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# AN ANALYSIS OF EMBODIMENT AMONG SIX SUPERHEROES IN DC COMICS

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## **Abstract**

*This study analyzes the changes in physical presentation of several DC comic book superheroes, finding that the bodies of superheroes have become far more sexualized, exaggerated, and unrealistic in recent years. The comic reader's "gaze" upon the bodies of the characters produces an intersection of spectacle and narrative that cannot be disconnected from both the physical body and the costume of the hero. Literature on the bodies of male and female bodybuilders reveals a connection to the hyper-embodiment of male and female superheroes, which represent the ego ideal of Western representations of "perfect" gendered bodies. The study concludes by asking if contemporary comic books must shift from the "Modern Age" to the "Postmodern Age" in order to break out of their practices of reaffirming gender binaries. The argument expands on work by Jean Baudrillard and Judith Butler.*

## **Introduction**

The goal of this article is to understand the ways in which male and female superheroes' bodies express not only their superpowers, but also their gendered identifications. Through an analysis of images from more than 70 years of DC comic book history, this study suggests that superhero characters have become hyper-sexualized, while their embodiment has increasingly represented

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hegemonic assumptions about males and females. This shift is most likely due to the fact that the comic book industry is male dominated, as is its consumer base (Taylor 2007; Yabroff 2008). This results in gendered narratives that reflect the imaginings of these males with almost no consideration whatsoever for the intervention of women. Although it can be argued that men dominate many elements of cultural production, these men must consider the effect their decisions have on female consumers of their products. This necessity is virtually nonexistent in comic books because of the general lack of a female audience. Therefore, this study will strive to show the repercussions of this nearly exclusive male gaze on the physical presentation of characters.

The masculinity of superhero comic books is not new: the birth of the superhero form in comic books can most readily be traced to the creation of Superman by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1938. In many ways, Superman serves as the archetype for the superhero form, both in plot and uniform. He pioneered spandex, popularized the characteristics of a secret identity and powers greater than that of any mere mortal. Superman also emerged from and represents the male-centricity of superhero comic book production; he was created as a representation of masculine fantasies. According to Siegel, Superman represented the stereotypically idealized male body type and potential for power, as reflected in Siegel's claim that some of his ideas for Superman came from his childhood desire to be "real terrific" so that girls would like him (Harvey 1996)<sup>1</sup>.

This study reveals that male-centric production and consumption of comic books results in a hyper-masculine character presentation of male characters and a hyper-fetishized and hyper-sexualized presentation of female characters. In addition, these character types have become more exaggerated during the seven decades that this study analyzes. The result is that the most hyperbolic bodies for male and female characters appear in

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<sup>1</sup> Wonder Woman, created in 1944 by psychologist William Moulton Marston, was originally developed in contrast to this idea. Marston developed Wonder Woman, who has functioned as a metaphor for American nationalism and women's position in American society, as an alternative to the obsessive masculinity of comic books (Emad 2006; Reynolds 1992; Wright 2001). Ironically, she is now one of the most fetishized superhero characters.

contemporary comics. Furthermore, this study argues that the bodies of contemporary superheroes have moved in a postmodern direction, in which the gender signifiers lose all connection to real human bodies, becoming simulacra. This postmodernity is limited, however, by the comic book world's obsession with gendered bodies. Although in postmodernity the human body should "be understood as multiple and without center" (Call 2002:130), comic books maintain an ambivalent relationship to this idea. Ironically, this limiting obsession with bodies also pushes superhero characters toward their postmodern nature as simulacra in the first place. This study argues that it is essential to move beyond gendered obsession to create a comic book superhero that better represents realistic, human-embodied achievements and combats the dangers of body-obsession present in contemporary American society.

### **Methods**

The position of superheroes as embodied, albeit fictional, beings has received only occasional academic attention, though there has been more in recent years. This study will account for some of more than 70 years of super-embodiment through an analysis of characters that have survived this time span. Specifically, this study analyzes Superman, Batman, Green Lantern, Wonder Woman, Mary Marvel, and Black Canary. These characters were selected because each has existed since the 1930s or 1940s, when superhero comics first appeared, up until the present day. Each of these characters is a DC Comics character.<sup>2</sup>

This study focuses on DC characters because more of them have survived throughout the years than Marvel characters. Marvel has only had two superheroes survive as the same character, Captain America and Namor, both of whom occasionally fell out of use during the years since their creation. Additionally, Marvel's only female character of the 1940s, Miss America, fell out of use decades ago, and thus could not be analyzed for this study. Using only characters that have been in use since the inception of the superhero age in comics allowed for better comparison of characters, as each is meant to represent the same individual even though their

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<sup>2</sup> DC Comics remains one of two major comic book companies; the other is Marvel Comics.

appearances have often changed. Additionally, it allowed for a more accurate analysis of the evolution of costumes as sexually explicit, particularly for female characters, throughout the years.

### ***Image Selection***

Comic books were coded from the 1940s to the years 2007–2008, splitting them at the decade mark. A total of 257 images, 140 of men and 117 of women, were coded from 77 comic books. These comics were selected by starting with either the character's first appearance, or the first issue of a character's solo book. From these first issues, two comics per character were selected from approximately each ten year period. If during this time a character did not have his or her own comic title, the author attempted to find what comics they appeared in during any given decade, if at all, and selected the images from those comics.

After selecting comics, the author identified all full-body images and then randomly selected three from each comic to analyze. Cover images were always used when they included a full-body image, because cover images are what the consumer sees first when selecting a comic, and some artists have commented on the importance of this in attracting consumers to a particular issue, especially when using women on the cover (Wizard Entertainment 2005).

Microsoft Excel was used to randomly select three images from each issue. For this process, each image was coded with a number, which was then entered into Excel, and images were selected using the "random" function. Weber (1990), suggests that in order to maintain validity in selection, one can use a variety of approaches. His first method is random selection and his second is systematic selection. This study systematically chose the issues of each comic, as described above, but randomly selected the final images to be analyzed.

These methods are in line with a hermeneutic approach to content analysis, in which the researcher attempts "to identify frames by providing an interpretive account of media texts linking up frames with broader cultural elements" (Matthes and Kohring 2008:259). In this context, the broader cultural element is the hegemonic presentation of gender and its connection to male and female gazes and consumption patterns. However, this study's

methodology begins to reconcile some of the validity concerns about this approach. Although Matthes and Korhing claim that researchers working in this tradition run the risk of selecting “frames they are consciously or unconsciously looking for” (259), the combination of systematic and random selections mitigates this effect.

