"They say it'll kill me…but they won't say when!"
Drug Narratives in Comic Books

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The mass media play an important role in constructing images of drug trafficking and use that circulate through society. For this project, discourse analysis was used to examine 52 comic books and graphic novels. Comic books reproduce a dominant discourse of negative drug use which focuses on hard drugs such as heroin and cocaine. These drug narratives set up a dichotomy between victimized drug users and predatory drug dealers. Drug users are depicted as victims who may be saved rather than criminalized. By contrast, drug dealers are constructed as villains who are subjected to the ritualized violence of comic book heroes. The construction of drug users and drug dealers is also marked by gendered, racialized, and class-based patterns of representation.

Keywords: drugs; comic books; discourse analysis; cultural criminology

INTRODUCTION

For most of us, the mass media have provided a window on the social world beyond the confines of our daily lives. It is through the media that many of us have learned about spheres of social power and deviance with which we may have rarely come into direct contact. In the case of illicit drugs, many people's understanding of drug users and drug trafficking has been shaped by both the factual accounts of news media, as well as the fictional accounts of film or television. For example, for those who are not members of the subcultural world of drug use, heroin use has been made imaginable through the *Vancouver Sun's* coverage of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (Bohn, 2000; Kines, 1997; Sarti, 1992), or through films such as *Trainspotting* (Macdonald & Boyle, 1996) or *The Basketball Diaries* (Heller & Kalvert, 1995). The illicit marijuana economy has been rendered knowable through television stories of marijuana grower arrests, or through the iconic imagery of Cheech and Chong movies. In short, the mass media have played an important role in constructing the images of drug trafficking and drug use that circulate through contemporary society.

For this project, I drew on cultural criminology as a theoretical lens to examine comic books as a particular site where drug use and trafficking was discursively constructed. I used discourse analysis to examine a set of 52 comic books and graphic novels (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Foucault, 1991; Jaworski & Coupland, 1999). From this analysis, I concluded that comic books reproduced a dominant discourse of negative drug use, which focused primarily on hard drugs such as heroin and cocaine. Discourses of pleasurable or revelatory drug use existed only at the margins of comic book drug narratives. Furthermore, most comic book drug narratives set up a dichotomy between victimized drug users and predatory drug dealers. Drug users were

depicted as victims who may be saved rather than criminalized. At the same time, drug dealers were constructed as villains who were subjected to the justifiable violence of comic book heroes. The comic book construction of drug users and drug dealers was also marked by gendered, racialized, and class-based patterns of representation. Finally, comic books privileged a model of vigilante justice, where ritualized violence was the dominant form of punishment for drug dealers. In this fictive world, the police, courts, and prisons were only of marginal relevance. Discourses of drug use that focused on managed use, decriminalization, or legalization—rather than criminalization—were rendered invisible.

Cultural Criminology as a Theoretical Lens

The term "cultural criminology" has been used by Ferrell and Sanders (1995a, p. 12) to describe a form of criminology that takes culture seriously. One of the main themes within cultural criminology has been recognition of the "essential role of the *media* in shaping the intersections of culture and crime" (p. 14). The media have drawn on crime and deviance as resources for cultural production. At the same time, behaviour labeled as criminal exists within a postmodern media-saturated social environment. As a result, crime exists "from the start as moments in a mediated spiral of presentation and representation" (p. 14). This theoretical perspective has emphasized the importance of sensitizing ourselves to relations of "power, conflict, subordination and insubordination" (p. 15) in the social construction of crime and its policing. Criminal subcultures have emerged in resistance to dominant cultures, and deviant identities have been formed in interaction with hegemonic norms and values. As the authors noted, "Subordination and insubordination define the interplay between culture and crime; and it is through this interplay that power is both enforced and resisted" (p. 15).

Barak (1994) also made a convincing argument for cultural criminology, or a "constitutive criminology" (p. 19). This model of criminological media research has drawn upon labeling theory, symbolic interactionism, postmodernism, and Cultural Marxism. Barak claimed traditional criminological approaches to the media were flawed because they tended to treat media texts as resources, rather than subjects for research in their own right. Instead, a constitutive criminology has analyzed the ways in which social realities of criminality were constructed through the mass media. Through an analysis of crime news, Barak argued the mass media typically focused on the sensational, violent, and crimes of the poor, while making everyday criminality and the crimes of the elite invisible.

In linking an analysis of cultural discourses of crime with social power, it has been important to emphasize that cultural criminology has not adapted a totalizing view of the mass media as a simple tool for the transmission of a dominant ideology. Drawing upon the work of criminologist Young (1973), Sanders and Lyon (1995) argued it preferable to think of media effects in terms of a "consensualist" model of the media where "the media consistently act to reinforce the conventional beliefs that society is essentially orderly and that most people agree on what is right or wrong" (p. 27). In general, media portrayals of deviance worked to "arouse moral indignation" (p. 27), while avoiding depictions of deviance that might make criminality appealing. According to Young (1973), the media have reproduced social consensus through the construction of an ideal-typical "average man" [sic] who has been "content in his [sic] universe of hard work and industrious consumption" (p. 315). Outside the boundaries of normal society,

the media has depicted a marginalized world of deviants who were either "innocent" and "must be saved," or who were "wicked" and "must be punished" (p. 320).

Finally, research in cultural criminology has provided insight into the media construction of drug-related crime and its policing. Barak (1994) provided a noteworthy discussion of the media construction of the United States' war on drugs. Here, drug use and trafficking were simplified into a moralistic narrative, while any analysis of the underlying causes of problematic drug use was outside the parameters of debate. In other words, dominant media discourses tended to bracket out an analysis of the social patterns of inequality that underlie drug economies. Ferrell and Sanders (1995b) also asserted that media depictions of drugs focused on drug use and trafficking as individualized deviance, while rendering invisible the sociological aspects of the drug economy. They wrote, "Those trapped in the ghetto or in minimum wage jobs might point out that we not only want them to inhabit an increasingly bleak future, but to do so clean and sober" (p. 315).

Reinarman and Levine (1997) analyzed the "media frenzy" (p.21) that accompanied the emergence of crack as a social problem in the United States. Here, the authors describe how crack was articulated with a New Right ideology that individualized social problems while diverting attention from structured social inequality. Through the media framing of the crack epidemic, "social problems" were translated into issues of "*individual* deviance, immorality, or weakness" (p. 37). Elsewhere, Boyd (2002) noted mass media constructions of drug traffickers created a caricature of drug trade workers that legitimized the policing of the drug economy. In media texts, such as drug films, the drug dealer was generally constructed as someone "evil, sadistic, immoral [and] greedy . . . [They] lure innocent youth, and draw moral women into drug addiction and crime" (p. 398).

