete" (39). It is designed with usability and reproduction in mind, and, time permitting it might be worthwhile to compare the industrial means of making—comics and films—against the modes of consumption more fully and theoretically.

Note how in figure 1.3 the panels serve both to contain static images that depict action, which readers must interpret with the help of the narrative and art, but they are also sequenced so as to provide a forward motion to the story both spatially and temporally. Yet, the work of making meaning both within panels and between them is left to the reader. This is not to say there isn't a formula—top to bottom, left to right—or that the creators want to obfuscate the process, just that the act of giving life to the visual medium is done inside the consumer as opposed to an external process (a la film) or purely speculative one (a la the novel). Scott McCloud, author of the best-regarded text on understanding the basic principles of the medium, describes the process thusly: "Comic panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure [the style of comics to show a part of an action that is perceived as a whole action] allow **us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality**" (McCloud 67, emphasis mine). In short, comic books may signal the reader as to how things connect, but the reader must do that connecting to make the medium work. While it is not unlike reading, the use of white space, framing of visuals, and words themselves allow for pages to be read in myriad ways—especially considering the lapse of time between one panel to the next is never the same necessarily.

In a superhero comic, then, filling in the action of the hero places effort on the reader's real body and asks them to engage with what passes for one on the page. For Bukatman, comics' strength comes from the unique elements of play derived from this stepping-in, of sorts. Bukatman leans heavily on Roger Callois and Johann Huizinga in situating comics, and the enjoyment derived from them, as play:

> I would argue, however, that superhero comics connect most strongly to Caillois's play category of *mimicry.* There is a strong element of role-playing in the world of superheroes – who among us has not tied a towel around the neck to serve as an ersatz cape? *Reading superheroes is a form of playing superheroes . . . Most urgently, it involves acts of fantasy that may be knowing set against what is sometimes called 'real life'* (4414, emphasis mine).

That passage denied by superhero films, then? It is the passage towards becoming the hero, to role-play as it were. For Bukatman, the inherent implied motion of comics, those moments readers fill in with

imagination what happens between the panels is removed in the film. Instead, the movement is foregrounded, and the characters performing these movements so blatantly unrealistic that the only pleasure remaining is one that revels in the spectacle of the cinematic might, and that is not play.[46] The superhero film does not offer play via escapism or make-believe because "by removing the body from space, [the superhero film] removes meaning – lived meaning – from the body." In short, one simply cannot become embodied in the filmic representation of superheroes like they can in the comic version because one is not as readily invited to partake in a character's movements as they are in comics. And, this distinction of 'in comics' is important; Bukatman is, after all, a self-professed superhero comic fan himself, and his readings of the films cannot help but focus on how they measure against superhero comic books. I'm analyzing these films from a similar stance, and it is worth noting then the films, on their own merits might allow for a form of escapism. However, the key takeaway is how emphatically different these heroes and the mode of consuming them feels to the consumer who regularly experiences both mediums.

Bukatman is primarily concerned with this loss of embodied play via role-play, but his work dances around another passage denied that needs addressing—pleasure from disorder. Throughout *Poetics,* Bukatman positions animation and its ilk as unordered chaos; he finds the best animation's ability to be free of any predetermined order exhilarating for its viewer, and although he discusses his issues with the bodies on superhero films, he never makes the final connection. **That is that the superhero film orders what in the superhero comic is unordered**. The dazzling array of possibilities of looking inherent to the comic book page is traded for the chronological, predetermined and unavoidable sequencing of film; the comic book page possesses a past, present, and future given to its reader all-at-

---

[46] Bukatman seems to be drawing the difference in types of enjoyment as role-play with comics versus the type of awe filmic spectacle can induce. In short, he's referencing Eisenstein - **Eisenstein, Sergei.** "Montage of Film Attractions" *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory.* London: Harcourt (1969). He also positing a certain form of spectatorial gaze that all viewers engage in; while he doesn't gender it, he takes for granted the dynamic motion of the superhero genre film is a predominant experience of the films' spectators.

once in a form the film cannot because of its chronophotographic sequencing **.** This difference in how motion and movement operate from page to screen suggests to me the loss of another type of Callois' play – *ilinx*, or play that seeks vertigo and temporary destruction of stable perceptions (138). So much of Bukatman's investment in comics is based on the medium's ability to excite or induce a measure of role-play, but it arguably produces a disruption of perception just as often, and in the same ways. The comic medium works because of implied motion and reader-created movement-a la the user-led panel-to-panel construction McCloud references. As anyone who's read a number of comics, or sampled McCloud's seminal *Understanding Comics*, can tell you, the image splashed across a single panel of a comic only seems static. At a glance, it is; it holds no motion, it doesn't change, and it always has a gap between itself and the panels preceding and succeeding it. Yet, motion is constantly implied in the reading. Both in the work of moving the characters along, but also in the all-at-once visual treat of each page—a smorgasbord of past, present and future represented in each panel that is laid before the audience before they resume reading in the 'right' order.

Spider-Man is a classic example. In most comics featuring him, audiences are treated to him travelling via web slinging. His body is never in actual motion, but it is always implied. His hands grip the webbing, his body is tensed for 'flight,' and the following panels often reveal that Spider-Man has arrived at some destination. He has moved. How powerful is this implied motion to the comic genre? Well, arguably it is the most important element since animated (including live-action versions) superheroes are constantly foregrounding the implied motion of the comics; it has captured the imagination so much, it dictates what directors and animators must do to successfully reference the appeal of the character. Both the films and the animated versions of Spider-Man foreground this simply implied act in the comic. It is not sufficient for the animated version of Spider-Man to simply arrive somewhere via a cut, we must see the iconic web slinging in action. An immediate counter-argument might be to suggest this is solely a difference between the filmic and the comic, but it goes further than

that. 2012's *The Amazing Spider-Man* had an elaborate first-person POV shot for early web swinging to foreground it; the late '90s cartoon (Fox Studios 94-97) used CGI backgrounds just to better capture a sense of swinging through New York skyscrapers (Cawley). In short, the filmic emphasizes movement the reader brings to life in the comic book version.

But, why such emphasis on motion? The preponderance of weight put upon Spider-Man's web slinging might suggest Callois' *mimicry.* Animators and fans are enamored with the concept of swinging because the comic book, again without actual motion, imparted that sensation so fully, it became desirable. Bukatman might note that only in the comics could this impossible mode of transportation become embodied and, thus, sought after. [47] Therefore, it is only natural for those who adapt superhero comic book material attempt to capture this very ingrained, quintessential aspect of the comic book medium and superhero genre. The film tries to make the implied felt. The ilinx, the sense of vertiginous play, and the mimicry, the role-play, collude in the comic book to engage the reader. Perhaps, more succinctly, they are one-and-the-same; the reader takes on the implied movement of heroes by navigating the vertiginous reading of comic book layouts, thereby engaging in mimicry through motion. The film may allow for enjoyment of illinx as it pertains to vertiginous action scenes, but the reading is always preordained, sequenced, and given to the viewer in a single format; the superhero film viewer never gets to experience the act of putting together like the comic book reader does, and thus that particular avenue to mimicking the hero is closed.

Of course, only applying vertiginous play to implied motion as above undersells what ilinx in comic books truly covers. Angela Ndalianis notes in "The Frenzy of the Visible in Comic Book Worlds," comic books are not static; they simply rely on a different method than the persistence of illusion regarding the movement of lines (Ndalianis 239). Instead, the motion of comic books is given by the audience itself and its willingness, or inability not to, link sequential images together to form a

---

[47] Embodied in the movement of the reader's eyes and physical turning of the page.

narrative.[48] Ndalianis is expanding on McCloud's fourth chapter, entitled "Time Frames." McCloud

argues that in comic books time is spatialized. The audience is trained when reading a comic book to see

time as moving along an axis. Whether it is from panel to panel, or even in a panel itself, too much

happens on the page of the comic for readers to accept the static image as just capturing a single

moment (94-105). The reader is complicit in advancing time by moving his eyes along the page and

continuing the reading. Motion in comics, then, isn't as much implied as it is created by the reader.

Therefore, while it isn't motion given by the persistence of illusion a la animation, motion does exist in

comics in an *embodied* sense of the word—all the reader's motions in the act of reading help give

motion to the medium. Ndalianis wrangles these concepts of motion together by concluding that comics

are places where "frenzied and chaotic activity . . . [play out] through spaces riddled with

contradictions" (247).

Martin Pedler and Paul Atkinson push the boundaries of ilinx as a fundamental concept of

comics in an even more pronounced manner, and their work on motion in comics only strengthens

ilinx's shared tie to mimicry. Atkinson establishes motion in comics as being more than just implied or

sequential:

> … still images in animation require greater detail, formal beauty or complexity to fascinate the
> eye. There must be internal movement that allows for the continued progression of time . . . The
> act of reading a comic book is not simply a means of joining together the panels in a sequence. It
> has its own accelerations and decelerations relative to the graphic qualities of the drawn image .
> . . These movements underpin the animated image but [t]here they are overwhelmed by the
> dynamism of the moving figure (278-79).

Atkinson implies the comic book image, in its quasi-static condition, is subject to more intense scrutiny

than a moving image because it always available in a single, unmoving form, and thus it must be capable

of doing more than the fleeting, camera-caught imagery of film. The animated, or filmic, is almost

---

[48] Obviously, this motion is also generated by the design, layout, and disruptions of gutters and panels; thus, it is
also a crafted motion, but it needs the reader to motivate it.

always moving or seeming to move.[49] Its motion pulls the viewers along, not the images themselves. Thus, by design, staging, and composition, the comic book panel must produce in the reader a desire to make the images move; the reader is the engine of visual construction and display in the comic book; the projector or screen is the same for a film. This implies another loss in the adaptation of comic to screen. The power of the panel, and the sense of motion it creates, is lost because in the filmic, motion seduces the eye by supplying motion. In suggesting that comics can and should create motion not only in the implied motion between panels but within the panel itself, Atkinson is highlighting another point of entry for play and embodiment that the film, by its very nature, cannot replicate.[50]

If Atkinson argues for comics as having motion in their smallest, most contained moments, Martin Pedler seeks to encapsulate the very notion of the comic book as one of constant motion. Films, he reminds us, present their viewer linear time, even in the most mind-bending, non-narratively-chronological films, because the action only unfolds in one particular way every time and the user cannot, without great interference, alter that sequence of viewing. Everything the viewer experiences is designed to unfold a certain way—it is chopped up and presented via editing.[51] The comic book audience, however, takes in the "now, past and future at once," thanks to panel and page layouts (259). When a reader turns a page, he/she may well know where their eyes are supposed to fall next, but due to the omnipresence of time presented in a page that holds multiple panels at once, he/she is almost beckoned to look ahead. Eyes are inevitably drawn to the flashiest images, future images that've yet to happen, or allowed to linger on the splash page, effectively slowing down time to consume the visual before the narrative. Additionally, Pedler speaks to the very structure itself, addressing films' reluctance

---

[49] Given that I need to move on from this point, I do not have the space available to discuss the static comic image against certain avant garde films or uses of cell animation; however, such a comparison might be useful because they would open up a discussion of how our interaction with the image fluctuates based on general assumptions of how it performs as opposed to just discussing the power of the static image itself.

[50] It is worth noting, at least as a brief aside, this is not to lay low the filmic; it is just an attempt to understand how these two visual mediums engage their users differently.

[51] A comic book is too. But, the necessary input of the reader means design can be ignored, mistaken, or misused.

or inability to easily replicate the lightning bolts, speed lines, and other unique aspects that so often serve as borders for panels of a comic. Nor, does film as often allow for a treatment of the medium itself to serve as a narrative device a la comic book character's breaking of the 4th-wall as readily as the comic does.

Figure 1.4 The Fourth Wall (Bolland, *Animal Man* Vol 1. #5, 1988)

Pedler paints the very structure of comics, their innately playful relationships to time and narrative, their use of borders as storytelling agents as vertiginous concepts of play that are not easily replicated in a medium, like film, with a steadfast attachment to a single method of engagement—watch a screen and see what happens.[52]

What then is arguably lost in the translation from comic page to silver screen? Ilinx. Film cannot replicate the page of a comic book; it cannot give us now, past and present all at once or at least it cannot do so within the expected confines of its normal presentational style. Segues from scene to scene cannot disrupt our perceptions in the same way comic panels can because such segues are given to us directly without the option of us roaming our thoughts and senses elsewhere. The filmic doesn't typically imply motion and story through a single, static panel. Nor does its typical foregrounding of superheroic action and motion ever produce the same embodied effect of implied motion that the comic medium has. Because the reader actively controls time, motion, and creates the links between panels and pages, the reader becomes embodied and capable of experiencing mimicry born of

---

[52] Again, it is not narrative that is linear and absolute in film. *Memento* (2000) doesn't have a linear story, for example, but it progresses linearly as a visual model because it can only ever progress one way—a set of moving images ordered in an unassail sequence by someone other than the viewer.

vertiginous play, in the reading of comic books. Even if the reader doesn't want to be Wonder Woman, the act of reading forces one to make her motive and understood during the reading process and throughout the duration of her time on the page. These things cannot be replicated easily in commercial film because film largely lacks the ability to induce roleplay via movement. [53]

And that loss is worrisome for comics because, as Marvel and DC continue to layout their new comics and plans, the increasing influence of films on comics becomes clear. In Matthew McAllister's article "Blockbuster Meets Superhero Comics, or Art House Meets Graphic Novels," the scholar tries to anticipate how the two industries may affect each other. While he never settles on anything concrete, he does offer a warning, "As film adaptations become a more institutionalized part of graphic novels and other alternative comic productions, one wonders if Hollywood's flirtation could also bring unfortunate lessons about the dangers of seduction" (114). Some fans would immediately cry truth and be righteously angry about it. And, while the obvious narrative synchronization occurs, like the sudden push of a Guardians of the Galaxy comic series to coincide with the release the film or the recent reshuffling of the Avenger's roster in the comic books to better cohere to the team represented in the popular blockbuster film, McAllister's warning seems more prophetic regarding the potential loss of that unique hybrid of illinx-to-mimicry play so inherent in the superhero comic book. What seems most disconcerting is not necessarily that comics have begun to imitate some of the narrative tricks of Hollywood films as chronicled earlier, but that in so doing they've begun an evolution towards offering their readers a form of engagement that is more akin to the chronophotographic model of film than the user-controlled illinx-to-mimicry play of comic books. Of course, modes of engagement with film are varied and full of their own unique pleasures. But, no mainstream films mirror the comic books' mode,

---

[53] I've traced a particular lineage of thought from comics to film, one with a more theoretical bent or focus on the medium itself. McAllister's work traces another, one focused on the industry and narrative influence of comics on the film. Marino Tuzi traces an ethical branch that reads characters as representative of contemporary societal issues now being revealed to a larger audience with the release of the movies. In short, there are other approaches; though again, they are determined to proceed from the comic to the film. (See bibliography for citations) Those are worthwhile reads, but don't address how comics, as an object, are adjusting to the times.

thus in adaptation that engagement is invariably lost. As superheroes increasingly become characters of the filmic, as they are encountered increasingly more often in that medium than the comic book, the illinx-leading-to-mimicry process becomes the secondary mechanism for superhero consumption. As this is not a competition, agonizing over this shift is not my concern. What is my concern, however, is noting that it's not just the narrative trends these mediums share, but that filmic, chronophotographic sequencing and delivery of the story is also taking hold of comic books.

The foremost example of this is in digital comics—comic books that exist as computer files meant to be read in browsers or by certain applications. Digital comics offer high-resolution images of comic books but exist only as computer files; they have no corporeality and they are read on the screen of an electronic screening device (tablet, phone, computer, etc.). While the issue of corporeality is an important one, what is particularly relevant here is how amenable the digital comic form is to removing the traditional form of comic book engagement I've detailed for the chronophotographic experience of viewing a film. In an excellent chronology on the digitization of Marvel Comics, "Digital Comics, Circulation, and the Importance of Being Eric Sluis," Darren Wershler discovers that the process of increasing comic's circulation, by going digital, has had some interesting consequences on the reading of the comics in line with my thoughts. First he details a bit more specifically how the platform works:

> [digital comics] "offer a 'guided view' that keeps the entire page of a comic intact…Nevertheless, readers never see the "entire page," which exists only as an organizational concept. On the iPhone, the program window and the screen edge are coterminous, and, unlike Marvel's digital subscriptions, the app has no page-view function, so the "page" is entirely notional and the frame is the major unit. Rotating the device changes frame orientation from portrait to landscape, which sometimes is an improvement but just as often leads to inadvertent cropping. The only time the reader ever encounters anything like the page is in full-page panels, where it becomes very small, or when tapping the top of the screen to jump to another "page," which is more like fast-forwarding to another set of panels than turning to a new page. Because of the tight framing, though, the panning motion across individual frames can be very effective, mostly for conveying motion through space. It can also be used to convey dramatically different emotions in different sections of large panels to great effect" (133).

While Wershler ultimately focuses on the circulation aspects of digital comics, he highlights an important issue—digital comics do not read the same as comic books. This difference is rooted in the

fact that the page, for a digital comic, is notional. As it operates on a screen, there is no real page which

has long been an evident and thus useful narrative divide for comic books. Moreover, the experience of

using it is different since the "frame" (or panel) becomes the "major unit" – in short, the reading of a

digital comic is best suited to maximizing a frame by frame exploration of a comic than a page by page

mechanism.[54] Comixology, far and away the leader in digital comics and the technology Wershler

mentions above, now offers a full-page view, but it is a) an option that the system settings do not

default to (thus assuming most readers prefer a frame by frame reading) and b) it doesn't operate like a

comic book because it only shows a single page thereby limiting the opportunity to explore visuals that

might have caught your eye in the normal 2-page spread of a print comic book. Instead, guided view

reading takes the reader from panel to panel, even within the panel from dialogue bubble to dialogue

bubble; the comic reads in a pre-ordained order, only shows you the scene that is sequenced to be seen

next, and in many ways operates like the chronophotographic film.

This obviously upends the traditional way of experiencing a comic book, even casually let alone

rupturing the mechanism of engagement I've laid out in this chapter. It blatantly opposes some aspects

of the "specific, complicated, and often joyously impossible" visual vocabulary Pedler speaks of (262).

No longer is the "'the drive of the visual succession" there to tempt the reader with future panels

(Atkinson, "Time," 54). In short, the reader is no longer bombarded with the easy freedom of controlling

time as they are in the comic book. This is not necessarily a bad thing—none of this is meant to infer

badness or wrong ways of reading a comic. Some might even argue that it is positive: it does heighten

the amount of time the reader spends with a given panel, and thus the motion of the pending action, as

the panel is not a static now but both a now and an aftermath, is highlighted. Atkinson would also likely

acknowledge this emphasis on the panel highlights his belief that "the importance of the line to the

---

[54] As mentioned earlier, frame by frame is the default. However, there is a level of reader option here. One can choose to read the material page by page. And, while this option speaks to the broader user-controlled interaction with comics in general, it still stymies the casual page turning or looking ahead the comic book can invite. Additionally, due to the constraints of a given screen, it occasionally cuts and refigures the page slightly for best fit.

general movement of the comic book is not dependent on the narrative action" (272) since it is no longer visually connected to a preceding or succeeding panel—it simply is.

However, in all other aspects, the unique interplay of ilinx and mimicry at play in the comics is mitigated by the predominant method of reading a digital comic book. Embodiment is tamped down because the reader no longer has the casual luxury to survey everything all-at-once; instead they digest the story as it is fed to them panel by panel. As stressed earlier, mimicry is also lost as it is established most readily via embodied movement. But, even without being able to explore the vertiginous and dynamic panel transitions and borders that would seem so central to one aspect of ilinx, motion is still not realized in digital comics as it is in film. Though the narrative structure of the guided view reduces one of the comic medium's unique elements, that of a designed layout and the reader's constant interaction with it, it still depicts the same exact panels as the books—Spider-Man is still not actually swinging. The reader still must imagine that motion and fill it in, however that filling in is now done by the swipe of a finger to summon the next preordained panel instead of the perusal of the eye over the comic page. It would be worth further pursuing how those movements (eye vs. finger) affect relationship with comics, but as I contend here the latter, because it serves essentially as the play button on a DVD remote, only summons pictures instead of creating what McCloud calls "continuous, unified reality" (67). The reader doesn't navigate and connect the material, using the "gutter" to signify breaks, in a manner that lends itself to construction. Construction is supplanted by reception—image by image—and the reader is robbed of the all-together-at-once view of juxtaposed images that form a sequence in traditional comic book art.

In some ways, the comic book mechanism I've described here can be seen as flirting with Barthes' notion of the ideal text. It is a text that "extends as far as the eye can reach" (5); but, of course, it still is meant to be read linearly—it begins and it ends. It also shares many concepts of the writerly text primarily in its foisting upon the reader the active work of constructing meaning. The digital comic's

guided view firmly wrests that control back to the author (and, interestingly away from the artist, perhaps, since many consumers are now only consuming their product as a single frame instead of a series of sequentialized panels meant to be navigated by the eye). It produces a readerly text that is predetermined and positions the reader to receive the story in a manner that avoids a lot of the potential incursions they could otherwise make in a traditional comic book form. While Barthes frames are excellent starting points to consider the difference in medium in which superhero stories are told, the takeaway remains – no longer does the comic reader have to navigate and actively engage with the panels and follow their hero along a winding path in superhero films and digital comics. A preordained visual simply jumps in the exact spot it should without even a possibility of the reader looking elsewhere. Guided view technology doesn't simply take you panel by panel, it moves you around the panel in the method deemed most appropriate; it makes sure to reveal the dialogue and the action of a given panel in the appropriate order. This not only hampers the reader's engagement with creating action like Ndalianis and others claim, it arguably stifles some of Atkinson's emphasis on the single panel. The reader doesn't get to create that action either by freezing on it and paying special attention; they are led through it.[55]

However, even implied motion may be giving way to realized motion similar to, if not fully animated as, the cinema. In 2012, Marvel Comics created and released Infinite Comics. A "technological step forward—it allows artists to pace the storytelling by shifting focus within a single drawing, or staggering the appearance of text bubbles in dialogue," Infinite Comics do away with large part of panel-to-panel transition and instead allow the creative team to alter the panel so that it may convey the action (Wagner). Dialogue bubbles disappear, only to be replaced by new ones within the same panel; slight shifts in movement, like a fist clenched and then thrown as a punch all take place sequentially

---

[55] A potential benefit of this hand-holding reading style? It is very new reader friendly. The following link is one of many examples on the internet lauding digital comics for their ability to teach them the art of reading comics. http://bittersweetfountain.blogspot.co.uk/2013/02/comixology-app-that-taught-me-how-to.html.

within the same frame. Instead of transitioning from one panel to the next, the reader simply watches

the panel evolve. They watch the implied motion give way to a form of realized motion. [56]

An even better term might be hyper-realized motion. According to Marvel's Chief Creative

Officer, Joe Quesada, digital comics will surpass print comics in their ability to show detail. He argues

that with advancements like retina display, brightness of screens, and the ability to zoom, readers will

have a deeper access to the artist's actual work – the limits of the printed page will not deter that

interaction (Wagner). However, this undermines the sense of play unique to comic books as well as

divorcing the superhero from any form of materiality or sensual (feel, smell, etc.) pleasures related to

comic books. Instead, enjoyment of stupendous art, of seeing what couldn't be seen before, reminds me

of the attractions of cinema a la Gunning's *Aesthetic of Astonishment* has long established. The spectacle

of hyper-realized, high definition superhero artwork, the reveling in the bewildering levels of artistic

display isn't far from subjecting oneself to the CGI-enhanced experience of seeing today's superhero

blockbusters in the theatre.

The advancement of comics into the digital age, this rise of the post-blockbuster comic, shows

no sign of slowing. Both Marvel and DC have fully adopted Infinite style comics and release multiple

Infinite-first comics that are designed for this mode of engagement.[57] Marvel is also initiating Project

Gamma, an "adaptive, non-repetitive score" that alters as a reader goes from panel to panel (digitally, of

course) all while reacting to the pace of their reading (Rosenblatt). Comixology have doubled-down on

the rise of digital comics by releasing products that allow novice or would-be comic creators the ability

to add guided view technologies to their comics and upload them into the digital store. In short, the

---

[56] Comixology currently has a few free Infinite Comics. One scene in particular captures the loss of implied motion perfectly. In the space of a single panel, a hero named Drax pulls his fist back and then unleashes it forward propelling the villain back. All in all, it reads more like a flip book than the traditional comic.
[57] DC^2 is the name of DC's initiative.

digital comic is only going to become a more dominant form of the comic genre and, with its rise, the linearly narrative comic is ascendant. [58]

Let's not *blame* film for comics that seem to be adopting their narrative styles and modes of consumer engagement, adoptions which seems to deemphasize the unique qualities of the comic *book*. Let's simply note that in light of their ever-increasing popularity, their consistent ability to bring millions of movie-goers to the cinema, superheroes, if not physical comic books, are becoming more viable and visible with each passing summer. Publishers have learned that 32-page books sold exclusively in a comic shop only reach a certain audience. While you cannot fault these companies for pursuing means to spread their very popular IPs, it does make you wonder what the future of comics hold. On some level, it seems like the thing diehard superhero comic fans may end up lamenting the most is not the absent feel of the glossy pages and heft of a book in a Mylar bag, but the loss of a narrative energy unique to comics, a sense of becoming superheroic through being forced to imagine the impossible.

---

[58] A final indication that digital comics are on the rise? Brian Bendis, acclaimed Marvel writer, mentioned recently on the *Word Balloon Podcast* that digital sales of comics were becoming an astonishingly large percentage of overall comics' sales (Siutranes). Not surprisingly for an industry that isn't super forthcoming with sales numbers, exact figures for digital sales were not available at the time of this writing.

Chapter 2: "Marvel Team-Up: Hawkeye, Loki and the Inescapable, Innate Resistance of the Female Superhero Comic Fan"

Right now we have eight titles that are anchored by female leads where it's that character's name on the masthead. We're definitely committed to growing that audience. – Axel Alonso, Marvel Comic's Editor-in-Chief, in an interview with *Time Magazine* (Dockterman 1).

On July 15th, 2014, Marvel took to the popular ABC show, *The View,* to announce that one of their longest-running and most established characters, Thor, would become unworthy of Mjolnir, his famed hammer, and thus his title, Asgardian God of Thunder. In his absence, a woman would pick up his title, weapon, legacy, and, most importantly, his ongoing monthly comic book series. The announcement itself was interesting. That it was unveiled on *The View* clearly hinted at the demographic Marvel hoped to reach; the show predominantly caters to a female viewership.[59] The change to a female Thor also seemed odd considering the success of actor Chris Hemsworth's popular portrayal of Thor in a number of Marvel films (and his continued portrayal in at least two upcoming films). But, also of note was the adamant nature of the announcement. Series writer, Jason Aaron, stressed, "This is not She-Thor. This is not Lady Thor. This is not Thorita. This is THOR" (View).[60]

Were these changes done in a vacuum, that is only to Thor, the common rebuttal would simply point to the elastic nature of comics—they always snap back to the status quo: *This change to Thor is purely temporary. He will be back to his old self by the time the next film hits theaters*.[61] However, even a casual examination of Marvel's recent publishing initiatives reveals the new Thor not as a one-off

---

[59] ABC, the network that broadcasts *The View*, is owned by Disney as is Marvel, publisher of Thor comics. This isn't the first announcement regarding Marvel comics to be made on the show. In May 2012, Marvel took to *The View* to announce the same-sex marriage of X-Man Northstar and his non-powered boyfriend, Kyle.

[60] He later added, referencing two classic Thor tales, "If we can accept Thor as a frog and a horse-faced alien, we should be able to accept a woman."

[61] The first fan reactions to the news across popular comic sites mirrored this conceit, like mightypug78's sentiment "I bet Thor Odinson will be back in a year". The other near majority of comments were simply outrages at the concept of a female Thor like "What the Hel?! Are they crazy? How can a girl be Thor?!" (Guerrero).

marketing shot in the dark, but instead a part of a much larger push to reach a historically underserved segment of their fandom – female readers. Under the banner of publishing brands Marvel NOW!, ALL-New Marvel NOW!, and Avengers NOW!, Marvel has assumed the best way to reach female fans is via a sustained and dedicated showcase of their female characters. As of April 2015, Marvel was publishing 14 monthly ongoing series with female leads: *Angela: Asgard's Assassin, Black Widow, Captain Marvel, Elektra, Ms. Marvel, Operation S.I.N., She-Hulk, Silk, Spider-Gwen, Spider-Woman, Storm, Thor, Unbeatable Squirrel Girl*, and *X-Men* (a version of the title focusing on the female cast of the large team)*.* Additionally, other series like *All-New X-Men*, *Fantastic Four,* and *Hawkeye* can be seen as portraying female lead characters as, at least, equal to their male counterparts. While Marvel, and their primary counterpart DC, has long had titles fronted by female characters, never before have they ran so many concurrently while promising to push others, like the forthcoming female Thor, to the front. In fact, the current offering of superheroine-driven series far outstrips any other era of Marvel's offerings. Female-centered titles, series in which a female character assumes the role of the titular protagonist, accounted for 22.5% of Marvel's superhero offerings for April 2015. Not only does this number mark a high for the publisher, it is leaps and bounds ahead of what the company was producing in the boom industry of the mid-90's. During that period, female led titles accounted for only 6% of the monthly superhero series.[62]

While the numbers alone indicate Marvel's newfound support of their female characters, a better indicator of the publisher's commitment to superheroines is the increasingly respectful ways these characters are now depicted—both as they break free of their consistent exploitation as sex symbols, damsels, or Mary Sues (overly idealized and faultless characters) and as they are written with progressively prominent roles in the canonical universe of Marvel comics. Most representative of this trend is the character of Carol Danvers (aka Captain Marvel). First appearing in *Marvel Super-Heroes #13* (March 1968, Roy Thomas) as an Air Force hotshot who would, over the course of time, become NASA's

---

[62] As comic books are released monthly, the exact percentage varies, but only in slight incremental amounts. Furthermore, it is worth noting that today's market share is 6% higher than a decade ago; the arrow trends up.

head of security, Carol Danvers had the makings of an early, assertive, and stereotype-bucking female superheroine. However, her first manifestation as a true-blue superhero, January 1977's *Ms. Marvel #1,* saw her adopt a uniform better-suited to showing off her blonde bombshell status as opposed to her diligent, military-taught savvy. While her costume wasn't out of place compared to most other heroines, her appearance in it marked the beginning of not only a long portrayal in costumes increasingly designed to accentuate her looks but also her narrative deference to men – she became Ms. Marvel because of her relationship with Mar-Vell, a male alien soldier, she gets lost in the shuffle of working for Iron Man and the Avengers, and, most jarringly, she was abducted, mind-controlled, and ultimately impregnated by a powerful being known as 'Marcus' while the Avengers essentially stood by and failed to help or even acknowledge the situation.[63] Writer Kelly Sue DeConnick's recently rebooted series, *Captain Marvel* Vol 7. (September 2012), ditches the title of Miss in favor of Captain, her skimpy leotard for a less-revealing and more utilitarian outfit, and playfully ribs Captain America that she "outranks him" (DeConnick). Her change in depiction and attitude immediately stand out, and the character has quickly won over a number of fans, male and female, who affectionately refer to themselves as the Carol Corps.

While the case of Miss-Turned-Captain Marvel seemed to draw an immediate and obvious line in the sand for that particular character, she is actually representative of a larger trend. Other Marvel heroines have seen just as poignant, if more subtle, shifts. She-Hulk's latest series emphasizes her skill as a lawyer and highlights the travails and difficulties of balancing superheroics while starting a law firm. When She-Hulk inevitably brawls with villains, she adopts a brutish appearance indicative of her strength and power rather than maintaining her buxom figure while wearing a skin-tight leotard meant to suggestively hug her form. Ms. Marvel, Danver's old alias, is now a teenage Muslim girl named Kamala Khan, who has been critically praised as the Peter Parker of today. This praise suggests the

---

[63] This plotline, in and around *Avengers #200* (Vol 1), is often brought up as a manifestation of comic books indifference, at best, and outright misogyny, at worst, towards women – both as characters and potential readers.

heroine and her series are grounded in the realities of contemporary teen life. Not only does her story depict a young woman exploring issues of faith, racism, heroism, and teen angst, her depiction is as clothed and non-suggestive as any hero to-date. Then there is the ongoing transformation of Natasha Romanov, the Black Widow. Arguably, the most visible female hero in Marvel's line up thanks to the star power of Scarlett Johansson and her portrayal of the character in the Marvel film franchises, Black Widow now enjoys a successful solo series at Marvel that continues to play on her role as the fictional universe's top spy. However, her appearance has undergone a notable transition, one that all the aforementioned characters share to a degree – a deemphasizing of the overt sexuality and a reemphasizing of the heroic prowess of these characters.[64]
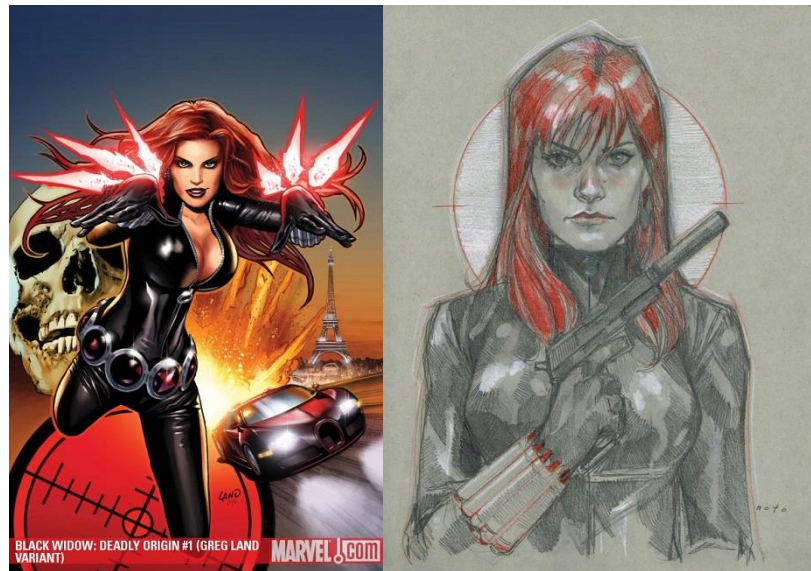
Figure 2.1 Black Widow Then (Land, *Black Widow Deadly Origins* #1, 2009)
Figure 2.2 Black Widow Now (Noto, Promotional Art, 2014)

If the above reveals an obvious trend – Marvel is revitalizing its female characters– it still doesn't address equally obvious questions -- Why? For whom? While it might be an easy stereotype, it is hard to dismiss the notion that superheroes, and by extension superhero comic books, are male domains. They were and are predominantly written by men, they were staples of reading for GIs, and they have

---

[64] None of this suggest comics have mastered the issue. Recent issues of Marvel's *Avengers World* (2013-2015) present sorceress Morgana le Fay wearing what can only be described as impossible lingerie and constantly flaunting her body. Other examples are rampant, but the point holds that titular characters are changing.

become cultural shorthand for certain nerdy guys' pastimes. They code as male; Henry Jenkin's 2012 breakdown of audiences at 2012's San Diego Comic-Con, long a haven for superhero comic fandom, goes to great lengths to detail how the con's "own population diversifies to include more women and minorities" as a counterpoint for how quickly mainstream perceptions of the hobby equate it to being male (36). And, while being a male comic reader doesn't mean you can't appreciate female characters, these female heroes' track records as successes are spotty. Put more poignantly, DeConnick states, "C'mon now, people: prove me wrong. Show me that a female-led book about the power of the human spirit, about the many guises of heroism, a book wherein no one gets raped or puts her cervix on display, can break six issues, won't you" (Richards)? DeConnick's claim that the vast majority of female-led books fail is highlighted by the miniscule percentage of them actually published. Even today's market which is becoming more aware of the potential for female-led titles still produces less than a quarter of books which front female characters.

