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Female fans, female creators, and female superheroes

The semiotics of changing gender dynamics

Angela Ndalianis

The superhero genre has thrived since the turn of the century. The record-breaking block-busters of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and DC's Extended Universe, Marvel and DC's adult and children's television series, multiple video games across numerous platforms, and plethora of comic books have all successfully extended their reach beyond the traditional comic book reader to attract new audiences across a variety of media. In this chapter, I focus on what I believe to be some dramatic changes that are happening in female representation and the female demographic within the context of the genre, particularly over the last decade. The emphasis will be on the female superhero across comics, film, and television and the systemic changes that have been (slowly) occurring in the stories, in the creative industries that create the stories, and in the world of fans who consume the stories.

There is a dynamic dialogue across these areas – the superhero narratives, the industries that create them, and the fans of the genre – that has generated these shifts and the emergence of new female superheroes signals a cultural shift generated by this three-way dialogue. At this stage this shift is but a small, seismic rumble but this rumble is expanding outward and is on its way to effecting a major transformation. It's not that we've never had female heroes – Ripley (the *Alien* franchise), Buffy (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), Sarah Connor (the *Terminator* franchise), Calamity Jane (*Calamity Jane*), Trinity (*Matrix*), Lara Croft (the *Tomb Raider* series), Charlie's Angels (*Charlie's Angels*), Yuki Kashima (*Lady Snowblood*), Alice (*Alice in Wonderland* and the *Resident Evil* franchise), and many, many others. By the same token, we've also had female superheroes from the beginning of the genre in comics and later in film and television – Wonder Woman, Batwoman, Batgirl, Invisible Girl, Ms. Marvel, etc. – but, as I'll go on to address later, especially since the late 1970s, these superwomen were primarily created by and directed to a male audience. The dynamic currently in place in relation to women (and issues of diversity more generally) in the superhero genre is resulting in systemic changes that are putting pressure on entertainment industries to reconsider their previous myopic focus on the white, heterosexual, male superhero.

This chapter examines the rationale behind this shift, which has seen a change toward representations of richer, more diverse characterizations of female superheroes that abandon previous (and, alas, continuing) norms that have hyper-feminized and simplified these characters for the gaze of an assumed male viewer or reader. An overview will be provided of:

Figure 22.1   Game of Thrones (HBO 2011–19). © HBO. Fair use

changes in audience demographics, which now comprise of a readership/viewership that is almost half female; changes in the entertainment industry, which have had to address both fan demand for more women creatives and the changing demographic; the introduction of more female writers and artists; changes since the early 2000s, which include the rise of digital comics and online arenas of debate that include social media. In the latter part of the chapter, I will turn to the writings of Juri Lotman, the Russian semiotician, and his semiotic model of the semiosphere, which offers a method for mapping out cultural shifts, and offers a way for a critical rethinking of how genres intersect with culture (Figure 22.1).

I'd like to begin with an example of a character who may not strictly be a superhero, but who certainly embodies many superhero characteristics. It's Arya Stark, the young girl hero from the incredibly popular television series *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2009–19), and the episode is "The Long Night," episode 3 of the season 8, in which Arya triumphantly kills the Night King. Throughout the episode – and the series – the viewer is set up to believe it will be Jon Snow or Daenerys Targaryen, both born into the role of monarch-to-be who finally rid the world of the Night King. Instead, it is Arya who flies like a superhero out of the darkness, Valyrian steel dagger in hand, and plunges the dagger into the heart of the leader of the White Walkers. On Twitter, @the darkknight77/Anthony B. Cagle proclaimed, "I use to like Arya Stark before last night's episode of Game of Thrones turned her into the ultimate Mary Sue," then added:

> Her killing the Night King
> Not earned
> Very little foreshadowing for most of the series
> Jon got fucked over.

In the thread that followed, there was uproar. On the question of foreshadowing, @SFBrianT/ The Borg Were Wrong asked "Did you even watch the show?" while in response to the Mary Sue comment, @Massawyrm/C. Robert Cargill remarked: "Anyone who thinks Arya Stark is a Mary Sue needs to A) look up what Mary Sue actually means and B) Study her as having one of the greatest character arcs of the 21st century" (@thedarkknight77). @thedarkknight77's negative response seems to be atypical of online responses to Arya's action. Reactions on social media can be described as explosive, in a positive way. Viewers of the episode filmed themselves in large groups in pubs and other public spaces as well smaller

groups at home and, as Arya plunged the dagger in, most erupted in joy, waving arms in the air, yelling victory cries out loud, with one man somewhere in his 20s crying out "that's my girl!" Millions of people watched these audience reactions on YouTube. I myself remember feeling elated, waving my arms around in excitement, and yelling out "Yes! Woohoo!"

This scene isn't just about Arya sticking a knife into the heart of the Night King. For me, it represents something bigger: sticking a knife into the heart of the traditional hero. While everyone expected the victor to be the born-to-be heroes, instead, it turned out to be the young girl who, very much like a superhero, had her own origin story that set her on a path of revenge to rid the world of the evil that had torn her family and world apart. Interestingly, also like a superhero, Arya played on issues of secret identity and disguise throughout the series. She's the self-made hero in the tradition of Batgirl, who strives to advance her physical skills in order to fight evil; but unlike Batgirl, her narrative unravels in a fantasy rather than superhero genre. It's because Arya is a hero different to the norm that everyone watching the episode in the YouTube videos (which have been viewed by millions) had such jubilant reactions to her act of heroism. She's an underdog who, from the beginning, fought against performing the role of a conventional "girl." Yet, it's this different kind of "girl" who manages to save humanity-at-large from extinction. And the fact that she's a girl-become-woman didn't dissuade men in most of the videos online from being thrilled at her heroic act.

For decades (probably more like millennia) male producers and creators have assumed that women can't be viable heroes (or creators) who can sustain being heroes in a successful heroic story or maintain the attention of an assumed male audience that's seen to dominate in the consumption of such stories. This scene and public reactions to it are, I believe, indicative of a major cultural shift that is beginning to happen. It's in the superhero genre that these changes are being experienced most dramatically.