Comic Books as a Research Site

Comic books emerged as a distinct medium in the United States in the 1930s. Despite their longevity, they have received limited academic attention compared with music, film, or television. While comics may be a minority art form compared to other mass media, they have occupied an important niche within North American mass culture (McCloud, 1993, 2000). According to Pustz (1999), comics have been read by distinct "interpretive communities" (p. 20), which have relatively closed borders. While it is difficult to establish precise readership numbers, there have been "between five hundred thousand and two million regular comic book readers United States" (Pustz, 1999, p. 208). The size of comics culture might also be estimated from monthly circulation figures. According to Marvel Comics' website, the monthly circulation for all of their comics has been about 3.7 million in recent years. Marvel, the medium's dominant corporation, has sold about 50% of all comics. This has also made them the 12th largest publisher of periodicals in the United States after *Time* magazine (*About Marvel: Media kit*, 2005). Finally, in the early 1990s, a single issue of *X-Men* sold a "record 8.2 million copies" (Wright, 2001, p. 254). Thus, while comics' audience may have consisted of a "small and very cohesive subculture" (Reynolds, 1994, p. 7), it has also been an enduring element of the North American cultural landscape.

Through an ethnography of comics subculture, Pustz (1999) argued that an active audience was produced in several ways through: (a) social interaction in comic shops, (b) the Internet, (c) comic book letters pages, (d) comics magazines, and (e) comic conventions. In general, North American comic culture has tended to be relatively homogenous (McCloud, 2000; Pustz, 1999; Walker, 2004). Recently, comic culture has been inhabited primarily by men in their 20s and 30s. A male-centred culture within comic shops has inhibited female participation in comic culture. While there has been a growing female readership of alternative comics such as *Sandman*, *Love and Rockets*, or *Strangers in Paradise*, Walker (2004) noted, "There are still relatively few women working on mainstream action comics. And while there's plenty of T&A in the pages of mainstream comics, that's not the kind of female presence I'm looking for" (p. 211).

In *Comic Book Nation*, Wright (2001) asserted comics have been an important site for research. He wrote, "Comic books are history. Emerging from the shifting interaction of politics, culture, audience tastes, and the economics of publishing, comic books have helped to frame a worldview and define a sense of self for the generations who have grown up with them" (p. xiii). Through a historical analysis of comics' dominant discourses, Wright argued comics have produced "a crude, exaggerated, and absurd caricature of the American experience tailored for young tastes. They offer a revealing fun-house mirror of life, not necessarily as it was or even as it should be but as young people have paid to see it" (p. xiv). The most important contribution that comics have made to mass culture has been the creation and perpetuation of the superhero mythos. Ever since a certain Kryptonian infant rocketed to Earth in 1938, characters such as Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and Spider-Man have achieved iconic status in North America and around the world. The importance of these comic book characters has been linked to their symbolic currency. As Walker (2004) wrote, "Superman does not just symbolize power and justice, he's also the incarnation of our faith and hope in power. Batman reflects our ambivalence toward the vigilante. Through the contradictory storylines and personalities of *Wonder Woman*, we can study the revelations of history" (p. 221). Thus, to dismiss comic books and their superhero icons as ephemeral pop culture detritus would be a mistake. Rather, the medium and its iconic characters have earned serious intellectual consideration.

Discourses of crime and the law have been central to superhero narratives, and these discourses have been examined by several authors. In an analysis of the Superman mythos, Eagan (1987) argued the construction of crime in Superman was ahistorical, asocial, and astructural. Superman was ever a political reactionary, he could never be an activist for social change. He may have spent years on a quixotic mission of "rounding up criminals and delivering gigantic Christmas baskets to the poor" (p. 92), but he never turned his attention to the structural causes of crime. Criminality was not located within social processes of economic exploitation or inequality, but was found within the deviant individual. The result has been that Superman was "the champion of the weak and the oppressed" (p. 92) only within the confines of existing structures of law.

Blackmore (1991) offered a similar reading of Miller's (1986/2002) Batman graphic novel, *The Dark Knight Returns*. Within this narrative, Superman could be read as an archetypical "vigilante" (Rosenbaum & Sederberg, 1976, p. 24), who worked "extralegally to preserve the established order" (Blackmore, 1991, p. 53). In contrast, Batman represented

Weber's (1978) "charismatic leader" (p. 1116), who sought the creation of a new social order (Blackmore, 1991). According to Blackmore (1991), the dominant discourse of *The Dark Knight Returns* focused on the "ease with which an authoritarian society operates under the banner of democracy" (p. 55). This graphic novel also provided a discursive construction of the mass media in which a passive, atomized mass audience was tied together through a common bond to a vapid pop culture. Blackmore wrote that Miller's media audience "can be convinced of anything with ease . . . the television presents at once a fragmented, and unified, society: all are watching a television instead of talking with each other, but again, all are watching the same channel" (p. 43). Finally, *The Dark Knight Returns* reproduced an essentially conservative discourse of crime. Here, the Batman narrative was dominated by a discourse that individual rights have become dysfunctional for the normal law-abiding citizen. The discourse of rights has been over-extended to criminals at the expense of victims of crime.

Vollum and Adkinson (2003) have drawn on both Batman and Superman to look at how superhero comics constructed law breaking and its consequences. According to the authors, Superman epitomized the "idealism of urban justice," while Batman represented the "realism of urban crime" (p. 98). Although the two heroes have had meaningful differences from each other, they both reproduced a hegemonic, conservative discourse of law, crime, and punishment. This conservative discourse included several key elements, among which were the notions that the law has been too lenient on criminals, that the law favoured the rights of criminals over the rights of victims, and that society has been marked by a general disrespect for authority. Finally, the authors argued these canonical superhero narratives adopted a pre-social notion of evil as something inherent in the deviant individual, where villains were "born criminals" who appeared to be "thrust into their roles by forces beyond their control" (p. 103). By contrast, complex social and cultural factors were left unexamined.

Wood's (1974/1989) *The Poison Maiden and the Great Bitch* was an early attempt at a gendered analysis of superhero comics. Writing specifically about Marvel comics, Wood noted that while the company attempted to publish material that was politically engaged, issues of gender and social power were addressed only in a denigrating way. That is, while war, racism, and drug use were taken up as serious topics within the Marvel superhero universe:

> [Stan Lee] and his staff continually treat one major issue, women's growing demands for human rights, as a nasty joke…Wenches, bitches, or weepy blond recreation equipment—but not people—they are admitted into a man's world only when shaped by the old, old molds. (Wood, 1974/1989, p. 18)

Wood also argued that most female characters in the Marvel Universe have fit into the dichotomy of the Poison Maiden and the Great Bitch. The former character type was the virginal, idealized woman who was a source of distraction and heartbreak for the hero. In Marvel superhero narratives, heterosexual love was always problematic. Emotions were a hindrance for male heroes, while women were blamed for creating emotional problems. By contrast, the Great Bitch was the woman as a dangerous super-villain. According to Wood, the most promising female character in the Marvel Universe was the Fantastic Four's Susan Richards (a.k.a. the Invisible Girl), who was allowed to be a mother and a superhero. Unlike other Marvel women, the Invisible Girl could be both heroic and emotional.

Finally, Robinson's (2004) *Wonder Women* provided a detailed examination of Wonder Woman as the archetypal female superhero. Robinson's main argument was that Wonder Woman and other female superhero narratives have contained glimpses of feminism. This was especially true during the Wonder Woman stories of the 1940s. However, the general trend in superhero narratives has been to move from a "pre-feminist" social world into a "postfeminist" fictional universe, where gender equality has flourished and "where accusations of discrimination are baseless" (p. 138). While this may be viewed as a positive move within superhero narratives, Robinson observed that this postfeminist world arrived without an engagement with feminism as a social movement, thereby bracketing out a sense of how these changes might actually occur.