### ***Image Coding***

This study referenced the Wizard Entertainment “How to Draw” guide (2005), a pop-culture book created in part by those in the comic book industry, when evaluating what aspects of images to code. The guide describes what the creators of comic books identify as important for the design of a superhero. Musculature was coded for both men and women. The study also coded specifically for abdominal muscles, accounting for whether (a) each individual muscle was defined, (b) there was a vague outline indicating thinness and form, but not strictly depicting the entire “six pack,” or (c) whether the stomach was visible but no actual muscles were indicated. Coding for each image accounted for the size, visibility, and definition of the musculature for men and women as well as the shape of the body. According to the guide, men should be drawn with a standard “V” shape and women with a classic hourglass figure.

Female characters were coded for breast size, ranking the images from those with breasts that are almost unobservable to “extra large.” Interestingly, in the Wizard guide artists commenting on the drawing of women’s breasts consistently claimed that breast size is not important to the design of the superheroine (Wizard Entertainment 2005:93,118). However, in modern comics, women’s breasts are often exceptionally large. In fact, requests to have breasts drawn smaller by female creators have been turned down by DC Comics’ editors: in 2006 when Jodi Picoult was writing *Wonder Woman* she requested that the character’s breasts be reduced in size to make her more realistic, but her request was denied (Gustines 2010).

Lips, facial expressions, and hairstyles were also coded using the guide’s discussion on how to make women appear “sultry.” These characteristics were coded for men as well, but generally went unobserved. For example, artists commented on the use of accentuated eyebrows, eyelashes, and lips, as well as a curved eye

and dark, thick lips, plus a decreased emphasis on the nose, to make a more “sultry” female character (Wizard Entertainment 2005:91–92,100). The portion of a superhero’s body that is covered by his or her costume was also coded. This proved most pertinent for women, as their costumes changed more frequently to reveal more of their bodies.

Hairstyle and body position were coded for both male and female characters. Coding for hairstyle proved more important for women than men, as women’s hair is commonly longer and has changed more often. Modern superheroines are more likely to have long, billowing hair, while men have mostly continued to have short, well cropped hair, or in the case of Batman, it is simply covered by his cowl. Body position was coded for a number of characteristics, but this article only analyzes the category of a character portrayed in some sort of bondage, which was far more common for women than men. It has been noted in previous studies that female characters, particularly Wonder Woman, are often portrayed in bondage, frequently, though not exclusively, to other women, promoting a kind of heterosexual male, lesbian fantasy (Emad 2006; Wright 2001).

## **Theory**

### ***Application of Film and the Male Gaze to Comic Books***

Ann Kaplan (1983) argues that body representations in film are “mediations, embedded through the art form in the dominant ideology” of patriarchal hegemony, meaning that “cinema is seen as constructed according to the unconscious of patriarchy, which means that the film narratives are constituted through a phallogocentric language and discourse” (310). This results in female film characters signifying the heterosexual male’s desiring unconscious, rather than an actual subject, which further produces the objectification of female characters (Kaplan 1983:310). Similarly, Laura Mulvey in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) argues that:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female... In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong, visual, and

erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (Mulvey 1975:837)

Thus, both authors argue that the female in the cinematic form is constructed specifically to be looked at through the heterosexual male gaze and to create heterosexual male fantasies. Through this gaze, the female on screen becomes objectified.

Drawing from this argument, the gaze of the comic book reader is even more likely to be that of a heterosexual male than the gaze of the movie-watcher. While both male and female viewers watch films regularly, the readers of comic books are almost entirely male, accounting for at least 90% of the comic book audience (Taylor 2007; Yabroff 2008). This overabundance of male viewership may result in an almost complete lack of consideration for the potential gaze of a female reader. Additionally, the creators of comic books are also almost entirely male, and thus the gaze is male from both the production and consumption perspectives. This is particularly true for mainstream comic book producers, such as DC, which, in contrast to independent comic producers, is especially lacking in females on the creative end (Chenault 2007).

Mulvey also comments that “mainstream film neatly combine[s] spectacle and narrative” (1975:837), and it seems that comic books serve a similar purpose. However, in comic books both men and women serve as spectacle. This is in contrast to Mulvey’s analysis of film, in which she claims only women are spectacle. The female particularly fulfills the role of the spectacle in film because, as Mulvey explains:

The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle and narrative, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of the story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative. (1975:11)

Furthermore, Mulvey argues that the heteronormative order prevents the heterosexual male from fulfilling the role of the spectacle, as “Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like” (1975:12). It is arguable that since 1975 this hegemonic order has partially changed. The rise of the male action hero, perhaps best represented by Arnold Schwarzenegger, has produced a male that

also serves as spectacle. Yet even this male is not as completely spectacle as the female. Because Mulvey's female spectacle freezes the narrative at a moment of erotic contemplation, it must be assessed whether the male action hero serves this same purpose.

The male action hero serves to move the narrative to a point of climax, an orgasmic opposite to the female heroine's freezing in erotic contemplation. When the action hero, for example Rambo, emerges shirtless with muscles shining, armed and prepared to confront his opponent in a moment of orgiastic violence, the audience knows that a climax is about to take place. Thus, although the male action hero does obtain "to-be-looked-at-ness," he does not obtain the full role of spectacle as the female does. In comic books, however, the images are already frozen by the nature of the artwork, allowing the gazer to linger or move on at his or her own desired pace. Furthermore, the image assists in developing the storyline rather than hindering it because of the dual nature of the image narrative in comic books (Harvey 1996). Because of this dual nature, the superhero, male or female, must be lingered on and exhibited in order to produce the full narrative plot.

Additionally, male superheroes, like Kaplan's screen actors who "become ego ideals for the men in the audience" (1983:318), also become a kind of ego ideal. The ego ideal of the superhero is even less realistic than that of the film actor, as the superhero is purely fictional and has powers above and beyond those that are even theoretically attainable by any human<sup>3</sup>. Female superheroines portray a kind of imagined fantasy of the heterosexual male gaze, representing the large-breasted ingénue of the Western heterosexual male imagination. Thus, "both genders are fantasies for young male readers, the women representing sex fantasies of adolescent boys who have little or no experience with real women" (Robbins 2002).

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<sup>3</sup> In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of superheroes that are present in film. However, in these films superheroes are rarely as hyper-real in bodily form as they are in comic books. This is not a coincidence, considering that real people must portray these characters. Although these body types may occasionally be close to achievable by real people, such as Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, most actors never achieve this level of musculature. An analysis of the similarities and differences between film and comic book portrayals could be quite interesting, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

The discussion of female superhero bodies often centers on breasts, and it has often been commented that the breasts of comic book superheroines are unrealistically large (Bukatman 1994; Robbins 2002). Of course, many women naturally have large breasts. This analysis does not condemn large breasts, but rather criticizes the way in which comic books use large breasts as a representation of femininity. This both objectifies the female character while also turning the breast itself into an object of the heterosexual male gaze. The perspective presented in comic books reflects the way contemporary Western culture has come to see women's breasts. For example, Young (2005) tells us that, "capitalist, patriarchal, American, media-dominated culture objectifies breasts before a distancing gaze that freezes and masters. The fetishized breasts are valued as objects, things" (126). It should also be recognized that the largest breasts presented in comic books are unrealistic, at least without plastic surgery, not only because of their size, but also because of physics; "If breasts are large, their weight will tend to pull them down; if they are large and round, they will tend to be floppy rather than firm" (Young 2005). In comic books, however, large female breasts sit high atop the chest of the superheroine, firm and round, as unrestrained by gravity as Wonder Woman herself.

