Heroes, Heroines, and Everything in Between

Challenging Gender and Sexuality Stereotypes in Children's Entertainment Media

Edited by CarrieLynn D. Reinhard
and Christopher J. Olson

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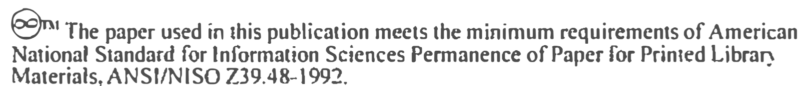
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This book is dedicated to all the nontraditional, nonheteronormative,
and LGBTQIA+ children seeking understanding,
acceptance, and respect every day.

THIRTEEN

"It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's a Transgender Superhero!"

Transgender Characters in Marvel, DC, and Image Comics

Thomas J Billard and Brian L. MacAuley

In recent years, comic books have emerged as perhaps the most valuable intellectual property in the contemporary media industry (Gibbs 2014), reigniting a cultural influence that peaked in the early 1990s (Rogers 2013). This influence is particularly notable within youth culture (Wright 2001), and comics have consequently been a site of significant controversy (see Wertham 1954). While comics traditionally have been viewed as sources of normative gender ideologies (Avery-Natale 2013; Brown 1999; Taylor 2007) and repressive and exploitative sexual politics (Brown 2011; 2013; Shyminsky 2011), the mainstream comics industry has recently made attempts to diversify in terms of gender and sexuality—as well as race and ethnicity—both in the pages of their books and in their writer's rooms (Bricken 2015).

The past decade has seen a rapid proliferation of diverse characters through the introduction of new characters (e.g., Kamala Khan, the Muslim Ms. Marvel), the bestowing of new titles on old characters (e.g., the promotion of Carol Danvers from Ms. to Captain Marvel), retroactive continuity (e.g., the revelation that Bobby Drake, aka Iceman, is gay), the assumption of previously male roles by female characters (e.g., Jane Foster becoming Thor), and the use of parallel worlds (e.g., Wolverine and Hercules kissing in an alternate universe). Writers have also encouraged

queer readings of canonically straight characters; for example, *Storm* series editor Daniel Ketchum remarked that the perfect model for the titular character would be superstar drag queen RuPaul (Abad-Santos 2014). At the same time, transgender characters have begun to emerge in comics released by mainstream publishers (e.g., Alysia Yeoh in *Batgirl*).

Yet while scholars have focused their attention on the representations of sexual minorities in comics (Lendrum 2005; Palmer-Mehta and Hay 2005; Shyminsky 2011), little attention has been paid to the emerging and evolving representations of transgender characters (cf. Scott and Kirkpatrick 2015). Addressing this gap in the literature, this chapter examines how transgender identity is constructed, communicated, and embodied in contemporary comics. While comics have historically maintained rigid gender binaries (Avery-Natale 2013; Taylor 2007), this chapter argues that transgender characters in Marvel, DC, and Image Comics represent a spectrum of transgender identifications that provide audiences with complex potentialities of gender and sexual identity, and challenge young readers to adopt more fluid gender ideologies.[1]

TRANSGENDER REPRESENTATIONS IN MEDIA

Transgender representations across a variety of media have proliferated in recent years, in both positive and negative ways. Past research on transgender media representations has documented the myriad ways in which transgender people are stereotyped, misgendered, mocked, and used to shock audiences (Billard 2016b). Moreover, past work has argued that these representations generally reinforce gender as a binary phenomenon (Willox 2003).

As potentially influential sources of gender ideology, media offer a set of criteria of validity for transgender people—criteria which are generally medical and/or aesthetic, and require maintenance of the male/female binary (Billard 2016a). For example, E. Tristan Booth (2015) argued that television documentaries about transgender people only acknowledge their subjects' self-identified genders once surgical alterations to their genitalia that align their bodies with their gender identities have been made. Likewise, in his analysis of journalistic discourse surrounding transgender bodies, Thomas J Billard (2016a) found that journalists apply aesthetic criteria to the evaluation of transgender identities, only acknowledging the authenticity of transgender persons' identities when they attain fulfillment of cisgender aesthetics, or are "passable" as cisgender.

As such, media representations of transgender individuals often reinforce the notion that one's "true" gender is that which is associated with the sex they were assigned at birth (Willox 2003). However, transgender stereotypes in mainstream media represent the transgender body simultaneously as an object of visceral disgust and of excessive sexuality, which serves to commodify anti-transgender violence as a sort of visual pornography (Lester 2015). At the same time, transgender people—and more specifically transgender women—are sexualized such that their representations are often more literally pornographic (MacKenzie and Marcel 2009). Once a transgender person has died or been killed, their sexual history becomes a subject for public spectatorship and intrigue (MacKenzie and Marcel 2009; Willox 2003). Furthermore, romantic relationships between transgender characters and characters who are the gender that the transgender person was assigned at birth are typically portrayed as transgressive, homosexual relationships (Abbott 2013). As such, transgender characters often are not allowed to have (viable) romantic interests. When they do, their romances simply reinforce the transphobic notion that a transgender person is "really" the gender they were assigned at birth, and that their self-identified gender is artificial or deceptive (Abbott 2013; Willox 2003).

