Masaryk University
Faculty of Arts

Department of English and American Studies

English Language and Literature

Bc. Michaela Hulínová

Representation of Social Realities in American Comic Books

Master's Diploma Thesis

Supervisor: doc. PhDr. Tomáš Pospíšil, Ph.D.

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I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently,
using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

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Author's signature

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Introduction

Since their early days, comic books have been politically and socially relevant: in June 1938, the character of Superman was created as a reaction to the Great Depression, and while Captain America was supposed to boost morale during World War II, the introduction of Iron Man in 1963 very openly reflected the Cold War anxieties in the United States. Despite the fact that comics have always been predominantly marketed towards children and young adults, comic book writers and artists have never shied away from tackling dark and serious themes. Some of the most popular and critically acclaimed graphic novels of the end of the twentieth century, such as *Watchmen, V for Vendetta* and *The Dark Knight Returns,* present layered and insightful critique of the era in which they were created.

The aim of the thesis is to examine how superhero comic books have simultaneously reflected and helped shape American social, cultural and political reality over the years. Special attention is devoted to the politics of representation. The thesis analyzes how superhero comics approach issues, such as gender, race and disability. Until relatively recently, the comic book industry used to be dominated by white male superheroes, but that is slowly changing. The two largest publishing companies, Marvel and DC Comics, are recently laying emphasis on racial and gender diversity in comics. The thesis therefore focuses on the importance of representation and investigates what this new trend of culturally diverse superheroes says about the American society.

The superhero genre is a relatively new one, yet it quickly became an integral part of American popular culture. Due to their accessibility and popularity, comics have a great cultural impact and therefore there should be no doubt that they earned their place in the realm of serious academic research. Although a lot has been written about comic books and their cultural significance, much of the work focuses on how comics

reflect the dominant values of the American society. Books like Mark DiPaolo's *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film* from 2011 and Bradford W. Wright's *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* from 2001 provide a concise history of American comic books and examine how comics contribute to the Western cultural tradition. However, not much attention has been devoted to the politics of racial and gender diversity in comics. The assumption that the average reader is a white male between the ages of fourteen and twenty five is slowly fading away. Instead, more and more comic book authors are of the sentiment that the comic book world should be populated by diverse heroes to reflect its culturally and otherwise diverse readership.

The methodological framework of the thesis combines various theoretical approaches from cultural studies to feminist disability theory and gender studies. The cross-disciplinary approach helps create a more complex picture of the superhero comic book as a cultural phenomenon. The thesis analyzes in detail a number of comic books which became in some way controversial due to their social or political undertones. In general, the superhero comic book can be viewed as a hybrid medium, since it relies on both its visual and verbal components to tell a story. This thesis does not consider the comic book genre from the perspective of visual culture studies, unless the visual element is integral to the underlying message or the cultural significance of the comic book in question.

The first chapter of the thesis is devoted to the beginnings of the superhero genre as well as the controversy around the creation of the Comics Code and the introduction of censorship in comics. The traditional Golden Age comics frequently reacted to the social and political situation in The United States. These efforts to be political have

been partially thwarted by the formation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954, the sole purpose of which was to ensure that comic books were safe for children. One of the events that instigated the campaign for censorship was the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, a book by German-American psychiatrist Fredrick Wertham, which claimed that comic books promoted violence, sex and drug use and were the number one cause for juvenile delinquency. The thesis attempts to analyze how the publication of Wertham's book in 1954 and the introduction of the Comics Code a few months later altered the way comic book writers approached topics that could be considered sensitive.

While the first chapter provides some historical and cultural context, the following chapters directly deal with the main area of interest, which is diversity in comics. Despite being very far from realism, superhero stories are rooted in real human experience that most people can relate to. Their goal is to approach as many readers as possible. One of the ways to achieve this is to provide the readers with well-written characters that reflect the diversity of the real world. The analyzed comic books are carefully chosen to present a variety of different approaches towards the representation of women and minorities in particular. It could be argued that one of the functions of comic books is to act like interactive medium through which artists and readers can negotiate the meanings of race, gender or disability, as they are represented by the hero. Superhero comics, such as *The Uncanny X-Men, Captain America, Black Panther, Batman* and *Ultimate Spider-Man* directly deal with the issues of race, ethnicity and racial discrimination in several of their story arcs, while graphic novels and comic books like *Wonder Woman: The Spirit of Truth* and *Batgirl* are arguably very feminist in their nature. Furthermore, there is a particular focus on the portrayal of disabled superheroes in *Birds of Prey*, *The Killing Joke* and *Hawkeye.* One of the aims of the

thesis is to examine how successful the authors of these comic books are in tackling the issues of race, gender and disability.

Finally, to complete the picture, the thesis briefly considers the future of comics. Despite their boost in popularity thanks to the recent big motion pictures, the traditional paper-and-ink comic books are on decline. Yet, comic books are arguably more progressive in their attitudes than their film counterparts. Some of the most popular superheroes today, such as Wonder Woman, Superman, Batman or Captain America, have been created seventy years ago and their portrayal has gradually adapted to reflect cultural change over the decades. However, their film adaptations seem to be frozen in time. Where comic book authors are not afraid to introduce new queer characters, replace white characters by more people of colour or to magically change the gender of a popular superhero from male to female, the movie studios owning the rights to superhero characters are more careful with their interpretation.

To label superhero comic books as mindless entertainment would be to dismiss the impact they have on the millions of people that read them all over the world. Even nearly a century after their creation, they keep on producing new cultural icons and role models and continue to weave some of the most flexible and long-lived narratives humans have ever invented.

1. A Super Short History of American Comic Books

American comic books as we know them today first emerged in the 1930s. They were preceded by newspaper comic strips and pulp magazines of the early twentieth century, and even before those, by satirical prints of the nineteenth century. Yet their history is probably most comparable to that of motion pictures.

As Bradford W. Wright points out in the introduction to *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, "the term *comic book*, in fact, is one of the great misnomers in entertainment, for they are not books and often are not comical" (Wright xiii). Over the years, the two oldest and biggest publishers, DC Comics and Marvel, have experimented with different formats – single-issue comics, graphic novels, trade paperbacks, digital-only, and different genres – adventure comics, crime comics, science-fiction comics, adult comics and even non-fiction comics. But their arguably most successful and ingenious invention has been the superhero character.

The American comic book industry would not be what it is today without superheroes. When DC Comics, at that time Detective Comics, Inc., launched *Superman* in 1939, no one was expecting that seventy-seven years later superheroes would be so popular that even people who never held a comic book in their hands, never watched superhero cartoons on TV as children or never waited in a line to see a comic book film adaptation would easily recognize Superman's shield and its iconic 'S'. Indeed, it seems that today knowledge about comic book heroes is gained by some kind of cultural osmosis rather than by direct exposure to the paper-and-ink comic books as it had been in the past. However, it does not make the actual comic books any less culturally relevant. It might be therefore worthwhile to look back at the era when comic books were still the only medium through which superheroes influenced the world.

1.1. Superhero Origins: From Alien Immigrants to Feminist Super Warriors

A planet is dying. Moments before the planet's destruction, desperate parents send their only child on a journey across the galaxy. On Earth, a married couple from a small town in Kansas comes across a space pod with a little boy inside it. They decide to adopt him and raise him as their own. The alien boy grows up to be incredibly strong. Driven by a moral compass that his adoptive parents instilled in him, he makes a decision. He will fight injustice and protect the world from crime and corruption.

Superman's origin story is probably the most widely recognized out of all superhero origins. Yet the story behind the creation of this most iconic of American superheroes is not so well known. In 1934, two high-school students, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, came up with the idea of a new type of hero – unlike any other hero before, their Superman could "hurdle skyscrapers . . . leap and eight of a mile . . . raise tremendous weights . . . run faster than a streamline train – . . . and nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin." But more importantly, he was the hero of the people, "the champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!" (Siegel, *Superman* #1 4).

It is a lesser known fact that the Man of Steel was created by second-generation Jewish immigrants. Siegel and Shuster were still children when the Immigration Act of 1924, also called The Johnson-Reed Act, was passed. The Johnson-Reed Act arguably shaped the immigration policy in the United States and continued to do so well into the 1960s. The Immigration Act limited the number of immigrants allowed entry into the United States. By introducing quotas, it also severely lowered the number of visas available to immigrants from areas of Southern and Eastern Europe. Since both Siegel's and Shuster's parents had originally come to the United States from Eastern Europe, it

is safe to assume that this development certainly had some impact on the young comic book creators, and especially on their new creation.

It is not difficult to see in Superman the representation of the immigrant experience. Superman was an undocumented immigrant who struggled to assimilate in a country that was both welcoming towards immigrants and suspicious of them. And even though he was never depicted as feeling ashamed of his origins, he led a double life, hiding who he was because he was worried that if people found out they would reject him. Like millions of young people from immigrant families around that time, Superman was a child of two worlds.

Alternately, Gary Engle provides a more idealistic interpretation of Superman's immigrant status in his essay "What Makes Superman So Darned American":

> Superman's powers . . . are the comic book equivalents of ethnic characteristics, and they protect and preserve the vitality of the foster community in which he lives the same way that immigrant ethnicity has sustained American culture linguistically, artistically, economically, politically and spiritually. The myth of Superman asserts with total confidence and childlike innocence the value of the immigrant in American culture. (qtd. in Fingeroth 54)

Initially, Superman appeared in newspaper comic strips. In 1938 he was featured on the cover of the first issue of *Action Comics* and by 1939 he had his own comic book. Grant Morrison, comic book writer who took a new spin on the character in *All-Star Superman* (2005), writes in his book *Supergods,* "the superhero concept caught on immediately with the public. The Superman Fan Club soon had hundreds of thousands of members, like some benign Hitlerjugend or sci-fi Scout movement" (16). With the red caped superhero's immense popularity, the comic book industry started to flourish.

The executives at DC Comics were quick to exploit Superman's success. In 1939, Bob Kane, a talented young cartoonist, was asked to create a second costumed superhero for the company. Kane proposed to them a character simply called the Batman.

After witnessing the brutal murder of his parents as a child, Bruce Wayne, an heir to a multi-billion dollar empire, swears to fight criminals and protect those that cannot protect themselves, so that no other child will ever have to experience the loss of their closest ones the way he did. He spends years studying martial arts and honing his mind and body into peak condition and eventually dons the cape and the cowl to become the Caped Crusader.

While creating the bat vigilante whose popularity would soon rival Superman's, Kane and writer Bill Finger took inspiration from "the lead character from a 1930 silent film entitled *The Bat Whispers* (the resemblance is slight, but the idea of the bestial alter ego is there); Leonardo da Vinci's sketches for an 'ornithopter' flying machine, its design based on the wings of a bat; and 1920's *The Mark of Zorro*" (Morrison 20). Additionally, Batman combined "the athleticism of D'Artagnan from the novel *The Three Musketeers* with the deductive skills of Sherlock Holmes" (Morrison 20). Batman debuted in *Detective Comics* #27 in May 1939. He was described as "a mysterious and adventurous figure fighting for righteousness and apprehending the wrong-doer, in his lone battle against the evil forces of society" (Finger 1). A billionaire playboy by day and vengeful vigilante by night, Batman was a huge success. In an effort to attract new young readers and lighten up the tone of the often serious and dark stories, DC commissioned Kane to create a sidekick for Batman and so in 1940, almost a year since Batman's first appearance, the character of Robin the Boy Wonder, was introduced.

Unlike Superman, whose heroics were tolerated and even celebrated by other characters, Batman and his early comics were more deeply rooted in reality. Batman never had any superpowers and since he operated outside the law, he was treated like a criminal by the police. As the World's Greatest Detective, Batman relied on his detective skills rather than on physical strength. As Morrison writes in *Supergods*, "where Superman strove for modernity in everything from the image of its hero to the kinetic editing of its torn-from-the-headlines narrative, the Batman strip reveled in the trashy aesthetic of the mystery pulps and the penny dreadful" (23). It is certainly true that Batman was more similar to the detectives of the pulp magazines than to the superheroes that flooded the comic book market in the following decades.

It could be argued that the appeal of Batman came at least partly from the fact that he was portrayed as being aware of his own privilege. Despite being a rich, white man in a position of power, he was empathetic towards the misfortune of the underprivileged, and used his public persona of Bruce Wayne to support people in need through his nonprofit Wayne Foundation, and his secret identity to rid his city of organized crime. Batman's determination to fight social injustice on two fronts is arguably what makes him unique among the Golden Age superheroes even in modern days.

In 1941 DC Comics approached William Moulton Marston, a psychologist and a professor at Columbia University, Tufts University and Radcliffe College. He was asked to create a new groundbreaking hero for the company that would replicate the success of Superman and Batman. Marston created Wonder Woman – the first female superhero.

