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Using Superheroes to Visually and Critically Analyze Comics, Stereotypes, and Society

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Introduction

Since the beginning of time, societies have often chronicled the lives of their most heroic. From Gilgamesh to Bilbo Baggins, many of the world's greatest tales follow the lives of legends and saviors. These incredible tales offer the reader a sense of the strength and nationalism found within the culture of a given society. For example, the cunning of Odysseus to escape Polyphemus, the courage and honor of Beowulf to take on all evil even in his old age, or the pride that Gilgamesh sees in his legacy, Uruk are all vital components of the respective cultural tenets. Therefore, these heroes are meant to be personifications of the land and people they represent. Just as Zeus, Thor, Gilgamesh, and Beowulf were the greatest heroes of their respective times and cultures and just as their stories are meant to resonate within their cultures, so too are heroes of our age (e.g., Batman and Superman). Comic books, in essence, serve as modern mythology (see for example, Hatfield, Heer, & Worcester, 2013; Klock, 2002; Reynolds, 2013; Reynolds, 1992).

Since their inception, comic book superheroes have served as cultural artifacts and representations of the times in which they were created. Superman, at least as we know him, appeared in 1933 at a time when Americans could use a heroic and patriotic figure. Captain America appeared in 1941 amidst the United States' involvement in World War II. Batman, similarly, made his initial appearance in 1939 on the heels of the Great Depression and the uncertainty over another global conflict.

The literature suggests, however, that comics have largely failed to adequately represent the society in which they were created. While the comics industry is moving in a positive

direction, readers require greater diversity of texts in which all readers can relate. While comics are at long last beginning to scratch the surface of diversity in America, it is important to help students understand the motivations behind this change. By doing this, teachers will not only help students to understand important literary elements, as listed in local and federal standards, in an engaging and pertinent manner, but they will also allow students the opportunity to find meaning in and valid applications for comics, and texts of all types, within their lives and their society. Accomplishing a task such as this within the classroom can help students to find relevancy within other mediums and to continue to search for knowledge in other unconventional, yet constructive ways.

Our Purpose and Connections to the Literature

Scholars have studied comics as a medium, from a variety of angles and through myriad lenses, for decades. Romagnoli and Pagnucci (2013), for example, suggested that while comics are studied and discussed, the superhero comic genre is purposefully ignored. Similarly, McGrath (2007) suggested the need to analyze comics and heroes via sociological perspectives, such as race and ethnicity. It is this need to analyze comics that drives our work with students and the instruction we share through this paper. In our classrooms, we use these suggestions to guide the critical inquiry with which our students engage, and as such, we use comics to foster visual learning (Eisner, 1998; Fisher & Frey, 2004; McCloud, 1993; Serafini, 2011; Smetana, 2010) and critical thinking (Brenna, 2013; Chun, 2009; Krusemark, 2015; Serafini, 2014) and task students with explicitly examining comic book superheroes through these relevant social lenses. The review of the literature that follows is meant to frame the analytical experiences our students undertake. While a comprehensive review of relevant literature is far too complex to be adequately dealt with here and is thus outside the scope of this article, we have structured our

discussion by the categories of misrepresentation (society, stereotypes, gender, race and ethnicity, and sexuality) that we provide our students to guide their reading, discussions, and learning.

Our aim is to give our students (high school English language arts), and the students of readers of this article, the constructive and enlightening experience we have had with comic books while also presenting them with a sense of diversity. Thus, we have selected four comic books (*Gotham Central*, *The Shadow Hero*, *The Authority*, and *Ms. Marvel*) and characters (Renee Montoya, Green Turtle, Apollo and Midnighter, and Kamala Khan) that we feel offer engaging experiences as well as diverse ones that explore several heroes from various racial, cultural, and gender-related backgrounds. (1) Originally a character in *Batman: The Animated Series*, Renee Montoya (*Gotham Central*) is a Latina detective in Gotham City. She is eventually framed for murder and outed as a lesbian by Two-Face, tossing her life into chaos. (2) The Green Turtle (*The Shadow Hero*) made his first appearance in 1944 in Chu Hing's *Blazing Comics*. Green Turtle's origin is shrouded in mystery, but scholars argue that Hing's goal was to create a Chinese superhero. The character was reborn in *The Shadow Hero* miniseries, which offered an overtly Asian main character. (3) Created by Warren Ellis and Bryan Hitch, Apollo and Midnighter first appeared in *Stormwatch*. In 1999, the characters made the move to a new series, *The Authority*, where they became lovers and were eventually married. (4) G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona created Kamala Khan, a Pakistani American, in 2014 as the first Muslim character to headline a Marvel publication (*Ms. Marvel*), where she assumed the role from the more widely-known Carol Danvers.

