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Western Kentucky University, azade.najafian@gmail.com

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ETHNOGRAPHY OF READING COMIC BOOKS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty in the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Azadeh Najafian

May 2021

ETHNOGRAPHY OF READING COMIC BOOKS

Date Recommended 4/2/2021

Katherine Horigan

Katherine Horigan (Apr 8, 2021 10:03 CDT)

Kate Parker Horigan, Director of Thesis

Tim Evans

Tim Evans (Apr 8, 2021 10:44 CDT)

Timothy Evans

Andy Kolovos

Andy Kolovos



Associate Provost for Research and Graduate Education

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Azadeh Najafian

May 2021

86 pages

Directed by: Kate Parker Horigan, Timothy Evans, and Andy Kolovos

Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology

Western Kentucky University

This thesis explores why adults read comic books. This research used the ethnographic method and interviewing eleven people, four women, seven male, as its primary source. Based on information and common themes gathered from interviews, I built this thesis into one introduction, three body chapters, and a conclusion.

In the first chapter, I argued that comics could function the same as myths and explained this function and related examples under the “mythic effect” name. In the second chapter, I discussed how my informants use reading comics as a means to escape their everyday lives and how sometimes this escapism carries a nostalgic feeling for some of them. At the end of this chapter, I demonstrated that reading comics can be considered a stigmatized activity and how my informants react to the common stereotypes around reading comics. The third chapter is about the relationship between comics and gender. I analyzed this relationship in two parts: representation of gender in comics and reading comics as a gendered activity.

I concluded that reading comics for my informants has more meanings than just entertainment. It can inspire them to make changes in the real world and alter their perspective. Also, media and the internet have significant roles in broadening comics’ audiences and challenging gender dynamics and stereotypes around reading comics.

Introduction

My first encounter with comic books goes back to about fifteen years ago. I was a Bachelor's student in Persian literature when I learned about anti-heroes in postmodern texts. The idea that ordinary people with all their weaknesses can be heroes of their own stories fascinated me. Right about that time, I became introduced to Batman, first via Christopher Nolan's first movie of his Batman trilogy, *Batman Begins*. Batman was the best example of what I expected of an anti-hero. He was a human with big fears and wounds, but he learned how to use and shift this dark energy to make changes. *The Dark Knight* changed my perspective on the classic binary of good/evil. Finding a gray area in moral stands was Batman's gift to my life.

Since then, I have become a huge fan of superheroes and superhero movies. When we moved to the United States, I discovered other forms of comic books and graphic novels. However, I realized a different atmosphere around comic books and comic books' fans, which I had not noticed before. First, my friends, especially some of my Iranian friends, have begun to tease me about this strange taste in books and movies, although I could see my popularity among their children has been increasing (even I heard from one of my friends that her daughter told her: "Azadeh is so cool!") Then I came to understand all the jokes and scenes I have heard and watched in many famous movies and series (*Big Bang Theory* is one to name mainly because the core of the series is about four brilliant scientists and comic book fans). My situation was very odd. Because of my background education, everyone expects me to read and follow profound texts and literature, but comic books!? It would not make sense to people who knew me. When I started thinking

about writing a thesis, the first question which popped up in my mind was why adults read comic books. And that was when this project started to shape.

Scott McCloud defines comics as "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1993:9). Based on this definition, comics are visual narratives in sequences and panels, transmitting information in aesthetic ways. It is important to notice that comics is a medium, not "a lowbrow genre of either art or literature" (Chute 2017:2). A graphic novel is a term coined by Will Eisner in 1964. Eisner had an advertising intention for inventing this term. He wanted his comic book, *A Contract with God*, to be received in bookstores, among other regular books, instead of being published and sold by the comics industry. He came up with this term to emphasize his book's literary qualities. Since then, the graphic novel has been used to describe "expressive, long-form narrative comics" (19) even though technically there are no differences between comics and graphic novels except that graphic novel has a more positive connotation and indicates "book-length comics for a sophisticated adult audience" (19-20). On the other hand, Webtoon is a digital comic that originated in South Korea:

The Webtoon is one of the representative genres of Korean pop culture showing Korean digital culture, consumed transnationally with the expansion of global digital networks. The term Webtoon, a combination of the words web and cartoon, was coined when Korea created webcomics or manhwa published online. Webtoons are also known as mobile cartoons, digital comics, web manhwa in Korean, and keitai manga in Japanese...Korea has produced a variety of Webtoons since 2003 that continue to change the way of reading comics, such as through highlighting images more than texts. The spread of smart-phones contributed to expanding the platform of the Webtoon industry (Jang & Song 2017:174).

Webtoon is a new generation of comics that has recently been very popular worldwide, mainly because of its significant visual elements.

These three visual narratives, comic books, graphic novels, and Webtoons, are art that, like other kinds of art, have their history, style, and creation techniques. Also, as art they reflect social and cultural elements and issues. By looking into these three variations on the comics medium and learning from their fans, we can trace where people's interests lie and how this expressive form of culture evolves on different levels to reach people from different backgrounds and genders. In this research, I use the term “comics” to address comic books, graphic novels, and Webtoons. Whenever it is necessary to distinguish them for analyzing purposes, I will specify the name of the respective form.

There are many ways to categorize research around comics and their fans. This research only focuses on readers of comic books/graphic novels/ Webtoons. The center of this thesis is how individuals interpret comics. Therefore, the act of reading was an essential element for finding the right fan to interview. Another central issue that I need to explain is that, although the primary question of this research was why adults read comics, I do not intend to generalize my informants' answers or try to find one ultimate correct answer for this question. This research reaches specific individuals to realize their perspectives and tendencies as only examples of a prominent American cultural group.

Many types of research about comics concentrate on fan groups or fandom; examples include Gary Alan Fine in "The Folklore of Small Things: Tradition in Group Culture," Bill Ellis in "What Bronies See When They Brohoof: Queering Animation on the Dark and Evil Internet," Markus Altena Davidsen in "From Star Wars to Jediism: The Emergence of Fiction Based Religion," and Mathew Hale in "Cosplay: Intertextuality,

Public Text, and the Body Fantastic," which is a part of his Ph.D. dissertation research, focused on fan groups, material culture (costumes), and identity. Mikel J. Koven, in "Folklore Studies and Popular Film and Television: A Necessary Critical Survey," points out similarities between Folk and popular film studies. But I decided to make a shift in perspective and put more emphasis on an individual's interpretations of comic books. One of the reasons I made this decision was that usually, people who are members of a fan group have many similar interests and perspectives. I wanted to explore more diverse ideas rather than focusing on one fan group with similar outcomes.

Literature review

There have been debates on whether comics and studying them belong to literature, cultural studies, or folklore. Some scholars from these disciplines argue that the boundaries between these fields are not as straightforward as they used to be, and sometimes studying some subjects can create overlaps between these fields. For example, Frank de Caro and Rosan A. Jordan in *Re-Situating Folklore: Folk Contexts and Twentieth-Century Literature and Art*, and Cristina Bacchilega in "Folklore and Literature" embark on relationships between folklore and literature. De Caro and Jordan defined the relationship between literature and folklore under the term "re-situation": "the process by which folklore is somehow taken from its position in a sociocultural context (de-situation) and placed into a literary or artistic context, whether by description, textual quotation, or some other means (such as the adaptation of a plot structure)" (2004:6).

Bacchilega discusses the concept of folklore in/as/and literature in her article. Focusing on intertextuality and decontextualization, she uses examples of rewriting fairy tales to make her point:

The dynamics and implications of entextualizing, decontextualizing and recontextualizing *in social life* as well as in literature and in scholarship greatly enriches folklore and literature perspectives on intertextuality. Whether we are focusing on oral and literary fairy tales only, or we are studying fairytale discourse in a variety of cultural practices, it matters how the fairy-tale "text" is constructed, who does the defining, in relation to which other definitions, in relations to which other genres and cultural fields, in relation to which social behaviors, in what kind of historical conjunctures, and for whose benefit. And if the text is plural so are knowledges: we learn not only about, but from other communities while remaining anchored in our own. This kind of folklore and literature lens helps to see a social formation as multiple and connected, an individual as a network, a teller as an artist, an artist as a manipulator of received knowledge, and metalanguages (in the plural) as a type of speech that exercises authority and also involves playing with and across traditions (2012:456).

She sees folklore as a lens for reading texts in social and cultural contexts. This unique perspective can be adopted for reading any texts, as well as comics.

More importantly, in *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*, Michael Dylan Foster argues that popular cultural studies and folklore cover many similar subjects with different viewpoints. Foster demonstrates that popular culture defines itself as a culture of everyday life and concerns with groups' (folks) productions such as music, festivals, etc. Sometimes, folk culture and popular culture are used interchangeably as if they are a subset of each other (2015:7-8). He concludes that "folk culture and popular culture are magically, paradoxically, two different sides of the same surface, never intersecting because they are always already intersecting. Intertextuality, transtextuality, mediation, remediation, and multiplatform functionality suggest that genres of expression are temporary and porous and that transmission and transformation between them is the rule rather than the exception"(26).

Also, Daniel Peretti, in the chapter "Comics as Folklore," in the same book, discusses the features and opportunities which comic books provide for folk studies.

Peretti reviews scholarly works about comic books that are done by folklorists and non-folklorists. He uses Superman as an example to prove his point. Peretti argues that comics can be considered folklore because there are many similarities between these two. Comic books contain folklore motifs and use epic heroes. Also, he argues that since comic books usually have more than one creator and are collectively owned stories, they can be counted as oral traditional epics. Besides, comic book characters, such as Superman, have become a part of oral traditions such as jokes and material cultures such as cosplays and festivals. He concludes that "the American experience has blended folklore and popular culture to the extent that to comprehensively study one requires attention to the other" (2015:117). Reviewing these studies shows that analyzing comics either as text, narrative, or cultural expression is an interdisciplinary study. Changing the viewpoint and focus of examination can put studying comics in each of these disciplines. My approach is a folkloristic focus sometimes drawing from literary and cultural studies.

The medium of comics is a way of storytelling and a form of narrative. As I mentioned in the selected studies above, comics benefit from folk culture and genres, especially folk heroes and epics. Additional scholarship makes connections between comics and myth. Leontine Jefferies, in his dissertation "Powerful Wounds: The Essential Mythological Formations for the Superhero/heroine Archetype in American Popular Culture," and Josef Peter Muszynski also in his dissertation "Structure, Form, and Content: Mythology and Comics," talk about the similarities between comic book and myth in structure and content. Both argue that comics, the same as myth, feeds from human unconscious and archetypes and contains significant binary subjects such as good/evil and light/darkness.

Muszynski believes that myth is a narrative, which has roots in our unconscious and brings opposites together on a metaphoric level. Myth contains infinite possibilities and expresses thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors via storytelling: "The imaginal and the metaphorical in myths help to structure how we view our past, live in the present, and move forward into the future" (2014:12). Then he argues that the unity of opposites can create a mythical narrative (35). He concludes that tensions between oppositions can be found in comics as a central theme. Also, the importance of time and space is another mutual element between comics and myths: "Myths occur in spaces apart from the reality of the world. The function of the comics panel is to separate space similarly. The other primary structure of myth is time, which also shapes comics form and content" (37-8). Based on this argument, comics can have the same structure as myths or other sacred narratives. I will extend this argument, drawing on the perspectives of comic readers, to show how comics can also have similar functions as myth. For example, they can tell us what is right and what is evil, what we should do or not do in specific situations, and, more importantly, inspire their readers to change the real world. In the chapters to come, I will show how comics inspired my informants to change their lives or their perspective on a topic.

Leontine Jefferies's dissertation explains how comic books, especially superhero comics, inspire and transform life events for their readers. Jefferies argues that superheroes are reincarnations of gods and demi-gods from classic mythology. In this way, Jefferies refers to psychology, especially Jung's archetype thesis, to prove superheroes, the same as gods and demi-gods, are a shadow of culture. They represent individuals' wounds, trauma, and flaws. That is the reason they are relatable and mirror of

a community culture, "the culture in which we live and create as a reflection of our desires, needs, wants, problems, and history. Seeing our world played out in the fantasy realm brings a realization of who we are and what we hope to become" (2017:10).

Though I am not taking a Jungian approach like Jefferies does, I ask comic book readers about how they interpret superhero and other types of comics, and they explain how they view comic characters as models of how they want to live.

Gender and its representation are another focus of study in researches related to comic books. In his dissertation "New Heroes: Gender, Race, Fans, and Comic Book Superheroes," Jeffrey A. Brown considers reading comic books as a social act. He worked with a group of middle school and teenage comic book fans in Toronto. He analyzed how they understand and interpreted race and gender in comic books, especially Milestone comics. His research focused more on fan groups and how Western masculinity ideas are reproduced through superhero comic books, and how audiences react to them. Although the main focus of Brown's work is on under-aged fan group readers, his use of ethnography as a research method is beneficial to my thesis. Brown's study ties to the concept of identity and race, which is not the focus of this research.

Also, Laticia Marshal, in her thesis "Representation of Women and Minorities in Groups in Comic Books," focuses on textual analysis and the concept of intersectionality to examine the cultural and historical aspects within character representations in comic books. She concludes that the representation of women and minorities in comic books is very much based on cultural norms, expectations, and stereotypes in American society. Marshal's work is a textual analysis, but her research results are applicable for a better understanding of gender in my study.

In "Graphic Novels and Multimodal Literacy: A Reader Response Study," Heidi Kay Hammond demonstrates how middle schoolers read and interpret graphic novels and how graphic novels can improve students' reading skills. Although Hammond's research results are related to education and literacy, her ethnographic method signified her study. Using the reception theory to analyze her informants' answers put this research on the border of literary and cultural studies. As tempting as it is to apply reception theory, I found it far from my research purpose. It seems that at some point, this theory imposes the idea of active reading and resistance to gathered data, as opposed to my ethnographic approach which allowed my conclusions to evolve based on interview responses.

Besides these research studies on specific subjects in the comic books world, I should mention Hillary Chute's book *Why Comics?* She discusses comics' history and demonstrates ten essential elements in comics, which are disaster, superhero, sex, suburbs, cities, punk, illness and disability, girls, war, and the concept of queer life. This study helped me look into comics in the context of culture and history and social issues.

Research Questions and Methods

The questions which this research attempts to answer are as follows:

1. How/why do adults read comics? How do they describe the experience of reading comics?
2. How do adults interpret comics?
3. How do adults learn about comics (for example, do media play a role)?
3. How does gender play a role in why and how adults read, interpret, and learn about comics?

