SURVEILLANCE, SOCIAL ORDER, AND GENDERED SUBVERSIONS IN BATMAN COMICS, 1986-2011

by © Aidan Diamond (Thesis) submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

Batman is "the world's most popular superhero."[1] An icon of American exceptionalism, Batman has been featured in radio programmes, television shows, musicals, and more films than any other superhero since his 1939 comic book inception. While Batman has also been the subject of more scholarship than any other superhero, sustained scholarly inquiry of his vigilante infrastructures and their effects upon those Batman deems criminal is scarce; instead, critical readers prefer to interrogate his fascist undertones.

This thesis aims to ameliorate this lack of scholarship by interrogating Batman's regulatory surveillance assemblage, particularly how it is negotiated and subverted by Barbara Gordon/Oracle and Selina Kyle/Catwoman. Using Foucault's theories of criminality, Lyon's articulation of surveillance, Haraway's cyborg hybridizations, Mulvey's deconstruction of the gaze, and Butler's and Tasker's respective conceptualizations of gender, I argue that female characters problematize and complicate the otherwise unquestioned authority of Batman's surveillance assemblage in the 1986-2011 DC continuity.

[1] "Batman Day Returns!" *DC Comics.* 14 June 2016, www.dccomics.com/blog/2016/06/14/batman-day-returns. Accessed 16 July 2017.

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Notes on Formatting

This project, by virtue of studying comics, encounters the problem of a citation style not standardized by the Modern Language Association with regard to formatting, parenthetical citations, and comicographies and bibliographies. The following decisions have been made in an effort to faithfully represent the original and multimodal nature of comics:

1. Dialogue or caption quotes, while edited to reflect prose-standard capitalization, have retained the emphases original to comics: italics and bold. Larger-sized lettering is indicated by CAPS LOCK.
2. Most superhero comics are unpaginated, making parenthetical citation difficult. When available, page and panel numbers are used (for example, to indicate the first panel on the second page: 2.1). When dealing with an unpaginated comic, the issue title will be used ("Mr. Wayne Goes to Washington: 2").
3. The format of the comicography is adapted from Allan Ellis' "Comic Art in Scholarly Writing: A Citation Guide" to meet the specifications of the Modern Language Association and respect the multiple authorship of graphic narrative.
4. Figures are included under fair use.

INTRODUCTION

I. Criminal Subjectivity and Subjective Criminality

On January 27, 2017, just days after the 45th American president had been sworn into office on a platform of unmitigated and unrelenting bigotry, the *New York Times* published the following headline: "Trump's Immigration Order Expands the Definition of 'Criminal'" (Medina). As an American—a queer, mentally ill, female American to boot—terrified by the prospect of this administration, I had been reading the news obsessively, half-convinced that the next alert would announce our impending doom by nuclear apocalypse. This headline was almost as bad.

I've been reading Batman comics since 2013, and studying them nearly as long. My relationship to the Dark Knight is by its very nature critical: I cannot flip through an issue without scrutinizing it for surveillance and regulation, without demanding from it a thorough and considered definition of what constitutes criminality. Because such definition is all but non-existent, I have always concluded that criminality in the DC Universe is a flexible and subjective concept. After all, from any legal perspective, superheroes are criminals themselves: vigilantism is against the law. But here, in this headline, was definitive proof of Foucault's histories of criminality and imprisonment, and a reification of what I'd concluded from comics: Criminality is inherently subjective, and it is always—

always—political.

While it's true that Trump has inspired comparisons to Batman's most famous villains (Fig. 0.1-2)—not to mention the Caped Crusader himself (Puglise)—I believe the most compelling connection between this project and the world into which it emerges is the calculated cultivation of a subjectively codified criminality. Batman, as I argue in the first chapter, regulates behaviours and individuals *he* finds deviant; agents of law enforcement historically have done, and continue to do, the same, whether operating as a police officer or the leader of the free world. Accordingly, contemplation of the criminalities regulated (or left unregulated)[1] by law is increasingly necessary. While pop culture may not be the best vehicle for this contemplation, understanding how fiction constructs and reflects the political realities of our world does help us navigate it.