Our goal is to offer our students a fresh take on comic books not only by helping them find comics that represent cultures not often included in the comic book form, but also to inspire

them to subsequently use these experiences to analyze society and to become creators of new comics that offer neglected cultures a stake in the comic book medium. We use comic books for our purposes because they are an engaging way to integrate cultural diversity and acceptance into the classroom. We want students to not only comprehend and analyze the importance of visual literacy in their lives, but also the need to analyze the viewpoints of various different cultures and synthesize those cultures with their own. Through this unit, we provide students with various artifacts of American history, but in doing so we encourage them to question in what ways society has changed and what changes still need to occur.

Society

One way in which we ask students to consider comics and misrepresentation is through a social lens (i.e., society), and our students read all four comics in this pursuit. Traditionally, comics have not always provided representative looks at contemporary U.S. society. In fact, in the mid-1980s, Alan Moore stated in the preface to *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*:

As anyone involved in fiction and its crafting over the past fifteen or so years would be delighted to tell you, heroes are starting to become rather a problem. They aren't what they used to be...or rather they *are*, and therein lies the heart of the difficulty. We demand new themes, new insights, new dramatic situations. We demand new heroes.

(1986, p. 3)

For the most part, the archetypal superheroes (i.e., Batman, Captain America, Spider-Man, etc.) have been white males. Additionally, they have been honest, masculine, and so forth white males. To further complicate this notion, Brown (2001) wrote, "Like most other forms of North American mass media in the twentieth century, comic books have more or less managed to erase all evidence of cultural diversity" (p. 2). Traditionally (and even contemporarily), superheroes

have not adequately represented what American culture looks (or has looked) like. That said, there have been more recent efforts to address diversity. For example, Captain America has been reconceived as African American, Spider-Man is bi-racial, and Ms. Marvel is now a Pakistani American. Additionally, there have been some attempts made prior to these contemporary issues (e.g., Wein & Cockrum's, 1975, "Giant-Size X-Men #1). Many traditional superheroes, however, no longer cut it; our society continues to grow, to shift, and to look significantly different—comic book superheroes must follow suit.

Stereotypes

A second lens through which our students engage with the four texts to view comic superheroes is that of the stereotype. In addition to failing to adequately represent the society in which they exist, comic book superheroes also often perpetuate stereotypes and misrepresentations. These stereotypes can be seen in myriad ways, such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so forth. Specifically, as McGrath (2007) argued, many comic book series continue to portray racial and gender stereotypes. Moreover, comparatively few comics include female and racially/ethnically/sexually diverse superheroes. Consequently, little research has been conducted to examine the intersection of these points of diversity in comic superheroes/heroines. The remainder of this literature review will focus on explicating the categories of misrepresentations our students wrestle with and the relationships between comic superheroes and gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality.

Gender

Yet another construct our students use to read the four comics and to analyze superheroes is gender, specifically visual representations of gender. One of the most frequently discussed aspects of comics, specifically with regard to stereotyping and accurate societal representation, is

that of gender and the superhero. McGrath (2007) pointed out an ongoing “underrepresentation, objectification, and sex-stereotyping of women...in comic books” (p. 271). Beginning in the 1980s, illustrators (largely male) began depicting superheroes, both male and female, with exaggerated sexual characteristics. Males, for example, were often drawn as having muscular, thick necks with comparatively smaller heads. Females were given long legs and large breasts and were often scantily clad to show off these characteristics (Robbins, 2002). As McGrath (2007) pointed out, superheroes were also given form-fitting outfits that accentuate the body. Perhaps part of this can be explained by looking at those who create the comics. Men continue to be responsible for comics (e.g., writers, artists, editors) and continue to outnumber women as characters. There are, however, beginning to be female comic writers who challenge and push against these norms by using their own stories and art to move in from the margins (Allison, 2014). It is also important to note a lack of scholarship in this area. Stabile (2009), for example, argued that many comic superheroes include overt sexism. Aside from this, few scholars have examined the relationships between gender in comic characters and power, sexuality, and so forth (Austin, 2015).

Race and Ethnicity

Through our study of comics and superheroes, we ask students to wrestle with a fourth category of misrepresentation—race and ethnicity. While this lens is utilized throughout our comics unit, students specifically apply this to Renee Montoya, Green Turtle, and Kamala Khan. In comics, topics and characters are reduced to *a* visual. These visuals are often superficial and stereotyped. This is especially true for the characters in superhero comics. Comic books, specifically those with superheroes, have served as historic and ongoing locations for stereotypical renderings of race and ethnicity, and the superhero genre itself has a “long history

of excluding, trivializing, or ‘tokenizing’ minorities” in numerous superheroes (Singer, 2002, p. 107). Furthermore, ethnic identity, while presented in varied ways, continues to draw from stereotypes (McGrath, 2007). Conversely, those that do not utilize stereotypes often exacerbate the issue by creating what Singer termed an “equally unrealistic invisibility” (p. 107). While contemporary issues continue to push back against these stereotypes, there remains an atmosphere of historical stereotype reaffirmation.

