20

ETHNOGRAPHY

Wearing One's Fandom

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I recently taught a senior seminar entitled "Comics and the Superhero Genre" which had an interesting mix of students. Approximately half of the class were die-hard comic book readers, and the rest were divided evenly between casual comic book fans and those who had never read a comic and only knew of superheroes through recent Hollywood films. It was easy to spot the life-long fans because almost every one of them wore a different superhero T-shirt to class all term. For every student with "American Eagle," "Abercrombie and Fitch," or our university logo written across their chest, there was one with a picture of Batman, Spider-Man, or Iron Man on their shirt. Occasionally the students who were new to comics would joke about not feeling like part of the club since they did not wear the unofficial class uniform. When four students brought in pictures of themselves costumed as their favorite superheroes for Halloween, half of the class were impressed, the other half were baffled. None of our discussion about the genre's historical development, structural elements, gender depictions, or readings about ethnicity, sexuality, hegemony, or patriotism helped the comic book novices understand their colleagues' devotion to wearing superhero clothing.

What the novice students were learning was that, perhaps more than any other genre, comic book superheroes are not restricted to a single medium. The genre is also fundamentally intertwined with a subculture of devoted consumers to such an extent that consideration of the fans is an essential element for understanding the cultural significance of the genre. Analytical methods applied to superhero stories can reveal a lot about how the medium expresses various cultural beliefs, but textual analysis alone cannot account for the various ways that dedicated fans use superheroes to establish a sense of community, express ideological identification with characters, or how they use the genre to project a sense of their core personal identity. In order to understand the importance of comics for a large portion of their readership we have to move beyond textual analysis and into the realm of "ethnography." Ethnography is a qualitative methodology that involves a researcher interviewing subjects, participating in events, and sometimes even

living within a given community in order to explore how real people embody and express cultural ideals. We have to consider the fans themselves and how they relate to the comics and to each other. It is only by focusing on the subcultural practice of comic fandom that we can begin to understand why wearing superhero-adorned clothing and specific Halloween costumes allows individuals to express communal affiliation and present an idealized version of their own personalities.

UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

Ethnography is the dominant methodology used in cultural anthropology in order to gather empirical data and first-hand (indigenous) insights into a social group or community. As a methodological approach, ethnography came to dominance in anthropology in the 1920s. In its most conventional sense, ethnographic fieldwork consists of a researcher living among a clearly defined community (both culturally and geographically), often a village or tribe, in order to gain an accurate and humanistic interpretation of the group and their cultural principles. Central to the ethnographic method is the use of participant-observation, formal and casual interviews, and questionnaires. The resulting study, or ethnographic monograph, was usually written up as an interpretive text heavily dependent on detailed observations about the lives of the subjects and with an emphasis on what Clifford Geertz famously referred to as "thick description,"[1] which is providing detailed examples of behavior in a context that helps explain the complex cultural meanings they enact. The emphasis on description is an effort to present cultural analysis which does not efface the humanity or the complexity of the subjects, and which is all the more authentic for its relatively unmediated presentation of facts. The objective of ethnography is to understand a culture from the native's point of view. Debates about the authenticity of ethnographic practices, and questions about the ability of foreign anthropologists to truly speak for the natives, have circulated since the 1980s.[2] Contemporary ethnographers are increasingly cognizant of the need to recognize their own ideological positions and how they may affect the interpretation of their subjects' culture.

Ethnography was eventually adopted by scholars working in the areas of media and cultural studies because the methodology facilitates a better understanding of how and why people from specific cultural groups see the world. A group such as American comic book fans may seem worlds away from Trobriand Islanders, but as a methodology, ethnography is an equally effective tool for understanding how both groups of people make sense of their world. The impetus for incorporating ethnographic techniques into the study of subcultures in Western societies is generally credited to the group of scholars associated with the Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham in the 1960s and 1970s.[3] Most of the CCCS scholars and their contemporaries shared an interest in subjects like youth subcultures, media consumption, and everyday uses of popular culture. In an era obsessed with moral panics about radical youth styles such as rockers, teddies, mods, and punks, these scholars turned to ethnography in order to come to grips with what these new youth subcultures revealed about styles, material consumption, and predominantly working-class, post-war beliefs. Likewise, the group was interested in discovering how real people consumed and interpreted media texts in a myriad of ways that ran counter to the dominant, Frankfurt School-inspired assumption that the media indoctrinated the masses into adopting specific ideological and hegemonic beliefs.[4] It was these twin interests in subcultures and the use of media texts