In summary, we live in a social world that is permeated with mass culture. Though not as ubiquitous as television or film, comic books have carved out a lasting niche in the cultural landscape of the last century. Since the 1930s, comic books have produced superhero narratives that have reproduced dominant discourses about society, crime, gender, and power. This review of the limited literature on comics has demonstrated that they are a fertile site for social research.

Discourse Analysis as a Methodological Framework

Discourses are particular linguistic forms of representing the world. They have been mobilized by actors as resources for social interaction. Our social interactions have also been shaped by the discursive resources that were available in particular social and historical locations. As Fairclough and Wodak (1997) have noted, the key quality of discourse is that it has been both "socially *constitutive* as well as socially shaped" (p. 258; see also Jaworski & Coupland, 1999). In other words, discourses have been produced, disseminated, reproduced, and transformed by social agents. Conversely, discourses have assumed an existence independent of any particular speaking individual. Thus, discourses are able to "transcend" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 124) local settings. We live among a wide array of discourses that have shaped our subjectivities, which we draw upon whenever we have interacted with others.

Discourse has been considered sociologically interesting for several reasons (Apperly, 1997; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Foucault, 1991; Prior, 1997). First, it has been an integral part of the interaction between social actors. Second, it has mediated how social actors perceive both their individual identities and their identities as members of social groups. Third, it has provided us with "representations of the world" (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 273). Finally, discourse has been implicated in relationships of social power. Discourses have often consisted of "ways of representing and constructing society which reproduce unequal relations of power, relations of domination and exploitation" (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 275). The essence of the relationship between discourse and power has been captured in the phrase "power/knowledge" (Gordon, 1980, p. 233). As Foucault (1980) noted, "relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses" (p. 93).

If discourse has been conceptualized as a sort of social structure, then the text has been seen as a concrete "social event" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 24) that captures an instance of discursive

interaction. Through an analysis of a set of texts, we may identify the dominant discourses, subordinate discourses, and absences that produce a particular construction of the social world. Among his guidelines for discourse analysis, Foucault (1991) noted we should attend to "the limits and forms of the *sayable*" (p. 59; see also Prior, 1997). That is, we should articulate the boundaries that separate allowable discourses from those that are excluded from representation. Therefore, in addition to documenting the dominant discourse of a group of texts, we must also be alert to the silences that characterize that discourse. As Foucault (1978) wrote, "There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse" (p. 27). Furthermore, we should be attentive to the "limits and forms of *appropriation*" (Foucault, 1991, p. 60) that have been embedded within discourse. By this, Foucault suggested that we ask, "How is the relationship institutionalized between the discourse, speakers and its destined audience" (Foucault, 1991, p. 60)? Finally, discourses have not been homogenous sites for the exercise of power by elites over the masses. Discourse has less often been a site of ideological closure than a site of social conflict. Therefore, while we may document dominant discourses, we must remain alert to the ways in which these discourses have been contested.

METHOD

Sample Selection

Comic book narratives have appeared in two main forms. Traditionally comic books were about 20 pages long, printed on low quality paper, stapled, and released as a periodical. However, recent years have seen the proliferation of trade paperbacks (or graphic novels), as a different medium for comic narratives. These are bound books that contain a longer story, which may have originally been released as several smaller comic books. These books are printed on paper that is more durable and may contain hundreds of pages of content. The present analysis of drug narratives in comics was based on an archive of 52 traditional comic books and trade paperbacks (see those reference list entries with an asterisk for details). All texts were published by Marvel and DC Comics, the two companies that dominate the medium. Thus, this study focused on the mainstream side of comics (which has been dominated by superhero narratives) while bracketing out a detailed analysis of drug narratives within alternative comics (Pustz, 1999).

Following the conventions of qualitative research, I used a purposive approach to sampling (Silverman, 2000, 2001). Instead of randomly choosing texts for analysis, I selected texts in light of my theoretical lens. The texts in this set were chosen either because they had received attention for their depictions of drug use, or because they have been considered canonical texts that depict drug use and trafficking. Several of the texts in this archive have been nominated for (or have received) Eisner or Harvey awards. These have been the chief marks of distinction within the comic industry.[2] Furthermore, I attempted to include deviant cases of drug narratives, which were likely to challenge my own preconceptions about the research project. For these texts, I focused on works that have achieved a somewhat canonical status among more alternative comics readers. Finally, I attempted to retain a flexible approach to sampling selection as the project progressed, adding new texts where relevant.

In order to construct a textual archive from which to work, I drew on two major sources. I began with comic books that have been recognized as noteworthy by Prism, an American organization that awards "the accurate depiction of drug, alcohol and tobacco use and addiction in film, television, interactive, music, video, and comic book entertainment" (Prism, 2004, ¶ 1). Prism award nominees and winners included stories from the following comic series: *The Avengers, Iron Man, Alias, X-Men, X-Force, Galactus the Devourer, Catwoman,* and *The Flash.* Of these texts, *X-Men*, *The Avengers*, and *Iron Man* have been popular series, which have been in publication for close to 40 years. By contrast, *Alias* and *Catwoman* have been the recipients of positive critical attention, including Eisner award nominations. This group of texts was published between 1998 and 2005.

My review of the literature on comics was also used to identify relevant canonical texts that address drug use and trafficking. From this body of literature, I was able to locate two classic drug narratives from the early 1970s. These included a three-part story about drug addiction published in *Spider-Man*, as well as a two-part story about heroin use and trafficking from *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* (Park, 2002; Pustz, 1999; Wright, 2001). Both of these stories received positive critical attention when they were published, while *Spider-Man* has been a perpetual fan-favourite since the 1960s. This literature review also led to the inclusion of key works from the 1980s. Both Miller's work on *Daredevil* and the mini-series *Cloak and Dagger* were responsible for turning comics' gaze on the American inner city and a fictionalized urban underclass. These texts marked the emergence of urban gangs and drug dealers as stock villains in comics. Miller's *Daredevil* was particularly popular among older readers during the 1980s (Jones & Jacobs, 1997). Finally, Morrison's *Animal Man* was included as an important deviant case, as it contained a counter-hegemonic drug narrative that offered a positive construction of drug use (Pustz, 1999).

The texts identified through the Prism website and the literature review were supplemented by informal conversations with comic shop workers in Victoria, British Columbia, as well as my own experience as a comic reader for 20 years. The graphic novel, *Wonder Woman: The Hiketeia* was added to the sample, as was the work of Bendis and Nocenti on *Daredevil.* Bendis' *Daredevil* has been the subject of significant attention from fans and critics, receiving several Eisner award nominations over the past few years. Finally, Moore's *V for Vendetta* and *Swamp Thing* were also included. Like Morrison's *Animal Man*, Moore's construction of drug use was more positive than the texts that were lauded by Prism. Moore is also regarded by many as the medium's best writer (Klock, 2002; Reynolds, 1994). Therefore, it seemed important to include a sample of his work as another deviant case.