Sexuality

Lastly, an important component of social analysis is the spectrum of sexuality; thus, we utilize the study of superheroes to foster this analytical thought in students, especially with regard to Apollo and Midnighter. Compared to previous decades, there are currently more LGBTQ content in comics. Palmer-Mehta and Hay (2005) argued that LGBTQ issues have “been increasingly explored by industry leaders, DC and Marvel, since the late 1980s” (p. 390), but these were mostly in supporting and more minor roles. Greyson (2007) also stated that many comics containing LGBTQ characters have historically not been from the large publishing houses, but have instead been self-published or through independent publishers. Others (see for example, McAllister, Sewell, & Gordon, 2001) have pointed to the benefit (and necessity) for analyzing comics and comic characters in a variety of ways (e.g., queer theory, LGTBQ, and so forth).

In 1994, a “Doonesbury” cartoon drew attention to the issues of homosexuality and gay marriage by taking a humorous shot at the typical religious and societal stance of homosexuality as being abnormal and being a sin (Preston, 1994). Almost twenty years later, Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* included characters who “normalize queerness,” which Brisbin and Booth (2013) defined as someone who “does not conform to the gender norms informed by a masculine-

feminine binary, which rests on a presumed heterosexuality (and heteronormativity)” (p. 22). In this way, *Sandman* is one of the few comics that, rather than reinforcing stereotypes, contradicts them. This, however, is not the norm in a comics industry that has regularly stereotyped many minorities and issues of diversity.

Analyzing Visual Narratives

In order to help students analyze contemporary comic book heroes and to ultimately make meaningful connections to the society in which they live, we introduce students to an instructional unit that utilizes four comics as the anchor texts. As part of this, students begin by analyzing individual images. This allows us to assist students in practicing and developing foundational visual literacy skills (e.g., analyzing, questioning, and interpreting images) and to guide students through conversations and group activities. Moreover, this serves as an opportunity to ease students into the social-critiques and analytical lenses that drive this unit (society, stereotypes, gender, race and ethnicity, and sexuality). It is only after these experiences that we ask students to apply their newly acquired skills as they read and analyze entire comic book narratives. The unit itself culminates in a project allowing students to compose their own visuals (i.e., depictions of heroes) that they feel adequately represent their society. As mentioned above, we utilize this four-week unit, designed to allow students to consider and discuss a variety of issues through the lens of comic narratives, with high school ELA students.

Ultimately, the purpose of this unit is to provide students opportunities to rethink the stereotypes that they, and others, have and the roles the media and society play in promoting and/or perpetuating these beliefs. As we read and discuss each comic, students make connections to advertisements, mass media, politics, social movements, U.S. and world events, and much more. Throughout the unit, students are required to ask complex and sometimes very personal

questions (e.g., What stereotypes do I hold, and where did they originate? How do I disrupt these personal beliefs and truths?) and to begin rethinking both themselves and the world. To help students go beyond simply reading and discussing our comics and to assist them in taking critical stances on relevant social issues, we also engage students in applying all that they have discussed, realized, and learned by composing their own interpretations of society—their own visual representations of heroes that well-represent the society in which they live.

Reading Static Comic Images

Before asking students to read and make meaning from entire comic books, we first have them look at single images from those texts they will later analyze. This is important to us for a variety of reasons. Given that the ultimate goal of this unit is to help students begin to analyze superheroes and to connect those heroes to the society in which we live, they must first wrestle with individual heroes and whether or not they feel those heroes adequately or accurately represent the U.S. We begin this unit by engaging students in small group and whole class discussions that require them to start thinking about and attempting to define ‘hero’ and the characteristics that they feel accurately represent the United States. Throughout this process, we want students to recognize that the concept of ‘the hero’ is often fluid and as Jung pointed out, unique and individualized, and doesn’t have to represent a specific archetype or stereotype. In fact, we aim to discuss heroes that represent multiple aspects of the world around us. As such, we also want students to recognize, and then discuss, that comic books, historically, have not always done a good job of accurately representing society.

As part of the unit, students will read and dissect four comic book superheroes, beginning with static images of each and then transitioning to reading the narrative as a whole. First, we introduce students to *Gotham Central* and Renee Montoya. Next, students examine The Green

Turtle. Third, we look at Apollo and Midnighter in *The Authority*. And finally, students read *Ms. Marvel*, where they analyze Kamala Khan. It is worth noting here that these are not the only texts valuable for this type of instructional approach. In fact, the use of other titles might help students to look at heroes and society in alternative and important ways. To select the texts discussed here, we compiled a list of comics and heroes with which we were familiar and that we felt would foster critical thinking and conversations in our students and then narrowed them to ensure they each offered students a unique look at the concepts that drive our unit.

