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Introduction:
Queer about Comics

There's something queer about comics. Whether one looks to the alternative mutant kinships of superhero stories (the epitome of queer world making), the ironic and socially negative narratives of independent comics (the epitome of queer antinormativity), or the social stigma that makes the medium marginal, juvenile, and outcast from "proper" art (the epitome of queer identity), comics are rife with the social and aesthetic cues commonly attached to queer life. Moreover, the medium has had a long history as a top reading choice among those "queer" subjects variously called sexual deviants, juvenile delinquents, dropouts, the working class, and minorities of all stripes. Despite this, comics studies and queer theory have remained surprisingly alienated from each other. On the one hand, classical comics studies' tendency to analyze the formal codes of sequential art separately from social questions of sexual identity and embodied difference has often led to a disregard for a nuanced queer and intersectional critique of the comics medium. On the other, the prevailing assumption that mainstream comics (namely, the superhero genre) embody nationalistic, sexist, and homophobic ideologies has led many queer theorists to dismiss comics altogether or else to celebrate a limited sample of politically palatable alternative comics as exemplars of queer visual culture. In this logic, "Queer zines, yes! Superhero comics, no!"

This alienation—at times even antagonism—evinces a failure of recognition in the current development of scholarship rather than a true gulf between the foundational questions and concepts of the two fields. The conceptual and historical intersections of queer theory

(and sexuality more broadly) and comics culture, in both its visual and narrative production and its fan communities, are rife and rich. At every moment in their cultural history, comic books have been linked to queerness or to broader questions of sexuality and sexual identity in US society. In the 1930s and 1940s *Wonder Woman* visually celebrated S-M practices and same-sex bonding between women, metaphorized through the image of the chained, shackled, or bound submissive; in the late 1940s and early 1950s crime and horror comics presented what was arguably the most antisocial critique of post-war domestic life outside of noir cinema, spectacularizing forms of violence, gore, and criminality that radically upended the ideals of nuclear-family harmony and the sublimation of desire in material goods; in the late 1950s *Mad* magazine elicited affective pleasure in the satiric critique of the nuclear family and its blatant refusal of the Cold War security state; in the 1960s and 1970s Marvel Comics revitalized the superhero comic book by infusing its art with the visual politics of gay and women's liberation while the artists who contributed to the *Wimmen's Comix* anthology (1972–92) brought a radical sexual politics to the visual culture of comic books; and from the 1960s to contemporary times, gay, lesbian, and queer culture has taken up comics as sites of sexual pleasure, such as in the graphic sex narratives of Tom of Finland and the cartoonists inspired by him, many of whom testify to beginning their cartooning by tracing and imaginatively redrawing the male figures they encountered in superhero comics. These latter crosscurrents now flow strongly in both directions, as evidenced by the recent proliferation of explicitly LGBTQ characters and scenarios in contemporary comics from the X-Men's "legacy virus" (a potent metaphor for HIV/AIDS) to the lesbian Batwoman and the gay Green Lantern. Moreover, the ubiquity of the medium—comic books being among the most mass-produced and circulated print media of the twentieth century—alongside its simultaneous stigmatization as the presumed reading material of a small slice of immature youth and social outcasts, models Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1990) now-classic formulation of queerness as both a universalizing and a minoritizing discourse: anyone and everyone can be queer, but actual queers are a minority group in the larger culture; similarly, comics end up in the hands of nearly everybody, but comic book readers are a niche (read: queer, nerd, outcast, weirdo) group.

As this broad sketch of comics' queer attachments suggests, rather than needing to be queered, comics themselves "queer" the archive of US culture. Encounters between queer theories and comics studies potentially offer broader historical assessments of how the literary medium of comics, and its larger aesthetic and production history, might be understood as a distinctly queer mode of cultural production that has functioned *as* queer history, rather than its serialized supplement. When we understand the history of sexuality and the history of comics as *mutually constitutive*, rather than merely reflective or coincidental, we can gain insight into the ways that the comic book medium's visual structures not only lend themselves to questions of sexuality and sexual identity but have also taken shape historically in response to transformations in the history of sexuality.

The coeditors' aim for this special issue has been to elicit sustained theorizations of the pairing of queerness and comics, and explorations of the implications of that pairing for reading American literature as well as for queer theory, queer politics, and comics studies. Among the questions we consider to be fecund for exploring what's queer about comics—and what aspects of comics represent and give meaning to queerness—are the following: How might a medium made up of the literal intersection of lines, images, and bodies capture the values of intersectional analysis? How do comics' attention to the visual orientation of images in space model a conception of *sexual orientation*—especially in relation to race and gender, since all these are coordinates of embodied being not truly "present" on the two-dimensional page but signified and referred to by combinations of text and image? How might the medium's discontinuous organization of images map onto disability's discontinuous relationship to heterosexual able-bodied existence? How might the medium's courting of marginal and outsider audiences allow for the formation of queer counterpublics? How do the comics medium's formal properties provide material analogies for or creatively materialize and literalize seemingly formless experiences of nonnormative erotic desire, pleasure, and intimacy? These questions only begin to scratch the surface of productive encounters between comics studies and queer studies, but they suggest a synthetic approach to comics that considers the medium's queerness as opening out into a variety of formal and narrative experiments that have attempted to deal with the problem of

being literally and figuratively marginal or “queered” by social and political orders.

