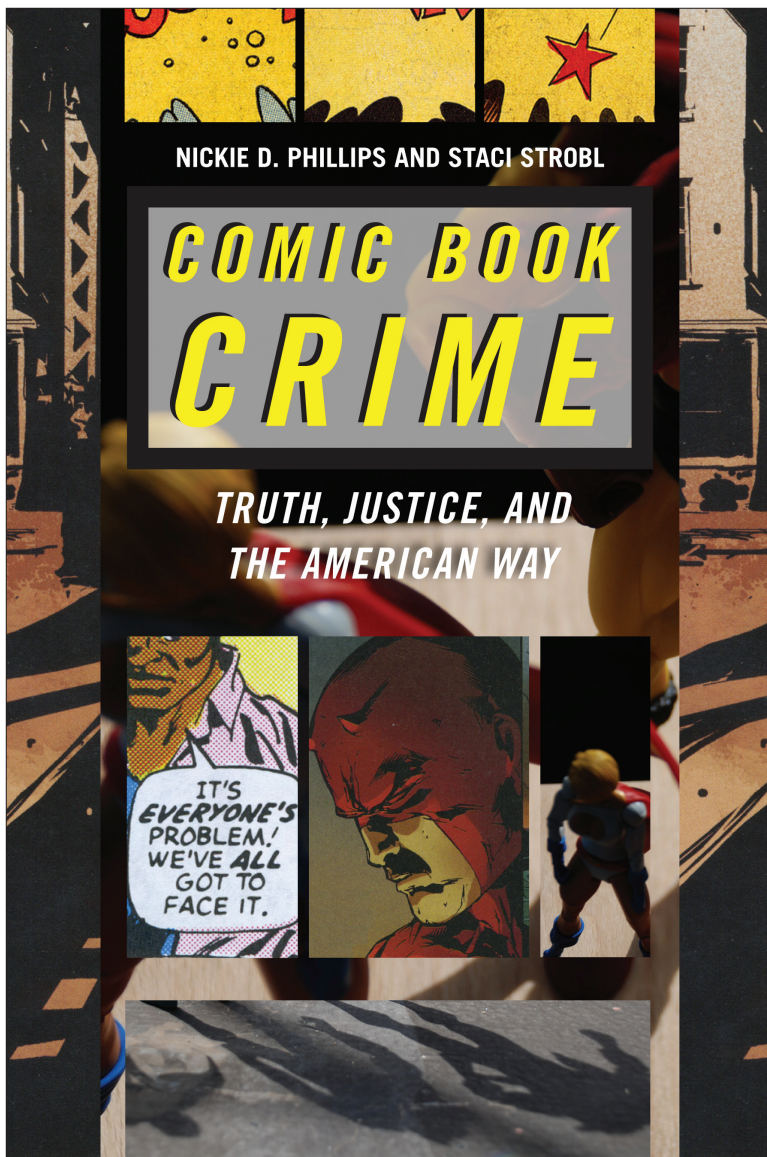


Comic Book Crime

Truth, Justice, and the American Way

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



Superman, Batman, Daredevil, and Wonder Woman are iconic cultural figures that embody values of order, fairness, justice, and retribution. *Comic Book Crime* digs deep into these and other celebrated characters, providing a comprehensive understanding of crime and justice in contemporary American comic books. This is a world where justice is delivered, where heroes save ordinary citizens from certain doom, where evil is easily identified and thwarted by powers far greater than mere mortals could possess. Nickie Phillips and Staci Strobl explore these representations and show that comic books, as a historically important American cultural medium, participate in both reflecting and shaping an American ideological identity that is often focused on ideas of the apocalypse, utopia, retribution, and nationalism.

Through an analysis of approximately 200 comic books sold from 2002 to 2010, as well as several years of immersion in comic book fan culture, Phillips and Strobl reveal the kinds of themes and plots popular comics feature in a post-9/11 context. They discuss heroes' calculations of "deathworthiness," or who should be killed in meting out justice, and how these judgments have as much to do with the hero's character as they do with the actions of the villains. This fascinating volume also analyzes how class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation are used to construct difference for both the heroes and the villains in ways that are both conservative and progressive. Engaging, sharp, and insightful, *Comic Book Crime* is a fresh take on the very meaning of truth, justice, and the American way.

320 PAGES • 34 B/W ILLUSTRATIONS • 4 TABLES
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Holy Criminology, Batman!