Marston and his wife Elizabeth Holloway, both proponents of progressive attitudes towards sex, lived in a polyamorous relationship with their lover Olive Byrne

(Morrison 35). Although often credited as the creator of the first feminist icon in popular culture, Marston was not exactly a feminist in the traditional sense of the word. According to Jill Lepore, feminists of the 1930s and 1940s "rejected the idea of women as reformers whose moral authority came from their differentness from men . . . and advocated instead women's full and equal participation in politics, work, and the arts, on the grounds that women were in every way equal to men" (31). Marston leaned towards a slightly different idea of feminism – he advocated the opinion that women were superior to men in every way (Lepore 164). Without a doubt, his Wonder Woman embodied this ideal of a superior woman. Wonder Woman, or Princess Diana of Themyscira as she was known in her homeland, came from a warlike race of fearless Amazons. The Amazon society, Morrison writes in *Supergods*, was based on "the kind of radical Second Wave separatist feminism where men were forbidden and things could only get better as a result" (37).

Wonder Woman's origin is quite straightforward: when Captain Steve Trevor from U.S. Army Air Corps crash-lands on Paradise Island, the homeland of Amazons, during World War II, Diana finds him and falls in love with him. As the island's "strongest and wisest Amazon," Diana is chosen to accompany Steve on his journey back to "America, the last citadel of democracy, and of equal right for women" (Marston, *All Star Comics* #8 8). There she assumes the identity of Diana Prince and under this false name starts working closely with the military intelligence. She also becomes Wonder Woman, a superheroine wielding the Lasso of Truth and fighting for justice and love.

According to the early comics, Wonder Woman passionately fought for women and children in Man's World. In a panel from *Wonder Woman* #32, Diana famously encourages women to stand up for themselves: "when you let your men bind you – you

let yourself be bound by war, hate greed, and lust for power! Think! And free yourselves! *Control* those who would oppress others! *You can do it!"* (Kanigher 5). Interestingly enough, although the title included plenty of powerful messages about the discrimination and oppression of women and minorities, the Golden Age *Wonder Woman* comics also contained an exceptional amount of bondage imagery. Nonetheless, with the introduction of Wonder Woman, DC's trinity of superheroes was at last complete.

At the time of the creation of the first superhero, the world was on the brink of another war. While Wonder Woman's alter ego, Diana Prince, became an army nurse, Batman and Robin stayed in Gotham City and supported the soldiers abroad from afar. During the initial years of World War II, Superman's beliefs reflected the isolationist politics of the country. Then a few months before the attack on Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war by the United States, the comic strip "How Superman Would End the War" appeared. The non-canon story published in *Look* Magazine, written by Siegel and inked by Shuster, depicted Superman landing in Adolf Hitler's bunker, grabbing the dictator by the scruff of the neck while boldly declaring, "I'd like to land a strictly non-Aryan sock on your jaw, but there's no time for that!" and then promptly flying him to Moscow to collect Joseph Stalin, only to whisk them both off to a meeting of the League of Nations where a representative of the organization pronounced Hitler and Stalin "guilty of modern history's greatest crime – unprovoked aggression against defenseless countries" (See Figure 1).

The entertaining comic strip made the readers of *Superman* question why Clark Kent did not participate in the war efforts in the actual comic book. After all, he was a nearly indestructible American citizen who could have ended the war with a flick of his finger, but the writers were rightfully concerned that sending Superman to war in the

comics might be offensive to the real world heroes risking their lives every day on the battlefield. In the end they came up with a compromise – Clark Kent tried to enlist, but even though he was in an excellent physical shape and passed all the other examinations, he was rejected "for faulty vision . . . when his x-ray vision penetrated the eye-chart and read a different chart in the next room" (Siegel, *Superman* #25 18). Apparently, he was too engrossed in thought, imagining what it would be like fighting for his country and did not properly focus on what he was doing. And thus Clark Kent did not join the army and Hitler's regime had to be defeated even without his help.

The Depression Era demanded superheroes like Superman who would fight for common Americans, but "the war years needed patriotic defenders of national interests" (Wright 29). In a bright red, white and blue costume, Marvel's first superhero, Captain America, became the embodiment of nationalism. The character's patriotic nature was immortalized on the cover of the first issue of *Captain America Comics* which depicted Captain America infiltrating a Nazi military base and punching Adolf Hitler (See Figure 2). According to Wright, "many of the young artists creating comic books were Jewish and liberal. Morally repelled by the Nazis, they expressed their politics in their work" (36). Two of these creators were Joe Simon and Jack Kirby who together produced Captain America. In their debut comic *Captain America Comics* #1, they introduced the character of Steve Rogers, a skinny and sickly-looking draft reject who gets injected with the super soldier serum and is promptly sent to war to fight against "the ruthless war-mongers of Europe [who] focus their eyes on a peace-loving America" (Kirby 2).

It did not take long for Captain America to become Marvel's most profitable character. Until this point, heroes like Superman and Batman "operated on the fringes of the law, but Captain America's violent work was endorsed by the Constitution itself" (Morrison 34). In his star-spangled costume and carrying a shield, Captain America

fought side by side with his Robin-inspired sidekick Bucky against a number of villains, the most heinous of them being his archenemy, Red Skull. In a red death mask and with a swastika on his chest, Red Skull was an unsubtle allegory for the Nazi threat. But despite the rather aggressive propaganda in Marvel's best selling comic book that urged its readers to participate in the war effort, Captain America first and foremost represented hope for a better future and peaceful times.

After the end of the war, comics had hard time adjusting to the postwar era. In many ways, the end of World War II marked the beginning of the end of the Golden Age of comic books. Once the leader in creating comic books that often reflected contemporary issues, "DC Comics adopted a postwar editorial direction that increasingly de-emphasized social commentary in favor of lighthearted juvenile fantasy" (Wright 59). And while DC's Superman and Batman started fighting more and more fantastical supervillains in order to keep the readers interested in their adventures, Marvel's comics featuring war era superheroes like Captain America lost their cultural significance and with that, their readership.

1.2. Seduction of the Innocent Reader: Attack on Comic Books

Ever since their first appearance, comics had been surrounded by controversy. Over the years, comic book publishers had to regularly dodge complains from concerned parents about one problematic issue or another, but those were usually isolated incidents. In the post war era these attacks multiplied tenfold. While during the Great Depression comics had been seen as harmless entertainment and in the 1940s they had provided much welcomed escape from the horrors of World War II, the 1950s brought about a significant shift in the public perception of comic books.

After the unexpected success of the new superhero genre, parents and scholars alike became exceedingly suspicious about the popularity of comic books among children. There was an influx of critics, psychologists and self-proclaimed comic book experts who claimed that comic books promoted violence, and caused eye strain and neurological disorders. In the 1950s Senator McCarthy started televised Senate subcommittee hearings, and comics soon became occasional targets of these hearings (Lee, *How to Draw Comics* 18). But the first public critique of the comic book industry already appeared in 1940. In an editorial published in the *Chicago Daily News*, reviewer Sterling North complained about the "badly drawn, badly written, and badly printed" comic books that had the effect of "a violent stimulant" on the young readers and put "a strain on the young eyes and young nervous systems." North further called comics a "hypodermic injection of sex and murder" that made children "impatient with better, though quieter, stories," and called on American parents and teachers to "band together to break the 'comic' magazine."

The leading spokesman of the witch hunt on comic books was German-American psychiatrist, Dr. Fredric Wertham. In his article "The Comics… Very Funny!" published in *Saturday Review* in May 1948, Wertham warned against the dangers of comic books that young children often bought and read without adult supervision: "it is pretty well established that 75 percent of parents are against comic books. (The other 25 percent are either indifferent or misled by propaganda.)" Wertham encouraged parents to look at some of the claims that he believed comic book apologists frequently made – such as that "comic books are a healthy outlet; it is good for children to find release for their aggressive desires" or "they improve reading skills" and "the children have their 'own choice' in selecting this literature," and went on to disprove them one by one. Wertham concluded his article by a bold allegation, stating that

"comic books represent systematic poisoning of the well of childhood spontaneity" ("The Comics… Very Funny!"). The article caused controversy among the general public and comic book authors alike.

Quite surprisingly, defense came in the form of fourteen-year old David Pace Wigransky who decided to represent the one party that was continuously shut down in these debates – the young people who actually read these comic books. In his letter to *Saturday Review* titled "Cain and Comics" he spoke out in protest of the witch hunt on comics:

> It is high time that we who are on the defensive become as serious as our attackers. We didn't ask for this fight, but we are in it to the finish. The fate of millions children hangs in the balance. We owe it to them to continue to give them the reading matter which they have come to know and love.
>
> Dr. Wertham seems to believe that adults should have the perfect right to read anything they please, no matter how vulgar, how vicious or how depraving, simply because they are adults. Children, on the other hand, should be kept in utter and complete ignorance of anything and everything except the innocuous and sterile world that the Dr. Werthams of the world prefer to keep them prisoner within from birth to maturity. The net result of all this, however, is that when they have to someday grow up, they will be thrust into an entirely different kind of world, a world of violence and cruelty, a world of force and competition, an impersonal world in which they will have to fight their own battles, afraid, insecure, helpless . . . It is time that society woke up to the fact that children are human beings with opinions of their own, instead of

> brainless robots to be ordered hither and yon without even so much as asking them their idea about anything. To be a child psychiatrist, one should be able to look at things through the eyes of a child. (Wigransky)

Wigransky's letter was a thoughtful counterargument to Wertham's theories and raised quite a few intriguing questions that are still relevant today. If children are kept in dark, how can they learn to differentiate between what is right and what is wrong? Is it not the society's responsibility to educate them? After all, children process things differently than adults. Is it not better to expose them to the problematic content in a controlled way instead of keeping them completely ignorant of its existence? Is censorship really the most efficient means of keeping them safe? One might argue that the various polarized opinions about this topic which emerged in the 1950s have helped shape the American popular culture. Naturally, Wigransky's passionate defense was met with a lot of suspicion from those who agreed with Wertham, and "some skeptics even suggested that Wigransky's letter itself may have been forged by an adult, perhaps someone working for the comic book industry," but *Saturday Review* investigated the matter and confirmed that the letter was indeed written by the teenage boy (Wright 97).

It seems to be deeply ironic that these anti-comics sentiments came from Wertham, since he was a professed opponent of censorship (Wright 178). However, as Randy Duncan and Mathew James Smith point out in their book *The Power of Comics*, "Wertham was no simplistic censor and was not lashing out at a medium he neither understood nor appreciated. Rather, he saw comic books as just one mass medium, but certainly the worst in his estimation, which taught children that violence was a solution rather than a problem" (276). At his mental-health clinic for the underprivileged in Harlem, Wertham conducted interviews with young children and was appalled to find out how many of the juvenile delinquents that he treated at the clinic read comic books,

which, in his opinion, promoted violence, sex and drug use. He collected his findings into a book. The reactions to the publication of Wetham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) were mixed – while the book impressed the general public and caused moral outrage that led to the creation of the Comics Code a few months later, comic book fans were quick to point out its many misinterpretations of the superhero genre. Wertham based his *Seduction of the Innocent* on the theory that the behavioural disorders and pathologies that he observed in his patients were a direct consequence of spending "an inordinate amount of time with comic books" (11). In the book, he criticized the subgenre of jungle books for prominently featuring scantily clad-women, and horror comics and crime comics for promoting cruelty and violence. Although he supported his claims by numerous anecdotes from his career as a child psychologist, Wertham failed to mention the broader social, cultural and economic contexts that factored into the rise of juvenile delinquency among his patients and instead put the blame entirely on the comic books that these children read in their free time.

The superhero genre got its fair share of attention, too. In his possibly most famous claim, Wertham proposed that the *Batman* comics contained homoerotic subtext. In chapter titled "I Want to Be a Sex Maniac! Comic Books and the Psycho-Sexual Development of Children" he wrote:

> Only someone ignorant of the fundamentals of psychiatry and of the psychopathology of sex can fail to realize a subtle atmosphere of homoerotism which pervades the adventures of the mature "Batman" and his young friend "Robin." (Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* 190)

Batman and Robin's living arrangements, Wertham insisted, were "like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together" (*Seduction of the Innocent* 190). Considering one of the rules of the Golden Age comic books was that characters were not allowed to age,

the original Robin – Dick Grayson, was a ten-year-old boy for a very long time, certainly well into the 1950s when Wertham conducted his research. However, it remains unclear whether Wertham was aware of the fact that by looking at Batman and Robin's relationship as sexual he was technically suggesting that Batman was a child molester.

Wertham became so notorious in the comic book community that his allegations even appeared in the actual *Batman* comics. The issue was indirectly addressed in *Batman: Gotham Knights* almost fifty years later. In a story titled "Fathers and Sons" from 2003, Bruce Wayne is being investigated by social services after Jason Todd, the second Robin, is brutally beaten to death with a crowbar by the psychopathic Joker. During his visit at the Wayne Manor, a social worker points out that there is something off about the circumstances of Jason's death and asks whether it is possible that "problems in the home . . . contributed to the chain of events leading to Jason's death" (Beatty 16). He is suspicious about why a rich bachelor would take under his wing not one but *three* orphaned boys and questions whether Bruce has ever been "anything *other* than role model" to his adopted sons (Beatty 19). Of course, it is not what it looks like – Bruce is not actually covering up child abuse. It is his duty as Batman to protect the secret identities of all the Bats and Robins in his family, so he unintentionally comes across as suspiciously secretive, but the implications are still there in the words of the social worker whose character was in all likelihood at least slightly based on Wertham.