The rise of the C21st female superhero

This section provides an overview of some of the female superheroes who have appeared in the last decade or so who have left a decisive stamp in terms of issues of representation, feminist agendas, female creators, and female readers and viewers. As Liam Burke explains:

> Moving into the second decade of the millennium there was a sustained attempt on the part of the comic book industry to redress this disparity by reworking the secret identities of some of their most high-profile characters, with female heroes taking over the mantles of Wolverine and Thor, Korean American Amadeus Cho serving as the Hulk's alter ego, and Pakistani American Kamala Khan becoming the new Ms. Marvel when the previous title holder, Carol Danvers, received her overdue promotion to the rank of Captain Marvel… yet after years in which every superhero seemed to be played by a white guy named Chris (Evans, Hemsworth, Pratt) some of this diversity began to seep into superheroes on screen. Superhero shows like Jessica Jones, Luke Cage, Supergirl, and Black Lightning provided a greater array of heroic types, while the box office grosses of Wonder Woman, Black Panther, Aquaman, and Captain Marvel have hopefully dispelled the misconception that women or people of color cannot lead superhero movies. (10)

One of the most successful additions is a superhero who has been around for a while – Wonder Woman – who first appeared in *All Star Comics* #8 in October 1941, but who had, until recently, never appeared in a movie. The Amazonian princess was the creation of psychologist William Moulton Marston (writing under the pen name Charles Moulton), and

she was very much inspired by feminists of the era who fought for the rights of the powerful, modern woman. Marston's wife, Elizabeth, and his other life partner, Olive Byrne, also had a role to play in the creation of the character, but it was Joye Hummel who was the first woman to write Wonder Woman. Hummel (later, Joye Murchison Kelly), who was a student and assistant of Marston's between 1944 and 1947 (the year of Marston's death), ghost-wrote a number of the Wonder Woman comics during the years of Marston's illness.[1]

She would remain the only woman creator of Wonder Woman until 1986 when another woman – Trina Robbins – would become the first female artist to draw Wonder Woman in the four-issue series *Legend of Wonder Woman* (written by Kurt Busiek). In the mid-1980s Mindy Newell would become the first woman to actually be credited with writing *Wonder Woman* (issues 326–8, 1985). However, it wasn't until 2007 that Gail Simone would be hired as the lead writer and the first woman to write Wonder Woman on a series run. Simone's run would last until 2010. Since then, more of an effort has been made by DC to include female writers and artists, including Nicola Scott, Jill Thompson, Jodi Picoult, Meredith Finch, Shea Fontana, and Mirka Andolfo.

The comic book industry took the lead in this respect, one that the film industry attempted to address with the blockbuster film *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017). A film about Wonder Woman had been in development hell since the late 1990s, with a number of male directors, including Joss Whedon, slated to direct. Around 2013 Warner Bros. revived plans for a Wonder Woman film and Michelle MacLaren was hired as director, leaving soon after because of "creative differences." In 2015, Patty Jenkins accepted the role. There was a great deal of media attention directed to the fact that a major blockbuster film – one that would be part of DC's Extended Universe in direct competition with Marvel's Cinematic Universe – had been given to a female director. The lack of faith in a female director was, no doubt, one of the reasons Jenkins wasn't locked into directing a sequel (Kit). Barring Kathryn Bigelow, everyone knew women couldn't direct action blockbuster films, right? Wrong. On release, the film earned $821 million worldwide (Wonder Woman). The press and social media went wild, and attention was drawn to Hollywood's failure to acknowledge and support woman creatives in the industry (see Lauzen 2017; Jacobs 2017). Jenkins became emblematic of the failure of the film industry to support women. Patty Jenkins has since been locked into directing *Wonder Woman 1984* (due for release in 2020), and she will receive a reported $7–9 million, a record salary for a female director (Kit).[2] The film's success revealed not only that women directors could successfully direct action blockbusters that could also be major box office successes, but that men would also go see films directed by women that also had a female lead character. I remember going to see the film and, during the battle sequence when Wonder Woman takes off her cape, walks onto the battlefield, and reveals her costume, an adult male in the audience started hooting and whooping with joy. It added to the elation I felt while watching the film.

While not the most ground-breaking cinematic experience of all time, the film *was* ground-breaking in terms of what it represented: empowered women and empowering to women, a strong female hero who was empathic and followed a different journey compared to male heroes, success in hitting the mark with both male and female audiences, proof that a woman could more than handle directing what had previously been considered male-domain film genres and budgets. Thousands of people posted their comments on twitter. Here is a sample:

- @emerylord – dear Lord, please bless the 10yo boy sitting next to me in Wonder Woman who whispered, "Diana, no!" as she put herself in danger.
- @emerylord – also, please, his friend sitting on the other side of him who whispered back, "she can do it." amen.

- @megsauce – NO WONDER WHITE MEN ARE SO OBSCENELY CONFIDENT ALL THE TIME I SAW ONE WOMAN HERO MOVIE AND I'M READY TO FIGHT A THOUSAND DUDES BAREHANDED
- @EvanMatyas – I've lived to see my childhood princesses become generals.
- @DeeGoots – Just passed my neighborhood comic store. Saw a little boy walking out in a #WonderWoman headband, holding her comic book. Hells yeah.
- @bessbell – Hospitals should play Wonder Woman in birthing rooms.
- @elisaskinner – I'm sure Gal Gadot has a great ass, but I'm so excited I didn't see it once in the movie.
- @AnnaAkana – Still blown away that women are feeling something we've never felt before. Representation matters.
- @Terri_Schwartz – Now #Wonder Woman's a certified hit, I look forward to all other studios scrambling for their own female-directed female-led superhero films!
- @joss [whedon, in response to male outcry about woman-only screenings] – I got to see Wonder Woman by myself weeks ago so shut up there's already been a man-only screening. Oh and it's a godddam delight.
- @chrishemsworth – I think she'd kick Thor's a★★

While most of the tweets were by women, men also responded. Most tweets were positive reactions to the film addressing gender equality in the story, in the film industry, and for the audience.