Fig. 0.1: Political cartoon by Patrick Chapatte (*The New York Times*, 9 Nov. 2016) featuring Trump in the guise of a jack-in-the-box, styled as Cesar Romero's Joker (*Batman*, 1966-68).

[1] Less than a month into his presidency, Trump also began to unravel Dodd-Frank, the legislation designed to regulate Wall Street and prevent another global recession.

Fig. 0.2: Screencap from *The Daily Show* (27 Jan. 2017), where the face of Heath Ledger's Joker (*The Dark Knight*, 2008) has been superimposed over Trump's face.

II. Batman the Surveillant

This thesis is concerned primarily with the imposition and negotiation of social order in Batman comics published between 1986 and 2011. Its avenue of exploration of social order is surveillance: who looks at whom, through what means, in what circumstances, and why? Following Michel Foucault's expansion of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon as a surveillance construct that affects its subjects in such a way that they begin to regulate themselves, this thesis understands that to watch is to control; to be watched is to be controlled. This control in itself acts as a dehumanizing force. It effectively declares that those watched have no right to agency or personal political freedom; they are merely pawns on a chessboard, to be acted upon—to be regulated—as the watcher sees fit.

At the heart of the concept of regulation is the idea that those upon whom regula-

tion is imposed are unfit to regulate themselves; that they do not know what is in their own best interests; that they must be corrected, by force if necessary, into acting as the regulator deems best for themselves and for society as a whole. There are benign forms of regulation, imposed upon the body, that are necessary to the smooth functioning of society—a child must not be allowed to hurt another child, and must learn that violence against others is unacceptable—just as there are benign forms of surveillance. Medical surveillance, for example, allows public health officials to track trends in physical health and potential outbreaks of disease in select populations. Though these regulations are subject to abuse—one has only to recall the early years of the AIDS crisis to understand the extent to which medical surveillance can be abused—they are relatively unambiguous in their efforts to promote a safe society.

Not all surveillance or regulation, however, is benign. In 2014, Edward Snowden revealed the extent to which the National Security Agency surveilled American citizens regardless of criminal history, ties to terrorist activities, or an entire lack thereof. The regulating arm of the law is frequently misused against already marginalized communities, particularly those who tend to be (hyper)visible, such as trans people, people of colour, and neuroatypical and disabled individuals. The regulating arm of society (which, per Erving Goffman [1959, 1963], may be understood as stigma) is deployed against all of these individuals and women, LGBTQIA+ persons, and those who have committed even the smallest offences. It is this more ambiguous and often malignant form of surveillance I examine here in the form of Batman's regulatory surveillance assemblages. Per David Lyon's (2007) articulation of surveillance, I understand a surveillance assemblage to be

the composite means and methodologies through which information is gathered and acted upon. In the 1986-2011 continuity, Batman's regulatory surveillance assemblage includes electronic audio/visual surveillance, wiretapping, informant networks, police and other law enforcement databases, and torture, among other means of gathering information and correcting deviance. Using variations of these tactics, I argue that Barbara Gordon/Oracle and Selina Kyle/Catwoman problematize and complicate Batman's regulatory surveillance assemblages in Gotham—though not always for the better.

III. Scope and Methodology

The scope of this project is determined by the concept of continuity. In comics fan culture, continuity refers to a standardized narrative reality, and is often used in conjunction with "canon," or the source material. A source material, particularly in comics, may have many continuities; each continuity belongs to the same canon in addition to having its own specific canon. For example, the DC canon includes what Will Brooker terms the "dark" Batman and the "rainbow" Batman (2012: 178-179): the murderous Batman of 1939, the camp Batman of the 1960s, and the Batman examined in this project. Within the 1986-2011 continuity, however, Batman is not explicitly camp, and he is not characterized as a murderer. Each of these characterizations is dependent upon its continuity to be considered canon (accurate to that continuity), and yet all of them are indisputably canon, as they are all present in the source material released by DC.