In the interest of developing some of these links, we would like here to map a few of the primary sites where we see queerness as a social/affective force intersecting productively with comics as a medium. This list functions merely as a starting point for identifying those locations where queerness—understood variously as a social force, a complex network of erotic and affective ties, or an entire shared culture—appears intimately bound up with the formal and narrative capacities of the comics medium.

1. The status of comics as marginal literature and art, as well as the assumed immaturity of its audiences (associated with childhood or arrested adolescent fantasy), situates comics as an outsider medium that elicits attachments from perceived social delinquents, outcasts, and minorities. Comics readers and fans construct their relationships to these texts on the basis of the medium’s marginality and often their own sense of disconnection from the expectations of normative social life. Comics is a medium that thus hails counterpublics. Per Michael Warner (2006, 56):

A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions but to speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public or to the hierarchy among media. The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness.

Comics counterpublics are shaped in large part by the development of a variety of alternative and often egalitarian and grassroots forms of sociality among readers, creators, and textual content including fan clubs, letter-writing campaigns, zines, and comic art conventions. What Fredric Wertham (1954, 189–90) presciently captured in his derision of the homosexual undertones in Batman and Robin in the mid-1950s was the same queer spirit that he would later celebrate in his embrace of comic book fan communities and their egalitarian practices in the 1960s and 1970s; in both comic book content *and* fan culture ran an ongoing critique of normative social relations that exhibits itself in both comic books’ visual content and their solicitation of nonnormative counterpublics.

2. The expansive representational capacity of the medium queers it. As a low-tech medium primarily composed of hand-drawn images, the representational possibilities of comics vastly outrun those of other media, requiring little to no special effects or technical equipment in the most classical sense. (It might be said, too, that this low-tech quality makes comics either fundamentally democratic or especially available to democratic practices.) Both the protocols of writing/drawing and reading comics dictate that anything that can be drawn can be believed—often if not most times with little or no attention to verisimilitude between what is represented on the page and what we perceive in the three-dimensional world beyond the page. This has made the medium especially effective as a space for the depiction of an array of fantastical characters, worlds, and social interactions (among humans, mutants, aliens, cyborgs, and other “inhuman” figurations). The fantasy aspects of the medium have historically lent themselves to the depiction of a vast array of nonnormative expressions of gender and sexuality—from the most metaphoric (in hyperbolic camp visuality or the metamorphosing of human bodies into forms that call into question traditional gender norms, etc.) to the most literal (the actual depiction of queer bodies and erotic attachments).

Such figures are possible to read as refractions of social and political possibilities. As coeditor Ramzi Fawaz (2016) shows in *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*, a perhaps unexpected example of comics’ refractory fantastic can be found in *The Fantastic Four* (1961), the first commercial hit of mainstream superhero comics giant Marvel during Marvel’s revival in the early 1960s. In that series, the three male characters’ physical mutations run up against and undermine their ability to embody normative masculinity even as their commercial dominance and fan response presented them as exemplars in a tradition of representation whose intention (after Wertham’s Comics Code Authority) was to produce heroic masculine role models. Instead, the heroes were freaks: Mr. Fantastic’s pliability was a sign of “softness,” the Thing’s rocky body rendered him fundamentally androgynous, and the Human Torch’s flaming body functioned both as a figure of hypermasculinity and as a visual signifier of the “flaming” homosexual of Cold War America. The extraordinary transformations that made them “super” and “heroes” also unraveled their traditional performance of gender and sexuality—or, as Fawaz suggests, such unraveling might even productively be seen as a necessary part of how it was possible to

think heroism (for the cultural producers who were putatively straight, educated white males) on the cusp of the vast social changes coalescing under the signs of the civil rights movement and, later, black power, second-wave feminism, the sexual revolution, the rise of the American Left antiwar movement, and gay liberation.

3. The unpredictability of serial narrative and narration and the visual structure of comics as a set of sequential panels that repeat, but always with a difference, suggest that comics are *formally* queer. Just as the underlying premise in comics that anything that can be drawn can be believed taps into the productivity of human capacities for fantasy, the formal character of comics—the idea that you can have indefinite iterations of a given story that never reproduce a single trajectory—helps clarify the ways that fabulation underwrites our realities, in decidedly queer ways.

Here for definitions we can turn to Saidiya Hartman's (2008, 11) description of the practice of critical fabulation:

"Fabula" denotes the basic elements of story, the building blocks of the narrative. A fabula, according to Mieke Bal, is "a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused and experienced by actors. An event is a transition from one state to another. Actors are agents that perform actions. (They are not necessarily human.) To act is to cause or experience an event."

By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, . . . [critical fabulation] attempt[s] to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.