The symbolic nature of the superhero's costume also represents the heterosexual male gaze. Reynolds (1992) tells us that the costume is an instance of *langue* or *parole* in the language of Saussure. "The *langue* (or language) is the structure of costume conventions, the rules that dictate the kind of costumes characters may wear. An individual costume is an example of *parole*—a specific utterance within the structured language of signs" (Reynolds 1992:26). The costume itself is representative of the role the specific hero plays: Batman's costume implies "night, fear, the supernatural," while Iron Man's "literally embodies his power" (Reynolds 1992:26). Therefore, the female costume, which often accentuates the breasts and buttocks, represents the role of the female not only as hero but also as sex object, limiting her role as subject.

The objectification of the female character is particularly apparent when one considers the nature of the comic book format. The comic is "a hybrid form: words and pictures" and in "the best

examples... The pictures are thus as much a part of a story as the plot line," as the images contribute to the narrative function (Harvey 1996:3). Thus, female characters in comic book form not only serve to be looked upon and objectified, but their objectification becomes an inherent part of the story, inseparable in this hybrid narrative format.

The gaze of the comic book fan is thus that of a heterosexual male, and the female character by nature is objectified. However, the female character is also powerful, inhumanly strong, and able to overcome biologically inscribed human limitations. She can go toe-to-toe with her male counterparts, both hero and villain, and can even win in these fights. Even so, she is ultimately inferior to her male counterparts because she can never escape the objectification of the heterosexual male gaze, and without a large female audience for mainstream comic books, male characters do not need to suffer from a similar attack. Even when the superheroine does win battles against her foes, she always does so under the male hegemonic gaze, an enemy she remains incapable of battling.

## **Findings**

### ***Reading Superhero Bodies***

Crucial to this study is the fact that the presentation of comic book characters, both in body and mind, has changed significantly throughout the years. Also important is that this presentation has shifted drastically for both male and female characters. While female characters were once portrayed as perpetually subordinate to their male superhero counterparts, modern superheroines tend to hold their own (Wright 2001). However, both male and female characters have evolved into hyper-sexualized portrayals of their respective forms. While the bodily characteristics of early superheroes were arguably realistic, the bodies of modern characters are far less achievable. Regarding women, "the spectacle of the female body... is so insistent, and the fetishism of breasts, thighs, and hair so complete, that the comics seem to dare you to say anything about them that isn't just redundant" (Bukatman 1994:4).

A similar statement can be made about male superheroes. While female characters are fetishized through their breasts, thighs, hair, and lips, the fetish of the male characters is singular in the portrayal of male power through exaggerated musculature. Male superheroes

are depicted as significantly more muscular than their female counterparts, as artists believe that an overly muscular female detracts from her femininity (Wizard Entertainment 2005:117). Thus, it is important that women not be drawn too “bloopy or dumpy,” but also not “too hard or chiseled,” as the former detracts from their sexuality and the latter makes them appear masculine (Taylor 2007). For male superheroes, “the muscular body is a heavily inscribed sign: Nothing else so clearly marks an individual as a bearer of masculine power” (Brown 1999:27). In contemporary comics,

The males sport enormous muscles, most of which don't exist on real human beings, necks thicker than their heads, and chins bigger than the rest of their heads... The females... possess balloon breasts and waists so small that if they were real humans they'd break in half (Robbins 2002).

Findings of this study indicate that this evolution toward hyperbolic forms has been increasing since the Golden Age of comic books. In addition, literature on bodybuilders can offer us some insight into the embodiment of superheroes, though there are important differences between the embodied nature of male and female bodybuilders in comparison to male and female superheroes. Female superheroes are portrayed as the ideal physical myth of contemporary Western femininity: They have large breasts, round hips and buttocks, a tight stomach, and are strong, fit, and independent. This is different from the female bodybuilder, who is often attacked with the claim that she has surrendered her physical presentation of femininity, a loss associated with the gaining of physical power and the loss of breast fat (Balsamo 1996; Steiner 2000).

However, the maintenance of femininity proves important in both cases. Both female bodybuilders and superheroines have to play at being hyper-strong, a stereotypically male characteristic, while maintaining their femininity. Female bodybuilders lose points in contests for failing to appear feminine (Balsamo 1996; Steiner 2000). In contrast, comic book superheroines can maintain their femininity through their artificiality; they do not need to gain obvious muscle tissue in order to lift cars or fight men with enormous musculature.

In short, the changes that have been made to the physical body in both comic books and bodybuilding mimic one another. Likewise, this analysis reveals that between the Golden Age and the Modern Age of comic books, the presentation of the characters' bodies has shifted dramatically<sup>4</sup>. For example, while no heroes were coded as having "exaggerated" muscles in the Golden Age, in 2000, 75% of the male characters sampled had exaggerated muscles. Additionally in 2000, 43% of the female characters sampled had large breasts (drawn as roughly the same size as the woman's head), and an additional 24% had extra large breasts (drawn as larger than the woman's head), while none fit either of these categories in the Golden Age. These findings correspond to a complete elimination of women with small breasts (drawn as not very noticeable or unnoticeable) and a 26% decrease in women with medium-sized breasts (drawn as noticeable, but smaller than the woman's head) since the Golden Age. The overall sultriness of female characters also increased 40% regarding their lips and 55% regarding their eyes in 2000. Superheroines' costumes also began to cover less of their bodies during this time.

### ***Differing Embodiment of Male and Female Superheroes***

Images of superheroines in bondage have been common since the Golden Age; Wonder Woman and other female characters have often been portrayed in involuntary bondage. For example, in an image from *Wonder Woman #2* (Figure 1, Marston 1942) Wonder Woman is being shocked into a state of temporary paralysis and then placed in chains. Additionally, the image shows Wonder Woman crying, not because of the "strength of her chains,"—Wonder Woman's super-strength should allow her to break chains—but

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<sup>4</sup> Comic books are regularly referenced as corresponding to a particular "age." The first of the contemporary ages of comic books, titled the Golden Age, flourished during World War II, and it was in this context that each of the characters analyzed here were created. The Silver Age of comics books began with the first appearance of The Flash in Showcase #4 in October of 1956, followed by the "revitalization of American comic books" with the birth of the Fantastic Four in 1961 and the X-Men in 1963 by Marvel Comics (Trushell 2004:152). This era lasted until the birth of the less discussed Bronze Age of comics with Giant Size X-Men #1 in the summer of 1975, which corresponded with an increased average age for consumers of the books (Trushell 2004:156). Finally, the Modern Age of comic books began in the 1990s and has lasted up until the present day.