Rather than simply asking students to view these images and to begin making relevant meaning from them, we provide students with levels of scaffolding: working in groups and utilizing a list of prompts/questions to guide their analysis. We make the decision to put students into groups for three main reasons. First, all students come to this project with different experiences and perspectives. While many students are familiar with the comic book superheroes of the big screen, most report never having read a comic book. Second, any social critique should involve a dialogue—this is no different. Third, students tend to grow as learners through meaningful collaboration. The handout used to guide students' analyses is intended to focus their attention and to foster the visual analysis skills necessary to evaluate the societal implications of any visual they encounter. The handout reads as follows:

As you *read* the excerpted images from each of these comics, discuss and provide a response to each of the prompts/questions below:

- Describe what the hero looks like.
- What are your initial thoughts?
- What similarities do you see between heroes?
- What differences do you see?

- Are any/all of these heroes representative of our society? How so?

These prompts are meant to serve as guides only. Students can and will make their own connections and utilize their own perspectives. Thus, a range of ideas, questions, and responses may ensue. This, however, is one of the positive side effects of this approach. We want students to practice asking questions of texts and forming their own interpretations. Likewise, students will certainly pick out ideas that we never considered, fostering a productive discussion and helping us all to learn on a daily basis. For example, when discussing *Gotham Central*, one student asked why Montoya's hair appears somewhat disheveled in the image (below), sparking an interesting conversation about the societal expectations on women to meet a pre-defined appearance. With that said, we always enter this unit with a list of specific prompts, guiding questions, and examples that can assist students in getting started, especially if this is the first time they have been asked to analyze static and narrative images. Below, we provide a discussion of the excerpts we use with students, along with a few points of interest that we think students should note. These are certainly not meant to represent the entirety of the topics of discussion possible within this unit, but are instead only designed to offer educators a glimpse into our pedagogical approach(es).

Rene Montoya. The first image we provide students is from *Gotham Central*, "Half a Life, Part 2" (vol. 1, issue 7, 2003). Using this image of Renee Montoya, who is cast in shadow and holding a firearm (see Figure 1), we begin by focusing students' attention on the use of color. We want them to note the dark tone and the high contrast within the image. Our students discuss a variety of ideas here, such as how the artist has included a generous amount of black and blue, which helps provide readers visual context about this character. Here we ask students to note the black as representative of what Montoya has been hiding from the world and the blue

as evoking a feeling of loneliness. This suggests the seriousness of the situation at hand, as well as emits a mysterious vibe. As readers, we are meant to feel what Montoya is feeling. The shadow cast across half her face shows us that she doesn't know everything about the situation she is in. Part of it is still a mystery (to readers as well), leaving her uncertain (i.e., shrouded in doubt).



Figure 1: Renee Montoya

Next, we guide students to the character (Montoya herself) in the image, as we want them to begin noticing how revealing visual characterizations can be. In this image, our eyes are drawn to her face. We ask students to notice that only half of Montoya's face is illuminated, suggesting she is hiding something or that we, as readers, are only seeing one side of her. In other words, we are only seeing "Half a Life." It is also important to note her gun. Montoya is a character with no superpowers; thus, she must use outside tools to achieve her goals. Given that we only see the right side of her face, and the fact that she holds her gun in her right hand, we can infer that the side of herself she allows to be seen by the world (and by readers) is her police force side. As readers, we along with the rest of Gotham, see a hard detective whose passion is connected to law and order. Throughout the comic, and the story arc, however, students will begin to see what is hidden on Montoya's other side.

Apollo and Midnighter. The second image we show students is taken from *The Authority*, "The Circle" (vol. 1, issue 2, 1999). In this image (see Figure 2), we are presented with two superheroes, Apollo and Midnighter, who each stand out in their own ways. Here, they work as a kind of yin and yang, as both heroes fight crime but do so using very different methods. Apollo, the brightly colored hero, delivers justice using conventional super-heroics



Figure 2: Apollo and Midnigher

(i.e., busting the bad guys and delivering them to the authorities). Conversely, Midnigher is more non-traditional in his approach to crime fighting. He utilizes threats, torture, and dirty fighting to achieve his goals. Both of these heroes, however,

work together by offering a system of checks and

balances. Midnigher, it can be argued, might be a villain without the interference of Apollo, and Apollo could be too soft on villains without Midnigher to remind him of the justice that is due. This is a common trope in superhero comics, but it works well here to paint a visual of two seemingly opposite characters.

To help students *see* this for themselves, we guide their attention to the use of color. We point out that Apollo appears to have a halo of light around his head, while Midnigher is enveloped in the black of his mask and cape. This provides an opportunity to help students think about the connection between the images they see and the alphabetic texts they read. After a conversation about their appearance and physical attributes, we ask students if it changes their opinions to know that these two characters are in fact lovers. Without fail, this initially surprises students, as they do not feel these two characters look like any stereotypical homosexual male often presented in the media. Here, we ask students to think about the ways in which the writer and artist have broken down barriers by presenting a Superman-esque and a Batman-esque character as lovers. From this image, students begin thinking and talking about why our society and media might paint such an obscure and inaccurate image of gay men (e.g., can a gay man be “manly?”).