that resulted in ethnographic techniques being used to consider what real people do with popular culture. And by interviewing, participating in communal events, observing their daily behaviors and activities, and sometimes even living with their subjects, these cultural studies scholars refuted the assumptions that youth was becoming increasingly corrupt for no good reason and that media consumers were automatically incorporated into dominant worldviews. Instead, they discovered that people from all walks of life use and interpret mediated messages and the materials of popular culture in myriad ways that reveal individuality, creativity, and ideological resistance.

Building on the question of "What do real people do with media texts?" ethnographic approaches to fandom became the next logical step. Landmark studies have considered a wide range of fan groups as diverse as Harlequin romance readers,[5] Trekkers,[6] and *Cagney & Lacey* viewers.[7] In recent years there has been a great deal of ethnographic work done on fandoms devoted to such cult favorites as *Dr. Who*, *The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Xena: Warrior Princess*, as well as fans of specific musical groups like The Grateful Dead, The Dave Mathews Band, or Phish, and book series including *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*.[8] Subcultures of fans are an ideal subject for ethnographic considerations of media use for a variety of reasons. First, fans are passionate about their consumption of popular culture and are especially active in their use of the texts (for example, making Halloween costumes based on favorite characters). Second, serious fans are easier to identify than more casual consumers because they often share similar styles (such as superhero T-shirts). And third, they are usually easier to locate in that they often gather at events/locations such as concerts, conventions, or specialty stores. Fans are an extreme example of how people consume and interpret popular texts such as comic books. By using an ethnographic approach we can begin to understand what the texts actually mean for the reader rather than just theorizing possible meanings assumed to be inherent in the text and only accessible by critics using learned analytical methods such as Marxism, semiotics, or psychoanalysis.

OBJECT OF STUDY

This chapter is not concerned with the content of any actual comic books. It is concerned with a larger understanding of how comic book superheroes function for fans as a crystallization of ideals and beliefs, and how these concepts are expressed through subcultural fashions. This research was inspired by the students who were baffled by their classmates' consistent superhero T-shirts and elaborate Halloween costumes. By using an ethnographic approach we can see how something as apparently simple as clothing can reveal a wealth of subcultural values. Though fans are more enthusiastic in their media consumption and easier to identify, that does not always mean it is easy to get in touch with them. In traditional ethnography, the researcher can simply move into a village (though even that is not always as simple as it may sound) and then interact continually with his/her subjects. But studying subcultures within one's own community requires a different approach. Researchers working within modern industrialized societies cannot simply live with their subjects. Instead, they must seek out members of the subculture wherever they may congregate, befriend them, and ask their permission to study them. Many universities also require ethnographic projects to be approved by a human subjects review board before research can begin in order to ensure the rights and safety of both the researcher and the proposed subjects.

Gaining access to a subculture can sometimes be a long and arduous process of being introduced to the right people, passing tests of legitimacy, and becoming familiar enough to the group that they may eventually accept you. For many traditional anthropologists, the high point of their fieldwork experience is when a member of the village symbolically adopts them, or when they are asked to undertake a ritual to become part of the tribe. Similarly, researchers working with contemporary subcultures may invest years before being fully accepted and trusted by their subjects. Even after strong contacts have been made within a subculture, ethnographic research in modern industrialized societies can be very labor intensive. Janice Radway has argued that a fundamental challenge for ethnographic studies of media reception is the problem of dispersed audiences and nomadic subjects.[9] Groups such as comic book fans can be difficult to pin down. Ethnographers of popular culture often must conduct their research whenever and wherever they can. Gatherings like conventions can be eminently useful, but they are too brief to allow a sustained period of observation. Media and subcultural ethnographers often spend months or even years establishing contacts and/or chasing around the city trying to gather information about the subjects.

