ENG 140J: The Superhero Narrative

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After completing my Ph.D., but before finding a permanent position at the College of Coastal Georgia, I had the good fortune to adjunct for a time in the English department of my alma mater, the University of California, Riverside. I describe adjuncting as "good fortune" because, despite the terrible working conditions of most adjuncts across the country, UCR is blessed with both a union and a creative, sympathetic chair of the English Department. The former worked to ensure a living wage for adjuncts, while the second, Dr. Deborah Willis, understood that in order for a Ph.D. graduate to find a tenure-track position, that individual needs to have designed and taught upper-division courses. Dr. Willis was also sympathetic to the popularity of comics and graphic novels, and she knew from my dissertation and years of coursework that superhero comics were my particular field. I was also just coming off teaching a successful class on "Comics and Graphic Novels in America and Britain." Further, UCR had and—thanks to the hard work of librarians like Melissa Conway and faculty like Rob Latham— continues to have the Eaton Collection, a wonderful resource of science fiction, fantasy, and dystopian fiction, which also happens to include about 70,000 comics. Thus it was that, in early 2011, I was asked if I would like to teach a second upper division English course on comics, and of course, I enthusiastically agreed.

The course number I was assigned was English 140J: Modes of Narrative. Course titles and descriptions are notoriously vague, often crafted to be easily manipulated. I was encouraged to do just about anything I wanted with this course, but the title struck me as a window of opportunity. Perhaps this was a chance to talk not just about comics but, rather, about the superhero across form: film, television, prose fiction, and more. With this in mind, I crafted a course which took the superhero comic as a baseline, against which we might measure all the other forms into which the superhero has expanded. This resulted in two questions: "What is the superhero narrative?" and "How does it change when it moves to different forms?" These questions shaped everything that came after.

There are many good academic books which survey the superhero comic, although *The Superhero Reader*, which I would otherwise

certainly have used, had not yet been published. But, I was aware of no satisfactory text that covered the superhero genre across media, and it seemed clear to me that I would need to piece together my reading list from many different sources. My first book, adapted from my dissertation, was more or less done at this point and was in the process of publication, so while I was not specifically looking for a new book project, this struck me as a good candidate. Perhaps, in the best academic tradition, I could use this class as a way of laying the groundwork for an eventual publication, a textbook useful for teaching the superhero across form. This personal and professional goal informed much of what followed as I drafted a very broad outline of the book and began selecting useful primary sources which would serve both in the classroom and in the manuscript. I settled on "The Superhero Narrative" as my title, and the class filled quickly to over sixty students, almost all juniors and seniors in the English bachelor's program. With so many students, I was assigned a teaching assistant to help grade papers; at the time, Ian Ross was a graduate student in the department whom I had not previously met, but he also worked with comics, specifically in the area of black masculinities, and he would prove a wonderful asset to the course.[1]

Most of the UC system uses quarters rather than semesters, and UCR is no exception. So, I had only ten weeks for the course. I immediately broke it up into five two-week segments, each focused around one building block in my tentative sketch of five not-necessarily-sequential elements of the superhero narrative: Origin, Nemesis, Love, Friendship, and "Death."

> • Origin: The origin of power seemed like a good place to start. Is the superhero, as Malvolio says in *Twelfth Night*, born to his powers, does he acquire them, or does he have them thrust upon him? How do these stories differ?
> • Nemesis: Superheroes fight supervillains and, especially in forms other than comics, the villain seems especially tied to the hero's origin and identity. Because of this, it seemed appropriate to enter the conversation about the adversary earlier in the semester rather than later.
> • Love: In the early comics which defined the genre, love was always a threat to the superheroic career, an obstacle which had to be rejected or avoided. But, as the superhero audience has aged, love is increasingly reconciled and integrated so that it becomes possible to be a superhero and have a rewarding romantic life at the same time.
> • Friendship: Perhaps the most nebulous of the five categories I began the course with, Friendship was intended to interrogate the interaction of the superhero with other superheroes. This is part of the developing complexity of superhero narratives; the hero no longer acts in isolation but, rather, becomes part of a community of superheroes.
> • "Death": At first, it might seem that there is a vast and perhaps infinite gulf between the maturation of the superhero as seen in Friendship and his or her

eventual death, if such a death ever comes. But as other scholars have pointed out,[2] the superhero is, in fact, constantly undergoing symbolic death as he loses his powers, rejects the superhero way of life, or is "killed" only to rise again. It was for this reason that I placed "Death" in quotes, to emphasize the fact that death, even more so than the rest of the superhero narrative, is very much an impermanent condition. This makes it, in fact, the very opposite of the final end normally meant by the word death.