Marvel's bold transitions, from making comic book Thor a female lead despite the presence of a successful male filmic version to the gradual freeing of female characters from their roles as primarily damsels or overt eye candy, suggest not only reacting to a perceived audience, but an informed and sustained movement to make Marvel comics accessible and respectful to the female fan. Marvel is not making this move because they've learned the error of their ways nor is it to imply these changes suddenly make the superhero genre female-friendly or feminist; the superhero industry sees a market, one that is hungry for content, and they are responding. They've no choice but to—female fans of superhero content are in state of constantly pressuring the industry just by practicing their fandom. In simplest terms, it cannot be easy to be a fan of a genre that trades in stereotyped representations of your gender and simultaneously seems incapable of acknowledging the validity of your fandom. This chapter intervenes here, then; contemporary female fandoms—or those that predominantly present as female—constantly spark tension by their mere existence since they've so long been unconsidered. The

influence of their 'sudden' presence is exacerbated by a number of fandoms that actively challenge this superhero status quo. This chapter suggests this evolution is driven, in part, by the innate resistance female comic readers exert—that is to say, Marvel couldn't, even if they wanted to, evade the growing pressure exerted by their female fans. The act of being a female superhero comic fan is one wrought with an oppositional energy – against the poor depictions of women in the medium, against the official producers of superheroes who disseminate these portrayals and often marginalize female comic readers, and, increasingly, against the wider, traditional fandom of superhero comic readers as they struggle to accept their fan objects' progression towards better serving an increasingly active and aware base of female fandoms. This resistance is a byproduct of simply being a fan since the industry and traditional fandom has considered them nonexistent. However, more and more, these fandoms visibly produce--blog posts that highlight how female characters serve male characters' arcs, Tumblr pages and fan art dedicated to sexualizing the male hero like the actual published comics do the female hero, comic news' site columns that decry the lack of female creators in the field, and cosplayers who reveal the sometimes sexually hostile nature of the comic convention circuit amongst many other outlets. Collectively, these outlets have been placing a pressure on the superhero industry—sometimes purposefully, sometimes inadvertently—that cannot be ignored. In short, female fandoms have recently forced a change in superhero comic publication and now must deal with the repercussions—actually being a targeted audience.

This chapter will systematically lay out the case that female superhero fans are always practicing a form of resistance by contextualizing the ways in which popular culture codes comic reading as masculine. Then it will offer specific examples of this resistance in the forms of two fan productions: The Hawkeye Initiative, a Tumblr that specializes in gender-swapped images and clearly aims to undermine the sexism inherent in superhero comics, and, Loki's Army, a social media gathering of largely female fans of actor Tom Hiddleston's portrayal of the character Loki, that through a swell of noticeable social

media behavior has helped shape both Marvel's cinematic and comic plans. The throughline from one example to the next is that female superhero fans have, over a short period of time, been able to use superhero-driven fan productions to force comic culture, commonly perceived and coded as male, to become more aware of female fans and characters. Furthermore, these fandoms reliance on male figures helps separate the belief that women readers can only be fannish over female characters, an important realization that more fully paints female superhero fandoms as simply superhero fandoms. The chapter closes by acknowledging that while female fans are not a monolith, their unavoidable resistance to the industry and traditional culture of superhero comics is. And, its effectiveness makes it a model of resistant fandom worth academic scrutiny and observation.

In framing female superhero comic fans this way, I'm revisiting what Jonathan Gray, Cornell Sandovoss, and C. Lee Harrington label 'first wave' fan studies. These foundational years of the field positioned fandom as "automatically more than the mere act of being a fan of something: it was a collective strategy, a communal effort to form interpretive communities that in their subcultural cohesion evaded the preferred and intended meanings of the "power bloc" represented by popular media" (Gray 2). Broadly, here I will be outlining how female fandoms have avoided and reinterpreted the male legacy of superhero comics. Specifically, however, I am directly referencing the seminal work of Jonathan Fiske's 1989 *Reading the Popular* and his claim that fans are "associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race" (Fiske 30). It may seem unwise to harken back to Fiske at time when both the field of fan studies and comic studies seem to be looking so adamantly to redefine themselves—the former, mindful of the past, but increasingly invested in understanding what it means that everyone is a fan, and the latter often attempting to quantify what makes comics, and thus the study of them,

unique.[65] While those directions have merit, and indeed drive large parts of this chapter and dissertation, it would seem foolhardy not to focus on the inherent resistance of female comic fans. Multimodal and media convergence practices, detailed in Chapter One, have doubtlessly opened the inroads necessary to make female comic fans more present as well as producing more outlets and options for them to engage as superhero comic fans. However, it is their unavoidable fandom-as-challenge to the superhero status quo that merits the most attention, especially considering the frequency with which female fans present themselves as being in tension with the object of their fandom and the perception foisted upon them by industry and the broader, more traditional fandoms of superhero comics.

Of course, to simply argue that female fandoms have turned official material to their own uses is a bit rote. After all, Henry Jenkins famously regards many fan productions as "poaching" and has argued that fan-created materials can be seen as "appropriating media texts and rereading them in a fashion that serves different interests" (40)—a la reading superheroes targeted towards men in a manner that makes the industry acknowledge female fandoms. Constance Penley sees it similarly, but she also politicizes the poaching, noting the inherent resistance to "overwhelming media environment we all inhabit" means fan creations can aspire to utopic, non-normed outcomes (484). The fan-production as re-reading of a text, and that reading being based on interaction with it, is obviously fundamental, but this chapter would like to push further along Penley's line as fandom as not only subversive but also resistant. One of the reasons this chapter leans into Fiske's work is to better elucidate the resistance Penley notes while also highlighting the mechanisms of how female superhero fandoms work, both as fannish and as part of an increasingly reciprocal producer-consumer feedback system. After all, Fiske shares Penley sentiments, only more forcibly and broadly-- "Popular culture *is made by* various

---

[65] A 2010 SCMS conference on Comic Studies with such luminaries as Scott Bukatman and Thomas LaMarre suggested that comics leave behind the 'what' – the relationship to gender, race, society—that other fields have already played out, and instead focus on the 'how' or what makes comics work (G. Smith).

formations of subordinated or disempowered people out of the resources, both discursive and material, that are provided by the social system that disempowers them" (464). Female superhero comic characters are subordinate to male heroes; female fans of the genre are subordinated because they often exist outside the construction of what many think of as superhero fan and because the industry has seemingly ignored them. Yet, I contend, they've begun to change the culture of superhero comics by using what the genre has given them.

Although my angle of inquiry is indebted to first wave fan studies, Penley, and most notably Fiske's foundational framing of fans, it seeks to break free of the insinuation that the fans' opposition is channeled in a single direction – towards only the 'power bloc' or a pop cultural hegemony. Nor is it just a small, applied sample of feminist politics. Instead, building off the of the intrafandom tensions highlighted in Chapter One, the argument here is that female superhero comic fans resistance is both innate and unavoidable, but also omnidirectional and medium-specific. That is to say, it manifests not only as opposition against the official producers, but it also manifests against superhero comic culture (and the consumers of it). Moreover, it relies on the traditional acceptance of superhero fandom as a masculine subculture and the traditional language of the fandom to be effective. And, this is key, IT IS effective—it is, as the numbers and female character evolutions above suggest, taking root largely because of its seamless, fluent integration into comic fandom and industry, often through the openings granted by this era of media spreadability and multiple channels/outlets. What we are exploring when we discuss the state of female comic fans today then is both an examination of what resistance looks like, intended or not, in the contemporary mediascape, but also the means by which fan resistance affects not only the official production of superheroes but the broader act of being a superhero comic fan today.

THE MASCULINE CODING OF SUPERHERO COMICS

It shouldn't surprise us that female superhero comic fans have been forced to resist. As mentioned above, comics are conceived of as male-oriented—a conception held by the producers, readers, and pop culture media at large. The latter often manifests in humorous stereotypes – *The Simpson's* Comic Book Guy's mix of slovenly appearance and scathing condescension or *The Big Bang Theory*'s cast being surprised to find a woman perusing the comics of their FLCS (Friendly Local Comic Shop). Such stereotypes do possess a kernel of truth. Jean-Paul Gabilliet's excellent synopsis of the comic industry, *Of Comics and Men,* draws on a number of surveys and inquiries funded by Marvel and news sources into the readership of comics, and uncovers a fairly reliable trend as the years roll on: overall readership falls, but, within the remaining readership, men assume an ever-increasing percentage. While much *Of Comics and Men* focuses on contextualization and reporting, Gabilliet does attempt to rationalize and explain the fading of the female audience:

> The disproportionate number of male comic book readers is easily explained by virtue of a conjunction of factors whose roots are found in the 1970s. It is the era in which the predominance of superhero stories was reinforced across the entirety of the industry. Filled with violence and action, displaying a masculine vision of the body, these stories allowed those who read them to 'participate—in an imaginary mode—in masculine games' that followed the example of adventure novels, detective fiction, and science fiction, all the reading choices of men rather than women. It was during the same period that the publishers abandoned romance comics, a genre in permanent retreat since the 1950s thanks to the competition of television soap operas. Finally, the reconfiguration of the industry in the direction of direct market distribution inscribed comic books within the masculine cultural practices of collecting and speculation, which were of little interest for women but which had great interest among men from preadolescence to adulthood. This tendency played out in a privileged manner in comic book stores, the dedicated spaces for masculine cultural practices such as comic books, collector's cards, role-playing games, and science fiction (208-209).

Gabillet's analysis is two-fold. Comics code as male because their narrative codes as male—violent, fast-paced, and filled with idealized men. However, they are also male because the economics minutia of comics is also considered male. The medium became coded in the male actions of collection and speculation, which in turn coded the space of such action, the comic book store, as male.

Matthew Pustz, author of *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*, echoes Gabilliet's implication that the industry may have left women behind.[66] Where Gabilliet notes that without romance comics, the market left little for women, Puszt offers that any entrance points for women were outside of most 'fanboy' targets, thus they were not superhero titles. He speaks of DC's imprint, Vertigo, and its focus on the supernatural genre as "including college-age young adults, women, the readers of Anne Rice novels, and those interested in the occult" (84). He contends that other genres allow for more realized female characters and says of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, "[Its] strong female characters have attracted many women . . . to the series . . . many of the stories' important actors are young adult women" (86). While there is nothing incorrect or wrong about this, remember Puszt is couching this effect on female readers as predicated on something existing, and marketing itself, as distinctly non-superhero. Martin Barker's ideological breakdown and semiological analysis of the British teen girl magazine, and corresponding comic strips, *Jackie,* reveals the troubling messages their romance strips imparted, while also, inadvertently suggesting again that women respond most strongly to comics outside of the superhero genre (205). The most troubling element of these analyses is the unstated claim that female comic readers can find no appeal in superheroes largely because they only read female leads, which are scarce in the superhero genre. They instead must seek out genres, like romance, that are more directly aimed at women readers. Not only does this imply a certain type of circular logic (women don't read superhero comics because superheroes are not for women, which mean they will continue to be written for men), it also completely ignores the success of certain superheroines and their appeal to male-readers. And, it completely overlooks the possibility a woman may find compelling narratives in superhero comics or joy in following male protagonists.

---

[66] I use the term 'left behind' because early comics were not really gendered. In fact, in the late 1920's a pair of psychologists, Harvey Lehman and Paul Witzy, surveyed reading habits and found that girls often read more comics than boys of a similar age (Gabilliet).

Unfortunately, the industry itself longed seemed to carry this very same belief that women who want to read to read comics shouldn't concern themselves with superheroes. In a 2012 panel discussion, Todd McFarlane, famed creator of *Spawn*, implied women could not find what they are looking for in superhero comics because they were fantasies for men – a male haven. He says:

> It might not be the right platform. I've got two daughters, and if I wanted to do something that I thought was emboldened to a female, I probably wouldn't choose superhero comic books to get that message across. I would do it in either a TV show, a movie, a novel, or a book. It wouldn't be superheroes because I know that's heavily testosterone — driven, and it's a certain kind of group of people. That's not where I would go get this kind of message, so it might not be the right platform for some of this (Rosenberg).

McFarlane's overall attitude during the panel, and that of his co-panelists (male comic writers all), was one that represented superhero comics as male fantasy, and thus, male-specific entertainment. Furthermore he and the panelists argued that superhero comics were not a place to try and make appeals to women or minorities as such overt appeals might undermine a good, interesting character by instead worrying too much about being a cypher for some cause. These arguments are the ugly endgame of Pustz and Gabillet's findings—holding firm to these evaluations of the superhero genre essentially gives superhero stories carte blanche to portray woman in whatever fashion they'd like because they can validate such portrayals as purposefully aiming to appease male fantasies.

Even publishing initiatives as recent as DC's 2011 "New 52" reboot seemingly fell prey to this type of thinking. This much ballyhooed revitalization of the publisher's comic line came under immediate scrutiny for its intensely sexualized depictions of heroines Starfire and Catwoman.

Figure 2.3 New 52 Catwoman (March, *Catwoman* #1, 2011)

Suzanne Scott, fan studies scholar, notes that these depictions of Starfire and Catwoman are not an accident. In a 2013 piece, "Fangirls in Refrigerators: The politics of (in)visibility in comic book culture," Scott notes that DC used Nielsen research that concluded DC's core audience for the reboot would be 18-34 year old males, specifically those who had read comics before. DC interpreted this data as a means to ignore potential female audiences; a move that supports Scott's findings that many scholars and the industry members see "comic book fandom and culture is coded as always completely male, and the comic book industry's failure to acknowledge the female audience is justified through economic rationalization" (2.3). Simply put, comic publishers see men as their audience and see comics that do not cater to that audience as risky and unprofitable.[67] Scott, relaying the frustration of female comic fans, points out one could also have read those results as an acknowledgement that DC had not to that point, and therefore should, expand their efforts to reach a wider female audience.

DC's reboot and McFarlane's statements speak to the problematic legacy for superhero comics—they have engaged in a repetitive history of fending of female readers and they simultaneously refuse to see how they are to blame for this fending off. After all, the industry claims that since superhero comics are grounded in idealized male fantasies they will always be for male readers. Laying blame on the genre and its history allows current publishers to justify a pre-existing audience they need to cater to instead of broadening their offerings. This, of course, means the industry is both ignoring female readers who've been reading *but also* ignoring potential new female readers. And, this is done simply by citing a lack of audience and using historical context—one the industry created and now maintains—that depicts a readership unwilling to support female-driven titles. As Scott says, it is an economic rationalization; specifically, it is one the industry wields like a shield instead of using as a springboard to grow their audience.

---

[67] See again DeConnick's claim on heroines not being able to break 6-issues.

Despite this disregard for a female audience, DC's argument that superhero comic fandom is 'completely male' is not only a poor excuse, it is an inaccurate one. One of the most disheartening aspects of their 2012 relaunch and its subsequent poor portrayals of female characters was that they occurred during a time when the fan discourse surrounding women and comics was beginning its most productive stretch. From Christina Blanch's MOOC (a Massive Open Online Course) on Gender and Comics, to the rising popularity of websites like DC WOMEN KICKING ASS and THE MARY SUE, cosplay at conventions to the discussion of this topic on well-regarded and popular comic book news sites like Comic Vine and Bleeding Cool, there were multiple points of evidence suggesting not only that there were female comic fans, but that they both comprised a larger percentage of the fandom than stereotypes might suggest and that they were increasingly becoming vocal about the way in which superhero comics treated them. While there are no verified numbers available that pinpoint how many women read superhero comics, people have estimated and approximated in a number of different ways. Often, they apply their own anecdotal information, such as the number of female fans at conventions or events; Marvel EIC, Axel Alonso, recently noted, "While we don't have any market research, the eyes don't lie. If you go to conventions and comic book stores, more and more female readers are emerging. They are starved for content and looking for content they can relate to." Other times, there are attempts to quantify the apocryphal data. Graphic Policy and Comics Beat writer Brett Schnecker regularly performs Facebook Fandom studies. By selecting comic-specific keywords and identifying the number of likes, tags, etc., Schnecker argues that of the 24 million people who self-identify as comic fans, 46.67% are female.[68] While there is certainly room to debate and discuss Schnecker's numbers and methods, his findings at least suggest a number of females self-identify as superhero or comic fans.

---

[68] While Schnecker defends his process, he has rightly been critiqued for the broadness of his search. The comic industry doesn't sell 24 million comics a month (not even close). Nor does his research suggest the correlation between Facebook 'liking' and actual fandom let alone differentiating between medium of interaction.

Comixology, the largest purveyor of digital comics worldwide, recently released information detailing that not only was over 20% of its readership female, but that they specifically knew who that woman was: "She's 17-26 years old, college-educated, lives in the suburbs, and is new to comics. She prefers Tumblr to Reddit. She may have never even picked up a print comic" (Melrose). The article later revealed that Comixology had recently surpassed its 200th million download and was the highest-grossing non-game app on the Apple store, all of which suggested the 20% was a fairly large number. One rationalization for digital comics draw is the ability to circumnavigate the supposed maleness of the comic shop, as mentioned by Gabilliet above. Marvel editor Sana Amanat noted that *Ms. Marvel*, a series with a fairly vocal and visible female fandom, is the company's number one digital seller and had even sold more digitally than in print (MacDonald).

The above data collides uncomfortably, then. Comics are coded as male in production, marketing, and consumption, yet more and more evidence surfaces suggesting a growing female contingent of fans (which in turn challenges long-standing economic rationalizations for disavowing a female audience). Thus, being a female reader directly resists the maleness of the medium. The very act of being a female member of a superhero fandom challenges the stance of industry stalwarts like McFarlane. It also challenges the pop culture and traditional fandoms' perception of superhero comic culture. Even the creator of Wonder Woman, William Marston, realized comics were increasingly becoming 'male' and worried about survivability of strong female characters in the medium, "… if a woman hero were stronger than a man, she would be even less appealing. Boys wouldn't stand for that; they'd resent the strong gal's superiority" (Robbins 60). He questions the female character, but a similar question confronts female superhero fans--how can an industry that inscribes itself with such maleness and that frequently positions female characters as secondary to male characters possibly have female fans that want to invest? One answer is via resistance. The position here is not that every member of superhero comic culture rails against the growing presence of the female fan, but that the female fan

cannot avoid the superhero world's use of female characters, ignoring of female fans, and prioritizing of the male fanboy (at times). Thus, each act of being a female superhero fan—from entering the comic store, to identifying as a fan, to challenging creators to stop hypersexualizing heroines—is an act that directly challenges the status quo.

Some might point out that such a resistant state is just an extension of being female in world that supports a male hegemony. But, it is more medium-specific; the plight of women-as-fans manifests out of a certain belief that female fans of science-fiction, a category to which superheroes are often attributed, have been hanger-ons in a male genre. In Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women*, she sums up the perception of female fandom by quoting Warner Brothers Studio founder Harry Warner: "… it was possible to claim that there was no such thing as an independent, honest-to-goodness girl-type fan, because virtually all the females in fandom had a fannish boyfriend, brother, husband, or some other masculine link" (17). While Bacon-Smith challenges the veracity of this perception, she acknowledges it is a perception that has continued. This is not unlike the reality that there have long been female comic fans, but the perception and coding of the world of superhero comics turned increasingly male over the years. Famed feminist scholar Gloria Steinem also notes the unique affect that superheroes and the comic medium have on women:

> The trouble is that the comic book performers of such superhuman feats 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…dependency and zero accomplishments get very dull as a steady diet" (203).

Steinem sees in the masculine coding of comics a role for women as being rescued. Sure, Superman and Spider-Man save men too, but they frequently save Lois Lane, Mary Jane, and poor Aunt May. As Steinem notes, dependency doesn't incite narrative engagement, thus "The only option for a girl reader is to identify with the male characters . . . if she can't do that, she faces limited prospects . . . and saying things like "Oh Superman, I'll always be grateful to you'" (204). Steinem is clearly equating a pleasurable

reading experience with the reader's ability to identify comfortably with the character. There are, of course, other ways of reading that resist the Mulvey-inspired one-to-one process of identification touched on by Steinem. But, even opposite-spectrum approaches like philosopher Noel Carrol's belief that the consumer never becomes one with the character, or film scholar Gilberto Perez's stance that identification is a public rhetoric in which viewers share a process of identification with multiple characters (Perez 9), the presentation of female superhero characters still makes them obtuse. While some may have a sliding sense of identification that both engages with the male hero's and the female ancillary character's qualities, there is no ignoring the male is almost always elevated above the female. Ironically, it is fictional comic character Kirsten McDuffie, who puts it best, when she tells potential love interest, Matt Murdock (aka Daredevil) things won't work because she "doesn't want to be just another character in *his* story"—essentially, acknowledging the unfortunate framing of female comic book characters throughout its history (Waid). Female readers who persevere then, or who willingly identify with the male heroes do so in spite of expectations and continue the trend of the female reader as resistant; they find enjoyment where none is, theoretically, designed to be for them.

The resistance of the female comic fan can certainly be framed in terms of broader feminist scholarship but bears more fruit when understood both as a struggle against a continuing legacy of perception of the female fan and the helplessness that superhero comics have at times asked female readers to face as they glorify the masculine at the feminine's expense. Moreover as Steinem, Trina Robbins, and others have noted, the best way of countering superhero comic culture's treatment of women is by co-opting the language. For Steinem and Robbins, this takes the form of recuperating Wonder Woman as a feminist icon. For contemporary fandoms, I contend, this takes the form of simply practicing one's fandom visibly. Particularly effective models include using the visual language of comics to challenge the industry, as the Hawkeye Initiative does, or capitalizing on the recent multi-modal

success of superhero comic characters to remove them fully from the grasp of comic fandom as Loki's Army does.

THE HAWKEYE INITIATIVE: A DIRECT CHALLENGE TO SUPERHERO FANDOM & INDUSTRY

Today's superhero comic fans are not the first wave of fans that sought to highlight the poor portrayal of female characters. In the late '90s, Gail Simone's 'Women in Refrigerators' was bringing attention to the subservience of female characters to males in superhero stories.[69] The late '90s also saw the organization of Sequential Tart, a community of female comic fans who sought to advocate for women upset with the way they, as female fans, were thought of by the comics industry. Even earlier than that, fans occasionally pushed for stronger female characters in the representations of heroes like the Invisible Girl and Marvel Girl. Laura Matton D'Amore notes in a piece on feminism and the superheroine that the Invisible Girl was less a superhero and more Reed Richards', aka Mr. Fantastic's, girl during her early years. Her depiction was "Sue as captive, Sue as beautiful, and Sue as housewife" (3), but rarely Sue as hero. Her presentation kept with the superhero genre's portrayal of the status quo, but it did incite certain fans, who even the 1960s noted her misuse—"My complaint is that her potential is seldom utilized. I object chiefly to the fact that in eight tries she has been captured by four of the villains. I think that she would make a better action character than a hostage" (*The Fantastic Four* #11, 1963, D'Amore).These fan voices not only pushed against the typecasting of female characters, their essential advocacy contrasted them against, and thus separated them from, mainstream superhero comic fandom, or as D'Amore argues the men who created her and the boys who consumed her. Scott invokes a great take from Joanne Hollows that is very relevant to D'Amore's claim; male-dominated subcultures, like superhero comic culture, will allow women in only if those women code themselves as men or 'as one of the boys'—that is to accept the maleness of the subculture they are engaging in. Of course, doing so would "fail to challenge the power relations which sustain a position in which there are

---

[69] Specifically, Simone, now a DC writer, used her mailing list and website to highlight how frequently comics used a woman's death to motivate or further a male character's plot arc.

few opportunities to capitalize on femininity" (Hollows 40). Instead, by situating their fandom as engaged with or aware of femininity, the output of many contemporary superhero fans highlight a struggle to, in fact, *challenge the status quo*—to break from what Suzanne Scott notes as the invisibility foisted upon the female comic fan by directly addressing the ways superhero comic culture fails them as female readers.

Again, while there have been moments of this visible resistance from female readers for some time, their arguments altered neither the use of female characters nor the male-codedness of the fandom. Some of this is attributed to the scarcity of a sustained dialogue from objecting fans and thus the presentation of a unified and dissatisfied front. While Marvel often published readers who dissented with them, most of those dissents were nitpicks of the plot or characterization of a given issue or character. For all the openness Stan Lee and the Merry Marvel Bullpen wanted to display, the letters page was essentially a gated community through which only the chosen few could pass. Even when those gates came down, largely as the internet became an increasingly viable form of fan gathering and dialoguing, it hasn't been until very recently that media spreads quickly through social media channels and related websites and thus more quickly disseminating potential disfavor with superhero comics' treatment of women. So, while Simone's, and others', forays were thought-provoking, they weren't immediately impactful on the community; it wasn't until those ideas spread outwards over the course of nearly a decade that they entered the vocabulary of many superhero comic fandoms.

Jonathan Fiske might suggest another reason these earlier forms of resistance didn't fully take root; he might ask, "Where's the reapporpriation? The altering of a given cultural product and the transgressive use of it?" Both Simone's websites and the occasional letters that Marvel or DC printed were, at their essence, complaints; a quick stroll through letters pages, online forums, and even today's twitter responses prove that comic creators are fairly adept at ignoring outright complaints. One element of Fiske's *Reading the Popular* is that successful resistance often involves a use of the material

the official producers give you. His most popular chapter details the way that fans used Madonna to think about and broach the subject of female empowerment. They did this not by writing about it or saying it aloud to the record industry; it was, in fact, their inability to articulate her casual denial of patriarchy that was liberating. Her utility to fans as a way to slip between "ideological control" was in the reading of her (images, songs, dialogue). The Hawkeye Initiative, a Tumblr webpage, takes this tact—it reappropriates the productions of superhero comic culture and reads in them a blatant sexism that was often inarticulate before. Afterwards, it reproduces an image for the broader public to read. And, such reading manifests this fandom's resistance while also making clear the tradition of missteps the comics' industry has taken in the portrayal of heroines.

The Hawkeye Initiative grew out of a 2011 online discussion about the "Strong Female Superhero Pose." [70] Over the course of that discussion, a few artists released gender-swapped images that sparked the creation of the Tumblr, The Hawkeye Initiative. While their use of Hawkeye, a non-superpowered Avenger who uses a bow and a host of trick arrows, grew organically, the foundational posts of The Hawkeye Initiative also position the archer as a weak link and underserved character in the Avenger mythos—he is the everyman but also the team's weak link. A viable target for parody, then, but also a character whose use to highlight misogyny wouldn't be undermined by the character's sheer masculinity. The site continues today by utilizing gender-swapped images to clearly and intimately force superhero fandom's acknowledgement of how the female is underserved by the comics industry and then sets about skewering that power relation.

---

[70] Gender-swapping in this manner did not originate with The Hawkeye Initiative. Fan art has long engaged in gender-swapped depictions, and, even in superhero fandom circles, gender-swapped depictions like *Manfire*, a satirical take on DC's Starfire character, have come out before or concurrent with this Tumblr.
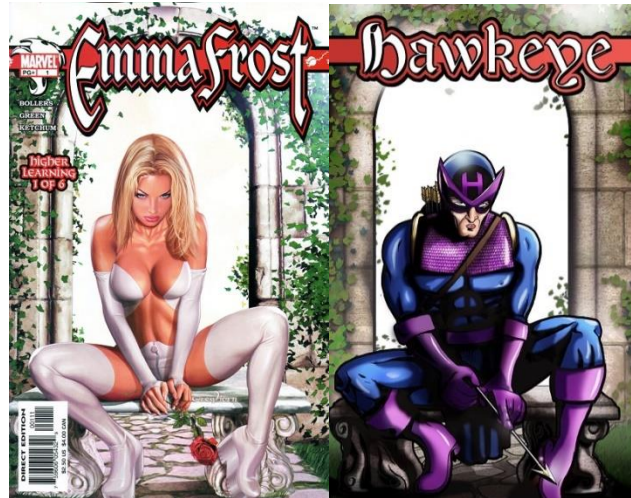
Figure 2.4 THI Example: Horn's 2003 White Queen, Fuz-Oodle 2013 Hawkeye

As the above picture clearly demonstrates, The Hawkeye Initiative asks a simple question: What if we were to pose our male heroes like our female heroes? Or, as Noelle Stevenson, under the alias of Tumblr persona gingerhaze, put it: "How to fix every Strong Female Character pose in superhero comics: replace the character with Hawkeye doing the same thing" (http://thehawkeyeinitiative.com/faq). If the images and quote above are not enough to make clear the site's intent, they do have a mission statement: "Created on December 2nd 2012, The Hawkeye Initiative uses Hawkeye and other male comic characters to illustrate how deformed, hyper-sexualized, and impossibly contorted women are commonly illustrated in comics, books, and video games" ("FAQ"). The site functions via gender-swapped images, and claims "As people become more aware of the extreme sexism in modern comics, they may begin to ask their favorite writers/artists for something different or looking into alternative comics. The Hawkeye Initiative is one way that people can express the desire for such a change in a way that is both compelling and fun" ("About"). The Tumblr's argument being that if a female character could be replaced by Hawkeye and the resulting image wasn't disturbing or silly, it could likely be considered non-sexist. It functions as variant-Bechdel Test, and while it is difficult to universalize what might be considered disturbing or silly, their reconstructions of men adopting the poses of published female characters does highlight how often these female characters are asked to sell sex.

Their initial release was met with widespread attention, meriting over 40 different articles on the meme from sites as comic-specific as CBR to more widely read and broad-based cultural outlets like Wired and Vulture. More importantly than simply being noticed, The Hawkeye Initiative gained steam immediately upon exposure. The Tumblr currently contains over 50 pages of entries and garnered over 2.5 million page views. It is followed by industry elites like Gail Simone, Dan Slott, and Matt Fraction. It has been referenced by the wildly popular Facebook game, Marvel Avengers' Alliance. And, it has generated offshoots of the gender-swapping meme like Brosie the Riveter.[71] A number of gender-swapped comic images have appeared across social media sites like DeviantArt and Twitter since the success of The Hawkeye Initiative, suggesting that even though not formally a part of the Tumblr, many depictions have been inspired by it—it had spread. For a few months after its appearance, it was the zeitgeist of superhero comic culture. It made the sexism inherent in superhero comics unavoidable, and while not all the discourse surrounding the topic was productive, it was at least had.

As comic culture and fandom moves from the physical and isolated space of the comic shop into the more open and diverse spaces of both the internet and conventions (which, while not new is an increasingly more open and visible representation of comic culture than the comic book shop ever was), it is not surprising that The Hawkeye Initiative gained such sudden popularity. But that it did is key. While originally a means for superhero fans to express frustration at the way female characters were treated, the spreadable nature of media content allowed the meme to transfer everywhere. While such transfer was at first digital, via shared images and the number of internet sites than ran stories regarding The Hawkeye Initiative, it wasn't long until the meme was given corporeality at convention spaces via cosplay. Not only did this give the fan production a bodily presence, it also presented itself to a number of fans who may have somehow not engaged with its digital form.

---

[71] Brosie is a depiction of a hirsute gentleman in a speedo who now adorns the offices of Meteor Games after it was brought to their attention their previous mascot, a woman with a hardhat and little else, was sexist (S

As it spread, discussion followed. Initial rebuttals often centered on the concept that the male figure is idealized in comic books too – Superman's rippling muscles, Batman's infinite abs, etc. However, an even cursory examination of these gender-swapped critiques dismisses that notion. Male figures might cut powerful stances and aggressive action poses, but rarely do they flaunt for the audience's attention like Guillem March's Starfire in the recently rebooted *Red Hood and the Outlaws* series by DC Comics:

Figure 2.5 New 52 Starfire (Rocafort, *Red Hood and the Outlaws*, 2011)

Figure 2.6 Guillory's *Manfire*

This pose, Fig 2.5, like many other female super-character poses, seems solely designed for sexual suggestiveness and titillation. This is meant both in the most obvious sense of the term, as she is posing sexually for the viewer (and note the reader's cypher in the lower right corner of the page), but also that Starfire here is a manifestation of all the male-fantasies that someone like McFarlane argue the genre is designed for. D'Amore makes the natural connection of this overt sexualizing to Mulvey's male gaze and sums the comic book heroine's position neatly:

> [The heroine] is objectified by the male gaze in a highly sexualized manner, privileging her to-be-looked-at-ness over her identification as a powerful superheroine… [Mulvey] argued that the patriarchal structure of film production – from male directors, writers, and producers, all the way to the privileging of a male audience – masculinized the camera lens. The way that women were seen on film was how men wanted to see them. Comics did the exact same thing. Men created, drew, inked, and marketed this early incarnation of Sue Storm's body, for a

predominantly young male readership. Her image is disproportionately eroticized, and her body is possessed by both the group's male identity and the male comic book reader (9).

This is especially obvious when contrasted with the parody image that followed in its wake, Manfire. Manfire affects its viewer because male superhero characters rarely strike such wanton poses in the comics. Laura Hudson breaks down the experience and properly sums up why comparing a handsome Clark Kent to a frolicking Starfire falls short. She says, "Why is she contorting her body in that weird way? Who is she posing for, because it doesn't even seem to be Roy Harper? The answer, dear reader, is that she is posing for you. News flash: Starfire isn't being promiscuous because this comic wants to support progressive gender roles. Starfire is being promiscuous so that you can look at her." Scott cites Hudson in her piece as well, and it works well; after all, the industry's 'economic rationalization', means there isn't a big enough audience to make it worthwhile to commonly pose Batman or Superman as sexual objects for some assumed female viewer/reader. The burden of being objectified and secondary falls on the women of comics.[72]

While the argument that men are also objectified still holds sway with some segment of the fandom, the discourse has largely moved on. Inevitably, and, of course, by design, these conversations were innately resistant—they directly challenge the content that superhero publishers put forth. Whether these conversations ranged from support to hateful backlash, or the innumerable shades of grey in-between, the fact that female fans were advocating that superhero comics were failing them made the discourse a conflict while also effectively and preemptively rebutting the culture's male-coded stance of "They aren't for you!"—after all, the presence of the fans, their passion, and their aptitude at using superheroes for an end disavow that notion. Discussants tried to pinpoint if this meme would successfully take root in the industry and have an effect. Some argued that having men pose as women fails to truly get the point across since it is easily dismissed as humor, and that the meme would be

---

[72] While I will touch on this in more detail shortly, male characters are, of course, posed for viewers – just in positons of enviable power or masculinity much more often than sexual suggestiveness.

better suited redoing poses of men in overtly sexualized masculine poses. Other discussions focused on the meme's potential to offend the transgender community. Each of these tangents focused not on traditional superhero fan discourse, like criticisms of character, plot, and creators, but instead on a certain meta-awareness of how the industry engages with its fans and how its multiple fans engage with themselves. It brought up questions of equality and fairness to be certain, but, most tangentially, it outright challenged the history and impending arc of superhero comic characters' representation.

Instead of weighing the merits of a certain creative team's run, fans weighed the political underpinnings and output of the comic industry as a whole. Even in cases where the meme faced legitimate criticism, the concept of female-fans-as-resistance was at the core. An example would be, comic artist Ramon Villalobo's questioning of where the line should be drawn regarding what is actually a sexist image of a woman in comics. He says, "I've noticed that a few of these Hawkeye initiative things have taken relatively tame examples of sexist poses in comic art and stretched the whole point way thin for comedic effect" (Villalobo). He goes on to note that women artists, though fewer, engage in similar representations of women, and yet he fears he faces more potential for backlash from this than others because he is male.[73] While responses ranged from outright agreement to the expected internet vitriol, the discussion centered on how female fans can and are integrating with larger superhero comic culture, and it was inspired by the resistant momentum of The Hawkeye Initiative. The Hawkeye Initiative is resistant in practice – it reappropriates material and directly rebuts the production of the comic industry. But, it is also speaks against the fan community that these fans, theoretically and in a broad sense, belong to. In short, it challenged the comic industry and fandoms to not only discuss the pleasure of comics but the ramifications of them.

Even the most heinous of responses to The Hawkeye Initiative can be seen as engaging the emerging gendered politics of superhero fandom. Many outlets, like The Mary Sue, that first picked up

---

[73] This too maybe a manifestation of female fans feeling aligned against their fandom. As comic culture is coded as masculine, Villalobo and other male artists make more viable targets for carrying on the patriarchal practices.

on The Hawkeye Initiative were catering to female comic fans foremost.[74] Thus, when discussions took

place there, they had a decidedly different response than the Comic Vine thread mentioned at the start

of this chapter. While in the Comic Vine thread certain misogyny was rampant regarding the female

Thor, discussions at the Mary Sue had a larger female fan base to counter certain hateful screeds.[75] For

example, when commenter Brutalitops Odinson vented, "My confusion stems from not understanding

WHY it is women dislike [women characters posing sexily]. No, it isn't realistic. Pure fantasy, about sexy

people doing bad-ass things, very sexily. The comics are ALL about sex, whether we admit it or not, so

let's just drop the whole *comics are anti-women* bullshit, he was met with an instant rebuttal from Sybil

Sylvia's, "Women do not like female comic book characters being reduced to sex objects because it is

dehumanizing. It says that men are valuable primarily for their powerfulness and thug-punching ability,

and women are valuable primarily for their sexiness and inhuman contortionist ability. Even if comics

were porn, they'd be bad porn. Good porn does not treat women as objects, but as participants" (Polo).