Comics and Constructions of Crime and Justice

pages 1-19

SUMMARY

This chapter serves as an introduction to the methods used and subject matter addressed in the book. The authors set out their goal of investigating how comic books and superhero stories explore crime and punishment. The relationship between comic books and fans, including elements like conventions, fan letters, and fan forums are briefly overviewed. Additionally, the affect of comics on the larger culture is explored. Superhero comics are read only by a small number of people, but expanded superhero and comics-related media like films and video games are immensely popular with a large part of the population. The authors assert that comic books tend to play out repeating story formulas, which reinforce a particular notion of justice and criminology. This notion is based on a white, heterosexual, male perspective as the default, who tend to protect the status quo which is defined as positive until “interrupted” and thrown into disarray by crime. The chapter concludes by outlining the course of the rest of the book, and making special mention of the authors’ focus on post-9/11 comic books.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What has your exposure to comic books been? Include extended media like TV and movies. What dominant themes/ideas do you remember about them, particularly in regards to crime and justice?
- Recall the quote from Jock Young that the mass media “does not cause aggression so much as provide a script or narrative which suggests when violence is appropriate, against whom, for what reasons and with what effects, together with images against whom violence is permitted and prohibited.” Do you agree? Who does the mass media suggest is violence is appropriate towards?
- One fan is quoted say saying they enjoy a certain character because (or in spite of) “deep down I know his moral compass, his concept of justice, are both totally fucking wrong.” Think of other popular media featuring protagonists with questionable morality. Why might they be so popular in 21st century culture?
- How does the concept of “continuity” affect comic storytelling, and possibly crime and justice messages as well?

“Crime Doesn’t Pay”

A Brief History of Crime and Justice Themes in Comic Books

pages 21-39

SUMMARY

This chapter gives a brief history of comic books and superheroes, with a focus on the crime and justice aspects. The chapter starts with the origin of many popular superheroes, and notes details like Superman beginning as a defender of the oppressed and champion of the people. Moving forward, during WWII comics served as propaganda, depicting the soldiers of the Axis powers as almost inhuman. In the Post-War era, superhero comics declined, but crime and horror comics became more popular. This led to a cultural backlash as experts blamed comics for juvenile delinquency. This caused the creation of a Comics Code, which banned explicit content as well as the depiction of sympathetic criminals or villainous authority figures. Superhero comics resurged while other genres fell back. More light-hearted science fiction adventures became common, but the Spider-Man story “The Death of Gwen Stacy” ended this “innocent” Silver Age. The 1970s opened up comics to more diversity, including the first black superheroes. In the 1980s, comics became more mature and were taken more seriously, even being able to publish outside the Code. Major titles became more sophisticated as well as tackled harsher subject material, like the contradictions involved in superheroism. Violence and sex also became more relevant. Works like *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* opened up shades of grey and the question of what role superheroes and absolute power play within a democratic society. The chapter ends by noting how comic sales began to decline in the 1990s, however, and publishers other than DC and Marvel grew, often with stories about more cynical, world-weary characters.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did superhero comics emerge to become a dominant genre of comic books?
- What outside influences and initiatives have affected comic books?
- What is the relationship between superheroes and the status quo, and how has it changed?
- How did comics address stories about social ills?

The World is Shifting

Terrorism, Xenophobia, and Comic Books after 9/11
pages 40-61

SUMMARY

This chapter covers how 9/11 changed comics. Just as comics reflected and depicted WWII, they incorporated 9/11 and the War on Terror into their plots and themes. This included stories that were fictional, but realistic depictions of the War in Iraq, and nonfiction adaptations of the 9/11 Commission Report and modern media coverage. The chapter identifies three major themes in post-9/11 comics: “a redefinition of the role of heroes, anxieties about America’s role in the world, and a preoccupation with Middle Eastern settings and Arab and Muslim characters.” The role of heroes was brought into question by the attacks, because fictional characters were unable to do anything in reality, instead voicing support for “real-life heroes” like police officers and firefighters. Superheroes did deal with the general issue of terrorism, however. Both progressive and reactionary responses were depicted. Captain America and Marvel’s *Civil War* questioned the practice of giving up civil liberties for national security, while DC’s *The Dark Knight* film starring Batman seemed to support Bush-era measures to fight terrorism. The question continues as to whether the superhero is a neocon or an apologist. The chapter continues on to address how, pre-9/11, Arabs and Muslims were almost always villains in comics. But post-9/11, there were actually more nuanced portrayals. Villainous portrayals continued, but US publishers made Arab and Muslim heroes, and Arab and Muslim creators produced projects like *The 99* and *Jalila*, an example of postcolonial “writing back to center.” The chapter concludes by discussing how various comic projects attempted to make sense of the fractured sense of identity and reality that Americans faced after 9/11.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How were Arabic and Muslim characters depicted in comics before and after 9/11? What changed, and why?
- Is adapting a government report to a comic format, as Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon did with *9/11 Report*, appropriate or useful? What is lost by the transformation? What is gained? What about adaptations to other forms of media?
- When 9/11 occurred, many comic book publishers, including both Marvel and DC, were based in New York City, and their stories either took place in New York City or facsimiles (Metropolis, Gotham). How might have this New York-centric view influenced comic book receptions to 9/11?
- What is “writing back to center” and how has it been used by Arab and Muslim comics creators?