It is likely that the long process of being accepted by members of a subculture and the onerous leg-work involved in data collection are two of the reasons that most scholars who use an ethnographic approach to fandom were themselves fans before they began to study the phenomenon. I, for one, have been a life-long comic book fan and was as likely as many of my students to wear a superhero T-shirt to class everyday (and I suspect every contributor to this book was also a comics fan long before they became academics). This is not as unusual as it may sound. After all, every Shakespearean scholar started out as a fan of the Bard, and every marine biologist was initially just a fish enthusiast. Still, it is important to point out one's own affiliation when doing ethnographic research because the data never speaks for itself. The ethnographer is always an intermediary between the research subjects and the reader, and his or her presence should be recognized because it affects how the data is interpreted and presented.

PROCESS

As a point of clarification, I want to emphasize that I do not believe most of the work typically classified as subcultural or media reception "ethnographies" (my own included[10]) are really ethnographies in the strictest anthropological sense of the term. Researchers studying goths, punks, bikers, Trekkers, ringers, cos-players, or any other subgroup found within our own larger national or regional cultures may use qualitative ethnograph*ic* methods, but that is very different from the day-in, day-out experience that traditional anthropology relies on. Still, by using ethnograph*ic* methods like participant observation and extensive interviews, researchers can move beyond the imposition of their own cultural assumptions about the "meaning" of something (like a TV series or a piece of clothing) and begin to understand what the deeper significances are for the people who consume or experience that aspect of popular culture.

The first step for any ethnographer is to provide some context for readers by identifying the subjects involved, the methods used for gathering data, and the relevant time frame of the research. The data for this chapter is drawn primarily from research conducted during the fall of 2008 and the spring of 2009. Some of the material is supplemented by my earlier ethnographic study of Milestone Media comic book fans, and some follow-up interviews

that occurred in the mid-2000s. The primary subject group consisted of 28 individuals (20 males, 8 females) who self-identified as serious comic book superhero fans. All of the subjects were in their late teens or early twenties and described themselves as economically middle-class. The research was conducted in and around northwest Ohio, though many of the subjects were originally from different parts of North America. Seven of the subjects were students of mine, while the other 21 were individuals I met through two local comic book stores, either by introducing myself or after being referred to a specific fan by employees of the store (cultural gatekeepers are an essential asset for ethnographers, whether they are comic shop owners or tribal elders). The primary method used was informal interviewing. Rather than a formal interview, which all too often implies an unequal relationship in favor of the interviewer—who controls the subject, the tempo, and the language used—I consider my interactions with these fans to be more akin to conversations. In this case conversations were much more effective because the age difference between most of the subjects and myself (I am in my early forties) would seem even more distancing in a formal setting. I wanted to avoid the fans' perception that I was an authority (a university professor) with some sort of judgmental agenda. Instead of trying to "get at" certain perceptions I was developing through direct questions, I found conversing about a shared interest to be much more conducive in a collaborative sense. Here I have taken a cue from Lindlof and Grodin, who discussed the practical advantages of the collaborative, unstructured style of interviewing as especially effective when faced with the difficulties of studying a dispersed audience and a system of media use (e.g., reading) that cannot be observed directly.[11] Moreover, conversation based on affiliation seemed to encourage the reader's enthusiasm because it is the way fans speak with each other, and it also avoids any misperceptions that the researcher may be simply a judgmental outsider.