While not all such exchanges are so pleasant, each has a dynamic at play that revolves on the axis of

gender, and reveals that the superhero comic fandom is just as patriarchal and closed off to women as it

has long been portrayed. It also highlights that unlike Fiske's example of Madonna's fans, female comic

fans are fighting against the fandom to which they belong—their resistance is just as focused on opening

the eyes of the traditional superhero fandom as it is bent on challenging the official producers.[76]

 And, the official producers have responded to the challenge. This response can be tracked

across two tiers. There is an immediate response in that certain creators have directly responded to the

Hawkeye Initiative and its argument about the mistreatment of female characters. And, there is a more

---

[74] A comic blog that has to gender itself acknowledges both the perception of superhero comic fandom as male while also serving as an example of a way in which female fans confront, and thus, resist this typecasting.

[75] In all fairness, a number of fans, men and women, tried to discuss the female Thor in a positive light or with rational disagreement, but there were few direct rebuttals to overtly sexist comments.

[76] Madonna's fans never had to rail against themselves to appropriate something meaningful from Madonna; they just had to *use* her in a manner that was not expected and subversive to her intended packaging. Certain comic fandoms may do that, a la The Hawkeye Initiative, but such moves mean resisting vocal elements of the fandom itself.

gradual response seen from the industry itself, often through the deployment of editorial statements and emerging publishing strategies.[77] The response of comic creators is both prominent and visceral. Throughout the duration of The Hawkeye Initiative's popularity, Matt Fraction has been the writer of the Marvel character's solo series. His work on the series, and that of a small cadre of visual artists and colorists, has been awarded an Eisner, the Oscar of the comic-creating community. The series has been a financial success as well as being a critically-lauded series. When asked if he approved of the Tumblr, Fraction unequivocally affirmed his belief in the site's mission, "it's great. it's hilarious. and it's important, silly as it may be. anything that helps raise awareness, for even a second, to the endemic and systemic marginalization of women via their hypersexualized representation in comics is a good thing. anything that makes people stop, for even half a heartbeat, and think is good in my book." Fraction's ringing endorsement carried clout not only because he was synonymous with the Tumblr's titular character, but also because of how that character was portrayed. Fraction's *Hawkeye* often portrayed women and relationships, but never strayed into stereotypes or overt sexualization. In fact, it actually branched into two distinct stories—one that followed the male Hawkeye's troubles in New York and the other exploring the younger, female Hawkeye's attempts to establish herself in Los Angeles.

While other creators have also taken to social media to express their enjoyment of the Tumblr, The Hawkeye Initiative needs to be seen as a larger part of a whole that the industry has seemingly only recently appraised.[78] The Carol Corps, a convention-attending group of Captain Marvel cosplayers, brings attention to and praises the empowered title character. The Women of Marvel podcast and convention panels highlight the challenges and issues facing women invested with comics as fan or industry members. There is a relatively new and vocal collective focus issue of how the superhero and the female fan are supposed to coexist. That the Hawkeye Initiative relies on attention-grabbing images

---

[77] The shifts towards more, and more fairly represented, female characters in Marvel's recent initiatives chronicled at the chapter's start are a fine example of this.

[78] Most notable would be Gail Simone's simple statement—"This is the best thing in the history of historical anything ever in the universe or elsewhere" (Hudson, "How").

of long-established male heroes in risqué outfits and poses might make it more memorable, and, perhaps, more effective than blog posts and podcasts, and by extension the complaints of earlier resistant fan movements.

With The Hawkeye Initiative, the gender-swapping is not an assumed role, most scholarship on the act tie it to alternative online identity creation, but instead a transformative piece of reimagining. Its emphasis is not that Hawkeye assumes a feminine role; it's that the viewer realize the schism, the hesitation in even thinking he might assume such a role. This hesitation, the moment's pause, the 'half a heartbeat' that Fraction references that makes the images transgressive, suggests more than any of Gabilliet's studies that superheroes are coded as masculine. The Tumblr is effective not because the images shock viewers, but because they juxtapose the male and female figure. Posing Hawkeye as a sexually suggestive White Queen, a femme fatale character whose costume is literally lingerie, asks the superhero fan to question how they've been unwitting consumers of female characters who may be positioned as heroes but are rarely allowed to act as such. What makes the Hawkeye Initiative useful resistance, then, is its fluent use of the visual language of comics. It is resistance from the inside; it's a testament that female fans, or those willing to advocate on their behalf, are becoming increasingly vocal and that they can use the fan conventions and knowledge in a way to critique the fan object. What is truly compelling may not be the specific mode of transformation, in this case the male-as-female depictions, but simply that fans co-opt material to make a direct rebuttal of a perceived wrong, in this case the sexist caricatures of women in comics. It is this *reappropriation of published work for political resistance* that is counterfandom, in that it challenges the fan object, its creation, and its consumption at a very visceral level.

When Fiske speaks broadly of popular culture, he couches that discussion in resistance— "Popular culture is always a culture of conflict, it always involves the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interests of the subordinate and that are not those preferred by the dominant ideology"

(1246). Were we to replace the term pop culture with fandom, and the latter is a visible extension of the former, we would be describing the work The Hawkeye Initiative and its ilk is doing. They are blatantly resisting and making new meaning by opposing the assumed or expected response to the material the hegemony, in this case the comic industry, is handing them. Even when Fiske speaks in examples and specifics, he seems to be writing about the movement that the Hawkeye Initiative is employing—"The girl fans of Madonna are resisting the patriarchal meanings of sexuality and constructing their own oppositional ones" (1246). The female fans who are advocating The Hawkeye Initiative are taking blatantly sexist images and contrasting them in an effort to construct oppositional ones via juxtaposition. But, the Hawkeye Initiative is doing so much more. They are actively practicing a mode of resistance against those who produce their fan object but also others, like them, who enjoy and consume it. They are not just resisting 'patriarchal meanings of sexuality' and replacing it with their own take; they are challenging others to remove those patriarchal inscriptions from the medium of superhero characters while also asking fans to consider their passive consumption of the material. In short, unlike Madonna's fans, today's female superhero comic fans are tasked with actively and manifestly resisting.

LOKI & THE MCU: AN INDIRECT SUBVERSION OF SUPERHERO PATRIARCHY

The Hawkeye Initiative is blatantly resistant; it does not attempt to hide the fact it is challenging the superhero status quo and its tradition of poorly using female characters. But as not all superhero fans, nor all female superhero fans, form a monolith, what of other manifestations of fandom? What of ones that do not directly challenge the industry or culture of comics? Sticking to Fiske as a framework, it is useful to consider the other form of opposition; in *Reading the Popular,* Fiske situates many fans as resistant; however, he sees surfers as evasive –shirking responsibility and alluding social discipline. Fiske bases a lot of this definition of the surfer on his reading of the beach. He argues that a beach confers a number of views from which to be read—it travels from city to nature, it confers tans, which people

unconsciously relate with leisure, health, and a state of mental well-being. For Fiske, surfers idealize and give bodily representation to the notion that there is a 'resistance of pleasure to ideological control" (Fiske). While Fiske initially equates the surfer to nature and argues it is this primal connection that makes surfing culture an evasive form of popular culture, he also argues it is subversive in its unapologetic pursuit of pleasure, "The potentially subversive meaning of the surf derives from this chain of concepts—the body, nature, the signifier, pleasure, and therefore desire seen as articulating an alternative, threatening way of making sense to the one proposed by the official culture. The subversion lies in the denial of control or power as socially constituted" (2527). The Hawkeye Initiative trends denying control by confronting it instead of resorting to the active pursuit of pleasure.[79] It highlights the most blatant manner in which the comic industry has misrepresented women—overt hypersexualization. However, it is so focused on that goal that it doesn't have a way of effectively speaking to the other methods in which female characters have long been mishandled. Whether it be the rampant typecasting (the infinite number of beautiful redheads in Marvel comics, the Lois Lane and Aunt May perpetual damsels in distress, or the Catwoman and Black Cat femme fatales, etc.) or noticeable lack of strong, popular, fully-supported series headlined by female heroes, gender-swapping alone cannot highlight all the injustices.[80]

Fortunately, there are evasive, subversive elements to contemporary comic fandom that can speak to these situations. They seem to be generated by superhero films. While there are no current female superheroes headlining films, there are a good number of male heroes.[81] And, each is portrayed by an actor cast for his ability to manifest the hero's' superheroic physique or charm on screen. While

---

[79] This is not to suggest posting on the site isn't fun; however, THI and its founders actively confront the superhero industry.

[80] Nor should it have to. No single fan production can speak for the varied hues of superhero fandom.

[81] Scarlett Johansson's Black Widow is an integral part to the Marvel movies, but she's yet to headline a single film. And, in fact, the female characters in these films often fall into the worst stereotypes that superhero comics have long purported such as the never-ending danger faced by the women of the Spider-Man series of films or the brilliant, unnamed journalist from the first Iron Man film who's only role was to be bedded by the debonair hero.

these characters are often engaging in feats of derring-do and other masculine poses that their comic book counterparts strike, and thus might be said to play to the male gaze in the form of roleplay, the films also clearly offer up sexualized male figures – not unlike Hudson's claim as to how Starfire poses to be looked at by readers.

Figure 2.7 Stills from *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) & *Thor* (2011)

Actors Chris Evans and Chris Hemsworth, Captain America and Thor respectively, spend lengthy, not-entirely plot-necessary portions of their films without their shirts on. These moments in some ways mirror the contortionist bending of characters like Catwoman—they seem to be posing for sex appeal only. They might not represent a full-blown inversion of the male gaze—it would be difficult given the scope of this chapter to analyze how much control female viewers exert—but, they definitely work to titillate viewers. Interspersed in some of the foundational comments that formed the Hawkeye Initiative, the founding ladies directly reference how these male characters were posed,

> Both Thor and Captain America: The First Avenger featured sensibly-dressed, awesome female characters checking out the shirtless male heroes in what was pretty much a textbook reversal of the typical male-gaze "pan the camera up and down her body before she gets to say a line" shit you see in most blockbusters. I mean, I don't pretend to be an expert in cinematography, but Steve's first appearance in Avengers is a lingering shot of his ass flexing while he pummels the crap out of a punch-bag (Baker-Whitelaw).

This is the very definition of irony, then. In catering to a male audience, comic books have positioned their male heroes as the most powerful, most important, and most successful franchises. When transported to live-action cinema, this focus on superhumanly fit male figures has created a filmic world where these idealized men, constructed on the comic page as masculine identities to aspire to or

assume, dominate the screen in a manner much more likely to be seen as a space for female desire.[82]

Some of this is simply because women are not as hindered from viewing films as they might be comics, thus the fact they can now engage opens up new ways of being a fan. However, the rash of post-cinematic fandoms that have cropped up around Hemsworth and Evan's portrayals suggests a number of processes of identification. Most obvious is an inversion of the male gaze as it positions these male characters as objects framed primarily for their "to be looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 11). That filmic representations of the superhero genre allow some measure of female desire shouldn't be too much of a credit to Hollywood—the film industry is no less sexist than Marvel or DC. But, the fascination of these fandoms with the very real body of these actors and their portrayal of these franchise characters, the variety of fan productions they put out, suggests more than just a form of identification based on sex appeal. And more than identification processes a comic book might generate, the attachment of these character themes to a very real body opens up a more multi-tiered process of identification, particularly Mary Ann Doane's focus on "recognition of particular objects, persons … as such (stars, etc.)" (Hansen 15). That a real body displays these characteristics means that a fans, primarily heterosexual female fans, can, if they so wish, intertwine superhero fandom with the longstanding tradition of celebrity fandom; in fact, it is likely one could pen an entire chapter on how Miriam Hansen's take on Valentino and the interesting ways that today's female fandom of male celebrity mirrors and diverges from that "fetishistic devotion" (25).

What is pertinent to this chapter particularly is not only that superhero films open up avenues for female fans to identify with superhero content, but that this latest wave of superhero films has begot a number of female driven superhero fan productions with more strength and cohesion than in any time past. That the majority of these outputs seem dedicated to playing up and supporting these

---

[82] Some of this shift in reception maybe because comics have an innate sense of roleplay invested in them – the reader must assume control of the hero to move him from panel to panel. In a film, rippling abs, square jaw, and piercing blue eyes represent handsomeness more overtly.

moments of female desire operate as an example of evasion and subversion. They do not speak directly of challenging the status quo of the superhero genre, as does The Hawkeye Initiative, instead the discourse surrounding such productions suggest they seek to relish, often in an insular group fashion, the things they enjoy – in this case the embodied reality of male superhero characters. In doing so, they both evade the long-standing relationship fans have with the male superhero—an idealized body and archetype for which the male reader to relate to—and subvert the ongoing representations of these characters by allowing the industry to market to and build off of their pleasures.[83] Furthermore, they evade normal superhero fan structures as they often post, engage, and interact in non-comic book related outlets and take part in dialogue that, because it is female-discussing-male, is rare in the fandom. And, finally, and particularly important to the consideration of these fandoms going forward, they evade the expected place for female fans—they align themselves predominantly with a male character. In short, fans who've accentuated or focused on the sexuality of these male heroes have evaded the pleasure traditional or 'male' fans have found in them in favor of their own pleasures; and, this pleasure is not only in seeing the superhero, but in joining together with likeminded fans to lay claim to said superhero.

Despite the blatant physicality and screen time given actors like Robert Downey, Jr., Evans, and Hemsworth, no one better personifies the way in which superhero fandom is now carving out a space for both female desire and a new, largely female-driven segment of superhero fandom than Loki, as portrayed by Tom Hiddleston in the Thor and Avengers movies. Hiddleston's portrayal has spawned a fan group, Loki's Army.[84] These fans create a number of fan productions, many of which play with the idea of Hiddleston-as-Loki gender or sexuality. Moreover, much as I've argued that the industry has

---

[83] Fiske might note another connection between the female fans of male superhero actors and surfers – the deindividualization of group members. Nicknames are prevalent, images and discussion focus on the center of pleasure (actors for the fans, waves for the surfers), and both are in threat of losing their uniqueness when catered to by capitalism.

[84] Not that the other actors/characters haven't done so; Hiddleston's is the most surprising, visible, and effective, however.

taken note of The Hawkeye Initiative and the rise of the directly confrontational fan, so too seemingly has the industry acknowledged the onset of this fandom. In light of these fans' enthusiasm, Loki has increasingly gotten more screen time, both in film and comic, with the latter representation becoming swiftly and markedly molded after Hiddleston's portrayal, both physically and in personality.[85]

Loki's Army is a hard to pinpoint fan group. Loosely, it is centered on the Loki's Army blog and Facebook group which incorporates fan stories, images, and messages across social media sites like Tumblr. The site acts as a central hub for Hiddleston-as-Loki fandom, but Tumblr, other blogs, and different fan outlets often have their Hiddles-centered creations and musings aggregated and shared by the Loki's Army site as well. Where it was easy and effectual to consider The Hawkeye Initiative as a site, it is best to consider Loki's Army as exactly that—a widespread conscription of fans centered on furthering and sharing their love of Hiddleston and Loki. Also, whereas The Hawkeye Initiative had one clear, direct output, Loki's Army, again less of a group delivering an on-point message than one engaging the more traditional fandom pastime of pleasure-seeking, has varied output that most often only speaks to other Loki fans. I will examine the three most obvious outputs of this fandom—images, fan discourse, and fan fiction—that sexualize Hiddleston while also bringing to bear female desire as the undergirding of this particular superhero fandom. Viewing the fallout from Loki's Army's rise this way underscores the effect they've had on comic culture and industry despite never overtly positioning themselves as confrontational to comic culture in the manner that the Hawkeye Initiative has.

The most overt form of sexualization is the imagery that Loki's Army populates the internet with. While many images play up the aggrandized ego of the Loki character and come complete with captions either recruiting members for his army or quoting his more memorable lines from the films, many more play up his role as irresistibly handsome and charming or delve into the realm of slash fiction

---

[85] The increase in visibility can be seen in his inclusion in the upcoming *Avenger*'s sequel, of which he wasn't planned to be a part of, and his new ongoing comic series . . . his first ongoing title in his 50+ years of publication.

by pairing him up with Chris Hemsworth's portrayal of Thor.[86] These images range from explicit to more PG-13 modes of affection; however, regardless of tone, Hiddleston-as-Loki is depicted and those depictions hinge on his sex appeal. Even when the images are not blatantly portraying Hiddleston-as-Loki as a body to be viewed, the fandom's discussion and positioning of the image makes sure to reference his (Hiddleston's) handsomeness, charm, or appeal.[87]

Figure 2.8 Sample Loki's Army-Produced Images

While these representations of Hiddleston-as-Loki focus on his appeal, other images often eroticize and more blatantly sexualize him—especially in the context of Loki's relationship to Thor. While mainstream comics have at times tackled the issue of homosexuality within the actual published pages of their work, the coupling of Thor and Loki still seem subversive.[88]

Figure 2.9 Sample Thorki

---

[86] There are many variations of this such as Hiddleston/Hemsworth pairings sans the characters they play.
[87] And these hard-to-quantify traits like charisma often get muddled in the continual conflation of seemingly nice Tom Hiddleston and manipulative bad guy Loki.
[88] Slash fiction need not be a reference to homosexuality or a fantasy thereof. It has often times been seen as a way to portray power dynamics and express resistance to cultural norms as fans play with the canon they're given.

Even considering that Loki has at times been portrayed as women, his gender-mutability a key element to his role as eternal trickster god, it is unlikely such depictions are the anticipated or expected response Marvel sought from fans who enjoyed the Thor-Loki relationship, be it filmic or comic. The images of Thorki [slash representations of the two Asgardian characters] represent a range of implied possibilities between the characters--from romantic longings to more explicit imagery. That such imagery exists on such a scale speaks to another element of how this fandom operates as subversive. It constructs characters long-possessed by the realm of the male fanboy and plants them firmly in the realm of slash fiction, an arena convincingly argued as a queer female space. Kristina Busse says of slash fiction,

> … fandom, with its greater tolerance, has often been a place for women to explore and negotiate issues of sexuality by reading and writing their desires, by acknowledging and sharing sexual preferences… slash in particular raises particular issues of identity and sexualities: women writing fantasies with and for one another projected through and by same-sex desires suggests that fandom may be a queer female space – if not at the level of text and writers, then at least at the level of their interaction (2988).

While one could contend that fandom as a whole shouldn't be construed as a queer female space based on the prevalence and accepted nature of slash works within it, it can least be said to entertain that space or, potentially, encourage it. Loki's Army fandom did not introduce slash works to comic fandom, but the popularity of Hiddleston-as-Loki and the size and diligence of the ensuing fandom has made the eroticism of these male characters more prevalent than ever before.[89] The Hiddleston-as-Loki portrayal is the motive force for these representations, and thus it can be assumed female desire often plays a part in these depictions. This is a reasonable assertion because the fandom, as noted above, is rife with claims about his appeal and fan productions of Loki in general eschew the long-established Loki, portrayed in the comics as a thicker, older man in favor of a version modeled after Hiddleston.[90]

---

[89] This is not to say there isn't or hasn't been other types of Avengers slash, just that the slash fiction hasn't threatened Iron Man or Captain America's status as male-coded comic hero in the way it has recoded Loki as belonging to 'fangirls'—a dismissive term that genders the production as for women primarily.

[90] There are likely other components motivating this fandom, such as the inversion of authority and remixing of canon productions—however, given Hiddleston-as-Loki's immediate rise and the fairly constant referencing of his physical appeal, the fandom is admittedly largely preoccupied with him as a place for desire.

Regardless if the imagery is slash-oriented or not, the underlying current remains the same—Hiddleston-as-Loki is presented as a sexual object or being. Loki's Army fan fiction carries this thread as well. Regardless of the plot, or genre, Loki's Army, by and large, crafts stories that inevitably position Loki as sexual. In Cat Winchester's fanfic "Every Villain is a Hero," the author crafts a 14 chapter story that picks up on the threads of the first Avengers' movie. It details action, suspense, and the comedy the Marvel Cinematic Universe is becoming known for. At the center of the tale is Lisa, a telepath, who becomes bonded with Loki as he challenges, and occasionally works with, the Avengers to find his missing brother, Thor. For more than half of the large piece, Lisa finds Loki obnoxious and evil, but bit by bit, the character becomes more humanized. She eventually becomes romantically involved with Loki, and the remainder of the chapters sees her discuss the character in a more sexual manner. After a scene in which Loki displays how strong even average Asgardians are to humans, Lisa and Loki engage in the following telepathic dialogue:

> Lisa shuddered, "I'm suddenly thinking that rough sex wasn't such a good idea."
> "You needn't worry; I haven't broken a paramour yet."
> "Well gee, that makes me all warm and snuggly inside."
> Loki gave a mental chuckle (Winchester).

Many of the non-slash fan fiction stories perform the similar maneuver of placing a female lead at the heart of the story and having them develop an idealized relationship with Loki. This is not an unexpected move. Fan fiction has long been characterized as primarily being written by women for women and often sees female characters assume a heroic protagonist role and all the tropes that entails. Additionally, it's been characterized as open and never being "delimited properties with definite borders that can be transgressed" (Derecho 908). It is also preoccupied with bodies—acknowledging both that fan fiction is invested in physicality and also relies on reader's intimate knowledge of the body and voices of pre-existing characters (Coppa 3243). Francesca Coppa argues that fan fiction becomes preoccupied with sex because it focuses on knowledge of bodies as an entrance point into the work. Such knowledge, Coppa says, is knowing who the characters already are, how they are supposed to

speak, look, act, etc. Having an unknown, a narrator the reader can then identify with, makes sense. The why of sex—that is why does sex drive fan fiction—is still debated. However, the answer isn't directly pertinent to the operation of Loki's Army's resistant subversion of comic culture as the fact that these productions directly intertwine female desire and sexual power with the male-dominated field of superhero fandom.

These depictions of Loki, whether he is in a tryst with Thor or not, challenge comic culture—not as overtly as Hawkeye's Initiative, but just as powerfully. Not only do they transgress a longstanding character and depict him in non-canonical ways, they make the character a vehicle for certain superhero fans to explore desires and power dynamics. The latter is just as important as the former, if less evident. Since it is unlikely that Marvel or Disney would officially position Loki as sexually as his army does, the fans are exerting a sort of 'non-approved' fan production. It is not canonical, it is not coded as male, and it relies more on Loki's multi-modal representation than his traditional form. But, by laying claim to him in this way, Loki's Army has essentially made the version of Loki their own—and they've largely made him the predominantly understood version of Loki. There has been a noticeable trend on message boards and fan sites that Loki has been fangirled—that is the character has a sense of being removed from the traditional fandom which codes as male and placed in this new fandom which codes as female.[91] This essentially means that a contingent of traditional superhero comic fans are now exercising a thought process that understands a comic book-generated character as belonging to fandom other than theirs; it is a process that not only reinforces chapter one's take on weakened media barriers but also acknowledges the many intra-fandom tensions at play. The work of Loki's army, then, is not just an act of subverting the character, it is an exertion of a fandoms' power on the broader spectrum of superhero fans.

---

[91] Fangirl carries with it a certain unfair, gendered connotation of the overly-involved fan or the screaming fans of pop culture phenomena like *Twilight* films or certain bands. Its use genders a fan object, but it also serves as an unflattering oppositional to the fanboy—the geeky overly-involved male fan who knows too much minutia.

And, this exertion of power has had some real, discernible, material effects. If the important takeaway from The Hawkeye Initiative is that it is a direct challenge to the industry, the important takeaway from Loki's Army is that, by and large, it presents as disinterested with changing the industry since via fan production one can circumvent said industry and create what the fan wants. Yet, thanks to its steady stream of fan production and abundance of followers, Loki's Army has clearly affected change in the industry. Hiddleston himself is clearly aware, as is Marvel, of his legion of fans.[92] His increased appearance in the second Thor movie, *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), has been attributed, at least in part, to the studio's acknowledgment of the character's charisma and popularity. In a recent *New York Daily News* article on Hiddleston's Loki, it is acknowledged that the character was never intended for even the three films he's appeared in; "The popularity of Hiddleston's slick trickster started eclipsing the above-the-marquee heroes …"Free Loki" T-shirts and "Loki Is My King" signs overran San Diego Comic Con. So much so that it's likely Marvel is going to feel compelled to bring him back to put the universe in peril at least one more time - even if it's not in a third "Thor" movie" (Sacks).

It is not only superhero films being affected, but the publishing side has course-corrected as well. Hiddleston's portrayal and its fans clearly inform the most recent Loki series, Al Ewing and Lee Garbett's *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, both in appearance and personality. The Loki of this series is younger and thinner than the muscled-middle aged man he's often been represented in the comics as; bears a striking resemblance to slightly de-aged Tom HIddleston. And, while he still has machinations upon machinations, he serves Asgard and his mother in a similar vein as his role in *Thor: The Dark World*—less a villain, more a sympathetic anti-hero. Just as blatantly as restructuring his appearance and his modus operandi, Marvel has clearly taken to catering to the property's biggest fans—Loki's Army. The first issue of Agent of Asgard alone references Loki writing slash fiction and contains some of the female-desire-

---

[92] Not only is he aware, he has at times, like 2013 Comic-Con very much played to his fandom. The intersection of celebrity and fandom here is interesting because it is inarguable Loki's Army has helped Hiddleston's career.

driven images that Hemsworth and Evans present in the movies, with Loki shirtless and near nude largely for the pleasure of the viewer—Loki goes speed-dating, he takes a luxurious shower, etc.

Figure 2.10 Marvel Now Loki (Garbett, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* #1, 2014)

The plot itself speaks to this shift in Loki-fandom. The Hiddleston-inspired younger Loki wages a series long battle with himself…except his opponent is more in line with the traditional comic book representation of the character—older, sinister, and sneering. Over the course of the series, the two Loki's wage a war of authentication; it is a battle to determine if the new Loki can ever be anything besides the older version of himself he is combating. The older self constantly decries the Hiddleston-modeled version and reminds him that no matter what the younger Loki is now he will always become the older Loki.

Figure 2.11 (New Loki v Old Loki (Garbett, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* #12, 2015)[93]

---

[93] The older, non-Hiddleston-inspired Loki says here, "I think it's time I told it to you. The story that turns you into me. The story of why you can never be anything but me" (Ewing).

It is quite difficult not to read these representations as an allegory for the battle taking place for Loki's fandom, specifically the ceding of Loki as a character to something like Loki's Army. Hiddleston-as-Loki's appearance at San Diego Comic-Con is warmly received by a large female fanbase, his increasingly prevalent depictions on the internet that are couched in languages referring to his cuteness or appeal, and his very presence is a reminder that female fans have secured a part of the ongoing superhero fandom stake.

That Hiddleston's popularity as the character propels such important financial decision again speaks to the power of Loki's Army. And the backlash to this, meme's that decry the only reason women went to see the *Avengers* is to see Loki or that the new Loki ongoing comic series is "meant for the fangirls" suggest that the character is now perceived as the subject of fans like Loki's Army. That Loki has become for a certain segment of comic fans the character that proves, problematically to them, female fan's marked inroads into comic culture is reminiscent of Jonathan Gray's positioning of the anti-fan's relationship to a fandom; Gray says anti-fans are not , "against fandom per se, but of those who strongly dislike a given text" (70). That text is Loki. Motivated by the fact that female fans now matter, and that Loki is their perceived flagship, a certain segment of fans constantly deride the character, yet, their derision is modeled in the anti-fan mode. Gray sees in the anti-fan someone who has to find fault with "something" (71); this means they still master the language of the fandom so they can express dislike. For people trying to position Loki's appeal to women as problematic, it often boils down to all the changes I enumerated above, "Was expecting a Tumblry fanfic-y/slashfic-y take on "handsome" Loki, hoping to read it and never get my hands in any future issues... Found all that" says one comic reader (Grey). Others derided the comic book series decision to ape Hiddleston directly; and, of course, a great number of fans enjoyed it, as well. That Loki's Army and fans of the new version of the character are facing an anti-fan backlash not only highlights the innate resistance female (or coded-as-female) fans have getting into the genre, it also validates the fandom as existing.

And it is this principle of pleasure-seeking that serves as Loki's Army's mode of resistance. By passionately practicing and producing their fandom for their beloved iteration of the character, these fans have evaded hegemonic intent. Loki was likely not intended to create a female following online, but he has. And that following, in its pursuit of pleasure, has made the character a sex symbol of sorts; while Superman, Thor, Captain America, and others have always been idealized men, they've rarely been cast as the center of female fan desire and consequently been reconfigured to appeal to that desire. Loki is now; Loki's Army's positioning him in such a manner has upset the status quo. And, not just of the comic industry which must respond to the whims of their consumers, but it has also upset the norms of seemingly male-coded comic culture, who in their outcry at 'fangirl's' attachment to the character can only view Loki as a Lothario-type character for tween girls instead of realizing he is actually an agent for women to finally practice some agency in realm of comic culture.

FEMALE SUPERHERO FANDOMS: NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

The examples of The Hawkeye Initiative and Loki's Army clearly indicate that contemporary female superhero fandoms are engaged in resisting long-standing patriarchy of both superhero production and superhero fandoms-at-large. Regardless if these fandoms are directly challenging the industry or more focused on practicing their fandom as a mode of pleasure-seeking, female superhero fans are aligning themselves against decades of traditional misogyny and poor representation. These fan productions are linked to changes in the industry and they clearly challenge the perception of the fandom and culture as male-coded. However, that they are happening doesn't answer why they are happening now.

The best way to answer this question is to likely revisit the claims that Gabilliet made regarding why the industry shifted away from women in the first place. Gabilliet's argument largely hinges on two, now untrue, claims. He contends that comics are pre-occupied with stories of violence and action that mimic other male genres like sci-fi and detective stories and that the comic book store is a male

space dedicated to perceived male activities like collecting and speculation. Superhero comics are still tied up with action scenes and cartoonish, and sometimes visceral, violence. However, modern superhero comics have seen a turn away from the dark, brooding comics of the '80s and the overwrought caricatures of the '90s to return to a sense of fun and joy as a stabilizing fulcrum of the genre. Gabilliet wasn't wrong to mention comics were going away from most women in the '70s. It takes only a cursory glance at the new series of that decade to see an emphasis on gritty sci-fi apocalyptic fiction like *Deathlok* and *Killraven* replacing more camp superheroes from the '60s and earlier. Additionally, as the Comics Code Authority weakened, creators felt capable of doing more and, in the immediate years afterwards, likely pushed the envelope just to do so (Howe 112-123). While this emphasis on violence and grit still has a legacy, and truly fueled much of the superhero work of the '80s and '90s, today's mainstream superhero comics offer a number of different genres to sample—not all of which are considered as historically unfriendly or obfuscating to female audiences. The even better point to be made about the variety of genre is that it represents a casting about for new audiences in general—a process that destigmatizes the longstanding perceived maleness of superhero comics to an extent by seeking to supplement it. Marvel's *Superior Foes of Spider-Man* is a "humor-driven series" (Truitt 2013). DCs *Superman/Wonder Woman* offers "love, superhero style" (Truitt 2014). Additionally, instead of turning to darker, more 'male' genres, comics now own the fact they are part of a larger multimedia family. As with the aforementioned example of *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, superheroes are often being brought in line with their filmic, and more broadly-appealing, representations. In fact, Marvel has released continuity-free volumes of Thor, Spider-Man, and others to coincide with the releases of the character's respective films simply to entice those film viewers who may have enjoyed the movie but find the prospect of comics daunting.

But, Gabilliet's concern that the industry had turned away from women still perpetuates the prevailing perception that women can't enjoy superhero violence or other tropes of the genre. The sales

figures and responses to *Thor*, *Captain Marvel,* and others suggest that isn't the case. Captain Marvel's inaugural issue sees her going toe-to-toe and beating Absorbing Man, a heavyweight villain who often tussles with the Hulk. The female Thor's first few issues see her trouncing Frost Giants, saving the Avengers, and humbling the original male Thor in combat. While there is obviously a male audience for these books, just like there is a female audience for, say, Batman books, it is more likely that the way in which the industry truly turned away from the female reader wasn't by removing romance books, it was by perpetuating practices that stymied their entry into the genre. If one of the joys of superhero reading is playing at being a hero, a landscape bereft of engaging female characters is sure to stymy female readership. But, as Hawkeye and Loki suggest, male characters could provide a space for female fans, as well. The key isn't same-gender, one-to-one identification; it is creating a book that doesn't stigmatize femininity as either only passive or sexualized while also constantly idealizing masculinity as powerful.

Regarding Gabilliet's second point, the comic shop is increasingly becoming less of the primary 'space' for superhero fandom. Thanks to the ubiquity of digital comics and online comic ordering, readers no longer even need to attend a shop to pursue their favorite characters.[94] The move to the internet both for purchasing and reading one's comics, but also for engaging in fan discussions, clearly mitigates the notion that the comic shop is an insurmountable obstacle for the enterprising female fan. In fact, the reader-friendly nature and their increasing presence may in fact be the first interaction many female fans now have with the object of comic books.

Additionally, Gabilliet's take doesn't account for the mainstreaming of comic culture, like the rise of the convention, namely San Diego Comic-Con (which drew only ~5,000 attendees per year in the '80s but now draws over 130, 000), and the prevalence of the superhero today. Even if the comic book store was still the primary physical space for engaging with comic fandom, the notions of comic

---

[94] As evidenced by the fact that digital comic sales are the largest non-gaming purchase made on tablets and smartphones. A trend obviously acknowledged by Amazon Inc. which purchased Comixology, the largest seller of digital comics, for an undisclosed amount in late 2013.

speculation and collection have long since dwindled in importance; Gabilliet himself chronicles the 1990s as the apex of the speculator's market. Collection still exists, but the concept is rarely tied to an economic model or fiduciary investment that would make the comic book shop the realm of 'men.' In fact, stripped of any real underpinnings, the comic book shop continues to present as 'male' largely because the demographics of purchasers are male and the stereotypical image of a superhero fan is male.[95]

Were just the barriers of speculation and collection faltering at the same time as the collective space of reading, discussing, and exploring comics growing (both physically and metaphorically), it would likely be enough to explain why female readership and advocacy is on the rise. But, Loki's Army is evidence of another entry point – multimodal versions of superhero characters. While superheroes have long populated radio shows, cartoons, and licensed merchandise, only the past 15 years has seen them truly take off as films. Today's comics are created in the massive shadow their filmic counterparts cast. The success of these films may not always correspond to more comic purchases, as Loki's Army's focus on Hiddleston instead of the pre-existing comic version suggests, but it undoubtedly brings attention and fans to superheroes who may not otherwise engage with them. Loki's Army is an example of how multi-media outlets have not only created new superhero fans but also, in some cases, divorced superhero fandom from comic fandom in a sustained manner. Loki's Army is, then, also an example of how contemporary female fandoms are no longer barred by the shifting tenor comics acquired in the years following 1970.

As suggested at points throughout this chapter, the fact that contemporary female superhero fandoms are starting to influence the industry and present themselves as fully invested fans of the superhero genre has garnered varying levels of backlash. This blowback not only characterizes the means in which female fans very presence in the fandom is resistant, it also attempts to ghettoize

---

[95] And, again, Gabilliet's accounting of collecting as a male code could be challenged.

female fandom as something other than normal comic fandom. Such a move is purely jingoistic; it reads these female-dominant fandoms wrong. Loki's Army may produce slash fiction, but they also produce comic reviews, engage in forum discussions, and try to theorize what might happen next in the MCU just as any other contemporary superhero fan-spot provides outlets to do. The same can be said of the creative forces behind The Hawkeye Initiative—Noelle Stevenson, a cofounder, is currently working for Marvel. Yet, a vocal contingent won't allow these female fans easy entrance into the broader superhero fandom. Being forced to assume a resistant stance and being asked to, whether directly or not, defend your gender as a reader still separates female comic fans from fully exploring their fandom and taking pleasure in some of the rote manifestations of comic culture – authoritative discussion characters, arcs, and creators.[96]

Comics are as guilty, and likely no more so than any other medium, in their failings to depict women fairly (both as characters and fans). Yet, it is the intimacy of their reading—the unique sense of roleplay Chapter One explores—and the purporting of their characters as ideal and heroic that seems to make their treatment of woman particularly disrespectful. So the resistance of female comic fans becomes a necessary burden. On one hand, these discussions must be had so that female fans can fully engage with their fan objects. And, on the other hand, these discussions reveal such an underlying, previously underexplored sexism in superhero stories and fandoms that they seem to, rightfully, accuse the status quo, and thus traditional superhero fans. Ultimately, cohesion of fandoms isn't necessarily needed or warranted, but it seems like being inclusive and validating of female fans is. And, cohesion would signal the acceptance of these resistant fandoms into the fold in a way that acknowledges everyone's enjoyment of the fan object—the superhero story—instead of the need to defend the genre against its validated detractors.

---

[96] This is not to suggest they cannot or do not do these things, just that there is always the lurking possibility someone may try to invalidate them based on their gender instead of some other, more fandom-centric criteria.