In 2012 Carol L. Tilley from the University of Illinois's Graduate School of Library and Information Science reviewed Wertham's personal notes, which remained under embargo till 2010, and found proof of what experts and some comic books fans had suspected for years – that Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* contained a number of "falsifications and distortions", and that Wertham "manipulated, overstated,

compromised, and fabricated evidence—especially that evidence he attributed to personal clinical research with young people—for rhetorical gain" (6). Wertham's concerns about excessive violence in popular culture were not entirely unfounded, but in the end his failure to remain impartial in his research greatly discredited most of his theories.

Stan Lee – creator of some of Marvel's most iconic superheroes – who had witnessed firsthand the rise and the fall of the anti-comics movement summarized it quite well in his book *How to Draw Comics,* "juvenile delinquents read comic books, so comic books must cause juvenile delinquency, went McCarthy's logic. I said 'Juvenile delinquents eat chocolate cake, so chocolate cake must cause juvenile delinquency,' but nobody listened to me. I wasn't on TV" (18).

1.3. Comics Code and the Impact of Censorship

In September 1954 Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) was formed and Charles F. Murphy was appointed to administer and enforce a code of standards that would regulate the content of American comic books. In many ways, CMAA's function was very similar to that of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which was responsible for the creation of the Production Code in 1930.

On 26 October 1954 the CMAA published the Comics Code. In the preamble it was stated that "the comic-book medium, having come of age on the American cultural scene, must measure up to its responsibilities . . .To make a positive contribution to contemporary life, the industry must seek new areas for developing sound, wholesome entertainment." The Comics Code introduced a number of restrictions and rules that comic book publishers had to dutifully follow if they wanted to gain the Comics Code

Authority seal of approval. These ranged from general instructions about not endorsing criminal behaviour in comics – "crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals," to more specific rules strictly prohibiting insults or attacks on any racial group or overtly sexualized depictions of women – "females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities." However, the Comics Code also contained a more general clause:

> All elements or techniques not specifically mentioned herein, but which are contrary to the spirit and intent of the code, and are considered violations of good taste or decency, shall be prohibited. (Senate Committee on the Judiciary: Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency)

Due to the vague wording of this clause, the final decision about depiction of themes that were not specifically mentioned in the Comics Code, such as drug use, was in the hands of the individual reviewers who "would note objectionable material, suggest revisions, and return the proofs to the editor, who would implement the recommended changes" (Wright 174). The reviewers often proved to be even more strict than the actual code, but the two major publishers, DC Comics and Marvel, as well as most of the smaller companies that became members of the CMAA quickly understood that if they wanted their comic books to continue being commercially successful, any kind of resistance against the Comics Code Authority would be counterproductive.

Interestingly enough, despite the fact that his book and articles helped put into motion the events surrounding the introduction of censorship in the comic book industry, Wertham never approved of the Comics Code, "the code did not ban violence from comic books, he insisted, but merely sanitized it into a bloodless and painless exercise with less graphic consequences" (Wright 178). Whether or not the Comics

Code had any positive effects on the young Americans remains unclear, but it certainly changed the way comic book authors approached topics that could be considered controversial in their stories.

The 1960s marked the beginning of a new wave of comic books. With the Comics Code firmly in place the focus of the censors shifted from comics to the new medium threatening to undoubtedly irreversibly corrupt American youth – television. The comic book industry was finally given some much needed breathing-space to creatively grow without being constantly suffocated by new restrictions.

If they wanted to survive in the age of television and movies, comic books had to take full advantage of their medium. Superheroes were the key to this. Cheap, action-packed and visually interesting, superhero comics were able to deliver what special effects in films and television would not have been able to imitate at that time. All it took was a little imagination, and the readers were suddenly immersed in battles of galactic proportions or gritty street fights alongside their favourite heroes. Commonly known as the Silver Age of Comics, the years between 1961 and 1971 saw the birth of a new type of superhero. While DC's trinity – Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman – continued to make money and therefore did not need to be significantly changed, Marvel was at a crossroads, questioning what their company's new direction should be. The answer came in 1962 in the form of Spider-Man. Writer-editor Stan Lee's creation of Peter Parker, a science geek who gets bitten by a radioactive spider and becomes a superhero, was nothing short of revolutionary.

In the meantime, older superheroes like DC's Green Lantern and the Flash were being reinvented. Influenced by the Space Race between the United States and the Soviet Union, superheroes were now getting their powers from science and technology

instead of magic, the way they had in the Golden Age. In 1962 an explosion of a gamma bomb created the Hulk and in 1963 Tony Stark built his first Iron Man suit.

The new heroes had to do what traditional superheroes failed at – they had to be relatable. After all, not many of the comic book readers were orphaned billionaires or super soldiers and surely none of them were Amazon princesses blessed by the goddess Aphrodite. But the Silver Age creations, such as Spider-Man, showed the readers that anyone could become a hero. Since the Comics Code Authority made mature stories a complete impossibility, the Silver Age comics usually had silly plots and harmless villains. However, that did not stop comic book creators from injecting their stories with subliminal social and political commentary. Around the same time as Stan Lee's X-Men, whose genes made them outcasts in the eyes of non-mutants, became an allegory for all the minorities who had to struggle against discrimination based on the colour of their skin, Black Panther, the first mainstream black superhero, made his debut, and the Civil Rights Movement reached its peak.

The Silver Age was full of brilliant new ideas. One of them was the invention of comic book multiverse – "an immense virtual reality inhabited by fictional characters, spanning decades and hundreds of thousands of pages, with its own rules, laws of physics, and alternative forms of time" (Morrison 26). Although the multiverse had a rather prosaic purpose – to make more money by bringing together popular characters that would otherwise never cross paths, the existence of infinite alternate worlds also paved the way for more cultural and gender diversity in the comic book industry. After all, if there was an infinite number of parallel timelines, there could be one in which Batman's sidekick, Robin, was a red-haired girl instead of a blue-eyed, black-haired boy or one where Spider-Man was a half-Latino half-African American high-school student

from Brooklyn who took up the superhero mantle after his world's original Spider-Man Peter Parker died.

The Bronze Age, closely followed by The Dark Age of Comic Books, brought more mature and morally ambiguous characters and stories. The comics suddenly depicted problems that American culture was dealing with in real life, such as racism, alcoholism and drug abuse. As the name itself suggests, the Dark Age comics were darker and edgier, filled with psychological complexity, and the art style shifted towards more realistic as the comic books started to take themselves more seriously. While the Silver Age was the era of the teenage hero, the Dark Age comic books catered to older audience. Graphic novels like Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1987) and Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989) delved deeper into topics like mental illness and morality of the vigilante life. In an attempt to at least partially escape the clutches of the Comics Code, DC started publishing under an imprint – Vertigo Comics produced popular titles that would otherwise never get past the censors, such as Neil Gaiman's *Sandman,* Alan Moore's *Hellblazer* or Grant Morrison's *Animal Man.* The Dark Age did not end as abruptly as for example the Golden Age. While the transitions between the early stages of the comic book history were always defined by some crucial event, such as the introduction of the Comics Code, the transition into the Modern Age of Comics happened very naturally over time.

1.4. The Rise of Diversity in Comics

The Modern Age of Comics is the era of the new, diverse superhero. In recent years, there has been a lot of discussion about the need for inclusion of characters representing differences along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality,

physical abilities, class, socio-economic status, religious beliefs and other axes of marginalization in comics. With the arrival of new social media and internet platforms, there has been a rise of voices demanding more diversity not only in comics but in popular entertainment in general. The two oldest and biggest publishing companies, DC Comics and Marvel, have reacted to these demands in three ways – by creating new diverse characters (DC's queer Batwoman and Midnighter, Marvel's Muslim superheroine Ms. Marvel and Black Hispanic Spider-Man), by giving spotlight to already existing diverse characters (Marvel's African American superhero Falcon became the new Captain America) and by updating popular established characters (DC's antiheroes Catwoman and Harley Quinn came out as bisexual in their respective comic book titles, Marvel's Deadpool was confirmed to be pansexual).

The two publishing companies did not appear to be concerned about good representation of women and minorities in the 1960s when black characters were mostly relegated to the role of a sidekick or in the 1980s when female characters were being killed and maimed and treated as a plot device to further the male superhero's character arc. Although it would be easy to put the blame solely on the publishers, the fact is that those comics reflected, as comic books always had, the dominant values of the era in which they were created. These days comic book creators are striving to subvert the harmful tropes of the previous eras. Hence two of the "big three" of Marvel Universe – Captain America, Iron Man, Thor – are no longer the stereotypical white male superheroes they used to be. *Captain America: Sam Wilson* debuted in 2015 and subverted the tradition of the white Captain America having a black sidekick. Steve Rogers, the original Captain, retired and his former sidekick Sam Wilson, also known under the name Falcon, became the new black Captain America. In contrast, a re-boot of *Thor* from 2014 featured Thor who was suddenly a woman. It was later revealed that

Jane Foster, who had originally been created in 1962 to be Thor's girlfriend, and who was at the time of the re-boot fighting breast cancer was the new Goddess of Thunder.

When asked whether it is better to flood comics with new diverse characters or to promote older, more established characters and only then create more as those characters start to stabilize in popularity, Gail Simone, a multiple award-winning comic book writer best known for her work on *Birds of Prey, Batgirl, Deadpool* and *Wonder Woman*, replied on her blog that "this 'flood' thing is a myth. There's no 'flood' of diverse characters. The vast majority of titles are still led by white, cis, straight characters." Simone admits that there is no easy answer to the question, but she believes that there is no reason to only go one path:

> Character creation is not a finite resource. We don't know which ones will pop. Do both. And people who get mad about it, they are often missing the point. If a book has all new characters and every single one is, say, LGBTQ, that will make a lot less news (which is something retailers and publishers care about) than saying, *Green Lantern is Gay* or *Cap is black*. Retailers and publishers rely on buzz and news sites and mainstream coverage. Joe Writer creating a new character called HERO XKRZ who is gay is not going to make that happen. You need both. (Simone, "This 'flood' thing is a myth")

A great example of what Simone is talking about is the character of Midnighter that was created in 1998 by writer Warren Ellis and artist Bryan Hitch. Together with his husband Apollo they were two of the first openly gay characters that appeared in mainstream comics, preceded only by Marvel's Northstar in 1992. The creators never needed to explicitly admit that these two superheroes were basically "an unashamed pastiche" of the DC's World's Finest – Batman and Superman (Lendrum 292). The

similarities were not exactly subtle – while Midnighter was a darker and more lethal version of Batman, Apollo was a bioengineered sun-powered godlike hero that could fly. Despite being fairly popular among comic book fans, Midnighter and Apollo never got as much exposure as, say, Superman and Batman would receive if they came out as queer in their comics. That seems to be the biggest problem that new diverse characters are facing today – they struggle to assert themselves in a world that has been for years dominated by straight, white, male superheroes.

In December 2015 DC Comics have included the growth of diversity in comics into their list of DC Comics' "Ten Moments that Mattered in 2015." In the article, which appeared on their official website, comic book editor Tim Beedle spoke for all comic book creators when he wrote, "we're just going to come out and say it: Diversity matters. It matters on the page and behind it. In fact, the need to diversify just may be the single biggest challenge facing comics today."

2. Minorities in Superhero Comics

Despite the efforts of today comic book creators to bring more diversity into their stories, there was a time when comic books used to be populated exclusively by white characters. For decades comic book creators at Marvel and DC Comics failed to portray America as a culturally and racially diverse society. There were no people of colour among the ranks of superheroes, super villains or civilians in Superman's Metropolis, Batman's Gotham or Flash's Central City.

The radical change came in the 1960s with the Civil Rights protests. Although comics rarely mentioned the Civil Rights Movement directly, the authors slowly began including random African Americans in crowd scenes. This rather stealthy approach was first implemented by Marvel and only later adopted by DC Comics and smaller publishing companies. In July 1966 Marvel introduced the first mainstream black superhero – the Black Panther, a cosmopolitan prince from a fictional, technologically advanced African country. Soon enough, Falcon, War Machine, Storm, Green Lantern John Stewart, Cyborg and many others followed in Black Panther's steps.

The Bronze Age of Comics in particular brought about a shift in the way comics approached stories dealing with minorities. In a famous *Green Lantern* issue from 1970 titled "No Evil Shall Escape My Sight," Green Lantern Hal Jordan is for the first time in his career confronted with the alarming situation of the underprivileged in America and it makes him reevaluate his ideas about heroism and crime-fighting. At one point in the story, a black man approaches Green Lantern and points out that although Hal saves whole civilizations in space, he is ultimately blind to the injustice that is happening on Earth:

> 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 6)

Hal is taken aback, but he eventually admits that he does not have an answer to that.