Wonder Woman was followed by another female superhero film – *Captain Marvel* – in February 2019. The film is based on the ongoing comic book series written by Kelly Sue DeConnick with art by Dexter Soy, which was released in July 2012. As was the case in *Wonder Woman*, the film focused heavily on relationships between women – in this case not the Amazonians but the two friends Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel and Maria Rambeau, who had trained as pilots together. At one point in the film, the women discuss the difficulty of being a woman in the air force and not being able to get flight missions. It's for this reason, in fact, that Carol Danvers agrees to take on a secret mission with Dr. Wendy Lawson – testing an experimental light-speed engine – which eventually results in her becoming Captain Marvel (when the engine explodes, Danvers absorbs the energy from the explosion, which gives her her powers). As was the case with *Wonder Woman*, the creators avoided over-sexualizing the female characters, and made an effort to hire women who could offer more convincing portrayals of female experiences and relationships. The film was co-directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck who, along with Geneva Robertson-Dworet, also wrote the screenplay. All three were also responsible for the story, along with Nicole Perlman and Meg LeFauve. Brigadier General Jeannie Leavitt, the first female fighter pilot of the US Air Force, was also hired as consultant on *Captain Marvel*, lending authenticity to the film's depiction of female fighter pilots. The film premiered in London on February 27, 2019 and grossed over $1.1 billion worldwide, making it the first female-led superhero film to pass the billion-dollar mark, and the second-highest-grossing film of 2019 (*Avengers: Endgame* came in first) (Hughes).

In television, the arrival of *Jessica Jones* (Netflix 2015–19) (Figure 22.2) and *Supergirl* (CBS 2015/The CW 2016–) in 2015 was the first time two female-led superhero shows aired simultaneously. Both shows push strong feminist agendas (the serial killer in season 3, Gregory P. Salinger, calls Jennifer Jones a "feminist vindicator"), dealing with issues of sexism, abuse, and equal rights (gender, sexuality, and race) and, like *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel*, both pass the Bechdel Test (two female characters talk to each other about something other than men). In fact, not only does *Jessica Jones* pass the Bechdel Test, but she inverts it. As noted

Figure 22.2   *Jessica Jones* (Netflix 2015–19). © Netflix. Fair use

in an article in the magazine *Vox*, "As season one continues, the show's male characters more frequently interact with one another. And those interactions are *almost always* about a woman" (Abad-Santos).

Jessica Jones was created by Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Gaydos and first appeared in the comic book series *Alias* (MAX/Marvel 2001–4). The character was adapted for television by Melissa Rosenberg, who wrote the Twilight scripts and was head writer on *Dexter* (Showtime 2006–13). *Jessica Jones* deals with hard core issues surrounding sexuality, assault, rape, addiction, trauma, and violence against women (and violence more generally). The character introduces a new kind of female superhero to the genre – one who's darker, is an alcoholic, suffers from trauma as a result of having been raped and her mind being controlled, and is not sure she really wants to be a hero. However, her job as private detective inevitably leads her to step into her superhero role, even if grudgingly. Jessica Jones is one example of the new superheroes entering the genre who lend more diversity and complexity to the superhero identity, and who place the drama against the backdrop of more authentic social and cultural issues, often issues that relate to gender. Given the fact that many of the show's themes focus on a number of female characters and women's issues, it's surprising (or perhaps not) that only four out of thirteen of the directors in season one were women (there were even less female writers). However, Melissa Rosenberg, *Jessica Jones*' showrunner, decided that for the second season of the series, all of the directors would be female, which they were, as were many of the writers (Ryan). (For season three, the numbers were about half and half.)

Superhero scholars have equated this shift toward stronger female representation with the third wave of feminism. For example, Neal Curtis and Valentina Cardo state that "Recent developments in superhero comics have seen positive changes to the representation of characters and storylines… these changes mark an intervention on behalf of female creators in keeping with the theory and practice of third-wave feminism" (1). A similar feminist agenda is found in *Supergirl*, which also tackles women's issues, but the superhero in this case is the flip side of Jessica Jones. Kara Zor-El/Kara Danvers/Supergirl is as shiny in spirit and full of hope as her cousin Kal-El/Clark Kent/Superman. Where Jessica Jones questions her role as superhero, Supergirl embraces it. Her initial workplace, the media company CatCo, opened up a space that allowed her to discuss issues relating to women in the workplace and female empowerment with her boss, Cat Grant. By season four, and true to the beliefs of third wave feminism, the series extends itself to explore wider political contexts and rights for all, in particular, alien refugees that have "invaded" the United States (including Supergirl); the show

thus metaphorically aligns itself with the real-world politics of Trump's presidency.[3] According to a Nielsen poll, the audience who watches both *Jessica Jones* and *Supergirl* "every week is almost completely equal in terms of gender parity. And even the show with the highest number of male viewers—*The Flash*—still has a relatively large number of female viewers" (McNally). In other words, despite the focus on female heroes and women's issues, both male and female demographics consume superhero narratives.

Many other female superheroes have emerged across media, all offering diverse representations of women. Faith Herbert, also known as Zephyr, first appeared in Valient's comic *Harbinger* #1 (January 1992) and underwent a revamp in 2016 (Figure 22.3). This plus-size superhero was created by writer Jim Shooter and David Lapham, and the new series has female creators – written by Jody Houser with artists Pere Perez and Marguerite Sauvage. Faith is now also making her way to Hollywood to become the first big-curved superhero on the big screen; Sony (the production company) have hired writer Maria Melnik, who worked on *America Gods*, to work on the film (Pulver).