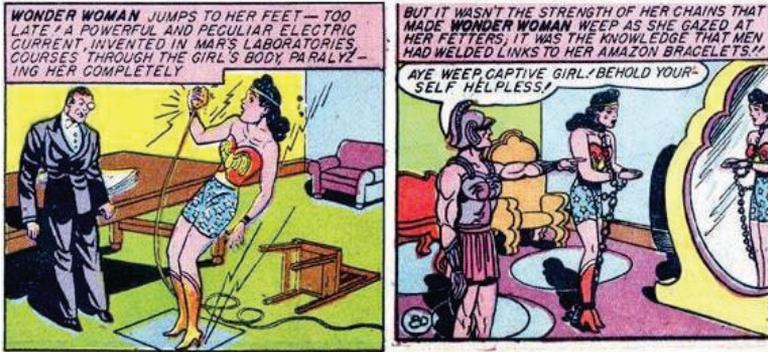


Figure 1. Wonder Woman #2

instead because her captors have bonded the chains to her Amazonian bracelets. Thus, this image not only shows Wonder Woman in bondage, but also represents the female's supposed obsession with consumerism and jewelry and its connection to the costume of the heroine (Reynolds 1992).

This image of Wonder Woman in bondage is far less drastic than more current portrayals, such as a Modern Age image from *Wonder Woman* #67 (Figure 2, Messner-Loebs 1992). Here Wonder Woman is truly degraded. Having crash-landed on a distant planet, her clothing is torn to rags and she is treated like an animal, a chain and collar around her neck and a meager bowl of water for sustenance. However, the artist has maintained Wonder Women's femininity, portraying her legs as long, thin, and undamaged, and almost grants the reader a view up what is left of her skirt. Additionally, her costume's tiara remains, a symbol of her Amazonian royalty and femininity.

In contrast, the focus for male characters is on their musculature, which is intentionally drawn in contrast to their female counterparts. This contrast denotes the superheroine's femininity in spite of her massive power and in opposition to male superheroes. Brown explains that "muscles are so adamantly read as a sign of masculinity that women who develop noticeable musculature—e.g. professional bodybuilders—are often accused of gender transgression" (1999:27). Therefore, comic book artists intentionally draw superheroines as smaller and less defined in order to maintain the character's femininity (Wizard Entertainment 2005). Thus, the creators of these characters "capitalize on the eroticization of the

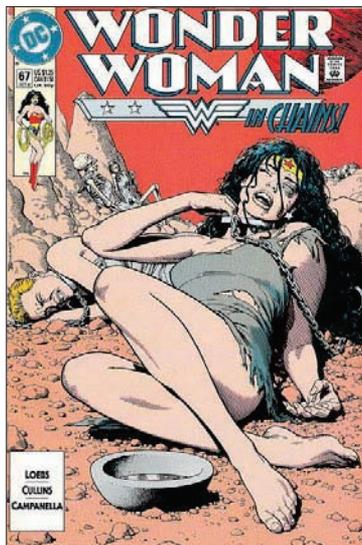
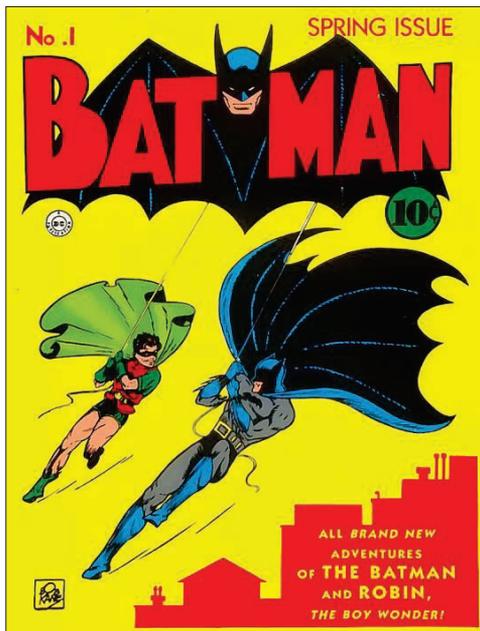


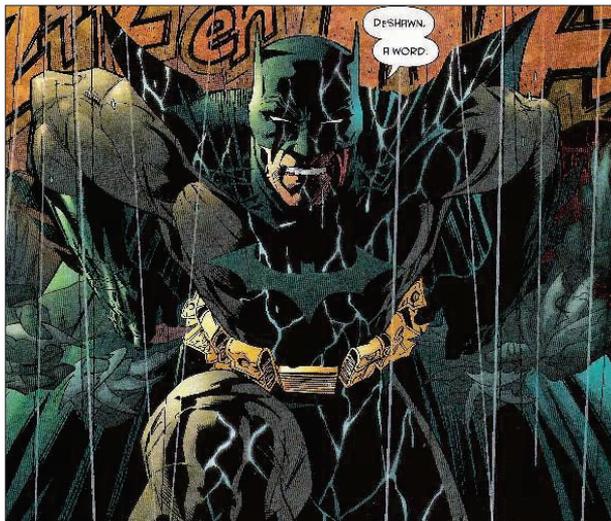
Figure 2. Wonder Woman #67

body” while “visually emphasiz[ing] both their musculature *and* gender differences... super sexuality has been carefully constructed according to highly visible [male and female] binaries” (Taylor 2007:345).

This binary is reflected in the changes that took place for both male and female characters during the time period analyzed here. As with superheroines, superhero bodies also became more hyperbolic and sexualized, though for men this was strictly through musculature. The cover of Batman #1 (Figure 3, Ramey 1940) represents one of the more muscular portrayals found in the Golden Age, which is minimal in comparison to the later image from Batman #664 (Figure 4, Morrison 2007). While the first image is that of a well-built and fit man, the latter not only represents what Reynolds (1992) describes as the costume embodying the identity of the character, but also shows a body image that is much harder to obtain. The muscles under his arms bulge, and the dark shadows represent an intimidating level of musculature that represents Batman’s sheer power.



*Figure 3. Batman #1*



*Figure 4. Batman #664*



Figure 5. Mary Marvel #2

Just as muscles represent masculinity, a lack of obvious muscles as a representation of femininity has remained constant across the seven decades of superhero comics. For example, one can observe Mary Marvel's lack of muscle on the cover of *Mary Marvel #2* (Figure 5, Binder 1946) compared to her image on the cover of *Countdown #47* (Figure 6, Hoppe 2007), when she has become a villain in the series. Although the artist of the *Countdown* cover depicted Mary with more musculature, partially because she is wearing spandex and a much shorter skirt than on the 1946 cover, she is still nowhere near as muscular as her male counterparts, even though her strength is comparable to or even greater than theirs.