It is important to note that I was, and remain, keenly aware of the assumptions in this five-part list, and I never imagined that these stages were the only way to organize the superhero narrative. Rather, they served as a first draft, a working document from which, with the help of my students and many hours of classroom interrogation, a more precise and nuanced narrative could be developed. However, with these five elements of the superhero narrative in mind, I could now begin assembling a reading list that would illustrate it. As anyone who has taught a comics course well knows, a lot of comics can be read and discussed in a very short time; this very teachability is one of the great advantages of using comics and graphic novels in the classroom. However, this can also create obstacles if, for example, the reading list becomes so long as to be prohibitively expensive. Further, the nature of the course suggested that I would need to sample many different characters across many different comics and other sources; should I require students to buy a large collection of, say, Superman stories if I really only wanted to use one 20-page issue from it? Fortunately, access to comics continues to improve for everyone as more and more titles are added to online databases like Comixology or Marvel's incredibly useful Digital Unlimited service. But, I had one other precious advantage: the Eaton Collection. I had the ability to assign comics long out of print and not collected online, and students could read these texts in UCR's special collection library.

Origins

From the onset it was clear that, before I could talk about the origin of any particular superhero, I would have to spend some time covering the origin of the superhero itself, as a genre. This was the first of many subtopics I would find myself covering during the course, worked into the initial five-act outline. In the classroom, I tend to emphasize discussion of texts and a give-and-take with students over lectures or a slide presentation, but in this case, it seemed appropriate for a one-class history of the superhero, one of the few slide presentations I prepared for this course. With it, I assigned an excerpt from Peter Coogan's work on the definition of the superhero, an article reprinted in *The Comics Studies Reader*. Coogan's definition of the superhero as a pro-social individual with powers, a mission, and an identity (or at least two out of three) is not unproblematic and it is not the only definition, but it provided a place for our conversation to start. The most useful problematic example in this conversation

was almost certainly Buffy the Vampire Slayer, a character most of my students recognized (unlike, say, the Phantom, another problematic character for Coogan) and who, in her own TV show, says, "I'm like a super hero or something."[3] And yet, according to Coogan, Buffy is not a superhero because, while she does have powers, a mission, and an identity as "The Slayer," she more clearly fits into other genres, such as the monster hunter or the broader horror genre. This idea—that genres are exclusive, and that a character might be excluded from superhero status because she is a better fit in another genre—was received very skeptically, and I am the first to admit that I did little to try to convince my students of who was right and who was wrong, preferring to acknowledge the diversity of opinions on this matter and present the question of genre as one which scholars continually debate, not always profitably.

But, no matter how long I put off the question of actual superhero origin stories, eventually I had to pick some examples, and I settled on three which I consider especially archetypal: that of Superman (born to greatness), Batman (acquires greatness), and Spider-Man (has greatness thrust upon him). But even this posed new problems because, of course, every superhero origin has been told and re-told multiple times, in shorter or longer form, and in various media. Therefore, I felt obliged to "pair" each origin, beginning with the original version and then contrasting it with a more recent retelling: *Superman: The Movie*, Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli's *Batman: Year One*, and Brian Michael Bendis and Mark Bagley's *Ultimate Spider-Man*. These last two I found useful because, while Miller and Bendis have both had enormous influence on the cinematic versions of their characters, this influence manifests out of the two texts in very different ways. *Year One* was written before Hollywood's re-engagement with the superhero genre in the wake of the success of *Blade* and the first *X-Men* film, but Bendis' revision of Spider-Man, part of the "widescreen" Ultimate brand, is more expressly cinematic. Thus, while Nolan's Batman films (and to a lesser extent those of Tim Burton) have referenced *Year One*, *Ultimate Spider-Man* was written *to be referenced*. Miller was writing to construct a new Batman comic-book universe in the wake of the *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. Bendis was making a new cinematic one in the wake of Bryan Singer's *X-Men*. As to my choice of *Superman: The Movie*, I confess to being an unrepentant fan of this film, but I hope it justifies itself as the first commercially successful superhero movie and, more important, a consciously cinematic one. That is, *Superman: The Movie* does not try to recreate a particular story from the comics, nor does it try to recreate a comic book "sensibility" or visual style (whatever that may be). Its views of Krypton and of the cornfields of Kansas are sweeping glories of cinematography, but at the same time, Christopher Reeve portrays Superman in a conspicuously natural and unaffected way so that he never poses fists on hips with his feet apart in what, even today, people think of as the "Superman pose." The comedic banter between Luthor and his dysfunctional family is utterly alien to the comic's page, both in the way these characters are represented and in their reliance on comedic timing.