In 2011, *Batwoman* #1 was launched as part of the New 52 rebooted DC Universe – and was extremely successful with a diverse range of readers. Kathy Kane/Batwoman was no longer a sidekick for Batman but was a powerful superhero in her own right. She was also a lesbian and in issue 17, she proposed to her girlfriend, Maggie Sawyer. Soon after, Batwoman's creators of this series, W. Haden Blackman and J.H. Williams III, announced they would end their run on *Batwoman* once they finished issue 26 because DC refused to allow Batwoman to marry her partner Maggie (Goldberg).[4] There was much fan uproar. Following the cancellation of Batwoman, the character was returned to DC in her own comic for the DC Rebirth event – this time written by Margueritte Bennett – and her popularity with fans has resulted in a television series (due to air in late 2019) developed by Caroline Dries and Greg Berlanti, with Ruby Rose playing the role of Batwoman. The series is set in the Arrowverse, sharing the same universe as *Arrow*, *The Flash*, and *Supergirl*. Despite the refusal to allow Kate to marry Maggie (DC have argued it was not about the fact it was a lesbian couple, but because to be an effective superhero she needed to be alone), the emphasis is on more diverse depictions of women, and greater female creative input.

Figure 22.3   Jim Shooter and David Lapham. *Faith*. (1992) Valient Comics. Fair use

The Batgirl of DC's The New 52 (and beyond) has involved a number of female creators, including Gail Simone, Hope Larson, and Mairghread Scott as writers and Babs Tarr as artist. One of the big news stories of 2014 was when Batgirl's new costume – designed by Cameron Stewart and Babs Tarr – was revealed; it was applauded for ditching the boobs-reveal outfits typical of female superhero costumes and opting instead for a costume that was about functionality. Batgirl will also soon be coming to the big screen. While Joss Whedon has abandoned the film, the new writer hired is Christina Hodson, who wrote the Transformers spinoff *Bumblebee* (Travis Knight 2018).

Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel is, perhaps, the most successful of the new female superheroes erupting on the market. She's Marvel's first Muslim character to have her own comic book and made her first appearance in *Captain Marvel* (#14) in August 2013, before headlining in her own *Ms Marvel* comic books series in February 2014. Kamala Khan is a Pakistani-American and a practicing Muslim who, after being exposed to Terrigen Mist, is able to flex and transform her body. The idea for Kamala Khan came from Marvel editor Sana Amanat who told other Marvel editor Steve Wacker stories about growing up in a Muslim family. They approached G. Willow Wilson, who is herself a practicing Muslim, to write the comic. In addition to her superhero adventures, Kamala deals with life as a teenager and as a second-generation American Muslim (Saner). As Sarah Gibbons explains,

> Ms. Marvel has been ground-breaking as a comic about intersectional experience, as it breaks with a long tradition of framing women through hegemonic cultural ideals. The representation of Kamala is particularly important when one considers how stereotypes about Muslim women in the media influence the ways that they are harassed and discriminated against in everyday life. (451)

Many others have joined the legion of new female superheroes – some replacing their white, male counterparts, and others not: Thor was no longer deemed worthy of Mjolnir and a woman took on the role of Thor (she will also be appearing in the fourth Thor film, *Thor: Love and Thunder*, played by Natalie Portman; America Chavez, who is both lesbian and Hispanic, took on the role of "America"; Iron Man was replaced by Iron Heart, an African American teenager; X-23, a clone of Wolverine, had her own comic; She-Hulk has made a comeback as a high-flying attorney – and these changes and many other changes are only in the medium of comics.

This is just a small sample of some of the new female superheroes and their female creators. I should also qualify by quoting comics artist Colleen Coover, who says that:

> comics do not consist only of those two companies [Marvel/DC and, by extension their parent film and TV companies], so focusing only on their advancements or shortcomings does a severe disservice to the women who create comics outside of that very narrow sliver of publishing. There has [been] a remarkable boom of women, LGBTQ people and people of color in American comics in the past decade or so, whether published by alternate publishing houses, small press, self-published or published on the web. (in Rhode)

It's at the grassroots and independent level that many of these changes first manifested, meeting the demand for new forms of representation and diverse creative talent. Marvel and DC followed suit, attempting to include more women writers and artists as well as other diverse groups in their companies. As of June 2019, there are 38 female and non-binary creators scheduled to work on 30 different comic books at Marvel in July, which makes it 32% of the overall comics for July. Releasing less comics than Marvel, at DC, 18 female creators worked

on 20 comic books in July, which also brings the total to 32% women (Hanley). At DC, early 2019 had 16% creators overall, with Marvel at 14.8%, so there was a marked increase in a matter of five months (Beat Staff). We're dealing with genre, which is by its nature formulaic; nevertheless, a lot of groundwork has been laid to complicate and make the female superhero more multi-faceted as opposed to cardboard cut-out characters that simply exist to be drooled over.

Superheroes and the rise of the female demographic

A number of changes have contributed to the shifts currently taking place, particularly in superhero comics, which this next section will primarily focus on. Central is the new dynamic that has evolved between texts, producers, and consumers, which includes the powerful voice of fans on social media that producers can't ignore, particularly with regard to female representation and female creators. Likewise, new modes of dissemination of superhero media, including digital delivery (e.g. ComiXology and other modes of digital comics distribution), have allowed access to comics beyond the male-dominated comic book dungeons that kept many women at bay between the 1970s and the early 2000s. Finally, there is a distinctive, transforming demographic in the consumption of superhero media, which is moving away from tradition male consumers to new male and female audiences and a more diverse audience in general.

