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From Subject to Cyborg: Reframing Identity within Female Spaces in Neil Gaiman's *Black Orchid* and *A Game of You*

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GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

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“Everybody has a secret world inside of them. All of the people of the world, I mean everybody. No matter how dull and boring they are on the outside, inside them they’ve all got unimaginable, magnificent, wonderful, stupid, amazing worlds. Not just one world. Hundreds of them. Thousands maybe” -Barbie, *A Game of You*

To Sharon, Greg, Zoyia, Aaron, and Ben whose unimaginable, magnificent, wonderful, amazing worlds made this journey a little easier.

Abstract

Whether they are secret or whether they are household names, identities are paramount in superhero comics. Yet those that create these identities do so from a place of privilege in a hierarchy which results in inauthentic characters and repetitive plots. For the superhero genre, the misrepresentation of female characters (perhaps related to a severe underrepresentation of female creators) has resulted in highly patriarchal storylines that are reductive, stereotypical, and often violent toward women. To combat this trend, one must consider the ways in which a more complex female character violates the current framework and offer a solution. For superhero comics, complexity violates its staunchly binary framework and a solution lies with the cyborg, a figure championed by Donna Haraway in her essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” A hybrid of nature and technology, the cyborg defies easy identification and finds a sense of belonging through means other than identity. Using this as a template, creators, specifically male creators, can include women in their stories without imposing harmful binaries. Evidence of a successful execution of the cyborg character can be seen in Neil Gaiman’s *Black Orchid* and *A Game of You*, both of which depict women in the midst of identity crises. This paper will explore the ways in which identity affects the depiction and treatment of these women, how they fare in its absence, and the alternative modes they use to find meaning for themselves.

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Introduction

In early 1999 comics author and illustrator, Gail Simone, started the website *Women in Refrigerators*, to track the number of women abused, disenfranchised, or killed in superhero comics (Simone). She emailed various comics authors such as Kurt Buseik (*Astro City*, *The Avengers*) and Daniel Brereton (*Nocturnals*, *Giantkiller*) with the list and asked for feedback. While some creators were dismissive of the list and in some cases seemed defensive, others acknowledged the sexism and misogyny within the community but appeared resigned to its presence:

. . . comic book superheroes began life as adolescent male fantasy figures, and for the most part continue to fill that role, we shouldn't be surprised at the (primarily) male creators of comics act out subconscious adolescent male hostility toward women in their art. (Conway)

Comics have the unique advantage over traditional literature to incorporate art into the discussion of how women are portrayed. Unlike other literary mediums, comics have a unique responsibility to contend with the dissonance between how a strong female character speaks and how she is visually portrayed. Wonder Woman, often touted as a feminist icon, is a good example of this dissonance because while she fights for truth and justice, she does so in a corseted two-piece. This is how ardent consumers of the genre want to see her, though. As recently as 2011, when DC Comics decided to forgo her provocative costume in favor of a sensible pair of slacks, her fanbase flooded the publishing juggernaut with scathing rebukes (Whitwood, *denofgeeks.com*). There have been attempts made at both DC and Marvel to

desexualize their female characters but every effort was met with criticism from consumers. Comics author Steven Grant is not surprised by the genre's tendency to hypersexualize women: "It comes down to sex, really. It's no big secret that, in the [male] adolescent power fantasy which are the bread and butter of superhero comics, fight scenes are symbolic surrogates for sexual activity" (Grant). If the fights are surrogates for sex, the depiction of the female body only emphasizes that fantasy.

It is difficult to accept that creators or their growing female fanbase would be content with reducing women to nothing but their sex, but in an email exchange between Simone and comics writer Kurt Busiek, Simone asked, "I guess my question then is what factors have made such a condition acceptable and common. Is it editorially mandated, or author-driven?" Busiek replied, "Beats me" (Busiek). This curt and indifferent response detracts from the gravity of the situation and suggests it is a non-issue. The lack of accurate representation reflects unfavorably on the entire comics medium, not just superhero comics, because when people think of the word "comics" they think of *Superman* or *Batman*. Despite being a genre, superhero comics are the face of the entire medium so when women are disrespected and subordinated in these stories, it reflects poorly on comics as a whole and people miss out on complex, female storytelling within other genres of comics such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* or Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*.

Answering Simone's question about what contributed to making the superhero genre such a misogynistic environment is vital because the misogyny has spilled over into real life. This is evident in the death threats received by comics authors like Chelsea Cain after she wrote *Mockingbird*, a series featuring a strong female protagonist. Fans of the genre flooded social media platforms such as Twitter with spiteful comments and demands that Marvel cancel the series. Of the comments, Cain said, "It's no different than what most comic book writers deal

with, especially female ones, [but] the tweets that bothered me . . . were the ones that questioned my right to write comics at all, and were disgusted by the idea of a female hero having her own series” (Bhattacharya). *Mockingbird* was cancelled after only eight issues in October of 2016.

Hostility is not just reserved for creators of female-driven comics but also for their consumers as incidents of sexual harassment continue at comics conventions, despite petitions demanding organizers tighten their harassment policies (KGNU “Sexual Harassment...”). The current climate within comics is detrimental, not only to the legitimacy of the genre, but to the well-being of the women it undermines.

Instead of simply lambasting the institutionalized sexism found within the genre, however, I wanted to offer solutions. By identifying the ways in which comics creators have fostered a negative environment for women, this paper seeks tangible ways to avoid these pitfalls and offer a model that authors and artists could follow to create a realistic female character within the genre.

The Cyborg Manifesto, an essay written by Donna Haraway, a feminist and prominent science and technologies scholar, theorizes that the mistreatment of women is a result of the binary structures in our society that sprang from the desire of the patriarchy to have power. By perpetuating myths such as biological essentialism, patriarchal society has created a hierarchy that favors men over women (for example, men are stronger than women, women are more emotional and therefore more irrational than men). Compartmentalizing makes things easier to control so binary structuring makes sense from a man’s point of view, yet that is not reality. People are more complex than the patriarchy suggests but men aren’t likely to go against a system that favors them, so they will keep telling stories about the strength of men. Women

should be the ones working toward changing circumstances for themselves, but the myth of binaries are so ingrained in their minds that they are carried over into the structuring of their own communities. Repeating this dualistic system in other communities to which a woman belongs results in a multiplication of expectations being placed upon her and, in a desire to belong, she has compartmentalized herself, fracturing the already fragile identity society gave her when she was born.

Instead of trying to mend these broken identities, however, Haraway suggests getting rid of identity altogether by advocating for the figure of the cyborg. Why a cyborg? As hybrids, cyborgs don't belong to any one group. They are both human and machine, nature and technology. Instead of putting society at ease and identifying as one or the other and thereby submitting to the power structure, cyborgs have found other ways to belong without using identity. By rejecting stories from the patriarchy, cyborgs have the opportunity to tell their own stories and this power to name is key to answering Gail Simone's question about why it is still permissible to treat women so poorly in superhero comics: *who* is telling the story?

Daniel Brereton, whose most notable works include the *Nocturnal* and *Thrillkiller* series, admitted that men were the ones identifying women and that the women victimized in superhero comics were written for the pleasure of men (Brereton). The struggle against men's narrative is a struggle "against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism," and it is this perfect identification of people that keeps them in one place and easy to control (Haraway 312). Cyborgs refuse such categorization and that makes them difficult for society to accept or understand. A cyborg's fluidity should make them ideal figures for the science fiction storylines of most superhero comics, but their complexity is not accommodated by the genre's binary coding in stories so it comes down to the storyteller. Haraway mentions

that writing is the weapon of choice for the cyborg, particularly “retold stories . . . that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities. In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin in Western culture” (311). This means that the woman (the cyborg in Haraway’s theory) must tell her own story but what does this mean for a patriarchal stronghold like superhero comics where male creators outnumber female creators by over sixty percent? (Johnston) It means that men must start thinking outside of binaries and write complex women that, like the cyborg, reject identity altogether.

The earliest, most promising example of a cyborg character in mainstream comics is the reincarnation of Black Orchid, titular heroine of a failed DC Comics franchise from the early 1970s created by Sheldon Mayer and Tony DeZuniga. The first issue claimed to be the origin issue but nothing was ever revealed about who Black Orchid was or how she obtained her superpowers. The series lasted only three issues before being cancelled. The Black Orchid character showed up sporadically in peripheral roles until 1988 when author Neil Gaiman and illustrator Dave McKean revived the character for a limited three issue reboot under the stewardship of Karen Berger, who was developing Vertigo, an imprint of DC Comics that would later publish comics with more mature themes. While Mayer’s *Black Orchid* stories were about bringing criminals to justice, Gaiman’s *Black Orchid* is about the heroine’s struggle with identity. In interviews, both Gaiman and McKean expressed frustration toward the traditional narrative and artwork in comics, and wanted to do something different which is why *Black Orchid* directly undermines the ludicrous formulas of the superhero comics genre, including the roles available to and the treatment of women (Sanders 13). She comes across men who insist on being the one to identify her but rejects each one offered and, in true cyborg fashion, ends the story without one. Gaiman’s *Black Orchid* is also the first superhero comic to feature a female

first-person narrator which meant Black Orchid was literally her own storyteller, another trait of the cyborg.

The same year *Black Orchid* was published, Gaiman began work on his award-winning *Sandman* series. Consisting of seventy-five issues and later separated into ten volumes, *Sandman* was a myth about myths that centered around the world of dreams which was created by Morpheus, one of The Endless.¹ In volume five of the series, *A Game of You*, Gaiman introduces an almost exclusively female cast, one of the first in comics history. Barbie, the main protagonist, has lost the ability to dream which is detrimental to her sense of self because her dreams were the only place she could be brave and have adventures. During her absence, her dreamworld is taken over by a nefarious creature known as the Cuckoo. In an effort to save their world, a creature from her dreams crosses over into Barbie's reality to convince her to return and save them. When she gets trapped in the dreamworld, her friends cross over to help her get back to their reality. One of these friends is Wanda, a transwoman who must contend with the binaries of the female community that insist on excluding her from the experience of being a woman. Wanda is the perfect cyborg character because she transcends the gender boundaries that have long defined superhero comics and suggests the possibility of even more diversity within the genre.

The second part of Gail Simone's question about the space women take up also stems from problems with the binary system. Space for women in society is limited, but not for the cyborg who "being both material and opaque" knows borders cannot restrict her (Haraway 294). Borders are inconsequential to cyborgs because they are connected to binary thinking, but the borderlands (or margins) are productive spaces where one has room to find her own affinities. The more questions she asks herself about what matters to her, the more space she finds to build

ideas and purpose. Such spaces are important in *A Game of You* because Barbie believes she has a safe space in her dreams but, in a patriarchy, it is not guaranteed these spaces will be truly feminine spaces because men are able to infiltrate without fear of negative repercussions. *A Game of You* reminds readers that a woman's space within a patriarchy is still under the authority of men and that she needs to move, not just to the borders, but beyond them into the places uncharted by society.

The female characters in *Black Orchid* and *A Game of You* closely resemble Haraway's cyborg figure in how they react to social identities, spaces, and the binary coding inherent in their formation. The cyborg ideals endorsed by these characters suggests that comics authors, by circumventing binaries and refusing to define women, can create accurate female representation within the superhero genre and effectively rejuvenate the medium of comics as a whole.

*A note about citation. When writing a scholarly paper about comics, one realizes MLA, APA, and Chicago Style formats have ways to cite a single comic panel like *Family Circus*, but do not provide a method to cite a series of panels within a comics page. For the purposes of this paper I have developed a way to cite individual panels as follows: chapter or issue.page.panels cited. The first number would be an individual issue in a run or a chapter of the issue is within a collected volume or omnibus. For example, *A Game of You* is a volume within the *Sandman* series so the first number would indicate the chapter. If I wanted to cite panels three through four on page thirteen of chapter two, I would indicate it thusly: (2.13.3-4). If I was referencing the individual issue *not* in a collected volume (issue thirty-three out of seventy-five), I would cite (33.13.3-4) indicating issue 33, page 13, panels 3-4. Concerning the illustrations in the endnotes, I use this citation method after the title.

Chapter 1

“By the ancient city gate sat an old coffee-brown, black-veiled woman who made her living telling stories.” (Dinesen 99)

Placed at the very edge of the city’s borders, the old woman sits on the outskirts of the city to tell her tales to the people passing by. She is the narrator of “The Blank Page,” a short story written by Danish author Isak Dinesen, and she relates a story about sheets to convey the failure of the male storyteller in relating the stories of women. The sheets, made by nuns in the area’s convent, are used by Portuguese royalty on their wedding nights to determine whether or not the bride was a virgin. If the sheets are found to be stained with blood the morning after, a Chamberlain or High Steward declares the woman was pure on her wedding night, thus legitimizing any resultant offspring. These blood-stained sheets are then taken to a nearby convent, framed, nameplates affixed, and hung chronologically in a gallery inside the convent. Every year, women in the royal family make a pilgrimage to the convent to visit and reminisce about their history, but it is precisely that - his story. Though the frames bear their name, they do not bear the stories of women, only their blood. The content of the frame is her body exploited to tell the story of her husband and legitimize *his* bloodline (his story). The frames, hung chronologically, are meant to be read as a story and if the word “frames” are replaced with the word “panels,” the gallery begins to resemble the structure of a comic book. The exploitation experienced by women in comics, superhero comics specifically, is similar to that experienced by the women in the royal family in that an issue may boast a female protagonist on the cover (as a nameplate may display the name of a woman), but the story inside is not *hers*. Superhero

comics are men's stories that depict women as men would want to see them, not as they are, and perpetuate a long history of phallogentric myths.