4. How do comics shape their readers' identities and behaviors in the real world?

I used the ethnographic snowball method to answer these questions based on finding and interviewing comics fans. I got my IRB approval for conducting interview-based research at the end of June 2020. As a comics fan, I started by interviewing a couple of my friends and asked them to introduce me to other fans. But my breakthrough in finding informants was when I asked Andy Kolovos to recommend some people to talk to. I found my other informants in this way and by making connections with my new informants. I interviewed eleven people, including four women and seven men. My informants' ages are between 24 to 51. So although my conclusions are limited to the people I was able to interview, I have different kinds of experiences and interpretations related to comics included in this pool of interviewees.

Because of the pandemic situation, all the interviews were conducted via zoom. I usually sent the electronic consent form 24 hours before our zoom meeting to give my informants enough time to think, ask questions, or change their minds. The interviews' lengths are between 30 minutes to two and a half hours. Even though I did not know most of my informants and never have had a chance to meet them in person and built rapport, I found them surprisingly friendly and easy to talk to. I did not have any difficulties persuading most of them to talk. Maybe because they knew Andy or were close friends with him, they trusted me and accepted me as a respectful gesture. Besides that, I guess the interview subject, talking about comics, was very appealing to them. They repeatedly told me they can talk about comic books forever and even asked me to contact them if I have any other follow-up questions, which I did. After I finished asking my questions and

ending the formal interview format, most of them were curious about me and my project. Even though they did not say it explicitly, I could see that they were fascinated by the fact that an international female graduate student is interested in comics and writing about it. They asked me about my favorite comics and characters, and we discussed our similar and different viewpoints. I believe the idea that their favorite hobby, which has been looked down on in many cases, is the subject of academic research, was the most important reason for them to cooperate eagerly. I had specific questions to ask, which I mentioned in the last part, but I tried to let them talk freely about the topic that I asked and not push them to go on or stop. I asked about when and what was the first comic they read, how they learned about comics, why they are still reading them, how they describe the experience of reading comics, and who are their favorite superhero and villain. I used some of these questions, such as the last one, as a discussion opener to persuade them to discuss their deeper thoughts related to social and cultural issues. For example, I requested an explanation when some of the informants said their favorite superhero is Spiderman. They answered because he is also human, with the same issues and flaws as them. Even one of them went to more details and said he could understand how Spiderman, as a sweating teenager in the classroom, feels because he was one. I came to realize that even though my research focus is not only on superhero comics, the way my informants sympathize with each superhero or villain can tell a lot about why as an adult, they still read comics. To supplement my virtual interviews, I have tried to keep in touch with my informants through social media, especially Facebook and Facebook fan pages. In this way, I could add some context to my research and better understand what my informants talk about.

Chapter outline

This thesis is organized into an introduction, three body chapters, and a conclusion. Based on data that I gathered from interviewing eleven informants, the chapters are in the following order. In the first chapter, I argue that comics as a form of narrative have a similar function as myths. Comics, the same as many sacred narratives, can inspire their readers to change the real world or alter their perspectives about life. I support this hypothesis by using examples from my informants and how reading comics affected their lives. I begin by explaining two prominent definitions of myth, from William Bascom and Roland Barthes, and describing how my interviewees' relationships to comics falls somewhere between these two understandings. I go on to explain how comics have had an effect on these readers' lives. For example, I asked my informant Cole if he ever read comics that inspired him to change his life or alter his perspective about something in the real world. Cole, without any hesitation, answered that he always says that his parents and Superman were responsible for his upbringing. When I asked how, he explained that he read one of Superman's issues about death penalty when he was a child. Superman discussed in a television interview why he is against the death penalty. As a child, these panels of the comic stuck with him, and until now, he is against the death penalty as an adult with a specific moral stand about this social issue. As a sacred narrative, the Superman story posed a significant stand and inspired Cole to shape his personality and change his perspective in the real world. Almost all of my informants have their own unique story about how reading comics changed and impacted their lives. I will discuss these effects under two categories: superhero comics and non-superhero comics.

In the second chapter, I discuss three significant common issues in the interviews: escapism, nostalgia, and stigma. Many of my informants described reading comics as an act of escapism. Reading comics provides them an opportunity to withdraw from the real world momentarily. For instance, Tara told me that she usually reads comics at the end of the day and prefers comics about real-life stories, rather than superheroes or fantasy comics, because these kinds of comics help her to relax for half an hour and clear her mind from her life's concerns and issues. I will use Hufford's idea of "enclave" to explain this experience. In Hufford's words, enclave is "regions belonging to one province of meaning enclosed by another. The enclave, anchored in one space and time, opens onto a reality anchored in another space and time" (1992:8) Enclave protects the readers from the real world's burden for a short time and provides them with joy, new identity, and friendship in this alternative reality. Reading comics creates an enclave, a bubble, in which its readers seek refuge to it for escaping shortly from the real world's issues and problems.

Some of the informants indicated that reading comics is very nostalgic for them. It takes them back to their childhood and simpler times. Folklorists such as Cashman worked with the concept of nostalgia. Since Cashman's term "critical nostalgia" is primarily related to material culture, it will not be instrumental in this study. Furthermore, my informants, such as Cole and John, described their feeling when reading comics as a nostalgic act, but they do not describe this nostalgia in a critical sense as Cashman does. In these cases, nostalgia is also a way of escaping reality for my informants.

Another issue that I will discuss in the second chapter is the idea of stigma and its evolution around comics fans. Comics fans used to be called "nerd" or "geek." Some of

my informants had/have this experience. But the meaning of these labels has changed during the last decade. Nerd and geek now have relatively positive connotations. For example, John, who is in his mid-40s, told me that when he was a teenager, he was bothered by others because he was a comics fan. On the contrary, when I asked Sean, who is in his mid-20s if he ever has been called nerd, he explained that nerd means being very smart these days. This word is mainly used as an adjective to describe people involved with computer science and knowledge; it is a good thing to call you nerd or geek. Two comics fans from different generations described the same experience in different ways. In this part, I also show that being a comics fan can be a stigmatized activity because it stereotypes people and forces them to face different discrimination levels.

In the third chapter, I will examine the concept of gender, its representation in comics, and how my informants react to those representations and interpret them. I will discuss these issues under two main parts: representation of gender in comics, and reading comics as a gendered activity. There are some differences between male and female answers. One of my informants mentioned that usually, reading comics is a "boys' club." He explained that these days this idea has changed. When I asked one of the female informants about this term, she agreed and added that even today, women do not like to openly join this club because the idea of having free time and enjoying a hobby such as reading comics is still seen as manly. Women should not have free time, or they have to spend their free time with their families, not with reading comics. I analyze the relationship between gender and comics based on these and more examples from the interviews.

Finally, in the conclusion, I focus more on closing my research results based on the research questions.

First Chapter

Comics as Sacred Narrative

Comic is a form of illustrated, visual narrative. As I discussed in the introduction, some scholars compare comics' content and characters to myth. They argued that comics borrowed some folk narrative elements, especially myths, such as epic heroes and contrast between good/ evil and light/dark. Also, the scholars discussed that comics, the same as myths, draw from the human unconscious and reflect humans' conflicts, fears, and even beliefs. These analyses are focused on structural and content similarities between myths and comics and built a strong case that comics and myths are compatible. However, they do not take into account how readers of comics view them. Therefore, I will construct my argument in this chapter to add another similarity between comics and myths. My focal point is not content or structural analysis, and my argument is not to say that comics and myths are equivalent; rather, I will concentrate on how comics can function in ways similar to myths for some people who read them. This research's center is on how my informants interact with comics and explain their importance in their lives.

Folklorists have characterized myth in different ways. William Bascom's definition has been a recurring point of reference. Bascom defines myths as

Prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith; they are taught to be believed; and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief. Myths are the embodiment of dogma; they are usually sacred; and they are often associated with theology and ritual. Their main characters are not usually human beings, but they often have human attributes; they are animals, deities, or culture heroes, whose actions are set in an earlier world, when the earth was different from what it is today, or in another world such as the sky or underworld (1965:4).

Bascom's definition indicates three important elements that define myth: Time, characters, function. Myth happened in remote past, its characters are gods or demi-gods, and it functions as a sacred and authoritative text.

On the other hand, Roland Barthes provides a post-structuralist and a very open definition of myth. He describes myth as a type of speech (1972: 109). He argues that the way that myth can utter the message is more important than the message's object (109). "Myth is a type of speech defined by its intention much more than by its literal sense; and that in spite of this, its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, made absent by its literal sense" (124). In Barthes's definition, subjective and personal interpretation has a significant role. In his view, many objects of modern life can be read and interpreted as myths. Thompson and Schrempf explain Barthes's perspective about myth:

In Barthes's analyses, the concept of 'myth' is not far from the Marxist concepts of 'mystification' and 'false consciousness', both of which points to the ways in which societies invent ideologies to justify and camouflage political and economic exploitation. Barthes notion of myth is also related to the term as it is sometimes used by political scientists and commentators to mean something like 'propaganda', except that the latter often implies dissemination from a governmental agency, while Barthes sees the middle class as happily contributing to the creation of mythology (Thompson and Schrempf 2020: 148).

Both demonstrate myth as socially and culturally situated but Barthes's definition is more focused on function and meaning of a text as a myth, while Bascom's is more focused on formal elements such as character and setting.

If we consider Bascom's narrow and Barthes's broad definitions two ends of a spectrum, then other definitions can be in between. I locate the similarities between myths and comics, based on my informants' perspectives, as falling somewhere in between these two definitions. This research does not aim to prove that comics can be read as

identical myths, or to find a definition that equates myths and comics to one another. Some kinds of comics, especially superhero comics, have strong potential to be contemplated as similar to myths in content and form, as the scholars cited in my introduction have argued. But I argue that besides heroic characters that usually are considered as the primary connections between myths and comics, there is another under-examined relation between these two, which came up in my interviews with comic readers: comics can function in similar ways as myth, producing what I call a “mythic effect.” Lauri Honko, in his definition of myth, enumerates four essential features for myth: form, content, function, and context. He explains that myths function as examples, as models. He believes that, in general, the most notable functions that myth can offer are the cognitive basis for and practical models of behavior (1972: 51). Also, in the functionalist school of thought, Durkheim and Malinowski discuss the roles myths play in maintaining societies and individuals. Thompson and Schrempf explain it in this way: "Myths provide symbols that promote positive social behavior...they lay out the basic rules and design of a society; they provide role models and thus paths of maturation for members of society" (Thompson and Schrempf 2020: 152).

Based on the information I gathered during hours of interviewing, I noticed that comics, graphic novels, and Webtoons had played a similar function in the informants' lives. From some point for many of my interviewees, this kind of text has become an important and sacred narrative for them, thus shaping their world and guiding them, and inspiring them to make a change in their everyday lives. This is true even for those readers who describe their awareness of the commercial context of comics, connecting to Barthes' explanation of myth as connected to mass media and capitalism. I do not claim

that comics became equivalent to myths, or that they read them exactly as they would myths. Rather, in these cases, I argue that comics and myth function in much the same way, which is putting forth a set of rules and inspiring their readers. This applies to all sorts of comics in general, including graphic novels and Webtoons. I will call this specific comics feature "mythic effect." Other types of narrative and media can also have the effect of inspiring their readers, but as I mentioned above, the reason I chose myth as the center of my argument, is that there are already other scholarly researches that discuss the similarities between these two genres. I will add a new point to this scholarship with my focus on similarities between myths' and comics' functions and how my informants interact with comics. It is a common assumption that comics have bad influences on their readers and fans, as I'll discuss more in the next chapter describing stigmas and stereotypes related to comics. In this chapter I will show that comics, according to my interviewees, not only do not have a negative impact on their readers, but also can inspire them and guide them to do good and make positive changes in the real world. I explain the examples of these influences below under two main categories: superhero comics and non-superhero comics.

Superhero comics

Although comics cover different kinds of characters and narratives, they are usually known by superheroes. Superheroes, like other kinds of fictional and non-fictional characters, can be influential. It is not unexpected that a child or teenager wants to be one of the mainstream superheroes, dresses like them, and even acts like them. But I was curious if this is a case among adult comic readers or not. I wanted to go deeper and see if I can find more. So I asked my informants if they have ever had this experience that

they read a comic/graphic novel/Webtoon, and it inspired them to make a change in the real world or change their perspective. Below, I describe the answers from some of them who were inspired by reading superhero comics.

Doing something for your country

Keith is 24 years old, and he is a computer scientist who works with the U.S. Army's human resource command. He believes in existence of real superheroes in our daily lives, such as soldiers, doctors, firefighters, etc. He thinks we may not have a superpower, but superheroes inspire us to do something, even small things, for the nation. He sees his work with IT in the U.S. Army as his way to offer aid based on his ability and limitation to help out real heroes and serve his country. He kept saying that "I won't be able to lift a car, but at least I've always tried to do the best with what I can" (2020). Superhero comics demonstrate how he can overcome dire situations and turn them around:

So one of the most, like striking, like, things from comics, like I always kind of like, think back to when I'm at least having a bad day or anything like that. And it's actually in one of the new Spider man movies. So I'm just really pumped accepted him. So there's a spider man. He's like, being crushed by a bunch of buildings. People really underestimate how strong it is. But a lot of people also forget he's still, he's still a child and Spider man like kind of breaks there for a second, starts panicking, because he's been crushed by this building. And he's in- in the comic. He's like, almost face, like face in the water. So he's like almost drowning, not, not enough that he can't lift out of it. But like enough that it would be concerning. And there's a really great panel where it's- it's cut down the middle of his face and on one side we see the Spider man mask, on the other side it's Peter Parker and he looks really scared. And in that scene Spider man basically like- like kind of hypes himself back up to get, you know, get through this and he pushes beyond anything he's done before and he manages to like lift the whole building up and he comes out of it and in the movie they do a very similar scene and props to the actor Tom Holland, he captures that like quick panic so well because whenever the building falls on him he calls out for help and, you know, if you can lift a car on your own people initial

thought is not going to be that guy[who] is going to call for help, but he's still just a kid, still human. So it's at least, and obviously, again, you know, superheroes aren't real. But it's at least for you to think like a person with the ability to lift a car still has like quick panic whenever something's going wrong, but they calm down. I think it through, and they get through it and they managed to overcome the termination situation that they're in. So that scene I always remember like the panel of Spider man's, like half face and then Peter Parker face and it's such a good panel (2020).

Even though Spiderman is a strong superhero, people forget that he is still a human, a teenager, and sometimes expect too much from him. As a person with super power, he also has his own limitation, can face very difficult situations, and experience panic attacks. But none of these prevents him from doing the right thing in the right moment. Keith sympathizes with Spiderman because he is more human and understandable than other superheroes to him. Noticing that even superheroes can panic and lose their ways, offers him hope and encouragement to not give up easily. Interestingly enough, he admits that “superheroes are not real,” but this critical fact, does not prevent him from being inspired by superheroes.