I cannot hope to judge when and if the intra-fandom sexism will die down; but, I can, and have throughout this chapter, suggest the industry has begun opening its doors to female audiences in a meaningful and pronounced way. They are, after all, paying customers. This, of course, begs the question as to whether or not these resistant fans are actually becoming free laborers for the patriarchal hegemony (i.e. the comic publishers or Disney and Warner Bros). Capitalism co-opts, after all. One might contend it is natural that the response of the comic publishers to the challenges and influences of these fandoms has been to give them what they want—to market to them. In the case of Loki, that is more Hiddleston, more Loki books, etc.. In the case of more direct challenges and resistance, it is an increased number of books headlining female characters, less emphasis on impractical sexiness line-wide, etc. And, to an extent, such appeasement works. The site DC Women Kicking Ass is doggedly feminist and proactive in its stance on the comics industry. The author recently released an article stating,

> As someone who has been writing and arguing about the potential of the female audience for superhero comics four plus years, I was very interested to see this [in a Marvel press release]: *This female THOR is the 8th title to feature a lead female protagonist and aims to speak directly to an audience that long was not the target for Super Hero comic books in America: women and girls.* Say what? I'm sorry what was that? Is Marvel actually saying they want female readers? That they are now targeting female readers? Why yes they are. It's almost worth the amount of trolling, attacks, rape threats and other shit I've experienced to see this… Something has changed at both publishers. Is it real? Will it last? Who knows? (Sue 2014).

While I've contended here the 'thing that's changed' is the pressure put on the publishers by female fans, DC Women Kicking Ass, The Mary Sue, and others have warmed up to and praised Marvel for its recent publishing moves. But, it begs the question of how calculated this is. For some scholars, like Laura Ouellette and Julie Wilson, it actually begs the question if engaging in fan production like this isn't actually a form of affective labor, a sort of busyness that sates the fan's drive to influence the fan object while not actually changing anything. While their work focuses on fans of Dr. Phil, their overall argument may apply. The authors state, "women's 'interactivity' can be mobilized as a gendered requirement' and that such active, 'neoliberal' involvements with their fandom potentially, "prohibits the fleeting pleasures and temporary distractions associated with earlier phases of domestic labor, such

as soap operas and romance novels" (Wilson 549).[97] Ouellette and Wilson see women conflating pleasure with labor, and although their work is centered on an already female-gendered fandom and focuses on how they may extend the traditional domestic labor women already perform into their lives as fans, the framework may bear fruit. After all, one way to characterize all of the above actions of female superhero fans is to call it work. Gradually shifting superhero comic culture, in this arena, and the toll of engaging with a fan culture that at times subjects one to accusations must no doubt be taxing and at times feel more laborious then pleasurable. Despite these potential pitfalls, the resistant fan model does produce change and empower the fandom in a way that is hard to monetize simply because the data isn't available. Are publishers marketing to women as appeasement? If so, is that problematic, or is it useful because it also makes their product, superheroes and their themes, more accessible?

Regardless if it is actual labor or not, superhero culture and industry has foisted upon its female fans an unavoidable burden of resistance. The better handling of female characters and the more direct outreaches to potential female fans, market-driven cash grabs or not, wouldn't be happening were it not for the pressure this resistance puts out. And it is not just the changes in industry, the release of new books that should be noted, it is the discussions on social media, in the comments section of every review of *Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* and *Loki: Agent of Asgard*—it is in those places we see the resistance manifest against the larger superhero fandom. The discussions of gender and the female influence on this current wave of comics, no matter how contentious, play out more directly between fans than they do between producer-and-fan. And, while the changes in fan production are notable because they introduce new or revised products, the fan culture is undergoing a shift – popular comic sites often have male and female columnists, run pieces on gender in superhero comics, and, most importantly, have begun to decry publicly arguments against increased female participation in comic culture.

---

[97] This prohibition of pleasure doesn't jive with Loki's Army, but seems similar to the approach of The Hawkeye Initiative. In the latter, the emphasis is on highlighting the faults of the industry and fandom instead of pursuing your enjoyment of superheroes. However, it is likely that sharing on The Hawkeye Initiative is its own source of pleasure too.

There is still work to do—where is the female superhero on the big screen?[98] Where is the next wave of female creators?[99] Why aren't fans of other properties taking note of The Hawkeye Initiative's model and challenging their own favored property? One would hope that as this movement continues, as its forms of resistance and subversion diversify, that it would spread, both to other fandoms and, then, into other content producers' industries. While the efficacy of these fandoms seems strong, their relative newness calls into question their reproducibility. They've experienced backlash, and continue to do so. Though they've begun to affect change in the publications of superheroes, the term is still synonymous with male fandom. Yet, as things change, as more girls and women engage with superheroes, regardless of how, where, or in what form, one can hope they identify with them freed of the barriers Gabilliet noted of the '70s or Pustz mentioned of comic culture. In short, the female superhero fandom's battle isn't over, but the initial skirmishes have proved encouraging—it is not hard to envision a future that is similar to comic's ancient past as a form of entertainment for both men and women. Acknowledging these fandoms' true effect then may have to wait 20 years or so when these publishing initiatives and fan cultures will have hopefully produced a culture that encourages young, female readers to become invested superhero comic fans of the next generation. Perhaps, someone like young Rowan Hansen, an 11-year old who recently wrote to DC asking for more female characters in books and reminded them, and everyone, that "Girls read comics and they care" (Bender).

[98] Coming 2019 – Captain Marvel!
[99] Admittedly, there is an upward trend here; one worth tracking.

Chapter 3: Flame [War] On! The Superhero Genre's Invocation of Race to Address Adaptation Anxiety

"*Because these are established characters, not just a movie. They've been established for 50 years. Please explain why characters that have lasted for 50 years and have a huge fan following need to drastically changed.*" Confounded Society, an internet commenter, arguing against Jordan's casting.

"*I can see everybody's perspective, and I know I can't ask the audience to forget 50 years of comic books. But the world is a little more diverse in 2015 than when the Fantastic Four comic first came out in 1961.*" Michael B. Jordan, a black actor, defending his casting as the Human Torch, a white superhero, in the 2015 *Fantastic Four* film (Jordan).

Perry White is a fictional character in the DC Comic Universe. He is the editor of *The Daily Planet* and made his first appearance in *Superman #7* (1940). He is a Caucasian newspaper man and has been portrayed in over 40 different media adaptations as an approximately 50-year old white male. However, in *Man of Steel* (2013), the latest Superman film, he was portrayed by a black actor, Laurence Fishburne. Nick Fury is a fictional character in the Marvel Universe. He is an aging white spy who made his first appearance *Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos* (1963). While he's had fewer adaptations, he was eventually made black in Marvel's Ultimate line of comics, an attempt to modernize and update their line. This version of him has been depicted for the last 7 years by Samuel L. Jackson in the Marvel Cinematic Universe of films. The actor quoted above, Michael B. Jordan, will soon portray the Human Torch, a white character first appearing in *Fantastic Four #1* (1961) in the latest film adaptation of that series. These shifts in racial representation are defined by the term racebending—a process of changing a character's race as they are adapted from one medium to another.[100]

The dialogue surrounding racebending, both broadly and in its specific relation to the superhero genre, is contentious as this chapter's starting quotes might suggest. This discourse is often presented as the following dichotomy. One side champions recent changes that have seen established white

---

[100] Racelifting is another term, but I will use the slightly more popular term racebending throughout.

superhero comic book characters be cast by actors of color. This side often argues that such moves contemporize the superhero catalog while also aiming to be more inclusive and representative of the current superhero consuming audience.[101] Like Jordan suggests above, this argument characterizes racebending as an acknowledgment of, and address to, better representing and serving an increasingly acknowledged diverse audience.[102] The other side, most strongly voiced by fans who identify with the tradition and canon of superhero comic book universes, attempt to position the restructuring of race as a rewriting of characters they've grown to love, respect, and enjoy. Those who take this angle often go to great lengths to present their side as not invested in race or political correctness and instead defending the sanctity of, in the Torch's case, a half-century of storytelling. This discourse naturally abuts ongoing scholarly examinations into race and representational politics vis-a-vis superheroes, adaptation, and comic books. While I acknowledge the shared border between academic analyses of superheroes and race with the broader superhero fan communities' conversation of race and racebending, I'd argue most academic approaches focus on diagnosis and prescription. The former addresses the myriad ways the superhero genre has failed both its minority characters and audiences, and the latter places the burden of responsibility on the industry to actively change so as to mitigate these failings. While worthwhile and often providing excellent explorations of the superhero genre's, and comic medium's, interaction with racial issues, the focus of these inquiries often overlooks the fans' and industry's own dialogues on race and racebending. Thus, it fails to acknowledge the shape of this dichotomous discourse—that it is much, much more intertwined with canon, narrative tradition, and hashing out superhero comic book fans' investment in the superhero genre in light of its constant and wildly successful adaptation to film than it is with concerns of race and representation.

---

[101] An audience that, as earlier chapters have suggested, is no longer predominantly associated with the reading of comic books.

[102] To clarify Jordan's statements, today is not necessarily more diverse than it was 50 years ago, but media is more representative than it was decades ago thus creating the feeling today is more diverse.

Adaptation anxiety—a sort of apprehension regarding superhero comics ongoing acquiescence to film—is at the heart of fan discussions on racebending. These discussions are almost always their most heated when racebending happens as part of an adaptation process, and almost always, if begrudgingly so, accepted when they happen within the comic medium. Fans' who fight racebending primarily rely on invocations of canon. That these fans attempt to stabilize and reify canon in the dialogue surrounding racebent superheroes reveals not only a perceived hierarchy of superhero mediums, it also serves as a means for fans to practice and present their knowledge—a form of validating their own fandom via authoritative understanding of the superhero. While this chapter ultimately discards emphasis on canon as a rational reason for resisting racebending, it will also make clear the fans' fidelity to the notion of canon is the motivating factor for their statements, regardless of its actual impact on the topic of racebending. Furthermore, I will highlight the issues fans seemingly have with racebending are primarily only broached in light of impending adaptation to film; I argue despite the invocations of race to broach canon, fans are more often using said canon not to argue against racebending specifically but as a symptom of rampant adaptation . Although, I frame the superhero-racebending discourse as primarily concerned with an anti-adaptation sentiment, I will also address the means in which the discourse itself actively hinders any real progress or purposeful racial discourse as it pertains to the superhero genre because it co-opts all the dialogue back towards a relationship with canon. The discourse makes race subservient to story.

This is unfortunate because, as many scholars have noted, the superhero canon has long had difficulty in treating characters of color with the care or effort they've provided white ones. It is unfortunate that the dialogue of race and superheroes is co-opted to address certain fans' wariness of ongoing adaptations' effects on the fandom of superhero comic readers. However, it is important to frame this discourse as it truly exists—an ongoing discussion that superficially addresses racial concerns vis-à-vis superheroes, and thus underserves it, that actually is a series of poorly articulated fan

complaints aimed at the adaptation processes' diminishing of the niche comic reading superhero fan and elevation of the rapidly expanding multimedia superhero consumer. The real fear, and thus the motivating force for these specific fans conversation on racebending in the superhero genre, is not Human Torch being black but a pervading sense that superhero fandom is transferring to the hands of the Other—not the nonwhite body, but the nonfan's immediate access to the previously unintelligible world of superhero fandom.

This chapter will examine this process, but will do so with an eye on how fan dialogues often position race less as an issue unto itself and more as a rhetorical tool that opens up a means to revere or, admittedly less often, deconstruct superhero comic book narrative traditions in an era that is seeing the genre and medium becoming increasingly separated from each other. To that end, the chapter will unfold in a three parts each building towards creating framework for the above. First, it contextualizes the racebending issue as a visible signal of adaptation and its interplay with fan's concerns about change. In so doing, it highlights both fans' attachment to a reified notion of canon despite how blaringly malleable and loose the concept actually is. This undefined nature of canon makes it a poor defense against racebending and the admission of this propels the chapter forward. Next, it draws on examples of the fan discourse to emphasize how quickly race, even when it is invoked and addressed, is discarded in favor of making racebending an issue centered on the changing of canon; in so doing, it also examines the way that such rhetorical moves stagnate the implied discourse on race by framing a host of very real concerns that have become inaccessible because the dialogue is so co-opted towards adaptation and canon concerns. And, finally, the paper returns Jordan's casting as a way to both tie tight the interplay between fan concerns of adaptation and racial issues in the superhero genre and also

position anxiety over adaptation as an element that can contribute to ongoing adaptation theory and research.[103]

CONTEXTUALIZING RACEBENDING, CANON, AND CONTEMPORARY ADAPTATION THEORY

Adaptation anxiety is a subtext of racebending discourse that seems specific to the superhero genre; after all, racebending has a long tradition in cinema and there is a longstanding, ongoing conversation surrounding the practice itself. Defined most briefly as the changing of race from an original story in its adaptation to a new medium, the practice has existed in Hollywood since the early era of studio films. In its most blatant and critically admonished form, racebending has been a practice which maintains a white status quo by providing key roles of color to white actors. Early examples of this would be Boris Karloff's portrayal of Fu Manchu in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932) or Rudolph Valentino's portrayal of Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan in *The Sheik* (1921). Even setting aside the very material racial concerns of this practice-primarily the way it excludes people of color from working in film and its heavy emphasis on stereotyping—the use of white actors to portray nonwhite characters produces powerful racial tensions.[104] Eric Lott's work regarding how whiteness has interacted with the notion of adopting other races via blackface, yellowface, etc. in the seminal *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1994) contends that these practices force "us to confront the process of racial constructions itself, the historical formation of whites no less than blacks" (476). Lott's spin isn't a positive one, per se; however, it adds to the material concerns a theoretical possibility that practices like blackface or racebending were actually attempts to constitute and explore, or idealize, whiteness

---

[103] Although this chapter heavily invests in a discussion of race and superheroes, it does so with the purpose of focusing on what motivates said discussion and its fallout. It doesn't fully broach the politics of representation, history of race and the comic book medium, or the call for contemporization that many scholars see racebending performing. This is not to discount the validity of these arguments; also, the absence of these issues is not meant to absolve the superhero genre for so enduringly leaning into racial stereotypes and failing to promote nonwhite characters with the vigor they've done white ones. Nor is it meant to discount racism in the fandom. The chapter simply adheres to a reframing of the ongoing discussion in hopes that it opens up lines of rethinking what fan's concerns around the topic might actually be.

[104] Racebending often manifests as coarse stereotypes; film scholar Andrew Weaver notes in a broader piece on how a lead actor's race affects viewership that empirical studies exist which suggest simply portraying races in race-neutral lights (non stereotypical) "stereotype reduction can be successful" (370).

against a performed other. It also, Lott contends, admits a fascination of the American White male with

the black male, with blackface and similar practices being a mimicry innately caught up in "white men's

fantasized proximity to black men" (491). Lott's positioning isn't a justification for a continuation of

these practices; it is an exploration for how the practices might have arisen out of and also affected

white male's image of themselves, but it also underscores how complex the issue of racebending is.

While Lott focuses primarily on a close reading of John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* to reverse

engineer blackface as a historical process and the other examples above represent an era that employed

blackface or other makeup to disguise characters as a certain race, the trend continues today albeit in a

different form.[105] It is now more often accomplished by reworking the character's race instead of an

egregious use of makeup to alter an actor's race.[106] The most notable recent example of this is M. Night

Shymalan's *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2010); this film, adapted from a popular Nickelodeon cartoon

series, replaced the Asian and other ethnic leads with white characters. The whitewashing—a form of

racebending that removes characters of color for whites—of these characters led to a fan movement of

letter-writing, internet discussion, and protests.

This "Avatar" response, colloquially known as Aang Ain't White in reference to a protagonist

character, also led to the formation of Racebending.com, "an international grassroots organization of

media consumers who support entertainment equality," that breaks down most clearly and presently

the potential dangers of this practice. On one hand this group highlights the immediate and material

dangers of racebending, "this practice has a resultant discriminatory impact on an underrepresented

cultural community and actors from that community (reinforcement of glass ceilings, loss of

opportunity, etc.)." That is to say, racebending removes both the opportunity for work from actors of

color but also removes from minority audiences the pleasures of finding representation on the screen.

---

[105] Blackface in entertainment, while greatly diminished, still exists. The most recent, widely-seen example is Robert Downey Jr.'s performance as Kirk Lazarus, a white actor who dyes his skin black, in *Tropic Thunder* (2008).
[106] Instead changing a character's race, studios also cast actors whose appearance might be construed as another race – Jake Gyllenhaal's performance as the titular character in *Prince of Persia* (2010) is an example.

Due to this lack of representation, the organization contends "This practice minimizes the achievements and discredits the contributions people of color have made to American society." This happens primarily in films that purport to adhere to some historical or factual base; often minorities who played a pivotal roles in the real world events the film is attempting to depict are racebent towards a white actor in the filmic portrayal.[107]

Although this organization arose out of the Aang Ain't White movement affiliated with the *Avatar* series and primarily paints racebending as an issue predominantly associated with robbing representation and opportunity from people of color, their origin is intimately intertwined with the notion of canonicity, as well. Lori Lopez, a scholar who investigated the fan protests surrounding this controversy of whites being cast in Asian roles, argued that fans not only had the difficulty of defining who was Asian enough to be cast but also had the task of making canon real. As she notes, the *Avatar* series doesn't take place on earth, let alone Asia, it simply culturally appropriates "practices, architecture, religious iconography, costumes, calligraphy, and other aesthetic elements from East Asian and Inuit cultures" (431). In this process, Lopez notes a form of political blindness that manifested in the *Avatar* fans; they weren't originally angling for fairer hiring practices in Hollywood because "their goals often remain within the world of the text itself" (432). In short, Lopez contends originally the Aang Ain't White movement was focused on casting Asians because it was true to the canon not because it was motivated by racial injustice. More broadly this suggests that fans who actively address issues of racebending often do so because they are protective of and faithful to the established canon of their fan object. Lopez is continuing a line of logic that exists in the broader field of fan studies. Much of the work in the field acknowledges that fan activism may lobby for progressive change but it is almost always draws inspiration from the fan object itself. As Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport, fan and media scholars,

---

[107] The organization singles out the recent film *Extraordinary Measures* (2010) which chronicles the curing of a disease. In the movie, the hero is Dr. Stonehill, a fictional character played by Harrison Ford. In reality, the disease was largely cured by Dr. Yuan-Tsong Chen, an Asian physician.

put it, fans are usually motivated by "non-political … culturally-oriented and consumer-based claims" (220). In short, fans are most often motivated by and see themselves responding to the specifics of their fandom, not a broader political or social movement.

This parallels my contention that, despite appearances, superhero fans who discuss racebending do so out of a difficult-to-articulate connection to Lopez's "world of the text itself." Fans might be eager to see a faithful adaptation, but Lopez is also tapping a larger vein of fan studies work—fidelity to canon can be seen as the well-chronicled practice of fans exerting authority over their fan object and investing their fandom with a measure of validity. Jonathan Fiske, the culture scholar's whose work is fundamental to the formative investigations of fandom, claims that fans use their detailed knowledge of their favored fan object to exert an influence over the community or at least to demonstrate a certain intimacy with the object so as to have established their credentials as true fans. While such a move-say, constantly addressing an issue like Jordan's impending racebending of Human Torch in a public forum— clearly faces outwards and shows outsiders you are a fan, Fiske also says of this dynamic that knowledge "serves to distinguish within the fan community…those who have accumulated the most knowledge gain prestige within the group and act as opinion leaders" (43). Whether aimed outwardly to show one's fandom or inward to indicate mastery and authoritative fandom to other fans, fluency with canon and in-depth knowledge of it demarcates a level of fan involvement. It also serves as the primary motivation to make comments and interact with the fan object as opposed to some external reason or pressure to comment—not unlike what Lopez's analysis of the Aang Ain't White movement revealed.

Fan scholars see this mastery of canon as a jumping off point for fans to expand and play with the notion of their established fan object.[108] Henry Jenkins uses an oft-cited example of The Velveteen Rabbit to highlight how fans give life to the static, or supposedly controlled, official production by

---

[108] Such play might be creative like fan fiction or fan film, or more discursive like the stereotyped 'fanboy' discussion of who would in a battle between X & Y hero. Or, it might simply be commenting on canon in response to an article about racebending.

working with it—invoking it, studying it, using it to create something else, etc. He sums up the importance of fans giving life to their fan object, or as it pertains here to the animation of a given canon, eloquently, "The text is drawn close not so that the fan can be possessed by it but rather so that the fan may *more fully possess it*. Only by integrating media content back into their everyday lives, only by close engagement with its meanings and materials can fans fully consume the fiction and make it an active resource" (62). That the fan may 'possess' the fan object implicates Fiske's mastery as not only authority over the topic but some level of ownership, as well. Janet Murray's seminal *Hamlet on the Holodeck* makes a similar move and overtly suggests that canon is designed to be played with, saying it "assumes a sophistication on the part of the audience, an eagerness to transpose and reassemble the separate elements of a story and an ability to keep in mind multiple alternative versions of the same fictional world**"** (40). The notion here is that fan ownership is presumed in the production of a narrative because the fan's drive to master and mold their fan object is so pronounced as to be unavoidable. All of these scholars, and many, many more, imply that fans are caught up in canon—both as its master and its owner (at least occasional owner). Canon is, after all, the narrative that usually has inspired a fan reaction from them, and therefore it is the narrative they cite and use. But, these scholars also specifically acknowledge the next step—fans' interaction with canon by making it active, whether espousing it with other fans or using it creatively, is the process that provides them the closest engagement.

The chain of connection starts to become clear: racebending is, for fans at least, an issue to be addressed foremost because it is an adaptation; adaptation and canon are intertwined because the former alters the latter; and, this process reconfigures something the fan has mastered as a means of expressing their fandom and asserting authority over it. Ironically, Jenkins, Murray, and others might suggest that fans themselves often engage in a process of adaptation themselves as they uses canon to build and expand narratives and discourses off of the officially produced material. Given this sense of

play with canon, it isn't surprising to hear media scholar Alan McKee acknowledge, "canon is never absolute. Its definition is achieved by consensus within various groups, but it is never stable. It is always open to challenge, is different for different groups – and can, of course, change over time. And it is the fans, finally, who make those decisions. It is they who are ultimately the powerful ones" (183). However, both this admission and the irony of fans adapting canon themselves directly addresses the incongruity of fan's reliance on canon to dissect racebending adaptations. The canon is malleable and debatable and so is comic book identity.[109] This raises the challenge the chapter contends with–inquiries into superhero adaptations that racebend are driven by fans' fidelity to canon and their need to show ownership of it, yet the canon itself is malleable.

How, then, can fans logically invoke canon as a means of invalidating or validating racebending? The answer is, of course, they cannot. However, this doesn't mean they don't attempt to validate certain structures as canonical. That is to say, fans can cull from canon the essential qualities of a character, regardless where the character presents. Will Brooker's essential Batman serves as an example—"Batman is Bruce Wayne, a millionaire who dresses in a bat-costume and fights crime. He has no special powers but is very fit and strong, and very intelligent. He lives in Gotham City. He fights crime because his parents were killed when he was young. He is often helped by his sidekick, Robin. He fights villains like the Joker" (40). While I'd add white to Brooker's canonical Batman, the point stands that regardless of the malleability of canon, there often is a core concept that certain fans prefer remain immutable. Regardless, if Batman shows up in cartoon, comic book, film, or video game, the fact that he almost always possesses Brooker's noted traits suggest that he will be familiar to people regardless of the medium they encounter him in. Still, so focused are fans on the suspected supplanting of the canon—or representations of the canonical like Batman above—they've long mastered and manipulated

---

[109] The most recent issue of *Batman* (#41, Snyder, Capullo, 2015) sees Commissioner Gordon donning the batsuit. He is at least the 9th person to wear the costume. Canon is debatable in comics because of how fluid continuity is and because a trope of the genre is time travel and multiple dimensions; but, it is important to keep in mind how fluid identity is too.

by an easier-to-consume, newer, and further-reaching story, that it is likely this segment of fans neither notes the ways in which their resistance to racebending seems racist and stubborn. Nor do they appreciate, no matter how they might be able to condense canon, its malleability and subjectivity.

In fact, it is likely superhero fans' intimate familiarity with and the pleasure they derive from this malleable canon is what both motivates them to invoke it against adaptations but also overlook the potential harm and racist overtones it can strike. In his breakdown of comic fanboys and culture, Matthew J. Pustz says of these hardcore comic readers, "the limited access [non-readers have to superhero comics] promotes insularity and, to go along with it, a certain amount of postmodern self-referentiality that is the source of part of the readers' pleasure in comic books" (23). Pustz contends here that these fans take pleasure in the meta-awareness of their fan objects, and do so in a way that others cannot because they are not aware of how superhero comics work. Pustz sees this in the way that superhero fans get an enjoyment beyond the pleasure of the plot in material like Alan Moore's *Watchmen* as they can reflect on the way the story both deconstructs and elevates the genre they are familiar with – a pleasure the non-superhero fan could never get. Pustz, similarly cites comic readers response to the way that Chris Ware comics bend the use of visuals and graphics to play with comic book norms—a move that those who don't read comics regularly would overlook. And, so on. It is not hard to picture this 'insularity' and the pleasure derived influencing the way that fans themselves discuss superheroes. It is likely discourse born of such shared intimacy and of such a cloistered nature obfuscates engagement to outsiders—non-fans.

Furthermore, the fans' emphasis on 'self-referentiality' reflects Jonathan Fiske's claim that fan's detailed knowledge grants them pleasure and closeness to their fan object, but also validity and authority within the fandom itself. It's not enough to simply be able to cite the stories and plots; a fan also likely understands the tropes of superhero stories. For today's fans, superhero or not, one of the easiest ways to demonstrate such knowledge is to communicate it over the internet. Often such output

is relegated to particularly-labeled fan locales – forums, comment sections, and blogs dedicated to superhero fandom are many and varied. Fans might also take their comments and ideas to social media, but often do so with full knowledge the people they are following or are following them share some similar interests. In these places, fans can banter, argue, and discuss any number of superhero specifics—characters, plots, creators, current going-ons of the publishers—but, they can do so in ways that also speak to the malleability of canon and other meta-issues of the genre; in short, the cloistered nature of the discussion I reference being born from its insular nature is allowed here, to an extent, and taken as part of the dialect. However, much of this is inward facing. It is a re-creation of the comic book shop—a place where people share an affection for superheroes and can discuss or argue issues ad nauseum.

However, as adaptations increasingly garner attention and superheroes become more and more affiliated with films, superheroes increasingly become focal points for much a much broader-cross section of person than the superhero comic book fan. Comment sections in online magazines like EW, USA Today, etc. become forums for fanboys, or those fans with strong allegiances to the primacy of the comic medium for the superhero genre, to hold court and display their knowledge.[110] In these venues, discussions of self-referentiality, at least deep discussions of it, falter; it is likely, or at least assumed, the reader of a given *Hollywood Reporter* pieces is more interested in celebrity gossip or film news than superhero minutia. Thus, these discussions often fail to address canon as malleable, as defined above, and instead hammer on the ways that the adaptation is, well, adapting the story. In these outward facing forums, fans present canon as impermeable and important. It would seem that comic book alterations to the superhero narrative are expected and accepted, but it is the adaptation, the removal of the narrative from the element in which the fans have first mastered it (both as a historical entity and

---

[110] Many of these sites now have special 'geek' sections devoted to comics, video games, etc.

a medium-specific genre) that raises the ire. In doing so, canon and continuity shifts from a thing chided, mocked, or debated to a primarily rigid means of adjucating the validity of an adaptation.

So why the difference? Why does canon become so important at the moment of adaptation? It may go back to that notion of canon and self-referentially as ways of expressing ownership. Thus the motivation may come in the form of expressing authority—not just of the individual fan, but of the superhero comic reading fandom as a whole; after all, praising or incriminating a choice in an adaptation via a comparison to some canonical moment or theme is a sure display of knowledge and a sign that the comic readings superhero fan has some ownership stake in the character. In this light, it is neither surprising that certain superhero fans, like Confounded Society, rely on canon as a means to question racebending and do so in a way that makes canon seem impeachable. Racebending is a clear, uningnorable change to canon vis-à-vis the process of adapting a superhero comic character/plot for film. Due to the success of superhero films, it garners more widespread attention from the media than the month-to-month ongoings of superhero comic books themselves and due to its broader appeal and coverage by broader media entities, stories on racebending provide the fan commenter a larger, non-echo chamber place to demonstrate their 'true' fandom. Thus, we can see fan comments here as motivated both by a desire to reify the comic book superhero canon to the outsider and to express some measure of fan authority over the material before its co-option by other audiences. (potentially, even superiority to fans of the adaptation only).

This begs other questions though, too. If you understand your preexisting fans' stake in the genre's canon, why alter it? Why racebend and potentially aggravate your core fanbase in the first place? After all, the recent controversy surrounding *Avatar* indicates that Hollywood still has no qualms about whitewashing or racebending away from nonwhite representation (see also Scarlett Johansson' recent casting as the lead in the Japanese anime adaptation *Ghost in the Shell*). Why lean into a nonwhite performance of a traditionally white character? There is an argument to be made that Marvel,

and to a lesser extent DC, realize that at least appearing progressive helps de-stigmatize the superhero genre and generates mostly positive press. After all, the pre-existing superhero fan is probably buying a ticket regardless, and it is very possible that Marvel and DC adaptations incorporated black characters into their films in an effort to reach untapped and underserved segments of the marketing pie. These films already take some flak for presenting a predominantly white male world, thus any inroad against this is welcomed as progress. It is also indicative of a larger, albeit slowly moving, trend of Hollywood and television studios' acknowledgement that a modern economic model must respect the financial power of nonwhite, non-male audiences. Furthermore, and aside from its financial stakes, the superheroes' legacy of whiteness—white creators crafting white characters for a perceived white audience that led to a narrative universe in which nearly all the popular and established characters are white—is being bared in a very real, material, and expansive way. All of which threatens to lay bare the criticism "that hero can only mean white" (Williams).

Straddling this dichotomy of appeasement—established superhero fan vs new film fan—is difficult. The established fans have become masters of a realm, legacy, and the characters within. Some of these fans, as many fans do and as detailed above, have developed a sense of ownership over the superhero genre and can see that authority, and thus the claim to the fandom, slipping away in light of its mass appeal. It doesn't take racebending to incite their potential disapproval of a film—Heath Ledger's casting as the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008) was met with widespread scrutiny at first—but, racebending is a clear change that visibly and representationally invalidates the canon they've mastered while also, as detailed in the previous chapters, threatens to make the comic conform retroactively to the newer film versions. So while other issues may motivate fan responses to racebending, such as white males' worries about broader demographic changes or being emboldened by internet anonymity, it's the anxiety over adaptation that fuels the fire because it blatantly challenges canon in a way that is unmistakable and attention-grabbing.

What constitutes this adaptation anxiety is likely dependent on the fan and mixes issues of racism, white privilege, fidelity to a perceived representation of a character, internet anonymity, and reaction to an impending loss of the niche superhero fandom to a wider audience, but these outburst are much more prevalent when racebending becomes an issue of adaptation. When Sam Wilson, the African-American hero known as Falcon, took over for Captain America in *Captain America* (Vol 7, 2014) or Nick Fury ceded his name and title to a black character, few publicly decried the situation in the ways that the Michael B. Jordan casting has. Some of this might simply be a factor of film news garnering more attention than comic news, some of it might be attributed to the fact that in the comic-specific incidents it is black characters stepping into white roles as opposed to white characters becoming black, and some of it might be because comic fans, as addressed earlier, are familiar with the ongoing fluidity of identity – characters change costumes, aliases and outlooks as their never-ending stories progress. But, all those reasons validate a malleability of character so long as it is done within the comic book; the moment such a shift happens while crossing media borders, certain fans bare their fangs.

Racebending happens via adaptation and certain fans cling to canon despite the shared, fluid nature of the concept (and, the impossible to pin down nature of it regarding fictional superhero universes specifically). Motivated in part by fans' mastery and ownership of canon, contemporary discussions of racebending then are more fraught with concerns of adaptation than race. This is the barebones throughline of the above. Despite this claim, I do not want to suggest that fans do not or cannot have a political impact or agenda. Obviously via the formation of racebending.org, the Aang Ain't White movement has wrought a certain impact that now focuses on the more far-reaching effects of racebending. And, as Chapter Two details, fandoms like the Hawkeye Initiative contributors do not hide the fact they seek to change canonical representations because of political or representational inequalities. What this intertwining of racebending and canon as it relates to fans does suggest is that adaptation anxiety is as fundamental to this discourse as the adaptive process is to racebending

practice. And, this anxiety has supplanted actual issues of race and representation. This shades the discourse as racist not only because it precludes an earnest dialogue of real racial concerns but also because it is often illogical and does defend detrimental representation practices in the genre. The challenge this chapter takes on then is both framing the discourse as divorced from an intentionality of race and inescapably mired in a tangible issues of it. Racebending seen in the superhero genre today primarily casts long established white characters with black actors in film. But instead of applauding this introduction of diversity, the discourse is mired in the early state of the Aang Ain't White movement--it can't let go of canon to address the broader, more culturally impactful discussion of the genre's handling of race. Race does get invoked in multiple forms, but all approaches are simply rhetorical moves that quickly dismiss race in the rush to defend the integrity of superhero narratives.

Connecting racebending's history with the mutagenic nature of canon reveals not only how impotent of an argument canon is to use in a discourse on potentially progressive racial changes, but frame this discussion as one that hinges on notions of fidelity—a concern of adaptation scholars. In the examination of the fan discourse that follows this section, understanding fan's allegiance to canon as an understandable desire but an illogical argument underscores both the emotional connection that fandom produces to the mastery of the text and the potential harm such adherence conjures. If the above ties racebending concerns to notions of canon, which is in turn faulty, contemporary adaptation theory suggests fidelity to canon is impossible despite being perceived as desirable. It paints the racebending discourse, as it pertains to superheroes, as a struggle for fidelity in the face of a promised, unavoidable, soon-to-be-accepted-by-the-mainstream infidelity—the adaptation.

And, certainly, these filmic adaptations have already created an ecosystem unto themselves. They are commercial enterprises in their own right. They merit articles, critiques, and fans who are not intimately engaged with the superhero comic fandom. They engender discussions of celebrity, plot, summer blockbuster talk that isn't always tied back to their comic book origin. But, for the segment of

the fandoms who affiliate more deeply with superheroes as comic book characters, the broad and varied discussions of these films invariably returns to their status as adaptations of ongoing material. Many elements of the film—costuming, plot, casting, etc.—are compared to source material, and, in this broader view, one could assert that racebending must be subjected to a similarly narrow line of inquisition. As mentioned canon is difficult to pin down but that doesn't stop fans from trudging it out every time a filmic adaptation looms. After all, Confused Society's anti-racebending argument that the Human Torch is an established character of 50+ years who has a large fan following at this chapter's start is strikingly similar to a number of fan comments regarding every little change a film adaptation exhibits. Like fans arguing against the *Amazing Spider-Man* reboot's cavalier attitude towards Peter Parker's maintenance of his secret identity and use of the Lizard as a villain when "50 years of history behind him, and there's just some things that really shouldn't be tinkered with" (Cyclonus). Or fans bemoaning both Superman's darkened costume and moral stance in *Man of Steel* (2013) as unlike his longstanding comic representations.[111] In fact, that multiple writers like Schedeen or Outlaw even had to preface their arguments for the potential of racebending by first acknowledging what is essential to a superhero comic character suggests a preoccupation with cleaving as close to the source material as possible.

This is an issue that television writer, Brian Lowry, contends is the crux of adaptation, "Do the filmmakers "open up" the material, seeking to augment its accessibility to a wider audience while potentially alienating those most predisposed to see it; or do they rigidly adhere to the source, at the expense of preventing newcomers from feeling able to belatedly board the bandwagon?" The answer is performed on a case by case instance, and if one goes too far one direction they face the scorn of the fans, too far in the other . . . Lowry mentions Zach Snyder's *Watchmen* (2011), and critics and the

---

[111] For a brief moment after the film's release, the internet seemed to let up a collective gnashing of teeth in regards to Superman's brutal killing of General Zod—killing being a decidedly anti-Superman thing to do.

general public admonish the remake. Then again Lowry makes a special case for comic book adaptations due the vehement nature of their 'fanboys' – he contends adaptations that shift too far from the source will 'prompt howls of indignation' and that as the Ant-Man's, Guardians of the Galaxy, and Captain Marvels of the world prep for their big screen adaptations, the official producers need to be political and "court their base before they start wooing fringe voters." This appeasement of the fans likely helps mitigate bad word of mouth before the film's release and makes sure that said fans not only see the movie but potentially do some free advertising for the film.