DC Comics first took full advantage of the idea of continuity in 1985, with their *Crisis on Infinite Earths* storyline, which ended the previous five decades' worth of storytelling in an effort to make their comics more accessible to new readers. With *Batman:*

The Dark Knight Returns (1986), written and pencilled by Frank Miller, inked by Klaus Janson, and coloured by Lynn Varley, a new age of narrative continuity was established. *The Dark Knight Returns* presented only a possible conclusion to this new continuity (others may be found in Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely's *Batman: Incorporated* or Neil Gaiman and Adam Kubert's *Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader?*), but in September 2011, DC Comics made the end of the modern continuity official. Cancelling every ongoing title, the publisher rebooted fifty-two new books, starting the numbering for each at #1 (even titles like *Detective Comics* and *Action Comics*, which were nearing their thousandth issues). Fittingly, this new continuity was dubbed the "New 52."

A reboot of continuity should be considered from two angles: first, as a commercial strategy designed to attract new customers, and, second, as a storytelling practice designed to allow decades-old characters to be updated and refined for a new era. The birth of the modern continuity in 1986 certainly achieved both; the New 52, and its successor, Rebirth (2016-present), have had middling success in each. The 1986-2011, also known as the Post-Crisis or "preboot" period in respective reference to the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* event of 1985 and the "New 52" reboot of 2011, covers comics published after *Crisis* and before the New 52. Nothing in or prior to *Crisis* or during the New 52 applies to this period by DC Comics' own admission: the 1986-2011 continuity is a contained, complete narrative arc and is, as such, very well suited to a sustained literary analysis such as the one I advance in this thesis.

As it would be practically impossible to coherently analyze the hundreds of issues spanning this continuity, I have elected to limit my close readings to specific texts of the

Bat-canon: *The Road to No Man's Land* and *No Man's Land*; *The Killing Joke, Batgirl: Year One,* "Oracle: Year One," *Gotham Knights* #43, *The Brave and the Bold* #33, and *Birds of Prey*; and *The Long Halloween, Dark Victory,* and *Catwoman: When in Rome*. I have carefully selected these comics for study for two reasons. First, I find them the most thematically engaging among comics of the modern continuity with regard to the representation of deviant bodies ("Othered" by race, gender, disability) and surveillance enacted upon and by them. Second, the comics analyzed in each chapter allow me to advance a more holistic understanding of twenty-five years of continuity due to the comics' specific formats and authorial teams, as will be discussed in Section VI of this chapter.

Further, I engage selectively with the comics published between 1986 and 2011 in pursuit of the most stable characterization whenever possible. Negotiating decades of comics in pursuit of such characterization is a challenge, as it requires both the assumption of faithful continuity and the willingness to set aside some interpretations in favour of others. For example, I assume that the Batman articulated by Frank Miller in *Batman: Year One* (1987) is the same Batman in *Birds of Prey, The Long Halloween,* and *Batgirl: Vol. 1.* Likewise, I assume that Miller's characterization of Jim Gordon in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) as a grim, pessimistic misogynist should be set aside in favour of the Gordon articulated in *Year One*, whose stability is largely sustained throughout succeeding comics.

While this selectivity may appear suspicious, and could in some cases undermine my argument, I believe it is a necessary sacrifice for this project—indeed, for any continuity-based analysis. Inevitably, any character presented by hundreds of different people

undergoes change and experiences moments of self-contradiction. Therefore, what I attempt is a synthesis of the most stable elements of any given narrative pattern or character—those characteristics evidenced by multiple authors across multiple titles, story arcs, and decades. I substantiate these claims with as much evidence as I can, but I recognize that any such claim can be refuted at least once if one only looks hard enough. My aim, therefore, is the identification and analysis of the character traits and narrative patterns *most* evidenced by the text.

IV. Reading the Dark Knight

At a recent conference, I was asked by a respected scholar about my research. “Batman,” I said, and braced for the reply.

“Batman! Hasn’t there been enough on Batman?”

As the existence of this thesis attests, I do not believe so. But the Dark Knight *is* the subject of more scholarship than any other superhero save perhaps the first, Superman.

Will Brooker is by far the most prominent figure in Batman scholarship. His books, *Batman Unmasked* (2005) and *Hunting the Dark Knight* (2012), provide essential cultural criticism spanning Batman’s 1939 inception to the early years of the twenty-first century. Brooker gracefully and thoughtfully engages with the queer Batman debate, synthesizing diverse perspectives and redeeming Fredric Wertham’s original readings. Most helpfully, Brooker investigates the fraught question of authorship in comics, which in comics is especially complex. Any given comic has several authors, such as the writer, the penciller, the inker, the colourist, and the letterer, not to mention the editor in the case

of superhero comics. Accordingly, any given superhero character has dozens if not hundreds of "canon," or official, authors, and hundreds more "fanon," or fandom-centred, authors producing transformative works based on that character and their universe.