Kamala Khan. The third superhero we ask students to visually analyze is Ms. Marvel. To do this, we use *Ms. Marvel* (vol. 1, issue 1, 2014). Unlike *Gotham Central* and *The Authority*, we provide students with three static images from this comic. Using these three images, students are able to compare and contrast the several differences between the original Ms. Marvel, Carol Danvers (Figure 3), and the new Ms. Marvel, Kamala Khan, at two stages of her superhero development (Figures 4 and 5). The image of Carol Danvers represents an often used stereotype of the traditional female superhero. We ask students to note the relationship between the image and the pressures media and society place on women: blonde hair, blue eyes, big chest, exuding confidence, and so forth.



Figure 3: Original Ms. Marvel



Figure 4: Kamala Khan Early in Career

To contrast this image, we ask students to view the two images of Kamala Khan. They note that the first image of Khan (Figure 4) parallels the first image in the similarity of the two outfits. What we also want them to note is that, while Kamala is dressed like Carol, she appears to lack the confidence and physical attributes; students discuss her posture and the angle at which she is holding her arms, suggesting an uncertainty with exactly what has happened and who she is. The societal parameters often placed on women are not as present in this image. When looking at the other image of Khan (Figure 5), however, students can note that she is



Figure 5: Kamala Khan Later in Career

still capable of being confident, although it looks quite different than in the image of Danvers; here, for example, students often point out her more powerful stance and body language, her clinched fists, and her upward-flowing cape. While there are several concepts students can pull from this image, we guide them to examine the artist's suggestion that the traditional norm for women (i.e., white, curvy, blonde) is not the only type on which a hero can be based. Instead, our students work together in small groups to discuss the idea that a hero can come from anywhere and can be absolutely anyone.

Green Turtle. The final superhero we share with students is the Green Turtle. To get to know this character, students view an image (see Figure 6) from Gene Yang's (2014) *The*



Figure 6: The Green Turtle

Shadow Hero. One of the first things students point out is the use of color. The majority of color used in the image is green, which students believe suggests his inherent goodness. We also point out to students that the use of green can also connote a

connection to the natural world (e.g., a turtle). That is, he is not supernatural. When discussing color, students also note that his red collar stands out. This is another clue to readers that he is not simply a hero, but he is a good person. The black in the background represents his shadow, which envelopes him, which lets readers know there is another side to him and that there is something other characters are unaware of (i.e., Green Turtle has a secret; in this case, his shadow protects him from bullets).

When discussing this image, students also bring up his cape, sparking a discussion of its dominance of and overall placement in the image. In contrast to the more traditional superheroes,

Green Turtle's body is hidden by his cape, which students often enjoy discussing (e.g., Why do we not see his build? What is the artist hiding from us?). In other words, the artists have not explicitly drawn attention to his physical build. Here, we want students to note the importance of this and to begin thinking about how and why his appearance does not parallel more traditional visuals of superheroes. Without fail, students also mention the image of the turtle on the cape. The turtle is not a fast, agile, or impressive animal, but turtles are thought of as wise. Turtles also often represent innocence, endurance, persistence, and success against formidable odds. These concepts tell readers quite a bit about who the Green Turtle is as a person and how he approaches crime-fighting.

A word on assessment. Before discussing how and why we engage students with transitioning from reading individual images to comic narratives, it is important to acknowledge the varying levels of assessment taking place throughout the aforementioned activities. First, collecting group responses to the prompts on the handout offer teachers a two layered assessment: after reading each individual image and after reading subsequent images and considering their meanings taken together. Additionally, as is true with all group work, teachers can engage in quality informal assessment through interacting with and listening to each group. Third, through frequent class discussions about students' experiences with and between images, the teacher can formatively assess growth as well as any necessary additional support needed. Finally, after reading and discussing the final image, we ask the groups to craft a group statement; as part of this activity, each group works together to respond to three questions: what did we learn; what questions do we still have; and now that we have seen all four images, how do we define or characterize the concept of 'superhero'? This assessment method offers students the opportunity to reflect, rethink, and report on their learning. While these represent the methods of

assessment we utilize, there are numerous other options; Bitz (2010) and Yang (2003), among others, offer teachers a variety of resources and rubrics for use in an instructional unit based on comics. As such, we would encourage teachers to experiment with their own assessment methods after first determining the learning objectives they most value as part of this approach.

Reading Comic Narratives

After providing students with multiple opportunities to engage with individual comic images and to begin thinking about and discussing the ways in which these superheroes are (or are not) representative of the society in which we live, we transition to reading comic narratives. To further the analysis students have already done, we bring in issues that contain the static superhero images previously viewed. Rather than only consider each of these heroes out of context, we believe it is important to analyze the characters within the setting, within the story, and within their world. Only then can students truly begin to understand who these people are and how they fit within our lives.

