



Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon, *The superhero costume: identity and disguise in fact and fiction*

Valentino L. Zullo

To cite this article: Valentino L. Zullo (2017) Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon, *The superhero costume: identity and disguise in fact and fiction*, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 8:3, 297-299, DOI: [10.1080/21504857.2017.1288644](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2017.1288644)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2017.1288644>



Published online: 28 Feb 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 183



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

such as *Youngblood* to be consecrated as the greatest comic book of all time, Beaty and Woo are not only interrogating the concept of the canon but challenging the orthodoxy of comics scholarship more broadly. This challenge is the kernel of the volume. Acknowledging the procrustean nature by which comics studies inserted itself into the domain of literary theory, Beaty and Woo use *TGCBAT* to give this disciplinary structure ‘a good shake’ (16). Robert Crumb, for example, is used as a subjunctive intermediary to examine how comics studies might have developed under the aegis of art history. Of course, with its focus on the canon of comics studies, the book is necessarily orientated backwards in time.

It is lamentable that Beaty and Woo do not extend their framework forwards, even if speculatively, to engage with how digitisation affects canon-building (they briefly touch upon the weak consecratory power of social media). Although digital comics and the digitisation of comics (in many adapted and remediated forms) is a relatively new development, Beaty and Woo could further have interrogated the notion of canon-building and challenged the literary bias of comics studies by posing one final question; what if the greatest comic book of all time were not a print comic? We can hopefully look forward to Beaty and Woo developing their framework through their very useful companion blog, which contains some further thoughts and addenda to the chapters of *TGCBAT*, and we should also await their next project *What Were Comics?* with anticipation. In the intervening time, *TGCBAT* serves as a much needed challenge to the orthodoxy of comics studies’ staid literary bias, deconstructing the processes of canon-building and the distribution of symbolic capital, such that Beaty and Woo succeed in giving comics studies that ‘good shake’ in the midst of taking its pulse.

Cormac McGarry

National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland

 c.mcgarry3@nuigalway.ie  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7645-3012>

© 2017 Cormac McGarry

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2017.1288643>



The superhero costume: identity and disguise in fact and fiction, by Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon, New York, NY, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, 175pp., US\$29.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1472595911

The Superhero Costume by Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon surveys the ‘[g]audy, theatrical, and athletically dynamic’ garb that covers, disguises and exposes the powerful bodies of the superheroes who dominate popular culture (1). Whether displayed in comics, film or video games, the costume proclaims to the reader, viewer or player that they have entered the world of the superhero. As Brad Ricca opines of Superman, the costume was ‘an announcement of who this character was’ (Ricca, quoted. in Brownie and Graydon, 12). Brownie and Graydon linger over the costume and its significance to the superhero in the four parts of their book: ‘Origins and Evolutions’, which contains chapters on the history of the superhero costume; followed by ‘Identities and Ideals’, exploring the role of patriotism, the alter ego and animals on the superhero; ‘Harsh Realities’ turns outward to fashion, cosplaying and real-life superheroes; and the final part of the book features ‘Case Studies’ of superhero comics. Brownie and Graydon aim to uncover the costume and its importance to the superhero.

‘Origins and Evolutions’ begins with the history of the superhero costume from influences of the Circus ‘Strong Man’ on Superman’s design onward to the later deconstruction

of the costume with Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*. So central is the costume that the authors argue, 'without it he [the superhero] is reduced to the lesser title of hero' (3). Brownie and Graydon give credit in this section to Michael Chabon's influential, 'Secret Skin: An Essay in Unitard Theory', which studies the evolution of the superhero costume, once drawn by artists as blocks of colour undifferentiated from the body of the hero, and now envisioned as a worn object with folds and creases, as film and other media have influenced comics' artists. However, as the costume becomes a more realistic object, the simplified image still dominates; as Peter Coogan has observed, the superhero's costume achieves 'expression through reduction' (Coogan, quoted in Brownie and Graydon, 18). What is missing here is a sustained discussion of gender and the costume (the same might be said of other important topics including, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ableism and so forth). Indeed, the authors write off the entire discussion in a single sentence in the introduction: 'the sexualization and fetishization of female superhero costumes has been so widely discussed that it would be unproductive to repeat the discussion in these pages' (4). While it is true that the female superhero costume has been addressed by many, what about recent changes? For example, what about Batwoman and her use of the wig, or the redesign of Carol Danvers as Captain Marvel? Identity politics may seem passé in the academy today, but the need for these dialogues is no clearer than when they are absent.