Beyond Brooker's work, Batman has been the subject of countless articles, essay collections, and book series. Scholars such as Leslie J. Anderson (2012), Lucy Rollin (1994), Julia Round (2017), Marc Singer (2006), and James Wurtz (2011) have investigated *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (Morrison, McKean, and Saladino 1989) through psychoanalytic, psychogeographic, mythological, and authorial frameworks. *The Dark Knight Returns* has inspired its own share of analysis from Steve Brie (2010), Geoff Klock (2006), Nathan G. Tipton (2008), and many more. Characters such as the Joker, Batwoman, Catwoman, and Barbara Gordon feature prominently in Batman discourse, notably by Carolyn Cocca (2014, 2016), Michael Nichols (2011), Paul Petrovic (2011), Michael Smith (2011), Rik Spanjers (2010), Lesa Syn (2014), and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley (2011). Further characters such as Harley Quinn and Jason Todd are coming under increasing scrutiny, with the former the subject of a forthcoming essay collection (Barba and Perrin 2017) and the latter featuring more frequently in conference papers (Diamond 2017; Kambam, Pozios, and Bender 2010). Kevin K. Durand and Mary K. Leigh (2011) foster an approach to Batman grounded in literary theory in their edited essay collection; *Batman and Philosophy: The Dark Knight of the Soul*, edited by Mark D. White and Robert Arp (2008), adopts a philosophical lens, and Travis Langley's *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight* (2012) examines the Caped Crusader through psychology. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio synthesize these and other

approaches in their edited volume *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media* (1991), and its sequel (edited with Will Brooker, 2015).

One major area of study in Bat-related media is the queering of the Dark Knight, with which I do not engage in this project. As stated in my bachelor's thesis (2015), I do not believe the way in which this debate—about whether or not Batman can or should be read as anything but heterosexual—has been executed is neither productive nor useful; indeed, being queer myself, I consider arguments on every side to verge on homophobic. The debate originated in the late 1940s, but was popularized by Wertham's incendiary *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). Though Wertham was more concerned with the harm suffered by the children he treated at his psychiatric clinic due to the societal homophobia of the era, the America in the midst of McCarthyism, the Lavender Scare, and the Cold War interpreted his (unsubstantiated) findings as follows: Comics, and especially the all-but-openly-gay Batman and Robin, turn good American children into delinquents and homosexuals.

Obviously, this reaction is horrifying; its effect upon the comics industry (namely, the Comics Code Authority) is deeply chilling. But the debate about Batman's hotly contested sexual identity is, to its detriment, so narrowly focused that it (1) ignores the fact that reading Batman and Robin, a child, as in a same-sex relationship positions Batman as a pedophile, thus confirming homophobic campaigns in the real world; (2) ignores a broader spectrum of sexual identity by insisting that Batman be either gay or straight, instead of, say, bisexual; (3) ignores the fact that the homosociality on which the gay Batman argument relies is equally, if not more so, dependent upon misogyny—or, alterna-

tively, that the straight Batman argument relies upon female characters being deployed as "no homo" plot devices, an equally misogynistic depiction. With respect to the confines of this thesis, I see no use in pursuing or participating in this discourse.

V. Beyond the Bat

In addition to the wealth of Bat-analyses available, broader superhero scholarship has informed this project. Among other scholarship, Dan Hassler-Forest's *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusades in the Neoliberal Age* (2012), which reads capitalism and surveillance in contemporary superhero movies, indirectly prompts both my analyses in Chapter One and future readings of superheroes. The main scholarship underpinning this thesis, however, is that of José Alaniz's *Death, Disability, and the Superhero* (2014), Carolyn Cocca's *Superwomen* (2016), Neal Curtis' writing on superheroes and sovereignty (2013), and Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl's *Comic Book Crime* (2013).