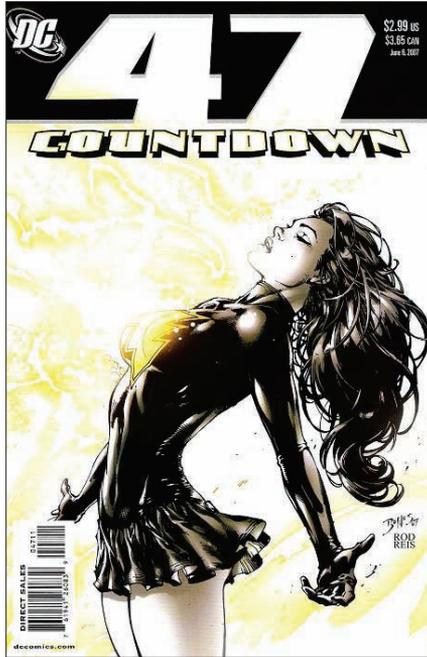


Figure 6. Countdown #47

These images of Mary also portray the lack of importance to the female character's role as villain or hero for her objectification. As Reynolds explains,

The costumed heroine may be frankly the object of sexual attraction, and therefore... constitute the object of their gaze ... the (male) reader is called upon to 'read' both heroines and villainesses as objects of desire—'good girls' and 'bad girls' maybe, but objects of the same rhetorical logic, as their costume change, unlike the males, can (at least potentially) be viewed as the performance of an uncompleted striptease. (1992:37)

The image of Mary Marvel on the *Countdown* #47 cover shows her as a villain who has just received new powers. In a similar image from *Countdown to Final Crisis* #10 (Figure 7, Beard 2008), she has also just received new powers. In both of these images Mary has slightly more noticeable muscle than in the Golden Age image, but



Figure 7. Countdown to Final Crisis #10

less than any male character. She is also the clear center of attention in these cover images, reinforcing the “to-be-looked-at-ness” described by Mulvey (1975). This focus is connected to Reynolds’s concept of the costume change as unfulfilled striptease—in each of the images of Mary Marvel, as in the image from *Wonder Woman #67*, the reader is almost given a view up her skirt.

Also of note is the regularity with which Mary Marvel’s costume has changed. Generally speaking, the coding of costume for both male and female characters proved most important for the female characters whose costumes changed more often and, in contemporary comics, often revealed more of the body than they did in earlier years. This is also important because it may represent the

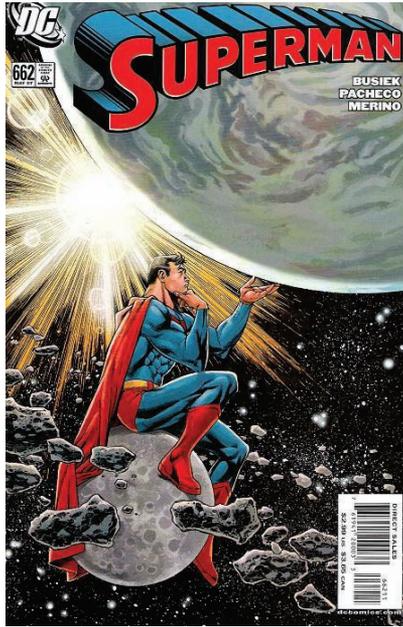


Figure 8. Superman #662

supposed consumer-obsessed, female stereotype in Western society. For some superheroines, their femininity has been represented by their array of costumes through the years, displaying their supposed love of fashion and frequent changing of their minds with regard to clothing.<sup>5</sup>

Although one may claim that a superheroine's strength and power does not need to correspond to exaggerated musculature because of the supernaturalness of her powers, the same is clearly not true for men. Similar to from image of *Batman #4*, the image from *Superman #662* (Figure 8, Powers 2007) depicts every one of the superhero's muscles quite visibly. Thus, it seems that

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<sup>5</sup> DC Comics recently released a new costume for Wonder Woman, changing her look more drastically than ever before. Interestingly, while it remains the case that most superheroines' costumes have changed to cover less of their bodies, as has been true of Wonder Woman historically, her new costume does the opposite, giving her pants and a jacket for the first time. It is perhaps not a coincidence then that her new costume has been heavily criticized. Wonder Woman's new look maintains, however, all the signifiers of hegemonic femininity discussed here.

musculature is used to portray masculinity rather than sheer power or strength. Wonder Woman and Mary Marvel are both superhumanly strong, each having a comparable level of strength and power to Superman and far more physical power than Batman, yet neither needs the musculature in order to maintain this power. In fact, it seems that these female characters are intentionally drawn without musculature in order to maintain their femininity, and it is precisely because of the extreme power of these women that they must be portrayed as less muscular in order to keep them “less” than men. Much like bodybuilders, men must be strong to be masculine, and women must remain feminine if they are going to be strong.

In the early days of superhero comics, women were often portrayed as subordinate to men (Wright 2001), but they were also drawn as being somewhat more comparable to real women. However, as superheroines have gained equal narrative footing compared with their male counterparts, their appearance has become more exaggerated, with a particular emphasis on their breasts and buttocks, flowing hair, and pouty lips. Thus, they have not only been objectified, but it seems that it has also been necessary to continue to limit their potential power; female superheroes are either subservient, but comparable to “real” women, or powerful and equal, but unrealistic and objectified.

### ***The Role of the Nonsuper “Other”***

Weltzein (2005) claims that gender in comic books is partitioned between the uncostumed (secret identity) as unmasculine or feminine, and the costumed (superhero) as masculine or unfeminine. An image from *Wonder Woman #279* (Figure 9) portrays Diana Prince, Wonder Woman’s secret identity, being sexually harassed by her male superior, Phil, at the Pentagon. Diana clearly states that she is not interested in Phil’s advances, yet Phil forces himself upon her. Although the superhuman strength and powers of Wonder Woman would have allowed Diana to stop Phil from kissing her, this power has to be restrained in order to keep her identity a secret and to maintain her femininity, which would be sacrificed if she showed herself to be strong enough to fend off the advances of a man. In other words, her strength must be kept in check when she is not in her superhero identity as Wonder Woman. The female bodybuilder faces similar problems in maintaining femininity despite physical



