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- 1 Gavaler, Chris. *Superhero Comics*
- 2 London and New York: Bloomsbury Comics Studies, 2017. Pp. 376. ISBN: 978-1-4742-2634-9
- 3 Katherine Marazi
- 4 Despite the ubiquity and current overabundance of superhero productions, academic publications and courses on superheroes are not as widespread. Fortunately, over the past decade traditional and online MOOC courses focused on superheroes as well as academic publications resulting from either conferences or individual research have grown in numbers and importance. One such publication, Chris Gavaler's *Superhero Comics*, aims to historically and thematically inform readers on the form, contexts and genre of superhero comics. Beginning with "What is a superhero comic?" a question most readers today may feel fairly confident in answering, Gavaler provides a historic and thematic account of just how complex the answer to this question is.
- 5 Gavaler adopts a genre approach focusing on "the tradition of superheroes in superhero comics" whilst examining "pre-comics characters to the extent that they maintain a defining influence on their comics descendants" (2). Terminology is insufficient in fully understanding what comics are. In light of the collaborative processes of writer, penciler, inker, colorist, and letterer the content of comic books as Gavaler states is "the product of complex and often overlapping creative processes" (4). What is even more intriguing is the idea as Gavaler argues that "a comic book has no single original" but is in fact "its multiple copies"(6). In order to provide an answer, Gavaler draws on the different ages that define superhero comic book periods viewed in juxtaposition with the Comics Code periods, the legal copyright and ownership issues mainly revolving around DC and Marvel as well as the financial and demographic figures of comics. Though a demanding book, Gavaler's style of writing as indicated in the backcover blurb is indeed accessible, easy-to-navigate, straight-forward and accompanied by a variety of examples.
- 6 Chapter One provides a historical overview of the pre-comic origins of superhero comics and is subdivided into that of the mythic, the imperial, the wellborn and the vigilante superhero. Gavaler calls attention to the universality of superheroes and examines the

claim that they are contemporary versions of ancient mythology from the perspectives of four universal topics: monomyths, memory processing, appeals of violence and children's cognitive and moral developmental levels. While Joseph Campbell's monomyth in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) is apparent in superhero narratives what is unique about superhero comic books is their ability to enact this monomyth weekly or monthly. Thus, the monomyth alone cannot fully cater to the universality of superheroes.

- 7 Aside from the monomyth, minimal counter-intuitiveness can also describe superheroes thus introducing a cognitive psychological perspective to account for similar stories across cultures, the powers superheroes have and their pan-cultural appeal much like that of fairy tales and fables. Gavaler also notes that the "superhero genre shares both the objection to and the extended focus on violence" (27) as it began as "an oxymoronic genre of sanitized hyperviolence, pleasing readers by avoiding direct representations of its most central subject matter" (28). Superheroes as problem solvers will resort to violence, a factor that is popular because it excites, provides justified reprisal or is simply universally understood. As Gavaler points out if superhero comics have achieved a level of universal myth it is one of "[a]n adolescent-focused micro-epic depicting individual transformation from the ordinary to the morally and minimally counterintuitively extraordinary through violence rendered in a paradoxically violence-obscuring style" (32).
- 8 The imperial superhero or at least traces of imperialism are evident in superheroes because the "imperial roots were established long before the comic book incarnations of the character type" and continue to "haunt" contemporary superheroes (34). The initial influences are evident in nineteenth century colonial British literature and more specifically with the character Spring-Heeled Jack who emerged during England's expansion as an imperial power and who encapsulated imperialistic, adventure and fantastic features that influenced the type of stories and characters to emerge in American superheroes. Similarly to Spring-Heeled Jack, Edgar Rice Burrough's John Carter and Tarzan personify American and British-American imperialism emphasizing the colonial frontier, transformation and the attitudes behind imperialistic power and authority. All three exhibit features that Superman displays, thus demonstrating their influence on superheroes.
- 9 In the 1950s and 1960s while superhero stories moved away from the frontier myth the feature of imperialism and the oriental remain. Gavaler informs that the imperial binary, though a defining trait, still persists causing tension in superheroes and results in what Claire Pitkethly terms a split that makes the characters "superhuman" (48) a matter that when coupled with superhero hybridity and racial anxiety leads to the wellborn superhero. Baroness Emma Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* inspired the dual-identity feature as well as the notion of hybridity and more specifically the wellborn hybrid evident in characters like Batman whilst perpetuating the eugenics movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Gavaler highlights that "[w]here the imperial binary [...] distanced the racial Other along a colonial periphery, eugenics figures the racial Other as the degenerate threatening the metropole from within" (51) and gives credence to the upper class white man championing the status quo as their inherited and justified right. Of course this mentality altered with the historic and social circumstances that appeared in the 1940s with Nazism.
- 10 Gavaler identifies the origin of supermen and more specifically hybrid and wellborn supermen and the influence of the eugenics movement in George Bernard Shaw's 1903