Phillips and Strobl's work exemplifies the lines of inquiry I wish to pursue in this project. In *Comic Book Crime: Truth, Justice, and the American Way,* both argue that superhero comics, far from embodying an idealized form of service and justice, reproduce systems of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and classism to harmful effect in their narratives—and, although the genre has come a long way, it has much farther still to go. I intend to build upon their argument here by suggesting that though Batman's regulatory infrastructure may not be overtly discriminatory, it is manned by a creature of absolute privilege against those he deems dangerously Other; that is, Batman's infrastructures are absolutely informed and shaped by racism, classism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia, and so cannot avoid enforcing these prejudices.

José Alaniz's monograph on disability in superhero comics further grounds my research, as Barbara Gordon is physically disabled and wheelchair-bound. From a practical perspective, his research necessarily informs my own. However, Alaniz argues that superhero comics in the Silver Age to the modern age and onwards anxiously view physical difference (disability, gender, race) as a threat to be contained, much like criminality, madness, or poverty under Foucault's schema. His later article, "Standing Orders: Oracle, Disability, and Retconning" (2016), develops his understanding of disability and superheroes in reading Barbara Gordon/Oracle. Likewise, Carolyn Cocca's article, "Re-booting Barbara Gordon: Oracle, Batgirl, and Feminist Disability Theories" (2014), and her book, *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation* (2016), offer examinations of Barbara Gordon that are grounded in intersectional feminism, particularly with regards to disability studies. While my analysis of Barbara does not draw overmuch on reading her through disability theory, as Cocca (2014, 2016) and Alaniz (2016) both do, their respective arguments inform my own and provide essential context for any criticism of the character.

Neal Curtis' article, "Superheroes and the Contradiction of Sovereignty,"[2] suggests that the narrative drive behind long-form seriality in superhero comics stems from the chronic instability of the superhero figure—that, following Jacques Derrida's *pharmakon,* the superhero is at once the cause of social ill and the only apparent cure. I intend to apply this argument in anticipation of a specific criticism of my thesis: that Batman singles out deviant bodies because they are criminal and, in doing so, prevents crime. Us-

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[2] Curtis developed the arguments of this article into a monograph, *Sovereignty and Superheroes* (2016); regretfully, I only accessed it after this thesis was completed.

ing Curtis' argument, I counter that Batman also engenders this criminality by profiling the citizens he purports to protect and indiscriminately surveilling, confining, and punishing them. In short, he causes the problem he seeks to cure.

VI. Chapter Outline

Each of the three chapters in this thesis models a different approach to continuity-based analysis. The first examines a narrative based on an "event," where a storyline is comprised of dozens of individual titles over a certain period of time, and each issue is tied directly to the next regardless of title. The second endeavours to assemble a single narrative from a disunited series of single issues, one-shots, and extra features. The third confines its approach to an opus composed by a single authorial team (with the exception of the third volume's colourist and editor, the authors remain unchanged over the seven years of development and production).

The first chapter, "'Did Gotham City create him? Or did *he* create *it?*': Rebuilding the Panopticon in *No Man's Land*," examines the "event" comic of *No Man's Land* ([1999, 2000] 2011, 2012). Drawing upon Neal Curtis' adaption of Jacques Derrida's *pharmakon* (2013), Michel Foucault's articulation of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon ([1977] 2010), and Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl's conceptualization of apocalyptic justice in superhero comics (2013), I examine the construction and enforcement of Batman's panoptic, regulatory surveillance assemblage. This assemblage, I argue, is used not benevolently for the strict purpose of crime-fighting, but as a tool to identify and enforce modalities of difference, with Batman himself serving as the normate (Garland-Thomson 1997: 8). Because Batman bases his conceptualization of difference upon his own identity

as a white, able-bodied, performatively neurotypical, cisgender, heterosexual man—and a wealthy man at that—any and all deviations from this baseline normate[3] are marked by his surveillance and the violence he employs to "correct" or confine this deviance.