In concluding this section, I should note there were two important exclusions from the textual archive. The first was a key early drug narrative entitled *Murder, Morphine and Me* (Cole & Kotzky, 1947). This story was cited by moral entrepreneur Wertham (1954) as evidence that comics led adolescents into drug addiction and engagement in the drug trade (see also Wright, 2001). This story was excluded because of the difficulty of locating an affordable reprint. The second notable exclusion was the body of underground "comix" (Pustz, 1999, p. 60) from the 1970s, epitomized by the work of Crumb and by Shelton's (1968) *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, which often described drug use and drug using subcultures. These stories often revolved around "buying marijuana or LSD, avoiding the police, rolling a joint, marijuana-

induced hunger pangs, and more" (Pustz, 1999, pp. 62-63). While the inclusion of this work would have been valuable, reprints of this work were not easily available in affordable editions. A valuable extension of the current project would be a comparison between the drug narratives in this alternative body of work and in the mainstream narratives that dominated the present textual archive.

Data Analysis

For the first stage of data analysis, I did an initial reading of all of the texts that made up my textual archive. Using the bibliographic software EndNote (Thomson ISI, 2004), I entered research notes on each text. These notes were primarily descriptive, recording the salient aspects of each text. The notes focused on the type of drug(s) featured in the narrative, the construction of drug users, the construction of drug dealers, narratives of addiction and recovery, and on discourses of justice.

As I completed a first reading of the texts, I imported my research notes from EndNote into N6 software (QSR, 2002) for qualitative analysis, which was used to code and analyze my notes. I adopted a purposive approach to coding. Based on my first reading of the texts, I began with the texts that were likely to yield the richest data. I started by coding the classic drug narratives from *Spider-Man, Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, and *Daredevil*. The coding scheme was adapted from the coding scheme developed by Boyd (2003-2006) for the Social Science and Humanities Research Council-funded study *Drug Films, Justice and Society*. Indexical coding focused on the following broad themes: (a) constructions of the drug, (b) constructions of the drug user, (c) constructions of the drug dealer, (d) constructions of crime and justice, (e) recovery narratives, and (f) locations (see Appendix). Throughout the coding process, I also paid particular attention to depictions of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and social class within the drug narratives. As I worked through my initial research notes, I added new coding categories based on the content of the texts, following the grounded-theory tradition of qualitative research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Kirby & McKenna, 1989). After working through these classic texts, as well as several texts drawn from the Prism website, I reviewed and revised the coding scheme.

Subsequent to an initial revision of the coding scheme, I moved between coding my research notes, reviewing the data within coding categories, and comparing the content of different coding categories. Following a detailed analysis of 38 texts, I felt I had reached a point of "saturation" (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 138) with the data, where the coding of additional texts did not alter the emergent results. Before closing off my analysis, I reviewed the remaining research notes in order to ensure that nothing important was excluded from the analysis. The analysis concluded with a final revision of the coding scheme, where the coding categories were arranged in relation to each other.

RESULTS

Constructing Drugs in Comics

Heroin was the most prevalent illicit drug in the data set, appearing in nine texts. Heroin was constructed as an inherently bad drug, in that it appeared to have only negative effects. The

construction of heroin repeatedly focused on discourses of addiction, withdrawal, and overdose. By contrast, discourses of its pleasurable effects were only admitted at the margins of the drug narratives. Cocaine appeared three times in the data set and pills appeared twice, while crack, solvents, and angel dust each appeared once. The overwhelmingly negative construction of heroin was echoed in the depiction of these other illicit drugs. The negative discourse of drug use was also extended to fictional performance enhancing drugs, which appeared in five texts. These drugs were used by heroic characters in order to increase their own power. While narratives about performance enhancing drugs were marked by discourses of pleasurable use, they were dominated by discourses of problematic drug use.

Psychedelic drug use appeared in five texts. This included LSD and peyote, which appeared in one text each, as well as a fictional psychedelic drug that was depicted in three *Swamp Thing* graphic novels (Moore et al., 1984-1985/1990; Moore et al., 1985-1986/2001; Moore et al., 1987/2003). In contrast with other illicit drugs, the construction of psychedelics was characterized by dominant discourses of spiritual drug use, leading to revelation and enlightenment. Thus, the depiction of positive effects in psychedelic drug narratives provided a noteworthy counterpoint to the construction of other illicit drugs. However, it was noteworthy that the depictions of psychedelics were entirely limited to deviant case texts. These texts were marketed to mature readers, and they did not feature the iconic superhero characters that dominate the anti-drug narratives that focus on heroin, cocaine, or other hard drugs.

One particularly notable silence in the comic book depiction of drugs was the relative absence of marijuana. That is, marijuana only appeared once, in a *Swamp Thing* story from the 1980s (Moore et al., 1985-1986/2001). This depiction of marijuana located it firmly within a hippie subculture, which was also articulated with pro-environmental politics. Marijuana use was not problematized, it was normalized within the subculture. The construction of marijuana contrasted sharply with the depiction of most other illicit drugs. The invisibility of marijuana was noteworthy, given its prevalence within youth culture, especially when compared with heroin or cocaine. In the fictive world of comic books, the most visible and problematic drugs appeared to be the harder drugs, epitomized by heroin.

Turning to the comic book depiction of legal drugs, it is notable that alcohol appeared more often in the data set than any individual illicit drug. Whereas all combined illicit drugs appeared in 27 texts, alcohol appeared in 20 texts alone. This was more than twice as often as heroin, which appeared in nine texts.[3] The discursive construction of alcohol was overwhelmingly negative. Problematic use was portrayed through recurring themes of denial, violence against others, and alcoholism as a permanent identity. Where alcohol differed from the depiction of illicit drugs was that discourses of normalized use were also admitted. Finally, tobacco appeared in only three texts. Rather than something that was framed either positively or negatively, these comic narratives constructed a non-smoking fictive universe.[4]

In this textual archive, addiction was a nearly universal outcome of drug use. The bulk of drug narratives adopted an addiction-sobriety dichotomy, where the user faced a binary choice between a moral sobriety and a morally degraded state of addiction, with little room for occasional drug use or managed dependency. Narratives repeatedly linked addiction with the impoverishment and sexual degradation of drug users. For example, *Daredevil: Born Again*

(Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987) told the story of Karen Page, the ex-girlfriend of the superhero Daredevil. Years earlier, Karen had been Daredevil's secretary and girlfriend, however, she left him to pursue an acting career. In this book, we learn that she has fallen into a life of acting in pornographic films, accompanied by heroin addiction. When she re-entered the Daredevil narrative, she was physically, sexually, and morally degraded. Her degraded state was dramatized when she sold Daredevil's secret identity for a fix.

The addiction discourse was also extended to texts that focused on alcohol use. In this textual archive, the *Avengers* characters Iron Man and Warbird/Carol Danvers, as well as the *X-Force* character Siryn, were each depicted as having an addictive relationship with alcohol. Addiction was portrayed as a problematic outcome of legal and illegal drug use alike. Thus, the textual reality constructed in this data set did not create a dichotomy between problematic illicit drug use and acceptable legal drug use.

Discourses of negative drug use also focused on the risk of overdose and withdrawal. Overdosing was a prevalent negative drug effect. It occurred across several types of drugs, including heroin, cocaine, pills, angel dust, and alcohol (as alcohol poisoning). The withdrawal discourse took two distinct forms. First, withdrawal was an element of addiction that could be exploited by dealers, pimps, and sexual predators. For example, in *Cloak and Dagger* (Mantlo & Leonardi, 1983a, 1983b, 1983c, 1984), a young cocaine addict's withdrawal was used to coerce her into working in the sex trade. Thus, withdrawal ensured the state of servitude and slavery of degraded users.