In order to discuss repeated re-writes of the superhero origin story, it was necessary to introduce the vocabulary of the retcon, and I decided to do this through the use of A. David Lewis's article, "The Secret Untold Relationship of Biblical Midrash and Comic Book Retcon," which appeared in the *International Journal of Comic Art* (*IJOCA*) and illustrates the retcon using Nick Fury. Now, *IJOCA* is the oldest ongoing journal in comics studies and one of the most respected, but it is not available online. This meant that, even though my students were obliged to write reviews of two different academic articles of their choice during the semester, they would never look at *IJOCA* when they went looking for articles to review. I, therefore, made the decision to try assigning articles from *IJOCA* whenever I went looking for critical support in the class with an eye towards both giving them exposure to an excellent resource while also ensuring that I would not be "stealing" articles from the various online sources I knew they would find on their own (such as *ImageText* or academia.edu, which provided the bulk of the articles my students wound up reviewing).

But some articles were so vital that I could not overlook them, and Eco's "The Myth of Superman" was definitely in this category, as it provided a platform to discuss the difference between serial narratives and finite ones. The impact of the form of the serial narrative on the comic book superhero cannot be overstated, and in this, the comic book superhero contrasts well with the prose novel and many superhero films that are generally self-contained and finite. However, even as films and television have become increasingly serial in form—manifested in the interlocking films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe or television shows in the post-*Lost* era—comics have become less so. Instead, they are conceived and written with an eye towards the trade paperback volume that sits on the bookstore shelf and tells a complete story with few loose ends. Eco's article also allowed me to usefully foreshadow the idea of "Death" months before we would eventually get to it.

Nemesis

If superhero comics can be broadly divided between those which were written first with initially less, and then with increasingly more, cinematic awareness, nowhere is this difference more visible than in the absence or presence of the nemesis in the hero's origin story. In the first appearance of Superman, Batman, or Spider-Man, and even in the influential *Year One*, the famous archenemy does not appear. But, when Spider-Man's origin is expanded and re-told into a trade-sized mini-epic perfect for the big screen, now the Green Goblin is the secret mastermind behind the plot and, indeed, behind Peter's transformation. Tim Burton famously elided the characters of Joker and Joe Chill so that he and Batman could actually get into an on-screen debate over who created whom. I chose to illustrate this link between the origin of the cinematic hero with his nemesis using M. Knight Shyamalan's *Unbreakable*, a film which also offers many other extremely interesting moments of comparison between the comic and cinematic superhero narrative. As Bruce Willis's character

of David Dunn increasingly comes to accept and even embrace his nature as a superhero (a word never actually spoken in the movie), his world transforms subtly into a comic. His clothing alters, so his rain-slicker elongates into a cape and deep hood. He and Samuel Jackson's "Mr. Glass" find themselves increasingly framed—doorways, lockers, television sets, and windows become the panels of their comic book world. This effect culminates in one of the final sequences, when David investigates the room in which a murder has taken place and he does not appear to move. Instead, the wind blows a white curtain across the fixed camera and, each time the curtain falls back, David has shifted position. The white curtain has become our gutter and David is now an object of sequential art.