In the case of this project, finding the subjects was relatively easy. Whenever I saw a fan wearing a superhero T-shirt at a comic book store, at a convention, or even in the classroom I simply identified myself, explained the project and engaged them in conversation about their clothing. All of the subjects were eager to talk about their fashion statement. "This is my favorite Batman shirt," exclaimed Steve, a 17-year-old high-school student, "I have about five more at home but I love that he looks really bad-ass on this one!" All of the other respondents were just as enthusiastic. For example, Kevin, a 35-year-old salesperson declared: "My superhero shirts are just about all I wear when I'm not at work. They are kind of my trademark." And Julie, a 20-year-old college student, excitedly claimed: "I love all my superhero shirts! Not a lot of women are into comics so this kind of sets me apart from the crowd." What quickly became apparent was that all of the people I spoke with were not embarrassed by wearing shirts that others may associate with childhood heroes. Rather, the respondents were proud to wear their favorite heroes on their chests and to detail the extent and the type of their superhero shirt collections. All of the subjects claimed to have at least five superhero shirts, and several owned over 30. Three of the 28 subjects claimed that they were familiar with the characters primarily through recent Hollywood films and television programs; the remaining 25 identified themselves as serious comic book fans. Interestingly, only four of the participants said they simply purchased any superhero shirt they thought looked good; the rest had very specific types of superhero shirts. The most common type of collection (over 50 percent) was devoted to favorite characters (e.g., only Batman, Spider-Man, or Wonder Woman shirts); others owned shirts with characters from specific publishers (e.g., only Marvel, DC, or Top Cow); and two of the individuals would only wear shirts they had

made or altered themselves. The visible pleasure all of these fans took in wearing superhero shirts, and the seriousness with which they collected them, helps to reveal several key subcultural principles. The most obvious revelation is that the shirts allow people to publicly declare themselves as members of comics fandom. Or, as Josh, a 20-year-old college student remarked: "My shirts let everyone know I'm a proud comic book aficionado. I'm a super-geek!"

SAMPLE ANALYSIS

As a marker of cultural status, or subcultural belonging, what we wear has always been an important tool. In all cultures, clothing is a primary means by which we understand other individuals and is a symbol by which we convey our own sense of identity. Think about how often we in Western culture characterize someone's economic, racial, or professional status by the type of clothing they wear. In a similar manner, we identify people as part of a subculture by the way they are dressed. Goths wear black exclusively, bikers wear jeans and leathers, skateboarders wear baggy clothes, and so on. Comic book fans wearing superhero T-shirts is a very literal way to mark themselves as part of a fan subculture. In his seminal study of British youth, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige emphasized the symbolic importance that clothing carried as a means to declare group affiliation and as a form of resistance to dominant cultural standards.[12] Hebdige described how groups such as punks, mods, and teddies used radical clothing styles to set themselves apart from the general populace and to convey their ideological frustration with the political and economic conditions they found themselves in during a period of British decline. Though not as explicitly political in motivation as the radical styles of punk, many of the individuals I interviewed stressed the importance of their shirts as a way to mark themselves as non-conformists. "I kind of like that most people look down on comics fans," said Mike, a mid-twenties medical student

> cause most people are idiots. Comics fans tend to be smarter—at least I like to think so—and embracing the fact that you are a comic book nerd by something as simple as wearing a shirt is a way to say "screw you" to all the people who are dressed exactly alike with clothing from Abercrombie and Guess.

Likewise, Luke, a high-school senior, claimed

> I want everyone to know that I'm into comics even if they are not "cool." I'm not going to be brainwashed by MTV and magazine ads that tell me what I'm supposed to look like to be accepted. I'm into comics and they're fun, so I take a lot of pride in being different from most of the kids I go to school with.

For these two, and for most of the other subjects, wearing superhero T-shirts is a way to distance oneself from the perceived conformity of our larger commercial society. They see themselves as above, or beyond, merely accepting the media-imposed cultural standards of "cool" clothing. In Hebdige's terms, they demonstrate a degree of resistance to cultural conformity.

In addition to marking someone as a member of comics fandom, the respondents also perceived their own T-shirt collections, and those of others, as an indicator of how

serious and knowledgeable a fan someone is. "I have a pretty awesome collection of shirts," declared John, a 24-year-old police officer.

> Some are really old, some are foreign, some are limited editions. I'm really proud of them because they let everyone else—at cons or the comic shop—know that I'm a hard-core fan. I know my shit when it comes to superheroes and some of the younger customers who have seen me around will ask me what books they should be reading and what I think about certain storylines.