Figure 9. Wonder Woman #279

strength, which reflects the degree to which comic books are presenting not only the role of female superheroes and their secret identities, but also cultural assumptions about the roles of women. Presumably, there is little need to counter these assumptions in the comic book world because of the lack of female demands from producers or consumers. However, the superheroine has a secret identity that allows for the maintenance of femininity in a way that is not possible for the female bodybuilder. While “female bodybuilders... need to artificially recreate ‘natural’ femininity which many ‘lose’” (Steiner 2000:25), superheroines can maintain this femininity not only through their continued maintenance of an apparent feminine body, but also through the separation of the female superhero and the less powerful female alter ego. While female bodybuilders are expected to maintain the “grimacing”



Figure 10. Superman

masculinity of the powerlift along with the smiling passivity of motherhood (Steiner 2000:28), the comic book superheroine does not have to worry about constructing these two identities in a single bodily presentation. Instead, she has a kind of dual-body in her duality, allowing the secret identity to be feminine and the heroic identity to take on a kind of masculine aggressiveness and power, yet without the traditional physical signifiers. Even in her super-identity, the superheroine maintains the signifiers of her femininity despite her gains of power and strength. This maintenance of femininity seems to be a necessary part of the degradation of superheroines as powerful women. The sheer power of the female superhero may require that she be hyper-feminine in order to not be seen as masculine.

We can also see that male superheroes suffer from a similar problem. In a Golden Age image we see that Clark Kent, the alter ego of Superman, in order to appear weak and “not super,” which also means “less masculine,” refuses to take on a bully and, with his refusal to use violence, loses the affections of Lois Lane, who deems him a “coward” (Figure 10). This emasculation of Clark Kent reflects Klein’s (1993) claim that the superhero represents all the myths of male hegemonic formations, including both their physical and emotional selves. Bodybuilders often try to replicate these myths, as superheroes, like male movie stars, serve as a kind of ego ideal for the male viewer. But for male bodybuilders, these characters are not just a fictional ideal, but are also something to truly aspire to. This correspondence between the body of the superhero and the body of the bodybuilder has existed throughout

much of the history of bodybuilding as a sport<sup>6</sup>. In the early days of bodybuilding, the ideal male body was more easily attainable—fit, but not as extreme—with the shift to a less attainable body type later on, due in part to the affect of anabolic steroid development (Pope et al. 1998). This same development also connects to the history of football:

From the 1940s to the 1970s the protective padding developed into a form of virtual armor that increasingly exaggerated the athletic male form, and therefore exaggerated the superhero image of the football player (Jirousek 1996).

As the padded football player became a signifier of American masculinity, the superhero was able to match this development by being drawn with larger muscles, broader shoulders, a wider chest, and so forth. The bodybuilder, then, matched this form through the hyper-development of his own musculature. While at first, “few if any men... could be compared to Superman’s” body (Jirousek 1996:6), this began to change in the 1980s. This change was reflected in film as well, particularly through the bodybuilder-turned-actor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, who in 1982 played Conan the Barbarian, a character who had first appeared as a comic book character.

However, as Bukatman (1994) claims, the masculine self is developed in contrast to a less masculine “Other.” In comic books, as is sometimes the case with bodybuilders (Klein 1993), the Other and the hyper-masculine self exist in the same body, but the Other is disguised. Superman, for example, is the “real man,” while Clark Kent is “less than” a man, as he is not only weak but also a coward and a pacifist. Similarly, some bodybuilders develop their hyper-masculine self in order to counter any perceived “femininity” and weakness that they might be accused of harboring. Thus, we see here that the superhero character, like the superheroine, literally creates both identities in the same body via the alter ego, secret identity, which is absolutely necessary in order to have an Other to be compared with. Bukatman explains,

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<sup>6</sup> Bodybuilding began as a sport in 1880, but gained in popularity between the mid-1930s and 1950s, about the same time that comic books become popular.

The superhero body is marked in at least two senses: The secret identity constitutes the body *secretly* marked... but the costume and logo constitute the superhero as *publicly* marked. Mask, costume and logo are marks that guarantee the superhero body passage into the field of the symbolic. (1994:100–101)

Thus, the “act of bodybuilding only represents a more activist dedication to the same compensatory, hyper-masculine, anxious armored forms” that superheroes maintain (Bukatman 1994:110). In this way, the transition between the uncostumed and emasculated alter ego epitomized by Superman’s Clark Kent, into the costumed superhero represents the transition into true manhood (Weltzein 2001).

The unattainability of this ideal is reflected in the nature of the American male ideal, represented by the male bodybuilder, for whom,

American macho... gets in its own way. Built upon a shaky foundation of male self-esteem, the hegemonic American male can’t deal with androgyny or entertain his softer side... and so attempts to build a façade that is so extreme as to go unquestioned (Klein 1993:278).

The comic book superhero is the ultimate manifestation of this phenomenon, literally splitting the “softer” and “harder” sides into two selves. Thus, for both men and women in the real world of bodybuilding and the artificial world of comic books, the splits between femininity and masculinity, strength and weakness, and power and subservience are constructed in parallel ways through the use of the alter-ego, secret identity to take on the role of the depowered and pitiful Other, while the superhero takes on the ego-ideal form.

Additionally, for men this construction of the less masculine Other in the form of the secret identity is a part of the very nature of hegemonic masculinity. Connell (1987) explains that,

Hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women. The interplay between different forms of masculinity is an important part of how a patriarchal social order works. (183)

Thus, in the case of comic books, the hegemonic and subordinated masculinities coexist in the same body via the super-identity and the secret-identity. In fact, the superhero is a perfect representation of hegemonic masculinity, as “the winning of hegemony often involves the creation of models of masculinity which are quite specifically fantasy figures” (Connell 1987: 185-185). Because comic books are a male-centric industry, it makes sense that they contain the most extreme reproductions of this hegemonic formation.

### ***The Superhero Form***

These portrayals of both male and female forms are ironic in light of the subversive nature of the super-body: “The sheer *otherness* of the superbody—its strange powers, its anatomical exaggerations, its continual reconceptualization—should render these antiquated strategies obsolete” (Taylor 2007:246). In other words, the super-body has thus far been able to do anything except transcend the norms of the male/female binary and its exaggerated hegemonic representations. However, this inability of the otherwise transcendent body to overcome this norm becomes less surprising when one considers the obsession over embodiment in comic books characters. Every aspect of the superhero is based upon his or her embodiment; “Even the mind becomes a body, telepathic, telekinetic, transplantable and controllable” (Bukatman 1994:94). The body itself, then, is an integral part of the comic book.