Yet Jamie Capuzza and Leland Spencer's (2016) recent work suggests that this may no longer be the case, finding that transgender characters in American scripted television series engaged in healthy sexual and romantic relationships almost as frequently as their cisgender counterparts. Additionally, in contrast to nonfiction television programs, "scripted series were less likely to reduce transgender expression to the idea of being 'born in the wrong body,' pathologize transgender bodies, or obsess about genitals and attractiveness" (Capuzza and Spencer 2016, 10). Thus, fictional narratives might present more progressive and culturally transformative representations of transgender identity. As such, the media landscape seems to have evolved such that many of the previously predominant stereotypes have been replaced with more respectful and well-rounded representations.

At the same time, many scholars have noted the emergence of a new set of "trans-normative" representations (e.g., Owen 2016) which necessitate whiteness, conventional attractiveness, middle-to-upper-class status, heterosexuality, and normative family structure to legitimate trans characters as "good" transgender people. Conversely, "bad" transgender people fail to meet these heterosexual and cisnormative standards. Consequently, these trans-normative representations offer only a limited range of gender possibilities, reifying the binary gender system and rewarding adherence to normative social structures surrounding gender and sexuality. However, most studies in this area consider representations in media meant for adult audiences, less is known about transgender representations in children's media (see chapter 2 in this anthology for such research).

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN COMIC BOOKS

Comic books have generally been considered sources of normative gender ideology and exploitative sexual politics, particularly regarding gendered and sexualized embodiments (Avery-Natale 2013; Brown 2011) and socialized gender norms (Brown 2011; 2013; Lendrum 2005; Shyminsky 2011). Some research, however, has focused on more progressive content in comics, exploring queer readings of ostensibly heterosexual characters (Peters 2003; Schott 2010; Spieldenner 2013), postmodern interpretations of embodiment (Bukatman 1994; Taylor 2007), and subversive gender performance (Brown 1999; 2011), as well as the emergence of canonically queer characters in mainstream comics (Lendrum 2005; McAllister 1992; Palmer-Mehta and Hay 2005).

Gender- and sexuality-related tensions in the visualization of the superhero(ine)'s body have been of particular significance. Specifically, scholars have questioned whether the exaggeration of male and female superbodies further entrenches gender divides or, conversely, signals a shift away from gendered bodies. In a visual content analysis of six superhero characters from the 1940s to 2008, male characters were increasingly portrayed with hypermasculine bodies, while female characters were portrayed with increasingly hypersexualized bodies, as well as in highly fetishistic apparel and positioning (Avery-Natale 2013). Additionally, male characters in contemporary comic books present a "masculine duality" that simultaneously asserts the inherent heroism of the everyman and portrays male heroes as invulnerable, hypermasculine, unidimensional paragons, while female characters are generally unidimensional fetish objects designed to satisfy a presumed heterosexual male audience (Brown 1999; 2011). In particular, non-white superheroines are often presented as hypersexual and exotic (Brown 2013).

Rather than reading these depictions as evidence of emphasized gender differences, Edward Avery-Natale (2013) argues for a shift away from binary gender to a point at which "the gender signifiers lose all connection to real human bodies" (73). Indeed many scholars have argued that superbodies must necessarily be read as queer bodies in their resistance to normativity; they cannot be categorized as male or female, heterosexual or homosexual, if even human at all (Bukatman 1994). For example, Aaron Taylor (2007) argued that the superbody exceeds the boundaries of both gender and sexuality, offering an almost trans reading of superhero embodiment wherein the excess of the superhero body results in an androgyny that defies normative gender characterization.

Queerness has long been a subject of commentary and controversy in comic books, particularly regarding expressions of homosexual desire (e.g., Wertham 1954). Yet representations of homosexuality have contradictorily consisted of implicitly queer but ostensibly straight characters (e.g., Batman and Robin, Wonder Woman, etc.) and narratively "straightened" gay characters. As such, the most "productive" representations of queerness have been those inferred by audiences, while deliberate representations of queerness in mainstream comics have generally been regressive. Brian Peters (2003) has thoroughly analyzed the implicit queerness of Wonder Woman, arguing that she has simultaneously and variously been characterized as a lesbian and as a gay man in drag through subtext. As such, she is legible to queer audiences as representative of their lived experiences, while remaining legible to non-queer audiences as sufficiently normative (Spieldenner 2013).[2] Neil Shyminsky (2011) has analyzed similar dynamics in male-centered comic books, arguing that male sidekicks typically represent an ambiguous sexuality that serves to divert readings of homosexual desire from the necessarily heteronormative hero. In locating queer desire in the figure of the sidekick to whom the hero is beholden, however, queer audiences can (and do) read latent queer desire between the characters.

Before comics contained "out" queer characters, audiences could read implicitly queer characters in open and transformative ways (Schott 2010). However, the proliferation of deliberately queer characters has taken this away from audiences, as the queer characters they have been offered are often uninterestingly normative and inflexibly stereotyped (Schott 2010). According to Rob Lendrum (2005), "In order to avoid concerns of homosexuality invading the family unit or corrupting youth, including the readers of the comic, contemporary gay heroes are given ethical concerns regarding family and parental responsibility" (72), which ostensibly heterosexual but queerly-read characters do not have.