In 2013, during a panel promoting PBS's documentary series *Superheroes: The Never-Ending Battle*, a few troglodyte comic book creators were asked why comics focus so little on women and minorities. The panel included Gerry Conway, one of the creators behind DC's character the Punisher, who responded by saying that readers aren't interested in female or minority characters. Todd MacFarlane, who created *Spawn* for Image Comics, said that he wouldn't steer his own two daughters toward comics because the industry is "testosterone-driven." But even in 2013, the facts were beginning to prove comments by both writers wrong. The comics industry had lost touch with its changing demographic and the industry was in decline. Around this time, in the mainstream, it was Marvel (initially) and DC – following the lead of many independent comic book companies – that began to address diversity and change in the market from what had been a dominant male audience, particularly in the case of superhero comics. Despite glib, sexist remarks and disbelief expressed by men in the comics industry, the reality was that to fail to address your demographic is to fail to attract your new market that can bring in revenue. Jason Rhode states:

> The reality that women are involved in comics is neither a new topic nor a new fact. Women have always made comics, and women have always enjoyed comics. However, the last several years have witnessed grassroots changes in both the business and fandom of comics—alterations that are not widely understood.[5]

One of the reasons the changes aren't understood is because of the difficulty in tracking who's buying comics – DC and Marvel are not forthcoming with statistics – especially in what had been the traditional method of purchase since the early 1980s: comic book shops and online orders.

Nevertheless, there have been other ways to track the changes. Brett Schenker, who runs the comic website Graphic Policy, explained that in March 2017, the number of comic fans on Facebook in America were 31 million and 283.8 million worldwide. Jason Rhode provides an overview of many of these changes stating that: in America, men accounted for 52.78% of readership and women 47.22%; women are the majority of fans under 18 and will

"eventually become the majority of fans as age increases"; European Facebook likes were divided between women at 45.45% and men at 54.55% (Rhode). While not all comics are superhero comics, a great percentage are and, as Rhode states, this offers a reasonable picture of the changes in readership. In addition, "Data in the Evidence Based Library and Information Practice Journal states that 98 percent of public libraries reported having graphic novels and comics in their collections…. [Results showed that] public library usage was 68 percent female and 32 percent male" (McDonald).

The writer of Thor (including the female Thor) – Jason Aaron – has responded to this issue of changing demographics. Walt Hickey argues that the focus on male characters and male writers "may be due to whom publishers have perceived their audience to be." He quotes Jason Aaron, who explains:

> "Over time, we started to appeal to the same, dwindling fans," he said, adding, "I don't say that derisively, because I'm at the heart of that dwindling group of fans, and always have been." (Aaron is male, white and 40 years old.) During the 1960s and '70s, comic books moved from grocery store newsstands to specialized shops, which mostly catered to a young, white, male audience. Once that happened, Aaron said, the industry lost a way to attract new fans. (Hickey)

We do know that female comic book readers have been on the rise over the past few years, partly because of the rise of digital comics distributors like ComiXology. According to new registrations, "young female readers are currently ComiXology's fastest-growing demographic." ComiXology's Chip Mosher has stated that "Recently, surveys have shown that 30% of our new customers are female…. This is up 50% from the last time we revealed the percentage of female new customers at NYCC in 2013" (McNally). Given the upward trajectory, the female demographic is no doubt even higher in 2019. Comics conventions reveal similar trends. A July 2018 survey of the SanDiego Comic Con showed that 54% identified as males, 44% as females, and 2% as other (Holloway). A 2015 study by Eventbrite that polled 2,600 different fans found that the number of male and female respondents who attended the convention was exactly even (Eventbrite).

Of course, part of the reason for the growth in female superhero comics readers can also be the fact that there are far more women working in comics these days – Gail Simone, Kelly Sue DeConnick, G Willow Wilson, Tula Lotay, Adriana Melo, Marjorie Liu, Ming Doyle, Hope Larson, Babs Tarr, Jill Thompson, to name just a few. And comic books from Marvel and DC are also featuring more female characters, including superheroes, where more attention is paid to the depth of character.

Victoria McNally reviewed the statistics of female readers and viewers across superhero media. In relation to superheroes on television she states that, according to data provided by Nielsen in early November 2015, the average audience in the United States watching *Supergirl* and Marvel's *Agents Of S.H.I.E.L.D.* were, at 48%, equal in terms of gender parity and "even the show with the highest number of male viewers – "The Flash" – still has a relatively large number of female viewers [40%]." She concludes that "male viewers DO respond to interesting female lead characters" as, I would add, female viewers to male leads. Based on Nielsen research, film attendance of superhero films showed a higher attendance of men but not by that high a margin. *Ant-Man* (2015), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *The Wolverine* (2013), *Dark Knight Rises* (2012), and *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) all averaged 42%–44% female attendance, while *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014), and *Man of Steel* (2013) sat at approximately 45% – not that wide a margin.

The consumer/producer dynamic

In her book *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*, Carolyn Cocca discusses the comic book store/direct market period of comics that dominated between the 1980s and the early 2000s. She states:

> The last decades of the twentieth century were marked by the explosive growth and decline of local comic shops, which fostered a narrower fan base and coincided with more sexualized and more violent depictions of female superheroes. Rather than sell comics to newsstands and drugstores and grocery stores, who could return unsold merchandise, publishers increasingly turned to distribute comics to specialty stores that could order a specific number of heavily discounted comics of their choosing but could not return unsold merchandise. (10)

As Cocca explains, the comic book stores "fostered exclusionary cultures that deterred new and/or demographically different readers. Comic fandom had been widespread and diverse in the 1940s…[however, the new market] seemed to be mostly male, white, and older" (11). Assumptions about the demographic resulted in an "increasingly, homogenous fan market" that was conservative and, in turn, mainstream superhero comics began "to display very particular and very binary representations of gender: hypermuscular men and hypersexualized women" (11) – or, what I like to call, the hyperbazookaization of the female superhero. As Cocca and Suzanne Scott outline, the design of the female superhero's body drew on the erotic "good girl" pinups of the 1940s and 1950s, which were revised in the 1980s into "bad girl" erotic art typified by the work of Milo Manara, who also drew cover art for superhero comics during this era.