Section Two, 'Identities and Ideals' surveys the design of the superhero costume, including influences from the patriotic designs of Captain America, the significance of the alter ego to the stories, and the influence of animals on superhero costume designs. They begin with Captain America and his patriotic costume, which were born out of the 'looming shadow of World War II' (56). And while Steve Rogers has retired the costume before, it necessarily returns because of its iconic status. Captain America's costume establishes his identity as a public figure, protecting all during the Second World War (and after), as he wears the flag of a democracy. In contrast, then, the alter ego of many superheroes allows them to take ownership of their personal lives as they become private citizens with families, and have personal problems, apart from their public self. Finally, the authors turn to animals, a pervasive source of inspiration for superhero designs. Brownie and Graydon argue 'clothing and costume generally has no identity of its own ... animal costumes are an exception to this rule' (83). While I cannot agree with their assertion, considering their review, only pages before, of Captain America and the significance of the flag on his design, I agree that the animal costume indeed does come with its own associations for the reader (just as any other costume does). The chapters in this part of the book ultimately ask critics to think about the costume beyond the secret identity and at the level of iconicity.

Brownie and Graydon argue in 'Harsh Realities', that '[s]uperheroes exist out of time. They do not belong to any one particular era' (97). Because we are looking at icons, the 'costumes that remain most static over time are largely symbolic' (98). This section then shifts away from the portrayal of the costume in comics and turns to the outside world and the influence of fashion, the ever-growing world of cosplay and real-life superheroes. A segment of this discussion is dedicated to the question of gender in superhero comics as, it seems, it is the female superhero who is most influenced by fashion trends. Wonder Woman, The Wasp, Dazzler and so many other female superheroes' costumes have been defined by fashion trends more than their male counterparts. Even within comics, there is more discussion of the female's costume in the story because '[w]hen female superhero costumes follow fashion, there is sometimes a need to justify it in practical terms' (102). They offer as an example, Anne Hathaway's stilettos in *The Dark Knight Rises*, where she slices the leg of a villain with her heel to demonstrate its practical use. Of course, Superman has never had to truly justify his costume, but the female character must show their costumes are both practical and stylish.

The authors then turn to the art of cosplaying, where ‘the boundary between body and costume becomes blurred’ (115). Cosplaying, though, is not the only reason some have begun to dress up as superheroes: political activists including *Pussy Riot* have dressed in costume, along with vigilantes that patrol the streets as superheroes. These real-life images, both in fandom, and outside of it demonstrate the power of the costume for inspiration and identification as a source of good. What is lacking here, though, is again a discussion of identity on cosplaying and real-life costumes. What happens when a female cosplayer becomes a male character or adapts a male character into a female one? The same questions might be asked of different races, sexualities and abilities when cosplaying.

The final part of Brownie and Graydon’s book contains what the authors refer to as ‘case studies’ of comics. They first offer *Watchmen*, which captures the anxiety of the weight of history on superhero comics, with its images of costumes hanging ‘limp’ in the Nite Owl’s retirement. A case study on Iron Man follows, which considers how the ‘superhero identity can become more attached to the costume than to its wearer’ (145). The Iron Man suit is the superhero. Finally, the authors reflect on how a group of heroes with little cohesiveness, the X-Men, utilise the ‘X’ to unite themselves – as outsiders part of a group. They also offer several X-Men who have refused to use the ‘X’, including Dani Moonstar, who believed that she should dress in clothes that evoked her Cheyenne heritage rather than wearing a traditional X-Men uniform. The authors suggest in doing so her civilian identity has a larger role in her superhero functions. There are many other characters that we could explore in this way, including Luke Cage, as ‘Hero-for-Hire’, or She-Hulk as lawyer, always shifting between costumes and her civilian and ‘public’ identity. These characters challenge our perceptions of costumes and the impact upon the identity of the hero. Unfortunately, this is the shortest section of the book, but the authors’ ‘case studies’ are a useful format for discussion of superhero costumes and would be an excellent jumping off point for a future collection or blog.

Despite my lament of the absence of a sustained discussion on race, sexuality, gender, class, ableism and other aspects of identity on the superhero costume and its rendering across media, I do believe that Brownie and Graydon provide perhaps the most comprehensive review and bibliography, across disciplines, of superhero costumes to date. In this regard, their research is essential reading for the study of the costume and will foster future discussions. Their study of dressing the superhero functions to open a stuffed closet that has been sealed for too long.

Valentino L. Zullo
Kent State University
 Vzullo@Kent.edu

© 2017 Valentino L. Zullo
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2017.1288644>



A review of the comics of Joe Sacco. *Journalism in a visual world*, edited by Daniel Worden, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2015, viii + 285 pp., US\$60 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-4968-0221-7

The Comics of Joe Sacco. Journalism in a Visual World has been published as the first volume of the University Press of Mississippi’s new series, Critical Approaches to Comics Artists. It was followed by *The Comics of Hergé. When the Lines are not so Clear*, edited by Joe Sutliff Sanders (published in August 2016). The two subtitles – *Journalism in a Visual*