What is potentially queer about comics' fabulation and thus the formal relation comics bear to queer politics? Take two fundamental conceits of queer theory: In what is perhaps the most oft-quoted line from the inaugural moment of queer theory, Judith Butler (1991, 313) claimed that "gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original." Only second to this then-revolutionary statement might be Sedgwick's (1993, 8) bracing contention that "one of the things that 'queer' can refer to [is] the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically." Though both theorists first formulated these claims to describe the instability of gendered and sexual

identity, their statements characterize the operation of the comic strip form exactly. As a serialized medium, comics proliferate images that imitate both material or embodied experience and previous images or copies in a sequence; this proliferation, which visually appears as an “open mesh” of pictorial icons organized in countless sequences, underscores the limitless differences produced between an ever-expanding range of images and the figures and worlds they depict. Simultaneously, the sheer number of images, texts, and characters the medium produces renders claims to originality superfluous, as does the presentation of mutant, monstrous, or altogether fantastical characters that have no “original” form in everyday life. Perhaps more than any other literary or cultural mode, then, comics self-consciously multiply and underscore differences at every site of their production so that no single comics panel can ever be made “to signify monolithically.” Each iteration of an image, an issue, a storyline, or a world has the potential to disrupt, comment on, or altogether alter the flow and direction of what has come before: in this sense, comics function, to borrow from Sara Ahmed (2006), as queer orientation devices, productively directing readers toward deviant bodies that refuse to be fixed in one image or frame, toward new desires for fantasy worlds that rebel against the constraints of everyday life, and toward new kinds of counterpublic affiliations among readers who identify with the queer, deviant, maladjusted form called comics.

Each of these areas of nexus is rich unto itself and allows scholars working at the intersection of queer theory and comics studies to talk about a range of things—from the cultivation of rarefied fan communities, to the production of queer intimacies between readers and fantasy characters, to formal and representational feats that lend themselves to being articulated to the depiction of nonnormative or queer orientations to the world.

Following is an example of how a reading attentive to these vectors of confluence reveals that the most quotidian—or what we could heuristically propose as paradigmatic—encounter with even mainstream superhero comics is replete with queer meanings. Figure 1 shows the cover of the first comic book that coeditor Darieck Scott remembers buying as a child. This cover features Nubia, the iconic superhero Wonder Woman’s black twin sister, who debuted in 1973 (Bates and Heck 1973; the cover artist is Nick Cardy). Nubia was in many ways a failed superhero character. She appeared on this cover and in a part of DC Comics’ bid during the bronze age (c. 1970–84) to broaden its

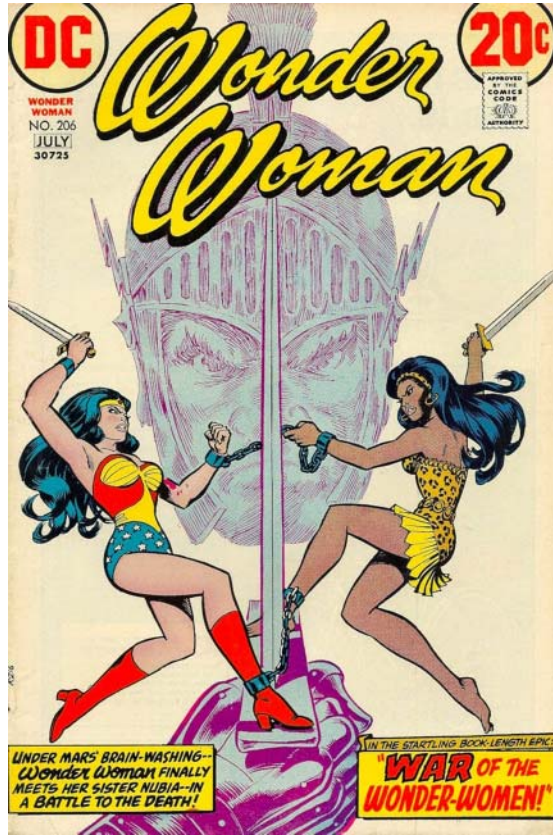


Figure 1 Wonder Woman and Nubia face off in 1973. From Bates and Heck (1973), *Wonder Woman* #206

consumer audience, to capitalize on the apparent success of Blaxploitation films, and to signal that the fantasy world of DC Comics, like that of its rival Marvel Comics, was engaged with “real” contemporary developments like racial integration and the emergence of the site of the black ghetto in US cultural discourse. The character Nubia, however, unlike other DC Comics 1970s assays in racial diversity such as now-mainstay character John Stewart, “the black Green Lantern,” gained little traction, disappearing from *Wonder Woman* after three issues and never becoming a frequently recurring secondary or even tertiary character in DC’s fantasy world. Yet Nubia’s apparent inability to capture the attention of her creators (Don Heck, penciller; Cary Bates, the principal writer; and Robert Kanigher, the editor) did little to prevent the character from becoming a template figure

for a range of fantasies of black power and beauty proliferating in a fan counterpublic—a fandom aware of its “subordinate” or “alternative” status within the larger counterpublic of never-quite-mainstream Wonder Woman fans. Typing “Nubia Wonder Woman” into an internet image search nets you pages of fan-created images of the character, as well as references to the web page for “Nubia, the Illustrated Index” (Strickland n.d.). (A recent book on comics by Deborah Elizabeth Whaley [2015], *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime*—reviewed in this special issue—devotes seven-plus pages to considering Nubia.)