Man and Superman and Baroness Emma Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Gavaler then eloquently proceeds to an account of the eugenics movement and the matter of hybridity with sociopolitical historical accounts and how those were mirrored in literary samples such as Edgar Rice Burrough's *Tarzan of the Apes*, Frank L. Packard's *The Adventures of Jimmie Dale*, and Douglas Fairbank's *The Mask of Zorro*. While molecular biology and the study of genes led to the decline of the eugenics movement in some countries, the allure of the superman remained. Superman, Batman and even Captain America perpetuate the influence of eugenics and the dual identity in today's comicbook superheroes. Gavaler notes that the trope of vigilantism similarly grows from the same anti-democratic impulse that historically defined the eugenic superman. Gavaler informs that Thomas Dixon Jr.'s *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the actual KKK ideology evident in the post-Civil War period, the post-World War II period and the 1914-44 period influenced the vigilante superhero. Surprising as this may appear, Gavaler highlights that "the superhero incorporated tropes introduced by Dixon and literalized by real-world Klansmen, the genre also emerged from a culture that was turning against the Klan. As a paradoxical result, superheroes are vigilantes who battle, among other evils, vigilantism" (90).

- 11 Chapter Two examines the fascist hero and the historical context that saw the emergence of the first wave of superheroes of the Golden Age, mainly Superman. There is a correlation between the superhero genre and the war against fascism. The question of whether comics and superheroes are fascist received various responses in the early and mid-1940s and while superheroes may appear to battle fascist enemies and regimes they do display some common points. Gavaler states that in a general sense "fascism, like superheroism, champion acts of anti-democratically authoritarian violence committed in the name of the national good" (102). The main element that gives credence to this is both Shaw's connection between superman and eugenics as well as Fredric Nietzsche's *ubermensch* and how that was appropriated by Adolf Hitler. Siegel and Shuster's Superman however is meant to invert this notion and put distance between the superhero Superman and how the term was conceived before and appropriated by historical figures of that time. Thus, superhero comics were influenced by and mirrored historical and sociopolitical elements of their time.
- 12 Gavaler further explains that their drop in sales and popularity in addition to other factors was also due to the fact that "[i]f Superman was never simply a personification of democracy but was fascism redirected to defend democracy, then the contradiction could not be maintained after democracy no longer needed defending" (116). As a result, other genres rose to prominence after WWII and superheroes began to regain popularity in the 1960s due to revisions and reconceptions. Fredric Wertham's attack on superhero comics did not aid in superheroes regaining their popularity during the 1950s and early 1960s but even this poses as evidence of the strong ties superhero comics had with the sociopolitical and historical reality of those times and how they were considered capable of exacting their own messages and influence.
- 13 Continuing to draw the historical and thematic parallels, Gavaler moves to the MAD (mutually assured destruction, associated with Manhattan Project) superhero. Superheroes in the 1960s became more psychologically complex. The Marvel stories in this period are products of their political times. The Manichean dichotomy of good and evil evident in the Golden Age has shifted and according to John Donovan, "comics during the Cold War were a reflection of the concerns of Americans in a politically dynamic and

unstable world” (qtd. in Gavaler 128). Such examples include the Fantastic Four, the Atomic Knights, the Hulk, the Amazing Spider-Man, Thor, Ant-Man and Iron Man. In the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis, the popularity of some of these titles and atomic bomb themes waned. What is more, these superheroes stray from the type readers were familiar with in the Golden Age. The superheroes conceived in the post-Cuban missile crisis era and posing as the generation that is influenced by and coping with the aftermath are the X-Men followed by Daredevil. In the aftermath various titles such as the Fantastic Four and the Hulk were revised. Gavaler informs that the shift in the comics genre from melodrama to relative realism reflected the shifting attitudes in anxiety towards nuclear weapons (141).