The second chapter, "'I'm Oracle. I know everything': Narrative Trauma, Cyborg Feminism, and Building a Better System," interrogates how Barbara Gordon experiences and negotiates Batman's regulatory surveillance assemblage as a Gotham civilian, an aspiring law enforcement official, an able-bodied female vigilante, and a disabled vigilante surveillant. As a woman in a overwhelmingly patriarchal (and male homosocial) society, Barbara opts for the ostensibly less-regulated (than the Gotham City Police Department or the FBI) Bat-vigilantism. When Batman's surveillance assemblage fails to protect her and, in doing so, marks her as deviant due to her new disability, Barbara builds a superior and more all-encompassing surveillance network that tracks not only Gotham but the rest of the world as well. Using Peter Galison's adoption of cyborg origins (1994), Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1991), and Tobin Siebers' theory of disability (2008), I argue that Barbara achieves personal political freedom for herself through her new surveillant persona as Oracle. She does so, however, at the cost of subjecting Gotham and the other polities she surveils to even greater surveillance than Batman has ever managed.

The final chapter of this thesis turns to Catwoman and her own negotiation of Batman's regulatory surveillance assemblage. Though subject to the same patriarchal

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[3] Most notably developed by Rosemarie Garland Thomson in *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997), the normate refers to a "normal" person as constructed by an ableist society: someone without physical disability or extraordinary appearance, and who is and is perceived as neurotypical. Further, this conceptualization of normativity includes race (the normate, in the West, is white), and gender identity and expression (cisgender and coded in accordance with heterosexual conventions).

pressures as Barbara, as well as being an antihero at best and a criminal at worst by Batman's definition, Catwoman plays the system without colluding with it. Building upon Judith Butler's ideation of performativity ([1991] 1999), Laura Mulvey's analysis of gender in visual narrative (1989), and Yvonne Tasker's conception of musculinity (1993), I argue that Catwoman successfully defends her activities, interests, and narrative against Batman through her myriad performances of gender and gender roles, and especially her exploitation of the gendered politics of the gaze.

VII. Superheroes are Cool, Man![4]

One of the earliest criticisms about this project came from a fellow Bat-nerd—a graduate professor I respect, for whose course I had submitted the *No Man's Land* chapter as my final paper. The problem, he told me, albeit in a much lengthier note, was that I asked too much from superhero comics: critiquing monstrous villains as racist, ableist, or similarly cruel caricatures was not critically productive, because such caricatures are a necessary evil of the superhero genre. Without a monthly "big bad," superhero comics as we know them would simply cease to function. To argue against these villains would be to argue against the genre itself—something that I, as an avowed superhero fan, would surely be hesitant to do.

But I don't see the problem, because to me, there is nothing "necessary" about the evil these characters represent. Villainous caricatures are endemic in the superhero genre, but not inherent to it. The superhero stories I've loved best have always known the difference: Fraction, Aja, and Wu's *Hawkeye*, DeConnick's *Captain Marvel,* Genevieve Valen-

[4] "Holy Musical B@man! Act 2 Part 5."

tine's superb *Catwoman* run, Rucka's *Wonder Woman*, Landis' *Superman*, and—of course—Batman. Snyder and Winick and Grayson and Rucka, O'Neil and Loeb and Morrison—the very best Batman comics had evils unbound to the Joker or Killer Croc or any of the other Rogues.

And so, this is where this professor and I will disagree: He believes that the superhero genre is innately and irredeemably flawed because of the degree to which it relies on thoughtless plot devices; I believe that it is neither innately nor irredeemably flawed, because I have examples by the dozen *proving* to me the heights to which it is capable of rising. There is a problem in the genre: I won't argue that, but writing off the genre, especially as it becomes ever more prevalent in our cultural landscape, is arguably worse than refusing to see the problem in the first place.

Here's how I see it: If you dismiss an entire genre because of its history of using racist, sexist, ableist, hetero- and cissexist tropes—well, first of all, a lot of stuff besides superhero comics will have to go. But more importantly, you stifle its capacity for greatness. By saying it only does what it can, by ascribing its development only to fan-interest or capitalism, you say that it cannot do anything else. And so, there's no expectation for the genre to meet. There are no heights to which its heroes can aspire.

I believe in superheroes. I say this without irony. And—though they frequently have me tearing out my hair in frustration—I believe in superhero comics. That they are capable of greatness, that this capability has been demonstrably proven time and again, is a foundational assumption I take with me into this project. The arguments advanced here, then, must not be read as an attack on superhero comics, or reason to dismiss them from

our cultural discourse. Rather, let this project be read as raising the bar for the genre.

So. Are you ready to fly?