Also, despite framing 'fanboy's as a particularly difficult group, Lowry is characterizing the fundamental processes of adaptation hinging on the capture of hard-to-pinpoint essential narrative elements of the source material. It can be difficult to note or discuss the ways in which Peter Parker has changed from his comic book self to his onscreen versions—though people, of course, do—but a change in race is a brash, bold, and immediately obvious departure from canon; one can contend that Andrew Garfield is poor casting as Peter Parker, but there is an obvious, visual rearrangement of who Human Torch is, visually, when played by an actor of color. It is obvious to non-superhero fans often too, likely making it an area where fans might be compelled to exert their *knowledge*, as Fiske coined it in his take on the cultural economy of fandom. Fans can debate and exert authority over one another when arguing if Peter Parker has a New York accent, but there is no arguing or debate regarding his race – he is white. Up to this point, this chapter has laid out the motivation for fans to debate this blatant change as adaptation anxiety while also trying to acknowledge some of the subtle racist work such adherence performs. But, as the chapter concludes I'd like to position this dialogue as part of contemporary adaptation theory.

On one hand it might seem odd to run what boils down to an argument of fans trying to preserve or validate racebending adaptations through adaptation theory because for much of the loose field's history it has held firm to the "assumption that each medium has a specific nature which invites

certain kinds of communications while obstructing others" (Kracauer 3). This is a take that is dismissive

to fan's ire about superhero racebending because it so clearly categorizes each medium as having its

own legacy and work to do. And, in a certain broad sense, this is true – people engage materially with

different mediums in different fashions; however, contemporary adaptation theory, increasingly faced

with an astonishing proliferation of mediums from which and to which narratives are getting adapted

has increasingly refuted this belief. Scholar Thomas Leitch in his takedown of the adaptation field of

study, "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory," suggests that because seemingly-medium

specific devices and tropes bleed into each other so readily it makes little sense to position one medium

as the home for a certain theme or artistic tool. Instead, he says of the non-material barriers we erect

between mediums is that they only seem to have media-specific "essentially distinctive properties,

[but] those properties are functions of their historical moment and not of the media themselves" (153).

As it pertains here, it validates having the debate for why things might get racebent in an adaptation

while also dismissing the notion that just because it was done at one point in time in one medium it

should be carried forward.

More specifically, Leitch dismisses the idea that "fidelity is the most appropriate criterion to use

in analyzing adaptations" as an outright fallacy—a crucial blow to fans who hold canon as the key

conceit in discussions of adaptation broadly and racebending specifically (161). As detailed above, canon

is malleable, and thus it is a poor weapon to use against adaptation—yet, fans still use it. This might

suggest that trying to break down the concept of faithfulness to a narrative as a weak argument or an

illogical approach would be no more effective than Jordan's reasoned approach to defending his casting

as a necessary step in diversifying the genre. However, Leitch's take deals less with how the specific

flexibility of canon invalidates its invocation and instead emphasizes that fidelity is "unattainable,

undesirable, and theoretically possible only in the trivial sense (161)." He compares it to translation and

notes the inevitable changes that happen; furthermore, he contends that even if an adaptation is done

in the same medium "the source text will always be better at being itself" (163)—all adaptations are going to be measured against the original, he contends, and each will be found wanting simply because it is impossible to be the same thing. Such, an approach to this particular discourse is fruitful because it finds life immediately – regardless of who was cast as the Human Torch, the actor would inevitably be compared to the perceived canonical form of the character.[112] But even this fairly narrow 'perceived canonical form' is subject to individual takes; given superhero comics lengthy narratives, fans are likely comparing him to a very particular, era-dependent version of Johnny Storm that they've encountered. Not only does an actor's inability to match the written version beg discussion and potential complaint, that each fan may have a different take on the canonical version also fuels discussion. Of course, as mentioned before, the one thing that all fans can agree on is that Johnny Storm isn't Black. Thus, these fans can fall into a form of lockstep that suddenly makes canon an applicable measure of debating the adaptation. To which Leitch might suggest that no matter the actor's color, they are still stuck making the same malnourished argument of comparing the adaption's fidelity to something that is absolutely impossible to recreate anyways.

Leitch and other adaptation scholar's might also see the adaptation anxiety as the motivating source for this discourse because of the prevailing sense that "source texts are more original than adaptations" (Leitch 162). Contemporary adaptation troubles this by examining how much current work is somehow an homage or adaption of something else, and often performs old narratives, concepts, and tropes in new and inventive ways. And, as Kyle Meikle's "Rematerializng Adaptation Theory" suggests "it is time for adaptation scholars to turn their attention away from the combination of texts to the combination of things" because every adaptation is taking cues from a number of inspirations (182). Nowhere is this more evident than in the works of comic book adaptations; these films scour and pick from decades and decades of comic stories to produce something that *works* for their film. More to the

---

[112] And this perceived canonical form would draw on the decades of Marvel's main *Fantastic Four* comics to suggest he should be white, blonde, charming, and immature a la Brooker's Batman.

point, acknowledging how little impact a single source has on an adaptation while also crediting adaptations as more than derivative steals some more wind from the argument that canon is infallible and that it's usage in these arguments is unimpeachable.

While the above might invalidate canon-adherence and adaptation anxiety as legitimate concerns to be raised in discussions of racebending, they should also be read as needing to be defined in such ways because fans so overwhelmingly adhere to them. As mentioned, mastery of canon—regardless of how loose the term is—represents a form of valid fandom. Using this fidelity to judge adaptations might be a fallacy, as Leitch suggests, but such judging allows fans to exercise notions of fan authority in an increasingly public and open sphere (despite the anonymity of the internet cloaking their true selves). What follows in the next section, is a close reading of many of the ways in which the racebending discourse presents across superhero fandoms; what is revealed is that even the level-headed fans are adhering to notions of fidelity and canon, and thus engaging in a protracted discussion of the relevancy of their fanhoods, and in turn co-opting potential avenues for discussing race in the superhero genre.

THE SUPERHERO FAN RACIAL DISCOURSE: TROUBLING & NOT REALLY ABOUT RACE

As I've mentioned, superhero discourse on racebending, that is discussions that tie the genre and the practice together, are always, overtly or subtly, responding to the impending/ongoing adaptation of superheroes. This motivation may be varied but it lies most directly in a kind of fan drive to protect their fandom from its usurping by a broader audience. The practice of focusing on adaptation so often means these discussions shortchange the important, fundamental concept of race and representation at the heart of racebending. Even superhero fan discourse that attempts to directly reference the issue of race finds itself still building off the a base of canon, tradition, and adaptation anxiety. Even when fans sympathize with the racial components of racebending, they often do so by addressing canon, "[Michael B. Jordan] can't control his race and he is going to take any acting job he

can get especially a potentially big one like this. He is justified in his frustrations and he is correct that he is the subject of a moderate degree of bigotry, **considering how the other actors are all at least equally wrong for their parts**" (Jordan, emphasis mine). This contends that the racebending is a hard change to swallow, but it isn't an issue of race because the entirety of the plot and cast is screwed up. It acknowledges a racial component via bigotry but equates bigotry with poor casting. This commenter suggests dropping race as a focal point of the issue and instead focus on the fact that the entire adaptation isn't faithful.

On the flip side, we get pro-racebending fan reactions that just as quickly disavows race, too—"It is just time to stop paying attention to race and **instead focus on the story, and more importantly, the message of the story. Comic books have historically been a social commentary of the times.** We have characters that have been in their twenties and thirties for the better parts of 40-60 years" (Jordan, emphasis mine). Racebending for this commenter is ok, not because fairer representation is needed or called for. Not because it is unjust or illogical to simply cast the best actor regardless of skin color. The reason racebending is justified here is completely non-racial—it is because comics historically are social commentary, thus an adaptation should carry on that legacy.

These invocations of race are brought up as a means to enter the discussion, but they are seemingly only there to ignore. This move is even more pronounced when discussants attempt to justify their argument against a progressive and inclusive casting as 'colorblind' or as acknowledging racial issues exist but that they aren't pertinent here, such as this response to Jordan's casting: "It's not the race part that's the issue. It's the family dynamic being changed, essentially removed, that's the problem. . .By saying they're adopted means they still could be the potential romantic couple among the group. And this doesn't happen in ANY of the comic book incarnations of the Fantastic Four" (Jordan). "It's not the race part that's the issue," this commenter says. An apt summation of racial dialogue and

the superhero genre. Many would, and with good reason, contend that race is the issue that needs to be discussed. But, it is hard to argue with this – it is the issue that isn't actually being discussed here.

Instead, time and time again, in one form or the other, under one rhetorical guise or the next, what is being addressed is the fealty or lack thereof to the established narratives of the superhero genre. The cache that comes with acknowledging this established narrative is obvious for the industry member and the fanboy – it is currency; it makes one what Fiske simply calls an "expert". But as superheroes continue to garner an increased cultural cache, it is the movie-fan, the new influx of superhero advocates, those who watch television shows, attend the films, etc. that are catered to. It is very likely that, given the tremendous gap in viewership of the superhero films and smaller readership of superhero comic books, that a great number of viewers are comfortable with the films being canonical unto themselves. Thus, without a strong grounding in the world of superhero comic books, these are not the fans making complaints. As Chapter One stressed, these films go to great lengths to make viewers feel like they are engaging with a canon unto itself. Marvel is trying to keep its *readers* happy by producing increasingly better comic books but also trying to pick up new fans who can exercise fandom and consume superheroes without ever having to pick up a comic book. These fans, those who can water cooler talk about the latest superhero film have been led to the belief that the superhero is destigmatized as part of geek fandom. But, superhero comic book reading doesn't equate to this—while more and more people may way superhero-themed attire or attend blockbuster films, it is still rare to see people reading superhero comics in public. The fandom is still niche—the opening up of their fandom is what motivates their take on racebending because it further marginalizes their superhero comic reading by ignoring it for the new canon—film

This small sample of responses, here and throughout the rest of this project, is indicative of a larger trend of fans summoning the specter of race during racbending discussions but only as a means to acknowledge it is an issue. Instead of delving into that admittedly difficult topic, they quickly pivot to

a number of concepts that reference canon – the story, the characters' histories, the failures of films to properly serve the source material, the merits of the comic book medium, and so on, because these things are the in the immediate realm of securing their authority and place as fans. Of course, such focus leaves open a number of ways to both interpret and position the work of these fan dialogues as racist. It's largely disavows race by not permitting meaningful discourse to unfold, but it also supports a canon of the superhero genre that is whitewashed with what few spots of color there are highly stereotyped.

As this section progresses it will cull from the vast number of responses the three most common rhetorical approaches to the discussion of racebending and the superhero genre – Is Race Essential to a Character? Does the Character need to be given a Contemporary Facelift? Does Racebending Add to the Narrative Meaningfully? These rhetorical bases are culled from a number blogs and stories, some referenced below, that attempted to navigate the decisions to racebend with some of the fan vitriol those decisions garnered. I'll go through each rhetorical move individually to highlight how each diminishes notions of race in the discourse and elevates the importance of canon in the face of impending adaptation and how troublesome this is; this common outcome serves as a throughline although each question also brings to host a number of tangential points worth acknowledging as they make a fuller, clearer picture of race and superheroes available.

Is Race Essential? In 2011, *Screenrant*'s EIC, Kofi Outlaw, wrote a piece titled "Changing Face: Diversity & Change in Comic Books and Superhero Movies" that attempted to understand the racebending trend as it pertained to the superhero genre. Outlaw's piece was written while the *Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) was in pre-production; at the time, thanks to the recent success of Miles Morales, a Latino alternate version of Spider-Man in the comics, an ongoing discussion surrounding the potential racebending of Spider-Man was brewing. Outlaw ultimately contended that anyone can play Peter Parker, aka Spider-Man, because race isn't vital to his theme or character:

> A bright but wimpy kid from Queens, NY who has a broken family structure (no parents), and is considered an outsider, gets bitten by a radioactive spider and at first uses the power as a cash

hustle. His uncle dies violently as a result of the kid's indifference about right and wrong, making the kid want to clean up the streets and be a force for good. Are we really saying that this story, in modern times, can't be about a minority character? (1)

Taking Outlaws' argument further, there is nothing that disqualifies any race from portraying a character who is bright, harried by an overprotective aunt, lives in the city, has a troubled love life, and is full of sarcastic wit (all key components of Spider-Man). But what is interesting about his argument, and many similar ones to it, is its desire to question if race is essential to the character. It is paramount to asking if an alteration of race would upset the integrity of the canon. And, discussions like this, discussions that riddle the superhero-racebending discourse, subtly begin that shift of making the conversation more focused on the canon than the potential and representational outcomes of racebending.

That it gently redirects the discourse towards discussions of canon and narrative characteristics might also be overlooked because the task of defining the identity and theme of superhero characters can be daunting. While the unique nature of comic books seriality means that superhero characters have 'lives' that extend out 50+ years in many cases might seem to entrench their race if not their thematic qualities, it is also important to understand that the fluid identity is a trope of the superhero genre. James Rhodes, an African-American war veteran has filled in for Tony Stark's Iron Man multiple times, Doctor Octopus was inside of Peter Parker's body for the last two years (2012-2014) of published Spider-Man comics, Professor X was revealed in the 70s to have been an alien impostor for most of his published issues – superhero identity is as malleable in comics as canon is (and is no doubt a contributing factor to the flexible nature of superhero comic canon). In the case of certain heroes, like DC's Flash or Green Lantern, the title is often a mantle that gets passed on to the next worthy hero. So much has been done by so many different people in the guise of any given superhero, it can be difficult to pin down what makes the essential representation of certain heroes – let alone their race. The superhero genre depends on a fluidity of identity and prepares its consumers to expect such moves;

however, when the move becomes a question of adaptation, a move that will entrench a new version for a broader audience, the fans seem to willingly forget this trope.

Ultimately, identity-fluidity as a genre trope doesn't discount that the dominant representations, and thus the prevailing perception, of these heroes are often white; superhero fans develop an attachment to a character not just as a narrative device, but as a visual representation which is often a white character. For example, it is not just that Spider-Man fans want the hero translated to the big screen with all his spider-proportionate powers, it is equally as likely they want his counterpart, the nebbish, neurotic, and hapless Peter Parker—likely the character they more identify with than the brash costumed hero—to make that translation. While it is difficult to argue that a character of any ethnicity couldn't exhibit those personality traits (let alone accidentally get bit by a spider), it is more difficult for fans to reach a relative consensus regarding when race is essential to integrity. Often characters that get tagged as having race be an essential component of their character are nonwhite—both a signal of making them different but also a reliance on the stereotypes of the time. Luke Cage is drenched in Blaxploitation. Sunfire is a metaphor for the American bombing of Hiroshima. Black Panther and Storm are inexplicably tied to the continent of Africa. As editor of the MarySue.com, Jill Pantozzi puts it, "They were created in such a way that they use their racial identity to help inform their characters. If you change that, they aren't the same people anymore" (6).

Superhero genre racebending benefits from this essentializing of race in a very blatant way—it provides an easy rationalization for why non-whites should always be cast as they are while also disavowing white as integral to many character's core characteristics. However, it is in fact a troublesome rationalization. At a very visible level it equates race with story and condones the shift I mention above, the giving way of potential discussions of race and representation in this discourse to ones of faithfulness to the fiction. More subtly, however, is this grounding of black superheroes in their race starts with their conception as alternatives to pre-existing white characters. The construction of the

minority character is the construction of a provided option to the white character thus race is a presumption of their creation. This, of course, was not a motivating factor in the creation of white heroes; it is very unlikely someone was suggesting that publishers really, really needed to create a white character to diversify the fictional superhero universe. The inextricable nature of race's essentiality to characters of color suggests that race is the thing that differentiates them from white characters; it demarcates nonwhite characters in a way their superpowers cannot, and it weighs these characters down with a sense of the real world that white characters do not often have to deal with. Moreover, it hints at the white structure of superhero narratives – white characters can be anything; nonwhites must always be grounded in a way that positions their race, their non-whiteness, at the foreground.

Richard Dyer's work in *White: Essays on Race and Culture* suggests this active othering of the nonwhite is symptomatic of the failure to think about white as race: "As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people" (1). Using this framework to address both the positioning of non-white characters in superhero canon and the stagnant use of race in the racebending discourse unveils the damage that the superhero community's responses to racebending potentially have. It also sets up a theoretical concept of race that I'll put scholars of race and superheroes into conversation with to better elucidate the inadvertent racism the rigid adherence to canon in the face of adaptation performs –all of which speaks to Dyer's primary concern that "[non-whites] can only speak for their race. But non-raced (i.e. white) people can [claim to speak for the commonality of humanity], for they do not represent the interests of a race" (1).

Marc Singer, for example, gets specific with Dyer's take and narrows in on why the comic fan likely cannot separate the non-whiteness from a given minority superhero character. He says, "Comics rely upon visually codified representations in which characters are continually reduced to their appearances… this system of visual typology combines with the superhero genre's long history of

excluding, trivializing, or tokenizing minorities to create numerous minority superheroes who are marked purely for their race" (107). They've become ingrained visually and narratively as inherently caught up in their non-white, racialized representations. Problematic in its own right, as Singer contends, superhero stories reliance on visual reduction harbors "a potential for superficiality and stereotyping that is dangerously high" (107). But, it also validates *White*'s overall premise that it is difficult for non-white heroes to represent the universal concepts of heroism since they are so immediately referent to their given race or minority concerns. They cannot be superheroes; they must be a **black** superhero, a **latino** superhero, and so on.

Jeffrey Brown, noted for his work on race and comics, has also long argued that the superhero genre not only has troubles portraying minority characters, it has particular trouble in letting black characters be masculine in an uncoded not intensely physical way—an especially troublesome aspect considering the non-white character's relation to the material and real world. Brown explains, "the black man has been subjected to the burden of racial stereotypes that place him in the symbolic space of being *too* hard, *too* physical, *too* bodily" (28); these stereotypes manifest uncomfortably in the superhero genre which idealizes the "hypermasculinity" of muscles and toughness. Compared against the wit of Spider-Man, the compassion of Superman, the intellect of Tony Stark, black superheroes like Luke Cage, Steel, and to an extent the Black Panther have largely been defined by their toughness or aloofness to the systems of society—a notion Brown references as the black "cool pose" meant to posture but also detach. More troubling, however, is what the black hypermasculinity confers then, "the more one's identity is linked to hypermasculine persona based on the body, the more uncultured and uncivilized, the more bestial, one is considered to be" (30). Ultimately, Brown is noting that black superheroes are rarely allowed access to soft skills – they may be allowed similar powers as Superman, toughness and strength, but they never get the failings of Clark Kent, the everydayness that allows for "reader identification". When they are allowed to diversify their masculinity with "gentler, more

responsible, and more cerebral qualities" it is noted (31). Human Torch, theoretically, has this diversification. Charming, bright, optimistic, fiercely devoted to his family, and a hero who's capabilities rely on flight and fire instead of muscles and steel skin. There is a potential here for an advancement of Brown's hopeful heroes, who admittedly he saw in the mid-90s Milestone comics, to make a move to the big screen and bigger audiences.

This framework—white as normal and un-raced—again seems to invite the type of racebending the superhero genre enjoys: white characters being adapted into non-white roles. There is, at least, this real material benefit. However, the fan discourse justifies this not in a way that acknowledges or grapples with the notions of race and representation but instead by intimately tying non-whiteness to canon and character by making it essential. What is missed, but what should be clear is that such a move is simply a legacy of the superhero genre's lazy racism—black characters are defined by being black, for example, because they had to be alternative to the white normalness that pervaded the genre. This may make these characters immune to racebending, but it is a sorry logical explanation for why white characters can be racebent as it circumvents the need for better representation and introduction of primary, popular nonwhite heroes.

So, not only is the use of the non-white superhero character steeped in perpetrating and relying on stereotype, it is used as a demarcation from other heroes—quite a feat in a fictional world full of aliens, mutants, and robots. It also undercuts a classic argument against racebending adaptations – that they would never adapt a black character into a white role (obviously, many fans are unaware of or not relating superheroes to the history of the racebending practice) and such an exclusion is proof of this discourse being about political correctness:

> let's make Falcon a white guy, and Cyborg lets have him played by Ryan Reynolds, Black Panther lets have him played by Karl Urban, … the race does not matter right? But the author [of this piece defending Michael B. Jordan's casting] is only bullshitting you, we all know what he would write had the race of traditionally black characters been changed to white, its only ok because the character being changed here is a white male, and the author is this piece is a" Social Justice Warrior" trying to push an agenda (Schedeen).

This argument attempts to flip the script on worrying about what is essential to a character by making the rhetorical position one of reverse discrimination. But, if anything it opens up the questioning if race is ever integral – why couldn't there be a black Human Torch, a white Black Panther, a Latino Spider-Man, etc.? Of course, that is not the intent of the argument; the use of reverse discrimination is a means to implicate the argument for racebending as caught up in all the things that are not canonical, and, thus, are wrong ways to broach the topic which invalidates the pro-racebending argument.

Do Superheroes Need Contemporization? Moving on from the double-edged sword of positioning race as fundamental to non-white characters, an implication of Dyer, Singer, and many fans resorting to trying to argue if race is or isn't essential is the legacy it references. There is no getting around the fact that comic book superheroes were largely created by white males for a perceived white male audience during a time that had different, more conservative social mores and understandings of racism and sexism than today. In many ways, the superhero comic book has long been overdue in offering better representations in this regard. Even Michael B. Jordan's' quote opening this chapter comments on this need to update this legacy for a "more diverse time." Of course today isn't more diverse, it is just more represented; and, today isn't any less or more racist, it is just that racism takes other forms. "Recent decades have witnessed the globalization of racism, the racialization of social categories, and the proliferation of race talk, which contributes to the reification of race," says Arif Dirlik, historian (1363). Dirlik's work suggests WHAT may be less overt, but it is more subtly widespread and part of everyday discourse. Just as when the racebending discourse questioned if race was essential to character, the question of asking if superheroes need to be updated for contemporary times is both flawed and ultimately a method of addressing the community's concerns with adaptation. It is flawed in that fails to acknowledge the issue that contemporary times are not more diverse and less racist empirically. And, it addresses adaptation anxieties by allowing canon to become the center of discussion

again by making canon a historical and concrete benchmark with which to address the need for updating

superheroes' ethnicities.

And it should be noted that the superhero genre doesn't have the best track record with the

treatment of non-white characters to draw from. As Matthew Smith, comic scholar, notes, superheroes

have either been poor representations of diversity of the real world or have dodged the issue entirely:

> The struggle to portray the full diversity of America is nothing new for the source material for these adaptations, the great American comic book. The great comics innovator Will Eisner gave the heroic lead in *The Spirit* an African-American sidekick named Ebony White. With his pronounced lips and thick accent, Ebony embodied every offensive stereotype already thrust upon the African-American community in vaudeville, film, and radio. Eisner later expressed regret for playing into those stereotypes, and his peers largely decided to avoid depicting people of color. Of course, no representation may be as bad as misrepresentation. Although superheroes had arrived on the scene with *Superman's* debut in 1938, it would be another quarter of a century before a hero of color would appear with the *Black Panther's* premiere in 1966. (1)

Smith mentions this history while praising Disney's decision to unveil a more inclusive slate of upcoming

movies that feature nonwhite and non-male lead roles (primarily 2017's *Black Panther* and 2019's

Captain Marvel). He also notes that despite the overwhelming whiteness of the filmic franchises, in his

trips to comic conventions he is often amazed by the number of nonwhite and non-males who cosplay in

those guises. Smith equates such dress-up as an attachment to the powerful themes and narratives

these characters represent, though one could read the situation more subversively and in vein with fan

scholars who see such co-option as way to enact some of their own power or affect. But, he wonders,

"could such heroes become even more potent icons for a new Millennial generation that expects

diversity? On the other hand, perhaps these heroes will not resonate in quite the same way that icons

like Cap do, and we won't see white boys attired like the Black Panther" (1)?

Smith might be oversimplifying things; especially after framing white-as-normal in the superhero

genre, it might be that the options to roleplay as a nonwhite hero are quite limited. Regardless the

answer or issues with Smith's query, he positions superheroes as uniquely capable to speaking on

matters of diversity. Perhaps mirroring his opinion, is the recent twitter trend (May 2015) asking DC and

Marvel to speak out on the Black Lives Matter movement via their black superheroes. Or the call to diversify Marvel's *Agent Carter* television show. The former movement invests superheroes as powerful visual archetypes that might have an impact in acknowledging the plight of black citizens. The latter speaks to the increasingly vocal and seemingly newer fans of superheroes who see the genre having a responsibility to speak to issues of diversity and representation. Of course, racial tensions and issues of diversity and racism are not new, nor were they ignored by superheroes in the decades before.[113] However, much of the rhetoric surrounding the push to accept racebent representations of superheroes seems to imply that today is, or should be, more progressive and diverse; thus, when fans take to argue against racebending their adamant adherence to notions of superhero canon, itself white and male predominantly, their arguments are positioned as racist. And, since they mitigate any real discourse on race as well as stubbornly position concerns of adaptation over concerns of representation, they are, in fact, performing racially-troublesome work.

This drive to contemporize superheroes can be seen in the works of fans who dabble with and remix superheroes genders, race, religions, and other distinctions. For example, Kendra Pettis's, a writer for Huffington Post and Racialicious, a site devoted to discussing pop culture news with an eye on issues of race, fan fiction that racebends, Marvel's notorious femme fatale, Emma Frost, the White Queen, as Beyoncé. Her productions racebend a character signifying a number of white beauty tropes—blonde, blue-eyed, pale-skinned—reconfiguring her as a black woman to address notions of feminity. More specifically, even, is Orion Martin's *X-Men of Color*, a reworking of published X-Men comic panels that reconfigure white characters as black. Both of these fan productions claim to be motivated by a desire to contemporize and address failings they see in the world of superheroes. As Martin says of his decision

---

[113] Most famously of would be 1983's *Green Lantern/Green Arrow #1* in which an elderly black man confronts the Green Lantern and says, "*I been readin' about you... how you work for the blue skins... and how on a planet someplace you helped out the orange skins... and you done considerable for the purple skins! Only there's skins you never bothered with -- ! The black skins! I want to know... how come?! Answer me that, Mr. Green Lantern!*" (O'Neil and Adams, 1983).

to make X-Men characters black, "playing out civil rights-related struggles with an all-white cast allows the white male audience of the comics to appropriate the struggles of marginalized peoples ... While its stated mission is to promote the acceptance of minorities of all kinds, *X-Men* has not only failed to adequately redress issues of inequality – it actually reinforces inequality" (Demby 5). Martin, a black artist, argues that despite being a metaphor for diversity and marginalization, the X-Men characters overwhelming, unavoidable whiteness hinders their capability to serve as representations for people of color who might otherwise find the message meaningful or empowering. Martin, here, is making a claim for better representation than the superhero genre has offered to date—a struggle documented with the Black-Owned Communications Alliance's famous photo of the young black child wearing a cape and seeing a brave white hero looking back at him in the mirror—while also pointing at some of the troublesome issues of having a predominantly white canon, and thus the invocation of it in racebending discourse, has.

Figure 3.1 What's wrong with this picture? (BOCA Ad, Martin, 1982)

Arturo Garcia, editor of Racialicious, sees the need for this representation, but seems resigned to the fact that fans have been indoctrinated by consuming a legacy of white canon—specifically, they've grown accustomed to consuming white representations of these characters so long that change seems to radical a departure. So despite all the oddities they can handle regarding canon and identity — aliens, robots, cyborg, and mutants, to name a few—Garcia claims they've also strongly bonded to the primary whiteness of characters. He borrows famed novelist Junot Diaz's oft-cited quip to sum his take

up, "[geeks] will read a book that is one third Elvish, but put two sentences in Spanish and [white people] think we are taking over" (Demby 17). What Garcia and Diaz are suggesting is that fandoms can readily and willingly accept the fantastical—robots, cyborgs, time travel, aliens, elves, etc.—but elements that code these fantastical elements as nonwhite are resisted. Broadly, this refers back to Dyer—everything is coded white because white is the norm until otherwise. Elves, aliens, and even robots are white unless the reader is informed otherwise. This also speaks to a potential reason for why changes in the comic book are met with less resistance than their adaptation...characters are not racebent within the comic book universe. Today Captain America may be black, but that is because the mantle of the Captain America is being worn by Sam Wilson—a black hero formerly known as Falcon. The original Captain America, Steve Rogers, wasn't changed, and he is still white. Moreover, as the mutable nature of canon suggests, the comic book can always easily revert; Captain America can be white again, given time. This underscores that despite the constant reference to canon, what actually at stake for these fans is adaptation because it threatens a change to canon which operates different from the elastic nature of the comic book; it's not just widespread, it's a more irreversible and fundamental change. Michael B. Jordan's casting as the Human Torch isn't Johnny Storm ceding the identity to another person; it is Johnny Storm *becoming* a black character.

Looking past Garcia's framing of a debate that rages on his website, looking past the way he sees, if not acknowledges, that the motivation is tied up in adaptation, the concept of updating superheroes for the times still seems to hinge on race and representation in way that the previous section on determining essential characteristics didn't. Martin, Pettis, Garcia and more are making direct calls for a superhero universe that is more representative of how they envision the world to be. This is a call much of the scholarship on race and superheroes also makes, and it is a call I believe is needed. However, as I've said from the outset, it is not the truth or the call that is only under scrutiny; once these calls become part of the larger discourse on race and superheroes they get transformed because

the overwhelming response to these pieces is one that never fails to ignore the racial aspect while overemphasizing the loss of canon in light of adaptation. Even the most vehemently racist comments, those that directly rebuke calls for contemporary updates to characters, become referential to notions of the narrative as the core issue at stake:

> Political correctness run amok. Kill off whitey. Replace with multiculti. As a white person who has read and loved Spiderman my whole life, I am out. Will no longer buy Spiderman or Marvel. They could easily have created a new black/Hispanic hero if they wanted to but this guy [Editor in chief Axel] Alonso changing a cultural icon is a FU to white Americans. This is a FU moment to white people (Pantozzi).

This commenter has obviously produced a racist diatribe, and while you can't truly validate such a take, every attempt they make at qualifying their argument is reference back to a sense of canon. The commenter has 'read and loved Spider-Man' their 'whole life' – a reference to both their devotion, longevity, and the primacy of comic books (via reading). They contend that Marvel is 'changing a cultural icon.'[114] This latter statement speaks directly to transformation and to the pantheistic place of this particular character. All elements fans might use to assert their authority or knowledge and all language concerned with fear of changing the character—not racebending specifically. This comment, if distasteful, is indicative of a larger trend of fan comments that seemingly invoke race, though not often as crassly, to actually dismiss racebending. Moreover, it belies the unfixed nature of canon—they can accept a character who turns out to be, say, an alien suddenly, but they see the permutation of race as disingenuous. While there is no set, one true way fans are negotiating their concept of canon in wake of these changes, the tone often implies that fan's investment, their authority and knowledge of the material, also allows them to set the parameters of how canon is used as a validator of change.

It is not just the fans who use race as a means of actually addressing canon, it is the producers too. Anna Beatrice Scott, a race and theater scholar, argues convincingly that the official producers of superhero material are not as invested in race as they might purport to be. In her article, "Superpower

---

[114] Marvel, of course, wasn't changing their character – this comment is responding to the allegations/movement of making a black actor play Peter Parker.

vs Supernatural: Black Superheroes and the Quest for Mutant Reality," Scott describes a history of superhero industry and culture using blacking characters in the safest, most sterile manner so as to both seem inclusive yet cater to a perceived primary white audience. "[The necessity] for representing the real when rendering a black body as fictional character almost always reveals the creator's intention of getting it right or righting a wrong, but rarely writing a story. Beyond the lines and hatch marks, black superheroes still await their mutations into actual fictional beings," contends Scott (312). What Scott sees a sterile or recognizable use of black characters in comic books also, I contends, is what consistently grounds them in the real. More than white characters, which can be aliens, members of a lost race, or elves, black characters are almost always connected to some real world geographical or sociopolitical manifestation—Black Panther is tied to the politics and perceived tribalism of Africa, Green Lantern John Stewart is consistently portrayed as conflicted over his job as space cop and his responsibility to better the inner city urban center he was raised in, Luke Cage is a product of Harlem, a racist judicial structure, and the prison system, and so on. While I'm extending Scott's exploration of the comic industry's inability to treat black characters as fully fictional, this consistent grounding unveils the superhero genre as a place that hasn't allowed heroes of color to achieve the same level of the fantastic or uncanny as white characters because, in the producers' efforts to be careful or mindful of black audiences, they've never been more than people of color first and superheroes second. There is no black Superman or Batman, characters who've so fully disavowed reality or realistic physicality.

Thus, all the lip service the industry pays to supporting Michael B. Jordan's casting or even comic specific events like the unveiling of a black Latino Spider-Man can largely be seen as an attempt to sate an audience instead of actually elevating characters of color to equitable levels with white characters. It also reifies whiteness in the way Dyer acknowledges because the emphasis on these characters is their race. Jordan's defense of his casting is largely because he sees the diversity as needed—thus, because he is black. The comic industry's distinction between upcoming Spider-Man series (one featuring Miles

Morales, the other Peter Parker) further demonstrates this. In the press releases for the Mile Morales release, the author, Brian Bendis, claims "it's the real Spider-Man for kids of color, for adults of color and everybody else" (Sacks, "Miles"). The press release emphasizes Morales' heritage, "son of an African-American father and Puerto Rican mother," more than what the new series will bring to bear as a narrative (Sacks, "Miles"). Compared to a similarly tied press release for the Peter Parker series—which emphasizes not only that Peter will be leaving New York, but that Miles will be replacing him in the city—Morales' information is invariably tied up in race as his primary demarcation and new narrative ventures as Parker's primary demarcation. And, while this isn't a direct reference to maintaining canon, per se, it is a move that carries the genre's legacy of not fully delving into race in a progressive or sustained manner.

Many fans see this pandering to race as inherently problematic both in its reification of white and its reification of canon. Says one thoughtful fan:

> At this point, it seems more likely we're going to see traditionally white/male characters get "racelifted", than to see genuine original people-of-color get a big screen adaptation. Which is problematic, as it gives the impression that the existing nonwhite/male characters are either not good enough, or not popular enough, to justify a big screen adaptation. And frankly, I think that sucks. It gives the impression that the best minorities can get is playing a "white man's playground": "sure, you can play a supporting character or one out of four superheroes, but this is still going to be a predominantly white movie." You can make Perry White, Human Torch, Heimdall and the like black, but frankly, I'd much rather we got Luke Cage, Misty Knight, John Stewart, Cyborg, Steel, Vixen, Black Panther and other genuine black superheroes in their own films than playing secondary characters in movies about White Males ("Black Skin").

Points like the fan's above don't reference the fact that there is a Luke Cage television series being produced, nor does it reference the ill-fated film *Steel* (1997), starring Shaquille O'Neal, but it brings to bear that the characters of color are rarely front & center – Human Torch is at best part of an ensemble, though the character is often the least developed or emphasized member of the Fantastic Four. Perry White, Nick Fury, and Falcon are all minor characters or sidekicks to white heroes in their respective films (*Man of Steel* (2013)*, Avengers* (2012)*, Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014)).The most notable racebending moments of the genre, Perry White in *Man of Steel* (2013), Heimdall, the Human

Torch, Kingpin in *Daredevil* (2003) – all of these are non-lead roles. The heroes and protagonists of these stories maintain their whiteness despite the fact that, say, if Heimdall can be black, why couldn't Thor? While there may never be a satisfactory answer to that question, the answer fans use invariably favor narrative reasons—audience, canon, tradition, recognizablity, marketing—more than it does in addressing concerns of that the superhero genre is underserving its wide and varied audience.

Even simply introducing black characters is difficult for the industry. P.L. Cunningham frames the superhero culture's use of black characters by simply noting the industry's unwillingness to have black supervillains. Using Singer and Scott in his own piece, he notes how difficult it is for the industry to depict black supervillains because they so often ground nonwhite characters in reality or, worse, prevailing stereotypes. Depicting a villain as black then today runs the risk of garnering unwanted criticism for their handling of race. Of course, Cunningham notes the same thing other scholars have – not having skillfully used characters, be they villain or hero, of color well in the past is a poor defense for not using them today. Hence Cunningham's call for "more complex, contemplative, and powerful black supervillains" (59). And, while that is a worthwhile call, what is truly pertinent to this chapter then is again not only is it scholars who are emphasizing the call for true, progressive approach to race and the genre, but also, by virtue of making the call, they are unveiling the fact that the industry, just as much as the fans, has other issues at stake in this discourse and that ultimately race is a mask their discourse wears.