These transitions in the presentation of characters are important because of the comic book’s hybrid form. Rather than simply representing artistic shifts or cultural paradigm shifts to a more hyper-sexualized, symbolic world, the hybrid format of the comic book makes these transitions part of the narrative presentation of the story, a story that is obsessed with the embodiment of the characters. While both male and female characters are exceptionally powerful, the female can never obtain the musculature of the male, lest she submit her femininity. The male, similarly, can never appear weak in spite of his strength, lest he submit his masculinity and its phallic representations. Because spectacle and narrative are so thoroughly combined in the comic book form, it becomes difficult to imagine a superhero without this hyper-embodiment. However, a partial closure of hegemony can occur through a questioning of this bodily

discourse. Such a shift could produce an age of postmodernity in comic books.

### **The Postmodern Age of Comic Books?**

In order to develop a Postmodern Age of comic books, it is essential to analyze theoretical developments that provide an understanding of the positions of gender and images in the contemporary world. Beginning with Jean Baudrillard's (1995) work on simulacra and simulation, literature argues that in the Postmodern Age there is no longer any correspondence between the "real" and its signifiers. Instead, everything is a representation of a representation; there is no reality that goes "beyond" the sign, making everything a signifier without a signified. This simulacral nature of experiential "reality" not only corresponds to illusory constructs, but also to physicality and bodies. Similarly, Judith Butler (1999) argues that the sexed body itself is also not an aspect of anything that one might call the "real." Instead, it is a performative entity that people act out while always failing to truly achieve its hegemonic construction as a perfectly gendered presentation. Sex, like gender, is an identifier specific to a historical age that has no meaningful correspondence to what might have been called the "real."

These two perspectives can be combined to provide a better understanding of the images present in contemporary comic books and to push comic books further into their Postmodern Age. Embodiment is clearly the basis for such a transition to the next age, because no other part of the superhero has ever corresponded to the bodies of "real" people because of their supernatural existence and artificiality. It is only the embodied artificiality and its lack of correspondence to the embodiment of most contemporary humans that has changed since the Golden Age, producing female and male heroes who appear as if they are from "different worlds [than each other], neither of which is Earth" because of their equally unreal, but drastically different presentations (Robbins 2002).

This also connects to the contemporary extremeness and artificiality of male bodybuilders' presentations of masculinity. If "bodybuilders who won the Mr. America title in the pre-steroid era could not hope to compete against steroid-using bodybuilders today" (Pope et al. 1998:66), then this is a way in which the entity of the

embodied self has become more artificial in modern bodybuilding through the use of chemicals. Additionally, bodybuilders have become more artificial in that they have developed to match both football players' pads, which are not a part of the physical body (Jirousek 1996), and to match the superhero body, which does not truly exist.

Thus, while the bodybuilder has always corresponded more to the comic book body than to the body of other males, an earlier era of bodybuilders, like the Golden Age superheroes, would still have corresponded more to other males than modern bodybuilders do, even if their ego ideal remained artificial. Although the bodybuilder may have always used the comic book character as his ego ideal, he did not become a simulacrum until the superhero also developed in this direction and the bodybuilder tried to match this, moving away from the Greek ideal of "smooth sleek lines and limited muscle definition" (Jirousek 1996:6).

In the contemporary world of obsessive body projects and image projects in which people engage in extensive "work" on the body (Bordo 1993) many men and women are continually searching for the next best thing in embodiment to obtain this ego ideal through fad diets, gym memberships, obsessive exercise, and surgical enhancements. While Mulvey and Kaplan claimed that movie stars were the ego ideal of their time, the ego ideal of the comic book character corresponds more readily to the postmodern world. After all, the comic book character is not only that which is not real, or that which cannot be real, but instead represents that which society wishes to be real. It is a representation of the ego ideal that cannot be, a perfect signifier of sexed bodies that do not correspond to anything signified, a pure simulacrum.

This model additionally fits the current state of embodiment in the postmodern West, as these heroes have managed to obtain the bodies that so many work toward without the necessary human labor that goes into achieving the goal. Thus, the superhero corresponds to the desire for immediate satisfaction emerging out of postmodern and postindustrial capitalism. By being born on a planet with a red sun, and then transported to Earth, with a yellow sun, Superman becomes the ego ideal of man—perhaps Nietzsche's Übermacht. Through the gift of a technologically advanced ring, Hal Jordan, and others, become the super-powerful, intergalactic police force that are

the Green Lantern Corps, instilling wholly undemocratic statist discipline upon mostly nonsuper intergalactic organisms. Through a gift from ancient Gods, Mary Marvel and Wonder Woman are both superhumanly powerful, yet lack the physical signifiers of strength qua masculinity that would transcend the partiality of femininity's hegemony by making its illusory nature apparent. Thus, the contemporary presentation of superheroes, with their perfectly gendered and sexed bodies, represents the psychic cravings of an era of bodies that emerge from an industry that has no need to consider the desires or gazes of a female audience. The characters' perfection and lack of correspondence to a gendered "real" is so obvious as to be nearly redundant, as Bukatman (1994) said of the presentation of female superheroes.

The only partial exclusions to these rules are the Batman characters, which have trained and honed their bodies to the utmost of perfection. While these bodies would be practically unattainable for many people, the characters have reached this level through possible human actions, though these actions may be "bigorectic," to use Susan Bordo's (1999) term describing the obsessive size accumulation or muscle hypertrophy in which some men engage. Batman represents human actions in the world, obsessively working at one's body to achieve perfection and happiness. However, Batman's body is still beyond what most humans could realistically attain, but it is artificial without the artificial means of attainment. Furthermore, Batman also represents mental attempts at satisfaction, as he is not happy. Though he has his adopted "family" of sorts, he remains dark and tortured in spite of his billionaire status as Bruce Wayne and, more importantly, his perfect body. Batman, then, also represents the unattainability of perfection and the failure of postmodern capitalism and postmodern body projects.

However, the postmodernity of superhero characters is also ironically limited by their obsessive embodiment. In each case, it seems that the male and female presentations of the body in comic books correspond to a human essence imagined in the minds of the primarily male creators and consumers. The human essence, though, has no place in the postmodern; the Postmodern Age is that which emphasizes a lack of essence. Thus, while the comic book character's super-embodiment makes the obviousness of sex and body as simulacra transparent, it also recreates the psychic longing

for the real. Like the bodybuilder, the obsessive embodiment of the superhero represents the desire for the illusion of a gendered “real” that does not exist. Perhaps, then, one can imagine a truly representative or imaginative postmodern superhero that might better transcend the boundaries of embodied essences and binaries. As Taylor (2007) pointed out, the unattainability of superhero potential should allow for transcendence of all essences, yet comics seem stuck in the illusion of a “real” gendered embodiment.