Second, withdrawal was a necessary obstacle to overcome on the path to recovery. Passing through withdrawal was a means of triumphing over the individual weakness of addiction. This was made apparent in the narrative of Cecelia Reyes, one of the X-Men [sic], who was addicted to a power-enhancing drug called Rave. She was fighting through withdrawal with the aid of the other X-Men. Contemplating her situation, Professor X (the group leader) thought to himself:

> It may have been possible to use my telepathy to purge both the drug and her desire for it from her system. But that cure would be far worse than the disease. It would leave Cecelia forever in doubt about her own abilities, her own strength, forever dependent on me as a crutch. (Claremont & Larroca, 2001, p. 19)

In several texts, a dominant discourse of negative drug effects appeared alongside a marginalized discourse of pleasurable effects. In *Green Lantern/Green Arrow, Spider-Man, Catwoman, X-Men,* and *Iron Man*, pleasurable effects were part of the seductive lure of drug use that led to problems of addiction, overdose, and withdrawal. For example, in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, a young Asian man tied off his arm and injected heroin. As he did so, he said, "In a minute I'm gonna be flying! Don't need food…don't need girls—just ol' mama spike into the mainline!" (O'Neil, Adams, & Giordano, 1971/1983, p. 4). Immediately after shooting up, the user fell to the ground, dead of an overdose. It was typical that the overdose appeared to arrive as immediate repayment for the illusory pleasure of drug use.

A more explicit pleasure discourse appeared in *Swamp Thing*. Here, pleasurable effects were linked with psychedelic, spiritual, and erotic drug use. When Abby Cable ate one of the psychedelic tubers produced by the Swamp Thing, her humanoid vegetable lover, she underwent a metaphysical awakening. She exclaimed to the Swamp Thing, "Everything's alive and…and it's all made from the same stuff! I never realized…I never realized…that the world…was like this…" (Moore et al., 1984-1985/1990, p. 196). This passage evoked the Edenic myth, with the exception that it was Adam who offered the psychedelic fruit of expanded consciousness. This positive construction of drug use existed only at the margins of the comic book construction of drugs. This counter-hegemonic discourse was overwhelmed by a construction of illusory pleasure that is repaid by pain, suffering, degradation, and death.

Constructing the Drug User

In this textual archive, drug users were not constructed through a discourse of criminalization. From the 1970s through the present, users were depicted primarily as the victims of predation by villainous drug dealers. This dichotomy legitimized the differential treatment prescribed to each character type by the hero. Where drug dealers were bad guys deserving of justified violence and criminalization, drug users were the subject of pity and aid. At the same time, a junkie discourse was frequently invoked as a device for constructing drug users. The term junkie was an othering device, which defined users as untrustworthy and outside the moral community of normal society. When Karen Page sold Daredevil's secret identity for heroin, her junkie identity was repeatedly invoked as the cause of her betrayal (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987). While junkies were depicted as morally and physically degraded, they remained pitiable and subject to aid from heroic characters. They were not subject to the same process of criminalization as drug dealers.

Gender, racialization, and class were all used in the construction of drug users in the archive. Turning first to gender, women appeared most often as problematic drug users. Male drug users and addicts were far less visible, especially as the focus of extended addiction narratives. The comic book construction of drug users implied women were much more likely to engage in problematic drug use, they were more likely to yield to the individual weakness of addiction. Women's illicit drug use was also generally linked with sexual degradation and exploitation by men, whether through involvement in the sex trade or through trading drugs for sexual access. For example, Catwoman's young protégé, Holly, mused on her past as a heroin addict:

> And when you're a junkie that's all you do—wait to score, wait to shoot up, wait for it to wear off, wait for a guy who gives you more money to score again, do anything he wants to get it, wait to score, wait to shoot up. (Brubaker et al., 2003, p. 43)

However, gendered patterns of representation have changed over time. Addicts in 1970s drug narratives were male. Spider-Man's friend, Harry Osbourne, was addicted to pills; while the Green Arrow's male sidekick, Speedy, became a heroin addict (Lee & Kane, 1971/1995a, 1971/1995b; O'Neil & Adams, 1971/1983; O'Neil et al., 1971/1983). By contrast, no male character was the subject of an extended drug narrative beyond 1980, with the exception of the

ongoing depiction of Iron Man as a recovering alcoholic (Quesada & Chen, 2000; Tieri et al., 2001).

The textual archive was also characterized by racialized constructions of drug use. Characters who were the subjects of extended addiction narratives were most often White. The main exception was Cecelia Reyes, the young mutant addicted to the fictional drug Rave, who was identified as Puerto Rican (Claremont & Larroca, 2001; Claremont, Yu, Derenick, & Williams, 2000). At the same time, an explicit discourse of racialized drug use was mobilized within the 1970s drug narratives. For example, in *Spider-Man*, Randy, a Black friend of Spider-Man, told his White friends:

> Man, this drug scene really bugs me! Everyone figures it's the Black man's bag—but it aint! We're the ones who hate it the most! It hurts us more than anyone else—'cause too many of us got no hope—so we're easier pickin's for the pushers! (Lee, Kane, & Romita, 1971/1995, p. 46)

Here, Black drug use was located within a racialized political economy, a theme that was repeated in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* (O'Neil & Adams, 1971/1983).

However, this critical discourse of racialized drug use disappeared in the drug narratives of the 1980s and 1990s. Instead, these drug narratives were marked by the repeated visual juxtaposition of Black and Latino background characters, drug use, and an impoverished inner city landscape. In *Catwoman, Cloak and Dagger,* and *Daredevil*, multi-ethnic drug use was normalized as a sort of common sense that was not explicitly problematized. Given that dominant Whiteness has been typical of super-hero comics as a genre, the frequent depiction of multi-ethnic drug users as secondary characters was particularly salient.

Class was also a noteworthy factor in the construction of drug users. The dominant discourse articulated illicit drug use with poverty. Drug users most often inhabited an impoverished, inner city landscape. However, there were a few notable appearances of wealthy drug users. In *Spider-Man,* for example, Harry Osborn's drug use was used to illustrate that the drug problem exists beyond the boundaries of the inner city. Robbie Robertson, editor of the *Daily Bugle*, wanted to write about the wealthy youth's overdose on pills. He told his publisher, J. Jonah Jameson, "I'm showing that drugs aren't just a ghetto hangup! They hit the rich—same as the poor. It's everyone's problem! We've all got to face it" (Lee & Kane, 1971/1995a, p. 79). Upper-class drug use also occurred within a subculture of celebrity in *X-Force*, a comic that used the super-hero genre to analyze the obsession with celebrity in postmodern mass culture (Milligan & Allred, 2001; Milligan, Allred, Cooke, & Fegredo, 2002). Throughout this textual archive, drug users were typically depicted as members of an impoverished urban underclass. Exceptions to this depiction focused on upper-class drug users, while middle-class drug users and addicts were rendered invisible.