Scott, unaware of this context or this future for Nubia when he was first powerfully attracted to the cover image, became an initiate of Nubia’s counterpublic in a way that can scarcely be understood without the assistance of queer theory. Having had no previous exposure to Wonder Woman as a six-year-old in 1973, Scott was entranced by, desirous of, and identified with this image of a dark-skinned, glamorous, powerful black woman warrior. Nubia was the kind of black and queer object of desire that contributor andré carrington describes in his essay, “Desiring Blackness: A Queer Orientation to Marvel’s *Black Panther*, 1998–2016.” It was also, significantly, and in the paradigmatic manner in which comics provide sources of fantasy for their readers of whatever age, an *education* instantiating such desire, before Scott could have named black and queer as objects of desire, in a world that, of course, makes the satisfaction of such desires exceedingly difficult. Scott’s attraction to this cover image and to Nubia’s story inaugurated a fantasy of black power and black beauty, conjunctions that could not appear as other than at least partly if not wholly fantastic within what was apparent even to a child as an antiblack “real” world. Here, then, we see a comic operating precisely as a queer orientation device, productively directing young Scott and other readers both then and later toward new desires for fantasy counterworlds that rebel against the constraints of everyday life.

But of course the cover image is also shot through with the discourses of antiblackness, signaled by its use of well-worn tropes that enable a much more demoralizing reading. Above we note that queer orientation devices direct readers toward “deviant bodies” as much as new desires, and here we can discern, not without dismay, the price that deviance pays even in fantasy, when measured on a scale of value that pushes against but cannot escape the racist contexts of its

creation. Apart from the interesting choice of “Nubia” as the character’s name, the otherwise glorious leopard-skin skirt here functions, through signifying wildness, animality, and their overdetermined exemplars the “jungle” and “Africa,” as though it were a kind of transnational or supranational costume of blackness—a blackness and an Africa made powerful by the fact that Nubia is powerful, a wildness and animality rendered glamorous by her superheroic aura. These associations open the image to fully justified accusations of caricature and stereotyping. (Importantly, this costume appears only on this cover, where Nubia’s identity has to be established with a minimum of text or story contextualization; in fact, Nubia never appears in this costume in the comic books and instead wears feminized Roman armor.) At the same time, this concatenation of effects and affects is flanked by the presence of the sword and the Roman-helmeted villain in ghost form looming behind, linking them to the familiar imagery of the classic ancient world and to classical evocations of mythic heroism: in such a way that the combined Barthesian *studium* and *punctum*, as it were, of the image achieves what Kobena Mercer (1994, 200–201) says (provisionally) of some of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of black men, where men “who in all probability” come from the disenfranchised, disempowered late-capitalist underclass are “in the blink of an eye” “elevated onto the pedestal of the transcendental Western aesthetic ideal.”

On *Wonder Woman*’s cover Nubia appears historyless, except insofar as her history is that of repeated iterations of racialized types—with all their dangers, harms, and eked-out pleasures—and of largely (but not only) malignant metonyms. The frisson of excitement and pleasure beholding Nubia in 1973—and even now—is the effect of the projections her mute two-dimensional figure invites. As an entirely new superhero then and a rarely featured one now, her image is an example of how the comic book form or the sequential graphic narrative form appeals for and requires the participatory imagination of the reader-viewer. We are invited to imagine the world that makes a powerful black Wonder Woman possible, and from there, we are asked to imagine her presence in the “real” world and the wrongs that her power and beauty might right. Moreover, we are, perhaps, even encouraged to identify with both this black Wonder Woman and her potential power (which may lie ultimately in her very ability to incite endless fabulation on the part of the viewer).



Figure 2 The reconstituted X-Men appear as a tower of heroic figures on the holographic cover. From Kelly and Peterson (1998), *X-Men* #80

In a different time and context, yet with parallel resonance, Fawaz remembers his own first comic book reading experience in 1998, when he encountered the X-Men, a cadre of mutant outcasts gifted with extraordinary abilities due to an evolution in their genetic makeup. Fawaz was thirteen years old when he picked up *X-Men* #80, the series' thirty-fifth anniversary issue (Kelly and Peterson 1998), at a local comic book shop in Tustin, California, and beheld its radiant holographic pink cover depicting a tower of dazzling, disco-attired

superheroes (see fig. 2). At its center appears the steel-plated Colossus carrying the puckish warrior Wolverine aloft his impossibly muscular arm, with the teleporting blue elf Nightcrawler leaping upward near their feet; surrounding this trio are an explosive group of superhuman woman warriors, the intangible Shadowcat, the weather goddess Storm, the nigh-invulnerable powerhouse Rogue, and the bone-wielding rebel Marrow. Growing up in a queer family, sibling to a gay brother, and bullied to tears on a daily basis for his own exuberant gayness, Fawaz immediately connected with the words “A team reunited . . . a dream reborn” emblazoned on that cover, which spoke to him of the promise and possibility of queer kinship and solidarity in the face of overwhelming odds. Above all, what struck Fawaz about that cover was the sheer variety of characters depicted—how could a man made of steel, an intangible woman, a white-haired weather goddess, a butch teen girl with bones sticking out of her skin, and a teleporting blue elf be any kind of a team? Who were these people, and what dream did they share? Almost demanding an act of critical fabulation from its reader, the image elicits a desire to understand how disparate, monstrous mutant heroes might act in concert. In less lofty yearnings, the fantasy of standing atop the arm of a muscle-bound Adonis surrounded by powerful mutant women, in pink holographic form, was at least one gay boy’s dream come true.