Previous comics research further identified a pattern of depicting gay characters in victimizing and marginalizing conditions. For example, Matthew McAllister (1992) noted that gay visibility seemed to only occur in the context of AIDS, thereby perpetuating an image of gays as "AIDS victims." More recently, Valerie Palmer-Mehta and Kellie Hay (2005) cited the example of the GLAAD-award winning *Green Lantern* story line in which the titular hero avenges the life-threatening homophobic violence experienced by his gay friend, Terry Berg. Thus, while there exists "a superhero for gays," gay people are themselves not portrayed as heroes, but rather as helpless and pathetic victims in need of saving by heterosexuals. At the same time, comic books incorporated LGBTQIA+ characters into major titles long before mainstream television introduced recurring gay characters (Franklin 2001), and the trend continues with transgender characters.

TRANSGENDER CHARACTERS IN COMIC BOOKS

The current multiplication of transgender representations in comics suggests a period of negotiation not unlike the medium's gradual introduc

tion of gay characters in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite the comic book's reputation as a children's medium, there is evidence to suggest that its depiction of queer and trans characters is more progressive than that of mainstream television.[3] This observation is not to unquestioningly conflate transgender issues with issues of sexuality or sexual preference, but rather to note similar cultural negotiation and increasing acceptance of subject positions once considered deviant by mainstream culture.

While prior academic analyses of gender and sexuality in comic books have neglected transgender characters, *Cinema Journal* published an interview with three prominent trans women comics bloggers moderated by Suzanne Scott and Ellen Kirkpatrick (2015) regarding transgender representations in superhero comics. As Rachel Stevens, staff writer for *Women Write about Comics*, remarked in the interview, trans people who are not yet out "can find something to relate to in regard to secret identities. Hiding an important aspect of your identity from the people around you because you can't be sure how they'll handle it, that's the kind of pathos you'd find in a Marvel comic" (Scott and Kirkpatrick 2015, 167). Beyond the resonance of secret identities, transgender readers have increasingly been presented with transgender characters with whom they can more directly identify.

All three interviewees specifically mentioned Wanda Mann (of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*) as their first exposure to a transgender woman. While they critiqued the somewhat stereotypical representation of Wanda, they each noted how "reassuring" she was for them. As J. Skyler, writer for *ComicBookBin* and *ComicsAlliance* remarked, "what struck me hardest was her refusal to allow biological essentialism to deter her from asserting her womanhood" (Scott and Kirkpatrick 2015, 163). However, they found other representations of transgender characters were less reassuring. Mey Rude, editor for *Autostraddle*, pointed out that, also in Gaiman's *Sandman* comics, several transgender women appeared as victims of a serial killer obsessed with "preoperative transexuals." In her words, "this is how I was introduced to trans women in comics—lying dead on the bed of her murderer" (Scott and Kirkpatrick 2015, 161–62).

The bloggers each criticized "body-swap stories" (Scott and Kirkpatrick 2015, 162) such as Sir Tristan (of *Camelot 3000*) and shape-shifters such as Mystique (of *X-Men*) as insufficient representations of transgender or gender-nonconforming people because they fail to represent the lived experiences of real transgender people. Skyler noted, "Part of the reason we all seem to gravitate toward Wanda is because she's the first character we came across that we could label without hesitation as an authentic transgender person—one who embodied all of the real-life difficulties we all share" (Scott and Kirkpatrick 2015, 163). As a point of contrast, Rude pointed to Xavin (of *Runaways*), who, although a member of the alien Skrull race, legitimately experiences her gender—from presentation to pronoun use—differently at different points in time (Scott and Kirkpatrick 2015).

Finally, they turned to the recent proliferation of deliberately transgender characters—whose identities are not read or inferred, or the result of superpowers or advanced science—among them Alysia (*Batgirl*), Alain (*Shutter*), Cassandra (*The Wicked + The Divine*), and Zhen (*Trees*). Yet, as Rude noted, except for Alysia, none of these characters appear in the superhero genre that dominates the comics industry. Nonetheless, they argued that these characters represent a new direction in transgender representations that are direct, deliberate, and largely positive. The observations and critiques of these trans women bloggers informed our analysis of these emerging representations.

METHOD

Against the backdrop of this past research, the authors conducted a textual analysis of transgender representations in mainstream comic book publishers to investigate the extent to which they challenge binary gender categories and present diverse possibilities of gender to their readers. The authors compiled a representative, if not comprehensive, list of transgender characters across titles that have (at one point or another) been published by DC, Marvel, or Image Comics, or one of their subsidiaries or imprints (see table 13.1); these representations range from 1978 to 2015.[4] These three publishers were selected as they represent the top three publishers by both retail and unit market shares (Diamond Comic Distributors 2016). It should be noted, however, that the definitive source for the characters on our list was fan discourse. Whereas a similar study conducted prior to convergent fandom (Jenkins 2008) would require reviewing archives of thousands of comics—a process likely to omit characters that resonate with contemporary understandings of transgender identity—fan discourse presented a ready-made list of transgender characters for analysis. While an analysis of fan discourse on transgender characters is outside of the scope of the present study, it is essential to note that fan discourse has become an essential resource for academics in an age of convergent media (Jenkins 2008).