On a concluding note, normalized heterosexuality also characterized comic book drug narratives. Only one narrative depicted a non-heterosexual drug user. In *Catwoman*, Holly was a recovered heroin addict and ex-prostitute who was involved in a same-sex relationship (Brubaker

et al., 2003). With this single exception, normalized heterosexuality was not disturbed in this textual archive, which was a notable patterned silence.

Constructing Drug Dealers

The discursive separation between drug users and drug dealers pervaded comic book drug narratives to the point where it assumed the status of a truism. Comic book drug narratives constructed drug users as pitiable victims in need of help. This contrasted with a dominant discourse of predatory dealers who deserved punishment. The ideal typical predatory drug dealer takes advantage of individual weakness and the naïveté of youth. For example, in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, the heroes discovered a drug production lab that was owned by a wealthy dealer named Saloman Hooper. Saloman was shown talking to a scientist who was working on creating "real high-grade dope!—Enough to net you plenty!" (O'Neil et al., 1971/1983, p. 20). To this, Saloman replied, "More than plenty…when we cut it and retail it to those sad fools, our customers!" (p. 20).

This construction of the predatory dealer and the victimized user was also demonstrated in *Catwoman*, where Catwoman mused on Brendan, a young boy injured while working in the drug trade in the impoverished East End of Gotham City. Brendan was one of many "poor kids used by powerful men…Men who keep themselves insulated from the abuse and terror and death that makes them so powerful in the first place" (Brubaker et al., 2003, p. 20). The discourse of the predatory drug dealer was central to the creation of a user-dealer dichotomy, which defined the dealer as a villain who is criminalized and subjected to the righteous violence of the superhero.

This construction of the villainous drug dealer was only undermined once within this textual archive. In *Swamp Thing*, Chester was a likeable, well-meaning character who was both a drug user and dealer (Moore et al., 1985-1986/2001). When this hippie character first appeared, he was wearing a brown leather jacket, blue jeans, and a headband. His jacket was covered in pins, including a peace sign and a Black power insignia. Chester's apartment also worked to signify his subcultural identity. It was decorated with old rock concert posters, a copy of Zap (an underground comic from the 1970s), and books on plant botany. While Chester was a singular example of a sympathetic drug dealer, it was notable that he dealt only in psychedelics and marijuana, rather than hard drugs such as heroin, cocaine, or angel dust. The existence of Chester at the margins of the comic book construction of the drug trade underscored the typical role of drug dealers as villains, who were generally not rendered sympathetically. A more sympathetic construction of drug dealers, which accounted for the political economy of the drug trade, would have undermined the simplistic construction of the drug dealer as a villain who could be subjected to the ritualized violence that has dominated the superhero genre.

The drug trade was depicted as a male domain. The drug narrative in *Catwoman* was the only site where women were depicted—in passing—as drug trade workers (Brubaker et al., 2003). The male dominance of the drug trade contrasted sharply with the frequent depiction of female drug users. Thus, the dichotomy between drug dealers and users was also a gendered dichotomy. In this gendered drug discourse, male drug dealers were marked by their penchant for violence, while female users were marked by sexual degradation. *Wonder Woman: The Hiketeia*

(Rucka & Jones, 2002) provided an illustrative example of the gendered nature of the drug trade and its articulation with the sexual degradation of female users. In this graphic novel, Wonder Woman was bound by oath to protect Danielle, a young woman wanted in Gotham City for the murder of several men. Batman tracked Danielle to New York, where he came into conflict with Wonder Woman over her fate. In a key part of the story, Danielle explained that she killed the men because they used heroin to enslave her sister and coerce her to work in the sex trade. Danielle described her sister's last days as an addict, "You're an appliance now. You're a television. And there's nothing left. And when you die, cops make jokes…because you're just another junkie whore" (pp. 67-68). The discursive construction of the drug trade in comic books was marked by a gendered divide between predatory, violent male dealers and victimized female users. In this gendered fictive reality, male dealers were subjected to the violence of the hero, while female users were more often saved by the hero rather than subjected to criminalization.

While the drug trade was a predominantly male domain, it was also a multi-ethnic social realm. Throughout the textual archive, images of Black, Latino, and White drug trade workers were invoked. However, while the drug trade was marked by a mixture of ethnicities, there was a notable intersection of ethnicity and class within the hierarchy of the drug trade. Put simply, White men were the elite workers of the drug trade, whereas Latino and Black men were typically shown as street level dealers and underlings. This intersection of class and ethnicity typically appeared as a sort of hegemonic common sense. However, it was problematized in *Catwoman*, where the hero told a Black street-level worker:

> You think you're a big man, but you're just a pawn for some rich White man who got you to turn on your own kind…And you don't even get any respect from your boss…because just like me, he knows if you fall, ten more creeps just like you will take your place. (Brubaker et al., 2003, p. 25)

In this excerpt, the racialized hierarchy of power that appears to be a normal part of comic drug narratives was made explicit and problematized.

Finally, two points should be made about the function of class in comic book drug narratives. First, there was a class distinction between physically degraded drug users and dealers, who were dressed in clothing that was more expensive-looking. Second, there was a class hierarchy within the drug trade. Here, signs of drug wealth became more apparent as the narrative moved away from street-level dealers toward the big boss figures. For example, in *Catwoman*, the drug wealth of Xavier Dylan, the White drug lord, was marked by his lavish apartment and clothing (Brubaker et al., 2003). Similarly, in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, Saloman Hooper was depicted on a yacht, also wearing expensive clothing (O'Neil et al., 1971/1983). Here and elsewhere, clothing and physical setting were repeatedly used to demarcate the powerful drug lord from the less powerful street-level dealers, who were simultaneously wealthier than their customer-victims.

Discourses of Justice

So far, I have described the discursive themes that were used to depict drugs, drug users, and drug dealers in the fictive world of comic books. In this section, I turn to the model of justice

that was created through comic book drug narratives. The police, courts, and prison system existed only at the margins of comic book drug narratives. The invisibility of these official institutions of justice was a notable patterned silence. In the absence of narratives of arrest, trial, and imprisonment, the justified violence of the superhero became the dominant mechanism of punishment for drug criminals. Daredevil, Spider-Man, Green Arrow, Green Lantern, and Catwoman were among the heroic figures that repeatedly beat up drug dealers, without legal constraint or reprisal. Within these narratives, drug dealers received the same type of violent treatment that had been meted out to more exotic supervillains on a monthly basis.

Vigilante justice was normalized within comic book drug narratives. Characters like Daredevil, Green Arrow, Green Lantern, and Spider-Man worked outside the boundaries of law that have governed the official institutions of criminal justice (i.e., the police, courts, and prison system). However, there were well-defined rules of the game for the ritualized violence of super-vigilantism. This model of legitimate vigilantism was governed by two principles. First, the superhero vigilante worked as a complement to the official justice system. While violence was a ritualized part of hero-villain interaction, the ultimate aim was to submit the villain to official processes of criminalization and punishment (which occurs off-page). Second, while the hero may have used violence, he or she did not kill the villain.