For primary texts, I went to four books which placed the villain character in the lead, a position from which he could garner the sympathy of the reader. Over two weeks, the students read *Soon I Will Be Invincible*, a short novel that, in addition to featuring a villain protagonist, is a pastiche and parody of well-known superhero comic tropes, illustrating many concepts we had already discussed and others we would return to later in the course. But, because it is a first-person prose novel, its narration brings a "life of the mind" to the villain protagonist that is inherently both more realistic than the presentations of a villain in comics while also being completely alien to the visual requirements of the comics form. We read Moore and Bolland's *The Killing Joke*, Roger Stern and Mike Mignola's *Triumph and Torment* (the story in which Doctor Doom rescues his mother from Hell with the help of Doctor Strange), and *X-Men* 150, the issue in which Magneto was retconned to be Jewish, written by Chris Claremont and drawn by Dave Cockrum. Ana Gal's article, "The Social Modes of Heroization and Vilification in *Bram Stoker's Dracula*" was useful in two ways. It introduced the work of Orin Klapp, who describes the very notion of heroism and villainy as essentially hegemonic tools for othering and who also breaks villainy down into three useful sub-types, the Persecutor, the Traitor, and the Moresflouter. Gal's work was also especially useful in a class about superheroes across genre because her article highlights the way that the visual form of comics accentuates Dracula's villainy and makes him a less ambiguous character than he is in Stoker. We supplemented our reading of Magneto with Kathrin Bower's essay, "Holocaust Avengers: From 'The Master Race' to 'Magneto,'" which usefully places the character into the larger context of comics portrayals of Jews traumatized by the Holocaust.

Introducing World War II and Magneto's suddenly-revealed status as a Holocaust survivor became an opportunity to present the charge that superhero comics are inherently fascist, an accusation which has been repeated by a great many highly respected artists and critics, including Gary Groth and Art Spiegelman. Craig Fisher's article, "Fantastic Fascism: Jack Kirby, Nazi Aesthetics, and Thewelweit's Male Fantasies," was used to introduce the concepts of fascist art to the students and, simultaneously, present a vivid and, to my mind, very compelling defense of the superhero genre using art by Jack Kirby. Kirby, of course, was an outspoken critic of fascism in his Fourth World saga and other books, with the purest expression of

that fascism being the Anti-Life Equation, the object of Darkseid's quest and an ultimate weapon that does not kill but, instead, enslaves. For Kirby and, by extension, the genre which he did so much to create and define, the superhero is not about rigidity and male power, but about freedom and movement. Indeed, a superhero like Big Barda is most heroic when she is in motion, a living expression of creative and imaginative power.

Designing and teaching this class was an incredible opportunity for me and I was very grateful for it. One way to express this gratitude was to "pay it forward," expanding the opportunity presented by the course to my colleagues and peers. My teaching assistant for this class also worked with comics, and so I made a space in the schedule for Ian to lecture on a topic of his choice, something he might use to further his own professional interests and add to his own teaching experience. Fortunately for us all, he chose to speak on black masculinity and superhero comics, and we assigned a number of readings on this topic. A chapter of Kahan and Stewart's book *Caped Crusaders 101* surveyed the portrayal of black characters in superhero comics. Jeffrey Brown outlined the "cool pose," and short excerpts from *Alias*, *Ultimates*, and *Spawn* that illustrated the concepts put forward in these readings. We added Michael van Dyke's article, "What's Going On? Black Identity in the Marvel Age," because it included a criticism of Kirby's run on *Black Panther*, a useful counterpoint to the defense of Kirby we had seen in Fisher. I describe Ross' topic as a fortunate choice because I was keenly aware how little time I had set aside in the ten week quarter to talk about issues of race. UCR is a cultural studies department, and I was trained on issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. It would have been easy to organize a superhero course along those lines, but I had instead taken a structuralist approach. The readings Ian assigned could provide only a taste of the complex issues of race embedded in the superhero genre, but that could be said of just about anything else in the course as well, and we had to do the best we could with the short time we had available.

Love

It was precisely to address some of these weaknesses that I began our conversation on love with academic criticism which specifically addressed queer superheroes and LGBT issues. By pairing two articles which concerned Marvel's *Rawhide Kid* limited series, a book specifically marketed as "gay" to great public fanfare and national news, I tried to illustrate the fact that comics scholarship is an ongoing conversation. Robert Lendrum's article, "Queering Super-Manhood: Superhero Masculinity, Camp and Public Relations as a Textual Framework," was referenced and critiqued by Frank Bamlett in "The Confluence of Heroism, Sissyhood, and Camp in The *Rawhide Kid: Slap Leather*." The academic conversation is, of course, always the ideal, but because there are so few journals and publishers devoted to comics scholarship, these conversations are actually easier to find and easier to track. When a comics scholar picks, say,

a single character or creator, it is still possible to read every academic text ever published on that character, even if it is Batman.