Once again, Marvel made the first step and slowly began introducing stories and characters that delved deeper into the issues of inequality and discrimination. Through the characters of Professor X, Cyclops, Rogue, Kitty Pryde, Wolverine and other mutants comic book authors criticized the American society's mistreatment of people that appeared to be different. Marvel's X-Men became the metaphor for the minorities and the oppressed.

2.1. X-Men's Days of Future Past: Of Mutants and Minorities

In his book *War, Politics and Superheroes* Mark DiPaolo explains that "the story of the X-Men is the story of the oppressed and the disenfranchised striking back against their oppressors, so any reader who feels oppressed may relate to the X-Men, regardless of the nature of the oppression, or its level of severity" (DiPaolo 219). While DC Comics made a franchise of indestructible aliens and flawless Amazonian warriors fighting for truth and justice, Marvel's X-Men were designed to be as flawed and human as the people that read about them.

It does not happen very often that a comic book character's superpowers become the reason for their discrimination. The knowledge that Superman has the power to destroy the entire world or enslave whole nations never enters the discourse. It is not allowed to. The moment it does, the authors have to acknowledge that this godlike character is just one bad day away from becoming a global threat. As alternate universe stories like *Injustice: Gods Among Us* and *Superman: Red Son* prove time and again, he

has a great capacity for cruelty. But no one ever tries to contain the mild-mannered Superman just to be sure he does not go rogue. Although some of the more paranoid characters such as Batman never forget what Superman is capable of. At one point Batman even points out that "it is a remarkable dichotomy. In many ways, Clark is the most human of us all. Then… he shoots fire from the skies, and it is difficult not to think of him as a god. And how fortunate we all are that it does not occur to him" (Loeb 7).

Marvel's *X-Men* take a different approach. Within the universe of the *X-Men* comics, super-powered characters are feared. The general public and the government regularly attempt to control and contain the mutants simply because their genetic makeup is slightly different. Neil Shyminski believes that "mutant super-humans are able to utilize racially charged discourses of oppression and victimization because they are commonly figured as normative humanity's racial other" (389). In short, their superpowers are used as analogous plot devices to address inequality and intolerance.

In *The Uncanny X-Men* #141-142 from 1981, a storyline known under the name "Days of Future Past," an adult Kate Pryde transfers her mind into her younger counterpart in the past in order to prevent the assassination of Senator Kelly, which in the original timeline led to mutant genocide. The future storyline takes place in the 21st century. Mutants are imprisoned in Mutant Internment Camps where they are forced to wear inhibitor collars that neutralize their powers. The comic explains:

> In North America, in the year 2013, there are three classes of people: 'H,' for baseline human – clean of mutant genes, allowed to breed. 'A,' for anomalous human – a normal person possessing mutant genetic potential… Forbidden to breed. 'M,' for mutant. The bottom of the heap,

> made pariahs and outcasts by the Mutant Control Act of 1988. Hunted down and with a few exceptions – killed without mercy. (Claremont 5)

The mutants of the future experience discrimination, abuse, intolerance and more, all because they are different. The dystopian scenario is purposefully reminiscent of the horrors of World War II. At one point in the story Dr. Moira MacTaggert, an associate of Professor X, comments, "registration of mutants today, gas chambers tomorrow" (Claremont 21). The holocaust parallels are pretty straightforward. What makes them so ominous is the fact that they are referencing a part of human history and projecting it on the future. The underlying theme of *The Uncanny X-Men* is that if people do not start respecting minorities as their equals history will repeat itself. This is only emphasized by Storm's words to Senator Kelly after Kate saves his life in the past timeline, "mutants, like people, are both good and bad. You would do well to remember that, senator, before you seek to condemn us *all"* (Claremont 21).

The *X-Men* comics of the second half of the 20th century educated young readers about intolerance and inequality, yet they still featured a team of predominantly white characters. Their diversity was mostly metaphorical. And so those readers who wanted more than subtext gravitated towards stories that presented actual representation of minorities.

2.2. Black Superheroes: Separate but Equal

Marvel's Black Panther was the first black superhero to appear in mainstream comics. T'Challa, a superintelligent and highly skilled fighter and prince of the fictional African nation of Wakanda, first appeared in Marvel's *Fantastic Four* series in July 1966. His homeland, one of the most technologically advanced countries in the Marvel universe, represented the fusion of the traditional African culture with scientific

progress and symbolized the "anticolonialist critique of the economic exploitation of Africa" (Nama 43). Although it remains unclear whether his superhero name referenced the Black Panther Party, which incidentally became active in the same year as the character was created, it is probably safe to assume that there was some kind of connection between the two. After all, Marvel was famous for filling their comics with references to real world events.

After having introduced the first black superhero, Marvel again managed to outshine DC Comics by creating the first African American superhero. Despite the fact that he started as a supporting character and a sidekick of the white protagonist, Sam Wilson, otherwise known as the Falcon, quickly became Captain America's equal. Their partnership was somewhat tense from the very beginning, in no small amount due to the unequal power dynamics of their relationship. As a team made of a genetically-altered super soldier and a black social worker that grew up in Harlem, Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson regularly found themselves in opposition.

However, the authors did not shy away from pointing out their differences. Race was addressed fairly often in the comics. In one of the earlier stories of their partnership, Falcon tells Steve, "your skin may be a different color . . . But there's no man alive I'm prouder to call . . . Brother!" (Lee, *Captain America* v1 #126 20). Nama points out that Falcon and other black superheroes "were a logical response to the cultural fallout generated by the struggle for racial justice and equality that took hold of the nation from the late 1950s to the early 1970s" (153). In many ways Steve and Sam's personal relationship reflected the situation in the United States at that time. However, despite the rocky beginnings, Captain America and Falcon eventually managed to build their partnership on trust and mutual respect.

Marvel comic books, *Captain America* in particular, always had a great social resonance. When in 2015 Marvel decided to retire Steve Rogers from the role of Captain America, Sam Wilson seemed to be his only logical successor. Sam Wilson's Captain America is portrayed as thoughtful and ambitious superhero. Unlike his predecessor he does not work for the government. His politics are liberal and he supports immigration. He is, in his own words, "fighting the fight no one else is willing to" (Spencer 20). The cover of *Captain America: Sam Wilson* #1 depicts Sam in his full Captain America regalia, which is instantly recognizable as an upgraded Falcon suit. Instead of simple reds and whites his new costume adopts the colours of the American flag (See Figure 3). It looks familiar, but at the same it is noticeably different from Steve Rogers's traditional star-spangled suit. The new costume reflects Sam's desire to differentiate himself from his friend and predecessor who "always tried to stay above the fray . . . He took a stand when he had to, but as far as politics went -- he played it close to the vest" (Spencer 11). As a black man stepping into a position historically held by a white man, Sam is under a lot of pressure. The government and the press are ready to disown him at the first opportunity. They label him "Captain Anti-America" and "Captain Communism" after he publicly takes a stand against oppression and injustice (Spencer 12).

But the newly appointed Captain America strongly believes that it is ineffective to stay apolitical in the light of the deteriorating political situation in the United States:

> This country is as divided as it's ever been. Red and blue, black and white, Republican and Democrat, North and South -- feels like we are constantly at each other's throats. We don't trust each other. We no longer see ourselves in our neighbor. And this is not some intellectual debate --

> people are dying. Our streets are burning. Inequality is soaring. It feels like things are about to break wide open. (Spencer 10-11)

Although Sam is talking about the fictional world of the Marvel universe, the parallels with the situation in the 21st century America are not exactly subtle.

In the first issue of *Captain America: Sam Wilson*, the new Captain America recounts a mission during which he saved a group of Mexican immigrants from a cult of white supremacists. When a woman whose grandson got kidnapped by the anti-immigrant organization known as the Sons of the Serpent contacts him, he takes the opportunity to act. The woman believes that her grandson was abducted because he was leaving food, water and medicine for undocumented immigrants crossing the US-Mexico border. After Captain America witnesses the masked, gun-wielding men terrorize a group of immigrants walking through the desert, he decides to confront them. The racist cult leader, calling himself the Supreme Serpent, tells the immigrants, "you come here for employment that is rightfully ours! And if denied it, you seek welfare paid for by our tax dollars" (Spencer 22). His words echo the claims of certain real world extreme anti-immigration groups and individuals. However, Captain America makes his position clear. He does not condone racially motivated violence.

At one point Sam muses, "the more I saw the people I believed I was standing up for being walked on -- the more I heard a noise machine spouting intolerance and fear, drowning common sense out -- the more I wondered -- shouldn't Captain America be more than just a symbol?" (Spencer 11). Historically the *Captain America* stories have avoided domestic issues. The original Captain America battled Nazis and other international threats, but he stayed largely apolitical, preferring to present a watered-down version of patriotism instead of taking a specific stance on controversial issues.

Sam Wilson proves that his Captain is more than a symbol. He is not afraid to pick a side in a conflict and speak up when he witnesses injustice.

Despite the comic book's bold social commentary on inequality in the United States, Marvel has ultimately failed to portray the two Captain Americas as equals. The comic book makes it quite clear that Sam is not *the* Captain America. He is Captain America with an asterisk. His series is called *Captain America: Sam Wilson*. The colon followed by the subheading reflects the unequal treatment that superheroes of colour still encounter today.

2.3. Spider-Man, Batman and Police Racism

Vigilantism is by its definition an illegal activity. It should perhaps come as no surprise, then, that superhero work often requires cooperation with police. Some superheroes like Batman and the Flash embrace this. Batman often assists Police Commissioner Jim Gordon during his investigations while the Flash works as a police forensic scientist in the crime laboratory at the Central City Police Department. Other costumed heroes, such as Spider-Man, keep their distance.

In the first issue of Marvel's alternate universe comic book *Cataclysm: Ultimate Spider-Man*, the web-shooting superhero once again dons his costume after taking some time off. After he effectively stops a street brawl he is confronted by two police officers:

> Police Officer: "Oh man, oh man! Is it *you*? Is it *really* you?"
>
> Spider-Man: "Uh…"
>
> Police Officer: "Oh man, it's true! You *are* back!!"
>
> Spider-Man: "Uh—"
>
> Police Officer: "We all heard you might be back into it. Good for

you!! Good for all of us!!"

Spider-Man: "Really?"

Police Officer: "You kidding? I wish there was *fifty* of you."

Spider-Man: "But you guys used to pull guns on me--" (Bendis 13)

At first glance the scene seems to play out as every other regular confrontation between a self-proclaimed vigilante and police officers who have to pretend that they disapprove of vigilantism in front of their superiors, but who are actually glad to accept any help that they can get (See Figure 4). However, this is not Peter Parker, a white college student with an aptitude for science. This world's Spider-Man is Miles Morales, a half African-American half Latino teenager who took up the superhero mantle after the world's original Spider-Man died, which puts the whole interaction in a completely different light. When in *Ultimate Spider-Man* Miles says that police officers used to "pull guns on him," he is not referring to the numerous instances in which members of the police force tried to arrest Spider-Man. He is talking about how the police used to treat him *without* the mask.

Police racism is something that comic book writers used to avoid. That has changed in the last few years. In 2015 DC Comics published not one but *two* Batman comics that directly addressed racialized police violence. The first one was Scott Snyder's issue of *Batman* that came out one year after Michael Brown, a black teenager, was shot to death by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014. But Brown's killing was not the only incident that the comic was referencing. The boy's murder was preceded by those of Eric Garner at the hands of police in New York City earlier that year and Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old, who was fatally shot by a neighbourhood watch volunteer in Florida in 2012. With the number of police brutality cases on the rise, Snyder's *Batman* #44 looked deeper into the problem of racial profiling and its

intersection with poverty as well as other economic factors, such as gentrification. In an interview for the *Guardian* Snyder said he wanted to show Batman questioning his mission:

> Here is where he begins to learn [the limits of] the methods that he thought would work: finding a criminal, making an example of the criminal, throwing the criminal in jail … Instead, what he has to learn is that the problems that he's facing in today's city are much more humbling, are much more complicated. (qtd. in Ackerman)

If Superman's Metropolis is the idealistic image of American cities, Batman's Gotham is its darker and more realistic reflection. In Gotham everything bad that can happen *does* happen. And it is up to Batman to try to make sense of what his city is experiencing.

In the flashback story the World's Greatest Detective is confronted with a gruesome crime scene. A body of a black boy being picked apart by crows has been found "less than one foot from the old city limit" (Snyder, *Batman* #44 4). As Batman is carrying out his investigation, one by one confronting and dismissing the usual suspects, he starts realizing that the boy's death was the result of a series of unfortunate events, one of them being Bruce Wayne's decision to rebuild certain parts of the city in hope of providing better living conditions for lower-middle class families. What Bruce did not realize at that time was that these private developments would eventually force out longtime residents, including the boy's family. After some investigation, Batman identifies the perpetrator, "his name is Ned Howler. He's a ten-year veteran of the GCPD. Celebrated twice, but a lot of gray – a lot of gray, likely a lot of dark, papered over" (Snyder, *Batman* #44, 21).

