Shelley Streeby   Heroism and Comics Form:
                         Feminist and Queer Speculations

Captain Marvel and the Art of Nostalgia. By Brian Cremins. Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi. 2016. xiv, 203 pp. Cloth, $65.00.

Frank Miller's Daredevil *and the Ends of Heroism*. By Paul Young. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press. 2016. xiii, 276 pp. Cloth, $90.00; paper, $27.95; e-book, $27.95.

Hellboy's World: Comics and Monsters on the Margins. By Scott Bukatman. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press. 2016. 263 pp. Paper, $24.95; e-book, $24.95.

Twelve-Cent Archie. By Bart Beaty. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press. 2015. ix, 221 pp. Cloth, $90.00; paper, $26.95; e-book, $26.95.

Instead of the disembodied abstraction that is typically the norm, I begin and end by remarking on my own embodiment as a white female scholar of popular culture reflecting on comics studies by reviewing four books written by white male scholars, all of whom make significant contributions in theorizing comics form. Queer theory teaches us to question the naturalization of norms, so while I observe that all four are male-authored texts that focus mostly on male characters, creators, and audiences, I do not assume bodies neatly match up with genders and sexualities. Instead, guided by queer of color critique, I emphasize each book's contributions in theorizing heroism and comics form while asking whether and how they engage, illuminate, limit, or even refuse analysis of intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and nation as intertwining social constructions. Three are studies of male superheroes. The fourth, Bart Beaty's *Twelve-Cent*

Archie, explores a world organized around a male character who is the antithesis of a hero: Archie is "a young man to whom things happen; he is not someone who makes things happen" (16). Overall, I am struck by the significance of gender (especially masculinities), sexuality (especially heterosexuality), race (especially whiteness), and nation (especially the United States) for the objects, creators, collaborations, audiences, and industries under discussion. On the other hand, imagining female, feminist, and queer readers and readings of comics is largely foreclosed, while maleness and masculinities are often reified and underexplored as historical constructs, even in work that makes significant contributions.

One of my guiding premises is that queer studies and especially queer of color critique have much to offer comics studies. As Siobhan Somerville (2014, 203) explains, *queer* since the 1980s functions both "as an umbrella term that refers to a range of sexual identities that are 'not straight'" and as an analytic that "calls into question the stability of any such categories of identity based on sexual orientation," thereby exposing the latter as constructions that "establish and police the line between the 'normal' and the 'abnormal.'" In addition to this guiding premise, I build on queer of color analysis modeled by scholars such as Roderick Ferguson, José Esteban Muñoz, and Fatima El-Tayeb, all of whom examine gender, race, sexuality, and nation as intertwining social constructions. Ferguson (2004, 149n1) defines queer of color critique as "a heterogeneous enterprise made up of women of color feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory, and queer critique" that interrogates such "social formations as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices." Ramzi Fawaz (2016, 32) further theorizes the post–World War II "superhero as a distinctly queer figure of twentieth-century popular culture" by approaching "popular fantasy and its political effects" from the perspective of queer theory, which "is a body of knowledge that concerns itself with the ways queer or non-normative figures generate alternative desires, bring into view unexpected objects of passionate attachment, and facilitate the production of novel forms of kinship and affiliation." Although none of the books I discuss here draws much or at all on queer theory, all take up comics form in ways

that both illuminate and swerve away from queer figures, alternative desires, unexpected objects of passionate attachment, and nonnormative social and sexual relations. The figure of the "little boy" as privileged subject and imagined reader and scenes of intergenerational transmission of comics among fathers, sons, and brothers also recur, suggesting that masculinities and relationships among men are central to almost all of these comics as well as the communities and networks that transmit their meanings.