The textual analysis of these representations was informed by work in gender and queer theory, semiotics, ideology, and comics theory. Specifically, the analysis looked at the visual depiction of the transgender characters as well as their treatment within the narrative. Therefore, depictions of the transgender body, the relationships these characters undertake, and the engagement with/departure from stereotypes from past media representations of transgender characters were of particular interest. Stuart Hall's (1993) encoding/decoding model guided our analysis in

considering these factors as well as the likely interpretations of comics readers.

ANALYSIS

The analysis of transgender representations in Marvel, DC, and Image comic books suggests how both textual content and features specific to the comics medium offer opportunities for uniquely transformative representations of transgender identity. The following results trace chronologically some of the most significant transgender representations of the last few decades to illuminate the broader trajectory of these representations over time.

Shvaughn Erin (1978–1993)

DC's *Legion of Superheroes* introduces Shvaughn as female, and for years she is treated as such. Eventually, however, the series reveals that Shvaughn was assigned male at birth and transformed her body by taking Pro-Fem, a hormone drug that induced a female transformation. Later, Earth's government falls to enemy forces, resulting in war. Amid the disorder, Pro-Fem becomes hard to come by, and Shvaughn transitions back to a male body—a physically and psychically painful process. While the futuristic and fantastic nature of the story means Shvaughn can transform her body with an ease that transgender readers can never aspire to, the analogy of Pro-Fem to hormone therapy is clear, and provides readers with a model of medical intervention for those who want it. Moreover, the pain caused to Shvaughn by access constraints outside of her control likely resonates deeply with audiences who could not access hormones to begin medical transition for political, social, or financial reasons.

Many of these resonant elements of Shvaughn's story are undermined by aspects of her romance with Jan Arrah, aka Element Lad. While Jan is supportive of Shvaughn when she loses access to Pro-Fem—which is a positive image of love despite incongruous body/gender identifications—it is eventually revealed that Jan loved Shvaughn despite her female body and feminine gender identity, and that he is actually gay and in love with "Sean" (Shvaughn's birth name). Further, it is revealed that Shvaughn took Pro-Fem to transition because she hoped Jan would love her if she were female. This notion that a trans woman's identity is driven by a desire for male affection is an incorrect and dangerous one, and undermines the positive, or at least resonant, representations of transgender identity offered by Shvaughn earlier in her story.

Table 13.1. Transgender Characters in Marvel, DC, and Image Comics

Character	*Gender Identity*	*Title(s)*	*Time Character in Print*	*Publisher (Imprint)*
Shvaughn Erin	Trans woman	*Superboy and the Legion of Super-Heroes; Legion of Super-Heroes; Legionnaires*	July 1978–November 1993	DC
Sir Tristan	Trans man	*Camelot 3000*	December 1982-April 1985	DC
Cloud	Gender-fluid	*The Defenders, Solo Avengers; Star Masters*	September 1983–December 1995	Marvel
Desire	Gender-fluid	*The Sandman*	November 1989–September 2014	DC (Vertigo)
Wanda Mann	Trans woman	*The Sandman*	November 1991–May 1992	DC (Vertigo)
Courier	Trans woman	*Deadpool The Circle Chase, Gambit, Deadpool Corps: Rank and Foul*	August 1993–May, 2010	Marvel
Kate Godwin	Trans woman	*Doom Patrol*	September 1993–August 2002	DC (Vertigo)
Lord Fanny	Trans woman	*The Invisibles*	October 1994–June 2000	DC (Vertigo)
Aruna Shende	Gender-fluid	*Batgirl*	August 2000	DC
Orlando	Gender-fluid	*The League of Extraordinary Gentleman*	November 2002–July 2014	DC (America's Best Comics)
Sir Ystin	Nonbinary	*Seven Soldiers: Shining Knight, Demon Knights*	August 2005–March 2013	DC
Xavin	Nonbinary	*Runaways*	October 2005–March 2009	Marvel
Alysia Yeoh	Trans woman	*Batgirl*	November 2011–	DC
Jake	Trans man	*Avengers Solo*	March 2012	Marvel
Alain	Trans woman	*Shutter*	April 2014–	Image
Zhen	Trans woman	*Trees*	May 2014–	Image
Cassandra	Trans woman	*The Wicked + The Divine*	June 2014–	Image
Inanna	Gender-fluid	*The Wicked + The Divine*	June 2014–	Image
Dagger Type	Trans feminine	*Batgirl*	February 2015	DC
Sera	Trans woman	*Angela: Asgard's Assassin; Angela: Queen of Hel*	February 2015–	Marvel

Note. List compiled by the authors Summer 2015 and may not be comprehensive.

Cloud (1983–1995)

In Marvel's *The Defenders*, Cloud is a nebula that comes to Earth and inhabits the forms of two teenagers, Carol Faber and Danny Milligan, whom it inadvertently but fatally injures. Subsequently, it can take the form of either teenager, and it frequently switches between them. Thus, while Cloud is not precisely a transgender character, it can be read as transgender—and more specifically nonbinary—because of its gender-boundary crossing behavior. Throughout their story, Cloud exhibits traits with which binary-defying readers could identify. For example, toward the end of their story, Cloud regains the lost memories of their origins as a nebula and, after one last mission to return the stars disappearing from the galaxy, returns to their true nebula form. For Cloud, neither the male nor female form (though it exhibits a preference for the latter, between the two) suits them, but rather it is as a form outside of this sexed gender binary that Cloud is their true self.