The superhero rose to popularity during World War II, a time of intense fear and instability for the United States. Thin and easy to carry, comics were sent to troops to bolster spirits and offered up characters like Captain America to encourage soldiers to see themselves and their actions reflected within their pages. Because soldiers were the targeted audience, men became the myths and the superhero community was built on stories of men performing heroic deeds, overcoming monstrous villains, and being rewarded with the love and adoration of women. When the soldiers returned home, so did the superheroes and the patriarchal ideals they represented: man as the active hero and woman as the immutable passive. This way of thinking affected the genre's singular iconic female, Wonder Woman, who after fighting alongside the men, was given the dubious "honor" of being made secretary of the Justice Society of America instead of being made a member. Subsequently, the male members of the JSA remained active and fought villains while Wonder Woman was left to fill the more passive role of secretary. She assured audiences she was happy in her diminutive role by telling the men she would be with them in spirit (Jackson, *SyFy.com*). Author Tim Hanley wrote an entire book (*Investigating Lois Lane: The Turbulent History of the Daily Planet's Ace Reporter*) about another iconic female figure, Lois Lane, struggling for decades to become more than just Superman's girlfriend with a number of more feminist spinoff series that found little commercial success and miniscule approval from fans. This should be no surprise because comic book audiences, consisting primarily of male readership, were simply not interested in stories with female leads (Horn 12). If a comic featuring a woman found any success, it was because it was marketed toward women and was typically about love and marriage. DC Comics had an entire romance line aimed at

women and included such titles as *Falling in Love*, *Girls' Love Stories*, and *Girls' Romance*, but superhero comics were reserved and written for those away at war, primarily men (Hanley 103). Although women were doing jobs ordinarily held by men fighting overseas, they were constantly reminded they were just placeholders that would be required to relinquish their positions once the men returned home. This placeholdering happens in superhero comics when male authors try to make “powerful female characters” who end up looking like women but acting like men. In her essay on feminine subjectivity in comics, author Sarah Cantrell laments that female characters must always contend with the hyper-masculine history of the genre by behaving like male superheroes (Cantrell 105). Even amidst today’s popularity of superhero movie franchises, women still struggle to claim an active female role in superhero culture. This is evident in a 2011 storyline of DC Comics’ *Birds of Prey* franchise which boasts an all female cast of heroes led by Oracle who used to be known as Batgirl until injuries sustained by the Joker confined her to a wheelchair. An all-female crime-fighting team is a step in the right direction, but they act like men in women’s bodies, which is most obvious in their treatment of the opposite sex.¹ Most male creators conceive of power in binary terms, as dictated by the patriarchal structure of the genre, and since power is aligned with men in a patriarchy, superhero comics tend to masculinize powerful characters, even when they are not men. There is little evidence in superhero comics to believe any power exists outside the realm of the masculine, as evidenced by Batman often showing up at the last minute to help them fight off a group of villains when their one female power (i.e. the female body) fails them. When DC Comics debuted the failed *Black Orchid* series in 1973, it went up against other comics titles featuring masculine icons like Spiderman and Iron Man. Despite possessing many of the same superhuman powers as her male counterparts, Black Orchid's powers were more “feminine” because she preferred nonviolence until she was left with

no other option.

Black Orchid is an interesting case because, though it's failure can be attributed to a few factors, the derogatory way in which her powers were regarded was certainly a reason it did not find an audience. At the start of the inaugural issue, *Black Orchid* was introduced in a blatantly debasing manner: “. . . she has the strength of a regiment, flies through the air like a bird of prey . . . and has the beauty and compassion of a young girl! (Mayer *Black Orchid* 429.1.1) According to her creators, writer Sheldon Mayer and artist Tony DeZuniga, she was a master of disguise who possessed a number of superhuman abilities including flight and superhuman strength. She would have been considered a force to be reckoned with had she been a man, but her powers never grew out of the shadow cast by her femininity. If *Black Orchid* is seen flying or lifting a car over her head, there are no awe-stricken exclamations of “It's a bird! It's a plane!” like male superheroes would get. Instead men yell things like, “It's a chick! She's . . . flyin'!” or “That crazy broad is as strong as an ox!” (428.5.3) Such diminutive responses to her heroic deeds translated to a diminutive response from readers and within three issues *Black Orchid* was canceled.

In addition to her lack of traditionally masculine power, *Black Orchid* lacked a secret identity, a vital component usually possessed by superheroes. The first issue exclaimed, “No one knows who she is, or from whence she acquired her extraordinary powers . . .” which is befitting seeing how she is a master of disguise (429.1.1). She would masquerade in typically female occupations such as a secretary or a maid, but nobody knew *Black Orchid*'s true identity, not even the reader. Other characters would speculate as to who she was but when the wig and rubber mask were found at the story's end, their speculations were never confirmed or denied. When the series ended, *Black Orchid*'s identity was still unknown. She would turn up

periodically as a peripheral character, but Black Orchid was deftly relegated to the obscure fringes of the DC Comics universe where she remained for over a decade.

The last person Black Orchid masqueraded as in Mayer's series was a woman named Susan which is where author Neil Gaiman picks up ten years later in his three issue reboot of *Black Orchid*. As Susan, Black Orchid is working undercover as a secretary at one of Lex Luthor's evil enterprises. She is sitting in on a meeting taking notes when the man in charge has her bound to a chair and removes her disguise, revealing her Black Orchid costume underneath. He comments, "Oh, nice. Verry pretty. You got one of those costumes under there too? Ohhh yesss. Pretty in purple! Ladies an' gentlemen – ta-daa! – It's Black Orchid! Yayyy!" [sic] (Gaiman, *Black Orchid* 1.5.1-3). The attention he pays to her femininity is similar to that of the 1970s *Black Orchid*, but in Gaiman's version the villain is using her femininity to mock her superhero identity. He ties her to a chair but, as Black Orchid notices, not with ordinary rope: "Steel? Titanium? High-tech. Tough" – a subtle way of letting readers know that pretty heroines are relics of an era that have become irrelevant in our world of ever-changing technologies and gender politics (1.5.6). The man in charge sees her struggling and, in a meta-moment comments, "I've read the comics. So you know what I'm not gonna do? I'm not going to lock you up in the basement before interrogating you. I'm not going to set up some kind of complicated laser beam death trap, then leave you alone to escape. That stuff is so dumb. But you know what I am going to do? I'm going to kill you. Now" (1.6.1-2). In the frames directly following, the order is given to kill Black Orchid. She is shot at point-blank range but survives due to her invulnerability to bullets. Seeing she is still alive, the villain starts a fire and exits the building leaving the superheroine to struggle free from her confines. Just as she reaches the window, and just when the reader begins to feel the storyline resorting to the superhero formula, the building explodes

and Black Orchid actually dies.

Upon her death, Black Orchid's consciousness emerges in a new body, one of many identical bodies lying dormant within large, purple blossoms in a greenhouse across town. Although this new body possesses Black Orchid's consciousness, she (hereafter referred to as Orchid for the purposes of this paper) awakens with no idea where she is or even *who* she is.

Gaiman and McKean's *Black Orchid* focuses on this issue of identity and challenges the authority origin has in informing us of who we are. In his essay on genre theory, Dr. Peter Coogan, director of the Institute for Comics Studies and co-founder of the Comics Art Conference, defined a superhero as a heroic character who displays "extraordinary powers, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero *identity* embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin . . . [emphasis mine]"(Coogan 205). Black Orchid possessed all of these things except the biography, or "origin story" as it is referred to within the genre. Again, the first issue claimed it was the origin story for Black Orchid but nothing was ever revealed about who she is, how she came into her powers, or why she fights crime. While Clark Kent and Peter Parker had day jobs, the woman who masqueraded as Black Orchid held numerous occupations and went by more than one name so, without a biography, even her identity as a superhero, according to Coogan's definition, is unfounded.

The importance Coogan places on identity directly contradicts the image of the cyborg, a figure proposed by Donna Haraway (author and professor of feminist studies at University of California, Santa Cruz) to represent a less restrictive, multifaceted example of how the complexity of women can survive and thrive in a society set up to confine and condense their individuality. According to Haraway, cyborgs do not have origin stories because origin stories

exist to explain identity, something cyborgs have no need for (Haraway 292). She suggests that women, like cyborgs, are part of many different communities, beliefs, and affinities so identity does not accommodate such fluidity. Identity becomes impractical to the cyborg and, as a result, an origin story is made inconsequential. Without an identity and without an origin story, Orchid is a cyborg inside of a binary structure (patriarchal society) couched inside of another binary structure (superhero comics). The opposition society posits to her as a cyborg causes her to regain consciousness in a shockwave of sounds and psychic duress. The purple-skinned heroine, though disoriented, immediately begins seeking answers to questions that have surrounded her for over a decade: where is she, why is she here, who is she?

Haraway believes that in Western society, the desire to maintain control within the power structure has created the need for identities. Identities are needed to participate and be seen in society, but they are rigid and lock people into their place on the hierarchy. This is advantageous for those higher up in the power structure because they don't have to concern themselves about those inferior to them. In contrast, the figure of the cyborg, being a hybrid of nature and technology, does not demand people place themselves in one category or another and is therefore able to accommodate a more malleable nature (291). Whenever she interacts with society, Orchid's identity becomes paramount. Lex Luthor identifies her as Black Orchid and, thinking he killed her and seeing she somehow came back from the dead, is interested in capitalizing on her abilities by perhaps weaponizing her, as he has access to a lot of munitions and mentions his armaments division (Gaiman, *Black Orchid* 1.31.4). Carl Thorne has just been let out of jail and believes Orchid is Susan, his ex-wife, because she looks like her. He believes she is the reason he was sent to jail and wants her dead because of this. Dr. Philip Sylvian, the man she first encounters after waking up, also imposes Susan's identity on her but for different reasons.

Drawn by the glow of the television, Orchid walks into the adjoining house and finds a man quietly watching the news. He seems familiar but she cannot place him and thinks: “I know him. (I don’t know him.) No, I do know him . . . somehow . . .”(1.17.5). Having no memory of her former superhero incarnation, Orchid walks up to Dr. Sylvian and speaks her first words: “Who am I?” (1.17.60). Sylvian believes she is a part of Susan Linden, a scientist he had once worked with who was the now-deceased Black Orchid. Mixing Susan’s DNA with that of plants, Sylvian created Orchid (along with the other purple beings she saw in the greenhouse) so though Susan is a part of her, she is not Susan. Adding to the confusion, when he refers to Orchid he does so in vague terms like “you people,” “blossoms,” or “you super-people.” Feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of the situation, Orchid becomes light-headed and passes out. Sylvian places her in a bath to revive her and when she awakens a second time he explains her faintheartedness is simply part of her biological makeup: “Being mobile, you’re using more water, more carbon dioxide than you would if you were still rooted . . . your kind absorbs most of what you need from the air. Orchids are epiphytic, y’know, air plants”(1.24.3-5). She immediately asks, “I-I’m an orchid?” to which he vaguely replies, “You are . . . uh . . . you were . . . you used to be . . . I mean, you weren’t, but . . .” (1.25.1). He pauses and decides to answer her by telling Susan’s story which is frustrating because Orchid was asking about her own past – not Susan’s. This is the problem with myths. They tell *a* story but it is never *our* story and this is certainly true of the one Sylvian tells because, though he claims he is relating Susan’s history, they are *his* experiences of Susan told from *his* point of view so it is not truly her story.

As his narrative progresses, Sylvian begins substituting the word “you” (referring to Orchid) for the word “Susan” and begins using the two terms interchangeably. Orchid thinks to herself: “Susan Linden. Her story touches echoes in me, but I don’t understand” (1.32.2). Orchid

could have accepted the identity as the girl who needs a man (Dr. Sylvian in this case) to take care of her, but her instincts tell her that this scenario doesn't make sense unless he is her caregiver. She asks, "Are you my father?" which might seem a naïve question, but it is logical considering the pseudo-fatherly role Sylvian has assumed up to this point. He told her Susan's father was abusive and that he helped shelter her from his wrath, effectively making him a better father than her biological one. He literally put a roof over Susan's head by giving her a room in his house and he had a hand in creating Orchid. He responds with a half-hearted "I suppose I am . . . in a way" but fathers are inessential to cyborgs so she retreats to sleep in a tree outside the home, outside Sylvian's patriarchal protection. (1.32.3).