A Better Tomorrow

Apocalypse, Utopia, and the Crime Problem

pages 62-81

SUMMARY

The fourth chapter examines the idea of “A Better Tomorrow,” which is tied to nostalgia for a perfect past that doesn’t exist. “A Better Tomorrow” is often stated to be what comic book heroes are fighting to achieve. The chapter highlights how the present is frequently seen as a time of danger and in an “apocalyptic” state. Crime is depicted as the key breaking point for these apocalyptic worlds, requiring a superhuman response. In modern comics, crime is usually government corruption, international terrorism, or organized crime, a shift from the violent street crime that dominated in the pre-9/11 era, though it is still present. Likewise, there is often a desire for an idyllic and dominant America, capable of enforcing its values on the world. The intense danger and threat to the present way of life and to the future justifies superheroes using violence as a tool for peace or for a better world. The modern city is depicted as a diseased, crime-infested, soul-crushing dystopia, a Hell on Earth, best epitomized by Batman’s Gotham City. The chapter explains how these dystopias are tied to the idea of destruction leading to resurrection, even that something must be “destroyed in order to save it.” While it is primarily villains who plot to destroy in order to rebuild, heroes engage in destructive violence as well. The heroes are treated as messiahs come to bring these new, better worlds.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why and how do comics depict the crime problem as “apocalyptic?” How does this affect the ways that characters respond to crime?
- What does it mean to “destroy the village to save it?” What circumstances have been used to justify this claim? Is it ever acceptable?
- What is the role of utopia in superhero stories and crimefighting? What are the values and origins of this utopia?
- How are superheroes linked to messianic imagery? How are they opposed to “man as animal?”

“That’s the Trouble with a Bad Seed”

Villains and the Embodiment of Evil

pages 82-106

SUMMARY

This chapter covers the nature and implications of comic book villains. Villains are often compelling either for their sympathetic backstories or the opportunity they provide for the reader to vicariously live through their taboo actions. Villains are often disfigured as a marker of their inner evil, firmly associating appearance with morality. The chapter also explains that villains often result from a cycle of violence, where they suffered trauma as either a child or an adult and go on to pass it along to others. Heroes also often have suffered some form of trauma, implying that while villains are partly products of their circumstances, they lacked the strength to choose good over evil, making them more culpable for their actions. Psychopathy is often a source of villainous behavior as well. The chapter explains both real-world psychopathy, and how it is displayed in comics, often being an escape for those who have suffered trauma to escape their memories. The idea of rational choice theory is discussed as well. In this theory, individuals choose to engage or not engage in criminal behavior based on whether it will increase their pleasure or decrease their pain. The chapter concludes by addressing how villains and crime in comics are almost always depicted as the result of individual circumstances. The occasional use of social disorganization theory, where “race, place, and poverty” intersect is an exception. However, for the most part critical crime theories, which assign blame to capitalist culture, the patriarchy, or racism, are rarely, if ever, depicted. Instead, heroes fight individual villains and maintain the status quo.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What physical traits are often associated with villains? How might these associations be used to stigmatize real world individuals?
- Do depictions of criminals in comic books match with any criminological theories, past or present? Why do they match certain theories more than others?
- What motivations drive comic book villains? What responses do they suggest would be required?
- How do villains and heroes compare and contrast? What is revealed by their similarities and differences?

“Aren’t We Supposed to Be the Good Guys?”