Like so many readers of the *X-Men* series over the decades, no character drew Fawaz in more than the weather goddess Storm, a Kenyan-born immigrant to the United States, the first black woman superhero in a mainstream comic book, and the X-Men’s team leader by the 1990s. In that same anniversary issue, at a low point in the team’s battle with an imposter group of X-Men, Storm rallies her bruised and beaten comrades by reminding them that what defines their bond is a set of shared values, a chosen kinship maintained through mutual love and respect, not by force or expectation. With his budding left-wing consciousness, on one side, and his attachment to queer family, on the other, Fawaz fell in love with this fictional mutant goddess and her team: this was the kind of community he longed for. What was it about the visual and narrative fantasy offered by a mainstream superhero comic book circa 1998 that could allow a thirteen-year-old Lebanese American suburban gay boy to so deeply and sincerely identify with an orphaned, Kenyan, mutant immigrant X-Man? If one were to try and explain this question by turning to recent public

debates about superhero comics, we might put forward the answer, *diversity*. Yet this term and its shifting meanings—variety, difference, or representational equality—would have rung false to Fawaz’s teenage ears. It was not simply the fact of Storm’s “diverse” background as Kenyan, immigrant, woman, or mutant that drew Fawaz to her but rather her ethical orientation toward those around her, her response to human and mutant differences, and her familial bond with her fellow X-Men. These were distinctly queer attachments in that they were grounded in the terms of alternative intimacy, kinship, and belonging. Both the cover image and the narrative that unfolded behind allowed for multiple queer attachments to intermingle at once, from affective aspirations for alternative community, to burgeoning erotic desires for a range of superhuman male bodies, to cross-gender and racial identifications.

These two examples of readerly identification and fabulation underscore a well-worn yet endlessly generative fact about the comics medium: the participation of the reader in completing the story usually is invited to occur between separate panels of images, in the “gutters.” Scott McCloud (1993, 60–74), a pioneer in theorizing the comic book form, calls this structural element in sequential-art comic book storytelling “closure.” McCloud identifies six different kinds of panel-to-panel transitions that insist on the reader’s imaginative contribution of completion to story elements: moment-to-moment transitions; action to action; subject to subject; scene to scene; aspect to aspect; and non sequitur (i.e., no apparent sequential relation). To return to Scott’s example, Nubia’s cover image is not strictly speaking an instance of this kind of structure of graphic storytelling, since Nubia here is iconic, presented in the recognizable postures of the adored superhero, rather than placed in a sequence. Yet the function of the gutter is taken up within the “panel” itself by Nubia’s clear mirroring of Wonder Woman in all but skin color and costume, a repetition with a difference that asks to us to consider the sibling relationship announced in the caption between the two characters and to ponder at once the possibilities and the limits of their equality. It is possible to see that in fact there *are* transitions from McCloud’s taxonomy in operation: an implied action-to-action transition, because Wonder Woman and Nubia have their swords raised and appear to be charging each other; a subject-to-subject transition, because the characters are divided by the sword and because they are

presented as radically differentiated mirror images of each other; and perhaps even a non sequitur transition, precisely because of the image's invitation to see the characters as so radically different, a difference underlined and intensified by the unnecessary presence of the leopard-skin skirt, which acts like a multiplier of racialized difference and an elaborate stage-hook begging us to pull stereotypes into the frame.

Once you open the cover and read the story within, Nubia's history is the same modern reimagining of the mythological as Wonder Woman's—she, too, was fashioned from clay and breathed into life by the gods, just darker clay than that of the pink-skinned Diana. The dividing sword and its gutter-within-the-panel function may illustrate how Nubia's character and image are engaged in an act of "crossover," just as pre-hip-hop black recording artists like Diana Ross, Michael Jackson, and Prince were often measured—and criticized—by the fact that the buyers of their records were not just black but included a significant white fandom. As such a crossover (though in reverse with respect to the positions and numbers of creators and consumers), Nubia registers in ways that always retain an element of being seen as different from white. She provides a template for a fantasy wherein blackness and black woman-ness are powerful, beautiful, and glamorous but largely within the limits of a perspective founded in Negrophilia (at best) and Negrophobia (at worst). This is not without powerful affective charge, especially in a genre like superhero comics in 1973 (and now), where the image of a black woman as heroic or powerful is uncommon and arguably actively repressed; but the image's *work* at the level of empowering anti-antiblack fantasy is perhaps either foreclosed or too much deferred by its appeal to either a notion of equality that smuggles in alongside it whiteness as the standard or to a fairly simple inversion of black-versus-white values. The cover image's formal comic book queerness, though, throws open and makes at least ephemerally manifest what racialized modes of beholding foreclose and defer. The repetition within the cover image, its mirroring and reversal of mirroring, is also an education about the proximities of the supposed gulf between races (the image makes Nubia's difference from Diana one of coloring process and costume only) and as a microcosm of the seriality of comics representation, where the stories and images, as they extend and repeat with alterations from issue to issue, in the hands of different pencillers, writers, inkers, and colorists—both professional and fan—allow for no fixity of image, form, or meaning.