Another identity Orchid encounters is that of the mother. Society has an almost reverence for mothers as the identification puts women in the strong position of life-giver, but many branches of feminism resent the importance culture puts on this role because of the control and regulations it places on a woman's sexuality. These opposing views show how confusing identity can be for a woman. During the 1980s when Gaiman was writing *Black Orchid*, there was a reclamation of the domesticated patriarchal mother-figure by eco-feminists who began wielding the image of Gaia: a powerful, nurturing, goddess responsible for sustaining all life on earth. Aside from the implications of power that came with aligning themselves with a figure essential to life on earth, eco-feminists drew parallels between the mistreatment of nature and the mistreatment of women at the hands of men. Gaiman drew from Gaia mythology to create the Black Orchid universe and to explain the connection Orchid eventually finds with nature. Within the Gaia mythology Gaiman teased out the figure of the May Queen who was a personification of the May Day holiday which was a celebration of spring and youth. Traditionally, the May Queen is a young girl usually dressed in white and wearing a crown of flowers in her hair.

According to some folklore, the young girl would be put to death once festivities were over. Gaiman took this image of the helpless, innocent lamb to slaughter and retooled it to be a symbol of growth and power in times of darkness (Gaiman, “Notes Toward” 191). Gaiman added to the description of a May Queen saying she also possessed great strength, flight, and the ability to communicate with specific plants. He went as far as to say that in order for a May Queen to materialize, she must possess a dead human conscience to start from which insinuates Orchid is a May Queen. Though Gaiman only suggests this, Swamp Thing, a character Orchid encounters later in the story, bluntly identifies her as such stating, “I know too little of May Queens” (Gaiman, *Black Orchid* 3.8.2) Although identifying Orchid without her consent is a highly patriarchal thing to do, when she asks Swamp Thing how the story ends he responds saying, “How the story ends? That is your affair. What do you want?” (3.8.2). Here Swamp Thing is doing for Orchid what Gaiman is also doing for her - metaphorically relinquishing authorial duties by refusing to create meaning for Orchid and inviting her to tell her own story, to be her own narrator.

In her essay on feminist mythmaking, Jane Caputi says that when women refuse the stories men tell about them and instead “foray into the realm traditionally forbidden to [them]” (meaning the realms of “the sacred storytellers, symbol and myth-makers”) women take power back (Caputi 427). As the earliest example of female first-person narration, *Black Orchid* is significant in how women are portrayed in comics because though Gaiman is the author, he is not the storyteller - Orchid is. Most comics are told by a non-present, third-person narrator which can only give a second-hand account of characters. Gaiman’s *Black Orchid* is the first instance where readers see a female experience through the eyes of a female character.² It could be argued that Gaiman is literally writing Orchid’s words so he is still writing her story, but while this is

technically true, one should consider how he uses his powerful position as male storyteller. Instead of reusing old identities or tropes, Gaiman shows them to the audience and subsequently rejects them by having Orchid reject them. Rather than creating a new identity for Orchid, he lets her wander without one which is imperative because even if the identity he gave her was completely new and outside of patriarchal norms, it would still be an identity authored by a man. The only way to ensure a female character gets proper representation by a male author, is for that author to give her space, not an identity. To the cyborg, forbidden realms include forbidden roles but also mean forbidden physical spaces. While women are said to exist in the social sphere (a masculine space within a patriarchy) their existence is as an object of that sphere not as a resident. This is best illustrated in the story when Orchid crosses paths with Batman.

Acting on a tip she received from Sylvian, Orchid goes in search of Pamela Isley, a former co-worker of Susan's who might be able to provide more clues as to who she (Orchid) is. She disguises herself as a human woman and enters the city to ask around about Isley. Having hit a dead end in her search, Orchid retreats to an alley to contemplate her next step when Batman interrupts her. Her encounter with Batman can be seen as a direct challenge from the male-dominated world of comics as the first thing he says to her is a brusque, "Who are you? What are you doing in my city?" (Gaiman, *Black Orchid* 2.30.1-2) *My city*. This territorial question implies that Orchid is treading in realms she does not belong and brings up a very important question about a woman's place. Orchid wasn't doing anything wrong but her presence aroused suspicion in Batman. She wasn't in trouble, she wasn't causing trouble - he simply didn't know how he was supposed to interact with her (the object in his sphere) so he demanded she identify herself: "Who are you?" Orchid responds truthfully saying, "I'm not sure I know. Not really. That's what I have to find out." Batman returns her honesty with an accusation: "You have a

name.” We see him struggling to pin her identity down but Orchid refuses and remains in ambiguity - “Not exactly. I know I’m not Susan. Phil said I was a Black Orchid” (2.30.2-3).

The power to name, then, is the power to identify but power is not guaranteed, even when women are the ones naming. Feminism, seeking to unite women under a single signifier, has used identities to make the feminine experience fit the existing social structure. Because they adhere to the same binary structuring society uses to separate men and women, however, the identities women create end up separating them from each other. As Audre Lorde explained, “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house . . . they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support” (Lorde 331).

Jane Caputi says the stories surrounding women are unrealistic because they are based on patriarchal myths traditionally used to “construct and maintain a phallogocentric reality” and claims they must be retooled to show the flaws of those myths and encourage active reinterpretation by women (Caputi 425). Haraway similarly argues that change will only come about through reconstructing the “systems of myth and meanings structuring our imaginations” (Haraway 302). The “Mother Earth” trope, originating in Gaia mythology, is another story that Orchid reconstructs but she does so in two ways. The first happens when she returns to Sylvian’s lab and discovers almost all of the other orchid-women slaughtered. She finds Suzy, an immature orchid and sole survivor of the massacre. Sensing a kinship with the little girl, Orchid offers her refuge and Suzy accepts. Interpreting Orchid’s help as maternal, Suzy asks if she (Suzy) can call her mommy (Gaiman *Black Orchid* 2.24.1). The indifference with which Orchid responds makes it seem that she really wasn’t agreeing to “mother” as a permanent identity but agreed to it for the time being as a mothering role would fit the situation and the context in which she was relating

to Suzy. This lack of permanence in the role of mother is evident as Orchid and Suzy's relationship changes from a mother-daughter connection to a sisterly one where they indulge in petty bickering. Though their disagreements do not add much to the overall storyline, they are evident in showing that the mother is no longer a static icon but a permeable, fluid form. McKean's artwork depicting the pair as they fly off into the early dawn sky speaks to this malleability as the two women are almost indistinguishable from each other.³

The second instance of Orchid remaking the mother trope happens when, after learning the whereabouts of Alec, a former researcher that worked alongside Dr. Sylvian and Susan, Orchid journeys to the swamps. Discovering Alec is actually Swamp Thing, she senses a kinship with him and relates to him her distress about not knowing who she is and the feeling of powerlessness she experiences because of it. Swamp Thing asks Orchid what she wants and she responds saying, "You know what I want. You have seen into my mind. You know my heart" (Gaiman, *Black Orchid* 3.8.4). He then reaches inside of her chest and gives her seed to grow "children" of her own. Some critics, such as Julia Round, have interpreted this interaction between them as a sexual act but what they fail to acknowledge is that though Orchid receives the seed from Swamp Thing, she is the one to actually plant those seeds in the ground of the rainforest (Round 13). In essence, she took on the identity of mother only briefly before also shouldering the role of "father." Here one can see Orchid's hybridity, her fluidity, at work. Unfettered by having to be "the mother," she chooses to transcend boundaries and indulge herself in traditionally male and female spaces. Gaiman used old myths like Gaia and the May Queens, but also incorporated newer ones from the DC Comics universe to introduce the new female superhero. McKean's depiction of Orchid throughout the book mirrors this blending of old and new myths.

The conventional way superhero comics depict women is to “couch a male superhero’s actions in an overtly sexualized female body . . . tiny waists and large breasts” but *Black Orchid* illustrator Dave McKean repurposed the traditionally oversexed female form (Cantrell 105). Orchid, in her non-human form, is portrayed naked which could be seen as blatant objectification, but she is painted in soft watercolors which bleed past the lines of her body into the environment which echoes her affinity with nature.⁴ Her form also lacks sexual characteristics like nipples and pubic hair so though she is clearly female, sex is not emphasized. Taking note that she died wearing the flamboyant, skintight 1970s costume designed by DeZuniga, Black Orchid’s death becomes a bold declaration that the old way of telling stories is no longer applicable.⁵ It was a notice to the comic book world “that the childish game of superheroes, crime, and violence [was] over, and a new, beautiful day [was] dawning” (Olson 31).

Reconstructing old myths also means reconstructing old symbols. In the same way McKean retooled the female form, Gaiman used familiar DC Comics symbols to show the ways in which they restrict and control the power women have within a patriarchy. Haraway states that any control strategies, “concentrate on boundary conditions and interfaces, on rates of flow across boundaries” (Haraway 302). This is seen when Batman tells her that Pamela Isley is in Arkham Asylum and gives her a card bearing his emblem on it so she can get past the woman at the desk. Giving her his card to gain entrance into the asylum implies that Arkham, an iconic structure within an iconic city (Gotham), will only permit a woman on the merits of a man.

After getting into Arkham, Orchid is led to Pamela Isley’s cell and finds her feeding a mouse to her “baby.” The “baby” resembles a cat but it has bloody fur and is missing its eyes. The zombie-like creature is a result of Pamela’s supernatural power, a power similar to Orchid’s

in that it is rooted in plants and nature. Though it is never addressed, because both Pamela (also known as Poison Ivy) and Orchid have a natural affinity with and draw power from the plant world, it could be assumed that Pamela is also a May Queen. Unlike Orchid, however, Pamela is not a cyborg because she has identified herself as Poison Ivy and confines herself to that one space (a metaphor made manifest in her current confines within Arkham). If Pamela abided by the rules of the cyborg and sought to find meaning outside those confines, she may have had a chance to wield a greater power. Instead, she laments her position and resents Orchid saying, “If I could be anything in the world, miss hybrid, I’d be you. And you’re complaining” (Gaiman, *Black Orchid* 2.38.8). Pamela’s bitterness is understandable because, when compared to Orchid who was created by Sylvian, Isley’s “babies” become a testament to her loss of power. Without the resources afforded to Sylvian, a man, Pamela has to work with whatever Arkham affords her: “It’s hard to get materials down here, though . . . it’s mainly roaches and moss” (2.37.1). It’s not that Pamela couldn’t create a hybrid as beautiful as Orchid, it’s that she is imprisoned within a patriarchal system so she is not granted the same access to materials that Sylvian has. What she produces will always be seen as inferior and Pamela resents this: “I never got any breaks, you know. I screwed up my life on my own, with no help on the way from anybody else” (2.38.8). McKean’s drawings of Pamela reflect her perceived martyrdom by depicting her with a crown of ivy on her head which brings to mind the image of Christ and the crown of thorns.⁶

Standing in opposition to isolation is the cyborg who finds meaning and purpose through her connections and not through identity. This is the case with Orchid who is still without an identity by story’s end and begins to recognize the multiple alliances forming within her. A major alliance she formed harkens back to the Gaia myth. When nature became feminized and eco-feminism revived the return of nature myths like that of Gaia, it also emerged in other fields

of study. In relation to science and biology, Gaia theory suggests that nature is not defined by one of its components (such as the ocean, the trees, or animals) but a combination of systems evolving together as a living organism. It believes nature, like the cyborg, is a system consisting of seemingly disparate parts working as a whole. This interconnectedness of nature presents itself in the story through “The Green,” a mysterious entity which Gaiman describes as “the collected mind of plants on this earth. It’s not quite a place or dimension, not quite a consciousness (although it can be both)” (Gaiman, “Notes Toward . . .” 189).

McKean’s art in this section reflects the connection between Orchid and Swamp Thing. When they begin communicating via The Green, Orchid is less defined and the lines distinguishing her from the background become blurred.⁷ The color green is also the dominant color throughout this section of the story which further emphasizes Orchid’s connectedness to her surroundings. Though the first panel on page six of the third chapter depicts his image above her form, her hair is depicted as wires connecting her to him via The Green.⁸ Additionally, her arms extend outside the panel alluding to the fact that she is beginning to transcend borders and limitations. The following page depicts a blurred outline of Orchid with her hand inside of a syringe.⁹ This echoes Haraway’s definition of the cyborg as being a hybrid between science and nature. Like the cyborg, Orchid straddles more than one world and more than one identity. She wants to be part of the Green but also part of the city. Suzy notices Orchid’s contemplative state and says to her, “You miss people and that stuff, don’t you?” Orchid concedes and adds, “I have too many of Susan’s memories to be truly happy here [in one place]” (Gaiman *Black Orchid* 3.48.3). Understanding they must leave, Suzy asks if they will sometimes be able to return to the rainforest. Orchid says they can and they fly off into the sunset together, bodies silhouetted by the sun: “Together we soar, we climb, we ascend. Together. Into the sun” (3.49.5-6). It is fitting

we never find out Orchid's identity because that is something society demands, not the cyborg. Given there were no more comics planned for Black Orchid, such an ending might be maddening, but for a cyborg, flying off into the endlessness of the sky is the only way the story could end.