In the changing environment of current superhero fandom, a great deal of pressure has been put on the media industries – especially the comic book industry – to stop these sexist portrayals of women and to address to the question of what new audiences want. Social media – Tumblr, Facebook, twitter, YouTube – have become ideal delivery systems for fans in the thousands to voice their dissatisfaction with the result that fan voices are putting pressure on producers and creators. One of the most successful online protests happened on Tumblr and came under the title of "The Hawkeye Initiative." In an article about The Hawkeye Initiative, Scott explains:

> The Hawkeye Initiative is a crowdsourced fan-art site, founded in December 2012 on a simple premise: "How to fix every Strong Female Character pose in superhero comics: replace the character with Hawk-eye doing the same thing." The "initiative" referenced in the site's title is to "illustrate how deformed, hyper-sexualized, and impossibly contorted women are commonly illustrated in comics" by redrawing comic-book panels featuring superheroines with the Marvel character. (150)

Since then many other male superhero characters, particularly from Marvel and DC, have succumbed to the sexist exposure of The Hawkeye Initiative. In the "Notmyanus" revision of the "War Goddess" cover art (Figure 22.4), for example, the War Goddess is replaced by Hawkeye, whose spine is twisted to a ridiculous degree. The comic effect exposes the way the stance in the War Goddess version is situated in a potentially back-breaking pose in order to simultaneously make visible the breasts and curvaceous butt. To add to the hypersexualization, the tendril of some land-loving monstrous octopus creature comes threateningly close to invading the War Goddess' posterior! Posing a man in this way exposes the outrageous sexism that has been embraced as a norm in superhero comics for decades. The seemingly
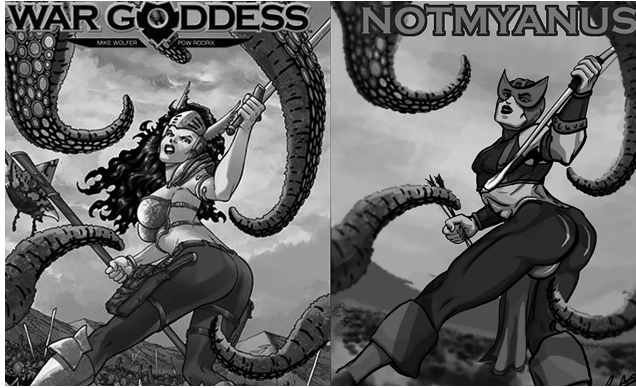
Figure 22.4 "Notmyanus," the Hawkeye Initiative revamp of the "War Goddess," January 16, 2014. ©chaosundivided. Fair use. Image available at: https://imgur.com/gallery/8WInN

"normal" is transformed and becomes defamiliarized so that the codes are exposed. Especially forceful is the way Hawkeye's buttocks seem to deliberately direct themselves to the monstrous tendril as it appears to prepare for entry.

Scott argues that The Hawkeye Initiative is one example of a trend in comics fan art toward the gender-swapping renderings of characters as "a mode of transformative intervention" that turns "the male gaze of comic book culture back on itself and holding the industry accountable for the paltry number of women being hired to work on mainstream superhero titles" (151). Female superheroes follow the style of the bad girl pinup and are posed in positions that, for the sake of eroticizing, are simply physically impossible. Bodies are twisted and backs are arched to the extreme, so that often the female superhero displays "all of her curves in front and back simultaneously" (Cocca 12), as is visible in the War Goddess image.

One controversial and vociferously critiqued example from August 2014 was Milo Manara's variant cover for the relaunch of *Spider-Woman* #1 (top left, Figure 22.5). News

Figure 22.5 *Spider-Woman* #1, 2014. © Marvel. Fair use. https://imgur.com/gallery/FmE7mJz

online and fans on social media went wild, criticizing Marvel for allowing this and other variant covers designed by renown erotic art artist Manara, for the issue to go ahead. Most rightly expressed the view that this belonged to the porn/erotica pinup tradition that Manara was known for, not the superhero genre. Initially, Marvel were going to go ahead with the cover issues, but public pressure made them finally pull the plug. Not only did the Hawkeye initiative respond with their own variation (http://blog.kimherbst.com/2014/08/hawkeye-initiative.html), but one genius fan created a 3D model that showed what Spiderwoman's spine and body would look like in 3D (Figure 22.5). In real life, Spider-Woman and many of her female counterparts would be requiring some emergency neurosurgery!

Meanwhile, Marvel have actually come good with this run of the new Spider-Woman. Spider-Woman/Jessica Drew becomes pregnant – the first ever pregnant title character in a superhero comic – and her costume was adjusted to suit the realistic needs of her pregnant state. More importantly, while the reader was strung along for the daddy-reveal, in the end it was disclosed that it was Jessica Drew herself who decided to have a baby and had herself artificially inseminated.

Some of the new superheroes have also been appropriated for more overt political purposes in order to effect social change (Figure 22.6). Writing about Ms. Marvel as "a real-world protest icon," Romano explains:

> When, in 2014, Marvel introduced its new iteration of Ms. Marvel: Kamala Khan, it was an instant hit. Kamala Khan broke records and stereotypes: Her debut issue received a rare sixth printing, and the character quickly became a beloved cosplay staple at conventions. But since her debut, Kamala has also become something more: a real-world emblem of protest against Islamophobia. In 2015, the San Francisco street art activist group Street Cred used her image in response to a series of racist bus ads that had been bought by an anti-Muslim group. The artists strategically vandalized the ads using Kamala's image, the idea being to encourage passersbys to spread love, not hate, for the Muslim community. Then, amid the tumultuous political and cultural climate following the election of President Donald Trump and his "Muslim ban," Kamala emerged as the leader of a band of social-justice-driven superheroes. Claimed by protesters and wielded across social media, Ms. Marvel has become a symbol of resistance to the sweeping changes Trump issued during his first week in office. (Romano)

Figure 22.6 *Ms Marvel* (2014). © Marvel. Fair use

Artist Phil Noto also "remixed one of his own comics covers in order to symbolize Kamala's reaction to a Trump presidency" (Romano). Reworking his cover variant for *Civil War II*, Issue #0, where Ms. Marvel reacts to a falling out with her mentor, Captain Marvel, Noto replaces the image of Captain Marvel with Trump.