Cunningham isn't the only person to notice a dearth of quality black characters, and this is in fact a response that many fans bring up in their arguments against racebending: creators should simply produce new characters of color instead of changing entrenched ones. Setting aside the dismissive approach to racebending for now, such an imploring misunderstands the economics of contemporary comic books. One of the tropes that these fans are most likely familiar with is the difficulty new characters often have finding a fan foothold in a field dominated by well-established characters like

Wolverine, Spider-Man, Batman (all white males), and other long-running, established-in-the-cultural-vocabulary characters and groups.[115] Even those series that offer nonwhite heroes and seem to be successful often have paltry sales numbers compared to more firmly entrenched , and white, characters' books. Miles Morales, a black Hispanic Spider-Man, headlines the critically acclaimed *Miles Morales Ultimate Spider-Man*. However, despite generally positive praise both for its narrative and promotion of a nonwhite lead in the firmly established role of Spider-Man, its 2015 average sales were less than 30,000 month and it rarely cracked the top 100 selling comics of a given month.[116] And, this is a character who is an adaptation of a very, very successful intellectual property – Spider-Man. The mid 1990s saw the rise of Milestone Comics, an imprint of DC publishing that emphasized black heroes and characters; despite critical acclaim, the series generated only lasted less than five years due to falling sales figures and worries about the market of "comics for blacks" (Jones 354). These numbers have long given comics an unfortunate 'economic rationalization' to avoid a heavy investment in books lead by nonwhite characters despite all the potential pitfalls such a choice might lead to.[117]

Not only does this common anti-racebending argument fail to realize the economic difficulties of creating new characters whole cloth (let alone those that take the role of an established character), it often attempts to situate race, or whiteness, as integral to the character being changed. This issue—whiteness as an integral element of a character—deserves heavy investigation because it implies that superheroes represent elements of their ethnicity but it also aggravates the notion of malleable canon and implicates a racial rationalization that isn't far from the economic rationalization that saw Milestone fold in the '90s. Before scrutinizing it in full, however, it is important to first see how the fans make the case for race as integral aside from it being a function of acknowledging X character was always Y color.

---

[115] Or as Jill Pantozzi, a well-regarded comic and comic culture critic, puts it, "They say things like, "Don't take 'our' characters away from us, make new ones instead if you want diversity. Right, because all-new characters usually work so well selling their own titles."

[116] Statistics culled from Comicchron.com

[117] That economic rationalization is a flimsy defense in the comic book world is explored in the previous chapter regarding female lead characters.

For example, many fans have argued that the Human Torch's whiteness is fundamental because he has a sister and a family, all white—changing one changes the family issues at the heart of Fantastic Four stories. For Heimdall, a Marvel character portrayed by Idris Elba in *Thor (2010)* and *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), it is that his character belongs to a Norse pantheon, all of them modeled on white, Scandinavian warriors and gods; Heimdall, in particular, being modeled after Heimdallr, the "whitest of gods." The argument being put forth then by certain fans is that race is a fundamental factor of some of these characters and changing it makes the character unrecognizable (a tie back to essentialism). Yet, since creating completely new comic book superheroes, let alone making them for film, that are marketable is difficult and risky,[118] proponents of racebending see it as an ideal way to circumvent the many pitfalls of trying to catch on with a new creation.

Does Racebending Add to the Story? Actress Felicia Day, most popular because of her creative work with Buffy, Supernatural, and Geek and Sundry, recently made clear that she was against the racebending of *Peter Pan*'s Tiger Lily but in favor of *Fantastic Four's* racebending of the Human Torch. She made her argument by rationalizing what was gained and lost in each transaction.

> I am not upset about Tiger Lily, a role originally written for a Native American female character in the book, being cast as white because it upsets the canon. Screw canon. I am upset about a role that was expressly written as a female minority being given to white actor instead...To compare Tiger Lily being cast as a white women to Human Torch or Heimdall being cast as an African-American is not equivalent, because I don't think this issue is about violating or adhering to "lore," I think it's about providing more representation. And that's why I think that the Human Torch being cast as African-American is an awesome thing, because that move evolves Hollywood and **storytelling and the Marvel universe**.

Day sees in racebending at its best an opportunity for fairer labor practices in Hollywood. Something is gained. But, she also hints at an evolving element of storytelling—a harder to quantify element. Returning to Outlaw's piece on diversity, he notes that the superhero genre has often mined new story elements by fundamentally changing characters. Even if that change is not racial, he highlights the

---

[118] And completely undercuts the reason behind Disney's purchase of Marvel – access to valued and recognized pre-existing intellectual properties.

transfer of power from one Caucasian Green Lantern to another, the new character's personality and experiences create a fundamentally new type of story being told. Outlaw suggests that, at its best, racebending could do the same work. That is to say that there is a potential in racebending that allows for some playing with the superhero character in a way that the comic book is allowed to do, again because it doesn't invalidate the fan or threaten to replace them, without raising as much ire.[119]

Jesse Schedeen, a writer for the popular IGN website, sees specifically the move to a black Human Torch ad finally allowing the film to fully grapple with the most fundamental aspect of the long running series – family. He says,

> And the story should be much better off for it. The typical American family is no longer characterized by four white people living comfortably in the suburbs... There are families made up of countless races, nationalities, and cultures. Many children have parents of different races. .. All of this speaks to the idea that the FF are the most eclectic and unusual family unit in the Marvel Universe, especially once you factor in the strange, wonderful children in the Future Foundation. That's something the new movies need to celebrate.

Schedeen is referencing both the comic book version of the Fantastic Four's preoccupation with family (Mr. Fantastic and Invisible Woman marrying, having kids, the treatment of the monstrous Thing as a doting uncle, etc.) and its more contemporary expansion of what family means (the last decade has seen the Fantastic Four include mutants, aliens, Atlanteans, Morlocks, robots, kids of villains, etc. in an sort of expanded family known collectively as the Future Foundation). And, Schedeen's suggestion is another FF reboot with a white Human Torch doesn't open up the thematic avenues of family in a way that the proposed mixed-race brother/sister team do.

Fans have even used this justification—race as additive—to retroactively acknowledge that racebending has worked in the comics. Idris Elba's casting as the aforementioned Asgardian Heimdall was initially met with staunch resistance that mostly hammered the incongruity of it—""At the risk of sounding like a bigot, I think this is nuts!" said another. "Asgard is home to the Norse Gods!!! Not too

---

[119] The superhero fan may read the change of a superhero as it happens organically in a comic book as canonical, but if such a move is predicated by a depiction in a different medium—most likely film—the alteration is invalidated because it serves a different purpose than the superhero comic fan wants.

many un-fair complexion types roaming the frigid waste lands up there. I wouldn't expect to see many Brad Pitt types walking around in the [first mainstream black superhero] Black Panther's Wakanda Palace" (S. Jones)! And, while Elba himself attempted to defend his place, largely by noting everything mystical, fantastical, and odd about the Marvel Universe should make it a place where one's skin color is less of an issue, it wasn't until the aftermath of the film, that people became 'ok' with the casting. In Schedeen's article, he even references his belief that the Human Torch casting will blow-over, like Heimdall's did, once people see the performance. And, Outlaw notes Elba's performance made an unknown Marvel property a viable and engaging character:

> many people walked away from *Thor* with nothing but praise for the nobility and stature Elba brought to Heimdall…The actor picked for the part had the chops to make the part memorable – so nothing was really lost, only gained…If anything, they expanded the noble essence of Heimdall in ways the comics haven't been able to achieve: how many more people like the character now that he's connected with Elba?

In each of these arguments, race again becomes secondary to narrative concerns. Nobody is praising the risk, decision, or the material real world fallout racebending has had in these situations, they are acknowledging the story was better for the change, or that it allowed the story to evolve in an unexpected way. Even Elba's own defense has to reference the fantastical canon of the Marvel Universe as being a place where those of different skin colors could co-habit. Schedeen's defense of Jordan's casting largely hinges on his belief that it will finally allow the thematic tale of the Fantastic Four's 50+ years of stories make a successful translation to the big screen. And, Day's admonition may ground itself in a very real and material race concern but has to acknowledge that her concerns are abutting people's worries about 'lore' and storytelling; in fact, the need for her to write her defense was because people couldn't believe she was copacetic with a change to Marvel's lore but not Peter Pan's.

The above factors might seem reductive—it would be impossible to innumerate all the ways superhero fans and culture approach such a broad issue like race—but they are the most prominent rhetorical approaches to the current discourse on racebending as it pertains to superheroes. Setting

aside the fact that fans and superhero critics have felt the need to forge a series of tests to judge racebending—a mechanism that clearly favors race's relation to canon and narrative, albeit illogically since canon is malleable, as opposed to representation or real world import—each of these questions is only invested in the concept of race on the surface. Is race essential, was the character's whiteness more a product of the times, does altering race add something to the character or narrative? No one of these lines of inquiry is meant to supersede or be more valid than the next, but they are a snapshot of the types of questions superhero fandoms are engaging with. And, these questions overwhelmingly push towards an engagement with adaptation concerns over racial ones. They each so fully fail to address issues of race that they actually perpetuate many of the problems the scholars addressed here see the superhero comic book long committing. Not only does dialogue framed by these approaches subjugate race to story, it makes non-whiteness an essential marker for characters and commodifies racism by marketing characters as racialized.

In short, the superhero genre's history is one, in part, of taking Dyer's concern that white is normative and race is a riff of that and giving it visual and narrative energy; this discourse simply keeps, unintentionally, referencing this history as idealized and thus keeps constructing non-white as secondary or othered. In a roundabout manner, that fans keep seeing themselves engaged in a discussion against or about impending adaptation has referenced and acknowledge the racist structure of the superhero comic book genre.[120] Compared to the previous chapter, in which I lay out how a concerted fan effort has made some small inroads regarding the marketing to and portrayal of women in comics, the fan dialogue regarding racebending still seems embryonic. It cannot escape canon because canon is simultaneously malleable yet fixed—malleable because the superhero story never ends and because fans participate in its construction and fixed because their participation its creation permits fans, as some fans see it, to reference it as a stable, to-be-adhered-to concept. Thus, the dialogue fails to even

---

[120] Not to mention many comments often fail to account for representation at all. Instead, they simply focus on asserting the reverse wouldn't happen.

fully acknowledge the racial issues and audiences' concerns. While the same argument could be applied to gender regarding superhero films, , the lack of genderbending in the films likely hasn't sparked the adaptation anxiety needed to ignite a sustained discourse. Moreover, the industry's backpatting itself for being inclusive in these moments of racebending belies the fact that they are, similarly to the fans, invoking race not to discuss it, but utilize it to further their own ends. After all, they still are not fronting their insanely expensive films with people of color. Comments regarding black casting as tokenism directly rebuke the belief that the industry and fandoms' discourse around this topic is truly progressing anything and instead suggests it is simply making flimsy overtures.

THE SMALL STEP OF RACEBENDING

It is possible to take everything above, my linking of racebending discourse as being more tied to canon and that canon-defense being motivated by adaptation anxiety that neatly fits contemporary adaptation study and come to a completely inverse finding – all of this talk of canon is actually a veil that hides the predominantly white fan's innate racism. Albert Fu, sociologist, has done exactly this. He positions this dialogue as means for the fan to justify whiteness in the genre. That is, the invocation of canon is actually an invocation of maintaining white superiority. Fu's excellent article, "Fear of a Black Spider-Man: Racebending and the color-line in superhero (re)casting," contends that the discourse around the superhero genre and racebending is "heavily coded with racial antagonism" (1). Fu argues that fans often hedge their criticisms of racebending by declaring their take as non-racist, or, as I might suggest, the more nuanced and varied invocations of race above; these are moves that Fu sees as attempts to "legitimize white normativity" (2). When Fu sees "the vast majority of [superhero fans] legitimize their positions in ways typical of 'geek debates – by referencing canon," he sees in it the traditional subcultural move of acquiring identity and authenticity via displays of knowledge (a cashing in of cultural capital),but also that such a claim is ultimately invalid; that is to say it is true purpose is not tied up in the exercising of fan power but of maintain racial status quo (4). In short, he follows a very

similar path to me, but ends up at a different conclusion—I don't discount racism, but see adaptation anxiety as the motivation whereas Fu doesn't discount canon fidelity but sees racism as the motivation. Of course, these approaches are not mutually exclusive, but they emphasize the findings and discourse in different ways.

Fu's conclusion hinges on our two different interpretations of the process. Fu agrees with the concept of canon as malleable. In fact, he points to superhero creators and fans who acknowledge that there have been many changes to characters over the years and that these representations when *done in the comics* may be met with some resistance, but are accepted as part of the genre/medium. And, he notes these changes usually garner some fan affection after any initial outcry has receded. Secondly, and supplemental, he reminds his readers that comic books possess a multiplicity of stories. That is to say, there are alternate versions, 'lost issues', and retcons that further muddy the identity of characters in a number of ways. His process mirrors a lot of what I've written especially in regards to the allowance, expectation, and quicker acceptance of identity change in the comic book medium. Fu makes addresses this specificity to discredit canon as a valid reason, and thus a sham defense in light of an ongoing desire to keep heroes white. After all, how can one use canon against racebending when the term itself is ever in flux in the superhero genre?

I don't disagree with Fu; he is right to acknowledge, more forcefully than I've done here, there is an inherent racism to this discourse. However, none of what I've detailed above should suggest that fans are not being racist, but it should emphatically foreground one of the elements in racebending superhero discourse isn't a discussion of race but a discussion of canon meant to help fans grapple with the impending broadening of their fan object as it is continually adapted for new, non-comic reading audiences. That adaptation anxieties are the core conceit of this discourse is even more troublesome because a lot of racist (and sexist) meaning can hide behind canon-as-a-defense; it is a never-ending way

to sidestep discussions of race by invoking race as most pertinent to concerns of narrative consistency, etc. My take nuances Fu because it doesn't dismiss canon, it instead acknowledges it as a reflexive defense against narrative change—adaptation.

Fu is, actually and in many ways, validating my case that the subtext of this discussion, canon and adaptation anxiety is also a very powerful motivating factor in their framing of responses to racebending. First off, he underscores how flexible fans often are regarding race and representations of characters *as long as they are done in the comics*. Such a move not only suggests that superhero fans are comfortable with the notion of malleable identity, and thus less fearful of racebending, but Fu also grants a primacy to the comic medium. A haven for the fan to exercise their authority in and on. It isn't until, in his article, the potential of casting Donald Glover to the film that the issue and passionate fan rejection truly takes root. Thus, his fear of a black Spider-Man is still one that begins to emerge in light of an adaptation to a larger audience—this is especially clear because there was similar change in the comics at the time, one that Fu addresses, when Miles Morales took over for Peter Parker as the Ultimate Spider-Man. While this change, of course, met with some resistance, Fu categorizes it as one the accepted changes to canon that make fan's use of it so troubling. Yet, he fails to acknowledge the medium-specificity of these changes and the notion I raise here of adaptation weakening the fan's hold on the fan object in a way that intra-comic changes don't. If one sees audiences comfortable with, to an extent and after some time, racial shifts in comics, but a sustained outcry in their move to film, doesn't it stand to follow the real threat is the adaptation and loss of authority adaptation represents? One way to exercise that fan power is to disavow change – an inverse of the display of knowledge, a disavowal of ignorance.

Additionally, Fu dismisses canon as a legitimate argument on the premise it is illogical to accept shifting canon in the comic book medium but to reject it in film. He never seems to quite grasp that it doesn't matter to the fan if the argument holds up to scholarly critique or not; admittedly, my work is

much more invested in the fan's stake—I see Fu's point about how irrational it is to use an evershifting notion of canon as a valid arguing position, but I also see the fan's use of it is as both an expression of their fandom and as means to validate certain story changes over ones wrought by the process of adaptation. The superhero comic fan has mastered some level of the superhero comic book universe. When it is altered for a broader, more commercially viable medium and thus a wider audience, the fanboys reference to canon may be illogical but it does make clear the lines between the mediums at play. Thus, when Fu points out so many arguments that cling to canon, he is in fact pointing out that fans are grappling with changes to that migration across media and not race, primarily. Such a revelation doesn't discount Fu's take that the fallout from this leaves a group of traditional fans as essentially white washing cultural reproductions of superheroes, but it does question how conscious they are of their whitewashing.

The casting of Jordan as Johnny Storm in the upcoming *Fantastic Four* film is as close as the industry has come to casting a nonwhite actor as a top flight superhero. Admittedly, the character often takes a backseat to the Reed Richards and Sue Storm dynamic, but his persona is oversized.[121] Schedeen notes this when he says, "as long as Jordan's Johnny Storm is a suave, overconfident ladies' man who revels in his newfound celebrity and struggles with the need to grow into a mature adult, he's true to the source material." The casting of a black actor to play an outgoing, self-confident, and suave hero is a progressive move because it potentially allows a well-known black hero to present as something other than stereotyped. More specifically, that Human Torch, a product of radiation gone wrong and not explicitly tied to the 'real' like many of the black superheroes of the comic book are, may mean a black superhero gets to be hero first, black second.

---

[121] An interesting thought experiment would be to analyze what might happen had Sue Storm been the minority character. She will most likely have a bigger role than Jordan, and her love interest with Reed Richards would open up the film in a way many scholars and critics are calling for.

Of course, as evidenced by this chapter, engaging with superhero fans and critics, one might not see this possibility or even understand it was an issue worth discussing. This absence hammers home the importance of understanding the true aim of the dialogue here. The discourse surrounding superheroes and racebending is heavily garbed as a discussion of race and potentially meaningful change. Many of the articles cited here reference diversity, hate, change, race, and identity directly in their titles, yet, more often than not, these outlets feel a need to justify their discussion as one that addresses the power of canon—either to see racebending as a mode that works within canon or to undermine existing canon. The comments that follow from superhero fans and those invested do the same. Discussions of race pale in regards to references to existing narrative or the concept of narrative as fundamental to a successful adaptation. The danger here is two-fold. It mitigates the work done by scholars and a discerning few popular critics who see in these adaptations and racebending opportunities a possibility to address issues of representation and racial politics that the genre is uniquely poised to do.[122] Secondly, it mitigates superhero culture's interaction with racial issues. The use of race as a concept to broach canon opens up the culture to criticism; when fans decry racial changes, no matter if the particular fan is racist or not, it is difficult for a broader, unattached viewing public to not see in that some of the worst stereotypes of comic fandom – rabid fanboys lashing out at change or immature and spiteful men. Furthermore, the industry's use of, at best, secondary characters for racebending can be seen in a similar light as the broader fandom's. While the industry is likely only motivated by canon in so much as they want to appeal to the broadest audience possible, and thus they are carrying on a tradition of white male leads that is endemic to Hollywood films, the changes they make often come across as noticeably disregarding of race and representation. The alteration of a character like Harvey Dent in *Batman* (1989), where he has a very minor role, to African-American only to have him be played by a white actor in *Batman Forever* (1995) where he is the film's primary

---

[122] Throughout the reading of this chapter, I was struck by how many who addressed the broader issue of race invoked the word hero and how meaningful it was to make a space for all people to feel as if they could be one.

antagonist underscores the industry's interest in aspects outside of both canon and race. And, the moves don't go unnoticed; "minorities don't like to be pandered to by empty gestures," Outlaw says in his article trying to justify racebending.

And, in closing, Outlaw, a black writer, may be just as guilty as everyone else then - his focus is, after all, justifying racebending. Not analyzing its impact or its need as much as how he, and other fans, should consider the topic as it relates to the long and storied canon of their beloved superhero genre. Guilt may be too strong of a word- I don't want to suggest that superhero fans, culture, and industry are villainous. But, I do want to emphasize that despite the term race being thrown about in regards to the multitude of adaptations to the big screen, the concept is rarely being addressed in meaningful ways— ways that might address what it actually means to have a black actor portraying a hero on the screen or what a shifting diversity of film superhero adaptations might portend for the future of comic books and comic readers. And it leaves a lot at stake:

> The financial stakes are much higher for multi-billion-dollar movies and shows, of course. But so are the philosophical stakes. Marvel currently has the eyeballs of hundreds of millions of moviegoers across the globe — something that's never been true before for any comics company. It has a massive platform to tell all those viewers across the planet, "Anyone can be a hero, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or anything else" (Reisman 9).

As Matthew Smith noted earlier the comics themselves somehow seem to still engender this belief despite their spotty record with diversification; but, as these colorful characters become realized in live-action and portrayed by real people, they are not only going to be broadcast to more viewers, they are going to face increasing scrutiny. And, at first glance, it might seem like superhero culture is holding up well under that scrutiny, after all there is a litany of articles and fan think pieces on the topic of race, but I hope this chapter reveals how ethereal those discussions currently are. While most of the scholars here have prescribed that the industry be more representational, more inclusive, and more adroit in their handling of minority characters, the only thing I'd like to prescribe is that actual spaces are opened up for this discussion as the normal fan avenues of social media and other cultural outlets seem to be stuck

in a holding pattern around the importance of canon as a means of addressing their true concern –

adaptation anxiety.

Chapter 4: "Uncanny Fandom: Media Spreadability and the Reframing of the Superhero Comic Fan"

*"The hard-working artists and creators who are the very foundation of [the comic] industry…the reason there even is an industry.…those creatives who have **busted their asses** and spent money they perhaps didn't have to spare in order to be there exhibiting for–and accessible to–the fans…**have been reduced to being the background wallpaper against which the cosplayers pose in their selfies.**"* – Denise Dorman, wife of famed comic artist Dave Dorman, September 2014.

Denise Dorman's take on cosplayers, fans who dress up as characters from comics, video games, televisions or movies, suggests the group is a blight on the comic industry. It also suggests the conventions, large fan-interacting-with-industry conferences, where comic creators go to peddle work and mingle with the fans have become increasingly infiltrated by cosplayers. While the latter may be empirically true, Dorman's statements offer an apparent dichotomy—one is either pro comic or pro cosplay. For Dorman, the two would seemingly be exclusive. Such exclusion hinges on Dorman's argument that cosplayers both feed off fans who are drawn to conventions by the comic industry and that, in so doing, disrupt the economy of comic creators. She says, "**Privately, famed comic book industry personalities everywhere are discussing with each other whether to stop exhibiting at comic book conventions.** There's a fine line between being accessible to and pleasing the fans vs. LOSING MONEY at these conventions" (emphasis her). Dorman lays this loss of revenue and potential boycott at the feet of cosplayers, "I **have slowly come realize that in this selfie-obsessed, Instagram Era, COSPLAY is the new focus of these conventions**" (emphasis her). Dorman extrapolates this new focus as an indication fans have moved away from interest in comic book culture and towards an interest in the "visually arresting costumes" of cosplayers and the celebrities that certain 'geek' franchises bring onto the convention floor. This latter part is exceedingly important, then; cosplayers are just one facet, an admittedly easy visual snapshot (and thus an easy target for certain superhero comic fans), of how comic conventions nationwide are increasingly losing an emphasis on the comic part of their names. In

fact, to Dorman's credit, she doesn't solely blame the cosplayers, though many of her readers do; instead, she blames the convention-attendees who are less and less interested in the creative process of comic creation and increasingly seeking emphatic and intriguing decorations for their social media profile – a signed picture from a comic book artist or a selfie with fan wearing functional Iron Man armor? Or, even better yet, and more indicative of a growing trend of Hollywood cashing in on conventions, particularly San Diego Comic Con (SDCC), a pic of celebrities holding court to celebrate an upcoming film release.

Figure 3.1 Taking a bow at SDCC 2014

One takeaway from Dorman's blog is the passionate comic fandom at conventions has been usurped. Cosplay is an easy target as the hobby has gained increasing traction at conventions worldwide, but, this is just a small symptom of the steady replacement of these conventions focus on comics in an effort to better accommodate a host of genre fandoms. Over the course of the past decade, SDCC and other large comic conventions have been inundated with, and eager to display, the masses practically crashing their gates in an anticipation of engaging their given fandom and also marveling at the spectacle of large-scale comic conventions. Though no more indicative of the changing demographics of comic conventions than the increase in celebrity appearances, film panels, and journalists, cosplayers have been singled out often as the most vivid iconography of the contemporary

convention. Images of cosplayers, be they of people dressed up as superheroes or not, whether they be celebrity's in a forthcoming superhero film or not, are striking visual representations of the perceived comic-con atmosphere. These images are appealing in a way Dorman suggests—bright, vivid, and colorful indulgences that signify a certain broad 'geek' culture. And, thanks to the prevalence of sharing sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, images of cosplayers have become the most dispersible representations of comic conventions. In short, and through no fault or desire of their own, non-comic fans increasingly represent as visual signification for the broad fan gatherings that conventions house. While it is unlikely many fandoms possess any real angst over this, a segment of superhero comic fandom has lumped this into an increasingly perceived marginalization of their fan object from all fronts.

Mainstream news coverage seems to bear the trend of what comic conventions now present out. San Diego Comic Con, arguably the nation's premier comic convention, had a number of news reports unfurl out of its week-long 2014 festivities. Many of these reports deal with celebrity sightings or film and television promotions, but after these Hollywood centric exhibits, respected news sites like MSNBC and CNN offered coverage on cosplayers at the convention to complement their film or television-specific coverage.[123] Even popular comic book news sites like Comic Vine or Bleeding Cool follow up conventions with photo collections of cosplayers and celebrity sightings. Missing from these visual representations of comic conventions are both the comic professionals and the comic-reading fandom. A subplot in documentarian Morgan Spurlock's 2012 release, *Comic Con IV: A Fans' Hope*, is the slowly diminishing presence of <u>comic</u> books at the <u>comic</u> convention. Showcased through Chuck Rozanski, the aging owner of the one of the nation's leading comic vendors, Mile High Comics, viewers are treated to a narrative that speaks to increasingly less floor space for comic readers, more attention to the film franchises, cosplayers, and video gamers, and fewer sales of actual comic books. This is a

---

[123] CNN had no less than three articles including a comprehensive report that chronicled 24 hours in a cosplayer's life during the convention and a "Who Wore it Best" take on the costumes of the convention. MSNBC, at least, mixed this entertainment coverage with a discussion of cosplay as a fandom at the foreground of discussing sexual harassment in popular culture.

notion echoed by a number of fans in a variety of forms. Rozanski's fear of losing convention space to

the films is mirrored by fans in comic forums suggesting the narrative of their comics are dependent on

the releases of the films –an Ant-Man solo comic series leads into 2015's film starring the character; the

Inhumans, fans contend conspiratorially, are supplanting the X-Men as Marvel's cypher for being a

minority both in anticipation of their forthcoming film and because Marvel is tired of shelling out free

publicity for a bunch of characters they no longer have the film rights to. [124] And, so on.

Therefore, more than just potentially upsetting the economics of the creator-at-comic-

convention market, the emphasis on everything non-comic at conventions has increasingly conflated the

uninitiated or public's perception/understanding of superhero comic fandom with a host of other

superhero-adjacent issues. Cosplayers, as the most striking and visible element of comic conventions

have become a visual shorthand—alongside the sight of celebrities holding court for an adoring public—

for comic conventions as a whole. Yet, as their name suggests, comic conventions have a strong, and

decades long, tie to the industry, fandom, and culture of superhero comic books.[125] Media coverage,

interest, and fascination with comic conventions like SDCC has risen in a way that mirrors the increased

visibility of the superhero but not the comic book and has, to a general non-fannish public, potentially

conflated superhero fandom with cosplay and other convention-going attributes. Of course, superhero

comic readers are not necessarily cosplayers and vice versa—though some are.[126]

The larger point to be made from all this coverage of comic conventions is that as the superhero

has increasingly become divorced from the medium of comic books, so too has the perception and

reality of what constitutes a superhero fan. And, cosplayers make for a nice, identifiable, and prevalent

---

[124] The X-Men film rights belong to 20th Century Fox.
[125] Obviously comics can refer to more than superhero books. But, as Sean Howe points out in his history of Marvel, comic conventions started as a way to interact with superhero comic creators (52-53). And, even in today's increasingly diversified comic book market, superhero comics account for over 70% of the market share.
[126] Despite the fact that superhero costumes are often used in cosplay, cosplay, like superhero comic book reading, has its own factions, fandoms, and variances. Because someone dresses as Wolverine, for example, does not mean that person does (or doesn't) follow the character's comic book series.

example of how this conflation works, thus raising the ire of people like Dorman. Of course, cosplayers are not alone in garnering the media's attention. Due to contemporary successes of superhero adaptations in television, film, and video games, the number of ways that a consumer can maintain considerable, sustained connection with superheroes is growing—and it increasingly has nothing to do with comic book readership; so many other avenues are now viable ways of being a form of superhero fan, that a blurring of these endeavors has increasingly substituted in mainstream culture as representations of superhero comic fandom.

While conflating the comic reader with someone who practices an enjoyment of superheroes in another form or via another activity isn't dangerous, it does highlight the fact fandom isn't a monolith. More specifically, these increasingly diverse manifestations of superhero fan activity suggest both a broadening spectrum of superhero fans and a concurrent increase in coverage of superhero comic culture. The fact that superhero fan activities that have little to do with comic culture have become more and more emphasized seemingly fuels a certain antagonism—'traditional' superhero comic reading fandoms speaking out against newer entrants or other participants in the increasingly broad, popular superhero fan contingent. It is important, then, to understand the mechanism of this fan divide, both because it better deconstructs the stereotypes perpetrated by the rants of certain superhero fans but also because it examines the mechanism by which a fandom, in this case superhero comic fandom, deals with an evolution of its fan object and the injection of new fans and fandoms aligned with said object. In summation, this final chapter contends both the obvious—superhero fandom is increasingly detached from superhero comic book reading—and the implication—that superheroes' elevation to the mainstream isn't doesn't correspond to an elevation of their traditional fandom which in turn fuels a form of anti-fandom antagonism against other manifestations of superhero fan activity or even things

that are mistaken for it.[127] Furthermore, tracing this mechanism opens up new avenues for exploring the evolution of fan objects alongside their fandom; this seems an increasingly meaningful line of scholarship thanks to entertainment cultures' increased use of mining nostalgia and established intellectual properties to fuel new franchises in a variety of media.

Taking the above into consideration, I'd like to characterize Dorman's worries as a reaction against the loss of not only a haven for comic culture but also the loss of identity as a comic book reading fan in the face of the much more visibly spread cosplayer—an unfairly, if oft-targeted and specific, stand-in for new, non-comic centric superhero fans.[128] Anti-cosplay outbursts originating from within comic culture need to be read as defensive and insecure arguments motivated by the real or imagined diminishing of the comic readers hold over his/her fan object- the superhero. This chapter contends that one substantial, and likely unconsidered outcome, of superheroes' proliferation in non-comic mediums, then, is a reconstruction of how the public-at-large perceives and engages with superhero comic culture. Driven both by a surging non-comic-related interest in superheroes, largely following the properties' commercial successes, and an upswing in superhero fandoms, like cosplay, that don't necessarily invest in comic reading, the superhero comic book fan has, much like his or her fan object, become the secondary representation of superhero fandom. What is at stake in an examination of comic culture's relationship with cosplay is an understanding of how the fan engagement with and the consumption of superheroes has evolved over the same course of time that saw superheroes become increasingly related to non-comic book media and has seen people's perception of what a superhero fan is broaden accordingly.

---

[127] As is always the case, this isn't to say that ALL superhero comic fans react this way; only that there is a trend in the fandom, be it a vocal minority or something larger, worth exploring to better understand the effects of superheroes' multimodal success on the core fandom—the comic book readers.

[128] This is a good a place as any to underscore, once more, that this chapter is not anti-cosplayer nor is the cosplayer in direct opposition to the traditional comic reading fandom, but their visibility makes them a visible manifestation of newer fans and fandoms that associate with comic book superheroes in a way that is both decidedly non-comic related and increasingly more media-friendly or depicted. This chapter could have just as easily focused on movie goers, video game players, etc. to enter the discussion.

The opening up of what constitutes a form of superhero fandom is not simply an effect of superhero characters and stories being adapted at record pace. Instead, it is that the emphasis placed on these adaptations, and the subsequent hype and commercial success, has made superhero fare increasingly interesting to non-comic-reading audiences; and, where larger audiences convene, news and pop culture outlets, naturally seeking readers and viewers themselves, follow. That the representations disseminated via these outlets align more often than not with a form of superhero interest that is not based in reading comic books means both that flashier versions of superhero fan culture (cosplay, movie attending, celebrity worship, etc.) have been elevated while the comic reader has been marginalized—the newer sustained forms of entering a form of being a superhero fan are validated by a mainstream presence the comic reader still has not acquired.[129] Exploring this dynamic is not meant to give the comic reader their 'due' or suggest that one form of being a fan actually is more valid or deserving. Instead, this chapter argues not only that these new, non-comic superhero narratives are not aimed at traditional comic fandom but non-comic reading movie audiences and that this avoidance of the traditional superhero comic fandom has actually re-inscribed what a superhero fan is to the point of making traditional superhero comic readers both miscast against an increasingly skewed perception of how their subculture operates and increasingly prone to attempts to invalidate other forms of entry into superhero fandom aside from comic reading. As a means of understanding these processes, I will position these intra-superhero-fandom tensions as a means to highlight contemporary media markets' transferring similar narrative content across multiple outlets and platforms as not just a sound business practice, but also process that reframes and redefines what certain fandoms looks like, or at least, how they present via cultural flows to the world at large.

---

[129] One could make a case that during the boom years of the 1990s comic market, there was a certain validation. However, many of the articles written on the trend at the characterized the success as intriguing because of the stereotypes of the comic book fanboy. A similar trend has recently occurred with mainstream coverage of *Twilight* fans, something Matt Hills notes in his article, "Twilight" Fans Represented in Commercial Paratexts and Inter-Fandoms: Resisting and Repurposing Negative Fan Stereotypes."

BECOMING ANTI-FAN

The tensions that arise out of the traditional fans' allegiance to the superhero comic book even as the superhero leaves the comic book behind spills over in a number of fashions. While some may take the relatively reasoned position of Dorman, many seek to lash out and discredit these 'new representations' of superhero comic fandom—a rhetorical move that often posits the non-comic-book-reader as not an actual superhero fan. When these tensions boil over, be they in fan forums, social media, or at convention halls, the resulting fallout is rarely pretty. One could point to any number of issues of sexual harassment female cosplayers have endured at comic conventions,[130] one could stroll through the comments on any number of internet articles on comic films, but longtime comic artist Tony Harris's Facebook diatribe is an exemplary picture of how this argument often plays out:

> *I am so sick and tired of the whole COSPLAY-Chiks. I know a few who are actually pretty cool-and BIG Shocker, love and read Comics… Heres the statement I wanna make… "Hey! Quasi-Pretty-NOT-Hot-Girl, you are more pathetic than the REAL Nerds, who YOU secretly think are REALLY PATHETIC…. You are willing to become almost completely Naked in public, and yer either skinny (Well, some or most of you, THINK you are) or you have Big Boobies… You are what I refer to as "CON-HOT". Well not by my estimation, but according to a LOT of average Comic Book Fans who either RARELY speak to, or NEVER speak to girls… ALL unconfident when it comes to girls, and the ONE thing they all have in common? The are being preyed on by YOU. .. After many years of watching this shit go down every 3 seconds around or in front of my booth or table at ANY given Con in the country, I put this together. Well not just me. We are LEGION. And here it is, **THE REASON WHY ALL THAT, sickens us: BECAUSE YOU DONT KNOW SHIT ABOUT COMICS**, BEYOND WHATEVER GOOGLE IMAGE SEARCH YOU DID TO GET REF ON THE MOST MAINSTREAM CHARACTER WITH THE MOST REVEALING COSTUME EVER… Yer not Comics. Your just the thing that all the Comic Book, AND mainstream press flock to at Cons. And the real reason for the Con, and the damned costumes yer parading around in? That would be Comic Book Artists, and Comic Book Writers who make all that shit up* (Johnston, emphasis mine)*.*

The above take is many things. It is misogynistic, it is derisive of comic's own fan base, it is angry, and it is vitriolic. It was also 'liked' and discussed favorably by roughly the same amount of comic fans who derided it, as was Mrs. Dorman's thoughts on cosplay. However, forging past the clear sexist discourse and the stereotyping of comic fans, Harris's argument is fairly defensive and fits into the mold

---

[130] While sexual harassment of cosplayers doesn't have to be the fault of superhero comic fandom or any other male-coded fandom, per se, the atmosphere of the subculture has definitely caused issues at times.

of comic culture attempting to fend off the loss of its status. He equates the real reason for the conventions as comic artists and writers, thus implying cosplayers gain notoriety and profit off of the creative team's talents (again, not unlike Dorman). Of course, media outlets and Hollywood studios would probably argue against Harris as to what conventions are increasingly about. Cast against these many outlets that cover cosplay, celebrity, and the atmosphere of large comic conventions, and likely also inspired by the increasing 'Hollywoodization' of places like SDCC ,[131] one doesn't have to strain to see Harris's defensive posture – "Yer not Comics. Your just the thing that all the Comic Book, AND mainstream press flock to at Cons". While his lashing out at the success of cosplayers might speak to a marginalization of comics themselves as the draw of the show, he further 'validates' his argument by positioning cosplayers as non-fans – they don't read comics, they simply look for the 'most revealing' outfit and go from there. Harris's rant essentially invalidates the presence of anyone not into comic book reading; it positions them as violating some untold code of convention-going and makes clear that a segment of superhero comic book fans have no trouble at all in diminishing the non-reader in general and cosplay specifically.[132]

Regardless of the hateful vibe of Harris's argument, his words lay bare Dorman's dichotomy and this chapter's contention that superhero fandom tensions arise in the wake of the marginalization of the comic reader. Harris, an insider of comic culture with his own fans, characterizes cosplayers as a nuisance and clearly not 'true' fans. Yet, at the same time he acknowledges the increasingly reality of comic coverage by news and media outlets—cosplayers get the attention and become the visual representation of comic conventions and culture. Thus, and ironically despite many readers concerns about the diminished presence of actual comic stuff at conventions, the disparate fandoms, all dealing

---

[131] "What's RIGHT and What's WRONG About the SAN DIEGO COMIC-CON" (Newsarama); "Is There Still Room for Comics at Comic-Con?" (KPBS); "How the Nerds Lost Comic-Con" (The Wire)

[132] While it is outside the purview of this chapter, much of the hateful comments directed at cosplayers fits into a larger discussion of male-dominated subculture and fandoms treatment of women. While Chapter Two touches on some of this, it is more likely that cosplay issues seen here could be explored alongside the current GamerGate and Women in Video Game dialogues that are starting to crop up.

with superheroes still, conflate. Inevitably, when a rant like Harris' makes the rounds then the focus is on the clear and pronounced misogyny, a characterization that often gets applied to comic culture at large. The point of this chapter is not to apologize for Harris or discount comic culture's contentious relationship with its female audience, but instead to note that while the tone is misogynistic and the rant itself horribly sexist, it is also overwhelming defensive and insecure. Harris and Dorman's words, echoed in many comic fandom circles, have a subtext that adamantly believes that superhero fandom is being given to everyone (the output of films, the influx of new fans, the conflation of what is a superhero fan) while the industry that birthed it and the core fandom that raised it reaps none of the recognition and, in fact, seems to be slipping away.