In Keith's case, superhero comics inspire and guide him in his life and give meaning to his life and everyday actions. He sees himself as a superhero's assistant, in his role supporting soldiers through IT work. As a comics reader, he has built a life influenced by them. In the real life, he helps real superheroes to do their jobs and at the same time, tries to have a super heroic manner, such as being strong and doing whatever he is best at. Comics motivate him to actively make changes in the real world and provide him role models, to follow through.

How to handle a relationship

Hunter is 24 years old. He has been a superhero comics fan since he was in middle school. His first encounter with superheroes goes back to when he watched animation

series based on comics. He is a big fan of Batman and Green Arrow because he, as an ordinary person, can easily sympathize with them. He believes many contemporary issues can be found in comics. For instance, being in a toxic relationship:

One of my, one of the biggest, like perceptions that I've seen is like basically a toxic relationship being identified with like Joker and Harley Quinn, um, and it's just the worst to me to like see like a lot of people putting them up like they're like equals, and they're at a good relationship together and all of this. And I hate it because, like, that's not what their characters are supposed to be showing. it's supposed to be showing a codependent relation or in a relationship on Harley Quinn's part where Joker remains indifferent and abusive and everything else and then a lot of people go on to not look at the idea or not look at the few comic lines that have Harley Quinn leaving Joker, and learning and learning more about herself and actually eventually finding different people that build her up and it's- it's interesting to see how- how that can go. So I guess that's- that's one like a look into toxic relationships. Say, you know, I haven't been in any kind of relationship that was quite nearly that bad. I've had issues before but nothing to that level. So, so yeah, I mean, I guess that's like one of the big, big things that kind of transition because like it's always- always looked at, like, how or why do the abuse victim... Why do they always stay... or was it like a big thing that they stay with it... and then you start seeing like- with like the easily... like with Joker and Harley Quinn. The, like, the manipulation that was used for quite a long time. So it's just something like that was- was an eye opener actually (2020)

Joker and Harley Quinn's relationship is a model of a toxic relationship that a superhero comic provides. Even though these characters are usually villains of comics, readers such as Hunter, who are looking for deeper meaning, find different layers of meaning behind this relationship. Since Hunter had some level of experiencing toxic relationship, he can reflect on Joker and Harley Quinn relationship and learn from it. This model of behavior is a warning and can help readers avoid such situations, or this comic can be victims' cautionary voice for others not to be quiet if they come across the same problem.

This is not the only relationship model and advice that Hunter has learned from superhero comics. He argues that comics offer an example for people who lost loved ones and show them they are not alone:

I can think of so many various real world issues that appear in comics everything from... I mean, one that's quite stereotypical is the loss of a loved one, like people handle it in various ways. A lot of times it's trying to continue to do good and continue that for that person or in the opposite realm of that, they go into a really dark place and they- they need help and they need something like that to keep going. I mean, I, I definitely think that comics have a spot for to help people...I think that- that people need to be more willing to accept you know comics is as something that I think could very easily like help people and get people to understand that they're not the only people who ever gone through something that they're doing (2020).

Comics can display various ways of coping with this situation (for example, how Batman deals with the loss of his parents). More importantly, comics can maintain some kind of "personal drive" and encourage readers to do something, even if it is small. Superhero comics present relationship models and life guidelines for Hunter and have helped him to overcome some of his life's difficulties.

Being a responsible person

Cole is 49 years old, living in Vermont, and working in an advertising agency. His first encounter with comics goes back to when he was three years old, and since then, he has been a serious reader and collector of comics, especially superhero comics. He even taught the history of comics for a short winter semester in a local college in Vermont. Thus he has an excellent knowledge about comics and his life is entangled with comics and reading them. Interestingly enough, he does not agree with the idea that superhero comics are modern myths. Because people do not own these stories, they belong to big companies, and this legal ownership prevents them from evolving among people. His

definition of myth is close to folkloristic view. But the most important reason he does not consider comics as myths is: "It's [they are] a tightly controlled corporate product."

Comics, especially mainstream comics, are products of big companies and controlled by them and their benefits. That is the reason they cannot be considered myths.

Even though he does not see or read comics as modern myths, he does not deny their effects on his life:

Well, the, the story that I always tell about this is half facetiously saying that I was partially raised by Superman. And- and but I think that, there is something to that. When I was a little kid, the people who were making Superman comics were largely, it was like a new generation of writers in their 20s and early 30s, who had probably grown up reading Superman comics and they were coming out of the experience of Vietnam and Watergate and things like that, generally pretty liberal and they made Superman kind of a super liberal. I told you earlier about the very first comic I ever read, which was Action Comics number 444 which has some Byzantine plot about aliens and disguise and Green Lantern shows up and none of that stuck with me. What stuck with me was, there is an interlude where Clark Kent has been invited to a TV panel discussion. A political one, and the topic is the death penalty and there is a conservative right leaning figure on one side, and there is Clark Kent, on the other, arguing against the death penalty. And it sort of plays into Superman, how to code against killing and one of the themes of Superman as a character was that. Here is a person who can push planets around, he has ultimate power. He's responsible. He was raised right in the heartland of America...but it also is like a noble aspiration, on a personal level, like, I'm not going to hurt anybody. Like, you know, I've been gifted with these great abilities and I am, you know, physicians first do no harm. I'm going to do the right thing. I'm going to try to and- and it's not up to me to be the judge, jury and executioner. I'm just there to help people. And that really stuck with me from- from the beginning. And I have to say that between being raised by decent ethical parents who sacrificed and- and you know, seeing them as an example. And some of the teachers I had in school and- and we're always incredibly influenced by our peer groups but Superman was a constant for me. In all his permutations Superman, The Super boy, The Adventures of Superman, who is a boy and that was always part of it. It was always that he was a, a, he was raised right and he was going to try to do the right thing. And he was not a bully and he was not a...he would not take advantage of people and- and he would go out of his way to solve problems

in a in a as peaceful away as he possibly could. And I always admired that and I really do think that it played some part in my eventual political revolution (2020).

Superman is against the death penalty, bullying, and being judgmental even though he is the most powerful being. He does not misuse his power and always does the right thing even though it could harm him. When this perfect symbol of goodness and peace argues against the death penalty, there is no doubt that this matter needs more consideration and thoughts because Superman defended it. At the time, whether or not Cole, as a child, completely get the situation, because this idea came from his perfect ideal in his favorite book, it stuck with him and grew with him until it had an exact ethical meaning for Cole. Now, as an adult, he can trace back the notion of his belief and articulate how his life is affected by reading comics. Even though he has not read comics as myths, he has been touched by the "mythic effect" of comics. Superman's comic became a sacred narrative that presented him with a flawless role model.

Cole mentioned in the interview that one of the reasons he, as an adult, keeps reading and re-reading comics is that in reviewing comics, he likes to go behind the scene and know more about comics' artists and their lives. This new layer of knowledge assists him to reach a different interpretation of comics. As he brought up in the above quote, now he gets it why Superman was against the death penalty, because its creators belonged to a liberal generation with a specific experiences and perspective. Thus, for Cole, reading comics is not only inspiring and providing him with reliable role models, but also it is reading history of modern America and the reflection of it in comics. Because of his background research, Cole is aware of how comics could present mythic

narratives of American history and justice. He reflects on this knowledge while reading comics and focuses more on parts which align with his value.

How to understand the dynamic of the world

Andrew is 47 years old, working as an IT administrator, and living in Essex, Vermont. He has older siblings who were interested in comics. So he grew up in a comic-loving environment and began with romantic comics. But what stuck with him as a child was superhero comics until these recent days. He did not mention any specific influential superhero, but he has been affected by the dominant superhero comics environment.

I feel like especially the- the superhero comics for my youth kind of shaped how I viewed the world like how it allowed me to more easily recognize that, that you know, evil, evil businessmen isn't just, isn't just as a trope and stories. It's like, that's there. They're just putting, you know, their interests above everything else and that's- that's the way life is. It didn't, the stories I read never glorified that, you know, it's always, those are always the bad guys. And at the end, that the heroes always kind of protected the innocents and that they always want to make the world a better place... The, the, the way it's portrayed the good versus evil that sort of stuck with me as far as how I saw the world (2020).

Comics shaped Andrew's world view and helped him to see through different situations in life. He is aware of bipolar atmosphere of comics and does not extend this perspective to his real life. But comics help him to admit and recognize the evil powers in the world and prepare him for what he should expect from them. Also, comics remind him that there are good sources of power in life, maybe not as mighty and strong as superheroes, but they are there. Comics built his reality by offering examples of how people and the world can interact with each other.

Self-identification

Sean is 24 years old. He inherited the love of comics from his father. He believes that comics helped him to answer questions about his identity as a teenager.

Sympathizing with Peter Parker, Spiderman, as a teenager who has the same issues and conflicts, aided him in better understanding his place, conditions, and emotions as a teenager. But more importantly, superhero comics present him a diverse universe in which everyone has his/her own value.

I think for me, like I was saying earlier, it's really the embracing of diversity, you know, and I mean I think the fact that I never saw a strict way for superhero characters to look or any you know comic book characters or anything like that, and allowed me to really see people for who they were and be so invested in allowing people to be their own superhero. You know what I mean? That's the part that really appealed to me is that I- I love the idea of somebody being able to be so selfless and giving in the way that a lot of these heroes were. You know what I mean, like, there's- there's that you know giant bomb is coming in and somebody's got to push and somebody's got to save somebody's got to do that ultimate sacrifice. And I think that's that in my mind appealed to me. That like I- I would love to believe that if I was in that scenario like a superhero would be, I would be willing to make that sacrifice. And the reason why is because I believe that, you know, human beings, regardless of whatever, you know, whoever you identify as whatever you identify as, that part about you is worth like defending and embracing. You know what I mean. So it's, it's very, very grandiose and in my thinking. But that's, that's really what it was. I never, I never once felt as a kid, you know, that sense of ignorance in the way that I hated somebody for not being able to understand them. I was always more intrigued as to why somebody was different. And that's what appealed to me from comic books. That's, that's, that's where that thinking came from is because everybody's so different. You know they- they look different, they act so different. I mean, one of the strongest superheroes, a big giant green monster. Like, how can I, how can I hate somebody for being different. When they have one of the strongest superheroes on the team literally be so dangerous. Like there's still a part of that quote unquote monster that is human. And that's what it is for anybody. You know, the part that may seem so different and strange and odd and weird and maybe scary to you is, is simply not true. It's, it's- there's more to person than just what you see (2020).

Comics have taught Sean the idea of “selflessness” and more importantly being himself. The diverse comics’ world allows everyone to potentially be “their own superhero.” Superhero comics provide him role models for measuring up to and give him a perspective, a worldview, an understanding, of life and people for living better. Comics have shown him that everyone has a monster/hero within themselves, like Hulk. Each person, based on the situation, chooses which one of these hidden figures should be released. Humans are more complicated than what their appearances reveal. Comics embrace these diverse appearances and powers and help him to do the same. Comics have shown him how to embrace diversity and difference. As he mentioned, he never had an extreme reaction toward “somebody for not being able to understand them.” Mutual understanding and accepting differences are comics’ gift to him. Comics have been a guide line, a map, for him through growing up and show him the various aspects of being human.

Non- superhero comics

Non- superhero comics also offer a different perspective and worldview for their readers. They encourage their readers to look for more in life by teaching them new and different thoughts. In this case, comics become a grand idea, a guidebook for interpreting the world.

How to be yourself

Claire is 25 years old and works in a National Park. She is a fan of Webtoons, mostly because she believes independent artists have more freedom to talk about “severe and diverse” issues in their comics. She likes to draw, and the initial reason she

was attracted to comics was the illustrations. Comics help her to improve her artistic skill and introduce her to new styles. But more importantly, they are gatekeepers of a new world in which you can be yourself.

I think I don't have any specific examples of like a particular one, but the continued variety that comes out, I think has helped me to continue to remind myself that there are these other stories out there and things other than my own experience that are available to be explored and to change my perspective. And I think there's going back to the whole like comics are just for kids and it being a welcoming community. I think it's also affected mine. The way I carry myself and the way that I talk about my interest and just having that exposure and talking to other people who are part of these communities. If it's given me some inspiration to not hide my interests, not like you know not tried to just fit the World, but to really lean into the things I'm interested in the way I want to express myself the way that I talked about things and just enjoy it. And not worry about what people are going to say (2020).

Comics encourage her to be herself and accept others and their differences. It has inspired her to “not hide my interests, not try to just fit the world,” but express herself in a way she wants and prefers. Comics offer new hope, a world without discrimination that she can not only look forward to but also work hard to make. Also, comics present an image of other possible realities and experiences “that are available to be explored and to change perspective.” They inspire her and show her the world is as big as her imagination and full of new opportunities. In this case, comics function like myths in a way that grants her a vision of other possibilities of living and ways to reach them. Comics not only expanded her horizon, but also introduced her to a community of like-minded people where she can express herself. For Claire, comics offer an ideal world and an inspiration to build this world. Comics encourage her to be brave and provide her with new experiences she can be inspired from.

Learning more

Daniel is 41 years old, living in Vermont, and working in politics. He shared that reading comics inspired him to be a journalist and become involved in politics. Following comic artists and writers, and how they affect their readers' lives by creating new issues, encouraged him to do something similar. Besides this general impact, he learned other things from comics too:

I can't say if there's any like a specific decision, but I certainly know like you know growing up, you know, the first time reading *Maus*, you know, by Art Spiegelman, you know, that was I was, you know, still a teenager in the 1990s, and that was really what one of the first comics, I remember you know being bundled up you know with the spine showing up in bookstores and in the public library, you know, it kind of infiltrated the book world, you know, in a lot of ways and reading that was, you know, both an eye opener for me about what the medium could do but also it was kind of a real for me an education about you know the history of- of fascism and Nazi Germany and how quickly a country can, you know, just descend into authoritarian chaos, you know, that was in for. And so, you know, I think, you know, my education before that on something like Nazi Germany was probably like watching *Schindler's List*, you know, something I had, you know, a real first-hand account that use stories and pictures to show me exactly what- what it was like, you know there and you know you can't read something like that without walking away with some real life lessons (2020).

Myths can be a history of a community, a map of the past for new generations to learn from. In Daniel's case, comics present knowledge about a part of the world and reality which he did not know about. He knew about Nazis and the history of that time but the comic made this information relatable and tangible, or as he put it, "a real first-hand account." Also, artists like Art Spiegelman and the roles they played in emancipating society inspired him to be a journalist and get involved in politics.

For Daniel, comics are inspirational in many ways. They helped him to choose a path for his life and encouraged him to learn more about new subjects. Daniel has known from comics that he needs to look for truth, either as a curious teenager or a responsible journalist. Comics, again, offer role models and guidelines for living better and making changes in the real world.