Batman reconstructs what happened the day when 15-year-old Peter Duggio was shot in the stomach by the Gotham police veteran. In the flashback scene the black teenager is shown wearing a red hoodie, similar to the one 17-year-old Trayvon Martin wore when he was fatally shot on his way home from a convenience store in 2012 (See Figure 5). When the officer trains his gun on him and tells Peter to lie on the ground, the boy hurries to obey. However, before he can respond to the demand, the officer pulls the trigger.

When Batman eventually confronts the officer, the man draws a gun on him, then puts his hands up in defense, "I was just doing my job. I got a call about a *gang* fight. You don't understand" (Snyder, Batman #44 21). But Batman understands all too well:

> He already knows what Howler is going to say… about how many cops have been shot in the area. About guns. And he knows this. He also knows how many young black men have been shot by cops, unarmed, in the Corner in the last two years. How many cops have gone unpunished. It's too much to bear. (Snyder, *Batman* #44 21)

The case leaves Batman visibly shaken. Being partly responsible for Peter Duggio's death makes him reevaluate his methods, "he got it wrong. He sees that now. Because there was someone to catch . . . Howler . . . Bruce Wayne. The whole city. Everyone and no one. But above all, the one to catch was the boy. Before he fell" (Snyder, *Batman* #44 31). It is important to note that while Marvel's superheroes, such as the Avengers, function as individual units who frequently group into superhero teams when a new threat arises, DC's heroes create families. The Bat Family in particular is fairly diverse. Despite the popular belief that Batman is a lone hero, the Dark Knight is actually very family-oriented. As a single father with five children, Bruce Wayne has to

juggle his secret vigilante life, his work at Wayne Enterprises, his playboy billionaire public persona *and* his surrogate family. All his children, whether adopted or biological, are of different ethnicities. Dick Grayson, the first Robin, has Romani background, there are numerous hints that Jason Todd – the second Robin, is Latino, Tim Drake is white, Cassandra Cain is half Asian and Damian Wayne, the only biological son of Batman, is of Arabic and Chinese descent from his mother's side. It is therefore not completely unimaginable that a racially-motivated murder of a child would have a great impact on Batman and make him deeply reconsider his worldview.

Frank Miller's *Dark Knight III: The Master Race* #1 written in collaboration with Brian Azzarello is the second of the two comic books created in 2015 that overtly references acts of police brutality. Miller's alternate universe story reflects and at the same time subverts Snyder's take on the problematic issue. The very first scene of the first issue of Miller's continuation of the critically acclaimed *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) depicts a black man in a red hooded sweatshirt being chased by police while he is talking to a friend on his phone. When his friend asks why the police are trying to arrest him, he replies, "the man don't need a reason" (Miller 6). He does not expect anyone to help him. Nobody has seen Batman for four years and Gothamites avert their eyes from injustice in the streets, fearing that they might become the next body in the GCPD morgue if they get involved. All of a sudden, the police officers get attacked by a dark figure.

What makes the scene even more powerful is the knowledge that the dark figure that swoops in to save the young black man is Carrie Kelley dressed as Batman, not the rich, white and privileged Bruce Wayne. Carrie comes from a much less privileged background. *The Dark Knight Returns* shows that her parents were neglectful hippies and drug addicts who often forgot they had a child and never even noticed that Carrie

became Batman's new Robin. What Carrie represents is the idea of someone who is intimately familiar with the injustice of the system consciously making the decision to stand up and fight against the system.

While *Captain America* tackles the problem of racial intolerance from political perspective, the *Batman* comics treat it as a socio-economic issue. Comic books are probably the only medium that gives creators this much freedom in terms of temporarily abandoning the overall narrative to comment on real world events. Present day comics are very flexible in that regard. And yet, at the same time, these stories depicting current real world issues hardly even disrupt the flow of the ongoing story. Captain America has always fought against people spreading harmful ideologies in his comics, and Batman has always fought crime, poverty and unemployment. It is the external knowledge of the real-life events that inspired these stories that significantly changes the readers' perception of them.

3. Female Superheroes: The Fight for Truth, Justice and Gender Equality

In the early days of comics, comic book publishers tended to reinforce traditional gender roles in their works by relegating female characters to the subordinate status of a superhero's girlfriend, a damsel in distress or a dim-witted sidekick. The women's main objective in comics was to resist the romantic advances of the male protagonist, fall in love with his superhero alter-ego and get kidnapped by criminals on a more or less regular basis. This formulaic approach towards writing female characters in comics is arguably as old as the superhero genre itself. Possibly the first and most famous victim of this unfortunate trend was Lois Lane who was introduced in *Action Comics* #1 in 1938, the same year that Superman made his debut. The feisty reporter from *Daily Planet* was, however, always more widely known as Superman's girlfriend rather than as an accomplished, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist.

For decades the executives at Marvel, and to a lesser extent at DC Comics, were of the opinion that their comic book readership – who they believed to be predominantly male and adolescent – would not be interested in comic book titles led by female characters. Wright points out that as difficult as it was to get white readers to buy comic books about non-white characters, "it was even harder to get boys to buy comics about women" (251). Indeed, it is quite easy to draw parallels between the portrayals of minorities and women in comic books – they were rare and often offensive, and they usually came from the minds of white male writers who, despite their best efforts, struggled to write these characters believably.

For years the comic book industry lacked female presence in the ranks of creators as well as readers. Stan Lee muses in the introduction to *The Superhero Women* from 1977, "do less females read comics because they seem to be aimed at a male audience, or are they aimed at a male audience because less females read them?" (3).

Ironically, the answer to Lee's question appears in his own book. It is no accident that Lee's *The Superhero Women,* an anthology devoted to Marvel's best female heroes, mostly featured supporting female characters in titles dominated by male superheroes. Scattered among them were superheroines like Red Sonja, Wasp, Black Widow or the original Ms. Marvel. In the end, a book that was meant to be a celebration of femininity in comics only highlighted the need for strong, empowered women in the industry. Although Marvel was the first big publisher to acknowledge and include black characters in its comic book universe, the company simply did not have well-written female superheroes.

Women were historically underrepresented in comics. For many years, DC's Wonder Woman was the sole ambassador of female power amidst the world's finest heroes. In many ways, she was a superhero ahead of her time.

3.1. The Amazon Princess and the Lie Detector

Lillian Robinson writes in *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes*, "in the beginning there was Wonder Woman. And, in the beginning of Wonder Woman, there was feminism" (27). Only twenty years after women received the right to vote in the United States, Wonder Woman made her debut on the pages of *All Star Comics* #8, encouraging little girls and young women all over the world to embrace their female power and telling them that their love and compassion were their greatest weapons in their fight against oppression. Many of these young girls grew up to become the second-wave feminists of the 1960s and 1970s. One of them was Gloria Steinem, journalist and sociopolitical activist, who decided to put a picture of Wonder Woman on the cover of the first issue of *Ms.* Magazine in July 1972 (Stuller 39).

Created by the man who invented the lie detector and who lived in a polyamorous relationship with his wife and their lover, Wonder Woman represented honesty, strength, beauty and emotional intelligence of women. At a time when women were basically treated as second class citizens, she was an outspoken advocate of women's rights and a much needed role model. William Moulton Marston, Wonder Woman's creator, explained the importance of a female superhero in his article titled "Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics" in 1943:

> 'Aw, that's girl's stuff!' snorts our young comics reader. 'Who wants to be a girl?' And that's the point; not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, power . . . The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of a Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman. (36)

Marston's Wonder Woman not only had the allure and the strength, she also had a great political importance.

"As lovely as Aphrodite – as wise as Athena – with the speed of Mercury – and the strength of Hercules," that is how Marston famously describes Diana of Themyscira when she first appears on the pages of *All Star Comics* #8 (2). Molded from clay by her mother Hippolyta, the Amazon queen of the ancient mythology, and blessed by the goddess Aphrodite, Diana becomes an ambassador of peace in Man's World. The story of Wonder Woman freely borrows themes from Ancient Greek and Roman mythology and combines them with twentieth-century feminism. Her origins reach "back into that Golden Age when proud and beautiful women, stronger than men, ruled Amazonia and worshipped ardently the immortal Aphrodite, goddess of Love and Beauty" (Marston,*Wonder Woman* v1 #1 2). Diana's primary weapon is the Lasso of Truth, a magical item forged by the goddess Aphrodite that forces those bound within it to tell

the truth and obey the commands of the person who wields it, which seems very apt for a character created by the inventor of the modern polygraph.

One of the unspoken rules of comic books states that a superhero's archenemies must in some way reflect the hero's unique traits. The reason why criminals in Gotham City usually end up in Arkham Asylum for the criminally insane instead of the Blackgate prison is because Batman himself is not exactly a model of mental health. Similarly, Superman's villains are often the physical representation of the idea that power corrupts – one of Superman's greatest foes is Bizarro, a grotesque, corrupted mirror image of Superman himself. However, Wonder Woman's rogues gallery does not have a unified theme as, say, Batman's villains who all struggle with varying degrees of mental health issues. Yet it could be argued that the majority of her villains have some aspect of misogyny or misandry in their characterization, whether it is based on stereotyping or profound hatred of a particular gender. Many of her female villains, such as Cheetah, believe in self-empowerment and despise Diana for her message of empowerment for all women regardless of status, class, sexuality, religion or race. Despite being an ambassador of peace, Wonder Woman often finds herself in situations where she has to fight for women's rights not only metaphorically, but also literally.

Since Marston's death in 1947, countless other comic book writers and artists have contributed to the message of Wonder Woman – some of them more successfully than others. In *Wonder Woman: Spirit of Truth* from 2001 artist Alex Ross and writer Paul Dini attempted to capture the essence of Wonder Woman, to show her motivations as well as her struggles. The graphic novel depicts Wonder Woman early in her superhero career. She is still new to Man's World, and it shows in the way she interacts with people. When she saves a young woman from an approaching tank during a civil rights protest in an unnamed autocratic country, she realizes that the girl sees her "only

as an unwelcome intrusion into her world. A bizarre creature every bit as threatening as the tank that nearly killed her" (Dini 18). Diana feels ill-suited to life among non-warriors because humans either feel threatened by her or underestimate her based on her appearance.

When Wonder Woman finds out about entire groups of women and children going missing in a Middle-Eastern desert, she decides to take the direct approach and go investigate. She arrives in her Amazonian attire and speaks their language with a flawless local accent, but the men and women start hurling stones at her. She muses, "though I'm used to my traditional attire, it only made the clash of our cultures more painfully evident. I could not blame them for lashing out" (Dini 23). Instead of being angry, she feels humbled. And that is arguably Wonder Woman's true superpower – she always responds with understanding, not aggression. After getting to know the world a little better from the human perspective, Diana returns in culturally correct clothing and infiltrates the base of the kidnappers. She feels righteous anger when she sees how these men treat women:

> The hostages I defend have endured more suffering than I will ever know. I take their pain and meld it with the rage their captors unleashed on me. I transform it into a living force and set it back upon them. Those they have silenced and suppressed now find release through me. I become, in this moment, a judgment upon all people who, for whatever reason or rationale, would subjugate others. (Dini 37)

Diana helps the kidnapped women, and though they are still frightened of her, she gets a few furtive nods and smiles in return (See Figure 6). She does not save them because of some misplaced white saviour complex. She does it because they are women. In her eyes all women regardless of their ethnicity or religion deserve her protection. Rebecca

Walker writes in her article "Becoming the Third Wave," originally published in *Ms.* Magazine in 1992, that to be a feminist is "to integrate an ideology of equality and female empowerment into the very fiber of my life. It is to search for personal clarity in the midst of systemic destruction, to join in sisterhood with women when often we are divided, to understand power structures with the intention of challenging them" (39). Wonder Woman embraces this definition of third wave feminism and at the same time stays true to her roots. Moreover, what also makes her unique is that she shows that women can be kind and nurturing, but also righteously furious and brutal. As Jennifer K. Stuller points out, "Wonder Woman changes men's ideas about women, and women's ideas about what they are capable of" (7).

Gail Simone provides a great summary of what the character of Wonder Woman represents in *Birds of Prey* #68 where Black Canary, another DC's revolutionary superheroine, declares:

> We simplify Superman and Batman into the *light* and the *dark* sides of our nature. Wonder Woman encompasses *both*. Completely maternal and caring, and all the best qualities a person could have… but I've seen her at *war* with an *axe* in her hand. And that's where the sweetness *stops* . . . Underneath that peaceful smile lurks one of the *scariest* women on Earth. (10-11)

In a world where women still have to fight to be respected, the message of Wonder Woman continues to be relevant.