Heroes, Deathworthiness, and Paths to Justice

pages 107-139

SUMMARY

This chapter introduces the idea of “deathworthiness,” the hero’s calculation as to whether or not they should kill a villain to prevent them from harming others in the future. This comes up often because comic book stories devalue peaceful resolutions and rarely depict them working. Peacemaking is devalued and heroes would be rendered obsolete if peaceful solutions were depicted as reliable and achievable. Heroes are also backed up by the notion that there is a recognizable and definable divide between “good” and “evil,” with heroes being good and “knowing what the right thing to do is.” Meanwhile, legitimate authority is ineffective or corrupt. There is also a focus on crime control versus due process, and while there is some debate in comics, individual rights often lose out to the goal of securing the public safety. Heroes even go as far as to invoke a form of just war theory in responding to “apocalyptic” events, with situations depicted as so dire that it is necessary to abandon the normal rule of law. The chapter goes on to address how anti-heroes are not an alternative to the usual good vs. evil formula, but just a twist on it, and the overall narrative structures remain intact. The chapter then addresses its key theme of deathworthiness. The chapter identifies four identified broad levels of deathworthiness: killing nobody except maybe in self-defense, killing those who have hurt/killed others, killing anyone “morally depraved” for any reason in the pursuit of justice, and killing innocents as collateral damage in battles between good and evil. Audiences tend to use the prior depictions and character of a hero to judge whether said hero was right to kill a foe, rather than the nature of the crime or criminal. Fans debate whether a “no kill” policy is practical, safe, or logical, and whether heroes are still heroes if they violate the policy. The chapter concludes by discussing how fans say that a given hero’s justice is meant to be just that, a fantasy, as opposed to a practical option in reality.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What do you make of the idea that “a real hero is the one who does the dirty work in order that others can be free from it?” Do you agree or disagree? What implicit statements about “heroism” and “dirty work” are involved here?
- How do comic books portray law enforcement and legitimate authority and how do these portrayals support stories of vigilantes?
- How is a reluctance, willingness, or refusal to kill used to characterize super-heroes? Why are these traits fixated on as opposed to the crimes committed by offenders?
- How are torture and violence depicted and justified in comics?

“Take Down the Bad Guys, Save the Girl”

Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Comic Book Justice

pages 140-168

SUMMARY

This chapter examines how comic book notions of crime and justice are intertwined with the way comic books depict gender, sex, and sexual orientation. It asserts that comic books depict justice and crime from a white, heterosexual, male perspective. The chapter discusses the branch of criminology known as victimology, which studies the targets of crime. Comic books and media in general more frequently depict white women as victims when evidence suggests young urban minority males are more likely to face victimization. In comics, women and non-heteronormative individuals are likely to face brutal forms of victimization, often necessitating male heroes to provide violent protection. Women are seen as objects to be protected and awarded to heroes. The chapter goes on to introduce the concepts of performative gender, and of “hegemonic masculinities.” The latter determines who society dubs “a real man” or “a real woman.” This ties into how male superheroes are given ideal physiques, while superheroines are given almost pornographic ones. The assumed male perspective of creators and fans is addressed in the low number of female superheroes who have managed to hold an ongoing title, and how those titles often are received with difficulty by the audience, while a large number of male superheroes is accepted without question. LGBTQA+ characters are addressed as well, and the chapter notes minor strides in the past decades, but comics are shown to still be riddled with problematic language and a lack of queer characters. Female characters are also faced with a dichotomy of either going against female stereotypes and being shown as overly aggressive or violent, or embracing them in a form of hyper-femininity that is often overly sexualized and made for the male gaze, even when comics readers themselves are made uncomfortable. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how comics make use of rape and brutality in the stories of female characters, often limiting their stories and life spans compared to male characters. These incidents of victimization usually do not focus on the woman’s experience, but rather that of the connected male character, showing whose perspective is in focus.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why do sexist and heteronormative views persist in comics? How might this be changed?
- Who receives the most focus when women in comics, particularly supporting characters, are injured, victimized, or killed?
- How is gender performative? What identity performance is done through crimefighting?
- Why is it problematic that female-led series are unusual, but male led ones are not?

“Aren’t There Any Brown People in This World?”