Thinking like comics

John is 45 years old, living in Vermont, and working as a postman. John's life is so entangled with comics. When he was young, he had a comic store, he composed a book that includes popular panels of famous comics, and he is the administrator of two private fan pages about comics on Facebook with almost 1000 members. He has a motto about comics, which is in the fan pages' logo: "comics bring us together." The relationship between John and comics is complicated and rich. He believes comics affected his life in various levels and stages. As a teenager, comics introduced a new landscape to him:

One of them that I really hold near and dear, was it was a an anthology of a bunch of short stories that were all it was published by a company called Eclipse comics by was co published with PETA for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. And I remember it, it hit that book hit me on a really- really seriously. I think I would have probably been, you know, early teens and it really sort of changed my world perspective on a lot of the way the world treats and interact with animals. I remember just I could pore over that book endlessly and I'd be affected by each and every time. You know, and just and it may be, you know, just then, from there, I think I would do more reading about, you know, cosmetic industry is that you know whaling industries and things like animal testing and things like that that were, you know, kind of hot news topics in the would have been like the late 80s. So yeah, that's the one that stands out to me. I think there's been a lot of like non -fiction works that have always led me to sort of research, a little bit more, you know, the comic has been sort of the gateway to the topic, and then I'll, I'll go and read research or watch documentaries more on something. As far as like changing life path or

anything like that, not necessarily, but I definitely you know will lean more towards those stages that were, you know, it would just inspire me to- to have more of an open mind to subjects (2020).

As John mentioned, comics, in this case, non-fiction comics, inspired him to look for more and dig deeper to find the truth. Comics have been a “gateway to the topic” for him and changed his perspective “on a lot of the way the world treats and interact with animals.” Interestingly, even though he said comics did not change his life path in this part of the interview, later he admitted that comics actually shaped his worldview.

I’ve resisted the idea for a long time. Just because I never liked being labeled but I definitely see it and my wife will point out to me that I have a very sort of black and white way of thinking. And she -she compares it to, you know, it’s. She’s like, it’s, it’s not about good versus evil. And it gets out of comic book John, you know, it’s like, you know, and sort of always have kind of good guys and bad guys in the situation. And then I sort of have to like draw myself back and pick, like, All right, well you know they’re there is a gray area here, but I guess in some ways I do, I do, sort of, you know, I do have that associative aspect, to my thinking where, Yeah, I would say it’s not necessarily like a static image but I sort of do assign roles that I think I’ve learned through comics over -over the years... So I think I can’t help but sort of see the world kind of through this sort of comic book lens. I think the language of comics, you know, sort of like these static images framed in such a certain in a way. There’s definitely it totally informs my -my worldview at this point (2020).

The way that John sees the world, understands it, and reacts in response, are highly influenced and formed by comics. He is so deeply absorbed in the comics world that sometimes he needs someone to stop him and remind him to draw a line between comics and reality. It seems that there is not a clear difference between the real world and the world of comics for John. Comics has constructed his reality. This influence not only affected the way he sees the world “through this sort of comic book lens,” but it instructs him on what is good and evil and gives him a measurement to evaluate the subject of his thoughts. As he put it, “I sort of do assign roles that I think I’ve learned through comics

over -over the years.” After all, it is not surprising that John’s life is so entangled with comics. Reading comics for him has become a social activity too. He seeks for people like himself to share this unique perspective and talk about it. Comics not only influenced his personal life and thoughts, but also swayed him to a way of how to choose and build a community around himself. John’s involvement with comics is in a different stage than the other informants. More interestingly, he is aware of this junction, enjoys it, and tries to make the best of it. Comics have turned into core, guiding narratives for him, which introduced him to a pleasant world. Now John has become a prophet, a messenger, to invite others to this promising and colorful world.

Learning about history

Katherine is 51 years old, and she is an adjunct lecturer at Boston University in the writing program. She has been teaching courses related to and based on comics for a while. Katherine started reading comics when she was a child, but she began with comic versions of classic books such as *Huckleberry Finn*. Her reading comics process paused for a long time until the late 1990s/early 2000s, when a new generation of underground comics, such as *Maus*, came to the surface. She even built the structure of her dissertation based on the comic *Building Stories* by Chris Ware. During years of academically being involved with teaching comics, she has had the chance to rethink the medium and assess what she learned from comics. Comics give her a more in-depth insight into the subjects and issues she studied or taught.

I would say, Alison Bechdel’s two books, both of them. I only read *Are you my mother* relatively recently, in the last two or three years, but those are profoundly influential, I would say in terms of how I think about my

personal life, but also just how I think about our history. I mean, I did American Studies and so much. I mean, it's just, it's just a wonderful rethinking of that time period from the 70s to the 80s. And I don't know. And actually, Jean Yang's recent book, *Dragon hoops*, that's another really good one that is sort of profoundly makes you stop and think about how you treat other people. I mean, again, these are sort of personal examples. But it's just I found that book was really fascinating in terms of really giving me some, he's so interesting because he, I feel like faith is such a strong theme for him, but he explores it in ways that they are really complex and you really don't have to be Catholic or even practicing in a particular religion to really appreciate it, engage with the problems and doubts, and issues that are raised by considering faith in a complex way. And I think that's just really terrific. I mean his work is amazing (2020).

Although these comics (graphic novels) did not inspire her or teach her something new, they provided her with profound interpretations about the subjects. These comics unveiled the complex meaning of familiar issues such as faith or American history by putting them in different contexts so she can realize them in distinctive manners. In another words, comics offered her different models of the way of living and gave her this opportunity to compare these models, find her favorite one, and think more deeply about life and its different aspects.

Learning about teamwork and diversity

Ashley is 45 years old, and she is a professor at Western Kentucky University. She has been reading comics since she was a child, even though until the interview, she did not notice how many comics she read as a child and how much her life was affected by that. She worked in a comic book store for a while when she was in her late 20s. She describes her interest as enthusiasm for a “nerd realm” which could include gaming, watching specific movies and TV series such as *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, rather than just comics. Reading comics is only a part of this realm. She is attracted to this so-called

“nerd realm” because, as she explained it, it is a “diverse universe.” A wider range of people appears in this realm, and the issue of social justice is more visible in this world. Also, “there’s a lot to be learned from that- that relationship between you know, those individuals like how do you work together as a team under unsurmountable odds and all this kind of thing” (2020).

For Ashley, comics and the realm it belongs to have a profound meaning that is separated from this world. She can refer to it as a source of distinct concepts that cannot be easily found in this world, and they are only accessible to inhabitants of that realm. This realm inspires and teaches her to do differently but, more importantly, gives her hope and a place to seek refuge from the limitations of this world.

Conclusion

Comics are verbal and visual narratives. Existing scholarship has shown that there are some similarities between myths and comics in content and characters. In this chapter, I argued that there is a new underrated connection: comics can have similar functions and effects as myths. These similar functions include providing role models, guidelines, and inspirations to change the real world. I call this function the “mythic effect.” These functions are not only limited to superhero comics, but other kinds of comics such as graphic novels and Webtoons can function in the same ways. Some may argue that narrative in general, across different media, could have the same effects. I do not deny this argument but explain that the reason I chose myth as a narrative genre to compare comics with is that there are already many scholarly researches which connect these two together. I decided to add to these existent researches by introducing another

similarity. It is important to note that I do not equate comics with myths. But I claim that, based on the information I gathered, comics can have similar functions as myths. This assertion is important because the usual assumption about comics is that they have bad influences on their readers and fans. I showed through analyzing my interviewees' comments that not only is this assumption wrong, but also comics have meaningful positive influences on their readers, even as significant and powerful as the effects that myths can have.

Some of my informants found their inspirations from superhero comics. They identified with one character and followed him as a role model in their everyday lives. A question may arise that what type of superhero did they choose as their models? Or in other words, why did these superheroes become role models? Travis Smith claims some reasons for the popularity of some superheroes over others:

Many people simply prefer characters who most resemble themselves, or, rather, the person they think they wish they could be. Batman attracts many fans on account of his vaunted humanity, his relentlessness and resourcefulness, and his apparent indomitability. Trends in the culture and the counterculture also play a part in deciding favorites. Lately, some characters have gained popularity because we want to see women and people of color empowered...The relative status of a character within their fictional universe is another standard by which one may be measured—the immensity of the threats they face, the degree of villainy among the foes they thwart, not to mention the admiration that their fellow heroes have for them. Consider how Superman and Captain America are held up as moral exemplars within their respective universes: They are heroes even to the other heroes...Or, one might find more inspiration in those who struggle with adversity and distress on a personal scale, like Jessica Cruz, the newest Green Lantern, or Netflix darling Jessica Jones (2018:4).

Among my informants, superheroes with more human features, such as Spiderman, are more inspirational. The reason is that the informants can easily identify and sympathize

with them, and this made them more popular. For example, as a teenager, Sean explained that he could, without any difficulties, identify with Spiderman because Spiderman is also a teenager going through puberty, getting bullied, and in love with the most popular girl at school. These human features make Spiderman an accessible superhero who can be a role model, followed, and trusted because he goes through the same problems and issues an ordinary teenager encounters.

As I discussed earlier, superhero comics are not the only comics that have mythic effects. Graphic novels and Webtoons can function in similar ways. They can inspire and encourage their readers to have a different perspective on known subjects and issues. They can shape their readers' worldviews and guide them through life. Also, they can provide additional and more profound interpretations of life and its phenomena.

In all the cases I presented in this chapter, comics function as a sacred narrative for their readers by opening up new opportunities and a realm of existence. Comics guide them to new visions or model of behaviors. They become more than entertainment and carry various meanings for their fans. The mythic effect, as a function of comics, raises this medium and genre above common assumptions about comics and shows the value and power they have in the lives of those who I interviewed.

Second Chapter

Comics, Escapism, Nostalgia, and Stigma

The main question that started this research was *why* adults read comics. As I have gone further, the question changed to *how* they feel when they read comics. Based on personal experiences, I expected that reading comics provides a way for escaping reality momentarily, but I certainly did not expect it to be as meaningful and complicated as my interviewees revealed. I asked my informants these questions: why do you [still] read comics? How do you feel when you read comics or describe your experience of reading comics? The first question's answer was enjoyment, and pleasure, whether explicitly stated or implied in their descriptions. But the answers to the last questions were also significant.

Based on Mary Hufford's concept of "enclave," which is "regions belonging to one province of meaning enclosed by another (1992:8), reading comics creates an alternative reality with different meanings and values. This enclave, the bubble, provides a safe space, separated from the reality of everyday life. Comic readers can seek refuge in it and create other meaningful realities or reasons for living for themselves. As I demonstrated in the second chapter, this alternative reality has a real impact on the readers' lives, but at the same time, it has been shaped by their daily lives, hence has different meanings and functions for each of them. "The world within the boundaries reconstitutes in various ways the world outside it. The model may reflect, reverse, affirm, or challenge aspects of the Ordinary and other extraordinary realms as well" (Hufford 1992:9). It is important to mention that in Hufford's case of study, her informants creates enclave by storytelling

and talking about the Chaseworld, while in my research, the informants built the enclave by reading comics.

For some of my informants, an enclave is where they escape from ordinary life and its hardships. For others, this escapism has a nostalgic feeling too. In this chapter, I will explain how this alternative reality functions for comics readers. I analyze them under two main categories: escapism and nostalgia. Again, it is essential to mention that these two functions and meanings are not entirely separated from each other for some of the informants. But I break them down into two parts for better analysis. In the third section of the chapter, I will discuss about stigma around comics fans and how my informants faced and dealt with others' reactions to their unique interest.

Escapism

Out of Body Experience

Daniel is very self-aware about his feelings when reading comics. He used the word "escapism" and described his reading comics experience as an "out of body experience."

I think, on one level, like there's always a level of escapism when- when you're looking for something to consume, you know, especially fiction. So there is that level of escaping, you know, where you are entering a story that is both, you know, maybe familiar and foreign, you know. You can step into that world and has all these new elements and you can forget, kind of, you know, where are you currently [doing], if you were sitting on your couch, you can forget that you're doing that now. And you are, you know, in this X Men universe or whatever it is (2020).

Daniel points out that he can escape reality and be taken away when he is reading fictional comics. This specific feature only applies to one comic genre of fiction. For Daniel, comics is not always a tool to get away from reality. As I discussed in the second

chapter, some kinds of comics help him and encourage him to improve his knowledge about reality and life and attached him more to the real world. This fiction world he refers to can be a familiar one or a new and strange one. As long as they do their jobs that are attracting his attention, it would be enough. He describes entering this world, the enclave, as "stepping into" and forgetting the current time and place, as if Daniel purposefully prepares himself to get into this bubble and expects specific effect to show up. He reads fictional comics because they can assist him in escaping from ordinary life. This function adds more pleasure to reading comics.

Comfort Food

Tara is 44 years old, living in western Massachusetts and East Hampton, and working as an associate registrar in a local college. She started reading comics as a teenager when she joined what she referred to as a "weird group" in high school interested in reading comics. Reading comics gave them a mutual subject to talk about. But she had a break from reading them when she became a college student to pursue other interests until five or six years ago when she heard about new amusing comics.

Tara is very clear about the reason why she reads comics, and she describes it as a way to escape her busy life for a while:

It's, um, for me, it's a really nice brief escape. I usually don't spend a lot of time, I don't spend hours reading comics. I like to either an issue or a, you know, small story. It's like reading a short story. I can take this little escape from a busy workday or, you know, I can escape from having to be productive and I can just feel alone and connected with something else entirely. I think that's what I really like. I don't spend a lot of time every day reading them but five minutes or half an hour. Yeah. It is, is this like, it's like a little treat. Yeah, that's like comfort food (2020).

For Tara, reading comics is like having some "me time" every day or once in a while. She can escape from her busy ordinary life to the world of comics and find an "alone" time to rearrange her thoughts and enjoy herself. She uses comics purposefully to distract and entertain herself at the same time. Reading comics is a "comfort food" for her soul to be free and shake off every day life's stress.