More traditional (that is, heteronormative) sexuality was illustrated with *Fantastic Four Annual* 3, the wedding of Reed Richards and Sue Storm, which functions largely as an excuse for every villain in Marvel Comics to show up and pick a fight. As mentioned earlier, for decades of superhero comics, women were portrayed as an obstacle, a hindrance that blocked the superhero narrative from moving forward. Heroes were forced to either consciously reject love or else were so oafishly clumsy at romance that love was forever beyond their grasp. When love was attained, it had to end, lest the satisfied hero settle down to that worst of all fates: a happy life. Gwen Stacy's death in *Amazing Spider-Man* 121 is a perfect example of this mechanism at work. Spider-Man's later romantic fortunes are also a good example of the trend towards superheroes who are married and with family, a trend presumably linked to the aging demographics for the typical buyer of comic books. In other words, as the audience for superhero comics changed from adolescents to married adults with children, creators responded with high-profile marriages (Superman, Spider-Man) and an increasing emphasis on the superhero "family." Within a few years, however, cinematic universes became tails wagging the comics dog, and superheroes who are also married parents seems to have been a temporary fad, at least for the mainstream publishers. Instead, the marriages of comic book superheroes have been erased or annulled, and in cinema, once again the essential descriptor of the superhero's love life is "tragic."

I didn't know all this at the time, however, and in an effort to give some example of this new optimism when it came to superhero romance, we read Kurt Busiek's *Astro City* stories "Dinner at Eight" and "The Nearness of You." In the first, Samaritan and Winged Justice try to have a date but are constantly interrupted by reports of emergencies around the world. Busiek, however, is writing in a revisionist style which honors past stories while updating them, and so both this and his wonderfully poignant "The Nearness of You" end on essentially optimistic, upbeat moments. The constant alarms of the world hesitate for just one moment; in that moment, Samaritan and Winged Justice get their kiss and, with it, hope for the future.

Much in the same way that we took time out from the 5-act structure to examine race, it was also essential to examine gender. After all, nearly all the characters we had so far examined were male, and I began with a slide presentation on the Superheroine Narrative that outlined the history of female superheroes, including topics such as fridging and the dominance of the spin-off heroine, female characters who are merely extensions of the male. Now, this course was taught in 2011, and while Marvel and DC have both made grand, public gestures lately in an attempt to court that half of the American population they have so far neglected, these efforts had barely begun in 2011. Instead, we read *Ultra: 7 Days*, an Image book written and drawn by the Luna Brothers but aimed at a female audience. *Ultra* has been described as "*Sex in the City* with tights" (Goldstein), and my students did not disagree with that appraisal. However, we mostly read the book as a way to discuss the ways that romantic re-

lationships altered when the superhero was female rather than male. To illustrate the changing and hopefully more enlightened way women could be portrayed in comics, I gave the students Alan Moore's notes to Rob Liefeld on the relaunch of the character of Glory; to many, Moore will seem a curious choice to illustrate feminist concerns, but in these notes, Moore speaks frankly on the sexual subtexts in Wonder Woman, the misogynistic representation of women in '90s Image comics, and on a kind of ideal (to Moore at least) female superhero that would symbolize and embody feminine power. Of course, Glory vanished before she could truly be born; instead, much of the material found in these notes would eventually be worked into Moore's later character Promethea. We finished our discussion of the superheroine with a screening of the "Ultra Woman" episode of *The Adventures of Lois & Clark*, in which Superman's powers are transferred to Teri Hatcher's Lois Lane. This remarkable episode is at once terribly cliché (Ultra Woman's costume is pink) and wonderfully critical (Lois uses her new X-Ray Vision to approvingly ogle Clark's ass).

Friendship

The original intent behind a two-week section on the topic of friendship in the superhero narrative had been to illustrate the way in which, as the superhero story becomes increasingly complex, the hero is welcomed into a new social community of other heroes. In practice, however, we read no comics on this topic and instead examined it solely by reflection on other media. *Thor* had just opened nationwide, so I took the opportunity to assign it as weekend watching; it must be remembered that at this time the Marvel Cinematic Universe was still developing, and the best film representations of friendship among superheroes (*Guardians of the Galaxy, Avengers*) had not yet appeared. Instead, the students began the single longest and most difficult text for the class, Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. Our conversation on this book was spread out over three class periods, roughly demarcated by the three parts of the book itself: the meeting of Joe and Sammy and their initial success, Joe's enlistment and assignment to the Antarctic listening post, and the reunion years later in New York. Much time was spent unpacking this terrifically dense and rewarding novel, tying it in with, for example, our earlier conversations on the origins of the superhero genre and the early influences upon it, the queer subtext, and the changing role of love and family.