Wanda Mann (1991–1992)

Sandman's pre-operative transsexual woman, Wanda Mann (an unfortunate joke at the expense of her gender identity), is the roommate of Barbie, the main character of "A Game of You." Throughout this story line, Wanda is misgendered, mocked, and degraded. Despite this treatment, she remains steadfast in her womanhood and demands the recognition and respect of those around her. In one such instance, Hazel, a lesbian neighbor, points out "Wanda? . . . You've got a thingie [i.e., penis]," to which Wanda humorously retorts, "Hazel, didn't anyone ever tell you that it's not polite to draw attention to a lady's shortcomings?" ("A Game of You: Bad Moon Rising"). As this excerpt demonstrates, Wanda refuses to succumb to normative expectations of femininity or the female body, and does not allow cisgender criteria to dictate her identity. Similarly, when her friends travel to the Moon—where only women can go—Wanda is denied the opportunity to go with them because the gods do not see her as a woman. As George, her quiet neighbor, tells her, "Even if you had, uh, had the operation it wouldn't make much difference to the, uh, moon. It's chromosomes as much as, uh, anything. It's like, uh, gender isn't something you can pick and choose as, uh, far as gods are concerned." Yet, even in defiance of the gods, Wanda continues to assert her womanhood: "Well, that's something the gods can take and stuff up their sacred recta. I know what I am" ("A Game of You: Beginning to See the Light").

The ultimate result of Wanda's defiance of others' expectations is not merely the maintenance of her dignity, but others' acknowledgment of her identity (the Moon excepted). When Wanda perishes in a hurricane, her family, who have never accepted her feminine gender identity, de-

transition her body and bury her under a tombstone reading "Alvin Mann." But when Barbie attends her funeral and sees this, Barbie waits until everyone has left to cross out the name Alvin in lipstick, writing Wanda above it. While this moment is an uncomfortable one to the extent that it celebrates the heroism of its cisgender character at the expense of its transgender character, Barbie's actions highlight the extent to which not only Wanda asserts her womanhood, but also others who love her assert her womanhood as well—in defiance of the Moon, of how others read her body, or of anything else that might contest her claim.

Thus, despite the frequent misgendering of Wanda by others—even deities—and despite her visual embodiment as a rugged, masculine figure with a protruding bulge in her crotch, Wanda defies the gendered perceptions of others and the current state of her body to assert her unquestionable womanhood. As such, her transsexuality does not represent a recuperation of the gender binary, but rather a defiance of it. For Wanda, neither her body nor her social position can discredit or delegitimize her internal sense of gender identity, thus detaching "transness" from medical transition and detaching womanhood from legible (hegemonic) femininity.

Lord Fanny (1994–2000)

The Invisibles' Lord Fanny (whose name is a transphobic joke implying both that she is a man and that feminine gender identity is derived solely from having a vagina) was assigned male at birth but raised female by her grandmother. Her grandmother was a fearsome witch who wanted her dynasty to continue, and since men cannot be witches, she raised Lord Fanny as a girl. The origin story thus suggests that Lord Fanny's gender identity is inauthentic and unwanted. Indeed, throughout the comic, she is portrayed more akin to a drag queen than a transgender woman, and frequent references to her penis are made for comedic purposes.

Perhaps even more troubling, however, is the offensive stereotyping of transgender women represented by Lord Fanny. Specifically, it is revealed during her magical initiation at Teotihuacan that Lord Fanny's patron goddess is Tlazolteotl, goddess of lust and adultery, thus reinforcing the stereotyping of transgender women as sexual menaces. Additionally, Lord Fanny is portrayed as a prostitute in Brazil, ultimately abandoning sex work after being violently raped at a party. More than reinforcing yet another stereotype of transgender women as sex workers, this story line makes light of the legitimate epidemic of violence, including sexual violence, directed at transgender women.

Xavin (2005–2009)

Marvel's *Runaways* features a group of teens who band together when they discover that their parents are supervillians. Xavin, a member of a shape-shifting race of aliens called the Skrulls, is the love interest of Runaway Carolina, who has come out to her group as a lesbian. As a shape-shifter, Xavin adopts the form of a human female to please Carolina. While Xavin clearly falls into the category of otherworldly being rather than a human transgender character, her ability to switch genders can be read as a metaphor for the arbitrary nature of gender identity. Xavin's original biological identity seems to be male, and Carolina herself seems uncertain as to Xavin's preferred gender identification. Yet Xavin reverts to female form during an argument when she temporarily is unable to concentrate and entirely control her appearance. For Carolina, this is proof of Xavin's identification as female. "Dumbo, you girled out. That makes this the real you, right?" Carolina asks. Xavin replies, "I didn't realize that was ever in doubt" (*Runaways* 29). While Xavin's alien identity might be read as an "othering" of a transgender identity, the character's ability to switch genders at will subverts the gender binary in ways that a human character could not.