Thus, this study proposes that to progress to an age of postmodernity in superhero comics, creators should look to the world of the cyborg and of cyber-punk in order to transcend embodiment. If the cyborgs of Donna Haraway’s work “make very problematic the statuses of man or woman, human, artifact, member of a race, individual identity, or body” (Haraway 1991:220); if the notion of postmodern subjectivity is one of fluidity and temporality; if humans “are now to be understood as multiple and without center” (Call 2002:130); then the world of comic books, with all their potential for artificiality, can embrace this postmodern humanity and abandon the illusion of human essence. Cyborgs and shape-shifters already exist in superhero comic books, yet all too often even they fail to wholly transcend embodiment, as even the shape-shifter ultimately shifts back to a perfected and sexed human form, and the cyborg, such as the character Cyborg in DC Comics, remains entirely and ostentatiously gendered. What this study suggests is that comic books move toward their natural, end result, and embrace the postmodernity of superhuman subjectivity by producing characters that transcend both the binary boundaries of discursive sexuality and the illusion of human essence. Only when this is done can a truly postmodern comic book project exist that does not reproduce the degrading and oppressive myths of Western masculinity and femininity. Perhaps in this coming age, DC’s Catwoman and Animal Man would be remade as the Deleuzian becoming-animal, and the character Cyborg would come to better represent Donna Haraway’s cyborg archetype. Characters could shift between ways of being in the world that are not limited by archaisms such as gender and anthropic principles.

In order for this to take place, it is necessary not only for women, but also for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals to become a larger part of the mainstream comic book

industry, or at least to become more frequent consumers of these products. As the example of Wonder Woman indicates, without more inclusion even the small number of women already in the industry will struggle to make significant changes to the presentation of their characters; as long as men dominate every element of the comic book industry, comic books will continue to represent their imagining of a perfectly gendered world. It is, at this point, difficult to know if this change will ever happen or what the repercussions for comic book sales would be in light of the character changes that might take place were this to occur.

### **Conclusion**

This analysis indicates that from decade to decade, the presentation of the characters in comic books has shifted significantly and continually in the direction of a less easily achievable and more sexualized body that is less comparable to the average body types of men and women. In the 1940s and 1950s, the Golden Age superheroes were depicted as fit—they were definitely in good shape—but their bodies were also more readily achievable and came closer to representing the bodies of an average person. For men, the musculature has since become far more defined and exaggerated, and their bodies more rigid. For women, their breasts increased in size tremendously, their costumes came to cover far less of their bodies, and their faces and hair became more “sultry.” Furthermore, women’s bondage became more graphic and extreme. Comics in the modern era have experienced a shift toward larger and more sexualized bodies than was ever present in the Golden Age of comics.

This study argues that a significant reason for this shift is that women are not considered when these characters are developed and drawn. With men determining the entire comic book project, it is no surprise that their imagining of hegemonic gender norms dominate the industry’s presentation of both men and women. Although homosexual characters have increased in recent years, a sign of positive change to be sure, these characters are, in all cases, mainstream representations of homosexuality that in no way transcends the usual boundaries of gender performance. In each case, these gay or lesbian characters fit every element of embodied hegemonic masculinity and femininity described above. The only

difference is whom these characters choose to date and with whom to have sex. Much as the presentation of women will not change until more women are producing and consuming these products, it is unlikely that more diverse presentations of non-heterosexual characters will occur until more LGBT individuals are purchasing and producing the products.

Beyond the simple desire to develop a more egalitarian, less patriarchal world, the development of a less obsessively embodied comic book age could have real consequences. In Susan Bordo's (1999) work, *The Male Body*, she emphasizes that in recent years there has been an increase in "bigorexia," also known as muscle dysmorphia or muscle hypertrophy, anorexia's opposite, in which mostly men engage in compulsive and excessive bodybuilding in order to develop bigger and more ostentatious muscles. Like the anorexic who sees him or herself as never being quite thin or small enough, the bigorectic or muscle dysmorphic sees himself as never being big enough, with muscles that are always too small. In other words, this individual views himself as never achieving the superhero ideal, and it "is likely that the increased use of anabolic steroids and dietary supplements among young males reflects the greater concern about having sufficient musculature and not appearing as 'scrawny' or 'wimpy'" (Vartanian, Giant, and Passino 2001:712), things that the superhero would never be accused of.

Thus, contemporary research suggests that both men and women experience dissatisfaction with their bodies, though this dissatisfaction moves in opposing directions relative to body size, with women comparing themselves to hyper-thin women and men comparing themselves to hyper-muscular men. In fact, in Vartanian et al.'s (2001) analysis, "satisfaction with current thinness... did not differ by gender" (719), instead it only differed in the desire for more or less weight. The male-created characters of the comic book world reflect these desires. Women are drawn as far smaller than the men, who are drawn larger than almost any living man. This reflects the fact that assumptions about the "best" and "most attractive" appearance for men and women are engrained in the imaginings of cultural producers. Because men are perhaps unlikely to be offended or "turned off" from a purchase by the presentation of their gender as more powerful, and because women are so unlikely to purchase

comics to begin with, there is not currently any pressure to change this presentation.

Additionally, although research indicates that the affect of media on people's experiences of their own bodies is complicated and multifaceted (Vartanian et al. 2001), there is little doubt that media images do affect body perceptions. Comic book superheroes must be included as a part of this media-dominated world, as the images presented within these comics contribute to body dissatisfaction. This may be particularly important because of "the connections between low self esteem and issues of public health" (Vartanian et al. 2001:711). A Postmodern Age of comic books in which the characters are no longer limited in their subjectivity by their embodiment and gender could be one part of this transition.

Future research should seek to determine if this transition is taking place, as well as whether any changes in the production and consumption of comic books occurs. One part of this research may be to review the small number of comic books that are produced by nonmale identified individuals and see if there are significant differences compared with those produced by heterosexual males. Although it will remain essential to look for this transition in DC comic books, future research should also consider other mainstream producers of superheroes, including Marvel Comics, as well as independent (indie) comics, where this transition may be more likely to begin. Indie publishers are less likely to be constrained by mainstream interests and assumptions. Additionally, there are already more female and LGBT creators in the indie industry.

Future work should also endeavor to analyze more of the storylines of comic books. Although women were once portrayed as inferior to males in the comic book realm, this is normally no longer the case. The position of both men and women in comic books has changed, even giving them occasional sexual agency, as depicted in the image of Black Canary leaping at Batman before they have sex in the rain on a dirty dock in *All Star Batman and Robin, The Boy Wonder #7* (Figure 11). It seems clear that the increased power and agency for women in comic books has corresponded to an increased objectification through embodiment. But are women being objectified in other ways, too? Black Canary is the seducer of Batman, yet Batman thinks of Black Canary literally through objects that relate to her, analyzing the feel and taste of her tongue,



Figure 11. Batman and Black Canary

concluding that she smokes Cuban cigars. He also insists that they keep their costumes on while having sex, thus creating another layer of alienation between them. Understanding these other narrative aspects of comic books and superheroes will also be important to understanding if the industry is progressing in the postmodern ways suggested above.

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