It is also important to stress how many people supported this rant. That a large contingent of people liked or stood with his take suggests there is a segment of the fandom that is insecure and defensive about the loss of the comic-con space in specific and the marginalization of the superhero reader as the primary conduit to superhero content. In fact, one of the throughlines of the last two chapters has been to chronicle certain fans defensive outbursts that, while racist and sexist at times, constantly invoke a concern over people not being 'real' superhero fans; clearly the two issues are not mutually exclusive and there is evidence throughout this dissertation that suggests an invocation of authority or canon somehow 'allows' for such harsh rhetoric. While Chapter Three extended some of the basic line of thinking in regards to fans' desire to lay an authoritarian claim over their fan object, Derek Johnson, media scholar, breaks down the fans' drive to take control very clearly. He posits that there can never be utopian fan communities because "fan activity is discursively dominated, disciplined, and defined to preserve hegemonies of cultural power" (5525). Johnson is arguing that fans are constantly in a state of using discussion and dialogue to claim their fan object, for themselves and like-minded fans, and while he largely paints this as a battle between the consuming fandom and the official producers, what he sees motivating this desire is applicable here. Johnson says, "This struggle to

consensually legitimate competing knowledge claims about fans, cult texts, and their productions…operates discursively to constitute hegemonies within factionalized fan communities…Fans attack and criticize [those] whom they feel threaten their meta-textual interests" (5513). The first part of this claim positions cult fandoms, like superhero comic book fandoms, as already factionalized because of the ongoing attempts for each participating fan or fandom to legitimize their take, knowledge, or validity of fandom. However, the turn he makes is that when those legitimizing claims come under fire, thus when the hegemony of the fandom they've attached to becomes a target and its knowledge potentially invalidated, their attacks turn "outward" (5513). This does not excuse statements made like Harris's nor does it truly rationalize their arguments or motivations, but it does provide a framework for how these arguments come to be. As this chapter progresses, it will underscore the perceived attack on the hegemony the superhero comic book reader has had.

Much of what follows then will be an exploration of superhero fandom's shifting away from comic readers and their insecure, defensive stance about it and losing their hegemonic power in this niche avenue. That the superhero reader is losing ground to the wider spread of less deeply involved fandoms seems inevitable; that certain fans are responding with such angst, like those described at the beginning of this chapter highlights the power of fandoms' hold over the fan, and the attachment people make to fan objects.[133] While my exploration of the processes that have led to the usurping of superhero readers as the primary superhero fan and comic books as the preferred medium unfold, I'll also depict why it is logical, if not rational. But to do so, I'd like to set-up one more concept that builds of Johnson's hegemonic frame—the anti-fan or, as Jonathan Gray puts it those who consider a particular text or genre, "inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel" (70). These obviously encapsulate Harris and his adherents take on cosplay, but it also crops in enough superhero fan

---

[133] It also underscores, fairly emphatically, how people can produce hateful speech in the name of validating their fan object. While not entirely the purview of this dissertation, the work done here clearly opens up avenues to consider this connection in a meaningful and sustained way.

forums—not just against cosplay, but against new, non-comic book reading fans in general—to suggest at the very least a vocal minority of fans with similar, if not as rancorous takes on the perceived threat outsiders pose to superhero comic fandom. Particularly, it harkens to Vivi Theodoropoulou, sociologist, take on anti-fandom that "The anti-fan is first and foremost a fan, and resorts to anti-fandom so as to protect her/his fan object from the threat its 'counterforce' poses. It suggests that in cases of extreme antagonism between two fan objects when binary oppositions occur, fans love to hate the 'opposing threat,' and use their anti-fandom as a form of communication and language" (6051).

While one would be hard-pressed to position cosplay alone as a counterforce or opposing threat to superhero comic fans, they are an increasingly visible concept of the larger loss of superhero comic fans agency and authority with their own fan object—the superhero. Moreover, they occupy the same space and via media outlets' willing conflation, they often get construed as a stand-in for conventions which use to code primarily as for comic readers. Of course, then, they are not an opposing threat but a visual representation of the loss some superhero comic fans feel in light of superheroes boundless rush into other mediums and other consumers. And, as should become clear throughout the chapter the "binary opposition" becomes the positioning and validity of what does and, more importantly, will constitute a superhero fan.

FROM COMIC READER TO JUST ABOUT ANYONE: HOW EVERYONE BECAME A SUPERHERO FAN

The perception of the superhero fan today is difficult to encapsulate because of the widespread diversity and success of superheroes as cultural and media phenomenon. Thus, to fully understand fans who might, if not so angrily and vehemently as Harris, consider their act of superhero comic book reading to be the pinnacle and most valid form of being an actual superhero fan, it is important not only to contextualize superhero offerings but also to acknowledge the broad, longform narrative that started

in the comics.[134] These multi-media adaptations (namely the films) no longer represent solely as their own, unique story nor do they refer the consumer who is interested in more fully engaging with these superheroes towards the comic books; they are stuck in the middle ground—everyone knows they originated in the comics, yet these adaptations so clearly do their own thing so as not to require any comic book knowledge to enjoy. Furthermore, as a multi-billion dollar industry on its own, Marvel Studio's films need not worry about funneling their audience towards the esoteric and stereotype ridden world of comic readership; they need only worry about keeping fans invested in the upcoming slate of films—and the ancillary merchandise. Chapter One addressed how these films borrowed liberally from the comic book narrative structure to do that—post-credit scenes, characters cropping up with regularity in each other's films, etc. However, they've been so successful as to have reconfigured the public's perception of the superhero genre from one that is for-the-comic-book to one that is clearly for the film. These moves, and their success, need to be framed by two broad concepts with a lot of overlap—media convergence and media spreadability. The former term Henry Jenkins defines as the "flow of content across multiple media"(185); this seemingly simple definition speaks to the width of the term because it implies not only technological shifts in dispersing media, but the repackaging and redistribution of media by those other than the official producers…like fans, for example. Media spreadability inverts the above definition by foregrounding the process as an actively-driven phenomenon. Spreadable media is defined by a

> [a] shift from distribution to circulation [that] signals a movement toward a more participatory model of culture . . . people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined. And they are doing so not as isolated individuals but within larger communities and networks, which allow them to spread content well beyond their immediate geographic proximity (Ford 182).

---

[134] Chapter Three touches on some of this motivation, too; fan authority and currency is caught up in the detailed knowledge you have of your fandom. The comic book reader is likely to have a more nuanced and deep-reaching understanding of superhero character than someone whose primary encounter is via another medium.

In short, it might be best to see convergence as the process of media moving along multiple channels, and spreadable media as the both the object(s) moving and the process of intentionally making media converge and "flow" across all those different media.

The concepts are important here because the non-comic book success of superheroes has fundamentally reconfigured the genre's primary relationship towards filmic media. That this is happening so quickly and so fluently suggests that media spreadability, here the adaptation of superheroes into other entertainment media and the fan recirculation of that material, is not an egalitarian process that spreads multimodal narratives, stories that share a storytelling origin but are separate stories told via different media, equitably, but instead favors ease of access and chasing commercial success. This point isn't necessarily counterintuitive to what Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Josh Green claim in their book *Spreadable Media*, but it does imply that certain media is much better suited to spreading and it is media that is internet-ready. While this might be a given considering Jenkin's proclamation that "If it doesn't spread, it's dead,", understanding how this process effects certain consumers, i.e. fans, underscores that these mechanism of media flow are more than just designed processes by which media converges, **they are processes that rework the very act of being a fan** because the implication that certain mediums or narratives will travel quicker, further, and more attractively than others. In this case, it's a process that emphasizes and underscores how easy it is for fans to disseminate superhero fandoms as they relate to the excitingly visual or shared experientially moments like film-viewing, convention attending, or game playing (to name a few). As superheroes increasingly relate to the filmic, the content that gets spread is filmic, as well. Since so many more people have seen the films than read the comics, since the films have an easier to distribute images and provide a potentially wider audience, and since the newness of the films means their narrative is more contemporary and easy to understand, the mechanisms of spreading media are slanted towards the

sharing of this material more fully and it being reproduced and understood more often and by more people.

To fully appreciate this ongoing evolution of superhero fandoms' constitutions, it is integral to examine the contemporary status of the superhero narrative both as a production but also as an object swept along by these media-moving processes. This angle better answers the question of what media convergence does. Specifically what it does not as an endpoint, but as a process that evolves not only media production but media consumption. In other words, the shift in the at-large perception of superheroes opens up a way to understand what happens in the wake of narrative properties as they aggressively expand into new, more widely distributed and received media in a consistent, culturally impactful way.

This plan moves beyond franchising or licensing of properties as was discussed in Chapter 1. For one, the convoluted possession of these intellectual properties stymies the simple arrangement of Marvel offering the use of their characters for a fee;[135] furthermore, the real success not only lay in the use of characters that have acquired popularity, but a use, as described in Chapter 1 also, that inscribes the releases of the film with the serial narrative concepts of superhero comic books. While this move clearly falls under the purview of media convergence though driven largely by producers instead of consumers, it is much more nuanced than that. It is multimodal storytelling, an expression of narrative content that realizes,

> "each medium has different kinds of affordances — the game facilitates different ways of interacting with the content than a book or a feature film. A story that plays out across different media adopts different modalities. A franchise can be multimodal without being transmedia —

---

[135] In the 1990s Marvel began selling the film rights to their characters in an effort to stave off bankruptcy and capitalize on their intellectual properties. Those sales have made for an interesting mess of current film rights. Disney, parent company of Marvel, owns the film rights to the Avengers' characters, street-level characters like Daredevil, Elektra, Punisher and Luke Cage, supernatural characters like Ghost Rider and Dr. Strange, and Guardians of the Galaxy. Recently they've entered an agreement with Sony Pictures to co-handle the Spider-Man films. 20th Century Fox Studios holds the rights to the Fantastic Four, X-Men, and Deadpool. And, finally, Universal Pictures holds the as-of-yet-unused rights to Namor.

most of those which repeat the same basic story elements in every media fall into this category" (Jenkins, "Transmedia 202").

The key to multimodal storytelling being that while it shares a narrative base that expresses across multiple platforms and media, thus converging, the expression of one medium doesn't corroborate with or expand upon the other medium in a direct, intertextually, narrative manner.[136]

Of course, for superheroes, it is a bit more complicated. While the most popular films, television shows, video games, and comics series do not share a story, and thus are not offering a shared storytelling experience, they still share characters that look and act similarly and present plots that are often cribbed or inspired by the other medium. Success of the filmic has further blurred the narrative boundaries between them. The characters of Iron Man and Loki in Marvel's published comics have increasingly become more similar to the actors' who portray them, Robert Downey Jr. and Tom Hiddleston, respectively, and adopt mannerism similar to the ones those actors effect on the big screen. Certain publishing strategies like Marvel Comic's recent emphasis on the superhero race known as the Inhumans in anticipation of a 2019 film release of the same name coupled with the de-emphasis of the Fantastic Four and X-Men characters (whom they don't have the film rights to) clearly hint that multimodal stories are more than, as Henry Jenkins says, stories in which "what the Green Lantern looks like differs from a comic book, a live action movie, a game, or an animated television series". They are stories that share a narrative on a foundational, informative level if not in in the actual contemporary, media-specific stories each platform unfolds. Black Widow as portrayed by Scarlett Johansson in the films goes through different experiences and narratives than her comic book counterpart, but they share a similar origin, style, and theme; they are two shades of the same character cast across different media.

This difference is critical, however, in understanding how media convergence, as it pertains to superheroes, at least, has reshaped fandoms. First, that the comic book, the original medium of

---

[136] An example of comic book transmedia storytelling would be DC's *Arrow: Season 2.5* or *Flash: Season 0* digital comics. They share a diegetic, consistent world with the television shows, CW's *Arrow* and *Flash*, and they deepen the story of those television shows by providing more content for consumers.

superheroes, is the medium that most often undergoes changes to better line up with what the films depict, again as detailed in previous chapters, suggests the filmic Marvel world's alpha status.[137] While the movies are obviously indebted to the comics for a number of narrative details, they do not cohere to the longstanding comic book canon in the way some might expect an adaptation to do. Furthermore, it is often the comic book stories themselves that adapt in the wake of a particularly successful film. A prime example would be the mid-2000s comic run of J. Michael Strazynski on Amazing Spider-Man where, following the wildly successful Sony film version (*Spider-Man*, 2000), the titular character changed to, in part, adopt the organic web shooters the film popularized for the mainstream audience. Of course, a number of smaller adaptations exist. Tony Stark's, Marvel's Iron Man, comic book home, a palatial coastal mansion, is a replica of the one seen in the films. Thor's archvillain has always been Loki, but after his success in the films and the subsequent anti-heroing of the character, the character's comic book relationship has become less an antagonistic rivalry and more a contentious partnering. While comics have long engaged in multimodal storytelling, they've rarely so quickly acquiesced to the dominance of the filmic and retooled their characters to express that medium's vision.[138] However, that the industry course corrects so quickly is itself a fallout from increased media convergence and interaction; box office returns, tweets, forums, and e-mails are not only more omnipresent than the old letter to the editor of comic books, they are, in comparison, instant. And, there is so much more of this feedback. Superheroes mimicking of the film can be read as the editors understanding how large a contingent of consumers actually enjoy those filmic representations and take them as the de facto character. Before this shift, comic trends were often reactionary to themselves, the Silver Age of comics (the late 50s to ~ 1970) were often silly and light-hearted, the next era of comics, the so-called Bronze Age was mired in more human realism; thus, the impossibly perfect, good, and morally unimpeachable

---

[137] The quicker turnaround time on comics and the fact they are constantly distributed indicates they are also more nimble and capable of such changes, too.

[138] The recent launch of a comic book called *Contest of Champions* (Vol 1. 2015) based on Marvel's very popular tablet fighting-genre game suggests other media may also be influencing upcoming comic book narratives.

characters of DC's Justice League lost popularity to Marvel's 'feet of clay' heroes like the Fantastic Four and Spider-Man. The writers' renaissance of the 1980s, characterized best by Chris Claremenont's critically acclaimed run of writing the X-Men from nobodies to the world's most popular superheroes gave way to the rise of the superstar artist in the '90s perhaps most defined by the booting of Claremont from plotting and scripting the X-Men so artist Jim Lee could handle both writing and art duties. As the current era of comics seems to pride itself on balancing the best of all the eras gone by, the context they are most reactionary too seems to be their widely seen movie adaptations.

Comparing the current superhero industry with its own past also better highlights how this combination of widespread prevalence and the creation of newer, more broadly accessible and self-referential narratives seems to have mitigated the process of entering superhero comic books as opposed to actually increasing readership. The Batman and Superman films of the late '70s to early '90s and the successful cartoon franchises of the mid-90s seemed much more related to the comic market than today's film entries. Some of this is simply because the films and cartoons were self-contained; if one wanted more Batman or Spider-Man they had to seek it out. Only now, largely thanks to social media and the widespread prevalence of the internet, are the films discussed, debated, and recirculated as their own entity constantly. Additionally, every year since *Iron Man (2008)* has not only seen multiple superhero adaptations hit the theatre and video stores, but, because of this, there has also been a seemingly never-ending supply of trailers, teasers, marketing information, and internet leaks that not only keep fans and audiences invested but promise the more superhero filmic action is coming. There was no promise embedded in the offering that suggested more superheroes were coming—at least not immediately. Even the weekly doling out of the TV cartoons was finite. When summer came, the cartoons reran. They did not suggest what was coming down the pipeline. Nor did these entries intermingle. Christopher Reeve's Superman and Michael Keaton's Batman existed in separate worlds

and thus ignored one of the truly unique and alluring draws of superhero narratives in comics.[139] For those whose interests in superheroes were piqued, a trip to the local comic book store was in order if they wished to keep experiencing superhero narratives. Today the buzz and the presence of the films is as constant as the weekly supplies of comics being shipped to hobby stores nationwide. Some of this, as highlighted before, is suggested by the strong readership during these years in comparison to the waning readership of today. Another interesting aspect of this is the closed loop of the fandom. In a perfect world for the comic book medium, the steady diet of superhero films, fan films, cartoons, and games would drive people to the comic stores in droves since they are ostensibly so many more points of entry. Yet, that each succeeds so well on their own not only speaks to the central tenet of this chapter, but of the larger disconnect between superheroes and comic books. More pointedly, however, is the direct exclamations of many contemporary fans and creators that these alternate medium versions of characters were their first brush with superheroes and *drove* them into becoming superhero comic book fans and consumers.[140]

While the sheer number of superhero media narratives today vastly outstrips those of the earlier decades combined, one of the real indicators that today's superhero films and television shows have usurped the throne of superhero prominence from comic books, then, is the this self-referential nature. In September 2014, both Warner Brothers' DC Studios and Disney's Marvel Studios announced the release dates and title of their forthcoming films—Marvel's in large, extravagant invite-only event that only highlights the importance they grant their films.[141] Inherent in these detailed release plans is a promise of a new Batman film, a new Avengers film, and so on – a promise to continue the stories of the

---

[139] One that today's films are capitalizing on as mentioned in Chapter One.
[140] Admittedly, much of this is apocryphal discussions across comic book podcasts, forums, and blogs, most notably the popular site Comic Vine. However, James Viscardi, an ex-Marvel staffer, runs a podcast entitled *Let's Talk Comics* that seemingly confirms this reality on a weekly basis. His show centers on an in-depth interview with comic book creators, and a great many of them speak of their entry into the world of comics as one driven first by an engagement with the characters in some other form.
[141] To contrast, new comics are often announced via brief interview with a writer and some accompanying art posted on a comic news website. While the comparison of the two creative marketing schemes is apples and oranges, it does underscore the mainstream attraction of filmic superhero characters.

films before then, a continuation of the given company's heroes' journey...not at all unlike the promise their comic books make. These films supplant the serial nature of comic books with their own ongoing story. In doing so, they do not cultivate fans of superheroes as pop culture has always configured that fandom has always understood that fandom. No; these films refer the potential new fan to the next filmic iteration or, perhaps, the stars that portray the characters themselves, not back to the comic books of which superheroes were born.[142]

As stated, today's comics don't do that; comic sales reports do not see an upward surge in the months preceding or succeeding a big tentpole release; that is to say the month after *Avengers* (2012) hit there was only a marginal uptick in comic sales, and one month later those figures backslid to the year's normal. And, while the years since the onset of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (2008-ongoing) have been full of anecdotal evidence suggesting more, film-fueled entrants into the realm of reading superhero comic books, the numbers and other, more impactful bits of evidence suggest otherwise. Recently, the popular YouTube video series, *Kids React*, ran an episode depicting the reactions of children, age 8-13, to the forthcoming May 2015 Avengers film. Not surprisingly, the bulk of the kids expressed excitement at the idea of a sequel, the gathering of the heroes they mostly recognized together in one film, the ominous reveal of the bad guy, and so forth. However, as a follow up question, an interviewer asked each kid if they had read or do read comics. The answers were overwhelmingly no; the harshest being given by a young girl who exclaimed she was glad she didn't while the closest affirmative was an acknowledgement by a boy that he had flipped through a few Thor comics. Pressing on the odd distinction that these kids were predominantly excited by the trailer yet apathetic towards the possibility of reading comics, the interviewer mentioned that some comic readers may not always be happy with how the characters and plots transfer from the printed material. While potentially heady material for pre-teens, most answered that this was to be expected; one even outright called comic

---

[142] At the risk of sounding like a broken record, please reference Chapter One for full details on this process.

readers nerds. While the purview of a larger and different bit of scholarship, it is likely that these kids are more accustomed to a screen entertainment culture than a written one, and furthermore the demographics are not available—do these kids have comic shops near them? Friends who read, etc.? In other words, this evidence is both a small sample size and potentially speak to larger issues, but the kids fluency with the films and characters juxtaposed against their, at best, indifference towards the comic book versions makes a clear indication that today, and seemingly going forward, the superheroes are related to films and these films do not entice kids into becoming superhero comic book fans.

As both Howe's Marvel history book and JP Gabillet's *On Comics and Men* suggest, kids have long been a core audience for superhero comic readership. The *Kids React* video suggests that while the latter still holds quite firm for the superhero portion of that, the comic book readership aspect is entirely disassociated from the process. Not only does the video highlight the lack of reference to comic books today's superhero offerings engender, it also highlights how the Marvel Cinematic Universe's seriality has captured the audience's attention. One precocious child exclaims to the interviewer "I've been waiting for this **so long**!" Multiple children identified who the heroes were, and they seemed to grow more excited when they saw the results of Feige's team-up mentality – "Wait? Why is Iron Man fighting Hulk?" or "Iron Man and Captain America? What is going on?!" None of this suggests that a child watching *Superman* (1978) as it came out would immediately force their parents to take them to the comic book store, but *if it did* pique that interest in superhero stories that was the clear outlet. Now, another film will be out in a year, television shows featuring superheroes are becoming increasingly common, and DC and Marvel-licensed characters are featured in some of each year's most popular video game releases.

That the popularity of one narrative outlet would challenge the hold comic books has on superheroes might seem absurd if you consider the fact superhero comic book fans have long been asked to engage in a navigation of multiplicity, or the pushing of several versions of plots and characters

simultaneously. That the films are multimodal shouldn't matter; after all, much of their success hinges on them being *read as comic book*, as outlined above. In an interview with Sam Ford, Henry Jenkins elaborates on multiplicity and the superhero comic book fan:

> No matter how complicated the superhero narrative may fell to the uninitiated, they are not nearly complex enough to satisfy their most demanding readers . . . Comics are discovering that readers take great pleasure in encountering and comparing multiple versions of the same characters. There are multiple versions of, say, the Spider-Man character in publication at once: in some, Peter Parker is still a teen, while in others he is an adult; in some he is married to Mary Jane and living at the Avengers Mansion, while in others he still courting her. Some emphasize action elements, and others stress romantic entanglements. But this is just the start. Further on the fringes, comic publishers experiment with books that are told from the perspective of long-term villains, stories that situate the protagonist in radically different time periods, experiments where the characters are reconceptualized from the ground up, or characters are placed in different generic or historical contexts (307)

Jenkins argues that multiplicity is inherent in the convoluted and continuity driven context of superhero comic books and that readers are expected to know which 'interpretive frame should be applied' to any given title (307). There is no arguing Jenkin's summation of both a certain segment of the comic readership or the fascination with alternative universes in the genre.[143] This implies that superhero comic book fans should then be able to see film as simply an additional alternative frame, another example of multiplicity in motion. After all, the films are multimodal versions of the superhero story. They are clearly demarcated from the comic book by medium, audience composition and size, and plot. The films may reference, give Easter eggs, or be inspired by superhero comic book canon, but they do not pick up dangling plot threads nor are they continued on in the canonical superhero comic book series, themselves. In all forms, they operate as DC's *Elseworlds* books or Marvel's *What If*s—stories that exist outside of canon, that allow for stories and characters to be reimagined and altered without directly influencing the primary line's ongoing stories and events. In this light, the notion of fans fretting losing their fandom to the encroaching masses who enjoy non-comic book superheroes is akin to

---

[143] As of this writing, both DC and Marvel have wide scale events dealing the nature of multiple universes and variations of their beloved characters interaction and intersecting with the 'prime' reality of their canonical works.

someone getting upset that Spider-Man once possessed and maintained the 'power cosmic'—a story told in *What If?* Vol. 2 #31, and with no impact on the canonical universe of comic books.

However, in the case of Batman, for instance, no matter how many writers and artists return to Frank Miller's non-canonical comic *The Dark Knight Returns* for inspiration or theme, that piece never threatens to usurp the comic book superhero itself. In all manners it is an aside – a graphic novel that sits outside continuity and doesn't inform the current 'run.[144]' Books like *The Dark Knight Returns* are marketed, consumed, labeled, discussed, as alternative (as if the Elseworld title of DC didn't give that notion away). For the comic reading fan, then, the films are not the canonical universe because they are not part of the cumulative history of the published Batman comic books. However, as discussed in Chapter 3 canon is malleable and constantly being arranged by fans. Thus, the fairly recent widespread acceptance and appeal of filmic superheroes essentially makes the movies the most read and publically referenced narrative of these characters—it becomes a new canon. This opening up of the superhero genre to the broader,non-comic reading audience invalidates the notion that they are separate from the canonical comic book universe because, increasingly, people are citing the movies as their canonical representation of the characters. The minutia of comic book knowledge certain fans have now, what once served to validate them in the fandom of superheroes is now essentially marginalized to trivia since everyone has a passing familiarity with a much more popular version of the characters. At the very least, inverting the structure and making comic book runs more and more the 'elseworld' when contrasted against the much better known filmic interpretations. Thus, the pre-cinematic explosion superhero fan isn't lifted up by the sudden popularity of his fan object, he instead finds his fan object

---

[144] A brief aside for the uninitiated: continuity speaks to the fictional histories stories of these superhero characters—theoretically, everything that has happened in *Amazing Spider-Man* since 1962 has, in some way, shape, or form happened to the Peter Parker character being written today. A 'run' is a creator's work on a series. For example, *Amazing Spider-Man* Vol 1. ran for 700 issues. Stan Lee's 'run' writing the character lasted from issue #1 to #100.

leaving him behind to be interpreted anew and in ways that no longer reference his knowledge of the character.

Simply put, the wildly successful film franchises influence on actually published superhero comics and their ability to present a new, accessible, and broad superhero narrative to a much wider audience overrides the fact they are not canonical books because their success has made superhero comic fandom a secondary consideration of the superhero narrative. Instead of fitting into the normal concept of multiplicity and acting as a complete aside, they are the multiplicity that heralds an impending singularity. As the superhero comic industry reshuffles characters to better align, representationally, with their more successful filmic counterparts, certain comic fans interpreted a marginalization of their fan object—the superhero comic book. What once was the crown jewel of Marvel and DC, is now, at best secondary. The fans see in certain moves—comic characters visual duplication of film counterparts, the narrative and stylistic techniques mentioned in the 1st chapter, the increasing crossover between Hollywood and comic book writers, and increasing amount of coverage superheroes-as-they-exist-apart-from-comic-books get from comic sites, news outlets, and podcasts—an inherent relegation of the superhero comic and a perception of the medium/genre as less than. While, as I've contended, everything the comic book does cannot be mimed in film, its ability to spread superheroes across a global audience with no real hitch as of yet has not only been good for the industry, its produced for them a new set of fans to which they can market and cater. The comic book no longer carries that responsibility, instead it seems to keep IPs alive and test out new ideas while also prepping those hardcore fans (those who regularly read superhero comics) for what is coming down the pipeline.

Film has co-opted the mechanics of comic book success to gain a unique purchase in contemporary pop culture and Hollywood industry. However, in so doing, it has, doubtless without intention, begun to the process of manifesting certain fannish fears about the role of their fan object in

the future of these characters. These fears have lingered too; as Matthew Pustz acknowledges in his work on comic book culture, "In 1995 fans who worried about the decreasing sales of the X-Men comics cynically speculated that Marvel would always publish them as long as money can be made from the products featuring the characters, the Saturday morning cartoon, and a perpetually rumored film" (16). Those cynicisms ring true today, as even back in the '90s, during the comic book boom market, it was noted that "Marvel can make more money from the toys and other products generated from [alternative mediums] that it can from comic books" (16) And, while invariably true, the narrative medium of entertainment that presented superheroes was the comic book. The comic readers were the most *consistent* consumer of superheroes. While merchandise might have been purchased for kids and cartoon watchers, it was the steady monthly stream of superhero comic readers that embodied what superhero fandom was. Film seems to fill that role today and the merchandise follows . . . and so too does our construction of the superhero fan. If film has become the dominant representation of superheroes, then it is likely comic book readers are no longer considered the predominant representation of superhero fans. Then what is?

THE EVOLVING SUPERHERO FANDOM

When Michael Keaton was cast as Batman in the 1989 film adaptation over 50,000 letters were written in protest of the decision (Hawkins 2). Look at any given superhero fan outlet today and you might see arguments that Ben Affleck will be a poor Batman as well, or the fact Tony Stark created Ultron in the films is an affront to comic canon, or that Superman simply doesn't kill regardless of what *Man of Steel* (2013) suggests with its ending. As evidenced by box office returns, many people enjoy these adaptations and are often ignorant of how these takes are met with by superhero comic fans, it doesn't immediately interfere with preexisting superhero fans' preferences for Jim Lee's depiction of Wolverine or Alan Moore's take on the Joker or a grittier Batman or whatever. However, that this tension does exist in certain forums reinforces traditional, or long-standing, superhero comic fandom's

uneasiness with the conflation of non-comic driven superhero fan practices encroaching on their territory. While I position this is as an example of anti-fandom, it is important to differentiate it as this chapter closes, too. It is not a rote 1-to-1 example. The rants of Harris and others in this entire dissertation are not indicative of Yankee fans complaining about Red Sox fans nor is it the easy anti-fandom of hating something popular. It is, as I hope this chapter has revealed, a defense system against the perceived marginalization of traditional superhero fandom—that which is tied to the comic book—and the rise of the filmic superhero story as prime. It isn't about a rivalry then, nor is it primarily about identifying oneself in opposition to popular culture trends, it's more a move to reclaim a position of the superhero fan as intricately tied to the comic book—a move to validate the fandom based on the medium of entry. This can largely be seen as an extension of Jonathan Fiske's belief that in an effort to battle negative portrayals of a given fandom, fans assumed a sense of ownership and freedom to interpret their fan objects. While Fiske imbues such ownership with a sense of political resistance that later fan and audience studies at times contend is overstated, the implication that fans feel a sense of authority or ownership is, by and large, accepted. As John Sullivan articulates in his excellent overview of contemporary media consumption practices, *Media Audience: Effects, Users, Institutions, and Power,* that "Fan audiences may feel so connected to the narrative that they revere that they develop a sense of ownership over the text. This places these audience members on a head-on collision course with the producers and copyright holders, who have a vested interest in developing the characters and storylines in particular ways" (198). As mentioned earlier, this collision is also with other fans whose best interests are served by these official producers; the same fandoms who lash out at the encroachment of new fans who see superheroes as not comic-book-specific also take umbrage with the business decisions that put so much emphasis on making superheroes accessible via other mediums.[145]

---

[145] Business analysts often take Disney's purchase of Marvel at a $4 billion price tag as a steal, and they speak of the purchase in terms that have nothing to do with comics. One analyst when questioned about if Disney's

Trying to understand this pervasive worship of what I'll call an assumed authentic engagement with superheroes over a non-comic associated fandom of the characters may start with a base understanding of fandom as a subculture that seeks to differentiate itself by action and engagements (a la Hebdige's take on punk and other subcultures of the late '70s), but it quickly leads back to media convergence, multimodal narrative practices, and spreadability. Cosplayers dress as, among other things, superheroes, and, as the name would imply, comic conventions are often formed on the basis they are serving the comic reading fandom by serving as both market and forum for fan/creator interactions.[146] That one would serve as the space for the other isn't surprising. However, as comic conventions, most notably San Diego Comic-Con, have increasingly housed non-comic properties and fans, they've garnered more mainstream attention –often in the form of media entities reporting on the next big, often film, TV, or game, release. As cosplayers are a constant at these conventions, and that the bright, easily identifiable costumes of superheroes make for some of the most attractive cosplay uniforms, it is not surprising these images get circulated as a representation of the ostensible comic convention. Images of cosplayers are posted by convention goers, the cosplayers themselves, and news sites that report on the convention (most often comic blogs and sites, but for the larger conventions more mainstream outlets as well). These images travel via social media by people interested in cosplay or conventions, but it also expands outwards. It also becomes reframed and remixed, thus 'spread'. Pop culture sites like IGN or magazines like Maxim reissue these circulated images as 'hottest' or 'sexiest' cosplayers (or comic geeks, thus highlighting the conflation issue). News sites like MSN and feminist sites like Bitch Magazine circulate the images to discuss the plight of sexism at conventions which in

---

investment has paid off, glowingly said "I might be naïve here, but I think $4 billion is cheap. Bob Iger (Disney CEO) probably knew the potential of Marvel even better than Marvel knew its *own* potential" (Mclauchlin).
[146] There are other conventions that often house space for comics, but the primary convention circuit is caught up in a legacy of comic book conventions that have evolved over the years (Howe 53-88).

turns suggests that comic fandom is sexist as harassment is an issue with comic culture (Asselin).[147]

Comic sites, like Comicvine, discuss the merits of the costume as it befits the comic character and so on. The images make the rounds; each outlet warping the image to its audience's expectations and a given message, but the cosplay image inhabits the space of the superhero fan and comes to represent it on some level, not because all or even most cosplayers dress as superheroes, though plenty do, but because they've become one of the most identifiable, visual aspects of convention culture over the past decade. Over time, this not only puts tension on convention sites as fans and industries alike try to negotiate the shared space (both physical and assumed) that is occupied by numerous abutting fandoms,[148] it also deepens the defensive nature of the certain superhero comic fan. The conflation of the two even comes across in the most ironic of cultural outlets; Marvel's *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* references cosplay girls waiting outside Stark Tower . . . but nary a reference to actual, physical comic books to be found.[149]

Superhero cosplay, then, serves as one of the new markers to the non-superhero comic fan of something that signifies superheroes, yet to a segment of the superhero fandom, it signifies a false attempt to be a superhero fan. That its most visibly circulated participants are young, attractive women doesn't help this latter perception because it clearly operates outside of the given, stereotypical approximation of a superhero comic book fan.[150] Many successful cosplayers do so as employment, or engage with others at conventions based on their costuming (posing for photos, engaging in costuming

---

[147] Note the director of Geeks for CONsent, Rochelle Keyhan's, conflation of convention and comic fandom in her assertion that harassment is prevalent in the culture, "[Harassment] is a separate, more specific issue within the convention space. It's very much connected (to the larger problem of women's portrayal in media) and it's the same phenomena, but manifesting a little more sexually vulgar in the **comic space**" ('Women'). Not the convention space or con space, the comic space. Typo or possible conflation of the comic con with comic fandoms aside, the result is unflattering regardless (and warranted nonetheless).

[148] Spurlock's documentary, as an example, reveals San Diego Comic Con has increasingly offered two separate avenues for these fans – cosplay competitions and space are separate from comic selling and artist alley. They may co-mingle in a number of places, but each fandom has things designed for them to engage with.

[149] There are plentiful comic book Easter eggs—but those are for comic book fans enjoy, the reference to cosplay directly acknowledges how it serves as publicly perceived signifier of the superhero or superhero-adjacent.