Detachment Feeling

Cole reads comics on different levels and for other purposes. He likes to get "a little lost," as he puts it, in the visual narrative of comics in the first level. He enjoys a good story, and as he describes it: "It's a way of passing time in a way that keeping your mind active without being really, you know, academically serious about it" (2020). Since he was three years old, Cole's initial intention to read comics is to free his mind from the serious world around him and find a way to tolerate the overwhelming part of his life. When he was a child, he could seek refuge in comics' world from being alone in his neighborhood or some family problems such as his father's unemployment. The comics' stability, or as he describes it, "continuity," assured him as a child. As an adult, he still finds pleasure in escaping to this world from his life's ordinary stress. The thing that has changed is that Cole adds another level of understanding to his reading. As I mentioned in the second chapter, now he is interested in how and by whom comics are created. In a follow up conversation that we had via email, he insisted on mentioning that, as an adult, he is aware of different layers of meanings in comics:

I do my best to read comics as I would anything else, with mindfulness of the tropes and stereotypes being employed, something that was less visible to me as a young person without any training in literature or much life experience. This is particularly important in comics, many of which inherently engage in a language of shorthand for character types and

situations. Whether I'm reading a superhero comic or an acclaimed graphic novel, I try to think about how gender, race, faith, and political stances are portrayed (or entirely absent) and to what ends (2020).

Reading comics is a way of escaping ordinary life for Cole, but only to a certain extent. He does not intend to lose touch with reality altogether. For Cole, escapism and awareness are two different matters that can be joined together. He wants to break out from some real-world elements, but he is still aware of important issues and hidden agendas in comics.

Something in Between

Reading comics is a getaway for Ashley too. She reads comics to shake off her tiredness.

I don't always want to watch TV or and I certainly often don't want to just read something. So I enjoy something in between [comics]. That I'm still reading a little bit, but I'm, you know, or... You know, I'll find that I have time, not a lot of time to sit and devote into something, but I want to have, you know, some a bit of time to kind of do something. And so I'll just pick up, you know, one of the graphic novels or one of the- one of the mostly the graphic novels or less the comic books these days (2020).

Reading comics not only helps Ashley to get away from her daily routine, but both also provide her a unique opportunity to deal with the issue of productivity. She wants to enjoy her little free time and at the same time does not want to feel guilty about wasting it. Reading comics, as she addressed it, is something “in between.” Since it is a kind of reading, she can feel less guilty compared to watching TV. This reading is also less serious than an academic reading, and she can let her mind and soul rest and enjoy. Thus, reading comics helps her escape her busy life and her stressful thoughts.

Nostalgia

Woody Allen's antagonist character, Paul, in *Midnight in Paris*, defines nostalgia as “denial, denial of the painful present.” Denial is the common assumption about nostalgia. The term has entangled with a set of meaning such as homesickness, longing for the golden age, and escapism. In *Yearning for Yesterday*, Fred Davis describes any positive feeling toward anything past as nostalgia (1979:8). In this definition, the feeling's positiveness is the keynote that distinguished nostalgia from other approaches to the past. Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* argues that this positive feeling is not toward a place (homecoming), but it is about the lost time:

At the first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time- the time of our childhood, the slower rhythm of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desire to obliterate history and change it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition (2001: xv).

In other words, nostalgia is a symbolic gesture toward time, specifically the past. In this term, the past changes into a personal metaphor for a person who is feeling nostalgic. Usually, this feeling arises when there is a contradiction between the present and the past. "The nostalgic subject turns to the past to find/ construct sources of identity, agency, or community that are felt to be lacking, blocked, subverted, or threatened in the present...Invoking the past, the nostalgic subject may be involved in escaping or evading, in critiquing, or in mobilizing to overcome the present experience of loss of identity, lack of agency, or absence of community" (Tannok 1995:454). In this sense, nostalgia is a reaction to the present situation by bridging to the past. Cashman, based on different definitions of nostalgia, characterizes it as a cultural practice that “may serve as a

response to a wide variety of personal and collective needs” (2006:140). As a folklorist, he puts nostalgia in a cultural context and explains it as a performance to serve better in ethnographic purposes.

When talking about nostalgia and comics, most of the time, the first thing that comes to mind is collecting old comics or different kinds of memorabilia. Though this is certainly relevant as well, in this research, I focus on the act of reading comics and the reactions and feelings of my informants while reading comics rather than collecting or any other fandom activities.

As described in the previous section, my informants read comics because they enjoy them. This enjoyment has several functions for them besides just the pleasure of reading. Reading comics helps them escape from their ordinary lives by creating an enclave in which they can stay safe and detached from the reality of everyday life. This escapism has a nostalgic feeling for some of them. Reading comics brings back their childhood memories or reminds them of a simpler past. In my informants' cases, nostalgia is another way of escaping ordinary life toward an alternative reality located in the past.

Archie Comics

As I discussed in the previous section, the main reason for Daniel to read comics is escapism. But recently, he discovered a new reason for diving into the comics' world:

I spent a long time reading comics like that [serious comics] but sometime in my- my 30s, I kind of rediscovered, you know, *Archie comics* and realized that not only was it appealing nostalgic world for me to dip my toe back into but they had some incredible artists working for him who were doing some, you know, revolutionary things with the limitations that they were allowed to with- with Archie comics. So it's interesting. I kind of at one point assumed I would just keep on reading very serious comics but in the past five years, my focus has just been on finding as many old vintage Archie comics as I can (2020).

Daniel has a nostalgic feeling toward Archie comics, and this feeling persuades him to read and collect old comics. Even though this act is a hobby and enjoyment for him, he had a serious reason for that. Reading and collecting old Archie comics helps him gain insight into the history of creating comics in a specific period of time. It is interesting to mention that Daniel is a member of John's Facebook comic fan page, and there is not a day that goes by that he does not post a panel of Archie comics in the group. Following his posts on the fan page shows how much he is dedicated to this nostalgic idea and the enjoyment of sharing his adventure through Archie comics with other members. The time and efforts he spends on pursuing this nostalgic idea adds to the pleasure of reading comics. It is another way to get away from ordinary life to an alternative reality.

Longing for a time not-lived

Cole's idea of nostalgia is so close to commonly understood meaning of the term: longing for a golden past, even if one never lived in that period of time to have a memory or personal experience. He is so interested in the Silver age¹ of comics, the period of time in which superhero comics flourished.

It is possible to read them [comics/old comics] as an older person and get enjoyment out of them, different enjoyment than a 10 year old would get. But still, they're fun. And they're nostalgic and- and I've often thought about it and I don't know if, I don't think there's a word for this in English, but nostalgia for a time, you didn't actually live through. That was before your time and- and I, there is an appeal in that for me because a lot of the comics that old comics that I am getting now are from before my time. I mean, I've got 1975 to the present pretty well covered for mainstream stuff that I would ever be interested in. Being able to pick up something from the 50s or 60s and think about the cut—the cultural context in which that appeared and the values and expectations of the people who originally read that is fascinating to me (2020).

Cole admits that reading comics is different for him as a ten year old and as an adult. This difference appears in how he feels when reading them. For ten year old Cole, reading comics was an enjoyment and escape from the reality of his time. For adult Cole, the pleasure and escapism are accompanied by the nostalgic feeling of an era that he never lived through but read and heard about. Or maybe he is nostalgic about the fictional world which was created in that area. Comics from the 50s and 60s are not just old comics; they symbolize a past time. By reading these comics, he can feel connected to their readers at different times. This nostalgic feeling in reading specific comics links him to the past and, at the same time, distracts and detaches him from the present time.

A reminder of a simpler time

Reading comics connects John to his childhood and reminds him of a simpler old time. But sometimes, this nostalgic feeling brings up specific memories:

I really enjoy tapping back into storylines or characters or- or just artwork that sort of hits me on a level where it really brings me back to- to my youth. To a more, you know, just a simpler time, I think. And- and I enjoy sharing that nostalgia with other friends of mine. I think everybody sort of has that thing, you know, whether it's a song or a band or a movie or something that sort of, you know, sparks good memories or just, you know, kind of bringing you back to a place. Comics, definitely do that for me. I mean songs will do that to me as well and, you know, I can smell the paper like an old comic. Mm hmm and transformed immediately to places where I was buying comics, maybe songs that were on the radio at the time when I first arrived at that comic store. You know, I saw... I had, I had three older sisters growing up. So much older than me that, like, you know, when I was a kid, you know, we were always driving to the colleges to visit them, you know, they're like 10-6 years older than me, at least, and anywhere we would go my mom would always make a point to, you know, we would go shopping and, you know, she would help me to find a comic book store, you know, if we went to a bigger metropolitan area because growing up in a small town in Vermont, there really weren't that many places to buy comics. And it's amazing because I can- I can hear a song on

the radio, and I immediately know, and I say it to my daughters and my wife, and they're just they're blown away because they're just like, why do you remember this stuff, like this isn't, this isn't that your, your brain is so filled with this information. It's crazy. But I'll be able to like, be like we were on, you know, this road driving to Saratoga Springs, New York. It was, you know, late fall. I remember reading, I was reading, you know, said comic and this song was on the radio, and they're just like, what, like, how is that possible. And if it's my brain is just absorbed all that all this comic stuff like a sponge... I have sort of repurchased many of them [comics] again to, like, you know, for that nostalgic reason (2020).

For John, not just reading the comics but touching or smelling them, or even hearing songs he associates with them, can bring back old memories. Comics change into a gateway to the familiar and simpler past. But his connection is not limited to a general idea of old times. Each specific comics can help him travel to a particular time and place and imagine it (living it again) with all details. This ability even surprises his family. As I mentioned before, in the past and present, John's life is so intertwined with comics. Reading comics brings him enjoyment in his present time in many ways. Also, some part of this enjoyment is related to remembering the past and his memories of childhood. He keeps this nostalgic feeling close by reading comics and repurchasing old memorable comics to relive his past selectively.

Immersing to the past

Andrew experiences a very similar feeling as John. Reading comics is nostalgic for him because he can detach himself from the present time and place and "immerse" himself in the familiar comics world. When I asked him to elaborate more, he explained his nostalgic feeling in this way:

Oh, [nostalgic] about being- being a kid again. Reading, you know, reading comic books like sitting, like, outside that- the picnic table or your, you

know, front step then ,and- and that's all you know, that's all you're doing that day is you just have a stack of comics that you're reading through. And- and, you know, remembering the, you know, the first time that you read that, you know that, uh... That say there was- there was another Superman or like here's another Superman what, yeah and it's like, oh, he's an older Superman. He's a Superman. He was the original Superman, you know, like, all that kind of discovery of and- and- and always references (2020).

Reading comics helps Andrew escaping to the golden age of childhood when everything was simple, and he did not have any task or responsibility to take care of except for reading a pile of comics. Also, remembering when was the first time he was introduced to a specific comic makes him make connections with the representation of the same character at different times. Finding these connections and references provides him an enjoyment resulting from nostalgic feelings and offers him a path to the past to forget the present time.

Lost in a world of comics

One of the reasons Sean keeps reading comics is “connection to my [late] dad” (2020). Also, as a child, comics were his fairytales and Disney worlds. He could find fantastic stories and characters in them: “You tell kids these fairy tales, these stories and that's- that's what comic books were to me at that time, you know, I, I didn't really get into like the Disney stuff or anything like that” (2020).

Being an adult, reading comics has another function for him besides remembering those magical and nostalgic memories:

I think in many ways it's so relaxing for me, like the- the action of, like going and reading a comic book it takes me back obviously to when I was younger, doing it and at the same time, I, I just get in a very like Zen kind of state. I just kind of go through and I'm reading it. I get that way even looking at like the encyclopedias, because I'm like, oh, that's cool. And I

draw the connections. I mean, oh yeah, this is this, I just get lost in it. I think that's the, that's the beauty of it. I think for a lot of people who read fairly often is, you get lost in that train of thought and that's what I love to do. I love being able to get lost in my thoughts (2020).

Reading comics for Sean functions as a reminder of his childhood and father (nostalgia), but more importantly, it is a state of mind when he finds himself relax and lost in his thoughts, far from the ordinary world. Sean compares comics with fairy tales. He can find his childhood, the golden time, in comics. Comics are nostalgic for him the same as fairy tales are for many others. Comics help Sean connect with his past and memories, get lost in his thoughts, and escape from the real world.

Stigma

Goffman defines stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting," and that reduces the bearer "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman 1963: 3). "Stigma can be seen as a relationship between an 'attribute and a stereotype' to produce a definition of stigma as a 'mark' (attribute) that links a person to undesirable characteristics (stereotypes)" (Link and Phelan 2001:365). Each society and culture has its own set of behaviors that are known as "normal." The definition of normal can be different from community to community, and it is subject to potential changes from time to time. If a person behaves differently from the acceptable norm of culture, they could be labeled, stereotyped, discriminated against and even discarded from society. Stigma is a cultural phenomenon, and a stigmatized person can experience discrimination at different levels. Goffman also argues that discredited (stigmatized) persons can make a community of themselves to reduce the social pressures they are facing. (1963:23-24).

There are several stereotypes around comics and comics fans that my informants shared with me. The common assumption is that comics are picture books for children. They are not serious literature, so adults should not care for them. Comics fans are usually called "nerd" or "geek," and based on their environment, they face different reactions and discrimination levels. Besides environmental elements, the time has a vital role in this stigmatized situation. The meaning of some of these labels, such as nerd and geek, has changed during time, which I will discuss further.

My informants have faced varied attitudes over time. These attitudes are diverse from negative behaviors such as insulting and bullying to very positive ones. But the point is, even positive reactions do not mean that this group of people, comics fans, is considered normal. They are still dealing with different stereotypes but in a less aggressive environment.

"It was an insult."

Some of my informants in their 40s and 50s had similar experiences about how comics fans were mistreated. Cole clearly describes a stigmatized group: "You know when I was a little kid the idea of somebody who read comics, it was- it was frowned upon. You know, you were illiterate. You were stupid. You were just wasting your time on junk" (2020). Comics readers three to four decades ago were treated differently. Not only were there common assumptions about them that they were stupid and illiterate people (probably because they only could read books with pictures), but also they were immature enough to waste their time and money on junk.

John had a more serious memory as being discredited as a comics fan:

I was really the only kid in my high school growing up that was into comics. It was not socially accepted and you know, I was I was definitely not the cool kid. You know, and, and would get picked on for reading comics or being seen with comics. So it was always a very sort of shameful thing for me growing up...

AN: Do you remember if other children called you by any specific name or label because you read comic books?

J: not, anything specific. I think they all just, they- they associated it being with very immature, you know, and it was just, you know, even that- even the teachers and the school at that time, you know wouldn't look favorably upon me, you know, bringing your graphic novel into, you know, study hall with me or class or something like that. It just wasn't taken seriously. It was just, you know, it seemed like it was a waste of my time.

Not only did John have to face bullying and being discarded in the school, but the social hierarchy of the school (teachers) and the environment he lived in, did not take him seriously and considered him immature; because of that, he described his experience of reading comics as "shameful." He explained that he could not show his interest in comics openly, but only to those with whom he knew it would be okay to talk about comics. He had to keep it "quiet" and learned "when and where and who to sort of expose it to and who not to expose it to"(2020).