However, Xavin's true value as a transgender character may lie in how she switches gender between panels. Often this transformation is not remarked upon; Xavin appears as one gender in one panel and as another in the next. As Scott McCloud (1993) notes, the area between panels, or "the gutter," is part of the unique grammar of the comics medium. Closure is how the comics reader makes sense of what happens between panels: "Human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (66). For Xavin's transformation, this single idea is a liminality: not one gender, nor the other. Left to the reader's imagination, Xavin utilizes the unique properties of the medium to destabilize the traditional gender binary.

The Runaways' reaction to Xavin is exactly what might be expected from a group of teenagers navigating the complex and evolving gender norms of twenty-first-century American culture. The occasional transphobic comment from the group's sole white teen male, Chase, reflects a heteronormative hegemonic masculinity. The pronoun trouble expressed by the youngest of the group, Molly, is occasionally confused, but ultimately accepting. These and other reactions from the group read as true to the characterization of children/teens finding their way in a confusing world without the support of parents.

Tong (2010–)

In Marvel's *The Fantastic Four*, Tong, an adolescent member of the subterranean species known as the Moloids, reveals herself to be transgender in issue 6. Once again, Tong's trans identity might be vulnerable to charges of "othering," but this identity likely owes less to efforts to dehumanize a transgender character, and more to the series' science fiction genre. Tong tells her fellow Moloids: "I have a girl inside me. I tried to be a boy like you, but there is no boy here. And I do not wish to be what I am not any longer" (*FF*#6). One blogger noted the matter-of-fact nature of Tong's coming out, and the potential of the comics medium for subverting gender identity (Cook 2014). The character's reveal is endearing, and the loving acceptance from Moloids and humans alike is genuinely sweet.

Alysia Yeoh (2011–) and Dagger Type (2015)

Of the comics' characters discussed in this chapter, Batgirl is likely the most familiar to comics readers and non-comics readers alike. The first issue of 2011's rebooted *Batgirl* series introduces Barbara Gordon's roommate, Alysia Yeoh. Alysia first reveals that she has a "secret" in issue 2, and she also seems on the verge of sharing something important in issue 4. However, Barbara's hasty exits from conversations due to her own secret identity as Batgirl cut the moment of revelation short. The reveal that Alysia is a trans woman comes in issue 19: "I'm transgender, Barbara." Gordon's word balloon with an ellipsis (comic book shorthand for speechlessness) and her stunned expression give way to a statement of friendship and loving support: "Babs, the people I love call me Babs." The character's reveal is tender, and Alysia's gender identity is never exploited for controversy.

Alysia always appears female; there is no attempt to blur the character's biological sexual identity. Barbara identifies Alysia as her best friend, and the relationship between the two, including heart-to-heart chats and shopping trips, is convincing. Importantly, Alysia, an activist woman of color, embarks on lesbian relationship with fellow activist, Jo. The lovers share a kiss in issue 31 that is explicit by any standard, and their wedding in issue 45 is most likely the first trans wedding in comics. Alysia might not be the first transgender character to appear in a comic, but she is the highest profile trans character in the medium. While Alysia is a peripheral character in Batgirl, her significance lies in her even-handed depiction and her appearance in a mainstream comic book of a character familiar outside of comic book reader circles.

Writer Gail Simone, a feminist comics blogger turned comics author, won plaudits for her depiction of Alysia Yeoh in Batgirl. However, the importance of authorship in comics is evident in the controversy generated when Simone's replacement on the book, Cameron Stewart, introduced Dagger Type, a villain who is revealed to be trans in Batgirl #37. Dagger Type's depiction as a maniacal villain in drag met with swift condemnation by queer-identifying comics bloggers. The new creative

team of Cameron Stewart, Brenden Fletcher, and Babs Tarr issued an apology on Twitter to fans for introducing yet another monstrous trans villain stereotype (Rude 2014). This creative team previously earned praise for its participation in what was seen as a trend of empowering depictions of female characters for a new generation of female readers. In fact, the marriage of Alysia Yeoh occurs after Stewart took over writing duties on the book. If nothing else, Dagger Type is evidence that even the negotiation of transgender identity politics—even within the pages of the same publication—is very much a work in progress in mainstream comics.

Jake (2012)

In Marvel's *Avengers: Solo* series, Jake is part of an all-female medical program run by Power Broker, Inc. to create a generation of super-soldiers. When his friends discover that he was a part of this program—and identified as a female at the time—they become concerned that he transitioned to escape the doctors who had experimented on him. He disabuses them of this notion, informing them that he had been on hormones for months before even starting the program. After receiving this information, his friends lovingly express genuine acceptance of him (*Avengers: Solo* #4).

Alain (2014–)

Alain is the best friend and roommate of Kate Kristopher, the main character of *Shutter*. Alain first appears as a female scientist, but her gender history is unclear. When Kate ends up in the hospital and Alain rushes to her bedside, *Shutter* presents the history of their friendship in flashback. This gender history is depicted without explanation: a young boy is bullied by an angry older boy and Kate intervenes. However, in the present, Alain is a beautiful woman with coiffed blonde hair with streaks of pink. There is no "coming out" moment, no discussion of her body or of medical procedures, and no interrogation of her sexuality. Alain is simply a Filipina woman who was raised as a boy.