Race, Ethnicity, and Crime Fighting

pages 169-196

SUMMARY

This chapter addresses race and ethnicity in comics, noting like the previous chapter that comics privilege a white perspective in their storytelling. White males are the ones most often shown to be heroes, and often non-white characters are relegated to being heroes only for their own race, ethnicity, or nationality, while white heroes get to be “universal,” and treated as the default. The idea of the “criminalblackman,” the notion of black males as inherently criminal and out of control, is present in comics and undermines attempts to show non-white individuals as heroes. The chapter goes on to discuss how heroes of color are rare, and often killed off or allowed to fade into obscurity, in contrast to their white counterparts, while white heroes continue to reappear. The chapter also brings up how many influential comic book creators were Jewish, and how this affected their creations. Black superheroes often have their blackness emphasized, and are either tied to Africa or to pasts as criminals or prisoners. Black characters frequently face race-related criticisms as well from fan communities, often betraying an ignorance of real world crime statistics. The chapter moves on to discuss Asian characters, who have the twin stereotypes of geeky scientists or martial arts masters. Female Asian characters often suffer erasure or fetishization as exotic. Latina/o representation is often held back by characters being associated with street gangs. Many Latina/o superheroes are shown as former gangbangers. Non-superhero comics are able to provide more nuanced depictions, especially when made by Latina/o creators. Native American characters are discussed as well. Native American superheroes are often a combination of various tribal cultures and are frequently tied to magic, spirits, and shamanism, and depicted as protectors of Native American communities rather than as heroes for the entire population. Native Americans who do not reside on reservations are under-represented as well. The chapter concludes by talking about how the creative and editorial staff of comic books are still largely white men telling stories about other races.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How do racial stereotypes manifest in comic book heroes, particularly their backstories and abilities?
- What storytelling opportunities do black characters, and other characters of color, open up that white characters do not? What creative elements are necessary for these stories?
- How are intersectional identities (mis-)represented in comics?
- In what ways are race and nationalism tied and complicated in comics?

Apocalyptic Incapacitation

The “Maximum-Maximum” Response to Crime

pages 197-217

SUMMARY

This chapter addresses the ways comics depict punishment and responses to crime. The authors lay out the five typical punishment rationales: retribution, incapacitation, deterrence, rehabilitation, and restorative justice. They follow up with explanations of each and examples of how comics show or do not show each form in practice. Rehabilitation is avoided or said not to work, despite many comic book criminals being driven by childhood trauma. Therapy would be the expected response, but therapy is either not present or said to be ineffective, such as at Batman’s infamous Arkham Asylum. Also often missing or ineffective is victim-offender mediation, where the two parties meet, explore the consequences of a criminal’s actions, and agree on a means of reparation, with the aid of friends, family, and community members. Comics dismiss “talking it out” if the option is presented at all, with heroes frequently in situations where it is “too late to try negotiating,” necessitating violence instead. Deterrence is mentioned in comics, but not often shown, likely because it would make for less dramatic confrontations. The chapter states the major preference of comics is for heroes to pursue incapacitation, while teasing the possibility of retribution. Heroes try to capture villains alive, but are tempted to kill their enemies. Incapacitation is embodied in the form of fictional “maximum-maximum” security prisons to contain villains, going to extreme lengths to restrict offenders and prevent them from committing further crimes. Retribution, in the form of heroes who kill, is often teased and sometimes readers voice a desire for “an eye for an eye” justice. However, heroes tend to not kill, but instead enact a variety of forms of harm or even torture. The chapter then addresses the comic book audience’s desire for heroes and protectors, and examines the question of why real life superheroes do not exist, save for a few individuals who practice a limited version. The chapter concludes by placing comic books, and their preference for incapacitation and retribution, within the larger American criminal justice context and discussion, where the idea of “tough talk” and “being tough on crime” is dominant.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ➔ Why might rehabilitation be rejected for comic book villains?
- ➔ Why do comics “tease” retribution, yet prioritize incapacitation instead?
- ➔ How do the prison practices in comics relate to real-world debates about safety and the rights of prisoners?
- ➔ Why do people not adopt comic book crimefighting methods in real life? What are real life examples of vigilante behaviors unlike comic book superheroes?