Interestingly, despite that unfavorable environment, he found a creative way to express himself, by making his own comic books:

I remember when in high school, you know, I would sort of express that- that- that sort of outsider mentality through comics and you know when, I would say, you know, the popular sports players, you know, classmates of mine, getting the girl and things like that. And you know, I would, I would do comics that sort of reflected that, you know, that outsider mentality of, you know, wishing I could be that person or, you know, not being the kid getting the sand kicked in the face at the beach, but you know, being, being heard and having my voice heard. So I would do some, I wouldn't say political cartoons, but they were definitely more, you know, like messages about feeling. Feeling like censored or feeling, you know, sort of unseen through, you know what, what was then my world, my, you know, high

school is, is your world at that point and everything is, you know, so big and so dramatic (2020).

John openly talks about being an outsider because of reading comics. His interest in something different from average passion made him feel abnormal and deprived him of relationships with others. He felt unseen and unheard in his world, which in this case is the high school. Reading comics stigmatized him, and he had to go through some level of discrimination. That is why John enjoys like-minded friends who share the same interest in reading comics with him. Even though, as a teenager, he could not express his feelings and make friends because of reading comics, as an adult, comics presented him with many friends and friendships, primarily through his Facebook fan pages. This difference shows a significant change in the mentality around comics, which I will discuss in the next section.

Tara and Katherine had to deal with some stereotypical reactions because of reading comics not as teenagers, but as adults. Tara is tired of explaining her interest to her acquaintances over and over:

Oh man, why you are reading comic books, not enough literature, why you're spending money on comic books and graphic novels, why not real books. Yeah, I think it I, you know, for people who are my close community, they get it. But for, you know, say, my co-workers that- that kind of raises an eyebrow for them. And, you know, so, you know, I've tried to explain to people that it's really, you know... I kind of explained that it's really just a medium. It's just another medium for telling a story and art, is incorporated and it's just it's... you know I think there's some feeling that, oh, that's for kids so I've, you know, I've tried to[explain] for people that think it's a little strange (2020).

The themes of wasting money and time, and doing a childish activity, hence being immature, are repeated in this dialog. The difference is that Tara tried to explain why she

reads comics. In other words, she tried to open a channel for communication to provide a better understanding of this stigmatized activity. But apparently, she was not totally successful, and still, there is an understanding barrier between her and some of her co-workers. Since Tara is an adult and has started to reread comics in the recent decade (in different times), she did not have to face overt discrimination. However, she still encounters stereotypes because of reading comics.

Katherine found herself embarrassed in a conversation with friends when she suddenly realized recently she only read comics.

When I was on a zoom call with friends from high school, some of whom are literature professors and it you know, people who are do all these various things. You know, we were trading things to read during the pandemic and I suddenly realized that everything I had read recently was a graphic novel... that was just everything that I had bought and was interested in reading. And so I sort of embarrassed, like, you know, here these five things I've read recently and none of them... they're all picture books, you know, and I think people don't expect that necessarily from me, or they associate me with reading literature and writing about literature...And so I don't- I don't think anyone in, I think, in a million years, people would not expect me to continue reading comics or be reading them as much as I am or ever produced one, like they just look at me and they think you're not someone interested in this world, somehow (2020).

Katherine put reading comics in the context of comparing it with reading literature. She mentioned a very common assumption that educated people do not read comics; they are "picture books" and are not suitable for adults with high education. Katherine did not mention her friends' reactions to her recommendations. Still, an inner voice resulting from knowing about the mentality of belonging to a stigmatized group stopped her and shamed her. In her case, she did not face any external disagreement or resentment but an inside feeling of embarrassment. People's expectations of her based on her education and

social situation, even if they are not saying them out loud to her face, give her the sense of doing something not suitable for her age or social rank.

"Now You Can Use it as Compliment or Insult."

During the interviews, I realized that the mentality around the comics fans as a stigmatized group had been changed. Even the meaning of some of the standard labels such as "Nerd" and "Geek" has altered. As my informants mentioned and implied in several ways, the passing time has a significant role in this evolution.

Sean as a young adult, 24 year old comics fan, explain this change based on his observation and experience:

I think, I think I was lucky... we were lucky enough to grow up in a time where nerd is kind of redefined; you know what I mean it is- it's moving beyond the traditional like outcasts. You know what I mean, where you're weird or your different, like you're- you're allowed to be whoever you are. Now, in many ways, in ways that you definitely weren't allowed to be when they first started writing these comic books. That's the funny thing. So I never felt weird in that way. Like, I love the fact that I read comic books... You know, I'm this way like my dad was, my dad didn't care what anybody thought of him. So that's kind of how I drew my personality. I was like, Why should I care what people think like I'm doing cool stuff. I like what I'm doing. And I never once felt judged for like comic books or reading this stuff. And because at the time it was becoming so popular, like everybody knows who the Avengers are, now everybody knows what comic books are. When especially, when I was growing up, there was still a little bit of that gray area but I-I remember I started going to school, right, when the first X Men movie came out. And that was like the first big superhero movie. So when I was like in class reading comic books, be like oh my god that's X Men. This one is, and I could like sit there and nerd out with them and explain it to them. As I never really felt that that, uh, that sense of dismissal from people because I like comic books because I was a nerd in that aspect... I know that- that can be weird for some people. But at the end of the day, I mean it's- it's like reading a book like how you gonna make fun of somebody reading a book like it's like those- those stereotypes, the bullies. Yeah, I think those are dying out, which is great because everybody's realizing, like, Oh, that's right. I should be reading I should be

learning things. That's right. It's not, it's not just cool to not learn anything. So I benefited from that, though I benefited from being part of a generation that was like nerd's cool there everybody's a nerd just being nerd became a compliment.

Sean talks about a new generation, a generation for which being a nerd does not have a negative connotation but is considered a compliment. He believes that the reason for this change is that society's understanding level has evolved. Media has an essential role in this transformation. Movies based on comics increased the common knowledge about comics and attracted new fans and readers to the club. In Sean's case, reading comics not only did not outcast him, but it also allowed him to show off his unique knowledge and "nerd out." Although some of his self-confidence came from his family background, he rapidly admitted that he never experienced any kind of dismissal or discrimination. For his generation, the old mentality of reading comics died out and even being called "nerd" can be considered as a compliment. Sean lives in a new environment that acknowledges comics as books, not junk, and reading them can improve one's insight. In this new generation, comics can be literature too.

Ashely agrees that there is a change happening, but she has other reasons for it. She thinks these days, "nerd" can have positive and negative connotations, based on who uses it and in what context. She argues that this alteration is caused by changing the status of "nerds" in the job market.

I think it used to be not so acceptable, but now sort of nerdy, is far more, at least socially, sort of valued in some ways... You know, where in some ways in high school, you know those kinds of boys [masculine, sport players] are very popular. But, you know, once young men, especially nerdy young men, enter the workforce oftentimes they're getting really great jobs and making a lot of money. And so, you know, then that all of a sudden that social shift means that they're, you know, they're more

desirable partner. For example, you know, they've got more social capital. I also think that we see a lot more of that kind of thing happening with Silicon Valley, more people investing a lot more money into things like these (2020).

Ashley did not deny that these days "nerd" can have negative or insulting meaning. Still, she admitted that since the job status of "nerds" has boosted in the workforce, more people are willing to accept them and even choose them over more usual popular kids. The work outcomes of nerds that include earning more money and having high-status jobs such as working in Silicon Valley have evolved the social status of nerds, and by association, of those who have been labeled in that way in the past such as comics fans. Comics readers still belong to a stereotyped group, but the stigma around this group and reactions to it have been changing.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed two main subjects. First, why my informants read comics and how they feel about it. Second, how they describe the reaction of others to this unique interest. I explained that the main reason for reading comics for the informants is enjoyment, but they experience other feelings and have different reasons for reading comics. They use reading comics as a way of escaping from their ordinary life. Reading comics creates an enclave, an alternative reality, for them to seek refuge there, forget the stress of everyday life, and detach themselves from the real world. Also, reading comics has a nostalgic feeling for them. It reminds them of their childhood, an old simpler time, or an idea of a golden time. But in the end, this nostalgic feeling is also a way of escaping reality and everyday life.

I also show that being a comics fan can be a stigmatized activity because it stereotypes people and forces them to face different discrimination levels. But based on my informants' observations and experiences, the mentality around this group has been changing. Even the meaning of labels such as "nerd" has altered. Enhancing the knowledge of comics by media, primarily via blockbuster movies, is one reason for this change. Also, since the economic and job status of "nerds" have been improving, their social status has been developing too, and society is more willing to accept them.

Notes

1. Silver age of comics (1960-1970) or commercial age of comics was a respond to postwar social conflict and change when superheroes were represented as essentially neurotic. The Fantastic Four, Incredible Hulk, Wonder Woman, etc. are some of the famous comics that created in this period of time (Chute 2017:73).

Third Chapter

Comics and Gender

Gender is a social and cultural construct that normalizes expectations and ideas about appropriateness regarding the categories of male and female gender identity (Clair 2009: 270-271). As I discussed in the introduction, in most of the researches about comics and gender, the focus is on textual analysis and also gender and race representation, especially in superhero comics. In this ethnographic research, I asked my informants what they think and feel about gender and its representation in comics. This question brought up other different reactions and led to discussing other issues such as gendered spaces related to comics and reading comics as a gendered activity. This chapter will analyze the information from my interviewees in two main sections: gender representation in comics and reading comics as a gendered activity.

Gender Representation in Comics

In response to my questions about representation of gender, almost all of my informants mentioned an "over-sexualized" representation of females and sometimes males in comics. But each of them has different ways to reach this point.

"Highly over-sexualized" female characters in superhero comics make Claire feel left out because she is a woman. Claire describes her experience as a child: "Even when I was a kid, I remember we would, you know, play pretend and I can never be any superheroes, because I was a girl and like that, as a memory, that stuck with me as I've grown up. And so even at five or six years old, I was waiting to be kind of pushed out"

(2020). Claire could not sympathize with superheroes because they are all men. She had a feeling of being left behind and “pushed out” even as a child while reading comics or playing pretend.

As a long-time comics reader, she looks at this feature with a "critical lens," because she cannot sympathize with the female characters and "fully go along with the story." She believes oversexualizing is not only in the appearance of female characters, but shown in the way these characters behave:

I had seen a lot of like, you know, all the jokes or the kind of like, one liners and stuff. We're all wary about like, sexual presentation or just being hot, you know, or -or being the eye candy or something. And on kind of a deeper level and things have kind of being the- the sacrificial character like this person can either be in danger in order to be saved by a guy or be kind of written out or killed off or discredited because, well, they're not really the main concern, you know, So yeah, I think it all kind of ties together (2020).

She mentions that most of the female characters are "eye candy" for audiences, without having other essential roles in the story. They are there because they can make male characters appear more powerful and masculine. She implies that just being aware that comics over-sexualized females permits assumptions or expectations from women and their bodies. These assumptions and expectations will come up in “jokes” or “one liners” or other daily conversations and become sources of reference and judgment for males and females.

Tara shares similar expressions and thoughts with Claire. She describes her interest in comics as "not superhero oriented" (2020) because of over exaggeration of female bodies and sexualization of female clothes. She explains that this feature has been

very "off putting" for her, especially in earlier times. "You know, just to look at a comic book cover, they almost, they all look the same. Yeah. The women were all represented the same way. And they were written by the same types of people, you know, cis-gendered white men were writing and drawing just about everything, and they have this kind of like, this laser focused view on what men and women look like" (2020). Tara mentions a very interesting point. Over exaggerating female bodies not only makes them sexual objects or as she puts it, "eye candy," but dehumanizes them. These female characters look like the same and then are expected to behave the same. She believes that male characters also deal with masculine exaggeration. But she agrees that many things have changed in the comics world, mainly because of female writers. She describes changes between comics from two decades ago and contemporary comics as differences between "night and day."

Keith said his first thought while reading comics is not gender-oriented. It does not matter if the character is male or female. Instead, he wants to know "where do they come from, what do they, what do they do, things like that like, gender to me, doesn't really matter as much, but I do enjoy when we get to see like a new cool female superhero" (2020). Keith, as a male, belongs to the "unmarked" (Shuman 1993:346-347) category of society, and it is possible for him to overlook issues such as gender. He admitted there are over-sexualized features in comics but believes female characters are not the only ones dealing with them:

But unfortunately, I think, since it is mostly a male audience comic book authors, understand that like, over sexualized female superhero helps sell the comic, so I mean that's at least a little sad that we can't just have like regular body proportion to people, but I mean, at the same time, neither are

males. We have males that look like hunting, you know, like Hulk. So I guess, at least, it kind of swings both ways, but like I feel worse for the females, because like if I was a girl, I wouldn't want to see tits popping out every single page, it would be nice to just see like a regular person (2020).

In this part of the dialog, Keith acknowledges that an important reason for having oversexualized female characters is a way of marketing comics for the male-dominated industry and audiences. Even though he feels "a little sad" for females, he cannot go further because males are also dealing with this issue, and it "swings both ways." He does not explain how he feels about oversexualized male characters, but he can understand that this matter could bother him if he was a girl. He likes female superheroes because "female heroes provide an interesting dynamic to like them, their male counterparts" (2020). He sees them not as independent characters but as foils to male figures.

Back to Keith's statement that gender does not matter to him, it is clear that he looks at the issue of gender and its representation in comics from a detached position. From the perspective of a person who watches things from a remove, gender does not have a significant role. Both males and females are dealing with the issue of oversexualizing representations in comics, so he wonders why it should be seen as a particular subject of interest. He tries to be fair by putting himself in female audiences' shoes, and this leads him to understand that "tits popping out every single page" could make girls feel uncomfortable, but apparently, this feeling is not a deal-breaker. Comparing Claire's feelings about this matter and how she experiences the sense of being left out, with Keith's statement about gender, shows two different approaches to this issue. Claire, as a female, is the main subject of this over sexualizing, but Keith is an outside viewer. Even when he tries to be sensitive about the issue, he cannot quite see the problem. But there is

a bright side to being an outsider. He recognized females are not the only subjects of over sexualizing; males are also dealing with it.

Daniel also admits that comics female characters are subjects of over sexualizing. He thinks it used to be worse since "a vast majority of the comics that I read were, you know, written by men, drawn by men, published by men, and you know, read by mostly boys" (2020). Male-dominated industry and audiences were the main reason for this specific type of female representation. He explains it more:

Most of the superhero titles were about male superheroes and they were always depicted as, you know, heroic and strong and their costumes mostly covered all their skin. And you know, I realized right away that, you know, the women superheroes were treated much differently. They didn't have their own titles. They were often, you know, kidnapped or coerced or, you know, held for ransom and had to be protected and saved and they had costumes that you know accentuated, you know you know, everything except for their strength. Usually, you know, it was how do we turn them into, you know, the sexual objects. I would say, like, you know, it seems to have gotten a lot better over the past few years, you know, putting aside, maybe like Marvel or DC and some of the big companies, but like, you know, within you know, the world of graphic novels, I would say, you know, you know, some of the biggest and most popular cartoonists, you know, our women these days (2020).

