Foreword: Superheroes in Contemporary Media

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Dealing with superheroes can be a tricky business. They tend to make a mess of things while battling opposing forces, often destroying buildings, devastating infrastructure, and debilitating city centres they claim to protect. Beyond damaging their external environments, superheroes tend to have a bad track record when it comes to maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships, often lying to their loved ones about their identities under the guise of 'protection.' Together, these collective harms may be worth the cost of staving off another intergalactic takeover, but it can still be difficult to accept superheroes exclusively as 'heroes' when they maintain the uncanny ability to destroy worlds with the flick of a finger. Indeed, there remains an unsettling, almost monstrous quality to superheroes whose corporeal and moral logics seem to extend beyond the intelligible, making them figures without proper place or home.

The inability to locate superheroes within human world orders is what marks their bodies as supreme sites of otherness, and in turn, what often makes them appealing to outcast or marginalized fan communities. Within the Western pop cultural imagination, superhero fans are typically understood as socially inept, white, cis-hetero male nerds who may assuage some of their masculine anxieties by identifying with or in relation to these figures. For such fans, superheroes may provide a temporary release from larger physical or emotional insecurities, represent ego ideals or sexual fantasies, or may even offer a space in which to embrace one's own felt sense of non-belonging. At least within conventional representations of these relationships, the outsider status of the superhero is experienced as an entirely white male affair and rarely are other types of viewers/readers/fans even considered.

However, given the robust and steadily diversifying landscape of contemporary superhero media, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the ways in which these figures are being taken up by artists and fans of colour, as well as by women and queer folx. For instance, Patty Jenkins became the first female director to helm an American superhero movie with the release of *Wonder Woman* in 2017. Jenkin's film also remains the biggest domestic opening for a female director. The year following, Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018) became the highest grossing superhero film ever made and the only one to be nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards. Notably, *Black Panther* costume designer Ruth E. Carter and production designer Hannah Beachler became the first artists of colour to be nominated for and to win Academy Awards in their respective categories. Most recently, Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck's *Captain Marvel* (2019) broke opening weekend box office records, surpassing expectation and inciting outrage from trolls on online review boards.

Even with this brief list of DC and Marvel Comics Universe highlights, it is clear that Western superhero culture is at a turning point. As of the late 2010s, there has been a palpable shift towards restorative superhero narratives that attempt to recuperate and carve out space for identities that have long gone underrepresented in this genre. It is not that contemporary superheroes serve an entirely 'new' ideological or political function; for instance, they continue to bring up questions of nation, governance, race, gender, sexuality, and the human. Rather, now more than ever they seem to be poised to address larger systemic histories of violence and cultural erasure for a mainstream/normative public. No longer relegated to Saturday morning cartoons or dime comics, these superheroes are quite literally the talk of Tinsel Town, and their impact—much like the mess they make while fighting—is growing exponentially. Take for instance the utter seismic wake of Coogler's *Black Panther*, which via its iconography and now-famous expression, "Wakanda forever," has become synonymous with projects of black empowerment, liberation, and recognition. The superhero genre has often been lambasted as worthless, juvenile and low art. However, its images and gestures are increasingly being mobilized in real-world political resistance—an astounding phenomenon that should continue to be explored. This is the cultural phenomenon that this inaugural issue has attempted to capture. To paraphrase an expression, "we aren't in Smallville anymore."

This foreword has meditated briefly on the Western comic book and cinematic superhero, but as you will see in the articles to follow, there is much more selection in this genre than meets the eye. In accordance with the mandate of *Panic at the Discourse*, this issue has sought to support new and innovative ways of theorizing that do not necessarily fit within traditional frameworks. Superheroes, as this foreword cues, are a messy business and demand a multi-directional approach that moves forward with a bit of trepidation, a pinch of bravery, and a smattering of courage. It is not necessarily easy to stare down a superhero, but if you can look them in the eye, they may just reveal a secret (identity) or two.

As the authors of this issue will show, the superhero genre and its multiple mediums are ripe for cultural analysis. For those unindoctrinated in these conversations, we hope that you use this issue as a primer and an opportunity to combat some potential reservations you may have regarding taste and value around such figures. As mentioned, superheroes have long since worn the supposedly shameful label of childish entertainment, apparently offering little by way of serious academic fodder. In response, scholars of comics, sequential art, film, media and beyond have written extensively on the political, intellectual and artistic merit of these texts, bringing superhero figures into the academy as valuable research pursuits.

For those more familiar with these dialogues, we invite you to use this opportunity to refract these characters through new lenses. An unquestionable binary of good versus evil guides many superhero values. Gender binaries also often go unchallenged in the genre and there has been a sordid history of gender-based character representations. Robyn Joffe's "Holding Out for a Hero(ine): An Examination of the Presentation and Treatment of Female Superheroes in

Marvel Movies" looks at depictions of the Marvel cinematic characters Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and Mystique to show how the postfeminist origin of the strong female character trope problematically represented superhero women variously though hypersexualization, infantilization and maternalization. Kaitlyn Adier Cummings' "Same Image, Different Lens: Revisiting the Critical Reception of Two Different Generations of Cinematic Superheroism" asks what superhero films do to be considered 'feminist' texts. The article examines the contexts of different generations of superheroine depiction and reception by looking at *Catwoman* (2004), *Elektra* (2005), *Wonder Woman* (2017), and *Incredibles 2* (2018).

While the superhero genre may have seen a positive increase in diverse representations, there is still considerable room for improvement. Nao Tomabechi's "Recycling the Other: The Role of Nostalgia in Superhero Comics' Orientalism" discusses how Asian portrayals in comics continue to be marked by Orientalist stereotypes and nostalgia for a manufactured past. The article examines the settings, characterizations, and otherness of DC Comics' Japanese hero Katana and Wolverine's storylines in Japan from Marvel Comics. James M. Elrod's "'I am also a we': The Interconnected, Intersectional Superheroes of Netflix's *Sense8*" examines how the representations of bodies and kinship-based subjectivities highlight queer people and people of colour as sources of heroic power. However, this intersectionality is also globally cosmopolitan, where neoliberal capitalism and its technologies threaten to uncritically flatten difference in national, racial, gendered, and sexual identities.

Turning to comics, Peter Cullen Bryan's "'I was swallowed by metaphor and digested by self-loathing': De-toxifying Masculinity in Gail Simone's *Secret Six*" discusses hypermasculine tropes found in characters typical to the superhero genre. In examining Gail Simone's depiction of Catman and Bane as adaptations, the article explores the possibility of redeeming characters and plots to healthier versions of masculinity. Joe Yang's "Salaryman Masculinity in *One-Punch Man*'s Kynical Narrative" examines the manga and anime to draw parallels between Japanese salaryman masculinity and superheroes, including the friction of the individual and socio-structural expectations of gender and systemic productivity.

Centring on contemporary politics, Megan Genovese's "Plot Twist or Plot Hole? Public Debate About *Secret Empire* and American Identity Crisis" contextualizes the 2017 Marvel Comic's reveal of a fascist Captain America in light of the 2016 American presidential election. The article uses political discourse analysis to examine the national identity crisis and its accompanying memory work. In "The Dissolving Panopticon: Surveillance Culture and Liquid Modernity in Spider-Man Media," Dave Stanley examines the various cinematic portrayals of Spider-Man in order to trace the development of surveillance technologies and culture in post-9/11 America.

All of the contributions to this issue are original and interesting contemplations on superheroes in contemporary media. On behalf of the editorial team, we are proud to have

produced this inaugural issue and hope that you enjoy engaging and grappling with these articles as much as we did. We sincerely thank Queen's University for their financial support for this new project.