The ending of Dinesen's *The Blank Page* tells of the pilgrimage women in the royal family make to see their sheets and how there is one frame in particular that every woman is mesmerized by. At the end of the long row hangs a canvas as fine and as heavy as any of the others. It carries the golden nameplate with the royal crown but, unlike the other frames, there is no name inscribed and the linen within the frame is snow-white from corner to corner, a blank page (Dinesen 104). That blank space communicates endless possibilities for women in the royal Portuguese family to change a narrative that has been repeated for generations. Women could cease to be this homogeneous monolith of blood-stained sheets and convey their own stories and complexities within the blank frame. As *Black Orchid* demonstrates, when a woman tells her own story it is often messy and open-ended, not necessarily interested in assigning meaning to herself or her experiences. Like the empty frame, Orchid (the cyborg) refuses a name (or an origin story in comics terms). She is part Susan Linden, part Black Orchid, part sister, part mother, which is in line with Haraway's theory that asserts no construction is whole and any efforts to unify a woman under a single signifier is shortsighted because it encourages a matrix of domination (Haraway 296-97).

Chapter 2

“In the pale light of the Moon I play the game of you. Whoever I am. Whoever you are. All sense of where I am, of who I am and where I’m going, has been swallowed by the dark. And I walk through the stars and sky... a trinity of dreams beneath the moon.”

-Neil Gaiman, *A Game of You*

Space, both physical and psychological, is a commodity for women. When Dr. Sylvian tells Orchid to go to sleep in Susan’s old room, Orchid refuses to be confined and informs him: “No . . . I need to be outside. In the open” (Gaiman, *Black Orchid* 1.34.2). The artwork in the close of this scene shows Orchid’s desire for space by juxtaposing hers with Sylvian’s. Readers see him through the window of Susan’s room where he is positioned in the center of the window pane. Acting as a frame in and of itself, the window is then contained within the comics panel and this frame within a frame suggests rigidity and structure.¹ Next to this is a panel showing Orchid sleeping on the branch of a tree out in the open. She is not in the middle but in the top left corner almost hidden away near the margins. A framing device is present but it does not consist of straight lines nor is it in black and white like the window readers see Sylvian through. Instead, the turquoise sky bleeds into the dark brown branches of the tree loosely framing a white space in the middle – a blank space full of possibilities. The comics panel itself is incomplete and open to the gutters which, in combination with the soft watercolor-like paints used, suggests newness, fluidity and exchange – a sentiment echoed in the cyborg who is “ether, quintessence” (Haraway 294).

When the women of Black Orchid were given space it was often either too restricting (as it was in the beginning of the story when Black Orchid was tied to a chair) or too small (like

Poison Ivy's cell). To get to Ivy's cell, Orchid walks past the common area where some of Gotham's most infamous male villains were enjoying some uninhibited free time in the brightly lit common area. Orchid asks after Ivy and an inmate named Hat (known better in the DC Comics universe as the Madhatter) leads her out of the room and down a seemingly never-ending flight of stairs. To reach Poison Ivy, Orchid notes: ". . . we go down. And we go deeper. Deeper into hell" echoing the inferior position women have to men in a hierarchy (Gaiman, *Black Orchid* 2.26.4). Contrasting Orchid's space (outside of the power structure) with that of Ivy's (inside the power structure), one can see the how space can affect a woman's power, her perspective, and her identity. Choosing not to sleep in Susan's room, Orchid is symbolically choosing to not take up Susan's identity. This gives Orchid a measure of power as seen by her place in comparison to Sylvian on the page: she is not below him. Ivy, on the other hand, has almost no power inside Arkham (a patriarchal structure) and is situated well beneath the men.

In contrast, the cyborg exists outside of the power structure so there is no cell for her. There is nothing keeping her in an inferior position. Women are inferior within a patriarchy because they are understood only within the context of their relationship to men (who are considered superior). Because cyborgs exist outside of this dichotomy, they are not accommodated and are forced to the margins as outsiders. This is preferable to a cyborg, though, because there are no identities in the margins to compartmentalize space or restrict movement from one place to the next. However, because of a cyborg's positioning outside of the social structure, society believes they are too far removed to offer valid perspectives. Though the views of a cyborg hold little importance to society, proponents of feminist standpoint theory suggest that a woman's positioning can give her a more accurate point of view. In her essay, "Making Strange What Had Appeared Familiar," Terri Elliott explains why:

Person A approaches a building and enters it unproblematically. As she approaches she sees something perfectly familiar which, if asked, she might call ‘The Entrance.’

Person X approaches the same building and sees a great stack of stairs and the glaring lack of a ramp for her wheelchair (Elliott 426).

In a hierarchy, Person A has no reason to concern herself with the challenges of Person X because they (the challenges) do not affect her (the privileged). The non-privileged individual, Person X, sees the entrance and what is lacking in the surrounding area so hers is a more accurate view of the structure as a whole. Applied to feminism, standpoint theory proposes that because a woman is in the non-privileged position in a patriarchal structure, she is afforded a point of view that lets her see the struggle it takes to get to the entrance and this is where theories such as Gaia can become regressive. Aligning women with such a powerful force, especially one that is considered a goddess, could potentially put them in a more privileged space which means their social scope could narrow.

In addition to a loss of perspective, Donna Haraway suggests that the attempts made by feminists to resituate women inside the patriarchy has resulted in a “painful fragmentation . . . along every possible fault line [that] has made the concept of woman elusive, an excuse for the matrix of women’s domination of each other” (Haraway 296). This means that even if some women were positioned higher up, there are too many branches of feminism for the move to be inclusive of all women. Still, feminism strives to embrace non-privileged women by attempting to redefine the word “woman” to be more inclusive of them. More spaces, however, do not equal more *space*, only added compartmentalization to the ways we define a woman. Additional identities result in what Haraway refers to as “webs of power and social life” that separate women from each other (307). This is illustrated in *Black Orchid* whenever Orchid came into

contact with other women. The female receptionist at the front desk of Arkham Asylum, for instance, won't let her in until Orchid flashes Batman's calling card. Poison Ivy is immediately defensive against Orchid's presence and assumes she is there to oppress her. The only women Orchid has any connection with are Suzy and the other Orchids growing in Dr. Sylvian's greenhouse. It might seem that only finding connection with others that look like her goes against the cyborg creed of inclusion but Orchid didn't exclude the other women. The other women, entrenched by their roles within the patriarchal structure, excluded her. *Black Orchid* shows how binaries create identities and how identities only limit space for women, but Orchid didn't start out with an identity so her story is a proposition of how a non-identity would impact somebody. This is also the case with *A Game of You*, volume five of Gaiman's award-winning *Sandman* series, which features an entirely female cast of characters struggling against the spaces identity afforded them, the opposition caused by those spaces, and the possibility that alternative means of belonging might exist for them.

A Game of You follows Barbie, a blonde haired, blue eyed divorcee trying to put the pieces of her life back together. When she and her husband Ken started having problems, he had an affair and ended up bringing a new girl into their home, effectively ousting Barbie from her role as wife. Shortly after, Barbie moved and was no longer a part of the infamous "Ken and Barbie," meaning she lost a major component of her identity. In addition to losing her space in society, she has lost her inability to dream and no longer has access to the spaces her dream world afforded her as "Princess Barbara."² The only space Barbie is given in society is within the male gaze, one of the most dangerous places for women because of the propensity it has to degrade them to such a level that they become objectified. In comics terms, the male gaze is partly controlled by the panel which controls what readers see and from what point of view they

see it from. Will Eisner, widely considered to be a pioneer of the medium, said that panels “capture” and “encapsulate” thoughts, ideas, and actions which tell the reader what to see (Eisner 38). How female characters are drawn and how the storyteller chooses to frame them places a unique responsibility on the comics medium to either perpetuate or prevent the male gaze. When a woman is sexually objectified in comics, her body becomes the focus and results in the alienation of the woman from her body and, in a deeper sense, makes her non-existent as a subject “since she owes her existence as a woman to sexual appropriation” (Haraway 299). This is illustrated in chapter one when George, the only man seen to live in her apartment building, is depicted at one point standing in front of a giant poster of Barbie wearing a short skirt and casting a flirtatious smile over her shoulder.³ The structure of the poster within the comics panel has her twice restricted: once by the hierarchy inherent in the patriarchal structure (represented by the panel), and another time by the male gaze (represented by the border of the poster). The frame within a frame is depicting her as a sexual object (in the poster) within George’s apartment (a male space). While looking at the poster, he says, “You don’t know us, Princess Barbara. But the children of the Cuckoo know you” (Gaiman *A Game of You* 1.25.8). This informs readers that George sees Barbie as a “princess” or more accurately as the “eternal feminine,” an archetype that idealizes women and excludes them from acting as complex, imperfect individuals - a manifestation of the male gaze (Beauvoir 266). This perception denies a woman her individuality and transforms her into a shallow, more simplistic version of herself that a man has diminished expectations of. To these men, women are a monolith, a perfect two-dimensional figure on the wall wearing a short skirt and smiling for their viewing pleasure.

As a means of combatting this simplistic view of herself, Barbie begins to draw complex patterns on her face with her makeup.⁴ While other characters view it as nothing more than an

eccentricity, Barbie is actually trying to regain control of how she is seen by controlling the perspectives of those around her. However, the illustrators of nearly every chapter emphasize Barbie's body parts, making her another in a line of women that have become secondary to their bodies in superhero comics.

Power Girl, for instance, is Superman's cousin and possesses many of the same powers he does. This would cause one to expect her to be taken as seriously as he is, but her body garners the most attention from fans as well as critics. Donning a high-cut leotard with a prominent cleavage cutout, Power Girl struggles to become more than her body. The same goes for other female superheroes such as Starfire whose costume only covers her shoulders, genitalia, and nipples, or Harley Quinn's cleavage-amplifying bustier. Even when a costume covers the heroine's body it is still skintight and accentuates every curve, as with Mayer and Zuniga's *Black Orchid*. The purpose of drawing female superheroes in this manner is to "couch a male superhero's actions in an overtly sexualized female body" which is done to sell comics and satiate the male gaze (Cantrell 105). Some may argue that men's costumes are just as tight, however, critics have noticed that men's bodies are not drawn in the same ways women's are. Websites such as CBR, Gizmodo, and Wired have all published articles putting male superheroes and villains into common female superhero poses resulting in men with arched backs, sultry stares, and contortions a regular body cannot achieve.⁵ This is why female spaces are important. They provide shelter from the manipulation of the male gaze and create a safe space for women to convey their own creative point of views, proven by the spaces occupied by the women in *A Game of You*.

For Barbie, a cyborg, her ability to occupy more than one space at a time is paramount to her survival. When one space is threatened, she is able to retreat to the other and wait out the

storm (as she literally does at the end of the story). When she is first introduced, however, Barbie is far from the image of the cyborg because she is struggling to find an identity which cyborgs have no need for. She is confined to one space (the reality in which New York City exists) and is unable to access other spaces (such as her dream world) which has made her lethargic and depressed. Her neighbor Wanda takes her out one morning to cheer her up but while they are out they come across Martin Tenbones, a creature from Barbie's dreams. He breaches the border between New York City and the dreamworld to deliver the porpentine, a necklace that, unbeknownst to Barbie, has the ability to grant her access to her dreams again. Because he is a large bear-like creature, however, Martin Tenbones is shot and killed by police only moments after crossing over. Barbie sees it happen and, suddenly remembering who he is, rushes to his side. As he lay dying, Martin Tenbones tells her, "Princess . . . the land . . . the land needs you. Please, come back to us . . . fulfill your quest. Around my neck . . . the porpentine . . . take it . . . the Cuckoo . . . it will destroy us all" (Gaiman *A Game of You* 1.21.4-5). Barbie takes the necklace home and ends up falling asleep in front of the television where, for the first time in a long time, she has a dream.

When Barbie dreams, she believes she is in a space of her own design but this is not the case. If it was truly her space, a space outside of the patriarchy, Barbie would not be bound by its tenets. The fact that she is known as "Princess Barbara" in her dreams and is referred to as such by George early on in the story, is an indication that Barbie is within a patriarchal space because a princess is not the highest authority in a land, the king is. Barbie's friends are referred to in a similarly diminutive manner when they visit her dreams where Morpheus addresses Foxglove and Hazel as "little maiden" and "little mother," and disdainfully calls Thessaly a "witch woman" (5.37.2). Barbie's inability to enter her dreams without a man's permission (she needed

the porpentine) also proves that her dream world was not her own. Like the Batman emblem aided Orchid, the porpentine carries with it a mythology that means something to the inhabitants of the land it came from. Barbie does not understand its significance nor that of the hierogram which means she is not the one who created them. If she is not the one who created them, she is not the one who created the myths surrounding them so, to understand who the space belongs to, one must look at the creator of the myths.