- 14 During and in the aftermath of the Vietnam War more violent and morally ambiguous characters emerge such as the Punisher, Man-Thing and Wolverine. The Reagan-era did restore the Manichean rhetoric of WWII and nuclear fear – although relatively short-lived – began rising even more in the late 1970s and early to mid 1980s observable in titles such as Bill Sienkiewicz’s *Elektra: Assassin*, Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* and Frank Miller’s *Dark Knight Returns*. Other characters that followed in the mid-to-late 1980s such as *Miracleman*, *V for Vendetta* and *Swamp Thing* demonstrate how the early 1960s MAD superheroes infused certain tropes and revisions into the superhero genre in general. Drawing on Alin Rautoiu, Gavaler informs that to this day the theory of superhero comics consists of two distinct genres: the first contains anthropomorphized superheroes whose moral principle is that of equilibrium whereas the moral principle in the second one focuses on reshaping or destroying the original narrative (151).
- 15 Chapter Four, though not straying from historical events, places more emphasis on social and cultural impact. Beginning with the Black Superhero, Gavaler divides this section based on how the particular superhero was conceived and viewed in the different Comics Code periods. More specifically, black superheroes were nonexistent “for the first thirty years of the superhero comics genre, emerged in the late 1960s, suffered reductive racial conceptions and poor sales in the 1970s, and, as more black creators gained influence the respective comics characters grew in prominence and complexity during the 1980s, 1990s and early twenty-first century” (156). In spite of very few exceptions, such as Lee Falk’s Lothar in *Mandrake the Magician*, Will Eisner’s Ebony White in *The Spirit* and Whitewash Jones, the pre-Code era saw very few black superhero characters and when they do appear they for the most part serve as comic relief and are caricature representations. During the first Code era, the Comics Code states that: “[r]idicule or attack on religious or racial group is never permissible” thus leading to an “end of overtly racist caricatures and a shift towards more complex representations” (Gavaler 160). Revisions of these characters took place during or in some cases before actual historic events. For instance, the creation of Marvel’s well-known Black Panther was actually before the national Black Panther Party. Meanwhile, DC as Gavaler informs, prevented writers from introducing black superheroes and characters. The character Sam Wilson a.k.a. the Falcon is considered to be the first African-American superhero appearing beside Captain America. While more black writers entered the industry and more black superheroes began to appear, the majority were written as Gavaler notes by white male writers working off of shifting stereotypes and expressing ambivalent attitudes towards black political power (164).
- 16 In the second Code era spanning from the 1970s to the late 1980s more black writers and artists entered the industry and contributed to the continuation of characters such as

Black Panther and the Falcon but also to the creation of new ones such as Luke Cage, Reno Jones, Nubia and Blade the Vampire-Slayer. Black female characters also started to appear such as Tony Isabell and Arvell Jones' Misty Knight and Len Wein and Dave Cockrum's Storm in the X-Men. DC's first African-American superhero title *Black Lightning* premiered in 1977 while their first female African-American hero Vixen debuted in 1981. While the 1970s posed as a difficult period for black writers and creators in the industry as well as for sales of comics with black protagonists, the 1980s posed as a transitional moment. Representative characters of this transition are Marv Wolfman and George Perez's Cyborg, Storm, Bill Mantlo and Ed Hannigan's Cloak and Dagger, Roger Stern and John Romita, Jr.'s Captain Marvel and John Ostrander, Len Wein and John Byrne's Amanda Waller. During the third Code era spanning from the late 1980s to 2000 black writers grew in prominence. In the fourth Code era, from 2001 to the present, many characters were retconned: a black Captain America, Blue Marvel, Whitewash Jones, Cyborg, Crimson Avenger as a black woman, a Nick Fury based on Samuel L. Jackson, and Miles Morales to name but a few. Superhero comics readers, superhero characters and the creators in the industry have grown more diverse. Nevertheless, there is still an evident gender gulf both in creators and characters.