Hence, we can find in reading this image and the palimpsest of many readings that layer it from 1973 on, or in a holographic *X-Men* cover and the affective aspirations of its teenage viewer, paradigms of comic book fandom—a young boy buys a comic book and falls in love with superheroes—and an illustration of how that paradigm, by usual accounts masculinist, covertly raced along the lines of white supremacy (i.e., baseline human is white), and imbued with a nostalgia conducive to any number of wicked conservative politics, is far queerer than it may appear. The stories we have recounted are actually that of a black and a Lebanese American boy’s introduction to superhero comics happening via identification and disidentification (in the sense of José Esteban Muñoz [1999, 31]) with an image of a female character presented as “black” and in a context where this image is a novelty within the pantheon of superheroic images, since few black-appearing characters grace comic book covers (significant exceptions being Marvel’s Luke Cage in 1972 and John Stewart on a *Green Lantern* cover in 1971). In this light, the marginal appearance in a marginal, dismissed-as-childish genre of representation rendered that marginal world of comics a world *for Scott’s and Fawaz’s own differences*—of blackness in an antiblack world and of cross-gender identification in a misogynist world that punishes boys for “girly” behavior as it constantly punishes cisgendered girls as “inferior.” Thus, this particular paradigm of comics fandom is a story of queer intimacy among character, reader, genre, and form.

What is most striking and generative about the collection of essays brought together in this special issue is the vast range of conceptual maneuvers they accomplish. Some of the essays provide fully formed queer theories of comics form. Others develop meticulous close readings attuned to the eruption of queerness on the comics page, thereby teaching us how to read comics for their capacity to represent or make visible nonnormative desires, intimacies, and affiliations in ways that might elude other mediums. Yet others track how comics provide an archival visual history of the shifting nature of sexuality in the United States. All make explicit how the formal terms and conceits by which serial comics operate—including sequentially unfolding panels, multidirectional modes of reading, long-form serial narratives, and admixtures of text and image, among others—are repeatedly articulated to the central questions of queer theory, including the relationship of embodiment to desire, the legibility of queer intimacies, and the struggle to make queer modes of living and affiliating both

representable and desirable. Rather than offering a single unified queer theory of comics or merely tracking individual representations of queers in comics, these essays *model the variety of ways that comics produce their own visual theories of queer desire*.

“Desiring Blackness: A Queer Orientation to Marvel’s *Black Panther*, 1998–2016,” by andré carrington, deftly handles the sometimes dissonant registers confronting comics scholarship. The essay takes seriously the notion that something as apparently ephemeral as fantasy and as supposedly childish as superheroes is immersed in, emerges from, partakes of, and comments on lived realities such as race and the discourses that construct those realities. Focusing on the divergent treatments of *Black Panther* comics by authors Christopher Priest (1998–2003) and Ta-Nehisi Coates (2016) of the title character’s black female comrades-in-arms, carrington interrogates how race consciousness and colonial legacies inform the discourses of desire operating within the comic. carrington’s *Black Panther* is a fantasy of an African past not subject to European colonialism and of an African utopian present and future that imagine their own forms of queer relationships. carrington brings the often contradictory influences and intertexts shaping *Black Panther* comics together in a meditation on the limits and possibilities of desiring what—from an Afro-pessimist point of view—is structured as the undesirable: blackness. carrington notes how utopian fictions often posit or assume the transcendence of racial distinctions, though the resulting representation frequently, and nigh universally, depicts a kind of assimilation that evacuates racial distinctions of all meaning, such that utopias, if they consider racial conflict at all, usually posit that the horrors of racism are defeated by eliminating the cognizance of race altogether. This common utopia-constituting move at once evidences an emancipatory imagination (and emancipatory politics) and a fundamental antiblackness that can name blackness only as something undesirable. carrington is interested in how the utopian imagination can maintain racial distinction while still fulfilling, or aiming toward the fulfillment of, utopia’s promises of a better, more just society; how in the utopian imagination of *Black Panther* comics, though blackness cannot free itself from the anti-blackness that informs and forever subtends it, blackness nevertheless becomes desirable.

In “‘Flesh-to-Flesh Contact’: Marvel Comics’ Rogue and the Queer Feminist Imagination,” Anthony Michael D’Agostino argues that the comic book superhero can function as a highly generative conceptual

resource for queer theory's investigation of unruly or "rogue" identifications across embodied and cultural differences. D'Agostino conducts a breathtakingly crystalline reading of a single superheroic fantasy figure, the infamous and beloved character Rogue from Marvel Comics' long-running *X-Men* series, which follows the adventures of a cadre of genetically evolved (or "mutant") superheroes who are socially outcast from humanity. Within the long history of superhero comics narratives, D'Agostino argues, Rogue's superhuman ability to absorb the psyches and mutant powers of others has functioned as an extended meditation on the possibilities, risks, and pleasures (both erotic and affective) of coming into contact with those who are unlike us, and consequently it allows us to forge identifications that may alter the very fabric of our being with unexpected results. He compellingly argues, "Rogue coheres as a metafictional figure not just for the specific heroes she touches but for the superhero genre's general conception of superhuman power as consubstantial with a nonnormative body, which is produced through transformative contact that renders differences mobile across a blurred boundary between subject and object." In so doing, D'Agostino suggests that increasingly fraught and defensive postures toward appropriation, assimilation, and other modes of presumably unethical identification with others in contemporary queer politics and theory are productively unsettled by superheroes, fantasy figures with whom we develop deep affective attachment because of their bodily vulnerability to outside forces. D'Agostino sees Rogue not merely as a representational figure for queerness or a fantasy of appropriating "the other" but as a figure who, in her long-running struggles to touch (and hence psychically absorb) others ethically, models a practice of queer intimacy between strangers variously construed. In her various flesh-to-flesh encounters, both coercive and reciprocal, with other mutant and superhuman beings, Rogue's evolving practice of ethical contact surprisingly braids together a wide range of queer, feminist, and queer of color commitments to negotiating and developing lasting ties across differences from the 1970s onward. Ultimately, D'Agostino not only reveals superhero comic books as rich sites of queer theorizing about the electrifying possibilities of identification but trains us to think and be like Rogue, touching our most cherished theoretical and social commitments to identity politics without ever holding on so tight that we become them.