In the *Sandman* series, the creator of the reality in which dreams exist (a place canonically referred to as “The Dreaming”) is Morpheus, the god of dreams. Centuries before Barbie came to inhabit the land, Morpheus created it for a woman he loved named Alianora. After Alianora’s death, the dream world was occupied by a number of different women before Barbie claimed it as her own and began filling it with inhabitants from her own imagination. This makes her no better than the Cuckoo who moved into Barbie’s space and claimed it as her own.⁶ The difference is that the Cuckoo acknowledges the limitations of the land and knows she can never have ultimate power over it because the land has imprisoned her. Hearing the Cuckoo explain her desire to leave sounds similar to a woman describing her place within the patriarchy: “You don't know what it's like to be physically confined to one tiny place when there are so many other places I could be . . . I'm constricted. I need to fly” (5.141.2-3).

Male spaces, in contrast, are not recycled like this because men have more to choose from, including the spaces already occupied by women. George was able to occupy space within Barbie’s building even though all of the other occupants seen are women. But if a woman were to enter a man’s space, she is immediately challenged by him (as Batman challenged Orchid when he first met her in Gotham). When Barbie ventures into a comics shop, her presence puts the men inside the store on the offensive: “the guy behind the counter seemed really amused that

I was like, female, and asking for this comic. He said [the comic] wasn't very collectable. Then he said they didn't normally see breasts as small as mine in his store, and all these guys laughed" (6.20.3).⁷ Inked using only two colors, the scene echoes the binary structuring of male spaces and, being that the store is full of superhero comics, alludes to the fact that the stories (also in two colors) are an important part of creating that binary structure.

The stories told in Barbie's dreams are binary and provide further evidence that it is a patriarchal space. As the Cuckoo explained, "Little boys have fantasies in which they're faster, or smarter, or able to fly" while little girls' fantasies are "much less convoluted. Their parents are not their parents. Their lives are not their lives. They are princesses. Lost princesses from distant lands"(5.4.6; 5.5.1) Even in a space Barbie considers her own, she still adheres to the patriarchal tropes about the desires of little girls: she was a beautiful princess going on adventures with male companions meant to help her and keep her safe.

Binaries are not reserved for the patriarchy, though. Thessaly's myths date back centuries to the witches of Thessalia and, though they are not patriarchal, reflect a similar hierarchical structure. Thessaly uses her knowledge of these myths to acquire power but the power she gains is usually over other women and not men. Similar to how Poison Ivy's power to create hybrids was a grotesque version of Dr.Sylvian's, Thessaly's power is a grotesque version of Morpheus' because it is a magic that requires destruction while Morpheus' magic creates life. When she wanted to know who attacked the women in their sleep, Thessaly kills George and nails his eyes, ears, and tongue to the wall before evoking his spirit from the dead to speak to him. Though it seems Thessaly has the power in this situation, a man has the power because it is George's body parts that provided the story of what happened to Barbie. When Thessaly draws the moon down from the sky and commands it to open the Moon Road so she and the others can enter Barbie's

dreams, its absence from the sky affects the tides and ends up causing a hurricane off the east coast of the United States. Here again readers see that the “power” afforded to women is a perverted power to be feared because it harms other people. When Hazel asks if Thessaly’s witchcraft is “new age stuff,” Thessaly replies, “Quite the opposite, really” (3.13.1) Women are given old things to manipulate into “new” things so when Thessaly needs answers she, like Poison Ivy, uses what she has access to. In this way, superhero comics limit the power they give to women because, as discussed earlier, if a heroine has power it is male power couched in a woman's body. It's recycled power and not their own so it will always be slightly inferior.

For women to gain more authentic power, creators of superhero comics cannot be afraid of rejecting the myths that built the genre. Male or female, artists and authors must work together to destroy the old spaces and leave a blank canvas for women to tell their own stories on. When Barbie agrees to break the porpentine on the hierogram, it summons Morpheus to unmake the land. Before he does so, Morpheus reminds Barbie that because she summoned him she gets a boon. Thessaly wants Barbie to have Morpheus kill the Cuckoo but, aware of the imminent danger her friends have put everybody in, Barbie elects to get everybody home safe instead. By letting Morpheus deconstruct the world and the myths he used to make it, Barbie is denying her space inside the patriarchal structure. This means the boundaries disappear for her, her friends, and the Cuckoo: “There was nothing left of my land anymore--a dead sky went on forever above us and below. It was over” (5.36.2). This freedom resonates in the illustration of this moment as, after the destruction of the mythic artifacts, the multiple panels disappear and only one side of a panel appears on the page, leaving the entire right side open and the women unbound.⁸

After Morpheus dismantles Barbie’s dream world, he leaves her and the other women on a tiny piece of land surrounded by nothingness.⁹ There is not much room for them to move but

this is where Morpheus leaves them to wait until the hurricane passes in the other reality. It is a state of limbo for the women, a place that doesn't exist in the Dreaming or in the waking world, but it is theirs. It becomes evident that this small island is a female space because the first thing they do is share stories. Hazel asks Thessaly how old she is and instead of simply stating a number, Thessaly responds in a grand manner, much like that of a storyteller: "I was born in the day of greatest darkness, in the year the bear totem was shattered" (6.9.5). Before she can elaborate any further, the women awaken under the rubble of their destroyed apartment building to find they were the only survivors. Barbie describes the process of going from the island (a female space) to New York City (a male space) as "that sensation you get on waking, as everything moved further away, and I started to become aware of the cold . . . and in my dream it was warm" (6.9.6-7). The descriptors "cold" and "warm" are binaries and signal the women's reemergence into the patriarchy. Barbie says that she tried to stay in her dream but that when she held on tighter, it slipped away quicker, "And then I, and then I woke, and then I woke up." Repeating the phrase "and then I woke up" communicates a sadness she felt about finally coming to terms with the fact that she never had a space of her own. At that point Barbie understood that home (or belonging) isn't an outward destination but an inward one stating, "I don't think home's a place anymore. I think it's a state of mind" (5.177.3).

Near the story's end, Barbie is getting on a bus going nowhere certain. She could be heading back to New York or she could be headed to the airport. The only thing one can know for sure is that Barbie's experience has disillusioned her concept of home and that she now understands there really is no place for her in patriarchal society. Readers aren't privy to her destination but, as with Orchid, knowing her destination is unnecessary. Nobody knows where the Cuckoo flew off to, either. One need only know that, like the Cuckoo, Barbie is now free to

go wherever she wants. Like it took the destruction of the hierogram and the porpentine (both objects steeped in the mythos of the dreamworld) to free The Cuckoo, Barbie had to allow the destruction of her spaces and her identity (objects steeped in the mythos of patriarchy) to free herself. Though she did not start the story as a cyborg, Barbie finishes it as one because she begins to search for more spaces and calls no one reality home.

Chapter 3

By the end of their stories, both Orchid and Barbie embrace the cyborg existence by forgoing identity and migrating to the margins of society to find more space. While their journeys elucidate the basic tenets of cyborg theory, they raise an interesting question about the influence they can have once they are outside of society. Readers don't see what happens to either woman once she disappears into the margins, so there remains a question about the probability of the cyborg figure affecting change in society if she is essentially invisible to it. The storyline of Wanda, a character in *A Game of You*, answers this question by being an example of somebody from the margins (a cyborg) that exists within a patriarchy without participating in it. Hers is not a journey to find an identity or space, but one of using her affinities as a cyborg to change her own life and the life of the women around her.

Lauded as the first transgender character in a major comics series, Wanda represents a significant advancement in representation for women within the superhero genre. She is a complex and empathetic character, which is unusual within a genre that typically fetishizes members of the LGBTQA community, especially transgender people (Scott and Kirkpatrick *Trans Representation* 161). Before Wanda, trans-individuals didn't exist in superhero comics as people but as shapeshifters, aliens, victims of magic spells, or the result of a science fiction body swap (Rude *Autostraddle.com*). They were represented in lesser known comics series like *Gay Comix* (1980-1989) and anthologies such as *Real Girl* (1990-1995) but these existed on the fringe. Comics scholar Hillary Chute referred to these as "underground comics" which is autological because, unlike "aboveground comics" that were mainstream, the characters in these

publications were virtually invisible, unseen by the majority of comics readers (Chute 20). When an underground character, such as a transgender woman, makes her way into an “aboveground” mainstream story (meaning a story written by a popular male author such as Neil Gaiman, and published by a comics juggernaut like DC Comics), she becomes visible but is identified within the male-female binary as a man. Identifying transwomen as men is putting them in spaces they don’t belong and when that happens, transwomen as women, become invisible again. Wanda is invisible for much of *A Game of You* because she is not seen as a woman, but as a man who wants to be a woman. In chapter one she passes George on the stairs and greets him but George walks right by her as if she doesn’t exist. In chapter three Thessaly does not acknowledge Wanda as a woman by informing her that she cannot cross on the Moon Road: “This isn’t your route. It can’t be. I’m sorry” (Gaiman *A Game of You* 3.22.3). Wanda’s family refuses to see her and sees only Alvin, the name given to her at birth, going so far as to put it on her headstone. Even in her dreams, Wanda is regarded as a man and is forced to conform to the male-female binary. When she refuses to conform, her dream becomes a nightmare. The only time Wanda becomes visible is in the afterlife when Barbie sees her with Death, one of Morpheus’ sisters. Barbie says she saw them together in a dream but it wasn’t a dream because she has never seen Death before (referring to her only as “this woman”) so it is more like she had a glimpse into the underground, where the invisible become visible (6.23.5). Wanda is drawn like a woman in these panels: soft face, slender waist, curvy body. Barbie comments, “There’s nothing camp about her, nothing artificial” (6.23.4). Her use of the word “artificial” is appropriate in the sense that society made (or identified) Wanda, not as a woman, but as a man who *wants* to be a woman. This doesn’t mean society created transwomen, though. It means society made transwomen *abnormal* by forcing them into a binary structure, as was done to Wanda.

Given the name “Alvin Mann” at birth, Wanda grew up in a small town with a family that reinforced patriarchal binaries by saying things like: “[if God] makes you a boy, you dress in blue, He makes you a girl, you dress in pink. You musn't try to change things” (5.176.3). Such rigid gender binaries made it difficult for Wanda’s family members to accept her non-binary gender which is why they cut her hair and dress her in a suit for her burial. Being from a small town where nosy people could easily get information about other people’s lives, it is understandable that Wanda’s parents would want to control how she was perceived. They assigned her a male identity but Wanda rejected it, finding a sense of belonging through affinity rather than identity.

Haraway defines affinity as being “related not by blood but by choice, the appeal of one chemical nuclear group for another, avidity” (295). Though being transgender is not a choice, whether you accept that part of yourself *is* and Wanda chose to let the many “magnificent, wonderful, stupid, amazing worlds” inside her coexist without giving precedence to one over another. Wanda found affinity with women but, unlike Orchid’s connection to The Green, Wanda was constantly being excluded from her chosen community. When she and George’s face are left behind in the apartment while the others cross over on the Moon Road, George says, “Us guys should stick together” and Wanda replies, “I am not a . . .” but stops short of answering (*A Game of You* 4.114.2). When the old woman she rescued from the storm asks her whether she was a guy or a gal, Wanda answers, “I’m . . . I was born a guy. And now I’m a gal” (5.145.5). Acknowledging the masculine aspect of her spectrum without identifying with it, Wanda uses inclusive language against binary comments meant to exclude her from the space she feels she belongs.

Wanda was excluded in other ways as well. When Thessaly commands passage

on the Moon Road to gain entrance into Barbie's dream, Wanda is not allowed because the Moon Road can only be tread by women. Wanda begs to go so she can help Barbie but Thessaly replies, "This isn't your route. It can't be. I'm sorry" (3.90.3). By invoking the power of a matriarchal figure within the community of women (the moon) to gain entrance into Barbie's dreams, Thessaly uses her position in the hierarchy to assert herself over another woman. Like the patriarchy, the matriarchy is still about putting women in their place and punishing those who do not perform their specific roles. Feminist theorist Judith Butler explains the consequences of such rebellion in *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* saying,

performing [gender] well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all . . . that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated (Butler 528).

Wanda's punishment for not performing her gender correctly was abandonment and, ultimately, death as only those in Barbie's dream world escaped the damage done by the hurricane in New York City. Crushed by the bricks of the crumbling tenement, Wanda lost her life because she was not allowed in women's spaces on account of having male genitalia. Similarly, the binary structures of patriarchy are simple and archaic, unable to support anything outside the norm.