Likewise, when I approached a teenage boy going through the clothing racks at Monarch Comics in Toledo and asked if he was looking for anything specific, he said:

> Yeah, I want the same shirt that the guy behind the counter is wearing. My friends and I come in here every Wednesday and he always has a different cool shirt on. He must have hundreds of them. I wish I had a tenth of the collection he does. Must be nice to have the inside track and get first dibs on the best comics and shirts … and to have an unlimited supply of comics to read.

Comments like these were repeated over and over again. Julie claimed to be the envy of her friends because she had "the most kick-ass Wonder Woman and Batgirl shirts." Casey was described by two companions as knowing "the most about Iron Man, and he has the T-shirts to prove it."

This tendency to equate certain shirts with prestige suggests that the quality and quantity of each fan's T-shirt collection is indicative of what is referred to as "cultural capital" within the subculture. The idea of cultural capital (or cultural economy) was initially proposed by the French ethnographer Pierre Bourdieu in his study of upper-class Parisian society.[13] Bourdieu noted that within group dynamics a hierarchy emerges based on the members' perceived relative status, a ranking based in the Parisian case on an individual's accumulation of both economic capital (material wealth) and cultural capital (knowledge, experience, expertise). Cultural Studies scholar John Fiske extrapolated from Bourdieu's concept to argue that a type of shadow cultural economy exists for fan communities in that, regardless of someone's economic or social status within the larger culture, individuals in the subculture can accumulate a great deal of status (subcultural capital) if they are seen as especially knowledgeable about topics or can demonstrate an advanced level of commitment to the subject.[14] In this sense, the wearing of superhero T-shirts amounts not just to being part of comics fandom, but to declaring oneself, and being perceived by others, as a serious fan or a type of expert. In other words, the shirts indicate a possession of subcultural capital of a higher level than that obtained by more casual fans.

The two subjects who only wore self-made T-shirts may at first glance seem to be an anomaly in this era where superhero T-shirts are readily available in every comics store, Wal-Mart, and Target. "I refuse to wear any of the mass produced, boring T-shirts that you can find in every grocery store," argued Susan, a bartender in her early thirties.

> If I'm given a shirt by someone for my birthday or Christmas I always cut it up and make something new out of it. I keep the image of the character but I turn the shirt into a dress, or rip it and rearrange it onto another shirt.

When I first spoke with Susan she was wearing one of her favorite creations, a long-sleeved shirt with images of Harley Quinn and Black Widow stitched together so they appeared to be holding hands. "I really like this one because it is clearly one of a kind," she explained. "Since they are from different companies, it is impossible to find a shirt with the two of them together unless you make it yourself." On another shirt Susan had sewn an image of Batgirl onto a picture of a Segway scooter so that it looked like she was happily riding it off to some adventure. Sean, the other do-it-yourself shirt maker was a 26-year-old freelance designer who specialized in making iron-on transfers. "I like messing around in Photoshop after I've scanned an image I like of Wolverine or Daredevil or whoever," said Sean, "then once I've finished cropping it and adjusting colors I print it out on special paper and iron it on to a cheap T-shirt." Both Susan and Sean prided themselves on wearing only unique shirts and both recounted stories of other comics fans enviously asking where they had gotten them.