Yetta Howard's "Unsuitable for Children? Adult-erated Age in Underground Graphic Narratives" uses the extraordinarily durable association of comics with childhood reading and entertainment as a starting point for theorizing the graphic narrative's capacity to "radicalize the definitional borders of adulthood and childhood" in distinctly queer ways. Howard explores how experimental queer writers and artists such as Kathy Acker, Diane DiMassa, Freddie Baer, David Wojnarowicz, James Romberger, and Margeruite Van Cook have used the particular formal qualities of graphic narratives to articulate or visualize complex experiences of childhood trauma and abuse from the perspective of queer adults. Howard puts theoretical pressure on the tendency to view comics as a medium that adulterates or taints developmentally "healthy" or desirable reading practices by willfully combining admixtures of text and images in ways that are analogous to the perception of queerness as a mode of being in the world that makes childhood sexuality impure or contaminated. Refusing this normative developmental logic, Howard instead makes a claim for the conceptually sophisticated and aesthetically generative qualities of such visual-verbal fusions. She argues, "Thinking about comics and queerness as adulterated textual and identificatory forms, I wish to mobilize the use of *adulterate*—to make impure by adding inferior elements—in excess of the worsening that it denotes and use *adult-erate* to name the ways that childhoods in the texts are adult oriented but also to characterize how their visual-narrative qualities, in their own contexts, revise and reflect notions of impurity and being worsened as singularly queer ways of being and representing." In the experimental comics texts she analyzes, Howard unpacks how various creators often use adult narrative voices alongside disturbing images of childhood sexuality, including sexual abuse and sex work, to show how "growing older" does not necessitate getting better, evolving into a normative sexuality, or covering over childhood traumas. Rather, childhood itself is revealed as an endless series of images to be incorporated into unfolding serial narratives, collectively forming a picture of how we grow askance from normative expectations. Essentially, Howard asks us to attend to the conceptual possibilities that emerge when an adulterated medium collides with distinctly queer narratives of growing up oblique to all expected routes of normal sexual and social development.

In "*Nancy* and the Queer Adorable in the Serial Comics Form," Jessica Q. Stark uses the iconic comic strip character Nancy as an occasion to theorize how comic strip seriality invites the open-ended play of

multiplicitous sequential possibilities that might unfold from a single icon, punchline, or gag. Stark places the original *Nancy* comic strips developed by artist Ernie Bushmiller in the 1920s and 1930s (which depicted Nancy as a sly trickster figure continually upsetting rules or pulling practical jokes on friends and neighbors) alongside the playful, erotic, and sometimes perverse appropriations of the Nancy character by gay artist and poet Joe Brainard. In a series of surrealist comics produced throughout the 1970s, Brainard depicted the pincushion-haired, boyish Nancy in a series of shocking and titillating poses, including having sex, doing drugs, exposing her genitals, inhabiting different genres of art, and taking on numerous shapes and forms. Stark disrupts a traditional mode of queer reading or interpretation that would simply see Brainard's work as a queer appropriation of a staid, normative, or one-dimensional mass cultural figure; rather, she reads Brainard *through* Bushmiller in backward sequential order, to argue that Brainard drew on already existing and proliferating queer possibilities in Bushmiller's serial strips from the midcentury. Both artists, she contends, capitalized on Nancy's cuteness by hyperbolizing the seemingly universally adorable qualities of girlhood to the point of absurdity, thereby making what is cute, adorable, sweet, or lovable about feminine heterosexuality seem hyperbolically ridiculous and consequently open to reinvention and play. Stark's most ambitious intellectual move is to treat the open-ended qualities of serial narratives—their invitation to present multiple, contradicting, and proliferating versions of identity, bodies, and intimacies—as a model for a queerly inflected analysis of cultural texts themselves: she reads the presumed sequence of Bushmiller to Brainard in every possible direction, rather than as a historical teleology from an earlier iteration of Nancy to a later queer one. As she forcefully argues, "Considering these works side by side reveals the paradoxical status of the long-publishing US comics figure writ large as a site for queer knowledge-making that invites revisionary accumulations, serial mobility, playful recombination, and an iconic malleability that underscores the multivoiced site of comics as a characteristically queer medium." In so doing, Stark suggests nothing less than comics seriality as a formal method of queer analysis.