One of the most endearing things about Wanda, though, is her acceptance of herself as somebody outside of the norm. She mentions her favorite comic book growing up was *Hyperman*, specifically the Weirdzos who lived on a square planet and did everything opposite of how it was done on earth. She first found an affinity with them during her childhood because, like her, everything about them was contrary to what society deemed "normal." So when Wanda

has a nightmare about them, one in which she tells them she is a woman and they force her to get gender reassignment surgery, it feels as though her kin have turned on her. They refer to her as “he” and “him,” they strap her down to a gurney and ask, “So what you am? A man or a woman? Whatever you am, we make it better” (2.55.5). One of the struggles faced by the cyborg is “perfect communication” so the Weirdzos broken language when speaking to Wanda is important. Communication is essential to identity because the patriarchy uses both to translate things they do not understand, which includes Wanda. Her body communicates “man” while her affinity communicates “woman” and society wants to “translate” her “imperfection” into one side of a perfect binary (man or woman). Identity is the “one code that translates all meaning [people] perfectly” (Haraway 312). Wanda is stilted communication which is a rejection of perfection and, therefore, a rejection of identity.

Some transgender women, such as comics critic Tasha Wolfe, don’t believe Wanda shares their experiences and accuses Gaiman of making Wanda a plot device to highlight Barbie’s role as an ally (Wolfe *TheMarySue.com*). Alice Castle, another transgender woman, echoed this saying there has never been a mainstream comic that has shown a transgender character struggle with things like hormone replacement therapy or sex reassignment surgery like real-world transgender people do (Castle *Bookriot.com*). She claims no character has had to go through any one of the myriad of ways the transgender body “must be sliced open and rearranged from the inside out so as not to feel wholly other” to themselves. J. Skyler, a black transwoman and LGBT visibility columnist for *Comicosity*, disagrees and believes Wanda was the first character that could be labeled as “an authentic transgender person - one who embodied all of the real-life difficulties [transgender people] all share” (qtd. in Scott and Kirkpatrick 163). Although no two experiences are the same, Wanda’s struggle against the Weirdzos (reassignment surgery)

and her exclusion by other women gives transgender women points at which they can meaningfully connect with her. A unique opportunity afforded to comics readers is finding connections in other ways that can be found only in comics structure.

In his book *Understanding Comics*, author and comics creator Scott McCloud dedicates an entire chapter to gutters, the blank spaces between the panels of a comic (McCloud 3.63.1). These spaces are where a lot of the action takes place in comics because it is here that readers must take an active part in the story. McCloud gives a two-panel example of reader participation where, in the first panel, there is a man with a raised axe chasing another man. The second panel is of a cityscape and a scream in a speech bubble emerging from somewhere in the city.¹ There is nothing showing what happened between panel one and panel two but one can comfortably surmise that something bad happened to the man being pursued. This is because of a process called “closure” where readers assemble the different fragments of a story (fragments being the panels of a comic) into a cohesive moment (3.79.9). Everything within the panels are a forced perspective whereas everything in the gutters is subjective to reader experience. Due to this subjectivity, the gutter would be regarded by society as a dangerous place so any woman dwelling there (on the margins) becomes a monster; something to be feared. Haraway, however, recognizes that those living on the fringes have immediate access to new frontiers and proudly counts the cyborg among society’s monstrous saying, “Monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imagination” (Haraway 315). To Haraway, monsters are pioneering spirits that have seen what is on the other side of that boundary and Wanda is a monster in this sense because she was the first transgender character in mainstream comics that people could connect to.

The relationship between the gutter and the panel also reflects the basic tenets behind

standpoint theory and why minority characters have struggled to be accurately represented. As discussed earlier, the superhero genre consists primarily of male creators so the forced perspective of the women found within the panels is going to be primarily male. The gutters, however, are the spaces beyond the margins. They are the open spaces that look to be empty but are, in fact, filled with endless possibilities of connecting the panels and creating a story. In much the same way, when a female character is brought up from the underground (or the gutters in this case), the panels impose a forced perspective that separate her into parts and causes society to see her as broken or incomplete. It's like a mother playing peekaboo with her baby: even though the mother "disappears" from the baby's perspective when she covers her face, it does not change the fact that the mother is still there. She's just invisible to the baby for a moment (McCloud 3.62.3). It is the same with women, especially transgender women who existed in underground comics but because theirs was not the dominant perspective, they were unable to escape the margins and remained invisible until Wanda came along in *A Game of You*. She is the ultimate cyborg because she is made up of seemingly disparate parts (male genitalia and female affinities) but she accepts herself for who she is. She does not try to mask her "weirdness" as society sees it by getting gender reassignment surgery, but celebrates her contradictions just as the cyborg does.

Though Wanda is a pioneer, she is still forced into the male role by the perspective of the illustrators. While the other women are depicted with soft, round faces, Wanda is given an angular jawline and a muscular body that communicate masculinity. For a majority of the book she is wearing a tank top and underwear which draws a lot of attention to her genitals. The emphasis may have been a subconscious act by the artists but it forced readers to identify Wanda as male, evidence that the male gaze will scrutinize the body of all women, even those society

identifies as male.

While the male gaze has more of a presence in the rest of the book, it is almost absent from the third chapter which is the only one illustrated by a woman, Colleen Duran. From finding comfort in each other's presence to banding together to save Barbie, chapter three has a different point of view. It does not utilize the male gaze (neither literally or figuratively) as George's face is nailed to the wall through his eyeballs, rendering his eyes useless. His presence is strictly controlled by magic and George imparts nothing to the conversation until the last two panels when his speech bubble appears meekly under Wanda's.² Chapter three is a view from the margins because it does not focus on the bodies or body parts of women in the same way the other chapters do. In fact, their bodies lose definition and appear almost androgynous.³ It focuses on female camaraderie and exposes the ways in which women can discriminate against each other by maintaining binaries within their own communities. For example, Wanda's exclusion from the Moon Road is an example of how Thessaly, in the name of the female matriarchy (the Moon), discriminated against her own community. Wanda, however, maintains her allegiance to Barbie and faithfully stays by her side and protects her body while the other women were gone. This is the first instance readers get to see where Wanda's affinities lie and her selflessness sets a standard for female relationships in comics to come.

The illustrations near the end of the story when Barbie is at Wanda's funeral are a beautiful comment on female affinity. Barbie finds herself alone at Wanda's graveside so she reaches into her purse, takes out a bright pink tube of lipstick and crosses out the name "Alvin" etched in Wanda's headstone. Instead she writes WANDA in bold, pink color.⁴ When first considered, this gesture can be perceived as defeatist because the lipstick will eventually wash away and "Wanda" will become "Alvin" once again. Keep in mind, however, that while "Alvin"

is set in stone, “Wanda” is not. The impermanence of the lipstick doesn't indicate inferiority but fluidity and the ability to exist in a structure but not be *of* it. “Wanda” will eventually disappear from the gravestone, but she is able to be rewritten time and again. As Barbie used makeup to alter how people see her, she used lipstick, an iconic female symbol, to alter how others see Wanda when they go to her gravestone.

The last time readers see Wanda is the last time Barbie sees her. She is with Death and she is happy. Dressed in an overtly feminine dress, Wanda no longer possesses masculine features and is seen as being wholly female. Critic Tasha Wolfe believed that this Wanda was never trans and is seen as cisgender in Barbie’s eyes. She goes on to speculate that Gaiman did this because, unlike society, he believes trans women are real women and Wanda should be seen as such at least once in the story (Wolfe *TheMarySue.com*). Thinking in terms of identity, Wanda’s outside transformation wasn’t a negation of her trans experience but a celebration of her affinity. Her family still identify her as “Alvin” but dying allowed her to transcend to a different plane of existence where she no longer struggled with society over who was going to tell her story. Readers aren’t seeing a counterfeit Wanda, they are seeing a transgender woman who is finally in control of how she is perceived. When Gaiman began work on *Black Orchid* he asked executives at DC Comics if they thought anybody would buy the story and they responded, “[The main character’s] a female character, and nobody buys books about female characters. So, no, we don’t think it’s going to sell” (qtd. in Wagner, et al.201). When he started work on *A Game of You*, Gaiman knew audiences were not going to like it because it was a story about women, saying things “most readers didn’t want to hear” (qtd. in Bender 118). In reality, these two works are among his least popular but they persist as good examples of how to write women when one is not a woman. He did not try to reign in the cyborg nature of his characters by

identifying them or locking them into a trope. In fact, he even resisted even giving them concrete names (as Wanda's parents tried to do by having "Alvin" etched on her tombstone). Orchid was referred to as Susan, Black Orchid, and mother, but she never settled on one name. Barbie was Princess Barbara, Wanda was Alvin, Foxglove was Donna, Thessaly was "witch," and Wanda called an old woman the, "I-don't-like-dogs-lady." Gaiman let his female characters struggle with identity and never solved the problem for them. When Barbie stands at the bus station in the last three panels of the story she muses, "And if there's a moral there, I don't know what it is, save maybe that we should take our goodbyes whenever we can." She stands silently for an entire panel before answering, "And that's all" (Gaiman *A Game of You* 6.24.4-6). There is nothing about the endings that create any sense of closure. Even the artwork in these issues had something to say about the space we give women. Artists stretched the panels and in some cases removed them altogether, giving the women more space to move and change how they are perceived. These stories, though unpopular, are proof that men can write strong female characters in superhero comics which is vital in an industry dominated by male talent. If men can resist answering the question "What is a female?" and instead create stories that just put the question out there, it gives female writers the opportunity to then step in and answer in their own way by creating characters that reflect their own experiences. Affinities are important to the comics medium because they tell us where we belong and if comics are pushing stories inclusive only of cisgender men, it should be no surprise that men are its main consumer (Horn 12). If minorities are not being depicted in ways they find affinity with, there is no reason for them to feel like they belong within the genre so they will go elsewhere to find their stories being told.

There was a time when novels, now academic bastions, were considered "entertainment suitable only for idle ladies of uncertain morals" and if one had any taste or a reputation to

uphold, one read poetry not novels (McGrath *nytimes.com*). It is true the stories were frivolous but, “novels are written for readers . . . books and buyers shape each other,” so if the content was inferior it was because novels were being written for an audience considered to be inferior (Deresiewicz *theatlantic.com*). In the same way Barbie’s dreamworld was a feminine space under control of the patriarchy, so were novels because though they were sold to women, they were written primarily by men. Novels were looked at then with the same dismay superhero comics are looked at now and it wasn’t until people started critiquing novels that change came to the medium, not just in content but in diversity of readership. To get better stories there has to be a demand for them and this is why continued criticism of the superhero genre is important.

Epilogue

Since the 1960s, feminism has repeatedly challenged the patriarchal backbone of superhero comics and people have been watching to see how creators respond. As the number of female writers and artists increased, attention began to turn toward the lack of representation in other minority groups, especially in the LGBTQA community. In his book, *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics*, author Justin Hall pointed out that while the struggle for women in comics has been difficult, it has been even harder for queer creators who are further marginalized by “appearing almost exclusively in gay newspapers and gay bookstores, and published by gay publishers” (Hall introduction). Visibility is paramount in a medium built on visuals so when big publishers like Marvel and DC refuse to print content from a minority community, they are essentially keeping that community invisible. Alison Bechdel, creator of such celebrated lesbian comics as *Dykes to Watch Out For* and *Fun Home*, said she started writing with the main objective being to make lesbians visible (qtd. In Hall introduction). She wasn’t crusading for gay men or transgender people, but lesbians because that is her experience and that is where her affinities lie. Straddling the borders separating mainstream, heterosexual comics culture and the lesbian community is difficult but Bechdel did it with her graphic memoirs which opened up the question of LGBTQA representation within other genres of comics, specifically the patriarchal juggernaut that is the superhero comic.

Representation has changed in recent years only as more critics such as Hillary Chute, Mike Madrid, Tim Hanley, and Jill Lepore begin questioning the absence of authentic minority characters. From *Bitch Planet's* Penny Rolle, *Rat Queen's* beard-clad Violet, and Noelle

Stevenson's primarily queer cast of female characters in *Lumberjanes*, non-binary characters are slowly coming to the foreground.¹ The recent trend of re-gendering iconic characters such as Thor, Captain Marvel and Iron Man has also been beneficial to the genre because they open up the sacred spaces surrounding traditionally male figures and give audiences the opportunity to see and accept women as icons. Even transgender women are starting to be included as the main protagonists in major titles like *The Wicked and The Divine*, *Kim and Kim*, and *Alters*, all which have garnered a lot of positive attention from fans and critics.

Despite the praise, superhero comics remain resistant to the burgeoning diversity. As recent as April 3, 2017, vice president of Marvel Comics, David Gabriel, released a statement blaming “too many new ‘female characters,’ too many new ‘diverse’ characters, and not enough core, classic Marvel characters” for dwindling sales and claiming the diversity model is “no longer viable”(Canfield *Slate.com*). The recent controversy surrounding the Qur’an reference on the character Colossus’ jersey in *X-Men Gold #1* does not help matters of inclusivity, as the verse warns Muslims that Christians and Jewish people are no friend of the Muslim and should not be trusted as leaders. Sales are down but community insiders say blame should be placed on bigger factors such as the over abundance of events and crossovers, price hikes, and Marvel’s talent pool slowly leaving for smaller publishers like Image that offer creators more flexibility to tell the stories they want to tell through author-owned titles (Elderkin *Gizmodo.com*). While Gabriel claims, “We saw the sales of any character that was diverse . . . our female characters, anything that was not a core Marvel character, people were turning their nose up against,” retailers actually credit diverse characters for bringing new customers into their stores, “people who’d never thought about buying comic books before” (Elderkin *Gizmodo.com*). Store owners admit the sales aren’t as high as they would like them to be but the new readers are there and

they know it will take some time to grow a new fanbase.