This practice of creating one's own clothing rather than simply buying it off the rack has a long tradition in subcultures. While it may be an anomaly among comics fans, making one's own superhero T-shirts can be understood as similar to what Hebdige described as the art of "bricolage" practiced by punks.[15] *Bricolage* is a French term Hebdige used to characterize the way punks would put together and wear unrelated items (e.g., safety pins, tampons, Boy Scout patches) in order to convey new and unsettling meanings to their clothing. More precisely, these do-it-yourself T-shirt makers are an example of what Henry Jenkins calls "textual poaching," a particularly interesting activity among fan groups.[16] Jenkins argues that fan activities such as filking (singing folk songs about television characters), making fan art (drawings, paintings, or photo manipulations of popular characters), or creating slash fiction (original stories or videos that place familiar characters in novel, often homoerotic, situations) are modern examples of poaching, the historical act of illegally hunting game from royal preserves. Contemporary textual poaching can be understood as fans appropriating corporately owned characters from their official texts and adapting them to create works that speak to fans' desires and fantasies that would never be sanctioned by those who hold the legal rights. Most textual poaching may be harmless fun, but some, such as explicitly homosexual depictions of Batman and Robin, can have serious legal ramifications when corporations like DC Comics, and its parent company Time Warner, have a vested interest in preserving Batman and Robin's wholesome and safely heterosexual image. Yet textual poaching, even when as seemingly benign as putting Harley Quinn (a DC property) and Black Widow (a Marvel property) together on a shirt, is evidence that fans do not simply make-do with the mass-produced narratives they consume. Rather, fans and even casual consumers actively use and re-imagine texts to fulfill their own needs.

The final point I'd like to make about the importance of superhero T-shirts for their wearers is that in addition to marking membership and relative standing within a fan community, all of the respondents appeared to have a personal connection with the characters they wore. This connection is most apparent when the individuals focused on collecting specific characters. As Steve explained, he only wore Batman shirts because

> Batman is my favorite superhero. Not just because he is cool but because he has no superpowers. He is just a normal guy—OK, a normal really rich guy—but he is the best hero because he is the smartest and works really hard to be true to his ideals.

Likewise, Rick, a 28-year-old graduate student, said he always wears Spider-Man shirts because "he doesn't really fit in with other supes. He has all these amazing powers and is super strong but he is unlike any other superheroes.... He sees the ridiculousness of the whole concept and is always funny." Others, like Jenna, a 24-year-old who describes herself as a modest feminist, concentrates on female superheroes because:

> Comics are such a guy thing, a pile of over-the-top muscles and testosterone. It's hard to be a feminist comic fan sometimes and so I latch on to the few female heroes who are more than just their sex appeal. That's why I have so many Wonder Woman and Supergirl and Batgirl shirts. I like a lot of the male centered books, but when I'm among other fans I want them to know that I care the most about superheroines.

Each of these fans, and most of the others I spoke with, use superhero T-shirts as a way to identify themselves as fans of specific characters because those heroes embody certain ideals (intelligence, humor, feminism) that the wearer values.

By collecting and wearing shirts of heroes who embody specific characteristics, the fans are symbolically creating a link between themselves and those characteristics. The shirts act as a bridge between what anthropologist Grant McCracken calls the "real" and the "ideal."[17] In other words, all cultures and all individuals constantly negotiate the precarious balance between our real world and our communal or personal ideals. The way things are is seldom the way we desire them to be. For a culture struggling with the reality of racism, the ideal may be a future where skin color is irrelevant. For an individual faced with real economic difficulties, the ideal may be dreams of winning the lottery. For individual comic book fans, like many of the ones in this study, the reality may be a boring job, long hours of school, being a bit socially awkward among peers, or experiencing sexism or racism or any other undesirable social ostracization. In contrast to their mundane reality, these fans embrace an ideal represented by certain characters. The ideal intelligence of a Batman, strength of a Superman, humor of a Spider-Man, female power of a Wonder Woman, and so on. As Stuart, a 26-year-old mechanic, insightfully put it:

> I wear these shirts because I identify with Wolverine. I think I'm like him in a lot of ways. Not the killing stuff... but I am straight forward and don't take a lot of crap. I have a sense of humor, but can be really serious and focused when I need to be. Wolverine is kind of how I ideally see myself—without any of the spandex though.

Something as simple as a T-shirt can make abstract ideals feel concrete. As McCracken argues:

> Goods help the individual contemplate the possession of an emotional condition, a social circumstance, even an entire style of life, by somehow concretizing these things in themselves. They become a bridge to displaced meaning and an idealized version of life as it should be lived.[18]

The function of superhero T-shirts as a link or bridge between the real and the ideal may not be a factor for all the collectors; some may do it just because it is fun or stylish, but the passion almost all of the subjects demonstrated about their shirts suggests a very deep and personal meaning.