[150] Not to mention, that it is perceived as a feminine endeavor makes it subject to the ongoing phenomenon of shaming and sexism prevalent in contemporary 'geek' fandoms.

contests), thus the projected stereotype foist upon certain cosplayers is that they are 'performing'—

professionally or as amateur enthusiasts, instead of attending comic seminars, meeting and greeting

creators, or diving through vendor's wares. These actions are then interpreted by certain fans as

irrefutable evidence that cosplayers do not read comic books. The veracity of such a blanket statement

is difficult to engage; after all, surely some people both cosplay and attend superhero comic specific

events, and others do not, nor do they purport to—in fact, they might be surprised to hear that because

they are wearing a Spider-Gwen outfit some segment of the fandom expects them to engage with comic

reading as a pastime.

The blog *Cosplay with a Brain*, runs a number of interviews with cosplayers about their origins,

and a theme there is that many are inspired by fascination with a character as it is circulated in broader

media (like film and thus an outcome of convergence and spreading media) or a fascination with

dressing up, thus attributing cosplay as a fandom of its own. If the engagement were that delineated or

simple, it is likely screeds like Harris's would be fewer and further in-between. However, since

cosplayers dress as superheroes, again not anywhere near exclusively, interact with comic fans, and

attend comic conventions, thus occupying the same physical and imagined space as superhero fans,

they inevitably become more mired or intertwined with comic/superhero fandom as it is generally

perceived. The same superhero comic fans who resent cosplay at conventions likely resent the increase

of Hall H's, SDCC's biggest theatre which is dedicated to film panels and presentations, devotion to film

releases and television premiers which further crowd out space once set aside primarily for the

superhero comic book fan.[151] However, the striking nature visual nature of men and women of all ages

attiring themselves in the fantastical outfits of fictional characters make them ideal visualizations of con

culture because it captures so much of the energy and focus of these spaces in a single snapshot. As

Doran bemoans, "I'll be the first to admit I revel in the *amazing,* visually arresting costumes. I snap

---

[151] This is another theme of the Spurlock documentary.

photos." But she also unintendedly acknowledges Jenkin's maxim that if it doesn't spread, it's dead

when she asks if "the general fandom population even gives a shit about the creators more than they

care about their Instagram profiles?" The comic creator, the collector, the reader all are invested in a

visual medium, but the medium of comic books is infinitely harder to spread via digital means than a cell

phone picture of man in a semi-functioning Doctor Octopus outfit:

Figure 4.2 Doc Ock Cosplay

At a glance, the breakdown of cosplay above simply offers a rationale for why so many self-

professed superhero comics fans feel threatened or lash out at cosplayers (gender is an important

aspect of this as detailed in Chapter Two). While it doesn't excuse Harris's rant, it does situate the one

small disturbance in the very in-flux state of contemporary superhero fandom. And, it starts to address

why understanding fan interaction in the face of media convergence, especially regarding the

emergence of multimodal narratives, is an important task to undertake. It highlights the process by

which a certain form of anti-fandom, one directed against fans of the same material but using said

materially differently or entering the fandom via a different medium, emerges. Using points of media

convergence to discuss elements of intrafandom interaction, a la the beginning of this chapter's

situating of the anti-fan, reveals that the convergence and spreadability of these narratives potentially

markets, spreads, and disseminates the concept of the fan in a shallow, possibly inaccurate way while

still maintaining or purporting a certain cache for being a fan. The fan defends their subculture as if they

own it, but increasingly this defense isn't against the poor use of material by the official producers. Instead, it is aligned against the influx of fans who do not practice canon, as understood by this segment of traditional fans. Such a view contributes to statements like DC comic creator Pat Broderick's directed towards cosplayers, "You bring nothing of value to the [conventions] . . . you're not helping the industry or the comic's market" (Ratcliffe). Furthermore, as seen with the ways in which cosplay has been addressed by mainstream media as it pertains to sexual harassment, the intersection of media spreadability and its influence on long-standing, traditional fandoms, like superhero comic fans, suggests it opens up these fandoms to more nuanced critiques from the culture-at-large and, therefore, introduces transgressive, or at least progressive, elements into the fandom. More concisely, acknowledging the ways that fandom are affected by media convergence and spreadability shifts the academic discussion away from the very empirical and business-like model of increased participation between consumer and producer (and the blurring of lines between the two) and towards an understanding of the very real effect media convergence has in further differentiating types of consumers or fans from each other.

The above is not to say that scholarship on media convergence isn't concerned with the consumption of media by fans—quite the opposite, it is potentially obsessed with it (or, at the least, elevating the consumer to the level of the producer). The authors of *Spreadable Media* argue that in their model "there is not only an increased collaboration across the roles [producer, marketer, audience] but, in some cases, a blurring of the distinction between these roles" (Ford 7). Their notion of the individuated roles becoming closer and, in places, blurred is in indebted to how Jenkins himself builds up the notion of 'collective intelligence' (in turn indebted to Pierre Levy). For Jenkins, this primarily manifests as a collective consumption, and he reminds us that "convergence does not occur through media appliances . . . Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with each other" (203). Each individual consumer is an audience

member, but they become marketer in their interactions with others, and potentially producers depending on their stage of involvement. This line of reasoning actually culminates in Grant McCracken's conceptualization of the consumer as a multiplier—one doesn't simply take in, one takes in, and puts out more than ingested. In many ways, a multiplier may be the catch-all term for the producer/marketer/audience. McCracken explains:

> "A "multiplier" is someone who will treat the good, service, or experience as a starting point. Multipliers will build in some of their own intelligence and imagination. They will take possession of a cultural artifact and make it more detailed, more contextually responsive, more culturally nuanced, and, lest we forget the point of the exercise, more valuable. Using a term like "multiplier" will help the meaning maker keep new realities front and center. If there is nothing in the product, service, or experience that can be built on, well, then it's back to the drawing board" (10)

The consumer is a piece to be moved on the board then for current scholarship on media convergence. How can the consumer build on the officially produced experience? What can consumers do to interact with the experience? What do these interactions look like? These questions are fine and serviceable, but I am suggesting discussions of convergence must also accept that designing with a multiplier in mind produces media that also affects the *notion* of ownership and the formation of fandoms. Its interplay with authorship is clear; via spreadable media, audiences are capable of reframing, remixing, realigning content. Take the notion of cosplay above and note how, depending on an outlet's audience, it is reframed and thus viewed differently. On a very base level, the one who reframes clearly enacts authorial control, but stopping there does very little to address or understand the sense of ownership that a fan, or consumer, has for certain material, especially narrative material. Understanding this deeper context to convergence and consumption would well serve the intersection between scholarship and business application discussions of media spreadability are currently vested in. But, it also suggests that we may understand more fully how media convergence is responsible for constructions of identity as much as media consumption is. Moreover, returning to the notion of authorship, we'll see that media convergence may make the act of authoring easier but it also

destabilizes the concept of authorship because it merges everything into a relatively molded and solid form.[152]

Much of the preface of Matt Hills' excellent *Fan Cultures* concerns itself with trying to parse out the inherent hierarchy of fandom, from follower to fan to cult, but in so doing emphasizes how many fans engagement with an object helps them craft a social identity. Furthermore, he argues their professed engagement with an object also leads them to be defensive of it and produce a "felt need to justify [their] fan attachments" (Hills xii). And, naturally Jenkins too underscores a fan's deep engagement with a property as something akin to ownership because their fan attachment becomes something that triggers responses, something that resists easy objective viewing – "Fans would reject such clear separation between feelings and thoughts: their favored texts are both tools for thought and spaces for emotional exploration" he says in an acknowledgement that his academic take on fans has at times favored understanding the former over the latter ("Fans," 5). I apply the term ownership to summate these observations. Intense familiarity and knowledge, an inability to fully separate emotion from thought, a relation dependent on interpretation, and a desire to justify or defend—all of these speak to a closeness and an *investment* bordering on possession. For the avid superhero fan, one doesn't simply engage with superheroes, they accrue information, form opinions of creative teams, develop favorite moments and characters, seek out like-minded aficionados, etc.

---

[152] It is worthwhile to take a brief aside and address how I am differentiating authorship from ownership. The above example, the one that media convergence positions as the work of reframing, etc., is clearly an act. Actual labor is done to produce something new with the media and this work spreads it further along (or, multiplies it). But, above I mention ownership as certain proprietary concern of fans, and this concept is often implied in works on fandom. Most directly and applicably, is Will Brooker's *Batman Unmasked*. Here Brooker argues that fans congregated around in-depth knowledge of superheroes, wrote letters, and, the best of them, were able to unravel who the creators, uncredited at the time, based on in-depth analysis (250-279). But, he also acknowledges that such knowledge came with it a sense of pride because their "discourse on [superheroes] validated . . . joining in debate not just with editors, but with fellow aficionados" (64). While Brooker speaks directly of the comic fan, the notion of intense or regular engagement with a fan object producing more than just the pleasure of being a fan, but of pride or ownership references Sullivan's take. Some of the foremost fan studies scholars have positioned the notion of propriety as integral to exploring fan culture. It can be seen in early works of fan studies, where fans formed interpretive communities to substitute their own meanings for the intended meanings of popular media thereby taking ownership of how a program or property was to be understood.

And it is these aspects that discussions of media convergence and spreadability, admittedly still in their critical infancy, seemingly overlook. At stake is not just the act of the consumer finding, engaging, and multiplying content; no, at stake is potentially a level of investment that dictates how that media is further multiplied and how the consumer reacts and responds to other multiplications. As it pertains to our four-colored superheroes, spreadability doesn't just add to their seeming everywhereness, it confuses the public-at-large's understanding of the superhero comic fandom (subculture) and aggravates that fandom's sense of authority and ownership. In some ways, convergence and spreadability make places like San Diego Comic-Con a battleground instead of the haven that has "continually presented comic books and comic art to a growing audience. That love of the comics medium continues to be its guiding factor as the event moves toward its second half-century as the premier comic book and popular arts style convention in the world" (Comic-Con). Increasingly, a segment of superhero fans would disagree with that sentiment because they cynically see the convention catering to other hobbies and mediums more. I'd simply suggest that Comic-Con rewrite the statement to acknowledge the concept of the comic book, so intimately intertwined with the superhero genre, is no longer capable of serving as the sole medium for the superhero character or the superhero genre.

Conclusion

There is more work that can be done along the lines I've opened up here. An ethnography of the comic book shop that interweaves with a reception study of film viewers who didn't read superhero comic books, for example, would bring an interesting empirical and grounded level of comparison to the ways that I see superhero fandom fracturing. A more detailed examination of the spectator and identification processes superhero film viewers and comic readers go through would not only compliment Chapter One, but bring a more theoretical bent to some of my inquiries, as well. A structured analysis of business practices, earnings, and strategies as it pertains to superhero publishing and film production would also unfold some of the numbers I've used here in a way that might help me forecast what the superhero industry is going to do (and answer why). But, all of these endeavors need the foundation laid here. Throughout this dissertation, though I've shifted my entrances into the nature of superhero comics, films, and fans, I've presented tensions. These tensions arise from the unprecedented upheaval the superhero genre is going through, and while it is tempting to talk about what the superhero genre is going to evolve into, understanding how it is rewriting both its core fandoms and its most-affiliated medium—the comic book—enables further enquiries that must acknowledge shifting consumer habits.

The uncoupling of the superhero and the comic book is rewriting the form of superhero stories by making them increasingly multimodal and filmic, it is rewriting the traditionally-accepted or perceived canon of these characters by incorporating progressive changes, and it is rewriting the fandoms themselves by broadening both what can constitute superhero fandom and how media-at-large perceives it. But, most importantly is acknowledging how symbiotic these changes are. That comic books are adopting more filmic modes of engagement couples with the fact that superheroes primarily reach audiences via sustained, frequent, and serial films means future superhero fans will share a different origin story than my own and that of other previous superhero fandoms. This broadening likely

motivates superhero cast diversification; and regardless if this decision is purely a business one or not, it can be seen as reformation of the canon, ever so mutable, future fans will be engaging with. In short, what starts with a series of successful film adaptations ends in a complete reconfiguration of how people engage with superheroes, how they present, and how they circulate.

This is nothing to be alarmed about despite all the fan outbursts and concerns my dissertation documents. That these characters are undergoing such change shouldn't be resisted, at least not by scholars, but it should beg examination. Superheroes are just the most prevalent, popular, and successful trend of an adaptation industry interested in mining nostalgia and pre-existing intellectual properties for their potential filmic value. While the practical implications of how this came to be are fascinating, so too is what this restructuring of fan objects does to the fandom. Jonathan Gray says of the most recent era of fan studies focus is that it

> allows us to explore some of the key mechanisms through which we interact with the mediated world at the heart of our social, political, and cultural realities and identities. Perhaps the most important contribution of contemporary research into fan audiences thus lines in furthering our understanding of how we form emotional bonds with ourselves and others in a modern, mediated world (300).

While I wouldn't my position my work as reaching quite a lofty goal, it clearly asks us to consider the fan as the single most important component in understanding how we navigate an increasingly mediated world. But, and perhaps opposing Gray's belief, it asks questions not of what the fan has to say about that world, but what that world can tell us about our nature as fans. Throughout this dissertation, I've chronicled certain fans arguing against others, decrying the perceived loss of the superhero comic book, or fighting against the impending alteration of the accepted canon; these changes are happening because media processes of circulation, production, and distribution are making it increasingly viable to tell the detailed, deeply serial story of the superhero comic book without the comic book.

In closing, the superhero goes on. Some fans follow it. New fans arise to admire its new form. And, while we can chart the genre's movement across mediums, and we can empirically see the

determining factors why Disney or Time Warner might push the genre into multiple platforms, what becomes more difficult to chart is the that following fan and that newly invested one. This dissertation, hopefully, begins to speak not only to how these fans—itself a broad term—interact not only with the shifting genre of superheroes but also with themselves.

REFERENCES

 "About Comic-Con International." *Comic-Con*. Comic-Con International. n.d. Web.

"About THI and FAQ." *The Hawkeye Initiative*. n.d. Web.

Asselin, Janelle. "How Big of a Problem is Harassment at Comic Conventions? Very Big." *Bitch: Feminist*

　　　Response to Popular Culture. Bitch Media. 22 July 2014. Web.

Atkinson, Paul. "Movements within Movements: Following the Line in Animation and Comic

　　　Books." *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4.3 (2009): 265-281

Atkinson, Paul. "The Time of Heroes: Narrative, Progress, and Eternity in *Miracleman*." *The*

　　　Contemporary Comic Book Superhero. New York: Routledge, 2009. 44-64.

"Avengers' Bulking Up $6 Billion Marvel Licensing Machine." *Ad Age*. Bloomberg News Group. 4 May

　　　2012. Web.

Bacon-Smith, Camille. *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth.*

　　　Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.

Baker-Whitelaw, "The Costumes and Characters of the Avengers, Part 3: Steve Rogers, Captain

　　　America." *Hello, Tailor* 14 May 2012. Web.

Barker, Martin. "*Jackie* and the Problem of Romance." *A Comic Studies Reader*. Ed. Jeet Heer and Kent

　　　Worcester. Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2009: 190-207.

Barthes, Roland. *S/Z: An Essay.* Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.

Bender, Kelli. "11-Year-Old Girl's Letter to DC Comics Starts Movement for More Female Superheroes."

　　　People 20 February 2015. Web.

"BLACK SKIN, WHITE SUPERHEROES: OH NO! YOUR BELOVED SUPERHERO LOOKS DIFFERENT!" *Geek*

　　　Outsider. 8 May 2013. Web.

Block, Alex Ben. "In the battle of Marvel vs. DC comics, there is one clear winner." *Hollywood Reporter*.

　　　Prometheus Global Media. 13 Nov. 2014. Web.

Bogost, Ian. "Against Aca-Fandom: On Jason Mittell on *Mad Men*." 29 Jul. 2010. Web.

Booker, M. Keith. *Comics Through Time: A History of Icons, Idols, and Ideas.* Santa Barbara: Greenwood

      Publishing, 2014.

Brooker, Will. *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001.

---. "Fandom and Authorship." *The Superhero Reader.* Ed by Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent

      Worcester. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013: 61-73.

Brown, Jeffrey. "Comic Book Masculinity and the New Black Superhero." *African American Review* 33.1

      (1999): 25-42.

Bukatman, Scott. *Poetics of Slumberland.* Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012.

Busse, Kristina. "My Life is a WIP on my LJ: Slashing the Slasher and the Reality of Celebrity and Internet

      Peformances." *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet.* Ed. Karen Hellickson

      and Kristina Busse. McFarland, 2006. Kindle Edition.

Caillois, Roger. "The Definition of Play and The Classification of Games." *The Game Design Reader: A*

      Rules of Play Anthology. Ed. Katie Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman. Cambridge: The MIT Press,

      2005: 122-155.

Carl. "Explaining Decompression in Comics." *Ogiue Maniax*. 23 Sep. 2011. Web.

Cawley, John. "Marvel Films Animation 93-97." 25 Apr. 2013. Web.

Ching, Albert. "AXEL-IN-CHARGE: A Final Swing with the "Superior Spider-Man." *Comic Book Resources.*

      Boiler Point Productions. 25 April 2014. Web.

---. "AXEL-IN-CHARGE: Welcoming Back Creators, Experimenting with Numbering." *Comic Book*

      Resources. Boiler Point Productions. 24 Jan. 2014. Web.

---. "Scott Snyder Enters The Third Act Of The "Batman" Story That "Terrified" Him." *Comic Book*

      Resources. Boiler Point Productions. 1 April 2014. Web.

Ciutranes, John. "The Bendis Tapes, Part I." *The Word Balloon Comic Podcast.* 12 Apr. 2013. Web.

"Comic Book Sales by Year." *Comichron*. n.d. Web.

Coppa, Francesca. "Writing Bodies in Space: Mediated Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance." *Fan*

   Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet. Ed. Karen Hellickson and Kristina Busse.

   McFarland, 2006: Kindle Edition.

Cunningham, Phillip Lamarr. "The absence of black supervillains in mainstream comics." *The Journal of*

   Graphic Novels & Comics. 1.1 (2010): 51-62.

Cyclonus. "The Only Thing Amazing is Calling this Bomb Amazing." *Comic Vine.* 28 Nov. 2014. Web.

D'Amore, Laura Matoon. "Invisible Girl's Quest for Visibility: Early Second Wave Feminism and the Comic

   Book Superheroine." *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture* 7.2 (2008): pars 19.

   Web.

Day, Felicia. "Tiger Lily Doesn't Equal Human Torch plus a really long rant." *This Felicia Day* Tumblr.

   2014. Web.

DeConnick, Kelly Sue. *Captain Marvel.* Volume 7 (1-17). 2012-2014.

Demby, Gene. "Who Gets to be a Superhero? Race and Identity in Comics." *NPR.* 11 Jan. 2014. Web.

Derecho, Abigail. "Archontic Literature: A Definition, History and Several Theories of Fan Fiction." *Fan*

   Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet. Ed. Karen Hellickson and Kristina Busse.

   McFarland, 2006: Kindle Edition.

Dirlik, Arif. "Race Talk, Race, and Contemporary Racism." *PMLA* 123.5 (2008): 1363-1379.

Dockterman, Eliana. "Marvel Comics Writers Explain Why They're Making Thor a Woman." *TIME* 15 July

   2014. Web.

Doran, Denise. "Is Cosplay Killing Comic Con?" *Bleeding Cool.* Avatar Press. 22 Sep. 2014. Web.

Dyer, Richard. *White: Essays on Race and Culture.* New York: Routledge, 1997.

Earl, Jennifer and Katrina Kimport. "Movement societies and digital protest: fan activism and other

   nonpolitical protest online." *Sociological Theory* 27.3 (2009): 220-243.

Edmondson, Nathan. *Black Widow*. Volume 5 (1-20). 2014-2015.

Eisenberg, Eric. "How Marvel Decides What To Put Into Post-Credit Scenes." *CinemaBlend.* CinemaBlend

LLC. 13 April 2015. Web.

Ewing, AL. *Loki: Agent of Asgard.* Volume 1 (1-18). 2013-2015.

Fine Brothers. "Kids React to *Avengers: Age of Ultron*." Youtube. 11 Nov. 2014. Web.

Fiske, John. *Reading the Popular*. New York: Routledge, 1989. Kindle edition.

---. "The Cultural Economy of Fandom." *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media.* Ed. Lisa

Lewis. New York: Routledge, 1992: 30-49.

Fitzpatrick, Connor and Josh Flanagan. "Episode 484." *iFanboy*. 10 May 2015.

Ford, Sam, and Joshua Green and Henry Jenkins. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a*

Networked Culture. New York: NYU Press, 2013. Kindle.

Fraction, Matt. "Soooooo.... I was wondering what's your opinion on The Hawkeye Initiative tumblr? Or

would you prefer not to comment?" Mattfraction.com 2013.

Fu, Albert. "Fear of a black Spider-Man: racebending and the colour-line in superhero (re)casting."

Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics (2015): 1-15.

Gabilliet, JP. *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books.* Oxford, MS: University

Press of Mississippi, 2009.

Goldman, David. "Disney to buy Marvel for $4 billion." *CNN Money.* Time Warner. 31 August 2009.

Gray, Jonathan, Cornel Sandvoss, C. Lee Harrington, eds. *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a*

Mediated World. New York: New York University Press, 2007.

---. "New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans." *International Journal of Culture Studies*

6.1 (2003): 61-84.

Grey, Melissa. "*Loki: Agent of Asgard* #1 Review." IGN. Ziff Davis Media. 5 Feb. 2014. Web.

Gunning, Tom. "Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the Incredulous Spectator." *Art & Text.* Vol.

    34 (1989): 31-45.

Guerrero, Tony. "New Female Thor on the Way." *Comic Vine*. CBS Interactive, 7 July 2014. Web.

Hansen, Miriam. "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship." *Cinema*

    Journal 25.4 (1986): 6-32.

Hass, Nancy. "Investing It: Marvel Superheroes Take Aim at Hollywood." *New York Times*. New York

    Times Company. 28 July 1996. Web.

Hawkins, Bennet. "15 Fascinating Things about *Batman* (1989)." *Uproxx.* 23 Jun. 2014. Web.

Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures.* London: Routledge, 2002. Kindle.

---. ""Twilight" Fans Represented in Commercial Paratexts and Inter-Fandoms: Resisting and

    Repurposing Negative Fan Stereotypes." *Genre, Reception, and Adaptation in the 'Twilight'*

    Series. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012: 113-130.

Hiltzik, Michael. "Untangling the Web." *LA Times.* Tribune Publishing Company. 24 Mar. 2002. Web.

Hollows, Joanne. "The Masculinity of Cult." *Defining Cult Movie: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional*

    Taste. Ed. Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lazaro Reboll, Julian Stringer, and Andy Williams.

    Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003: 35-53.

Howe, Sean. *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*. New York: HarperCollins, 2012. Kindle.

Hudson, Laura. "The Big Sexy Problem with Heroines and Their 'Liberated Sexuality." *Comics Alliance* 22

    Sept. 2011.

---. "How to Fix Crazy Superheroine Poses in Comics? Swap Them With Hawkeye." *Wired.* Conde Nast. 5

    Dec. 2012. Web.

Jenkins, Henry and Sam Ford. "Managing Multiplicity in Superhero Comics." *Third Person: Authoring and*

    Exploring Vast Narratives. Cambridge: MIT, 2009. 303-11. Print.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: NYU Press, 2008.

    Kindle.

---. "The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence." *International Journal of Culture Studies* 7.1 (2004): 33-

    43.

---. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers.* New York: New York University Press, 2006.

---. "Superpowered Fans: The Many Worlds of San Diego's Comic-Con." *Boom: A Journal of California* 2.2

    (2012): 22-36.

---: *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture.* New York: Routledge, 1992.

---. "Transmedia 202: Further Reflections." *Confessions of an Aca-Fan.* 1 Aug.2011. Web.

Johnson, Derek. "Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Constitutive Hegemonies of Fandom."

    Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World. Ed Jonathan Gray, C. Lee Harrington,

    and Cornell Sandovoss. New York: NYU Press, 2007: Chapter 21. Kindle.

Johnston, Rich. "Hey! Quasi-Pretty-NOT-Hot-Girl, You Are More Pathetic Than The REAL Nerds" - Tony

    Harris." *Bleeding Cool.* Avatar Press. 13 Nov. 2012. Web.

Jones, Gerard and Will Jacobs. *The Comic Book Heroes: The First History of Modern Comic Books - From

    the Silver Age to the Present.* New York: Random House, 1996.

Jones, Sam. "Idris Elba Defends Thor Role." *The Guardian.* 27 Apr. 2010. Web.

Jordan, Michael B. "Why I'm Torching the Color Line." *Entertainment Weekly* 22 May 2015. Web.

Kindle Edition.

Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton

    University Press, 1997.

Leitch, Thomas. "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory." *Criticism* 45.2 (2003): 149-171.

Lopez, Lori. "Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in *The Last Airbender.*" *International Journal of

    Cultural Studies* 15.5 (2011): 431-445.

Lott, Eric. "White Like Me: Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness." *Cultures of United States Imperialism.* Ed Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994: 474-495.

Lowry, Brian. "Adaptations Walk Tightrope with Fans." *Variety.* Penske Business Media, LLC. 10 Mar. 2009. Web.

MacDonald, Heidi. "Ms. Marvel is Marvel's "#1 digital seller." *Comics Beat* 4 November 2014. Web.

Manovich, Lev. "Image Future." *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 1.1 (2006): 25-44.

Mayer, Ruth. "Machinic Fu Manchu: Popular Seriality and the Logic of Spread." *Journal of Narrative Theory* 43.2 (2013): 186-217.

McAllister,Matthew, Ian Gordon, and Mark Jancovich. "Blockbuster Meets Superhero Comic, or Arthouse Meets Graphic Novel? The Contradictory Relationship Between Film and Comic Art." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (2007): 108-114.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994.

McCracken, Grant. "Consumers or Multipliers." *Spreadable Media.* January 2013. Web.

McFad, Koppy. "Decompression Chamber." *ComicBookBin*. Toon Doctor Inc. 10 Sep. 2004. Web.

McKee, Alan. "How to Tell the Difference Between Production and Consumption: a Case Study in Dr. Who Fandom." *Cult Television.* Ed. Sarah Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta Pearson. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004: 167-186.

McLauchlin, Jim. "DISNEY's $4 Billion Marvel Buy: Was it Worth It." *Newsarama*. Purch Companay. 30 Jun. 2015. Web.

Meikle, Kyle. "Rematerializing Adaptation Theory." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 41.3 (2013): 174-183.

Melrose, Kevin. "ComiXology is connecting with female audience." *Robot 6* 10 October 2013. Web.

Miller, John Jackson. "Disney Buys Marvel: Historical Notes on a Historical Pairing." *Comicchron*. 31 Aug. 2009. Web.

Mittell, Jason. "On Disliking *Mad Men*." *Just TV*. 29 Jul. 2010. Web.

Molavi, Justin, and Nikoleta Panteleva. "Top 10 Most Profitable Industries." *IBIS World Special

Report* Oct. 2011: 4. Web.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18.

Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT

Press, 1998.

Ndalianis, Angela. "The Frenzy of the Visible in Comic Book Worlds." *Animation: An Interdisciplinary

Journal* 4.3 (2009): 237-248.

---. "Why Comic Studies?" *Cinema Journal* 50.3 (2011): 113-117.

"Opening Weekends." *Box Office Mojo*. n.d. Web.

Outlaw, Kofi. "Changing Face: Diversity & Change in Comic Books and Superhero Movies." *ScreenRant.*

Relativity Media, LLC. 16 August 2011.Web.

"Overall North American Dollar Sales for Diamond's Comics, Trade Paperbacks, and Magazines for 2013"

Comic Chron. n.d. Web.

Pantozzi, Jill. "Hey, That's My Cape! Comic Books, Race, Change, & Hate." *Newsarama.* A Purch

Company. 3 August 2011. Web.

Pearl, Barry. "Esquire Magazine & Marvel: September 1966, Kirby & M. Severin Art." *Barry's Pearls of

Comic Book Wisdom.* 27 Mar 2014. Web.

Pedler, Martyn. "The Fastest Man Alive: Stasis and Speed in Contemporary Superhero

Comics." *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4.3 (2009): 249-263.

Penley, Constance. "Feminism, Psychoanalyis and the Study of Popular Culture." *Cultural Studies.* Ed.

Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler. New York: Routledge, 1992. 479-500.

Perez, Gilberto. "Towards a Rhetoric of Film." *Senses of Cinema* 1.5 (2000): n.p. Web.

Philbrick, Jami. "Kevin Fiege Talks 'Iron Man 2', 'The Avengers' and More." *Movie Web.* Watchr Media.

26 April 2010. Web.

Polo, Susana. "Introducing: The Hawkeye Initiative." *The Mary Sue* 3 December 2012.

Pustz, Matthew. *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers.* Jackson, MS: University Press of

Mississippi, 2000.

Ratcliffe, Amy. "Comic Book Artist Says Cosplayers Bring Nothing of Value to Conventions." *The Nerdist*.

Nerdist Industries. 6 Dec. 2014.Web.

Rhoades, Shirrel. *Comic Books: How the Industry Works.* Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007. Print.

Richards, Dave. "DeConnick Soars with Captain Marvel." *Comic Book Resources*. N.p., 18 Mar. 2012. Web

Riesman, Abraham. "Marvel's Diversity Issue: Screen Output Doesn't Reflect Open-minded Comics."

Vulture. New York Media, LLC. 9 Oct. 2013. Web.

Robbins, Trina. "The Great Women Superheroes." *The Superhero Reader*. Ed. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer,

and Kent Worcester. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2013. 53-60.

Rosenberg, Alyssa. "Legendary Comics Creators Dismiss Sexism Critiques, Say 'The Comics Follow

Society. They Don't Lead." *ThinkProgress.* Center for American Progress Action Fund. 8 Aug.

2013.

Rosenblatt, Seth. "Project Gamma brings intelligent audio to digital comics." *CNET*. N.p., 10 Mar. 2013.

Web.

Sacks, Ethan. "Spider-Man Miles Morales — popular biracial version of the hero — joins main Marvel

comics universe this fall." *New York Daily News.* 21 Jun. 2015. Web.

---. "'Thor: The Dark World's' Tom Hiddleston schemes for more Loki." *NY Daily News* 8 November 2013.

Web.

Schedeen, Jesse. "Between the Panels: Why the Human Torch's Race Doesn't Matter." *IGN.* Ziff Davis,

LLC. 25 Feb. 2014. Web.

Schnecker, Brett. "Market Research Says 46.67% of Comic Fans are Female." *Comics Beat* 4 February

2014. Web.

Scott, Amber Beatrice. "Superpower vs Supernatural: Black Superheroes and the Quest for Mutant

Reality." *Journal of Visual Culture* 5.3 (2006): 295-314.

Scott, Suzanne. "Fangirls in Refrigerators: The politics of (in)visibility in comic book culture." *Journal of*

Transformative Works and Culture 13 (2013): 40 pars. Web.

Shooter, Jim. "ULTIMATE COMICS – All-New Spider-Man #1." *Jim Shooter*. 18 Oct. 2011. Web.

Singer, Marc. "Black Skins and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race." *African American*

Review 36.1 (2002): 107-119.

Smith, Greg. "Surveying the World of Contemporary Comics Scholarship: A Conversation." *Cinema*

Journal 50.3 (2011): 135-147.

Smith, Matthew. "A brief history of racial and gender diversity in comic book movies." *Washington Post.*

31 Oct. 2014. Web.

Soule, Charles. *She-Hulk*. Volume 3 (1-12). 2014-2015.

"Spider-Man swings into Marvel films." *BBC News*. 10 Feb. 2015. Web.

Steinem, Gloria. "Wonder Woman." *The Superhero Reader.* Ed. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent

Worcester. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2013. 203-210.

Stribling, Eleanor. "Valuing Fans." *Spreadable Media*. n.d. Web.

Sue, "Case Dismissed? Marvel Brings the Hammer of Thor Down on the whole "Women and Comics"

Topic." *DC Women Kicking Ass* 15 July 2014. Web.

Sullivan, John. *Media Audience: Effects, Users, Institutions, and Power.* Thousand Oaks: SAGE

Publications, 2012.

Tahir, Sabaa. "MS. MARVEL: Marvel Comics' new focus on women 'characters and creators' aims to defy

the 'scantily clad' cliche." *Comic Riffs*. Ed. Michael Cavna. Washington Post, 4 Feb. 2014. Web.

The View. ABC. New York, New York, 15 July 2014. Television.

Theodoropoulou, Vivi. "The Anti-Fan Within the Fan: Awe and Envy in Sport Fandom." *Fandom:*

    Identities and Communities in a Mediated World. Ed. Gray, Jonathan, C. Lee Harrington, and

    Cornell Sandovoss. New York: NYU Press, 2007: Chapter 23. Kindle.

Tolsworthy, Chris. "Marvel and DC Sales Figures." *The Fantastic Four was the Great American Novel*. n.d.

    Web.

Truitt, Brian. "Superior Change of Pace for Spider-Man Comics." *USA Today* 27 June 2013. Web.

Truitt, Brian. "'Superman/Wonder Woman': Love, superhero style." *USA Today* 13 November 2013.

    Web.

Tuzi, Marino. "Individualism and Marginality: From Comic Book to Film: Marvel Comics Superheroes."

    College Quarterly 8.2 (2005). Web.

Villalobos, Ramon. "So Here is the Thing." *The Hawkeye Initiative* 7 Dec. 2012.

Wagner, Kyle. "Infinite Comics: Marvel's New Format Changes How Comics Are Created—And Read."

    Gizmodo. 3 Apr. 2012. Web.

Waid, Mark. *Daredevil*. Volume 3 (1-37). 2011-2014.

Weaver, Andrew. "The Role of Actors' Race in White Audiences' Selective Exposure to Movies." *Journal*

    of Communication 61 (2011): 369-385.

Wershler, Darren. "Digital Comics, Circulation, and the Importance of Being Eric Sluis." *Cinema Journal*

    50.3 (2011): 127-134.

"What is Racebending?" Racebending.com. Media Consumers for Entertainment Equality. Web.

Williams, Stereo. "Fear of a Black Superhero: Michael B. Jordan and the Importance of Colorblind

    Casting." *The Daily Beast.* The Daily Beast Company. 23 May 2015. Web.

Wilson, G. Willow. *Ms. Marvel*. Volume 3 (1-17). 2014-2015.

Wilson, Julie and Laurie Ouellette. "Woman's Work: Affective Labour and Convergence Culture."

      Cultural Studies 24.4-5: 548-565.

Wiltse, Ed. "'So Constant an Expectation': Sherlock Holmes and Seriality." *Narrative* 6.2 (1998): 105-122.

Winchester, Cat. "Every Villain is a Hero." *Archive of our Own* 1 June 2014. Web.

 "Women of Comic-Con protest sexual harassment, saying a cute costume isn't the same as consent."

      New York Daily News. 28 Jun. 2014. Web.

ABSTRACT

TURNING THE PAGE: FANDOMS, MULTIMODALITY, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE "COMIC BOOK" SUPERHERO

by

MATTHEW ALAN CICCI

August 2015

Advisor: Dr. Chera Kee

Major: English (Film & Media Studies)

Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

Superheroes are increasingly becoming more affiliated with film media than comic books. The amount of revenue generated, the formation of new fans, and the interests of comic publishers' parent companies all suggest that superhero film adaptations are the medium most associated with the superhero character. Such monumental shift in the distribution of superheroes—comic books were long the dominant medium of superhero characters—are indicative of ongoing media convergence practices; the success of these contemporary adaptations, from 1998 on, have not only caused the filmic superhero to eclipse the comic one, it has inevitably led to a rewriting of superhero comic book form and narrative canon to capitalize on the films' cache. Most interestingly, however, is the simultaneous evolution of superhero comic fandom. The aggressive adaptation schedule of superhero stories positions today's superhero comic fan as one who has to contend with rapid and radical recalibration of his or her fan object. In light of the superheroes' multimodal success—that is its success across multiple mediums at the same time but via different plots, stories, and narratives—the superhero fandom has become more diverse and progressive but also increasingly engaging in a form of anti-fan behavior. Lines of fandom are being drawn along lines of medium-specificity—the comic book or the film? While such lines obviously produce certain intrafandom tensions, it also speaks to the expansion of both what a superhero fan is and how they practice their fandom.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Matthew Alan Cicci is a PhD Candidate at Wayne State University in English (Film & Media Studies). His dissertation, "Turning the Page: Fandoms, Multimodality, and the Transformation of the "Comic Book" Superhero, is scheduled for a Summer 2015 defense. He has recently accepted a position as a Visiting Professor of New Media Studies at Alma College. His interests include comic studies, fan studies, and adaptation studies; he has a chapter forthcoming in *Ages of the Hulk: Essays on Marvel's Jade Giant in Changing Times* (McFarland, 2015) that details how Hulk stories written at the beginning of the 1990s frame the consumerism of the 1980s.