The story of Captain Marvel and his alter ego Billy Batson, Brian Cremins tells us, "starts with a kid and his books" (3)—namely an editor and writer for Fawcett Publications, Bill Parker, who as a boy read about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table and later invented Captain Marvel. But Cremins focuses especially on cartoonist and critic C. C. Beck and writer Otto Binder as cocreators of "one of the best-selling characters of the 1940s" (8). By recovering Beck's theories of comics form in fanzines, letters, and other archival sources, Cremins does valuable work situating Beck as a figure "like [Will] Eisner" whose "body of work remains one of the great achievements in twentieth-century comics in the United States" (9). Cremins also explores Binder's career as a pulp science fiction writer and his invention of the animal character Mr. Tawny as his autobiographical surrogate. Here Cremins's remarks on the importance of fantasy and on animals as expressions of "a shadow self, one hidden from the world" (51–52) suggest that animals can function as queer figures, as in Jack Halberstam's (2011) work on animated animals. In a discussion of how Billy Batson's black valet, Steamboat, remains fixed in place while Billy's movement and mastery of spaces signal his heroism, Cremins also denaturalizes racial categories and explicitly names white supremacy as a problem. He foregrounds as exemplary the story of Steamboat's removal after objections from New York City junior high school students in the local Youthbuilders program. "If the form is as flexible and promising" as Eisner and Beck believed, Cremins argues, then it also "offers the means and opportunity" (103) to subvert racial stereotypes. Drawing on work in literature, psychology, and memory studies as well as fanzines, he examines relationships among the "medium of comics, the lure of nostalgia, and the art of memory" (4).

Cremins concentrates especially on Billy as "a fiction of lost innocence, a marker of the idealized notions of boyhood and masculinity

in America in the 1940s" (56). He assumes the comic targeted boy readers (and, during World War II, soldiers) who found appealing the story's fantasy of "sheltered innocence" (75). Cremins also analyzes the comic as an extension of the boys' adventure genre, which goes back to the nineteenth-century dime novel, when white boy adventurers, often accompanied by a subordinate person of color, explored exotic, often racialized spaces far from home (see Saxton 1991 and Streeby 2002). While boys and masculinity are the main focus of this study, Cremins dedicates it to his grandmother and cites cartoonist Trina Robbins's memories of her "childhood discovery" of Captain Marvel, Billy, and most significantly Captain Marvel's sister Mary as a "pretty major inspiration" for her own career (quoted on 13). Cremins's brief mention of fanzines publishing photos of children in Mary Marvel costumes made me wonder about girl fans, as did Beck's remark in a footnote about how much his daughter and granddaughter enjoyed the series. At the end, Cremins analyzes a 1981 photograph of himself, surrounded by other "white middle-class boys" (148) and wearing a *Shazam!* T-shirt with an image from the Captain Marvel–inspired Saturday morning cartoon. With no memory of its origins, he speculates about the significance of wearing a T-shirt "with a character created for children in the 1940s" and concludes "the weight of nostalgia is literal," for the boys had "inherited a nostalgia for the popular heroes of the generations that preceded us" (149) even though the author did not read the original comics until much later.

In Paul Young's monograph on Miller's *Daredevil*, on the other hand, the author centers his own responses as a twelve-year-old boy and teenage fan, which he, unlike Cremins, remembers very vividly, even describing his study as a "masochistic project" and an "exorcism" (18, 20). Starting with the question, "Why did Miller's Daredevil blow my twelve-year-old mind?" (5), Young admits he still fears that writing a book will not "purge" either "the images or the rotating feelings of attraction and apprehension they inspire" (9). As "wretched" as he finds Miller's gender politics especially, he is "still haunted by what those images showed me and what they meant to me beyond what they depicted" (10). In a dialogue between Young as a boy and his older self, he explores the "hold" the comic exerted on his imagination in order to "shed some light" on Miller's success "and what that success meant for the discourse of superhero comics past, present, and

future" (10). Throughout, Young frequently refers to his past as a minister's son growing up in small-town southern Iowa, foregrounding his and his brother's responses to comics, which continue today in their biweekly podcast, *To the Batpoles!* Along the way, Young also shows how Miller helped lead the creators' rights movement and contributed to the "mainstreaming of superhero comic books beyond their traditional market of children and lifelong fans" through "grim, violent, and/or erotic 'adult' content and successful Hollywood franchises" (5). Miller did so, Young suggests, through a range of formal strategies, including breaking with 1940s superhero conventions of reverence for life and modeling "looser, cartoonier drawing styles and non-Code-approved violence" (210). Young contends that Miller used subtlety, irony, and complexity to muddy the good/evil binary of previous superhero comics and raise thought-provoking questions about the relationship between justice and the law. In each chapter, Young credits Miller with achieving a self-consciousness and formal complexity that expose "the act of creating comics" (72) and the conventions of the genre.