The scene in the comics shop at the end of *A Game of You* best illustrates the fears of major comics publishers in crafting content for minority audiences. Barbie left the store lamenting the fact that Wanda was not there to say something scathing to the man behind the counter, and this is reflective of the current climate in superhero comics. As one of the last bulwarks of male space within the comics medium, superhero comics are feverishly defended by men who feel they will lose that space if women are accommodated. Even when one considers the increase in female consumers, men remain the primary consumer of superhero comics which makes David Gabriel's comment about diversity alienating the male readership a ludicrous one (Cain *Guardian.com*).

Gabriel's scapegoating of diversity reflects the fear of changing the masculine stories superhero comics were founded on. If sales are in a slump, it is the fault of the new element and not a sign that the old traditions have run their course. It seems he thinks there will not be enough room for men if more women are added to the mix but this is classic binary thinking because it operates through exclusion. It is not the goal of diversity, nor of the cyborg, to exclude men but to include everybody. Helene Cixous expressed a similar sentiment in her essay, "Sorties," by saying there needs to be a rejection of "these firm and oppositional binaries [of masculine writing]" if one is to desire even the possibility of change (Cantrell 111).

In a 2004 piece for the New York Times, Charles McGrath wrote about the merits of comics like Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis" and Art Spiegelman's "Maus" yet advised readers to ignore superhero comics, blaming them for the medium's inability to "shed a certain aura of pulpiness, cheesiness and semi-literacy" ("No Funnies" 2004). He's not wrong. Although they are not the only type of comic book, superhero comics are usually what most people think of

when they think of comics. This is detrimental because attributing an entire medium to its weakest link alienates a lot of potential readers. Because superhero comics are lagging in terms of diversity and adequate representation, the assumption on the part of non-comics readers is that it is the same with all comics (graphic novels, graphic memoirs, comics series, etc.) so when a parent tells their child, “You can checkout five books but only one of them can be a comic!” it shouldn’t come as a surprise. Still, with the surge of superhero movies and the appearance of comics classes in universities across the world, people believe that comics no longer need to be legitimized. However, there are a number of factors that indicate the opposite. For instance, academia and consumers hesitant to call themselves “comic book readers” have a problem with the word “comic” so they use the more intellectual sounding, “graphic novel.” There is a distinction between the two but even that cannot be agreed upon evidenced by volume of websites claiming slightly different guidelines from each other and from the Library of Congress (F 565 *loc.gov*). Professionals in the industry, including Neil Gaiman, have come out against using the words interchangeably but there are other factors to consider. The system of cataloguing superhero comics is inconsistent across libraries and makes scholarly research more difficult than if one were researching a graphic novel.² Citing comics is another problem because there is currently not a way to cite multiple panels in either MLA, APA, or Chicago Style formatting.

In the Fall 2015 issue of *Cinema Journal*, comics scholars Ellen Kirkpatrick and Suzanne Scott suggested in an essay that not considering comics to be a serious field of inquiry results “in the construction of (literally ‘man-made’) boundaries and oppositions (e.g., form/content)” privileging not only “one field of research over another but also an idea of mutual exclusivity: the notion that fields cannot speak to or inform each other” (Kirkpatrick and Scott 121). Comics

possess a new kind of vocabulary and add new dimensions to stories that can inform how other fields of literature are interpreted. Marianne Hirsch, professor of comparative literature at Columbia University talked about the impact different media had on the reception of Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel, *Maus*, saying it raised not only the question of how the Holocaust can be represented, "but also how different media - comics, photographs, narrative, testimony - can interact with each other to produce a more permeable and multiple text that may recast the problematics of Holocaust representation . . ." (qtd. in Chute 457). Through the unique structure and new rhetoric they bring to the discussion, comics can be combined with other forms of media to offer new ways of interpreting traditional texts and of understanding the human condition.

A great example of this is Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*, a dense, dark descent into the mind of a mentally ill woman. It is often called a play because that is the medium in which Kane primarily wrote, but the structure and the voids Kane created within the piece make it difficult to identify with any confidence. Sometimes it looks like a play, sometimes it looks like poetry, and sometimes there are no words at all just random numbers scattered throughout the page. Why would Kane stagger words and numbers or mimic the layout of poetry if the text wasn't meant to be seen instead of just read? Conventional play structure typically includes a clear rise and fall in action and features elements such as characters, linear dialogue, stage direction, and scene delineation. None of these exist in *4.48* which makes reading (and staging) it a major hurdle. Using traditional play interpretation doesn't work because every staged production of *4.48* is wildly different which is ironic considering interpretation seeks to understand. Sometimes it is a monologue, sometimes there are three people, other times there is a whole choir. This is where applying the terms and structure of comics can help because comics distinguish things such as

dialogue from narration or stage directions in specific visual ways that regular literature is unable to consistently reproduce. At its base, comics is a sight-based medium that teaches readers to “separate the form from its often inconsistent content” and find a way to reconcile the wide range of iconography found in comics to their accompanying texts (McCloud 199, 202). *4.48 Psychosis* uses text as pictures in its placement of words and numbers and can be considered a sight-based text, so borrowing structural components from comics (gutters, frames, iconography) is justified.³ The burden Kane puts on her text to communicate meaning through its placement emphasizes the importance of another comics staple, fonts.

Nate Piekos, a font designer and founder of the online type foundry *Blambot*, noted how the different types of captions in comics (Location & Time, Internal Monologue, Spoken, and Editorial) communicated mood, speaker, volume, and voice by means of how the words are placed on the page (Piekos, *Blambot*). The text throughout *4.48* is varied and difficult to follow but, structured as a comic, can be more easily portrayed. Using visual cues in the text such as indentation and font, stage directions become distinguishable from character dialogue, narration, and internal monologue. The way the ending lines of the play are arranged, for example, could indicate where the character should move while delivering the lines as it resembles a page out of *Black Orchid* where the words follow Orchid as she falls from the sky.⁴ The result of comics structuring on the text is a piece that contains all of the traditional elements of a play, albeit in non-traditional ways. The fractured form of the play (its replacement of scenes and acts with fragments), its ability to be a poem, a play, and comics all in one text, reflects the multifaceted, undefinable qualities possessed by a cyborg and presents a tangible example of how something (or someone) can exist in multiple forms yet exist as one.

There is a lot of dense storytelling done in comics that address complex life issues and

include an array of ethnicities, lifestyles, and gender. Unfortunately, people unfamiliar with the inclusivity of the medium do not know about these works because the figurehead for the comics medium is a genre that still struggles with issues of exclusivity. The fact that the only interaction most people have with the medium is through the successful superhero movie franchises suggests superhero comics will remain the figurehead for quite some time so if change is to happen, it has to happen in this genre. Getting rid of binary thinking about sex and gender roles will give readers more opportunities to find affinity with superhero comics, but there is then a responsibility on the part of creators to acknowledge those affinities. Taking these spaces away from women and other minorities on account of slow sales is reductive to comics as a whole because, for many consumers, superhero comics are the point of entry to the entire medium. This is not an appeal for more female readership but for a more inclusive one. In the same way Orchid and Swamp Thing found affinity with each other through The Green, binary factors like gender should not determine personal matters such as where one finds “home.” As Barbie told Wanda as she sat near her grave, home is just a state of mind.

Barbie didn’t find change for herself on the real world level until she addressed the hierarchical issues at the internal level. Only after she stopped chasing identity within the patriarchy did Barbie understand that she didn’t need identity but space. Similarly, the comics medium can be more inclusive only after internal hierarchical issues are addressed and inclusion is imperative if comics are to have an impact on other literary mediums. A comics perspective would add fresh rhetoric to the discussions surrounding classic texts or, possibly, become a catalyst for newer forms of literature. The ending of *Black Orchid* encourages this intermingling of mediums when it depicts Orchid flying off into the sunset. Her silhouette against the sun is reminiscent of Leonardo DaVinci’s *Vitruvian Man*, a visual statement about the ability of

mathematics to blend with art and literature, resulting in another successful hybrid.⁵

Advocating for the inclusion of women in the creation of superhero comics is advocating for quality in superhero comics. Though the patriarchal grip on the genre is strong, male creators can use their position within the hierarchy to open readers up to the possibility of complex, authentic female characters by not writing for women but writing space for women. This is done by following the tenets of the cyborg which include not imposing a patriarchal (i.e. binary) identity on them and letting them explore their own affinities. These rules would apply to any non-queer creators writing queer characters. If they want to give space to those affected by the patriarchy, they must create that space just as Morpheus did for Barbie and her friends on the skerry. It may be on the margins and it may not be a big plot of land, but that space is full of possibilities. It is like that blank canvas at the end of Dinesen's story. All women need is the opportunity, the space to assert their own points of view, and superhero comics can become as complex and celebrated as more accepted literary forms. Change isn't going to come from the old ways that got the genre where it is today, but from standing in front of the blank page where, like the women in the convent, one can "sink into deepest thought" and imagine a life beyond the borders.

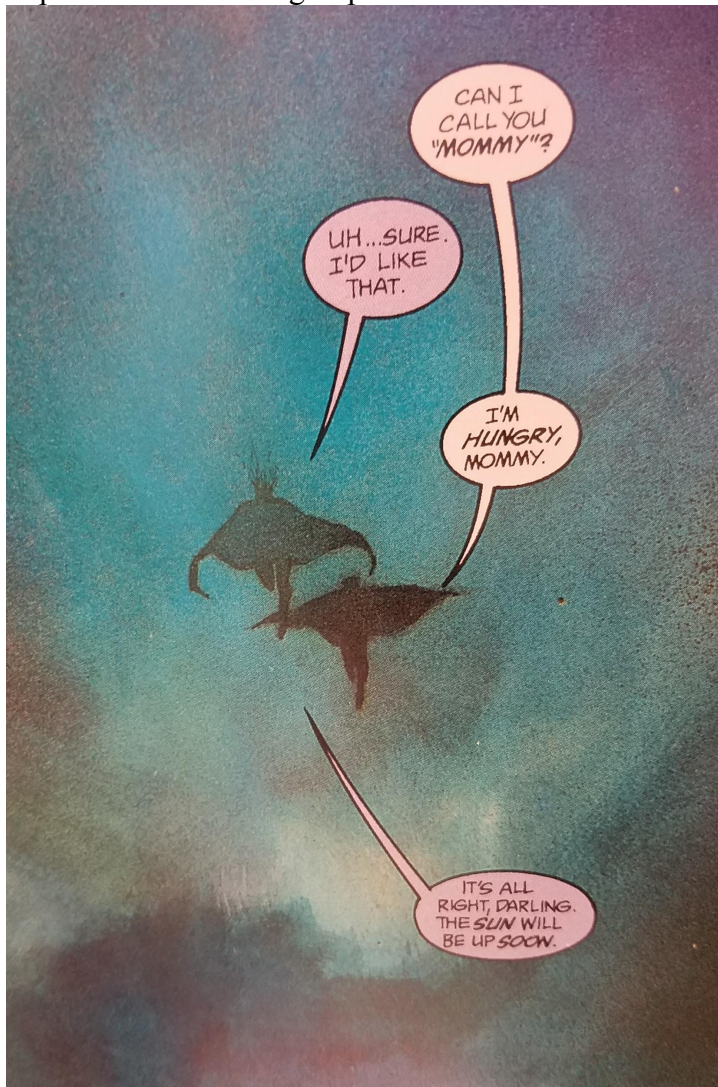
Endnotes

Introduction

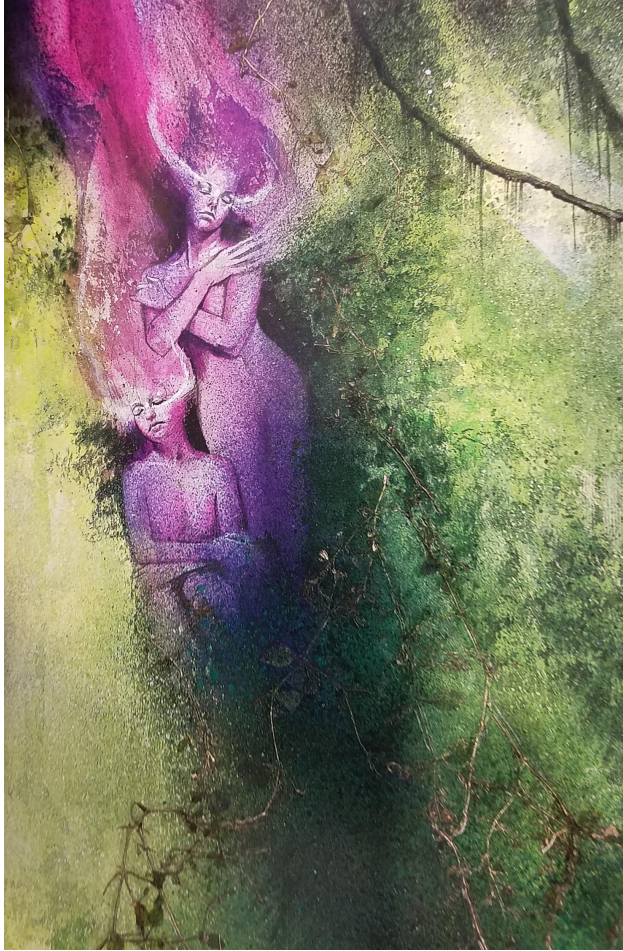
1. Not quite gods, The Endless are seven siblings that embody the natural forces on earth in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series. They are Destiny, Dream, Death, Destruction, Despair, Desire, and Delirium.

