

Call for Papers: Special Issue of *American Literature*: Queer about Comics

There's something queer about comics. Whether one looks to the alternative mutant kinships of superhero stories (the epitome of queer worldmaking), the ironic and socially negative narratives of independent comics (the epitome of queer anti-normativity), or the social stigma that makes the medium marginal, juvenile, and outcast from proper art (the epitome of queer identity), comics are rife with the social and aesthetic cues commonly attached to queer life. Moreover, the medium has had a long history as a top reading choice among those "queer" subjects variously called sexual deviants, juvenile delinquents, dropouts, the working class, and minorities of all stripes. Despite this, comics studies and queer theory have remained surprisingly alienated from one another. On the one hand, comics studies' tendency to analyze the formal codes of sequential art separately from social questions of sexual identity and embodied difference has often led to a disregard for a nuanced queer and intersectional critique of the comics medium. On the other, the prevailing assumption that mainstream comics (namely the superhero genre) embody nationalistic, sexist, and homophobic ideologies has led many queer theorists to dismiss comics altogether, or else to celebrate a limited sample of politically palatable alternative comics as exemplars of queer visual culture. In this logic, "Queer zines yes! Superhero comics no!"

This special issue of *American Literature* solicits scholarship on comics that dwells in the medium's queerness *across* genres, time periods, audiences and production histories to show how comic book form functions as a generative vehicle for registering, reimagining, and theorizing questions of sexual, racial, and embodied difference. We are interested in work that refuses the mandate to recuperate the literary or aesthetic value of comics, but instead views their

marginality as a productive force that allows the medium access to distinctly queer ways of life, worldviews, and creative experiments.

How might a medium made up of the literal intersection of lines, images, and bodies capture the values of intersectional analysis? How do comics' attention to the visual orientation of images in space model a conception of sexual orientation? How might the medium's discontinuous organization of images map onto disability's discontinuous relationship to heterosexual able-bodied existence? How might the medium's courting of marginal and outsider audiences allow for the formation of queer counterpublics? These questions only begin to scratch the surface of the inquiries we seek, but they suggest a synthetic approach to comics that considers the medium's queerness as opening out into a variety of formal and narrative experiments that have attempted to deal with the problem of being literally and figuratively marginal or "queered" by social and political orders.

Take for example two fundamental conceits of queer theory: In what is perhaps the most oft-quoted line from the inaugural moment of queer theory, Judith Butler claimed that "*gender is an imitation for which there is no original.*" Only second to this then revolutionary statement might be Eve Sedgwick's first axiom for queer studies that "people are different from each other." Although both theorists first formulated these claims to describe the instability of gendered and sexual identity, their statements describe the operation of comic strip form exactly. As a serialized medium, comics proliferate images that imitate both material or embodied experience and previous images or copies in a sequence; this proliferation underscores the limitless differences produced between an ever-expanding range of images, and the figures and worlds they depict. Simultaneously, the sheer number of images, texts, and characters the medium produces renders claims to originality superfluous as does the presentation of mutant,

monstrous, or altogether fantastical characters that have no “original” form in everyday life. Perhaps more than any other literary or cultural mode then, comics self-consciously multiply and underscore differences at every site of their production. Each iteration of an image, an issue, a storyline, or world has the potential to disrupt, comment on, or altogether alter the flow and direction of what has come before: in this sense, comics function, to borrow from Sara Ahmed, as *queer orientation devices*, productively directing readers toward deviant bodies that refuse to be fixed in one image or frame, new desires for fantasy worlds that rebel against the constraints of everyday life, and new kinds of counterpublic affiliation among readers who identify with the queer, deviant, maladjusted form called comics.

We solicit scholarship that considers how queer theory might transform the aesthetic analysis of sequential art beyond the question of gay and lesbian or “minority” representation, as well as the ways comics’ distinct aesthetic formal codes and production histories might inform theoretical debates in queer theory and literary studies (including, but not limited to queer temporalities, queer phenomenology, intersectional critique, critical race studies, disability studies, and affect). Rather than only analyzing the visual representation of queerness in comics, we ask how the formal and aesthetic structures of the comic book medium—serialization, temporal dissonance, collaboratively produced narratives, portable texts among others—have lent themselves to articulating the broader field of queerness, race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability at distinct historical moments and in particular artistic productions, and how these formal codes have interpolated an array of unexpected publics. We hope to see scholars engaging in analytical practices and approaches as diverse as comics themselves, in essays that capture the playfulness, exuberance, and eccentricity of the medium, while providing new concepts for incorporating comics into the theoretical and cultural study of sexual and embodied difference.

Submissions of 11,000 words or less (including endnotes and references) should be submitted electronically at www.editorialmanager.com/al/default.asp by July 31, 2016. When choosing a submission type, select "Submission-Special Issue-Comics." For assistance with the submission process, please contact the office of *American Literature* at am-lit@duke.edu or (919) 684-3396. For inquiries about the content of the issue, please contact the coeditors: Ramzi Fawaz (fawaz@wisc.edu) and Darieck Scott (dbscott@berkeley.edu).