

Serial Identities

Note: Student accounts of completing this assignment may be read at <http://grc.web.unc.edu/2013/07/08/comic-books-and-graphic-novels-undergraduate-research-in-american-studies/>

Background:

In class on February 19th we'll consider how the form of material production and narrative technique defined broadly as "seriality" effects the representation of queer identities.

Let's break down what I mean by "seriality" first. I believe a wide range of texts can be described as "serials." In the literary context, I define the serial as a publishing format and process of production by which a unified work is presented in installments that are materially, editorially, and/or chronologically separate. I want this to be an inclusive definition. It is meant to include texts that are traditionally thought of as works of serial literature like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories (originally printed in *The Strand* magazine) or novels like Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (printed in installments in *La Review de Paris* in 1856) and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (published in installments in *The Russian Messenger* from 1873-1877). But it is also meant to include works *not* conventionally thought of as serials. For instance, William Faulkner set many of his novels and short stories like *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Intruder in the Dust*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Go Down, Moses* in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County. Threads from many of these works intertwine with one another to form a—very large—overall narrative. So aren't these novels serials?

And of course, I'm talking about contemporary series of novels like *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Harry Potter*. I'm also talking about radio series like *The Green Hornet* and television shows from *I Love Lucy* to *M.A.S.H.* to *Dallas* to *Grey's Anatomy*. Series of films? James Bond, *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*.

So what can serials tell us when we "close read" them as a unified narrative? As a collection of different material objects? As a changing window into different facets of popular culture?

We need not answer all of these questions in an hour and some change. But we'll start thinking about them by taking a look at one of the largest serialized narrative constructs in human history—the Marvel Comics "universe." The blockbuster 2012 film *Marvel's The Avengers* exemplifies how Marvel Comics has serially constructed a sprawling narrative multiverse since it began producing comics (first as *Timely Comics* in 1939) by weaving together separate narrative threads (stories from the films *Iron Man* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) all fed into *The Avengers*).

Most scholars and critics agree that Marvel published the first "out" gay superhero, Northstar. Northstar first appeared in *Uncanny X-men* #120 in 1979 and publicly "came out" in *Alpha Flight* #106 in 1992.

Assignment:

- 1.) First, you'll split into five groups. **Before class on Tuesday, February 19th**, each group will read two comics featuring Northstar. I've divided the reading groups by era:

- early 1980s-- read *Alpha Flight* #7-8
 - late 1980s-- read *Alpha Flight* #44, 50
 - 1990s-- read *Alpha Flight* #106 and *Northstar* #4
 - 2000s- read *Uncanny X-men* #392, 414
 - 2010s-- read *Astonishing X-men* #1 and *Astonishing X-men Annual* #1
- 2.) In class on Tuesday, February 19th, your group will produce marketing solicitations for each comic you read.

Here's the rhetorical situation: you are an entry-level marketing assistant at Disney (the parent company of Marvel Comics). Your first assignment is to write brief marketing blurbs for the two comics your group has been assigned. An old adage among comics creators reminds us that "every comic is someone's first comic." Keep this in mind when crafting your sales solicitations—your plot description should intrigue the reader while not giving away too much. The most important aim to keep in mind: your solicitation should be written to appeal to both new and familiar readers, queer-interest and non-queer-interest demographics.

The successful solicitation will include the following:

- Title of the Series
- Issue Number
- Date of Publication
- Writer, Artist credits (this may include separate lines for pencilers (P), inkers (I), colorists (Col), letterers (L), and cover artists(C))
- 100 word or less plot description teaser that gives an overview of the plot without giving too much away—tell us what happens while making us still want to buy the comic
- Page count
- Pricing information

Below are three sample solicitations from current Marvel comics. Other examples may be found at <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=41685> .

UNCANNY X-FORCE # 1

2012

Sam Humphries (W) • Ron Garney (A)

Cover by OLIVIER COIPEL

THE DARKEST CORNERS OF THE MUTANT UNIVERSE: EXPOSED! The X-Men: sworn to protect a world that fears and hates them. UNCANNY X-FORCE: charged to deal with situations the X-Men fear and hate! Psylocke and Storm lead a new team of outcasts and scoundrels, including fan-favorite Puck, the villainous Spiral, and the mysterious Cluster. The first adversary to strike out from the darkness? X-legend BISHOP!

32 PGS...\$3.99

THOR: GOD OF THUNDER # 4

2012

Jason Aaron (W) • Esad Ribic (A/ C)

• Thousands of years in the future the last god king of a ruined Asgard makes his final stand against the berserker legions of the God Butcher.

• But even a king can fall. Even King Thor.

32 PGS....\$3.99

CAPTAIN AMERICA # 3

2012

RICK REMENDER (W) • JOHN ROMITA JR (A/ C)

CASTAWAY IN DIMENSION Z continues!

- 1930: Witness the birth of a legend! How did Steve Rogers, a 98 lb weakling, earn his courage?

- NOW: With the fate of a world hinging on his victory Captain America must defeat the barbarian lord of the Phrox!

- MEANWHILE: Arnim Zola's plans move forward, cursing Steve Rogers for years to come.

32 PGS....\$3.99

- 3.) In class on Thursday, February 19th each group will also produce a brief (300 word MAX) character description of Northstar as he appears in the two comics you read. The successful description will consider the following: Who is Northstar? What does he look like? What makes him a superhero? Describe his personality. Is he the “lead” in the comics you read or a supporting character? How much “page time” does he receive and how important is his story to the comic’s overall narrative? What narratives are juxtaposed with Northstar’s story and how does that affect his characterization? Remember that Northstar is popularly billed as the first gay superhero, so pay particularly close attention to how his sexual orientation is represented. Your descriptions should include both surface-level observations about the character’s representation as well as some critical analysis of his presentation.
- 4.) We’ll workshop these toward the end of class on February 19th, so be prepared to share your drafts. At the beginning of class on Thursday, February 21st each group will need to designate two folks to present the final drafts of your work to the class. One person will read your marketing solicitations aloud and the other will read your character description. Just make sure you figure out who’s doing what before class so we don’t have any of those “doyouwanttonoyougoaheadareyousureicangoifyouwantmeto” moments.