For this component of the unit, students continue to read in groups, as we continue to utilize discussion and team analysis. In contrast to our approach to the individual images, we allow each group to choose the order they read the comics (e.g., one group may choose to read *Gotham Central* first, while another group may begin with *The Shadow Hero*) because we are more interested in the culminating learning than in any one character or narrative. Similar to the previous group work, as students read, they continue to engage in conversations and collaborative writing by responding to another set of prompts:

In your small groups, read each comic and respond to the following prompts:

- Describe the hero.
- Describe the ways you connect (or cannot connect, perhaps) to the hero.

- Is this hero representative of you, your life, and/or your society?
- Compose a closing statement representing your learning and the evolution of your group's definition of superhero.

In addition to the prompts provided above, each group is responsible for crafting a group statement after reading each comic: how did this comic contribute to your definition of superhero? Finally, after reading all four comics, we ask groups to work together to craft a closing statement that addresses the following questions:

- What have you learned?
- What questions do you still have?
- How have these comics helped you define superhero?
- How have these comics worked together and combined to further your definition of superhero and your analysis of the heroes' connection to society?

Gotham Central. Below are excerpts from the comics we use with students and a discussion of concepts we want students to note. One of the texts students read is *Gotham Central*, volume 1, issue 7 (2003). Reading *Gotham Central*, students are introduced to a strong female character, one with no super powers. Here students can consider the portrayal of gender roles and whether or not they parallel societal expectations. In addition to discussing gender, students are required to analyze Montoya's ethnicity and what role that plays in her experiences and in our world. Moreover, through the story students realize that Montoya is gay. This can trigger meaningful conversations of stereotypes and social perceptions. For example, students often feel that while Montoya has the visual appearance of a Hispanic woman—they often point out her skin tone and hair color—she does not fit within the visual stereotypes they feel are held by society (e.g., married young, mother and caregiver).

One page we often focus students' attention is provided in Figure 7. When interacting with this sequence of panels, we focus students on the lighting by drawing their attention to the warm colors, such as orange and yellow. This presents an environment of acceptance and comfort. In contrast, the darker colors (e.g., blue and purple) can represent coldness and judgment. As we discuss these panels, students may argue that based on the dark colors used on Montoya and Dee's clothing, we can assume these women have learned to adapt to the hatred they encounter and to hide who they truly are by cloaking themselves in the same kind of cold colors as the world around them. This page presents the two



Figure 7: Color in *Gotham Central*



Figure 8: Relationship in *Gotham Central*

stepping out of this cold and unaccepting environment in which they typically live to come together to find solace and affirmation.

We also guide students to use the images provided to analyze the two characters. Where the two are sitting also presents a clue to their relationship. Here, students note that Montoya and Dee are sitting side by side, which tells us they are very close. Additionally, students point to the bottom left panel. Through the act of holding hands and character placement, readers can see that these two are intimate. In other words, students recognize that they love each other

Hero, readers are presented with a non-white male superhero, a concept that has not been traditional in American comics. Green Turtle is in many ways an average man, someone who just wants to make a difference. He does not have any “super” powers himself, but he is protected by his shadow (an external force), suggesting outside help which (1) departs from tradition and (2) is more relatable to student readers. Reading this text also allows students to question the concept of identity and what it really means to be “an American.” Because the hero of the story is first generation Asian American, it requires us to go beyond an analysis of the text and character to also analyze ourselves (e.g., our beliefs) and our social makeup.

While reading this text, many students mention the use of gender throughout the comic. For example, when looking at the two pages shown in Figure 10, they often question the



Figure 10: Shadow Hero Two-Page Spread

portrayal of the “hero.” In this sequence, the Green Turtle, who is just experimenting with being a hero, is crouched down in the forefront of the image, while an attractive female saves him from a group of thugs. This, our students note, contrasts traditional notions of heroes and of

portrayals of superheroes in comics. In these discussions, our students often prompt each other with engaging questions (e.g., Who is the hero of this scene? What does it say about him to be saved by a girl? Does the time period in which this is set affect how important these portrayed gender roles are?). Generally in comic stories, the male superhero would save the girl, but he is incapable at this point.

Moreover, the top right panel on the second page again reverses traditional gender roles in comics. We find this important to point out to students; thus, we guide them through the page. While we do notice an attraction between the two, the superhero appears bruised and bloody and is depicted beneath his female rescuer, a visual way for the artist to make her the more powerful character in the scene. Additionally, after the fight has concluded, she helps Green Turtle to a car, a car driven by his mother.

In keeping with our discussion of the connection between superheroes and fighting, we ask students to also consider Figure 11. This sequence of panels offers a fight scene more closely aligned with superhero comics. In it, our hero confronts the bad guy; however, for the one punch he lands, he is injured twice (scratched in this case) by his opponent. Students state that generally, we do not witness



Figure 11: Shadow Hero Fight Scene



Figure 12: Green Turtle and Mother

superheroes getting hurt in day to day fights, but the artist shows readers that Green Turtle is human. He is flesh and blood (with no superpowers).