We had examined superhero comics, film, television, and the prose novel, but *Spider-Man: Turn Off The Dark* was in the news at this time being plagued with financial and technical challenges. Therefore, I was eager to spend at least a little time examining the superhero musical. We could not travel to Broadway, alas, and made do with a *60 Minutes* special on the show and two Joss Whedon musicals: "Once More With Feeling," the famous musical episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Dr. Horrible's Sing Along Blog*. Buffy's "Scooby Gang" usefully broadened our conversations on friendship and family in the superhero narrative, and *Dr. Horrible* brought back

much of our earlier reading on the supervillain narrative and how it differed from that of the hero, even when the villain was sympathetic.

But the single, most well-received day of instruction, not just in this course but in my career to this day, was the hour in which I invited two real life superheroes (RLS) to class to talk about themselves and their experiences. San Diego is home to a very active RLS community, with at least one film project attempting to document the (mostly) men and (a very few) women who donned homemade uniforms and went out onto the city streets as self-proclaimed superheroes.[4] I reached out to the Xtreme Justice League and two of their members—Mr. Xtreme and the Urban Avenger—came to my class. I had told the students that we would be having guests that day and had assigned some reading material on the RLS movement as preparation, so although the students did not know for certain who was coming, they certainly had an idea. My large classroom was standing room only, as students brought their friends and made an event out of it.

The conversation was modeled on an episode of *Inside the Actor's Studio*. I gave a brief introduction to the two men and allowed them to speak about themselves. I asked a few questions designed to explore the five building blocks of the superhero narrative: how did they get started, why are there so few "real supervillains," and what is the impact of this lifestyle on love and family? The entire conversation was rich with contradiction and irony. For example, Phoenix Jones had recently achieved some nationwide attention, and when asked about him, Mr. Xtreme diplomatically suggested that Jones was in the RLS business for ego gratification rather than out of a desire to do good. At the same time, however, both men were happy to sign the poster advertising the upcoming documentary based on their team. Urban Avenger and Mr. Xtreme told sincere stories about the people they had helped and the good work they had done, not just on the streets of downtown where the homeless are hungry and where drunken brawls are common, but in children's hospitals and charities. They cut ridiculous figures—one student described Xtreme's green outfit and domed helmet as reminiscent of a Ninja Turtle—but they didn't care. Students were able to ask several questions until we finally ran out of time. I ended the session by asking them both how their stories would one day end. In a serious tone, Mr. Xtreme assured us that he would die in costume, on the job. Afterwards, many students asked for pictures and both men spent a while posing with them. A couple of my students had been tweeting the entire session; it was classroom as spectacle.

As Mr. Xtreme, the Urban Avenger (in a red hoodie and gas mask), and the entire RLS movement illustrated, costume was incredibly important to the superhero narrative. Indeed, no one could be accepted as a real superhero without one. We, therefore, spent (too little) time discussing superhero costuming and fashion, using Vicki Caraminas's article, "No Capes! Uber Fashion and How Luck Favors the Prepared," as a place to start. An entire course could be designed around this topic, and I now regret not including at least that key sequence from *Watchmen* in which Rorschach declares, "Give me back my

face!" In 2011, it seemed that there was a clear difference between costumes in comics and in film, with the latter more inspired by *The Matrix* than anything else, but three years later I am struck by how much these initial differences have been effaced. In Bryan Singer's original *X-Men*, Cyclops could joke about putting Wolverine in "yellow spandex," but by *Days of Future Past*, his black armored uniform could be broken up with gold bands and stripes, which are already evocative of his classic costume.