Chapter 1

1. For example, issue seven of the series opens up with the women at a male strip club speaking and interacting with the dancers in a derogatory manner p.3
2. Justin Green's 1972 work *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, was considered by some to be the first autobiographical comic. Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* was the "first superhero comic to present a sustained glimpse of the inner consciousness of a superhero" (Cantrell 104).



3. McKean, Dave. *Black Orchid* © 2.24.1. 1989. Print.



4. McKean, Dave. *Black Orchid*© 3.37.1. 1989. Print.



5. DeZuniga, Tony. *Adventure Comics #428 Black Orchid*©. 1973. Print.



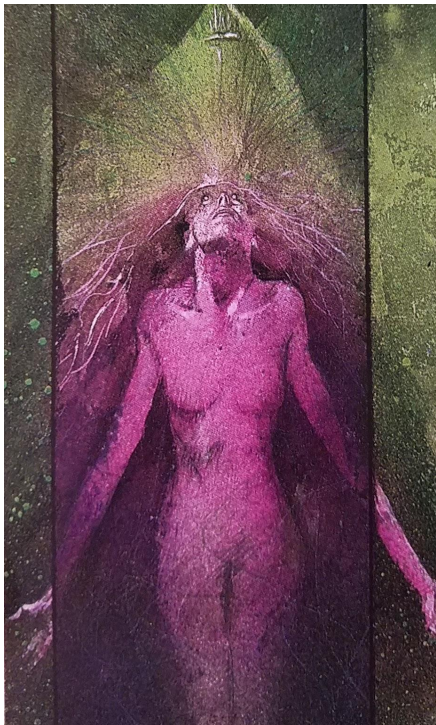
6. McKean, Dave. *Black Orchid* © 2.39.4. 1988. Print.



7. McKean, Dave. *Black Orchid* © 2.38.6-7. 1989. Print.



8. McKean, Dave. *Black Orchid* © 3.5.4-6. 1989. Print.



9. McKean, Dave. *Black Orchid* © 3.6.1. 1989. Print.



10. McKean, Dave. *Black Orchid* © 3.7.2. 1989. Print.

Chapter 2

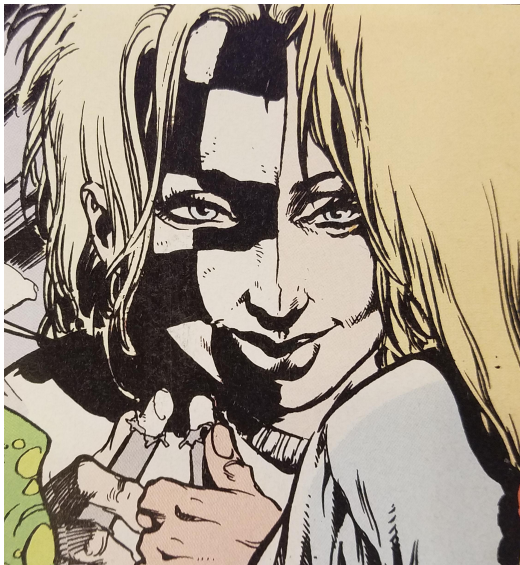


1. McKean, Dave. *Black Orchid* © 1.34.4-5. 1989. Print.

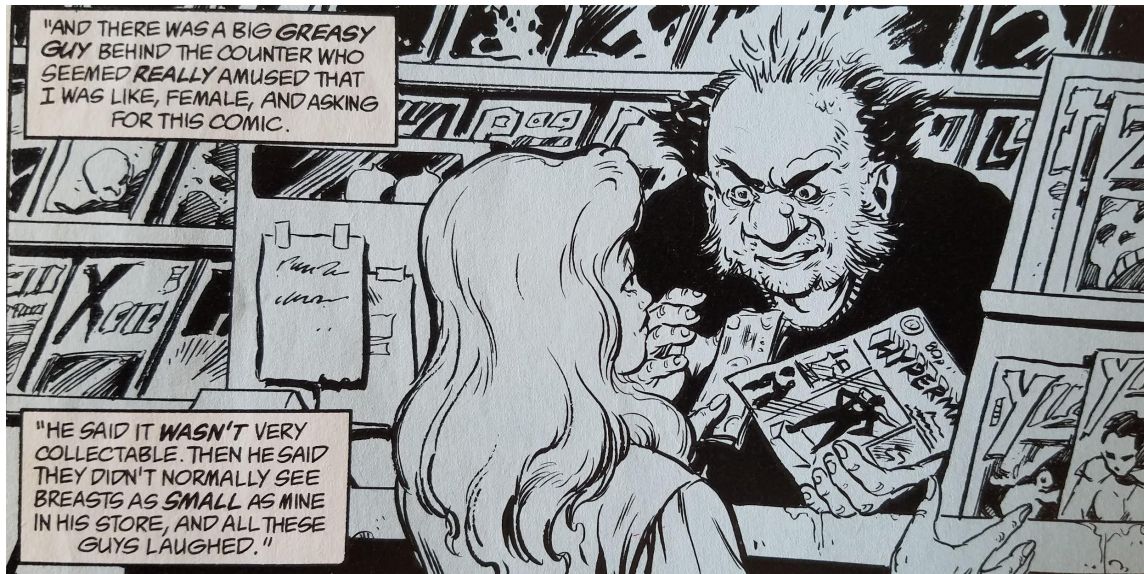
- Barbie's inability to dream is explained in an earlier Sandman volume, in which the main character (Rose) opened a Dream Vortex that severely crippled the Dreaming (the larger universe of dreams), especially the outlying skerry's where Barbie's dream world is located.



- Shawn McManus. *The Sandman* © Issue #32, 1.25.7. 1993. Print.



- Shawn McManus. *The Sandman* © Issue #32, 1.10.2. 1993. Print.
- <http://io9.gizmodo.com/male-superheroes-and-villains-copy-female-characters-s-1549000177>
<http://www.cbr.com/the-line-it-is-drawn-182-male-superheroes-in-female-superhero-poses/>
<https://www.wired.com/2012/12/comics-gender-swapped/>
- Brood parasites lay their eggs in the nests of other birds and the resultant offspring are raised by multiple different foster species. Likewise, Barbie came in to the already formed dreamworld and left parts of herself before leaving (Martin Tenbones, Luz, Tantoblin, and Wilkinson).



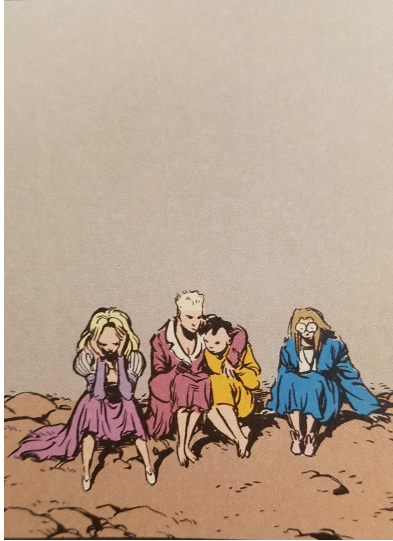
7.

Shawn McManus. *The Sandman* © Issue #37, 6.20.3. 1993. Print.



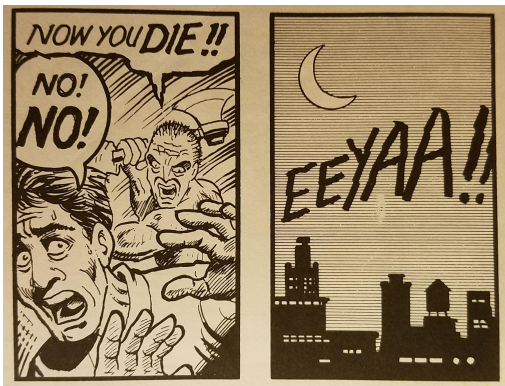
8.

Shawn McManus and Bryant Talbot. *The Sandman* © Issue #36, 5.25-26. 1993. Print.



9. Shawn McManus. *The Sandman* © Issue #37, 6.9.2. 1993. Print.

Chapter 3



1. McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* © 3.66.1-2.1993. Print.



2.

Doran, Colleen. *A Game of You* © Issue #34, 3.24.6. 1993. Print.



3.

Doran, Colleen. *A Game of You* © Issue #34, 3.13.5; 3.3.7. 1993. Print.

Epilogue

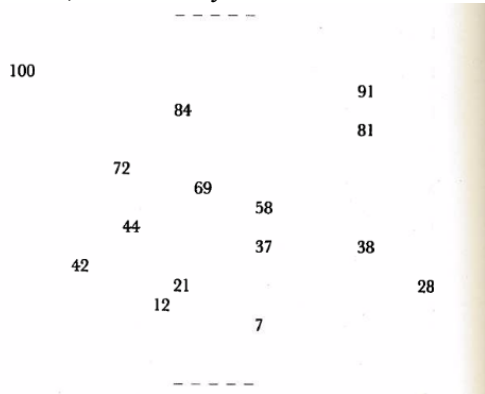


1.

“Penny Rolle.” De Landro, Valentine. *Bitch Planet* ©. 2015. Print.

“Violet.” Upchurch, Roc. *Rat Queens* ©. 2013. Print.

2. In the Grand Rapids Public Library, for instance, the spine label for *Maus*, Art Spiegelman’s award-winning graphic novel, would read, “Graphic Novel, Spiegelman.” Other titles written by Spiegelman would also be shelved there, making it easy to find works he has done. The spine label for *Green Lantern* on the other hand would read “Graphic Novel, Johns, v.3” (the latter number indicating which collected volume it is). If somebody wants to research the character Green Lantern, they could not go to one area on the shelf to find all *Green Lantern* books because *Green Lantern* has been written by various authors over the decades. In addition to being scattered around the graphic novel section, some superhero comics are still shelved in the non-fiction section which makes it more difficult to do scholarly research. The spine labels of superhero comics should list the character before the author, that way all of that character’s comics are in one place, making research faster. Making matters worse, the spine labels of *Batman* and *Superman* comics *do* list the character first, so there is hierarchical discrimination about who is considered “iconic” enough to be listed before the author. This makes finding and citing different sources difficult, so not many academics write about the superhero genre.



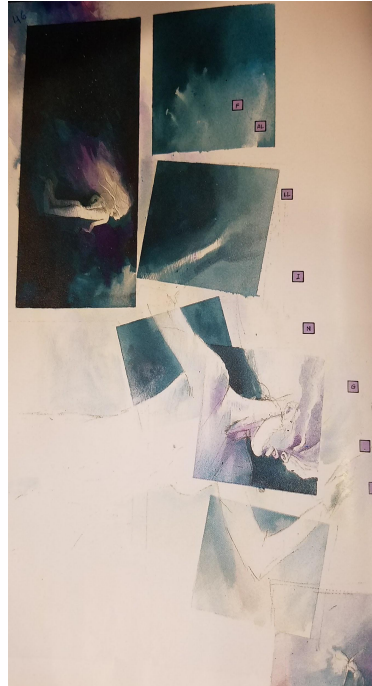
3. (Kane 208)

222 4.48 Psychosis

dislike
dislocate
disembody
deconstruct

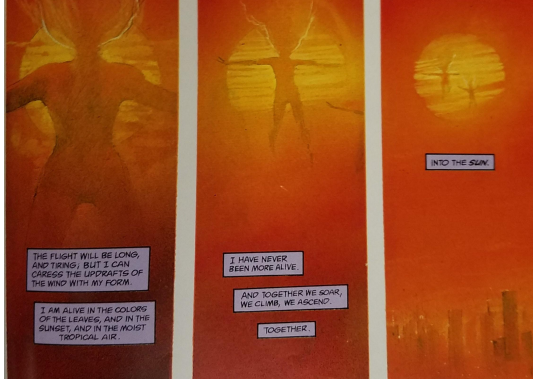
I don't imagine
(clearly)
that a single soul
could
would
should
or will

and if they did
I don't think
(clearly)
that another soul
a soul like mine
could
would
should
or will



4. (Kane 222)

McKean, Dave. *Black Orchid* © 2.46.1-7. 1993. Print.



5. McKean, Dave. *Black Orchid* © 3.49.4-6. 1993. Print.

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