These principles were clarified where the moral boundaries of vigilante justice were transgressed. For example, in *Wonder Woman: The Hiketeia* (Rucka & Jones, 2002), vigilante justice was problematized when it was undertaken by Danielle, a young woman being tracked by Batman for the murder of several men who were involved in drug dealing, pornography, and prostitution. This story ended on a tragic note. While Batman and Wonder Woman fought over Danielle's fate, she threw herself to her death. In a similar vein, a drug narrative in *Daredevil* depicted the misguided vigilantism of Billy, a young boy who wanted to kill the drug dealer who provided the angel dust that killed his sister (Miller & Janson, 1981-1983/2001). In the climactic scene, Daredevil talked Billy out of killing the drug dealer by asserting his own faith in the legal system.

In this textual archive, the story of the hero saving the drug user was a recurring theme. Where violence was used against drug addicts, the norms of heroism dictated that the user be saved, even if they were violently attacking the hero. For example, as Daredevil was defending himself from a group of young men who were high on angel dust, he mused, "dangerous or not, they're not hardened criminals. I don't want to hurt them…" (Miller & Janson, 1981-1983/2001, p. 10). By contrast, the drug dealer was constructed as a villain, who could be punished through the justified violence of the hero. For example, after beating up a group of drug dealers, Spider-Man told the leader:

> You don't know how lucky you are—you're only getting your lumps this time—while some of your pigeons [users] may pay with—their lives…Remember one thing—and remember it good—if I ever see you pushing that stuff—anywhere again—you'll think that this was just a playful picnic (Lee & Kane, 1971/1995a, p. 78).

In the model of superhero justice, the hero was the saviour of the innocent (the drug user) and the punisher of the guilty (the drug dealer). Therefore, the hero's violence reinforced the moral dichotomy between drug users and drug dealers.

DISCUSSION

Cultural criminology asserts that mass media texts are important resources for shaping and reproducing social myths about crime, deviance, and the law. In this paper, I examined the fictive world of comic books as a particular media site that constructs our knowledge about illicit drugs, drug users, and drug dealers. Several conclusions may be drawn from a discourse analysis of comic book drug narratives. First, illicit drugs are generally constructed as inherently negative. Discourses of negative effects far outweigh the marginalized discourses of pleasurable effects, or of revelatory drug use. For the most part, comic book drug narratives are conservative in nature, they work intertextually with the kinds of anti-drug discourses that are promoted by government and law enforcement agencies. Here, morality is defined through abstinence. The good guys just say no. With the exception of a few deviant cases, alternative drug discourses of pleasurable drug use, or of spiritual drug use, are subsumed beneath dominant discourses that reproduce a law and order perspective on illicit drugs. Illicit drugs are defined as essentially bad substances, regardless of the social or historical context in which drug use occurs. Addiction and degradation appear as inevitable effects, models of occasional use and managed dependency are among the patterned silences. At the same time, alcohol is also constructed primarily through discourses of negative effects. Thus, comic book drug narratives do not construct a dichotomy between legal and illicit drugs. Instead, all drug use is treated as potentially problematic.

Second, comic book drug narratives typically focus on hard drugs such as heroin, cocaine, angel dust, and crack. While psychedelic drugs appear in a few texts, these are comics directed at mature readers and do not feature the iconic superheroes that populate anti-drug narratives. Thus, instead of creating an explicit dichotomy between hard and soft drugs, comic book drug narratives focus on the negative effects of hard drugs while rendering soft drugs largely invisible. Given that these soft drugs (e.g., marijuana or psychedelics), are the illicit drugs which comic readers are most likely to encounter, this is a notable patterned silence.[5] Perhaps it is more plausible to reproduce the common sense of anti-drug discourses by constructing a drug-addicted other that does not contradict the personal experience of comic readers.

Third, comic book drug narratives construct a dichotomy between drug users and drug dealers. Users are typically presented as victims of predatory drug dealers. They may be physically, sexually, and morally degraded, but they remain victims who should be saved by the hero. The comic book construction of drug users is consistent with Reinarman and Levine's (1997) analysis of the media construction of the crack epidemic in the 1980s, where users were characterized by their individual weaknesses.

By contrast, dealers are predatory villains who are criminalized and punished through the justified violence of the hero. This finding is consistent with cultural criminology research on media depictions of the drug trade. Drawing on Boyd's (2002) analysis of drug film, I would concur with the claim that comic book constructions of drug trade workers depict "evil, sadistic,

immoral [and] greedy" men (p. 398), who deserve their violent punishment. This discourse locates responsibility for the drug problem among those who make up the drug trade. Members of the drug trade are simplified into evil men, who have chosen a life of social predation. While comic book drug narratives may help us understand the social structures that shape choices about drug use, we are far less likely to see the social and historical processes that make the drug trade an appealing economic choice for those who engage in it. This discursive dichotomy reproduces the notion that the criminalization of drug dealers is the most effective means of addressing problematic drug use. Alternative models of decriminalization or legalization are patterned silences. Moving from comic books to the outside world, we might ask whether these dominant discourses work to reinforce the power of the police as a necessary and righteous force against the social threat posed by the drug trade. Though comics are not an ideologically closed set of texts, they may be read as part of the "cultural political economy of the drug war" (White, 1997, p. 5). An examination of how these drug discourses are taken up by comics readers would be a valuable extension of this research project.

Fourth, my analysis also illustrates the ways in which cultural constructions of crime reproduce gendered and racialized relations of social power. Gender is perhaps the most obvious marker of drug user and drug dealer identity. Drug users are often female, whose addiction is linked with sexual degradation. By contrast, drug dealing is an exclusively male domain. As noted above, Wood (1974/1989) argues comic book depictions of women are limited to the archetypes of the Poison Maiden and the Great Bitch. To this typology, we might add the archetype of the *poisoned maiden*, the female drug addict who is preyed upon by villainous men and saved by heroic men. Thus, we see female drug users as passive objects, lacking agency, who are only acted upon by male heroes and villains.

Depictions of drug users and dealers are also racialized. In this textual archive, drug users and dealers are depicted as Black, White, and Latino. Therefore, addiction is seen as a social problem that crosses boundaries of ethnicity. However, White drug users are much more likely to be the focus of extended drug narratives, while Black and Latino users are pushed into a normal background of drug addiction and inner city poverty. In a sense, White addicts are the stars of comic drug narratives, while Black and Latino addicts are present to give drug narratives the right atmosphere. At the same time, the drug trade is marked by a racialized hierarchy, where White drug lord figures have greater power and wealth than multi-ethnic street level dealers. Given the normalized Whiteness that characterizes most of the fictive world of comic books, the frequent representation of non-White characters as impoverished drug addicts or as drug dealers might be seen as a questionable form of ethnic pluralism.[6]

Finally, existing research on superhero comic narratives tell us that these texts privilege conservative models of crime and justice (Blackmore, 1991; Eagan, 1987; Vollum & Adkinson, 2003). In this model of justice, superheroes police the boundaries of the status quo. By their nature, these icons of justice avoid acting for social change. The model of justice produced in comic narratives is essentially asocial and ahistorical. Criminality has its roots in an almost metaphysical, innate evil that is not grounded in a social or historical context. Furthermore, the law is depicted as too lenient on criminals and often fails to protect the rights of victims. The very existence of the superhero vigilante at the centre of drug narratives may be read as an implicit critique of the ability of established laws to protect society from criminals. However,

such a discourse is not made explicit in this textual archive. From an analysis of the present textual archive, I would conclude that comic book drug narratives are dominated by a vigilante model of justice. Drug dealers are constructed as villains who are subjected to the justifiable violence of the vigilante superhero. These drug villains are depicted as demonized individuals, whose deviance is not explained through a sociological or historical lens. In these drug narratives, the police, courts, and prison system appear only at the margins of the fictional universe. Superheroes seem to act as a surrogate to established forms of drug trade policing. At the same time, drug users are depicted as victims who should be saved, rather than criminalized. This discourse, which appears from the 1970s through the present, is a limited move beyond the 1980s drug war discourses that permeated the mass media and focused primarily on the criminalization of drug use (Barak, 1994; Reinarman & Levine, 1997). This sympathetic construction of drug users reframes them as moral subjects rather than criminal subjects, without allowing for managed use or the legitimacy of illicit pleasure.