Although Young incorporates insights from feminist film theory and at times addresses masculinity as a construct, I found myself a resisting reader when he moved from a particular, embodied, twelve-year-old, white-heterosexual-male "me" to a universalizing scholarly "we." Toward the end, Young alludes to Miller's saying, of *300*'s Spartans and vigilante superheroes such as Batman, that maybe "cultures need guys like that"; Young further clarifies, "I do mean guys—the reckless male narcissists who can't or won't make subtle distinctions between good and evil—to do the dirty work of 'preserving civilization as we know it'" (227). Clearly Young is criticizing the problem of reckless male narcissism and paternalistic investments in defending a racialized "civilization," but when he says Miller "lets us sit with that ugly possibility" and "squirm at our own enjoyment and/or disgust" (227), I feel the force of my own disidentification, as Muñoz (1999) put it. Although many female readers undoubtedly enjoy Miller's work, I am not part of the "us" who receives enjoyment, even if ambivalently mixed with disgust, from comics that explore whether white male narcissism is necessary or desirable to "civilization." I suspect that gender, sexuality, race, and nation shape such enjoyment in ways that also merit analysis and that considering their intersections in the field of superhero comics might teach us something about the construction of masculinities and imagined relationships among men.

Scott Bukatman also mentions his past as a young reader, but unlike Young he only started intensively reading Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* as a Stanford professor with research funds available to purchase new Dark Horse oversize library editions of the comics, which originally debuted in 1993. Bukatman insists he was not "returned to the world of my childhood," however, which he observes "isn't a place I especially want to revisit anyway" (6). Although he includes a chapter on convergences of technique and materiality in children's books and comics, he does not single out the figure of the boy reader, instead emphasizing how color can "provide a space apart that absorbs a reader" and "provides an antidote to pedantry" (99), enabling a "nonlinear mode of reading" (100). Bukatman suggests that *Hellboy* deviates from many other superhero comics in making its forensic detective protagonist "our surrogate" rather than "a figure of identification," such that "our interest is deflected or dispersed into the world itself" (198). Bukatman also emphasizes Mignola's "handmade ethos" (109) and "increasingly non-naturalistic" art, with its "refreshing attention to—and pushing of—the formal properties of the medium of comics" (9). Arguing that Mignola's art is not strongly shaped by a realism primarily indebted to cinema and television (9), Bukatman turns to a variety of media, "children's books especially, but also sculpture, pulp fiction, cinema, graphic design, painting, and medieval manuscripts" to "understand effects or possibilities in the medium of comics and to find vocabularies that will help articulate what it is that comics do" (10).

For readers seeking to explore queer possibilities in this beautifully illustrated volume, Bukatman's emphasis on *Hellboy* as "a comic steeped in the heretofore taboo genre of supernatural horror" (47) might be one place to start, since horror and the gothic are privileged genres in queer studies. The connections to Lovecraftian weird fiction and the occult detective could also open up questions about sexuality, gender, race, and nation, as could Bukatman's comparison of Hellboy to James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking, who is "able to cross between civilization and destiny, retaining the morals of white culture while avoiding its decadence" (74). Hellboy's resistance to following his destiny might be understood as a queer deviation: "Resisting one's destiny is hard and lonely work—those horns can grow back" (77). Mignola's fondness for "nonchronological stories and his use of nonlinear narrational devices" (181) might also be illuminated by recent work on queer time by Elizabeth Freeman, Halberstam, and others.

Gender and sexuality are rarely the explicit focus, though openings pop up here and there, such as a footnote where Mignola explains that he felt he needed more female characters but "couldn't draw" them since he was "terrible at drawing women" (227). Elsewhere, Mignola says he was surprised to discover that many of *Hellboy*'s fans are women and girls; it would be interesting to know more about audiences and to test the hypothesis that Mignola's focus on nonnaturalistic elements that work in ways other than through identification may enable female and queer affiliations and pleasures.