In the final panel, we see the hero resorting to a weapon to protect himself. Given that the bad guy in this scene is unarmed, we know the hero has moved beyond simply defeating a nemesis to self-preservation. Our students find this an interesting notion, as they feel it completely flies in the face of what they assumed. To further this point, we discuss that in many traditional comic

fight scenes, it is the bad guy who uses a weapon on the hero, thus taking away the idea of a fair fight.

In our work with *The Shadow Hero*, we also talk about the relationships between Green Turtle, his heritage, and his mother and the fact that there is nothing super about him. In the panel shown in Figure 12, we discuss who he is. In this image, we are shown that he is a normal young man. He is not rich. He does not appear to be special in any way. Instead, he has his mother. These discussions continue as we look at Figures 13 and 14. These two panels depict Green Turtle on his way to fight crime. He does not have the power of flight, and he does not have the ability to quickly traverse the city. Instead, on the first page



Figure 13: Riding with Mom

(Figure 13), we see him being driven around by his mother, who wears the mask to protect her identity when he does not. This, in some ways, suggests she lacks



Figure 14: Riding the Bus

faith in him and is not sure she wants to be associated with any failure he might endure. In the second panel (Figure 14), our hero takes public transportation. This tells us he is a common, working class man. It also

suggests that he is not different than anyone else in that city or on that bus.

The Authority. Another comic students read as part of this unit is *The Authority*. We ask students to read this text for a variety of reasons. Among these are that this comic allows students to first note and discuss the many stereotypes of masculinity and traditional superheroes that

arise. As they continue to read, students find out that Apollo and Midnighter are lovers, which prompts quality discussion of existing social stereotypes and assumptions of homosexuals, especially homosexual males and the ways in which these two characters contradict those and require us to rethink the concept.

While reading, students note the use of gender roles. In Figure 15, the idea of traditional gender roles is challenged. In these panels, Apollo and Midnighter each play multiple “roles” and therefore make these gender roles neutral. Throughout the page, Midnighter is visually portrayed as above Apollo. In other words, Midnighter is in the more dominant position. When discussing this scene, students often notice that Midnighter is holding Apollo, which they feel is symbolic of dominance; moreover, Apollo is in the lower, more vulnerable position.

To further student discussion, we ask them to look at Apollo’s body language. Based on the way he holds his body (e.g., arms crossed, face squinted), students define him as reserved and perhaps uninterested in the unfolding scene. In contrast to the discussion of Midnighter, Apollo’s attitude appears to set him apart from the scene, rather than addressing his vulnerability.

Through the combination of these panels, Midnighter seems to be vying for Apollo’s attention. This visually suggests that both characters are simultaneously vulnerable and dominant. Additionally, in the end we see both characters facing the same direction, both looking



Figure 15: Gender Roles in *The Authority*

toward the future. From this panel, students often point out that they are displayed at relatively equal heights and as accepting one another into their individual comfort zones. Contrasting this scene with traditional notions of males and masculinity, our students mention that the dynamic between these two men is something they assume to be shared by a man and a woman. These panels, thus, help students begin to break down the stereotypes they hold; furthermore, it allows students to analyze the author and artist's intent to question the status quo by composing a scene that requires readers to rethink the concepts of gender and "normal."

Ms. Marvel. The final comic students read as part of this unit is *Ms. Marvel*. This comic provides opportunities for our students to discuss gender and ethnicity through a very intriguing character. This text is unique in that it forces students to go beyond their own society by analyzing the world. Kamala Khan and her family are Muslim and much of the story is driven by this concept. Within this text, students are provided a snapshot into the life of an average American Muslim. More importantly perhaps, Kamala's family and story are relevant to many of



Figure16: Stereotypes in Kamala Khan

the things going on around the world.

While student conversations cover many panels and pages, we always draw students' attention to Figure 16. We ask them to notice how Kamala transforms into a blue-eyed blonde when being heroic. As part of this, they ask themselves two questions. Is this Kamala's view of what a hero looks like? And is this the illustrators commenting on society's perceptions?

One of the concepts students point out is Kamala's powers. They are not elegant like the previous Ms. Marvel,

who had super strength, super endurance, and flight. Instead, she is able to contort her body and stretch her limbs. This provides another opportunity to question societal pressures. The media often portray characteristics such as big hands and lankiness as unattractive, especially in women.

In the bottom panel, the author and artist show Kamala as human and as mortal. Without including a gun, the visual leaves no doubt that she has been shot. When we ask students to explain how they know this, they point out her grimace, her furrowed brow, and her blank stare. Likewise, they mention that the text itself plays a key role here with “Blam!” in block letters. These work together to show readers that she has been hit with something more extreme than in the previous panels. It shows us that she is not indestructible. It shows us that she can be hurt like the rest of us.