- 17 In the section titled the Gendered Superhero, Gavaler begins with an account of the superhero body in connection to costume so as to emphasize both physicality or rather hyper-physicality and the cultural ideology of *machismo* that was initially established in the Golden age of the superhero genre placing emphasis on masculinity. Gavaler informs that black men were already considered to be hyperembodied. Therefore, their respective costumes were more revealing and feminine-like so as to emasculate and conceal any excessive masculinity in comparison with white superheroes. The matter becomes even more complex for female characters. "Where men combine attractiveness and effectiveness, the two qualities are divorced and even opposed for women" (183). Even though attitudes toward female beauty have changed, this shift is not as apparent in the representation of female superheroes.
- 18 Gavaler highlights that "visual hyper-femininity correlates with the characters' shrunken narrative roles [and physical representations]" as opposed to the expanded roles of their male counterparts (185). Perhaps one of the exceptions is the Black Canary character, one who in the 1970s is even portrayed in combat action. Gavaler informs that in 1977 the Defenders were considered to be the first gender-balanced superhero team under writer David Kraft. Revisions of characters did occur, thus, mirroring the shifting attitudes of the times as evidenced in characters such as Phoenix, the Wasp, Invisible Woman, and Scarlet Witch. In the last half century until today "female superheroes have 'gained equal narrative footing,' but the change has paralleled an increase in hyper-sexualisation, as if the 'sheer power of the female superhero may require that she be hyper-feminine in order to not be seen as masculine'" (Gavaler 188). Exceptions to this are characters Jessica Jones and Carol Danvers a.k.a. Captain Marvel in the twenty-first century.
- 19 The matter of sexuality and its representation is also quite complex. Gavaler notes that "[b]y establishing a very particular hyper-masculine, able-bodied masculinity as an ideal, the male superhero body projects all other physical variations as inferior and so potentially antagonistic" (192). The superhero plot of physical domination in light of the aforementioned does encode a subtext of bisexuality arable for the representation of LGBTQ characters or queer readings of characters such as Batman and Robin. The Comics Code in spite of gay characters appearing in the 1980s [though openly gay characters

were still prohibited by the Code] and the early depictions of transgender characters in the mid-1970s being positive held that sexual abnormalities with regard to relationships are unacceptable so as to promote the heterosexual patriarchal family and marriage values. Of course, the increase in gay representation, gay rights and activism led to shifting mentalities and representations in the superhero genre. The Comics Code Authority actually “revised its guidelines in 1989 [so as to reverse its quarter-century [...] anti-gay mandates” (Gavaler 198). In 1991 there is the first overt and non-fantastical trans-character appearance of Wanda in *Sandman*, the Pied Piper character in *Flash* #53 and the character Northstar openly declares himself as gay in the 1992 *Alpha Flight* #106. Providing an extensive list of new characters and revised characters Gavaler highlights how the Deadpool character is probably the most prominent challenge to the traditional gender binaries by emphasizing pansexuality. Overall, the “history of black and LGBTQ superheroes demonstrates that superhero comics are rarely agents of cultural change [the comic book superhero does still serve the function of “white, male, heterosexual, cisgender, and non-disabled”] but, that once a social attitude has shifted, comics quickly follow and so reinforce the new status quo” (Gavaler 202).

- 20 The fifth chapter titled “Critical Uses” can be considered the most demanding in the book. Prior exposure to terminology and books on the language, grammar and syntax of comic books such as Scott McCloud’s could be considered useful. Nevertheless, the chapter provides ample images to illustrate descriptions, terminology and various points that are made. Gavaler draws our attention to the six tools necessary for visually analyzing superhero comics: “layout rhetoric, framing rhetoric, juxtapositional closure, page sentencing, image-text relationship and representational abstraction” (206). In addition to the detailed accounts and theoretical points Gavaler makes he further provides an extensive visual analysis of Frank Miller and Bill Sienkiewicz’s 1987 *Elektra: Assassin* accompanied by respective images and quoted text to demonstrate the application of the aforementioned six tools. Chapters such as this can prove quite useful in the comparison of comic book adaptations to films and television series demonstrating the differences and similarities between different media.
- 21 The sixth and final chapter “Key Texts” provides an annotated list of key works based on authorship and writer-artist collaborations. Other elements that define this list are: “aesthetic quality, historical impact, and medium innovation” (274). Genre is also taken into consideration. The practical limitations imposed require that only four works from each of the six-Code defined periods is chosen. Most if not all the titles are familiar due to the fact that Gavaler uses them as examples throughout the book. Avid comic book and graphic novel readers will most likely have read and be familiar with these titles already. For those who are just developing an interest in the superhero comic book medium this chapter also acts as a useful recommended reading list.
- 22 Overall, the unique contribution of Gavaler’s book is its ability to tie sociopolitical, economic and historical movements and events with superheroes and by extension ground their inception and existence to serious and integral cultural moments both in the U.S. and in other countries. The points where actual historical events and the inception of comic book superheroes intersect appear crucial mainly from the point of influence and how culturally-speaking superheroes perpetuate certain mentalities and ideologies or even challenge them. Upon reading this book one cannot consider superheroes as trivial, juvenile or as having nothing substantial to offer to literature, culture and media genres. In fact, Gavaler’s *Superhero Comics* reminds and highlights just

how important it is to view both the genre media and the superheroes in the cultural context that produces them.