Since the rise of the digital era and the social media tools it offers, the voices of superhero fans have not only become more vocal, but become more powerful because the collective voice online is heard by the thousands. Add to this the fact that online news and specialist magazines tap into fan dissatisfaction and they report on controversial issues such as gender and representation, sexism, ideologically problematic views, and the refusal of industries to accept changes in their demographic, entertainment companies are finally listening and changing the content of their creative output in order to address consumer concerns.

Superwomen in the superhero semiosphere

Over the last few years I've been thinking a great deal about the changes happening in the superhero genre, especially in relation to gender issues. I've been reading many of the new comics and watching the films and televisions series that are increasingly (especially in the comics and television) presenting new kinds of female heroes on the page and onscreen. I've also been following many of the online debates about the status of the female superhero, the industries that create her, the consumers that consume her, and the culture she circulates within. In one respect, I agree with Cocca that "the proportion of female superheroes as compared to male ones hasn't really changed" (1); however, I also believe that we're at a transition point that has already signaled a dramatic change that is in the process of happening. Thinking through these changes, I turned to the writings of Juri Lotman, one of the founders of the Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics. In my research, I've been particularly drawn to his writings because he offers a critical rethinking of how genres intersect with culture to effect change within a genre (Ndalianis 2004, 2015) and, in particular, it's Lotman's articulation of the semiosphere that is applicable to the superhero genre. Lotman's theory of the semiosphere provides us with a useful model with which to analyze the process of generic development and understand how genres interact with culture to effect new patterns and meanings in a genre.

In his article "On the semiosphere" (2005 [1984]) and later in his book *Universe of the Mind: The Semiotics of Culture* (2001 [1990]), Lotman outlined his theory of "the semiosphere," which he understood as encapsulating "the semiotics of culture"; semiotic objects that exist within the semiosphere are understood as operating like "thinking structures" that reflect "functions of intelligence" (2001, 2). In other words, the signifiers and the meanings they signify that exist within a semiosphere intelligently engage with other signification systems within and across semiospheres to the point where they can alter meanings of signifiers, or even transform the signifier itself. For Lotman, the semiosphere includes "the whole semiotic space of culture" and he defined culture as the "totality of information acquired, preserved, and transmitted by various groups of human society" (Lotman 2001, 125). The larger semiosphere encompasses all culture (which is human produced) and within it are millions of clusters of sub-semiospheres. And all exist within the biosphere which is the natural world – the universe.

The semiosphere is understood as a space that has a universal quality, in the sense that it includes all cultural meaning and is the space where meaning is generated. Within this, genres are one of a multitude of semiospheric clusters, and they intersect with other semiospheres (ideologies, political systems, entertainment industries and their modes of operation,

social media, etc.) within the larger semiosphere, sometimes intersecting, sometimes not. The semiosphere is semiotic in that it comprises languages, texts, and signs; is dynamic and is susceptible to change; and is enclosed or bounded (Lotman 2005, 208) – for example, the abstract boundary that contains and creates the thing that is the superhero genre. But Lotman uses the term "boundary" loosely in that it's not a permanently enclosed system, but rather the boundary is permeable and "acts as an organising mechanism" that filters and adapts "the external to the internal" (Clark 2010, 65). The signs within a semiosphere are complex systems that are constantly colliding with one another in time and space; they "comprise an inter-connected group of semiospheres, each of them being simultaneously both participant in the dialogue (as part of the semiosphere) and the space of the dialogue (the semiosphere as a whole)" (Lotman 2005, 225). For Lotman, there is constant semiospheric dialogue between the internal and the external to the semiosphere – it is a dynamic system.

Therefore, while containing its own, unique units of semiosis, according to Lotman, the boundary or periphery of a semiosphere is also malleable and open to dialogue with other semiospheres that circulate around it. It's at the periphery that new signs can enter a semiosphere from another semiosphere so that "what is 'external' is transformed into what is 'internal,' it is a filtering membrane which so transforms foreign texts that they become part of the semiosphere's internal semiotics" (Lotman 2001, 137).

In one passage, Lotman turns to the example of genre, explaining:

> something similar can be seen when the texts of one genre invade the space of another genre. Innovation comes about when the principles of genre are restructured according to the laws of another, and this 'other' genre organically enters the new structure and at the same time preserves a memory of its other system of encoding. (2001, 137)

But the invasion need not be by another genre. It can also be other cultural systems like changing ideologies. Let's consider the superhero genre according to Lotman's semiosphere logic. The superhero genre is occupied by a myriad of semiotic signs and one of the conventions of "the norm" – which sits at the center of the semiosphere – has been (to put it simplistically) the straight, white, male superhero and the sexist female counterpart. But, considering the issues outlined in this chapter so far from the perspective of a semiospheric dialogue, where clusters of semiosis from outside the superhero genre permeate the border of the genre, it becomes clear that pressure has been placed of the "norm" of the superhero genre. A dynamic dialogue is currently taking place in semiospheres that surround and intersect with the superhero semiosphere, to the point where they are effecting change through the entry of new semiotic signs from outside and into the space of the genre.