He mentions the differences between male and female representations, not just in appearances but also in how they behave or are treated. Interestingly, Daniel does not separate himself when talking about elements that cause the over sexualizing of female characters. He says, "how *we* turn them into sexual objects." Daniel does not present himself as an outside viewer, but he positions himself as a man in a male-dominated society, responsible for making females the sexual objects. Becoming a sexual object in comics happens by representing an over-sexualized appearance and how male characters treat females. Daniel implies that comics speak for the male-dominated society's

impressions about females, including beyond comics in the real world. That is the reason he uses the pronoun "we" to address what has created this situation. He believes that female representations are getting better in recent years because the industry is not entirely male-dominated anymore. Female writers add new perspectives to creating comics and provide a counter narrative for female presentation in comics.

John thinks too that female representation in comics used to be very bad, but it is getting more realistic:

I definitely think that they're [females] finally being represented in a more realistic way... I think it used to be the formula, was, you know, the more—the less the female character is wearing, the better. Yeah, the more dynamic poses that they could be doing, you know, the more- the more guys would, you know, pick up that issue. I think that- that- that's definitely fallen to the wayside (2020).

In John's view, over-sexualized females were marketing strategies for a better sale. He is happy this formula is changing, especially because John has two teenage daughters. As a comics reader and father, he wants his daughters to have better role models and representation in comics. He believes gender switches in some of the famous comics, such as having female Thor or female Spiderman, can be good and inspiring for the new diverse generation of fans:

I think that if it [gender switches] makes a good story then it's fantastic. I think that, you know, both boys and girls need good role models and whatever package, they, they come in, if, you know if it inspires them or makes them, you know, just use their imaginations I think it's fantastic. There's plenty of, plenty of characters throughout my, you know 40 or nearly 40 years of reading comics that you know are female characters, and I think they're, they're great. You know, obviously having two daughters. I want- I want, you know them to have appropriate representation. Especially when it comes to just like even just simple things like character design (2020).

As a serious comics reader, John has been mindful of female representations in comics, but being a father of two teenage girls offered him a deeper insight into the matter. He does not consider it an abstract issue anymore, but an important subject that can affect his daughters' lives.

Reading Comics as a Gendered Activity

While I was interviewing John, he suddenly said that reading comics "used to be a *boys' club*" (2020). This statement brought up a whole new concept that was apparently there, but I had not noticed. The question that came to my mind was that if reading comics used to be/ is a boys' club, should reading comics be considered a gendered activity? Chute explains in *Why Comics?* that even though the initial goal of creating comics (in the comic strip) was not to target a specific gender, it moved in this way:

Yet comics, as we know, were called "the funnies," and the medium came to be, broadly speaking, associated with humor and children. When superhero comic books hit in the late 1930s, and became a hugely popular consumer product...the association of comics with youth culture became more specifically the association of comics with boys. As a general matter this remained true despite the rise of other genres, such as romance comics aimed at girls, which began in the late 1940s (2017:278).

From one point on, the birth of superhero comics, the comics audiences started to shift based on gender. The presence of romance comics is another sign that confirms gendered divisions in the audiences and how the market tried to keep up with different gendered audiences. I decided to share John's statement with some of my informants and ask for their impressions. I started with my female informants.

Tara agreed with reading comics as a boys' club. But she brought up the issue of visibility in this matter. She argued that "I think that's more- what's visible people more willing to talk about it and the people more out there on social media talking about it and commenting on this and that, are men" (2020). In her view, one of the reasons reading comics *seems* a boys' club is that the female members of the club are not visible or not willing to show their interest openly. In Tara's words, "we're just not speaking up so much, and it's a little scary to speak up because of comics gate and the boys' club, it is intimidating." More female comics readers were out there, but they were intimidated to speak up and identify with any fan group. When I asked Tara what she means by "intimidating," she explained it by referring to common stereotypes about comics fans and female behavior:

I think, I think it's what the average public thinks comic books are and thinks that they're about, they, you know, they see the Avengers movies and they think that's what the comic books are all about, is just, you know, fighting and, you know, why would, why would a delicate woman want to read about fighting. You know, I think just reading in general, sometimes is, you know, it's kind of thought differently between the sexes. And you know that men have more time to indulge in their hobbies and women, women aren't able to have hobbies, because they have to do the home and, you know, raise the kids and, you know, a hobby for a woman is like a special luxury that most women can't do, and men, men- men go off to their man cave and can do whatever they like it's just like sports or anything else" (2020).

Tara mentioned significant stereotypes which female comics readers have to face. First of all, comics readers are members of a stigmatized group with its own special issues and assumptions. Based on what they see in media, people think that "comic books are all about fighting." General assumptions about comics say that they are not about important things, and also, these non-significant subjects are very male-oriented (war and fighting).

The second level of stereotypes also relates to gender, in questioning why a "delicate woman" wants to read something about fighting. In this degree, women face assumptions based on their gender and expectations related to it. Reading comics, because of its male-oriented content, is a male activity; thus, it is a gendered behavior that a real good woman should avoid. On one deeper level, these expectations are not only about how a delicate woman should or should not behave but also include what society expects as normal behaviors from males and females. Society considers having hobbies and free time for women as "luxury" because women's primary and never-ending job is taking care of their families. If they find free time after that, they should spend it with their families too. But it is acceptable for men to have their own free time, a "man cave," to have some quiet time away from the world. Because of these many levels of expectations and stereotypes, female comics readers feel they cannot speak up. They are intimidated because they face layers of stigma and gender stereotypes. Reading comics is considered a gendered activity, a boys' club; even though women have been members of it for a long time, they are intimidated to speak up and claim their place in the club.

Ashley also agreed that reading comics is "definitely still a boys' club kind of thing, though there's movement, but I don't, you know, I don't think it's huge" (2020).

Ashely pushed the argument further by suggesting that usually reading, in general, is not considered as a male activity:

You know, most growing up, I think most boys read comic books, and I think that parents, I mean, at least in my memory, a long time ago, you know, boys are not supposed to, like, to read. You know, this is sort of a *nerdy thing* and, you know, they're supposed to want to do other things, sort of culturally. So reading comic books, I think, it's like one way that parents could allow, you know, encourage their children to- to actually

read... but if boys were reading comic books, then they could sort of maintain their masculinity, but also by reading (2020).

Based on her experiences, Ashley argued that, culturally, society does not expect boys to show interest in reading. Or in other words, boys are expected to be interested in more outdoor activities. So reading is a "nerdy thing" for a boy to do. But reading comics is a way for a boy to maintain his "normal" masculinity while doing an otherwise unexpected activity. Here again, gender assumptions define how a person behaves, and how activity is labeled. Comparing to Tara's argument, the same reasons that make reading comics a gendered activity and not suitable for women to do (male oriented content, female gender stereotypes, etc.), create an environment for boys to read comics and avoid another set of gender assumptions and stereotypes.

In line with maintaining masculine status, Ashley added that: "I also think it's okay for you know, for those boys who are maybe not so physically, you know, into sports or something like that, comic books is a way to be competitive. It's a way to have a collection of something and also to have some level of like, you know, I guess like insider knowledge" (2020). She suggested that reading comics can help less physically masculine boys, saving their status as a man in a patriarchal society by having their own groups and insider knowledge. Culturally, society expects some sorts of behaviors and actions for boys. If a boy cannot fulfill these expectations, he puts himself in a lower rank of the masculine hierarchy. To make up the lack of some masculine elements, reading comics appears as an act of survival. The comics' content, especially superhero comics, provides the image of a strong man, and reading comics also provides them with insider knowledge, which helps them feel powerful and accepted as a comics readers group.

Thus, reading comics helps this group of men survive in a patriarchal society and feel less excluded. Based on that, reading comics can be considered a gendered activity and also it has more meanings for people who are members of this boys' club. Ashley suggested that if comics have more "female driven narratives" it could provide a better possibility for opening the boys' club's door to female readers and change the club.

Katherine confirmed Tara's and Ashley's ideas, but she was more specific about the boys' club's timing and believed that the situation has been changing.

I felt like the [reading] comics is a boys' club and that's certainly the way comic shops in the US in particular, had evolved [is a boys' club]. It was sort of a boys' recreational thing to do. Or that Mad Magazine seemed to be like a little bit tailored more toward a male audience or, you know, there's all these kind of things in popular culture that came together to make it seem that way. Comic Con world is diverse, but it's still on the mass market level feels very male dominated to me. Somewhere still in the American consciousness and American pop culture and an American mass media culture, right, like this is—there is the boys' club mentality floating around. And I think it does have a historical route. That- there are instances in the past where it really was a boys' club of creators. Or it was a boys' club of readers and different instances. If you look go all the way back to 1954 and that times, you know *seduction of innocence*, etc., like the focus of a lot of the juvenile delinquency, not all but some of it, was really focused on males who are out of control, right... But there's- there's definitely the stereotype of the young male. So I wonder if it's just, you know, it's this thing that's out there, but it's not really 100% relevant to comics as lived experience anymore. But it sort of takes a long time for that echo to fade and for some people, they're still invested in that, especially if they, I think if it comes with them from childhood and it was a way that they bonded with other males. You know, I can maybe, you know, maybe it was a boys' club in their lived experience. But it's just so far from it so far from mine and like the experience I have going to the independent [comics] thing. So yeah, I think it's, it's, that's just kind of a free ranging answer. It wasn't really a boys club for everyone, all the time. I don't think I don't think it was ever monolithic (2020)

Katherine drew a thin line between her past and present experiences and the boys' club's historical roots. In her opinion, the boys' club's idea was mainly a marketing strategy

(which I will discuss further later on). A male-dominated industry created a product for male audiences and caused a "boys' club mentality" in American pop culture. In her own words, Katherine explained how reading comics was shaped as a male activity around the stereotypes of a young male in 1950s and 1960s America. But she admitted that even though there was/is a dominant boys' club mentality; it does not mean everyone had/has the same experiences. It was a way of bonding and finding friends for some men, but these specific experiences cannot be applied to everyone. For proving her point, Katherine talked about her experiences as a child in her grandparents' house where comics were "kicking around" everywhere (2020), and everyone, regardless of age and gender, could access them. She argued that women always were there, as comics audiences and a part of the industry, but they were invisible: "if you start going back in time, like the influential things are just dominated by males for a really long time. And women are there, but they're just not recognized until later. And so then there's just this constant project of reclaiming their place. And also, you know, sort of trying to keep making space in the present for new ways of thinking about gender" (2020). Women were busy to make room for their rights and creativity in the society and the work place, so are not recognized as comics fans or creators until later.

Also, because of her job, Katherine knows and is in touch with some independent comics circles. Based on her recent experiences, she does not believe reading comics still is a boys' club. When I asked what has changed that makes it possible for a young female teenager to be an open comics fans, or even superhero fan, her answer was based on her lived experience of having a teenage boy and knowing many young passionate comics fans:

Something about the post structuralist mindset filtered into their [teenagers/new generations of audiences] lived experience, right, which is they really see things as socially constructed in ways that just never even crossed my mind... you know, there's a kind of empowerment that maybe that 16 year old young woman has to say, Hey, I know how to become a comics expert. I'm just going to go ahead and do it because you know what, I don't care what these people think. I'm interested in that, for whatever my reason is, and I have access. So I'm doing it right, like it's, some of it's access, I guess, obviously, but you know, I'm doing—some of it's also just the feeling that it is okay to break that rule like it—who cares if this person doesn't agree with me. And so something about a kind of storyline of both this kind of narrative that things are socially constructed combined with empowerment narratives that says, Okay, well if that's the case, then I'm an actor who has choice (2020).

In Katherine's perspective, new generations of comics readers are equipped with some empowering social discourses which give them support for being themselves and pursuing their interests. Also, they are self-aware that rules are socially constructed so they can be challenged and also changed. She believes this new mentality is a really significant reason for turning the boys' club around and making it more open and accessible.

After talking with my female informants, I thought I needed to go back and check some of this information with my male informants. I decided to choose two people from different generations and asked them what they know about this boys' club and how they feel about it.

Cole confirmed that it was/is a boys' club for many men, but it has changed. He explained that if in the past the main targets of comics were young white men, today "the market is diversified enough, and there are enough voices creating them that it is possible to find books in any genre or idiom that appeal to all kinds of people" (2020). Adding new voices and perspectives, especially female viewpoints, has formed a diverse market

for diverse audiences. Cole also had the same impression as Katherine about the new generation: "some of that may be age related. I definitely notice in my own kids and people their age, in a very good way, there tends to be less of a sort of like stark gender groupings, you know, young people that I know tend to hang out and share interests in a, in a less rac—not racially, gender segregated way which I think is healthy and great" (2020). For the new generation, the idea and definition of gender and gender rules are different, giving them more flexibility to pick and follow their interests.

I asked Cole a similar question I asked Katherine about what has changed that a young female living in the 21st century feels comfortable to be openly a superhero fan and want to enter the boys' club. He answered:

I think today the giant corporations that own these- these characters like Superman and Batman and the avengers have done a great job of marketing them to the broader world, they've made them generally popular in ways that are outside the comics, so it is- is no surprise to me if, if any, young person would find that they were a fan of something that millions and millions and millions of people all over the world are fans of (2020).

In Cole's idea, advertisers and media have an influential role in opening up the boys' club's door to public. Popular movies based on comics broadened public knowledge about comics and made their content seem more like public property that everyone can have access to. Therefore, regardless of gender or age, any person can be a fan without even the necessity of reading the comic books. Accessibility resulting from media and marketing, in addition to new conceptions of gender and gender rules, has built an environment in which reading comics is considered less of a gendered activity.

Sean approached the argument from a different angle. He argued that it is not surprising that reading comics used to be a boys' club because "everything in life is always a boy club" (2020). The male-dominated and patriarchal society turned everything into a boys' club, but Sean believed that it has been changing:

I think as we've evolved it's opened up so much more, you know in all aspects of life, and especially in comic books, because now you look at so many of the characters, so many of the writers, the artists that's, the thing is that the women who started reading comic books, when it was male dominated, you know, male dominated writers, creators all that stuff. They [women] got into it somehow, you know, they broke the mold they broke through that glass ceiling, and now you have very prominent female writers, creators, directors, all that stuff that really bring that energy into it, that- that take it to a whole another level of understanding (2020).