Rebecca Wanzo's "The Normative Broken: Melinda Gebbie, Feminist Comix, and Child Sexuality Temporalities" positions the fantasy erotica comic *Lost Girls*, by Alan Moore—a figure from the comics

pantheon in both independent comics and superhero comics for mainstream publishers—and Melinda Gebbie within a genealogy of feminist women’s comix from the 1970s and 1980s. Focusing on Moore’s *Lost Girls* collaborator Gebbie and her debt to and background in women’s comix, Wanzo considers how the inherently fantastic and nonrealist or pararealist representations of sexuality in comics allow us to experience pornography and consider sex in productive new ways. Threading its way through feminist debates about the harms or nonharms of pornography, “The Normative Broken” engages fraught discussions of childhood incest and sexual abuse of children, both of which are thematics that figure centrally in *Lost Girls*, as well as in the major intertexts *Lost Girls* references—feminist comix and three classics of children’s and fantasy literature, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, and *The Wizard of Oz*. Wanzo argues that *Lost Girls* and its antecedents in women’s comix stage a strong intervention in feminist approaches to female sexuality in their surprising deployment of obscenity. In *Lost Girls* and women’s comix, taboo representations of children’s sexuality and sexual abuse are central to a theorization in image-text narrative form of how traumatic pasts and the irreconcilable desires wrought by sexual injuries create the conditions that help lost girls find homosocial and queer belonging with one another. The comics are models of feminist temporalities of survival in the wake of trauma, but they also depict utopian futures that are often ecstatic and resistant to normative scripts of what we think of as women’s healthy sexual subjectivity. In contextualizing and examining a pornographic comic—albeit one with the prestige that Moore’s pedigree brings—the essay implicitly argues for widening the range of comics that comics studies takes seriously, pushing beyond the recognizably literary memoirs and autobiographies praised in studies of Alison Bechdel, Phoebe Gloeckner, Art Spiegelman, and others and beyond even superheroes. Wanzo draws connections among comics studies, pornography and porn studies, feminist approaches to female sexuality, the study of children’s literature, and theorizations of childhood and girlhood.

Our two final essays both examine the work of Alison Bechdel, with very different disciplinary and methodological approaches that nonetheless pay close attention to the comics form and its availability to illumination by queer theory. Kate McCullough’s “The Complexity of Loss Itself’: The Comics Form and *Fun Home*’s Queer Reparative Temporality” focuses on Bechdel’s celebrated 2006 graphic memoir

Fun Home to make broader claims about comics' potentiality for queer world making. McCullough closely reads *Fun Home* using queer theories of temporality—considering notions such as Elizabeth Freeman's "temporal drag," Kathryn Bond Stockton's "growing sideways," scrambled time, and the asynchronies between sacred time and human time. *Fun Home*, McCullough argues, exemplifies queer understandings of the past and of futurity, and invites a reparative reading of family that emphasizes queer kinship's departure from heteronormativity. "Opening up registers of queer time not available in purely prose or purely visual form, comics offer a unique opportunity for the enactment of a queer temporality," McCullough maintains. Bechdel's *Fun Home* mines the formal possibilities inherent in the medium itself to destabilize linear-progress narratives of sexual and psychological development. McCullough's essay integrates a vast body of knowledge in both queer studies and comics studies to inform virtuoso close readings of Bechdel's graphic memoir. The essay's robust analytical attention to both form and content in a graphic work provides a compelling model of how to use existing queer theories to conduct productive new readings of the formal qualities of comics and of how the comics form itself helps enrich our theorizations of queerness.

Alternatively, in "The Lesbian Norman Rockwell': Alison Bechdel and Queer Grassroots Networks," Margaret Galvan meticulously reconstructs the queer grassroots publishing networks that enabled Bechdel to develop a national following, first with her long-running comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983) and subsequently with her award-winning graphic novel *Fun Home*. Galvan uses Bechdel as an iconic case study for thinking about comics as a distinctly queer archive, a medium that weaves its way through larger histories of LGBTQ print and visual media production and political activism. Galvan tracks the origins of Bechdel's developing creative world making, including her beloved serial narrative of a cadre of radical queer and feminist friends, in a vast range of small gay and lesbian periodicals from the early 1980s onward, analyzing them within the larger visual contexts in which they were published such as LGBTQ-oriented advertising and local news stories. Galvan reads Bechdel's archive of comic strips as providing material evidence of LGBTQ cultural and political practices that are often obscured when such comics are reproduced and circulated outside their original print contexts, thereby losing their ties to larger queer collective cultural production. She claims: "I

develop new practices of close-reading comics that emphasize relationality and thereby unfurl how queer activism shapes such works. . . . This approach decenters the individual, honoring the rich history of collaboration in comics by opening a conversation about the multiple ways that communities shape even single-authored works.” Galvan’s project is groundbreaking first in its extensive use of archival materials from a range of locations, including the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College, and Firebrand Book Records at Cornell University; and second, in its theorization of what Galvan calls “the queer comics archive,” which she identifies as both the material sources of LGBTQ comics production and an archival research methodology that reads the unexpected appearance of comics in queer cultural and print materials as formal evidence of larger networks of queer community building.

Galvan’s essay provides a fitting conclusion to a collection that functions, in and of itself, as a queer comics archive; taken together, the essays relentlessly place queerness in its comics contexts—where it appears in and circulates around the circuits of comics production and consumption—while also recuperating the social relations and imaginative practices that comics have allowed queer subjects to forge. More than anything, perhaps, they model methodologically what it might mean to be *queer about comics*, to approach this medium through its sexiest, most disturbing, and most viscerally charged expressions without turning away from those boldly deviant serial possibilities. In so doing, these essays offer up a range of queer sequences to follow, perhaps even to places we have never dared to draw in our imagination.

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