3.2. Women in Refrigerators: The Curse of Superhero Girlfriends

In many ways, the superhero stories provide a modern take on mythology. In the past, the function of the myth was to tell stories that would help people better

understand the world. Even though women's roles in the stories have changed over the millennia, the modern mythology is still centered around the male hero. Women continue to be seen only in relation to men. As a result, female characters in comics often become archetypes instead of fully-fledged characters. They are the archetypal mothers, the love interests, the villainous femmes fatales and when they stop fulfilling these functions they completely disappear from the narrative. The considerably worse outcome is that they become "women in refrigerators." This odd phenomenon seems to affect female characters regardless of their race, ethnicity, sexual identity or political views. Superheroines, sidekicks, best friends or love interests – no one is safe from becoming a plot device to further male character's story arc. One could even argue that the trend is universal and encompasses all media. Women in refrigerators can be found in films and video games, although not so much in books. For reasons unknown, the *visual* image of a woman in distress endlessly fascinates male writers and creators.

The term "woman in refrigerator" was coined by Gail Simone, a writer and a prominent female voice in the comic book industry, who noticed a pattern in the way female characters were treated in comics. In 1999 Simone decided to compile a list of superheroines who have been raped, depowered or dismembered and stuck in the refrigerator as a plot device, and then posted her findings on the internet. On her website called *Women in Refrigerators*, Simone explains, "this is a list I made when it occurred to me that it's not that healthy to be a female character in comics. I'm curious to find out if this list seems somewhat disproportionate, and if so, what it means, really." As of 2016, the site lists over a hundred female comic book characters that met their early demise in order to advance a male character's story.

The scene that started it all comes from *Green Lantern* #54, in which Alexandra Dewitt, the girlfriend of a member of the Green Lantern Corps, Kyle Rayner, is

murdered and her dismembered body is stuffed into a fridge by the villainous Major Force only to be later discovered by Kyle himself. Just a few pages earlier, Alexandra admits, "for the first time in a long time I'm beginning to believe things are going to work out for us" (Marz 3). The statement only emphasizes the irony of the situation she soon finds herself in. Kyle comes home after an emergency caused by ripples in space-time continuum and finds a post-it note saying "Surprise for you in the fridge" (Marz 15). When he opens the fridge, he is greeted with the gruesome sight of his dead girlfriend. He clenches his fist in anguish and utters a single "oh god" (Marz 15). While the panels visually emphasize Kyle's emotional reaction, Alex's trauma is completely disregarded. Kyle fights Major Force and at one point even decides to kill him. However, his Green Lantern ring runs out of energy and the story ends on a cliff-hanger. Alexandra Dewitt's death ultimately becomes pointless. On her website, *Women in Refrigerators*, Simone herself points out that more often than not "there's a feeling of inconsequence, of afterthought, to these stories." And that is definitely the case in *Green Lantern.*

The scene has been twenty years later cleverly subverted by Tom Taylor in the popular comic book prequel of the video game *Injustice: Gods Among Us.* In *Injustice: Gods Among Us Year Two* #2, Kyle Rayner is on his way back to Earth after a one year-long mission in space, thinking about a girl he met a year and a half ago on a train, "she had a perfect smile. She liked all the same bad TV shows he liked. She gave Kyle her number. He said he'd call her the next day. Instead, he left to fight in an intergalactic war hundreds of light years away. Kyle planned on calling her as soon as he got home… That isn't going to happen" (Taylor, *Injustice Year Two* #2 15). All of a sudden, he is ambushed by the villain Sinestro and his Yellow Lanterns. Sinestro rips off Kyle's ring finger along with his Green Lantern ring that allows him to survive in vacuum, and

while Kyle is slowly suffocating, four Yellow Lanterns tie him up and tear him apart limb by limb. In a grotesque subversion of the original story from *Green Lantern* #54, Kyle himself ends up as the metaphorical (wo)man in refrigerator (See Figure 7). Moreover, his death proves to be just as inconsequential. His friends and allies on Earth never find out about what happened to him. He becomes just another casualty of the war of ideologies between Superman's regime and Batman's insurgency.

It probably might be useful to note that the story of *Injustice: Gods Among Us* takes place in an alternate universe where Superman becomes a fascist dictator after his pregnant wife Lois Lane is brutally murdered by the Joker. *Injustice* is arguably one of DC's darker stories, as its whole premise is based on quite an interesting premise – what does it take to make the most kind-hearted superhero turn evil? According to the creators of *Injustice*, the answer is death of a beloved woman. Kyle Rayner is not the only one who gets "fridged" in *Injustice*. So does Lois Lane whose death becomes the catalyst for Superman's downfall. But unlike Kyle, Lois is not forgotten and her death is never treated as a meaningless plot twist. In fact, Kyle's death is in all likelihood a form of apology from the writers to the female readers. In November 2013 Tom Taylor, the lead writer of *Injustice*, revealed in an interview for *Newsarama* that even though there was no way to avoid killing off Lois, since the sequel had already established this plot point and her death was one of the driving forces of the plot, he still did his best to treat her character with respect in the few panels she appeared in:

> Having to bring about her death in *Injustice* was the hardest thing I've ever had to write . . . I tried very hard to celebrate Lois and to show her at her best in *Injustice*, before her demise. Whenever Superman talks about her, he talks about the life the lost together. He acknowledges the person she was. She isn't dead and then forgotten. (Taylor, "'Unfridging Lois'")

Despite Taylor's good intentions, *Injustice: Gods Among Us* is just another comic book in a long line of comic books that fail to portray Lois Lane as a character with her own agenda and personality, independent of the character of Superman.

Although it was the death of Alexandra Dewitt in *Green Lantern* that inspired Simone to compile her infamous list, the general comics-buying public has probably always been more familiar with the story of a different "woman in refrigerator" – Gwen Stacy. In *Amazing Spider-Man* #121-122 published in 1973 Gwen met her untimely death and proved that even love interests of the main protagonists can die and never come back. In the two-issue story arc, Spider-Man's archenemy, the Green Goblin, kidnaps Peter Parker's girlfriend, Gwen Stacy. When Spider-Man comes to confront him, the Goblin drops Gwen from a bridge. Peter shoots his web to catch her, but unfortunately the web string does not have much give, and so when the line goes taut, Gwen's neck snaps. Gwen, as many women before and after her, dies in order to further a male character's character development.

The story ends with Spider-Man standing over the dead body of Gwen's killer, feeling disillusioned because he used to believe that when someone dies, "it should mean something. It shouldn't just be an accident . . . a stupid senseless accident. It's got to have a *point* . . . so it doesn't just mean . . . we live in *vain*" (Conway 27). Ironically, Spider-Man declares this in response to the Green Goblin's death, not Gwen's. Gwen's death is ultimately just a plot device in a story centered on and constructed around two men. That is not to say that Gwen Stacy did not have a great impact on the comic book industry. Gwen's death arguably set into motion the events that led to the introduction of darker and more mature themes in comics. It also marked the end of the bright and care-free Silver Age of Comics.

Even though not every woman in comics has been killed, maimed, raped, tortured or had some other tragic thing happen to her, it is kind of difficult to not see the pattern. Comics represent a form of escapism, yet it is almost impossible for women to get immersed into a world where a female character such as Alex Dewitt gets butchered in her own kitchen, where Lois Lane's sole purpose of existence is to be someone's love interest and where Gwen Stacy's most characteristic trait is being dead. Despite Wonder Woman's bright example of a complex female superhero, the inequality of representation between men and women in comics continues to be a serious issue.

4. Superpower or Disability?

At first glance, the term "disabled superhero" might look like a bit of an oxymoron. The word superhero usually evokes the image of a strong, muscled man in peak physical condition. But surprisingly, disability has always been quite a common theme in superhero comics. Stories about disabled heroes can be traced back into the 1930s when a blind character called the Black Bat first appeared in the popular pulp magazines, which were the predecessors of today comic books. The Black Bat was later succeeded by the nocturnal superhero Dr. Mid-Nite in the 1940s and dozens of others after him.

Today disabled superheroes can be divided into two groups: those with extraordinary abilities that easily compensate for their disability (DC's Cyborg, Marvel's Daredevil) and those with no superpowers (DC's Oracle, Marvel's Hawkeye). But even this differentiation between superpowered and non-superpowered disabled heroes is not as clear-cut as it might seem. Superhero origins often include a scientific experiment gone wrong or a similar tragedy that could very easily result in a serious injury, but instead it miraculously turns the unsuspecting character into a superhero with great moral and physical strength. Some superheroes therefore inevitably end up walking the line between being superpowered and being disabled.

A character like Cyborg whose body parts have been replaced by advanced prosthetics that greatly enhance his strength and intellect can hardly be considered disabled. And yet because of his physical appearance, he often struggles with the same prejudice and discrimination as disabled people. In contrast, the Marvel hero Daredevil has often been mistaken for being able-bodied in his comics. In compensation for his lost sight, Daredevil's other senses have been so preternaturally enhanced that he has no trouble fighting and navigating around unfamiliar spaces. He locates everything he can

hear and touch and then combines all these sensory inputs into one complete picture. But does that mean that he is not disabled? Does his superpower automatically invalidate or cancel out his disability? Rosemarie Garland-Thomson defines disability as follows:

> Disability is culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender. The disability/ability system produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies. Although this comparison of bodies is ideological rather than biological, it nevertheless penetrates into the formation of culture, legitimating an unequal distribution of resources, status, and power within a biased social and architectural environment. (5)

Garland-Thomson suggests that not unlike gender or race, disability is a social construct. A person is always disabled in relation to something. Whether they are perceived or perceive themselves as disabled depends on the situation, on the broader social and cultural contexts and on the person's environment. In most situations Daredevil would not be seen as disabled. His work as a superhero is not limited or affected by his blindness. The only time his impaired vision represents an obstacle is in his civilian life when he actually has to pretend to be completely blind as a part of his cover identity.

Disabled characters with abilities, such as Daredevil, Cyborg or even *X-Men's* Professor Xavier, can never truly provide a realistic depiction of what it means to be disabled. And so those who wish to see an accurate portrayal of disability gravitate towards disabled superheroes without superpowers. Over the years Marvel and DC Comics introduced numerous superheroes battling mental illness. Some characters, such as Batman and Deadpool have post-traumatic stress disorder, other characters struggle

with depression or bipolar disorder. The important aspect is that the comics actually show the impact of the mental illness and do not just brush it aside.

One of the best and most accurate representations of physical disability in popular culture can be found in DC Comics' character of Barbara Gordon. In Alan Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke* published in 1988 the Joker shot the former Batgirl through the spine in an attempt to drive her father, Police Commissioner Gordon, insane. Although she inevitably appeared on Gail Simone's list of women in refrigerators, Barbara's "fridging" was not permanent. Just like some of the luckier female characters on the list, Barbara came back as a much more complex and intriguing character. She was reintroduced as a new superhero, going by the name Oracle. In her subsequent appearances Barbara was portrayed as an independent disabled woman, working as a computer expert and an information broker feeding intelligence information to superheroes all across the DC comic book universe. As Oracle, Barbara became the shining example of the fact that one does not need superpowers to live with a disability.

4.1. From Oracle to Batgirl: Disability Erasure

In the most controversial scene from *The Killing Joke* the Joker comes to the house of Commissioner Gordon and rings the doorbell. Barbara, the police commissioner's daughter, answers the door. She is expecting her friend, but instead she is greeted by a bullet to the spine. Despite being trained by someone as paranoid as Batman, she does not even hesitate to open the door, which seems terribly out of character. The Joker then proceeds to undress her and take photographs of her mutilated body; all of this is happening in front of her father. The violent scene is so central to the story that it appears on the cover of the comic book. The cover of *The Killing Joke*

features a close-up of the Joker holding a camera and saying, "Smile." The camera is aimed at the reader. For a moment the reader is put into Barbara's role, lying on the ground and writhing in pain. It is a profoundly disturbing imagery (See Figure 8).

The scene is not sexual in nature, there is no method to the madness and that possibly makes this kind of violation and humiliation even more horrifying. The Joker simply does it "to prove a point" (Moore, *The Killing Joke* 17). He wants to demonstrate that there is no difference between him and the rest of the world. "All it takes is *one bad day* to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy," he tells Batman in one his most iconic monologues (Moore, *The Killing Joke* 41). However, the Joker is not interested in driving Barbara insane. This attack is aimed at Barbara's father and Batman. In *The Killing Joke* Moore reduces Barbara's pain into a plot point that provides motivation for the male characters. Considerably less thought is given to the impact of this kind of violation on Barbara's mind.