Zhen (2014–)

In the science fiction mystery *Trees*, Zhen is a transgender woman and the love interest of a main character, Chenglei. Zhen takes on the role of educator, informing Chenglei and the lay audience about transgender identity. The character is represented as strong and compassionate, and, importantly, her relationship with Chenglei is a rare instance of a non-stigmatized trans-cis romance in mainstream media. Yet ambivalent tensions exist in Zhen's relationship with Chenglei. For example, when she comes out to Chenglei, Zhen offers a common essentialist (and pathologized) explanation: "I am a woman. I was born in a man's body. Now I'm an adult, I'm curing that." Yet Zhen challenges the supposition that the body is the site of gender identity, cautioning Chenglei: "Those were my friends. Some of them are transgender too. Some aren't. You won't be able to tell, and you shouldn't try."

Sera (2015–)

In the miniseries *Angela: Asgard's Assassin* (2014) and *Angela: Queen of Hel* (2015), Sera is the companion of Angela, a character associated with the Asgardians, the reimagined Norse gods in the Marvel universe. Whereas Angela fits the hypersexualized yet muscular female superhero archetype, Sera is shorter in stature with thicker limbs, yet still reads feminine.

Perhaps Sera's most enduring contribution as a trans woman character is the agency she asserts as a narrator throughout both miniseries. In the first series, Sera frequently takes control of the narrative as she relates crucial information via her storytelling. Significantly, Sera narrates her own account of her gender transformation in issue 3 of *Angela: Asgard's Assassin*, and her coming out moment is a matter-of-fact reveal rather than a melodramatic plot twist. Sera was once a male angel, an Anchorite: "Our little men, I was among them, once." Here, we see Sera as a male only briefly and mostly from a distance. When Angela arrives in the Anchorites' realm, Heaven, Sera expresses dissatisfaction with this gender identification: "I have always been Sera. I don't belong here" (15). At Sera's request, Angela frees Sera from Heaven, and her gender transformation is revealed in a panel that finds the character emerging from a tent: "We found a way to make me myself" (16). As with Xavin, Sera's gender transformation occurs between panels; whether this transformation is biological or merely cosmetic is never mentioned. Importantly, Sera's gender is never questioned or remarked upon before the revelation that she was once male.

In the second series, *Angela: Queen of Hel*, Sera is the primary narrator. While Angela is the series' titular star, her story is a product of Sera's subjective account; thus, this trans character asserts control not only over her own story, but the story can be read as entirely a product of Sera's consciousness. In issue 2, Sera playfully self-identifies as an "ex-monk and enchanting enchantress," and her visual depiction in this miniseries is more akin to what one might expect from a female comic book superhero: her body is thinner and more sexualized than her appearance in the previous series. However, Sera's autobiographical subject position lends the story a psychological resonance.

Indeed, issue 4 reveals that Sera used to have recurring nightmares, and the reader experiences one instance of these nightmares through

Sera's subjectivity. She recounts a nightmare wherein she is buried alive and "they called me by another name. And in that hell, you never, ever came for me." Sera's nightmare is clearly a manifestation of the anxiety she felt before her gender transition. Again, it is the medium's unique properties that subvert traditional binary gender identification. McCloud (1993) provides a helpful understanding of the workings of the comic medium. The mix of iconic yet abstract art encourages identification with the characters. While first person narration is clearly not unique to this medium, the mix of narration with the iconic-yet-abstract imagery of the characters and a lack of audio is exclusive to comics. In this combination, the trans character's voice and account of her own subjectivity is entirely a product of a collaboration between the reader and the text. As the reader experiences the narrative through Sera's consciousness, they presumably identify with her even further.

CONCLUSION

As we have noted throughout this chapter, comic book representations of transgender individuals and identities vary greatly, ranging from normatively positive to blatantly stigmatizing. However, comic books are unique among mainstream media for their ability to destabilize cisnormative expectations of gender performance and embodiment, and for their culturally transformative power. Among Marvel, DC, and Image Comics, representations of transgender characters challenge biological essentialism and resist the binary categorization of gender, while simultaneously accepting binary-abiding transgender identifications as valid and meaningful. While these representations often offer impossible visions for transgender life by enabling cross-gender identifications through magic or futuristic medical technologies, they introduce young readers to a broad spectrum of transgender identifications and sexual identities that reflect more fluid gender ideologies.

The analysis found repeated instances in which characters' gender identities diverged from their anatomy, detaching gender from embodiment and biology. Moreover, transgender characters are increasingly depicted in non-sexualized ways, moving beyond the visual gag of a woman with a bulge or the titillation of a hypersexed transgender woman. With regards to the medium of representation, comics offer potentially subversive ways of expressing gender identification: characters may be drawn so that they are legible as male or female, or having more androgynous features. As McCloud (1993) notes, comics' iconic-yet-abstract mode of representation provides unique opportunities for its readers to see themselves in the characters, and this identification is clearly important in exposing readers to a variety of transgender identifications. Indeed, among the characters analyzed, transgender individuals were depicted in a range of ways that communicated the fluidity of gender identity.