Sean described previous female comics readers' efforts who "broke the mold and got through that glass ceiling" as an essential movement that paved the way for new generations of female readers and creators. In his perspective, these new female perspectives add to comics' meaning.

Sean characterized this ongoing evolution very positively and as a broad change not only for female audiences but also for men:

It's just those women reading it and falling in love with it the same way a man would. Both male and female characters and just saying, I want to do that, I want to create that, I want to write that. You know I want to tell the next story of wonder woman or I want to tell the next story of like, of the one of the female excellent characters you know Storm or Jean Grey all that stuff. And they- they you know, they tie into that symbol of strength and hope that we all get out of it even, you know reading it as a young man as kid, you're like Oh, I want to grow up to be like Batman or I want to do...The same thing for women, even- even with the male superheroes you know, there's no issue with a woman reading, you know Superman comic book and saying I want to grow up and be like Superman...there's nothing wrong with it, even with a boy now reading and be like, I want to be as strong as wonder woman, you know I read a couple of different stories of kids when they're picking out their Halloween costumes now and there's

boys that are like I want to be Wonder Woman yeah, be Wonder Woman. She's strong. Also same way that a girl would want to be Batman or any of those other characters. And that's kind of the beauty of it for me is the evolution from being a boys' club (2020).

In Sean's view, reading comics is less gendered activity and can have the same effects on female and male readers. Because the superhero characters for him are not completely known as male or female, but he recognizes them mostly by their strengths. Based on that, everyone, regardless of gender, can be in love with these characters and want to be like them. Therefore it is not strange if a woman wants to be Batman or a little boy picks Wonder Woman's clothes for Halloween. Sean talked and linked two matters in this dialog. First, in his perspective, the boys' club idea cannot be applied anymore because there is more to superheroes than their gender. Second, he connected his viewpoint to the idea of the boys' club's evolution by using the example of the little boy to show that reading comics is not a gendered activity or a private club, at least not anymore.

Although John started this conversation, I kept his opinion about the boys' club until the end. I asked him what he thinks about the boys' club today:

It has changed dramatically...you know, for job I walk around neighborhoods and I'm outside seeing people every day and I'm always amazed to see how many like young girls I see wearing comic book T shirts now and or sitting, you know, on a park bench or on the city bus or something like that with, you know, you know, a graphic novel or a manga book in their hands. So it definitely [changed]. Yeah, I don't think it's that boys club anymore. I think that- that- that exists in some circles, and I think it'll always be with certain titles or publishers or you know, certain messages digesting comics but yeah I'm amazed that, you know, I mean, I always think back first. I'm just like, God, like comics were really a shameful thing for me growing up. And secondly, I'm just like, I never knew a girl who read comics...it's amazing that you know, there's definitely comics for everyone now and I'm amazed you know how- how mainstream, it's- it's become in so many ways from going into bookstores and libraries to, you know, people just know these characters, the way they

know like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, you know, it's just like it's become part of you know, the, the cultural vocabulary (2020).

John also believes in ongoing changes and actually has seen it daily. From the place where John came from reading comics was a "shameful" thing to do even for a boy. But now not only can young people read comics openly regardless of their gender, but also comics is a part of today's "cultural vocabulary."

John and the other informants did not say that the concept of boys' club completely vanished, but they mostly believed that it has been changing. Reading comics is becoming more an open club and less a gendered activity.

Marketing Strategies and Gender

In the previous section, almost all my informants emphasized the importance of marketing in shaping a boys' club mentality. One of the common subjects that came up during conversation was comic book stores' role in forming the idea of boys' club.

First Ashley mentioned it: "I think that, you know, most comic book stores are owned by men. Most people shopping at Comic books [stores] and doing all the trading and listing, price listing, all of that kind of stuff, they're, all it's typically mostly men. I think that's changing some, but I still think that it's definitely like a, it's a dude thing" (2020). Ashley worked in a comic book store in her late 20s and said that based on her personal experiences. She described a gendered space that has been built around comics. In his article "Critical Ethnography: the Comics Shop as Cultural Clubhouse," Brian Swafford confirms this by focusing his research on a local comic book store. Based on his observation, he argues that comic book stores have become cultural club houses for

comics' fans and follow a set of rules. One of these rules is "No Girls Allowed" (2012:291-300).

I did not persuade the idea but Cole and Katherine brought it up by themselves while talking about how marketing shaped a specific audience for comics. Cole explained the relationship between marketing and gendered audiences:

It didn't used to be that way [boys' club]. When comics started, because they were at the very beginning reprints of newspapers strips, gender didn't come into play, everybody read comic strips in the newspapers in the 1920s and 30s and it was just one of the primary forms of popular culture of entertainment. And that carried over into comic books, at first, and through the 1940s and 50s comic books were very much, my understanding is that, they were not only were there comic books for boys and girls, but many comic books were read by both whether it's the Archie teen comedy titles or superhero adventure stuff or science fiction or...It wasn't until the sort of mainstream newsstand presence for comics started to go away and you could only find them readily in the direct market in comic book stores. That kind of access and who was reading them kind of like fed each other, so it was the- the guys, the young men who were really into a particular kind of comic experience that were willing to, They weren't reading them as casually as many people were reading them, they were driven to, want them enough to go to special stores, to get them instead of just finding them in their supermarket or- or local pharmacy. And the publishers saw that and knew who was buying their books in this way and started gearing their books more towards men, teenage boys through young adult men. It kind of they fed on each other to the point where I think by the 1980s, especially very much mainstream comic books were something for men. Women were presented as objects to acquire or look at in a way, that- that male characters were not. You know, you might see a strapping muscular hero and think ooh that, you know, sort of wish fulfillment like me, but you would look at buxom women in the comics and it was clear that it was, those were objects of desire not objects of wish fulfillment for readers necessarily (2020).

Cole described a dynamic between the market and comics readers. In the beginning, when comic strips were accessible for everyone, the issue of gender was not something that stood out. By creating a specific marketplace for comics in a comic store, a certain

group, young men, was willing to go to these stores and buy their products. Thus, the industry and the market focused on the more favorable and desirable contents for this defined group of customers. As Cole mentioned, these two, the market or access and the audiences, "fed each other." As a result, comic stores developed into gendered spaces and helped create a boys' club environment and mentality. It is important to notice that the timeline that Cole talked about is slightly different from Chute's time line which I mentioned in the previous section. That is because Chute talks about creations of different kinds of comics while Cole explains shaping the market for comics.

Katherine put more emphasis on the access and how it can change the range of audiences and comics' creators and writers:

I'm going to talk about marketing and I'm going to talk about the internet and how it affected marketing, the big sort of shift in marketing with the internets... it enables niche marketing on a level that you could never possibly have before. Right. And so all of a sudden, you don't need a broad based, like sort of vision of who your audiences [are], you actually could write for a small audience that sustains you that you can reach directly through the internet and they can pay you directly through the internet. And that seems to be a big game changer and a game changer in a couple of ways. One is it does allow for people who would have never been published before under other circumstances, and this is true not just for comics. This is true for any kind of publishing or broadcast media... I do think it does allow for space, for more voices. There are still dominant voices. You know, there are still voices who are gonna, you know, that doesn't take away the social dynamics and power dynamics that are there, but it does. There's enough space around the margins, it got bigger, you know, like, on some level, and people were able to not have to go to the center to go to the side of the margin. Like they can just go directly around over there and just skip those people in the center and so I think that helps (2020).

If comic stores centered the audiences and created a gendered space and mentality by limiting the access for all the fans, the internet provides open access for everyone.

Different comics creators and publishers with their unique voices, perspectives, content, and art can present themselves to a diverse range of audiences worldwide. If before they could not market their product because the industry only supported a specific kind of content or style, or could not sell their comics because the main audiences of comic stores were male, now they do not have to deal with these intermediaries and can be in touch with their audiences directly through internet and satisfy their needs. On the other hand, the internet offers an open and accessible space for comics fans of different ages, genders, ethnicities, etc., to be themselves and follow their interests, without the need to explain them to others. Internet not only gives them more space but also, more importantly, provides them access to all sorts of materials, in this case, different comics. For instance, female fans do not need to feel uncomfortable going to comic stores to buy comics. They can approach all kinds of comics just by going online. The internet has evolved the marketing of comics and the dynamic between the market and the audiences. It has provided almost free access for nearly everyone. Therefore, this new dynamic alters how gender works with regard to comics. If reading comics used to be a boys' club, today primarily because of a different way of access, it is not a totally boys' club. In this regard, reading comics can be seen as not a gendered activity, at least for the new generation, because now all genders have the access and opportunity to choose reading comics.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the relationship between comics and gender. I analyzed the information under two main parts: representation of gender in comics, and reading

comics as a gendered activity. In the first part, I explained how my informants feel and think about gender representation in comics. Both male and female informants mentioned over-sexualized appearance and behaviors of female, and in some cases male, characters and how women became sexually objectified and turned into eye candy for male audiences as a marketing strategy.

In the second part, I argued that reading comics could be considered a gendered activity. The base of the argument, introduced by my interviewee John, was the idea of reading comics as a boys' club. My informants explained that reading comics used to be a boys' club because of the male-dominated society and the industry, but it has been changing. One of the reasons for this ongoing change is that the new generation defines gender roles differently and believes that rules, in general, are socially constructed; therefore, they are subject to change. Another reason is that the industry is being more diverse by using especially female writers and artists. Adding these new perspectives has changed the content of comics and attracted more varied audiences. Also, my informants indicated the dynamic between marketing and audiences has played a role in making reading comics a gendered activity. In the past, comics' main marketplace was comic book stores, which were more male-dominated. The market produced comics that were more desirable for this group of comics audiences. But today, the internet has altered this dynamic. The internet provides more varied and free spaces for both the artists and the fans to express themselves. Also, it offers almost unlimited access for nearly everyone so that they can approach all kinds of comics regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, etc.

Conclusion

I started this research project in June 2020 with the central question of why adults read comics. I interviewed eleven persons in the summer of that year; four females and seven males, ages between 24 to 51 years old. I asked them questions such as when they started reading comics, why they are still reading them, who their favorite superhero and villain is, etc. Some of these questions became the core ideas of my chapters in this research.

In my introduction, I provided a definition of comic books, graphic novel, and Webtoon. Then I reviewed related scholarly works to my research and explained my research questions and methodology.

In the first body chapter, "Comics as Sacred Narrative," I analyzed answers to the question of have they ever had an experience of reading comics that inspired them to make changes in the real world or alter their perspective about something. Based on my informants' answers and secondary researches about similarities between comics and myths, I argued that comics could have Mythical Effects. It means comics can function in ways similar to myths by offering guidelines, role models, and inspiring their readers to do good and make changes.

The main questions that shaped the second body chapter, "Comics, Escapism, Nostalgia, and Stigma," were why my informants read comics, how they feel about it, and how they describe others' reactions to this unique interest. I explained that my informants read comics because it helps them escape from the stress and hardship of the real world by creating an alternative reality, an enclave, to seek refuge. This act of

escapism sometimes carries some sense of nostalgia for the simpler past and the childhood period. At the end of the chapter, I demonstrated how reading comics has become a stigmatized activity, how my informants are affected by that, and how the meaning of some of the stereotypes such as "nerd" and "geek" have changed during time from one generation to another.

Finally, in the third body chapter, "Comics and Gender," I analyzed my informants' reactions to gender and its representation in comics under two main parts: representation of gender in comics and reading comics as a gendered activity. Almost all of my informants were sensitive to and aware of over-sexualized characters and comics features, especially when it comes to female characters. In the next part, my informants expressed their feeling and thoughts about how reading comics used to be a boys' club and how it has been changing. They talked about the ways of marketing as a significant element in this alteration.

To conclude this research and sum up its results, I prefer to go back to my research questions and answer them. Again, the central question of this research was why adults read comics. When I went further with the interviews, this question had changed and became more complex. The "why" question altered to a "how" inquiry. I wanted to know how they feel when reading comics, how they describe the experiences of reading comics, how they interpret comics, and, more importantly, how reading comics shapes their behavior in the real world. Based on their answers to these questions, I realized that reading comics had become more than pure entertainment or hobby for them. If reading comics as a child was an amusement, it has gained more meaning and value for them as adults. Reading comics is still an entertaining activity, but it is also a means for them to

escape reality and have complex feelings about the past. For the adults I interviewed, reading comics is a way of community-making and finding like-minded friends for them. They read comics now to learn more about American history and the history of comics' creation. But more importantly, they are reading comics because it inspires them in their daily lives by offering new ideas, unique stories, and advanced art. For some of them, comics shaped their personality and changed their perspectives. Reading comics is a central part of their lives.

My other question was how my informants learned about comics and if media plays a role in it or not. I noticed that media has a particular role among comics readers. Through children's television series, the new generation of readers learned about comics' characters and content, such as Batman and Spiderman, which then attracted to the comic books. But media's role is not limited to this function. Media, including movies, TV series, animations, commercials, etc., has broadened the domain of comics' audiences. If before, only a few "nerd" children, mostly males, read comics, today because of more widespread media exposure, everyone can be a potential comics' reader and fan. Popular media not only extended comics' audiences but also has challenged stereotypes and gender boundaries around reading comics. Nowadays, a person from a different nationality, gender, ethnicity, etc., can read comics with fewer difficulties and assumptions than any comics readers three decades ago. The Internet definitely has an exceptional role in these alterations by providing access and space for almost everyone to express and pursue their interests.

Another main subject of my research questions was about gender and its role in reading comics. My informants confirmed that the gender of comics readers used to

matter. Reading comics was seen as a male activity. But now, because of changes in definition and expectation of gender and the existence of a worldwide web, the gender of readers is becoming less and less important or even noticeable. In this case, another effect of gender is how gender plays a role in choosing comics and interpreting them. I recognized that my female informants are less attracted to superhero comics. Over-sexualized female bodies and trivialization of females' personalities and characters are the main reasons for the female informants to read less superhero comics. They are more sensitive about the issue of gender and its representation in comics.

This research brought up several issues and questions to my attention, and I discussed some of them in this thesis. Studying comics is a subject of many fields such as cultural studies, literature, communication, and advertisement. I chose to add a folkloristic perspective to this research subject by using the ethnographic method and focusing on people and how they interact with comics in their daily lives, rather than a textual, psychological, or sociological approach. I believe the ethnographic method and folkloristic perspective can add to understanding comics' world. It can help recognize comics and read them not as a fandom but as a folk activity and identity and a community maker. Focusing on individuals from different backgrounds rather than groups can clarify the significance of reading comics for comics readers and correct general assumptions and stereotypes about them. My study sample was small and limited to the snowball method. I suggest future researches expanding the informants' domain to different races, ethnicity, gender, and even nationalities to have more diverse data about how comics readers interact with comics and express their feelings and opinions about this expanded universe.

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