Comic book writer John Ostrander played a vital part in Barbara's reintroduction into the world of superheroes and basically gave her back her agency as a character and as a superhero by making her an information broker in the *Suicide Squad* series. Ostrander recounts, "the Bat office was done with Batgirl at that point. Barbara no longer fit into their plans. Kim [Yale] and I asked if we could have her and we were told that. So we re-created her as Oracle. To us, it was important that the act have consequence." Ostrander did not want Barbara to just miraculously recover. Considering the damage done to her spine, he estimated that she would be paralyzed from the waist down. Barbara had been Batgirl for many years and during her career as a vigilante she was not afraid to go toe to toe with the worst of Gotham's costumed villains. Ostrander believed that being paraplegic would not stop her from fighting crime, he "felt she could still be a hero" (Ostrander).

Although Barbara first appeared as Oracle in *Suicide Squad* #23, the character gained on popularity through the comic book series *Birds of Prey* where she became the leader of a team of superheroines. One of the most important challenges for the writers was to get Oracle's portrayal right. In *Birds of Prey* Barbara is an attractive, tech-savvy woman with an eidetic memory who is also disabled. And while readers are never allowed to forget that Barbara is a person who uses a wheelchair, "her mobility is not a 'deterministic vehicle of characterization' for her as is often the case for characters with disabilities" (Cocca 17). Her wheelchair is drawn with great attention to detail, and it can always be found somewhere in the panel, even when she is not using it at the moment. She is not depicted as helpless or weak. Her martial art skills did not suddenly disappear when she became paralyzed. She can hold her own in a fight without much trouble. Not just one, but *all* of these aspects of her character are crucial. As Garland-Thomson writes, "images of impairment as a familiar, even mundane experience in the lives of seemingly successful, happy, even well-adjusted people can reduce the identifying against oneself that is the overwhelming effect of oppressive and discriminatory attitudes towards people with disabilities" (25). Oracle can be a positive role model for everyone. Both disabled and able-bodied readers can easily identify with her because unlike some of the more stereotypical portrayals of disabled people in popular culture, Oracle's characterization is not defined solely by her disability.

It is also important to note that in the comics her trauma is explored and not just brushed over. *Birds of Prey* #124 shows the first time she comes face to face with the Joker after he shot her. When the Joker recognizes her, he taunts her:

> most *victims* don't leave any impression on me at all. But you, sweet thing . . . You're in my *hall of fame*. Commissioner Gordon's baby girl.

> We had some *fun* that night, didn't we? The ol' man must *die* inside every time he sees you. I took your *legs* . . . your *future* . . . (Bedard 13)

However, Barbara never lets him finish (See Figure 9). Just like she never let what he did to her define who she is. She immediately takes control of the situation by telling him, "you took *nothing* from me," and then she shatters his teeth with an escrima stick (Bedard 13). According to Cocca, similar scenes help subvert "a common plot point for characters with disabilities in which a 'character's disability and femininity serve to indicate a terrifying or defeated situation'" (21). In fact the scene subverts stereotypes in more than one way. Barbara does not feel terrified, she feels vindicated when she later muses, "I've *hurt* you in a way your fractured mind can barely grasp. I've *taken* something precious from you – *violated* you in a way that thrills and *sickens* me" (Bedard 17). Towards the end of the issue, a local dental surgeon is found dead in his office, and Barbara immediately knows that somewhere out there, "the Joker has *his* smile back. But it's not his smile anymore. It's a *fake,* a reconstruction, and that preening narcissist will cringe from now on every time he grins" (Bedard 23).

For a long time Barbara was the only superhero who had suffered an injury that could not be cured. Even Batman's back healed after the supervillain Bane broke him – both physically and psychologically – in *Batman: Knightfall,* a story arc from 1993, but Barbara's never did. That is, not until 2011. Barbara's disability was retroactively cured when DC Comics re-booted their comic book universe and a new continuity called New52, was established. In the new continuity, Barbara got her own comic book title, except not as Oracle but as Batgirl. Incidentally, it was Gail Simone whom DC Comics approached, and who was supposed to bring Batgirl back to her former glory. Simone knew very well that the reactions to Barbara's miraculous recovery would be mixed, but she was also aware of the fact that if she did not write it someone else would. Ostrander

writes, "she knew they were going to restore Barbara whether she wrote the series or not. She could, and did, make the events of the Killing Joke and Oracle a part of Barbara's backstory; it wasn't just forgotten."

In *Batgirl* Volume 4 #1 the readers meet a considerably younger Barbara. The first few issues explore her survivor's guilt after regaining mobility. Barbara constantly wonders, "I don't believe in miracles. And if someone *is* handing them out . . . Why should I, of all people in the world, be the recipient?" (Simone, *Batgirl* v4 #2 16). Simone also heavily hints at Batgirl's PTSD when after her first patrol in years Barbara wakes from a nightmare, "tonight, I am Barbara Gordon. She of the eidetic memory. She who never forgets. Never. Except how to breathe, sometimes. Barbara Gordon, victim of a brutal home invasion . . . I panicked every time I heard a doorbell for months after. But I survived" (Simone, *Batgirl* v4 #1 12). The first costume villain she encounters after her recovery is Mirror, a man mourning his family who believes that "miracles, people surviving against impossible odds – are a *curse*, not a blessing" (Simone, Batgirl v4 #4 12). In a way, Mirror is a physical representation of Barbara's guilt over being the one who got cured when there was "a line of wheelchairs that could stretch half around the world," her shame of being the one who "stood up and left [hers] behind" (Simone, Batgirl v4 #4 3).

In the end, Batgirl manages to defeat Mirror and come to terms with her new status as an able-bodied person, but the question remains – why did she need to be cured in the first place? According to Garland-Thomson, the emphasis on cure "reduces the cultural tolerance for human variation and vulnerability by locating disability in bodies imagined as flawed rather than social systems in need of fixing" (14). Despite proving time and time again that she could be a popular superhero character the way she was, the higher-ups at DC Comics still felt that Barbara was broken, that they somehow

needed to fix her. Whether it was intentional or not, magically curing her disability only helped reinforce the harmful stereotype that disabled people cannot live a wholesome life.

Despite the blatant disability erasure in later comics, the message of Barbara as Oracle remains a powerful one. Her miraculous recovery does not nullify the effect she had on a whole generation of readers who learnt to respect her as a competent and highly-skilled superhero and a person who, at the same time, used a wheelchair. And since comic book continuity stretches into infinity, it is not improbable that in the future DC will decide to remedy the situation by bringing Oracle back.

4.2. With Great Power Comes Great Disability: Disabled Heroes in Marvel Comics

While DC Comics gave their readers a very realistic portrayal of a disabled superhero, Marvel can take pride in having introduced one of the most innovative and unique depictions of disability in comics. Although Marvel already had quite the roster of disabled heroes – from Daredevil to Professor Xavier – none of them proved to be as challenging to portray correctly as Hawkeye, a world-class archer and marksman who lost 80% of his hearing.

Clint Barton, or Hawkeye, first appeared in Marvel comics in 1964. Created by Stan Lee, the sharp-shooting hero quickly became a prominent member of the team of superheroes known as the Avengers. In a story from 1983 Hawkeye's eardrums were damaged by a sonic blast. However, his disability was hardly ever mentioned in the comics afterwards. The readers were told rather than shown that he was wearing hearing aids a couple of times, but that was the extent of it. In her article "Integrating Disability," Garland-Thomson likens the experience of being disabled without exhibiting visual markers of disability, such as using crutches or visible hearing aids, to

being queer, or more precisely to being "closeted" (21). Since Hawkeye was not visibly disabled and his hearing impairment did not interfere with his superhero work or his everyday life, he was, in Garland-Thomson's words, "passing as nondisabled" (22). After the character's resurrection in *Heroes Reborn* his hearing was restored. However, Clint was again deafened in his own solo comic book in 2014. In *Hawkeye* #15 he was stabbed in both ears with his own arrows by a villain called Clown, and this time his hearing impairment was approached with much greater care.

As a visual medium that uses speech bubbles to facilitate communication between characters, comics are not very well suited for the depiction of characters with hearing impairment. The creative team behind *Hawkeye,* writer Matt Fraction and artist David Aja, decided to prove that despite the limitations of the medium it can be done. Their *Hawkeye* #19 provides a thoughtful and authentic portrayal of someone who has to learn, or in this case *relearn*, to live with a disability.

The issue #19 starts with Clint sitting in a doctor's office. The otolaryngologist is talking to Clint's brother, explaining what kind of damage was done to Clint's middle and inner ear. But since the readers are experiencing the events from Clint's perspective, all they can see are empty speech bubbles. Throughout the story Fraction and Aja take advantage of the fact that in their core comic books are a visual medium. The majority of the dialogue is happening in sign language. Blank speech bubbles, parentheses and garbled letters function as the constant reminders of the lack of sound (See Figure 10). The scenes from present day are juxtaposed with panels from Clint's childhood. In these panels the readers discover that Clint was hard of hearing when he was a child. That explains how he knows the basics of sign language, but the story is told visually and the readers have to fill in the blanks themselves. Most of what is happening in Clint's head is provided through visual cues and through his brother's

remarks, "he is as 'Clint Barton' as Clint Barton's ever been. Won't speak, won't sign . . . 'S like when we were kids. He's *embarrassed* and got too much pride to ask for – he's a pain in the a-word. The king of a-words" (Fraction 10). It is evident that Clint is struggling with being dependent on other people and that is part of the reason why he is pushing everyone away, including his family and friends. The fact that he and his brother Barney are the only ones who can sign is certainly not helping the situation. Clint Nowicke, a comic book reviewer with hearing loss, writes:

> The moments in which Barney and Clint sign show that they are obviously beginners. Their signs lack structure and follow English word order, and each sign is shown without an accompanying facial expression. This is common among '101 signers,' who are often so intent on producing the sign that they ignore such aspects of the language as grammar (which is shown on the face). When Barney translates for Clint he does so one word at a time and then turns the phrase into a fluid sentence, which beginners often do as well. (Nowicke)

Additionally, the issue provides a very realistic depiction of lip-reading. As Nowicke points out, "the most skilled lipreaders can maybe catch about 40% of what is said, primarily because so much of English is said at the back of the throat, and that is merely one factor" (Nowicke). When Clint is lip-reading it is made obvious that he is missing large portions of what is being said to him, even when the other person is facing him directly. The other characters' dialogue is enclosed in parentheses, some words are garbled, other are completely missing or replaced by question marks. This lack of clarity only emphasizes the feeling of isolation that Clint is experiencing.

The interesting thing about this issue of *Hawkeye* is that, just like in all the other issues, there is an actual story happening in the background. The plot does not suddenly

stutter to a stop. It moves forward, albeit in an unconventional way. The authors make the story purposely difficult to read by using sign language without providing translation. Those who understand sign language can easily follow the conversations between Clint and his brother. Others find themselves struggling. After the issue was first published, David Aja posted on his Twitter: "if while reading *Hawkeye* #19 you feel you don't get it all, if you find obstacles, congrats, you're starting to learn what being disabled is." The story not only shows the readers what it is like to be disabled, it actually makes them experience it – from the very first page where the doctor is talking *about* Clint instead of talking to Clint directly, to the last one where Clint realizes that isolating himself is not the solution.

At the end of the issue Clint finally reaches out to his friends, "I'm deaf. They deafened me. I'm deaf and we need to talk. So . . . So I'm gonna sign what I have to say. I need the practice and I'm not gonna hide anymore . . . It'll be okay. Okay? Okay" (Fraction 18). The entire story arc comes to a natural conclusion in the last issue of the series, *Hawkeye* #22, in which Clint is drawn wearing his hearing aids (See Figure 11). It might be just a small step, but it shows that he is beginning to accept what happened to him as a part of who he is.

Ever since Fraction and Aja set the tone, other comic book writers and artists have been more consistent in their portrayal of Hawkeye as a disabled character. Moreover, other characters have started reacting to it. His disability does not exist in vacuum anymore. It is an important part of the narrative that invites discussion.

5. Superheroes Conquer Hollywood: The Fight for Representation in Comic Book Films

Comic book movies spent a long portion of their history in the no man's land between moderately successful – *Superman* (1978), and utterly disastrous – *Batman & Robin* (1997). It was not until the beginning of the 21st century that this trend started to change. Bryan Singer's X-Men from 2000 and Sam Riami's *Spiderman* from 2001 set the benchmark for cinematographic quality in the superhero genre. Emboldened by the success of the somber mutants and the web-shooting, wise-cracking superhero on the silver screen, Twentieth Century Fox, Warner Bros Pictures and other studios that owned the film rights to some of the most iconic comic book heroes started pouring millions of dollars into the production of comic book adaptations. While Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight Trilogy* (2008-2012) was heavily inspired by the Dark Age of Comics – drawing from Frank Miller's classic graphic novels, such as *Batman: Year One* and *The Dark Knight Returns*, the new Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), which started with *Iron Man* in 2008, and the DC Extended Universe (DCEU) launched in 2013 seem to be purely the product of the Modern Age. However, despite the fact that the actual comic books are becoming more and more progressive in their portrayal of race, gender and sexuality, their film adaptations fail to keep up. While this is partly due to the limitations of the medium, such as the cost of the production and the unpredictability of profit, the main underlying reason is arguably prejudice and discrimination.