Conclusion

Ultimate Justice

pages 218-228

SUMMARY

The conclusion begins with the phenomenon of “tough talk” in comics and American culture and policies. The dialogue about the death penalty is given as an example, as is the use of simplistic terms and phrasings such as “wanted dead or alive” or “good versus evil” in American policy. The conclusion goes on to summarize the findings of the research, such as how villains are depicted, and how the overall viewpoint of comics tends towards white, male, heterosexual social conservatism. This puts comics with other media that depict a certain enduring American understanding of crime and responses to crime. The demographics of comic book readers are mentioned, as the authors only managed to include one woman in their focus groups, and males tend to be more numerous in the fan scene. Male fans of color were more common, however, than what one might expect. The conclusion moves on to mention that despite the limited circulation of comic books themselves, their influence is felt throughout pop culture, particularly in the recent boom of superhero movies. The book finishes with a call for further criminological studies of comic books, to both challenge views held self-evident by comic books and their fans, and to continue to examine the comic books influence American culture’s understanding of crime and justice.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why might men of color be more strongly represented, and women less strongly, in fan communities, despite the racial and sexual problems of comic books?
- Given the increasing production of superhero movies by several companies, why is it important to examine the crime and justice messages in the source material? What could result from these messages being put on global display on film?

APPENDIX: SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

pages 229-237

The appendix includes a list of titles the authors examined, and how they were chosen and indexed. There was a focus on popular and therefore hopefully influential titles, identified in several ways outlined in this section.

Questions for Reflection:

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Consider what individuals are called “heroes” or “villains” by the media in real life. How are they constructed as heroes or villains? Who gets to be a hero versus a villain or even a victim?
- Does the concept of the superhero promote an inherently individualistic view of crime and justice?
- How does the idea of a “secret identity” relate to law enforcement, particularly the ideas of transparency and the right to face your accuser?
- How does the corporate nature of comic book publishers affect content and crime and justice views? Note that the “Big Two,” Marvel and DC, are owned by much larger corporate conglomerates (Disney and Warner Brothers, respectively).
- What might comic books look like if they valued, represented, and employed methods of crime response like rehabilitation and restorative justice? Alternatively, what might change if they further embraced deterrence or retribution?
- What is the “comic book formula?” How does it reflect a socially conservative worldview? Could this be changed? Should it be changed?
- What roles does vicarious experience and enjoyment of transgression play in comic book writing, advertising, and reading?
- Are comic books “for kids” anymore? Why or why not? How has this affected content?
- Why do comics use fictional locations, such as cities (Metropolis, Gotham) or countries (Latveria, Qurac)? What are these locations based on? What sort of crime and justice messages are communicated through the use of fictional locations instead of real ones?
- The authors touched on religion several times. How is religion tied to notions of justice? Of crime? How are sins related to crimes, even in a supposedly secular society? How does religion play a role in comic book depictions of heroes and villains, and crime and justice?

Supplemental Assignments:

SUPPLEMENTAL ASSIGNMENTS

- Superhero movies have become explosively popular in the past decade. Many are based on popular comic book storylines. Research a comic book movie and find out what storylines influenced it, and then read them. Compare the comic and the movie's approach to crime and justice. Did a hero spare the villain in one version of the story but not another? Did the nature of the villain's plans change? Were certain aspects of characters whitewashed or exaggerated?
- Look up the specifics of the Comics Code. Note the restrictions on content, and which identities and views were privileged. Research the Hayes Code, the film equivalent, and compare the two. Also look into their histories, when they were adopted, how they were enforced, etc. What impact would these Codes have had on the public understanding of crime and justice issues?
- Look up Women in Refrigerators, as mentioned in Chapter 7. Read the lists and analysis of how female characters in comics are killed, injured, or depowered relative to their male counterparts. How do these incidents of violence compare to how women are depicted in the media as victims of violence?
- Comics are not a media form unique to the United States. Research comics from countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Italy, or Japan and China. What crime and justice messages can be found in these works? How do they compare to their American counterparts? How do these reflect differences in the criminal justice system and cultures of the countries of origin?
- Research the history of Milestone Media, as mentioned in Chapter 8. How did the creators intend to address racism and racial imbalance in American comics? How successful were they? What policies and practices did they employ to try and change how characters of color were depicted?
- Chapter 7 does not explicitly address trans representation in comics. Research how comic books have talked about trans and other non-cissexual identities. Remember to look beyond superhero comics.
- Research the law & order and security situations at comic book fan gatherings, like the New York and San Diego Comic-Cons. Look into issues like the presence of replica weaponry, drinking, and sexual harassment or assault. How do the fan community and those they interact with engage in criminal justice practices in the pursuit of their interests?
- Research population demographics in the United States. Note the percentages that are non-male, non-white, non-heteronormative, members of various religious groups, etc. How do these compare to predominantly straight white male comic book universes? What might comic books look like if they better reflected the actual population demographics?