Death

   Finally, we turned to the question of "death" in superhero comics, reading *The Death of Captain Marvel*, the Dark Phoenix saga, "Kraven's Last Hunt," and the final issue of DC's 90's-era Vigilante, in which the lead character, a former district attorney turned crime fighter, takes his own life. We watched *Spider-Man 2*, which I chose not only because it is the best of the Spider-Man films but because it illustrates symbolic death, echoing Stan Lee's famous "Spider-Man No More!" sequence in *Amazing Spider-Man 50*. But the film also integrates superhero romance, so that by the end of the film, Peter can be a superhero and happily in love at the same time. Kraven's story was profitable on many levels, for it not only includes scenes of Spider-Man dying, being buried, and rising from the dead, but it also illustrates a super-villain narrative and ends in suicide, making it the perfect counter-point to Vigilante 50. For critical tools, we read an entire round table on the topic from *IJOCA*, including articles by Arnold Blumberg and Abraham Kawa (both writing on Gwen Stacy, whose death we had already read), and Wilbur Farley and Jose Alaniz (whose work was extremely helpful in our understanding and analysis of Captain Marvel). In addition to laying a solid groundwork on the topic of death and the superhero, this also became a way to swiftly attack a number of issues we had neglected previously in the course, including the entire "Golden/Silver/Bronze Age" fallacy, a categorization created by collectors rather than creators, and for this reason a system more confusing than useful. A close examination of the Dark Phoenix story illuminated the hazards of the "assembly line" style of comic production, so that one page added by John Byrne (in which Phoenix destroys the planet of the broccoli-people) has tremendous ramifications down the line (when Jim Shooter insists that, for this crime, she must die).
   It might be appropriate to briefly outline some of the other requirements and assignments students were given during the course. There were two exams, a midterm and a final, both composed entirely of short and long essay questions. Short essay questions were specific in nature, asking the students to write about particular texts they had read or which we had spoken about in class. Long essay questions were more open-ended, posing a broad question that required multiple readings and allowing the students to use, for their answer, whatever texts they knew best. I have already mentioned that students were obliged to write two reviews of academic articles; this was an attempt to get them working on research early, for their term paper due at the end of the course. Term papers could have, as their

topic, any aspect of the superhero narrative, but I was certain that everyone would write on film if given the opportunity, so I instead required that the paper maintain the course's assumption of the comics form as a baseline from which other superhero narratives departed and sometimes returned. In other words, students could write a paper about the *Arkham Asylum* games in contrast to Batman comics, but not on the games in isolation. We also had a discussion board component to the course; the students self-selected one of the five sections of the course and, for that section, were obligated to participate and guide the online conversations for those two weeks. They were not obligated to participate in the discussion group when their section was not active, though some did anyway. This format was something of an experiment for me, and I did it in an attempt to help guide the student into his or her research project early. That is, if a student had chosen "Nemesis" as her/his discussion group, this would prompt the student to start thinking, talking, and writing about the question of supervillains long before a final paper on *Arkham Asylum* was drafted.

There is no question that as I prepare to teach this course again at my new institution, I would do some things differently. Recent films have explored many of the issues relevant to the course, and without access to the Eaton Collection, several of the books I had assigned are now very hard for students to legally access. Many of the issues I explored as "subtopics" in the class, like LGBT concerns or superhero costuming, might be better introduced with different academic articles. Certainly, because I am back in a semester system instead of quarters, I would have the luxury of five more weeks (twelve and a half precious hours) of instruction and conversation. In hindsight, I might rename "Friendship" to simply "Community," and use this as a way to discuss not just the superhero's interaction with other heroes, but as a part of society at large. And, without doubt, there are sections of *The Superhero Reader* which I would now assign, enough to make it a required text for the course. But, I remain convinced of my original realization: that there is no single academic book which profitably introduces and analyzes the superhero genre across form. My first teaching of The Superhero Narrative went a long way towards building an outline of what that book would look like, but an actual draft of the manuscript has had to wait.

Notes

[1] Congratulations are now in order for Dr. Ian Ross.

[2] The Ever-Ending Battle research project, organized by A. David Lewis and including the work of many other scholars and critics, was published in the International Journal of Comic Art and presented at various conferences. Their online footprint can still be found in the Internet Archive using captionbox.net/eeb/

[3] The line is from the episode "Tabula Rasa", season six.

[4] At the time Mr Xtreme and the Urban Avenger came to my class, they had just finished their involvement with Michael Barnett's documentary Superheroes, which was first broadcast on HBO in 2011.

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