There is nothing in comic books themselves that could help explain to the non-fans in my class why so many of their classmates routinely wore superhero T-shirts. Nor could different methodological approaches to the text reveal any great insights into the passion of the fans. Yet, by utilizing an ethnographic approach, speaking with and observing real people, we can begin to understand that something as simple as wearing certain T-shirts can be loaded with personal and subcultural meanings. Clothing can represent membership in a fan community, it can symbolize an expertise about the subject, it can be used as a way to resist cultural conformity or as a means to re-work the official meanings of the characters. The shirts can even act as a bridge between our mundane selves and our idealized self-perceptions. As a methodological approach, ethnography is a lot of work, but the insights we can gain from talking with real people and considering how they see and use things like T-shirts is well worth it.

NOTES

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
2. See, for example, James Clifford and George E. Marcuse, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1986); James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, MA: University of Harvard Press, 1988); and Paul Atkinson, *The Ethnographic Imagination: Textual Constructions of Reality* (London: Routledge Press, 1990).
3. For a review of the influence of CCCS scholarship, see Patrick Bratlinger, *Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
4. See, for example, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" reprinted in James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woolacott, eds., *Mass Communication and Society* (London: Edward Arnold Press, 1977).
5. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (New York: Verso, 1987).
6. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
7. Julie D'Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).
8. For a historical overview of Subcultural Studies, see Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton, eds., *The Subcultures Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997); for introductions to the field of Fan Studies, see Lisa A. Lewis, ed., *The Adoring Audience* (New York: Routledge, 1992) or Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
9. Janice Radway, "Reception Study: Ethnography and the Problem of Dispersed Audiences and Nomadic Subjects," *Cultural Studies* 2 (3) (1988): 359–376.
10. Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Superheroes: Milestone Comics and Their Fans* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).
11. Thomas R. Lindlof and Debra Grodin, "When Media Use Can't Be Observed: Some Problems and Tactics of Collaborative Audience Research," *Journal of Communication* 40 (4) (1990): 8–28.
12. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen Press, 1979).
13. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Socila Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
14. John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," in *The Adoring Audience*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1992), 30–49.
15. Hebdige, *Subculture.*
16. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers.*
17. Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990).
18. Ibid., 110.

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21

CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

The Comics Shop As Cultural Clubhouse

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Nestled between a coffee shop and a Middle Eastern restaurant is a non-descript door that marks the portal into the local comic shop. Having been in my fair share of comic shops, the sights and sounds were familiar enough. Along the wall next to the door are the racks of new comics on display. The latest issues all greet an entrant into the shop. While these comics represent an industry that earns billions of dollars annually, there are still some . . . troubling . . . items. In particular, the heroines that share the covers with the heroes have a particular look: tall, with narrow waists, curvy hips, and ample bust lines.

The cover art and representations of women may be designed to appeal to a particular male audience, yet they also serve as a deterrent to "unwelcome" entrance by outsiders, in this case women. Looking around the shop, the four patrons playing a tabletop game, the two employees behind the counter, and the three other patrons leafing through the wares of the shop are all male. As I stand there, taking in the scene, the entrance bell clangs and a man, with a woman in tow, enters the shop looking for his latest comics. As she hides behind his arm from the other patrons, I overhear her ask why she had to come inside.

"I'll just be a minute. It's okay."

"I don't belong in here. Why do you always drag me in here?"

"Whatever. I've got 'em. We can go."

In a typical trip to the local comic shop, an avid reader will likely scan the new releases for interesting titles, ask for pulls (reserved items), and purchase the desired comics before leaving the shop for the week. Yet the preceding story takes a step back from the routine to explore how the comics themselves and the community members enact practices that ostracize others. In this case, the female visitor to the shop said she didn't belong and hid from view. This is a brief example of the type of work done through critical ethnography. Critical ethnography is defined as a qualitative research approach concerned with relations and power inequities between individuals and the sociopolitical framework, transformation of these relations, and attention to the research process