Composing—the Culminating Project

After students have engaged in ongoing conversations about these superheroes as presented in static images and comic narratives, we want them to begin to make sense of these experiences for themselves. Throughout the unit, our students have debated the connections between various superheroes and themselves and their society. To bring this full-circle, we ask students to compose a visual representation of a superhero relevant to their own lives. To facilitate this, we provide students the following assignment prompt:

For this project, you will use all you have learned and thought about throughout this unit to compose a visual that you feel represents *your* definition of ‘superhero’ and our society. In other words, drawing on your experiences reading, responding to, and discussing a variety of comic book superheroes, you will visually depict a hero you feel best portrays the diversity that is our country. You may create either a sequential visual or

a collage visual representation—the choice is yours. You can create your own images if you feel so inspired; conversely, you can incorporate existing images, but you must appropriately cite any image you utilize. Upon completion, you will also compose and submit a reflection to accompany your project. In it, you will describe the rhetorical decisions you made and how you utilized the visual medium to help others *see* how you (1) define superhero and (2) have made meaning from these experiences.

After crafting their compositions, students then return to their groups and analyze the images they have created, in much the same way they analyzed the superheroes throughout this unit. This serves multiple purposes. First, it acknowledges the importance of student created texts by asking them to apply the same critical lenses they utilize with other pieces of literature. Second, it helps students transition from critiquing comic characters to their (and their classmates') interpretations of society. Third, it extends student learning and helps them to see that critical thought is not simply a classroom construct but is a tool that is vital to their lives (i.e., being a contributing citizen requires asking questions of and analyzing the society in which we are members). While the benefits and possibilities go on and on, these three offer what we feel is a compelling rationale for this approach.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to present teachers with a rationale for and approach to harnessing the power of superheroes and comic books in (multi)literacy instruction. In addition, as an important goal of literacy educators is to encourage the analysis and application of the components that make up the Language Arts within our students, then it is necessary that this task be accomplished in a way that allows students worthwhile, relevant, and thorough experiences. Therefore, we suggest that achieving these educational ends is not only possible

using the comic book medium, but it is also vital for teachers to provide students with carefully designed opportunities to interact and engage with multimodal texts such as comics.

It is important to note, however, that as this medium and method of consuming text may be new to students, teachers must provide their students guidance and multiple opportunities to read and discuss comic and graphic texts, to recognize and wrestle with these social issues upon which we have elaborated, and to develop the skills necessary for fully-literate citizenship. As much as we would love to teach solely on the topic of comic books, their creation, and their history (and we could), we believe it is important for us to take students further. As such, it is vital that teachers who utilize this framework take the time to model social analysis and criticism for their students; additionally, teachers must provide their students with the ample opportunity to consider and develop their own critical stances; in our unit, we utilize small group discussions and guiding prompts to facilitate and help students develop these analytical and critical thinking skills. Lastly it is necessary to frame similar units with appropriate essential questions (e.g., How are identities formed and shaped? Given how we are constantly bombarded with “what a hero should be,” how might one form a heroic identity that is authentic and true to their society?) to allow for a focus on diversity, social issues, and ethnic equality rather than the comic book medium as a whole.

That said, teachers who use this approach must give their students the proper tools to effectively make meaning from the information received through multiple modes (e.g., images and text). This calls for a need to provide students with previous experience in visual literacy. Our approach offers students the opportunity to use their prior knowledge of visual literacy by applying it to a variety to texts, topics, and social issues. We also encourage teachers to familiarize their students with multimodal texts and the comic format prior to implementing this

approach. Our unit, and any educational use for comics, demands more from students than simply reading and writing traditional text and thinking in traditional ways. In order for students to gain the most from this interaction with comic characters, they must first be conversant with the comics medium, with multimodality, and with visual rhetoric. Following these same suggestions, we have experienced success implementing this unit with students and helping them to appreciate and construct meaning from the chemistry created through the pairing of text and images. That is, our students demonstrate an ability to engage in analysis, critique, and discussions of complex issues (e.g., race, gender, sexuality) relevant to their lives, report increased confidence in visual analysis, and perceive themselves to be better equipped to turn a critical eye to the society (including the representative heroes) in which they live.

In recent years, these issues of racism and sexism have been at the forefront of the social consciousness and discourse. Reports of these injustices continue to fill news reports on a global scale. In other words, students today require and hunger for opportunities to make connections to the world around them and to contribute in personal ways. Implementing this unit in classrooms has allowed us to guide students through the difficult world of critical text, self, and social analysis and has assisted our students in wrestling with these complex issues. This suggests to us that issues of equity and the desire to positively impact the world is on the minds of young adults. Through the use of multimodality, students can engage in deep discussions and debates of the important social issues they read about. Providing students diverse texts, such as the ones we have described, opens this line of communication and helps students develop the skills to analyze the world and the voice to change it. Furthermore, and in the interest of full disclosure, we love comics.

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