In the diagram, I have attempted to visualize some of the many semiosphere intersections that instigate a dialogue with the main semiosphere that is the superhero genre (Figure 22.7). For example, pressure on the industry has forced it to respond to the expanding female demographic (and other groups) that are now reading superhero comics and watching superhero films and television series. Fans and social media commentary have pressured the industry to acknowledge the changes, and to break up the dominant straight, white male identity of the creators to include more diverse creatives, which include women. This, in turn, results in the creation of new conventions, new character types, new stories that also enter the genre and introduce it to new signs that affect the dominance of pre-existing conventions. The new kinds of texts that are produced then dynamically enter into a dialogue with the readers and viewers who consume them, discuss them on social media, and further
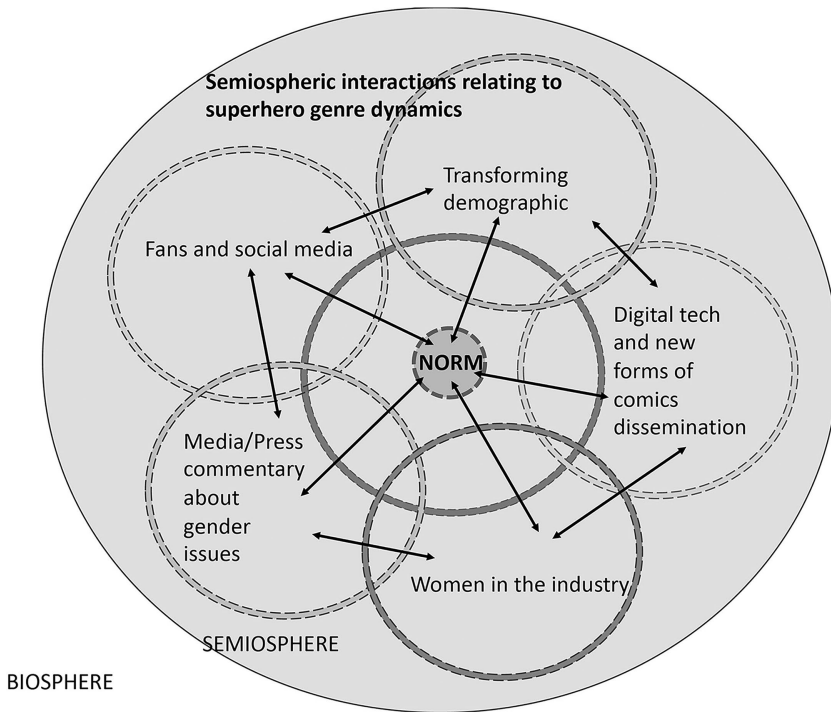
Semiospheric interactions relating to superhero genre dynamics

Transforming demographic

Fans and social media

Digital tech and new forms of comics dissemination

NORM

Media/Press commentary about gender issues

Women in the industry

SEMIOSPHERE

BIOSPHERE

Figure 22.7 Juri Lotman's semiosphere. © Angela Ndalianis

convince the industry of the changes in the demographics that are occurring. Like a feedback loop, this then results in more new stories by more women, which then leads to an increased fan base that is radically different to the white, heterosexual male who dominated for the last three decades. Within the shared space of the semiosphere, the signs of one semiotic object (female readership/viewership) have begun to influence another semiotic object (the superhero genre – which is altering its conventions and character types to meet the new consumer needs). The upshot is that pressure is increasingly being placed on the norm that sits at the center. The superhero genre has been exposed to new signs, belief systems, conventions, writers, artists, changes in the industry, etc. that succumb to both the thinking structure and conventions of the genre, but which also affect the genre and introduce change. The changes are happening incrementally but it's only a matter of time before the norm (which sits at the center of the semiosphere) is transformed and undergoes what Lotman calls an explosion into something else – a new norm.

We still have a long way to go, but I'm heartened by the fact that the dynamic exchange of ideas, debates, arguments, and agreements that are currently taking place is loud and noisy. It is also resulting in changes on a number of levels: a recognition on the part of the industries that approximately half the number of superhero consumers are women; the introduction of new approaches to developing female superheroes and their stories so they take into account a new market that isn't interested in the "bazookafied" women any longer; and the inclusion of more female creators and creators from diverse backgrounds beyond the straight, white male, which impact on the production of new texts. The changes may be slow but to paraphrase Sherlock Holmes – a change is afoot!

Notes

1 In his column "Comic Collector's Comments" in *Rocket's Blast-Comicollector* (#88 1972), Howard P. Siegel published excerpts from a letter Joye Hummel wrote to Jerry Bails – a pivotal figure in the comic book fandom scene in the 1960s. Hummel discusses being hired as Marston's assistant and how, soon after, he was stricken with "Infantile Paralysis" so that her duties were increased. One of these duties was to write Wonder Woman, sometimes on her own, sometimes in collaboration with Marston. (Jay) For further information about Marston and his feminist interests, see Brown.

2 According to recent studies, women in the United States only earn approximately 80 cents to every dollar that men get, with women of color earning even less. See, America's Women and the Wage Gap.

3 Kathryn L. Millee and Joshua Plencner read the series as being aligned with neoliberal feminism, where "feminists must work to seize the helms of large-scale institutions... because 'female voices at the highest levels' will directly 'expand opportunities and extend fairer treatment to all'" (52). They draw attention to the fact that, in *Supergirl*, "women hold nearly all of the positions of power... Yet, the notion of gender equity posited by *Supergirl* most often amounts to little more than an 'add women and stir' strategy wherein the constelled power of racist heteropatriarchy is given the esthetically pleasing face of an attractive, white, cis woman" (66).

4 On Williams' blog, Blackman and Williams wrote:

> From the moment DC asked us to write Batwoman — a dream project for both of us — we were committed to the unofficial tagline "No Status Quo." We felt that the series and characters should always be moving forward, to keep changing and evolving... Unfortunately, in recent months, DC has asked us to alter or completely discard many long-standing storylines in ways that we feel compromise the character and the series. We were told to ditch plans for Killer Croc's origins; forced to drastically alter the original ending of our current arc, which would have defined Batwoman's heroic future in bold new ways; and, most crushingly, prohibited from ever showing Kate and Maggie actually getting married. All of these editorial decisions came at the last minute, and always after a year or more of planning and plotting on our end. (W. Haden Blackman and J.H. Williams III)

5 In July 2015, Heidi MacDonald from the comics-culture website, *The Beat*, told *Washington Post* reporter Michael Cavna that manga was a major reason behind the boom, and noted, "It's not that girls need to be socialized into heroic storytelling – it's that they have to be socialized out of liking it." See Rhode.

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