After the success of the ensemble superhero movie *The Avengers* in 2012, there were rumours about Marvel planning a potential female superhero movie. When asked whether the only female member of the Avengers would get her own film, Stan Lee, former chairman of Marvel Comics, said, "well probably at one time . . . they'll make a

movie of the Black Widow. The thing is the women like these movies as much as the guys, so we don't have to knock ourselves out to find a female... but we will" (qtd. in Abad-Santos). Needless to say, Black Widow did not get a solo movie. And her characterization greatly deteriorated between *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014) and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015). In *Age of Ultron* Black Widow, a highly skilled spy, has to be repeatedly rescued by her male teammate when just one year earlier in *Captain America: Winter Soldier* she proved that getting past heavily "guarded gates and a 12-inch steel wall . . . shouldn't be a problem" for her (*Captain America: Winter Soldier).* But by far the most problematic is a scene in which she calls herself a "monster" for not being able to have children. She asks Hulk, "you know what my final test was in the Red Room? They sterilized me, said it was one less thing to worry about. You think you're the only monster on the team?" (*Avengers: Age of Ultron).* She does not seem to be concerned about being forced to kill and betray from a very young age, but rather, it is implied that she sees her loss of the ability to conceive as her greatest failure.

As of 2016, the number of female superheroes that appeared on film since Marvel and DC Comics launched their respective extended cinematic universes is four. The first one was Black Widow in *Iron Man 2* (2010), the second one was Gamora in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2013), the third one was Scarlet Witch in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), and the fourth one was DC's Wonder Woman in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016). Frankly, that is an alarmingly low number compared to the dozens of male superheroes populating the MCU and DCEU. It is also important to note that every single one of these women appeared as a supporting character in a largely male-dominated movie.

People of colour also suffer from underrepresentation in comic book film adaptations. Compared to comics, the portrayal of minorities in superhero films leaves much to be desired. Those black superheroes that actually appeared on film – Falcon and War Machine – were quickly relegated to the role of sidekicks whose only function was to support the white protagonist's arc.

It is probably a good thing, then, that this unfortunate situation will soon change. Wonder Woman, the first female superhero to grace the pages of comics, will be the historically first superheroine to star in a female-led comic book movie in 2017. Moreover, Marvel and DC recently announced that the popular black superheroes Black Panther and Cyborg will appear in their own solo movies in 2018 and 2020 respectively. It remains to be seen whether these future films will do justice to the source material and to the political and social commentary that can be found within it.

Conclusion

Art has always been the ideal platform to take on important world's issues. Text and images have influenced and helped shape people's view of the world and their deepest values for millennia. Comics are simply a continuation of this tradition. Some of the most iconic comic book characters today are the result of thousands of creative minds coming together to create one continuous and seemingly everlasting narrative, each contributing in their own way to the characterization.

Since the early days of comics superhero stories were the means through which comic book creators articulated their political views and beliefs and shared their understanding of the world. The superhero genre was created when the world was on the brink of World War II by two Jewish boys who both came from immigrant families. While their Superman gave marginalized people hope and reminded them that they deserved a place in the world, Wonder Woman taught boys to respect women and girls to believe in themselves. The introduction of comic book censorship only accentuated the importance of superheroes in the lives of young Americans. Comics came under close scrutiny by censors, critics and even psychiatrists because they were ambitious. They offered unfiltered insights into the socio-political situation of the United States and often reflected the values of the American society.

Superhero comic books continuously contribute to the Western cultural tradition in new and innovative ways. The history of Wonder Woman as a character parallels and on occasions intersects the history of feminism in the United States. Wonder Woman combines her creator's vision of a perfect matriarchal society and the reality of the twentieth century patriarchal America. Captain America, a superhero who is generally seen as the symbol of the United States in comics, started as a patriotic protector of national interests in World War II. Today, he reflects and celebrates diversity of the

American population. Contemporary comic books also offer spaces for discussion of issues that are relevant to the current social and political situation in the United States like immigration and racialized police violence, and integrate previously excluded groups, such as disabled people, into mainstream popular culture.

In contrast, there is still room for improvement in terms of representation. While superheroines such as Wonder Woman completely subverted certain gender stereotypes, women in comics are still being eliminated in the most gruesome ways in order to advance men's character development. The one group that continues to be largely marginalized in comic books is the LGBTQ community. The number of mainstream LGBTQ superheroes can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Although black superheroes are finally being given the opportunity to attract mainstream readers, other people of colour are regularly being whitewashed in comics and their cultural background is staying largely unexplored. Comic book movies seem to be falling into the same pitfalls that superhero comics are painstakingly attempting to avoid these days. Although they are already taking small steps in the right direction, comic book adaptations have yet to progress past the stage of blatant marginalization of characters based on their gender, race and sexuality.

When Alan Moore was asked to write the introduction to Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986, he made an interesting observation, "as anyone involved in fiction and its crafting over the past fifteen or so years would be delighted to tell you, heroes are starting to become rather a problem. They aren't what they used to be... or rather they are, and therein lies the heart of the difficulty" (Moore, ''The Mark of Batman: An Introduction''). Moore wrote these words three decades ago, but the same thing applies today. With seventy years of continuity, the superhero genre can easily start stagnating. Introducing more diversity into comics is one way to avoid this. Comic

books more than any other form of popular entertainment rely on their popularity with young people. And since young readers demand new diverse heroes, the future of comics offers a number of exciting possibilities.

Appendix

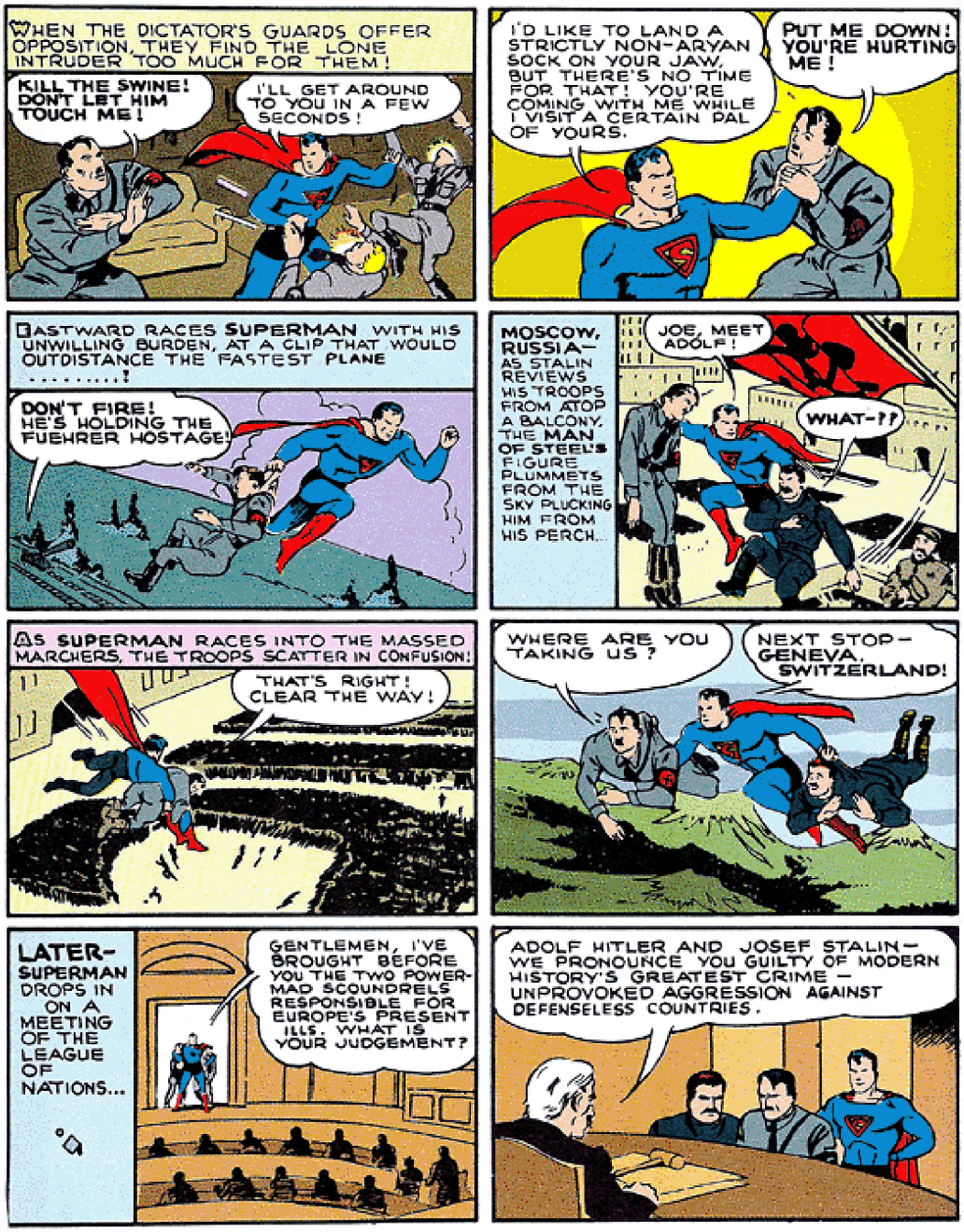

Figure 1. Superman brings Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin to the League of Nations' World Court for trial in "How Superman Would End the War."

Figure 2. The cover of *Captain America Comics* #1 (1941).

Figure 3. The cover of *Captain America: Sam Wilson* #1 (2015).

Figure 4. Spider-Man Miles Morales in *Cataclysm: Ultimate Spider-Man* #1.

Figure 5. A 15-year old boy is shot by a former police officer in *Batman* #44.

Figure 6. Wonder Woman helps a group of women and children in *Wonder Woman: Spirit of Truth.*

Figure 7. Kyle Rayner finds his girlfriend's body in a refrigerator in *Green Lantern* #64. The right side of the image shows Kyle Rayner's death in *Injustice: Gods Among Us Year Two* #2.

Figure 8. The Joker on the cover of Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*.

Figure 9. Oracle shatters Joker's teeth with an escrima stick in *Birds of Prey* #124.

Figure 10. Example of the use of blank speech bubbles and sign language in *Hawkeye* #19.

Figure 11. Hawkeye wears his hearing aids in *Hawkeye* #22.

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Résumé

The thesis examines how superhero comic books have simultaneously reflected and helped shape American social, cultural and political reality over the course of the twentieth and the beginning of the twentieth first centuries. Some of the most popular superheroes today, such as Wonder Woman, Superman and Batman, have been created seventy years ago, yet their portrayal has gradually adapted to reflect cultural change over the decades.

The first chapter of the thesis provides a short overview of the comic book history. The Golden Age comics frequently reacted to the social and political situation in The United States. These efforts to be political have been partially thwarted by the formation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954, the sole purpose of which was to ensure that comic books were safe for children. The chapter analyzes how the introduction of the Comics Code altered the way comic book authors approached controversial issues and what kind of effect this censorship had on the development of the superhero genre.

The following chapters focus on the representation of minorities, women and people with disabilities in comics. With the arrival of new social media and internet platforms, there has been a rise of voices demanding more diversity in comics. Presenting a number of examples, the thesis examines how contemporary comic books reflect their culturally diverse readership.

The final chapter is devoted to comic book movies. It shortly considers the future of comics and the place of diverse superheroes in cinematography.

Résumé

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá tím, jak komiksy pomáhají tvořit a zároveň odrážejí společenskou, kulturní a politickou realitu Spojených států na přelomu století. Populární superhrdinové, jakými jsou Wonder Woman, Superman a Batman, poprvé spatřily světlo světa před více než sedmdesáti lety. Během své dlouhé historie si prošli hned několika proměnami, aby se přizpůsobily novým kulturním změnám.

První kapitola poskytuje krátký přehled komiksové historie. Ze začátku komiksy často reagovali na společenskou a politickou situaci ve Spojených státech. Komiksový kodex z roku 1954, jehož úkolem bylo dohlížet na to, aby komiksy byly vhodné pro děti, tyto politické snahy komiksových tvůrců částečně překazil. Kapitola se zabývá tím, jak Komiksový kodex a následná cenzura změnila způsob, jakým tvůrci přistupovali k tématům, které by mohly být vnímány jako kontroverzní.

Následující kapitoly se zaměřují na to, jak komiksy znázorňují ženské postavy, postavy patřící k minoritám a lidí s tělesným postižením. S příchodem internetu a sociálních médií se stále častěji začaly ozývat hlasy čtenářů toužící po větší rozmanitosti v komiksech. Tato diplomová práce hned na několika příkladech ověřuje způsob, jakým dnešní komiksy odrážejí kulturní a společenskou rozmanitost svého publika.

Poslední kapitola je zasvěcena komiksovým filmovým adaptacím. Stručně se věnuje budoucnosti komiksů a tomu, jaké místo mají superhrdinové v dnešní kinematografii.