While the three books above focus on superheroes, Beaty's *Twelve-Cent Archie* explores "one of the most lowbrow examples of a particularly lowbrow art form" (3): "nostalgic" and "completely out of fashion" Archie, whose comics sold millions of copies a month in the 1960s and early 1970s (4). Although *Archie* superhero comics were briefly introduced, they lasted only sixteen issues collectively. Beaty calls this a failed "experiment" (195) since "an action hero" is something Archie is not, for *Archie* is "a comic about nothing" (192). But Beaty argues that, far from being a defect, this everydayness was one of the comic's great virtues: Archie was "the quintessential everyman—the typical American teen" (17) and *Archie* comics played with "the possibilities of everyday life in middle America, taken to certain logical or narrative extremes" (20). Beaty claims the greatness of *Archie* comics was inseparable from their nonliterary qualities as well as their attention to the quotidian. For instance, artist Harry Lucey was "one of the great masters of comic-book storytelling through body language" (21), known for "the amazing pliability of his characters and variety of their poses" (13), which supports Beaty's claim that body language is another way comics are closer to the visual arts than to literature. Contending that "scholars have focused nearly exclusively on those works that can be most easily reconciled within the traditions of literary greatness . . . or those of contemporary cultural politics," Beaty charges that such "cultural cherry-picking" leaves "enormous gaps in both the history and cultural analysis of comics" by excluding "the genuinely popular" (5) in the form of "children's comics and humor comics." These comics, he suggests, were "replete" with "self-referential formal play": they included "wordless comics, metareferential comics, and avant-garde and abstract visual tendencies" (6). Thus Beaty hopes to right "the scholarly wrongs done to Archie" by

"addressing the works as both typical and exceptional" during Lucey's 1961–69 tenure as lead artist (6), works in which Beaty discovered "a level of complexity and interest that was totally unexpected." The comics' form—"their lack of continuity, their brevity, and their independent functioning within a larger narrative system"—contributed to that complexity, and Beaty especially praises "the efficacy and cogency of the interrelated short-story comics form as a significant alternative to graphic novels self-consciously modeled on literary parameters" (8). Indeed, one of the many pleasures of reading *Twelve-Cent Archie* is its exemplification of what we might call such a queer nonlinearity. Like the comics he studies, Beaty's book is nonlinear and can be read in any order, while each of his chapters is "like every Archie story," which can "exist independently of the rest" (7).

Beaty addresses these comics' queer potential most explicitly in his remarks on Jughead, who he suggests is asexual but whose "disdain for women" is often "read as a suggestion of queerness" (64). Beaty rejects such a reading since he finds no evidence that Jughead desires Archie and understands the couple instead as an "asexual male pairing" (65). If, however, we conceive of queerness not (only) as an identity but (also) as an analytic that denaturalizes socially and historically constructed identities, then a queer reading of Jughead's asexuality is certainly possible. Instead, Beaty emphasizes how the male creators of *Archie* comics centered an asymmetrical love triangle on Archie, Betty, and Veronica, thereby creating a "visual pleasure" that was "intended for a male heterosexual reader" (140), so much so that there is a "clear connection between the sales success of Archie comics and the degree of sexualization of Betty and Veronica" (141). He observes that Riverdale is "almost completely free of mothers and surrogate mothers," Betty and Veronica are physically identical except for hair color and Betty's ponytail, and a range of male body types exist while there is only one female body type. At the same time, he acknowledges *Archie* comics were "always popular with a young female audience" and speculates that the launch of *Archie's Girls: Betty and Veronica* in 1950 "heightened that appeal" (14). Concluding that *Archie* comics were antifeminist despite enjoying a "high proportion of female readers" (142), Beaty imagines girls could enjoy Betty and Veronica without emulating their behavior since theories of "resistant reading" teach us that people do not necessarily internalize what they read (141).