The mass media help to shape our understanding of illicit drugs and the people who are criminalized for engaging in their use and distribution. Television, film, music, and comic books are all sites where knowledge about drug use and trafficking is produced and disseminated. In this paper, I have examined comic books as one site where representations of drugs, users, and dealers are constructed. These drug narratives form a system of power/knowledge in which illicit drugs are depicted through a dominant discourse of negative effects, while drug users are constructed as the victims of predatory, villainous drug dealers. This analysis is consistent with cultural criminology research on media depictions of illicit drugs. It is also consistent with research on depictions of crime and the law in comic books. In this textual archive, a network of power/knowledge privileges the authority of the forces of law and order, while subjugating alternative knowledge claims about the pleasurable or spiritual possibilities of drug use. Similarly, any claims about the viability of decriminalization, legalization, or managed dependency as alternatives to criminalization or imprisonment are also rendered invisible.

In this analysis, I have bracketed out a comparison of comic book drug narratives with the historical transformations in drug discourse in the broader public sphere. A historical comparison of comic book drug narratives with the dominant drug discourses of other mass media would be a valuable extension of the present research. Such a comparison could illustrate the ways in which the fictive world of comic book drug use and trafficking both reflect and depart from drug discourses in North American newspapers, magazines, or movies.

ENDNOTE

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NOTES

[1] The article title is taken from an issue of Green Lantern/Green Arrow about heroin use (O'Neil, Adams, & Giordano, 1971/1983).

[2] While these are the two main awards within the comic industry, the Eisners tend to be more mainstream in orientation, while the Harveys are somewhat more alternative in orientation. To use an analogy, the Eisners are the comic industry's Academy Awards, while the Harveys are its Cannes or Sundance Awards.

[3] The overrepresentation of alcohol in the data set can be partly explained by the inclusion of the "Carole's Story" narrative, which is spread out over several individual comic books.

[4] The X-Men character Wolverine is one of the few heroic characters depicted as a frequent smoker. However, his powers include a mutant "healing factor" that offsets the negative effects of tobacco.

[5] I am not aware of any study that examines the actual patterns of drug use among comic readers. However, Statistics Canada and the Department of Health and Human Services in the United States, report that experience with alcohol and marijuana is much more prevalent among youths and young adults than experience with other illicit drugs (Department of Health and Human Services, 2005; Tjepkema, 2004).

[6] Without engaging in a full content analysis of the textual archive, I would note that 13 of the 52 comics (25%) are coded for Black, Latino, and Asian drug users and dealers. A content analysis that compares the racialization of characters in drug narratives to characters in the broader fictive universe of mainstream comics would be a valuable avenue for further research.

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APPENDIX

N6 coding scheme

Index Tree
>   (1)Sorted by archive
>   >   (1 1) classics archive
>   >   (1 2) Prism archive
>   >   (1 3) deviant cases archive
>   >   (1 4) miscellaneous
>   (2)Construction of drug
>   >   (2 1) Type of drug
>   >   >   (2 1 1) heroin
>   >   >   (2 1 2) psychedelics
>   >   >   (2 1 3) performance enhancers
>   >   >   (2 1 4) marijuana
>   >   >   (2 1 5) Satellites
>   >   >   >   (2 1 5 1) pills
>   >   >   >   (2 1 5 2) cocaine
>   >   >   >   (2 1 5 3) solvents
>   >   >   >   (2 1 5 4) angel dust
>   >   >   >   (2 1 5 5) crack
>   >   (2 2)Drug effects
>   >   >   (2 2 1) addiction
>   >   >   (2 2 2) violence & insanity
>   >   >   (2 2 3) withdrawal
>   >   >   (2 2 4) overdose
>   >   >   (2 2 5) hallucinations
>   >   >   (2 2 6) pleasure discourse
>   >   >   (2 2 7) heightened consciousness
>   >   >   (2 2 8) Satellites
>   >   >   >   (2 2 8 1) tolerance
>   >   >   >   (2 2 8 2) super-powers
>   >   >   >   (2 2 8 3) incompetence
>   >   >   >   (2 2 8 4) bad trip
>   >   (2 3)Legal-illegal drug dichotomy
>   >   >   (2 3 1) problematic alcohol use
>   >   >   (2 3 2) normalized alcohol use
>   >   >   (2 3 3) normalized tobacco use
>   >   >   (2 3 4) problematic tobacco use
>   >   (2 4)Satellites
>   >   >   (2 4 1) hard drug soft drug dichotomy
>   (3)Construction of drug user
>   >   (3 1)Model of drug addiction
>   >   >   (3 1 1) user as victim
>   >   >   (3 1 2) psychological model of addiction

                  (3 1 2 1) dysfunctional family
              (3 1 3) individual weakness
              (3 1 4) social model of addiction
              (3 1 5)Satellites
                  (3 1 5 1) disease discourse
        (3 2) women & drug use
        (3 3) class & drug use
        (3 4) racialization & drug use
        (3 5) junkie construction of user
        (3 6) Satellites
            (3 6 1) sexual orientation & drug use
            (3 6 2) super-villain as drug user
(4)Recovery
        (4 1) recovery narrative
        (4 2) support network
        (4 3) Satellites
            (4 3 1) withdrawal
            (4 3 2) institutional setting
            (4 3 3) denial discourse
            (4 3 4) cold turkey
(5)Construction of drug dealer
        (5 1) gender & drug trade
        (5 2) racialization & drug trade
        (5 3) class & drug trade
        (5 4) separation of dealer & user
        (5 5) predatory drug dealer
        (5 6) violent drug dealer
        (5 7) Satellites
            (5 7 1) sympathetic drug dealer
            (5 7 2) Organized crime
            (5 7 3) untrustworthy drug dealer
            (5 7 4) children & drug trade
            (5 7 5) police as drug dealers
(6)Crime & justice
        (6 1) hero saves drug user
        (6 2) justified violence
        (6 3) vigilante justice
        (6 4) Satellites
            (6 4 1) police
            (6 4 2) prison
            (6 4 3) courts
            (6 4 4) drug user & crime
(7)Satellites
        (7 1)Visual constructions
            (7 1 1) paraphernalia
            (7 1 2) surrealism

(7 1 3) satellites
        (7 1 3 1) anti-drug imagery
(7 2) location
(7 3) mass media
(7 4) expert knowledge