Additionally, the analysis observed an evolution in the nature and quality of the relationships in which transgender characters engaged. While early transgender representations reproduced stigmatizing and delegitimizing stereotypes about transgender individuals' relationships—such as how they live out their gender to thereby seduce heterosexuals of the sex they were assigned at birth—more recent representations have been more legitimating. In these more recent cases, transgender men and women, as well as nonbinary characters, are often depicted in healthy, loving relationships, whether heterosexual (e.g., Zhen and Chenglei) or queer (e.g., Sera and Angela). As such, these depictions offer positive images of loved and accepted transgender individuals, while also dissociating transness from heteronormative expectations of gender performance.

Finally, recent transgender characters in these comics have been normalized without being normativized. In other words, recent transgender characters are treated—both editorially and by other characters in the books—as non-pathologized, non-stigmatized figures, yet are not made to adhere to strict normative expectations of whiteness, heterosexuality, etcetera, to legitimate their existence. Rather, transgender characters are normalized in agentic ways that respect their departure from cisgender norms and represent without filter the voice of those characters (e.g., Sera). This normalization includes characters not analyzed because they are entirely mundane (e.g., Cassandra and Inanna); that is, their transness is so secondary to their characterizations, and their acceptance by other characters in the book is so total, that they hardly deserved comment. Compared with early representations that focused almost entirely on the peculiarity of their transgender characters' identities, this represents a positive cultural transformation.

However, the representations of transgender characters are not entirely positive. While comic books such as *Batgirl*, *Runaways*, and *Legion of Superheroes* are major books from prominent publishers, most of their transgender characters are at best minor players in larger ensemble casts. Moreover, few of these characters can truly be considered "superheroes" in their own right; rather, the heroics are left to cisgender characters, while transgender characters sit on the sidelines. Most of these transgender characters also identify as women, thus reproducing the inequality in representation of transgender individuals' gender identities found in other media (Billard 2016b). Furthermore, some transgender or otherwise gender-variant characters continue to be used for shock value or as the punchline of a joke (e.g., Dagger Type), even amid the progress made in representations of other transgender characters.

Finally, while critics might be justified in noting the many instances of transgender characters who are aliens/monsters/sentient clouds (see Scott

and Kirkpatrick 2015), it is also fair to say that comics—especially superhero comics—are rarely interested in the mundane. While an easy interpretation is that these characters represent a means of "othering" transgender individuals, the fantastic nature of the medium should be taken into consideration. Just as science fiction lends itself to abstracting social issues in the service of creating an allegory, comic books also allow fantastic creatures and themes to stand in for very human identities and situations. At the same time, the call for more straightforward depictions of transgender characters is an important one, and one that the industry indeed seems to be heeding.

NOTES

1. It is important to note that for many of the characters discussed in this chapter, it is unknown if their creators self-identify as trans or genderqueer, or know anyone who does. While representation in the comics medium is important, so is representation in comics production. Addressing this issue, however, is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is a subject that should be addressed in the future
2. In September 2016, *Wonder Woman* writer Greg Rucka remarked in an interview that he and artist Nicola Scott consider the Amazon a queer woman, and that, as such, she should be considered canonically so (Santori 2016). However, as of the time of writing, she has not been depicted as explicitly queer in any books published by DC Comics. Furthermore, Wonder Woman's current identification as a queer woman does not erase decades of queer readings by fans prior to this announcement from the current writing staff
3. Perhaps significantly, streaming television is also ahead of the curve with programs such as *Sense8*, *Transparent*, and *Orange is the New Black*, offering far more positive transgender visibility than network and cable television (Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper 2016)
4. The time range of this study does leave out newer transgender representations, such as Koi Boi in *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl*. This analysis lays groundwork for identifying such representations, and hopefully more characters will be discussed in subsequent studies.

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Conclusion

New Role Models for Children?

Christopher J. Olson

As demonstrated by the chapters collected in this volume, nontraditional representations of gender and sexuality have become increasingly visible in media aimed at children, especially during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The last five years in particular have witnessed a rise in such representations, and not just in media created by independent producers but in certain mainstream venues as well. Children's entertainment media have seemingly adapted to the idea that gender and sexuality extend beyond the traditional binaries of male/female or masculine/feminine, and they appear to have done so to a greater degree than most other forms of mainstream entertainment media. Comic books, young adult novels, toy lines, and children's television shows and films all feature characters that transgress conventional boundaries of gender and sexuality, and while far from perfect, these representations still send a powerful message to young audiences that such identities not only exist but are valid and should therefore be accepted. Characters like BMO in *Adventure Time* or Elsa in *Frozen* can potentially inspire kids to think about gender and sexuality as fluid constructs rather than as a rigid either/or scenario. More importantly, adults can use texts like *Doc McStuffins*, *Runaways*, or even *The Hunger Games* to initiate conversations with children about complex identity issues such as those raised throughout this volume. As such, children's entertainment media requires more scrutiny to understand how they incorporate nontraditional representations of gender and sexuality, what sort of ideas these depictions convey to viewers, and how viewers respond to these representations.

While progressive representations of gender and sexuality have increased in recent years, they nevertheless remain relatively uncommon in all forms of mainstream media and often face challenges that arise due to ignorance, misunderstanding, or competing agendas (for an example of all three, see the furor over *SheZow* as described in chapter 1 of this collection). In addition, such representations frequently rely on prevailing stereotypes, and thereby fail to acknowledge the intricacies of actual nonheteronormative identities. Meanwhile, as illustrated in chapter 12 of