But while white girls were situated within antifeminist stories created by men, Beaty notes the absence of nonwhite characters in *Archie* comics, which resolutely ignored the social transformations of the civil rights era. Indeed, "Riverdale in the 1960s was a wish-dream of white privilege and normative sexualities, where all difference could be banished" (31). Reflecting on his own childhood in Canada, Beaty observes that "Riverdale was Edenic for a white kid growing up in a well-to-do suburb of Toronto in the 1970s," a version of his own "privileged world, only better." Although Beaty criticizes the normalization of whiteness in *Archie* comics, he embraces their pleasures. He ends the book by remarking on his enjoyment in watching his own son, who is now the same age Beaty was when he read his first *Archie*s, raptly immersing himself "in the world of Riverdale, just as I used to do" (212).

Beaty's speculation about Archie's female audience and the whiteness of *Archie* comics made me reflect on my own experiences reading them. I was born in 1963 in Ottumwa, Iowa, a deindustrializing small city that was then mostly white, though now home to a significant minority of Latina/os, and that is about forty-five minutes northeast of where Young grew up. I recall as a six-year-old buying *Little Archie* and *Hot Stuff* comics after lifting loose change from around the house, then biking around the neighborhood, stopping intermittently to read them covertly before my crime was discovered. *Little Archie* appeared from 1956 to 1983, thereby outlasting the 1972–74 collapse of *Archie* comics sales, and in 1969 I was reading them at the apex of their popularity. When I try to remember why they were so appealing, along with the color, the art, and the humor, I think of their cheapness (you could buy them with stolen change), portability (you could roll them up and carry them even when riding a bike), and most of all their ubiquity and easy availability (you could purchase them at the grocery store and many other places in my working-class town). Reading matter wasn't always easy to come by, and I remember urging my mother to buy them for me at the checkout stand partly because they were there and cheap enough that she might do it even though I had three little brothers also clamoring for things and my parents had a hard time getting by. Soon I moved on to *Mad* and *Cracked* and had mostly lost interest in *Archie* by my teens. As a twelve-year-old, I enjoyed the live-action *Shazam!* television show that preceded the

Saturday morning animated series depicted on Cremins's T-shirt, mostly because lead actor Michael Gray was a handsome teen idol often featured in *Flip* and *Tiger Beat* pinups. I was also drawn to *Isis*, a *Shazam!* spin-off featuring the ancient Egyptian superhero resurrected in the body of a female schoolteacher. I remember thinking *Archie* comics were corny and nostalgic for a fake America that never existed, but like Beaty I loved Lucey's art, and the love triangle meant two girls were crucial to the stories, which attracted me even though I didn't like either girl. As a working-class white girl, I disliked wealthy Veronica as everyone did but did not identify with Betty either, probably because she was blond and I was already baffled by how everyone thought blond girls were the prettiest for some weird reason, which I would later understand as white supremacy.

As a teen, I was drawn to the exciting visuals and alternative family teams that included women in *The Fantastic Four* and *X-Men* after spending hours combing through the cardboard boxes of a local store downtown that sold coins and comics to collectors. By the time I went off to college, I had fallen in love with the independent comics that suddenly appeared both in the local head shop across the bridge from the factory in Ottumwa and in my college town of Cambridge, Massachusetts, especially Los Bros Hernandez's classic *Love and Rockets*, which wrapped up science fiction, punk, and badass girls all in one gorgeous package. I especially adored Jaime Hernandez's Maggie the Mechanic stories, and since Lucey's *Archie* comics were a major influence on Jaime, my *Archie* fandom came full circle. In college and ever since, talking about comics with Chris Cunningham, a white gay man from Palestine, Texas, became one of my greatest pleasures. He shared with me how in a homophobic place he was sustained as a teen by the male bodies and queer families in the superhero comics I loved so much. I conclude with this autoethnographic fragment in order to suggest there are still many possibilities for enjoying and analyzing queer figures, alternative desires, unexpected objects of passionate attachment, and queer and nonnormative affiliations and kinship even in comics created by straight white men and aimed mostly at a transgenerational white male audience. And in thinking about form and heroism in comics studies today, there are still many questions left to ask about intersections of sexuality, gender, race, and nation.

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