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When the Abyss Looks Back:

Treatments of Human Trafficking in Superhero Comic Books.

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Superheroes and Social Advocacy

Superhero characters have historically engaged issues of social concern. Stories involving superheroes have frequently demonstrated a developed social awareness on national and international problems. Given that the audience for superhero characters is frequently (though not exclusively) composed of young people, this engagement has served as a vehicle for raising the understanding of issues and as a tool for encouraging activism on the part of readers ¹. As Palmer-Mehta and Hay ² succinctly state:

(They) have addressed a number of pressing social and political issues in narratives through the years, including alcohol and drug abuse, racism, environmental devastation, gun control, and poverty. In the process, they have provided a rich tapestry of American cultural attitudes and philosophies that reflect varying approaches to issues that continue to haunt, confound, and rile the American public.³

Scholarship on superheroes frequently references *Action Comics #1* as a foundational text in the development of the genre. As a point of entry, what's particularly compelling about the story is that Superman's first act of vigilante heroism is intervention in a case of domestic violence. When the story was first published in 1938, readers were likely familiar with the impact and extent of domestic violence in society. In fact, one of the major justifications for the Prohibition Amendment was that preventing alcohol consumption would curb what was classified as "epidemic" levels of domestic violence ⁴. One of Superman's first "heroic" statements given while righting the world's wrongs was neither a stance against invading aliens nor an invective

¹ McAllister, "Comic Books and AIDS.;" Thibeault, "Comic Books as a Reflection of Social Issues."

² "A Superhero for Gays?: Gay Masculinity and Green Lantern."

³ *Ibid.*, 390.

⁴ Cook and Moore, "The Economics Of Alcohol Abuse And Alcohol-Control Policies."

against some criminal mastermind. Rather, he attacks a man abusing his partner and states “...tough is putting mildly the treatment you’re going to get! You’re not fighting a woman now!”⁵.

The relationship of the superhero to topics of ongoing public concern appears to have been present even in the earliest days of the form. In fact, the cover of *Captain America Comics #1* shows the Captain punching Adolf Hitler over a year before the Pearl Harbor attack at a time when non-intervention was a commonly held public sentiment⁶. Superheroes continued their civic engagement throughout the World War II through propaganda and promotional materials aimed at galvanizing public sentiment towards national war efforts, yet it is in the period immediately after the war that superheroes develop their unique role in commenting on areas of social concern.

In 1947, the popular Superman Radio Show began what is widely regarded as its most successful story arc with “Clan of the Fiery Cross.” The Ku Klux Klan of this period was politically entrenched, widely respected, and enjoyed substantial financial resources⁷. Activist and writer Stetson Kennedy had infiltrated the KKK and learned precise details on both their campaign of organized terror and their group structure. His investigation notes included specific information about their secret codes, passwords, and leadership titles. When Kennedy passed this information on to the writers of the Superman Radio Show, they decided to produce the “Clan of the Fiery Cross” story which pit Superman against the KKK. The story contained the sort of precise details typically associated with a journalist’s account and broadcasters were completely

⁵ Siegel and Shuster, “Superman,” 5.

⁶ Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil : The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism*.

⁷ Bowers, *Superman Versus the KKK*.

unambiguous in stating that the show had an overt political aim ⁸. As an indication of the story's accuracy, Ku Klux Klan leaders were so incensed by the program that they attempted to have Pep Cereal (the show's sponsor) removed from supermarkets. The Klan's efforts failed and Kennedy's research received a larger and more diverse audience because of the story. Superman's successful defeat of the KKK was heard by over five million people and received immediate praise from the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the American Newspaper Guild, and the Calvin Newspaper Service, a chain of African American newspapers ⁹. In words that would become eerily prescient in describing the role superheroes can play in combating social ills, an executive at Kenyon & Eckhardt (the show's producers) stated:

This tolerance theme is good business. The psychologists tell us we're planting a 'thought egg' into the kids' minds. It won't have too much effect now, but it will when they become adolescent ¹⁰.

The Superman Radio show continued its progressive political stance with follow-up stories advocating for civil rights, equal treatment for women, and further action against intolerance. In the mid 1950's, however, public concern about comics creating a "culture of delinquency" resulted in the creation of the Comics Magazine Association of America in 1954. The CMAA quickly drafted the "Comics Code" as a way of regulating content and easing public concern about potential deviancy facilitated by comic books. Among other things, the Code stated that civic institutions, officials, and leaders "shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority" ¹¹. Clauses such as these necessarily had a chilling effect on

⁸ von Busack, "Superman and the KKK."

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Wall, *Inventing the "American Way": The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement*, 165.

¹¹ Comics Magazine Association of America, *Facts About Code-Approved Comics Magazines*.

the ability of superhero comics to explore controversial issues, as the exposure of wrongdoing and oppression frequently requires the indictment of institutional shortcomings. Thus, superhero stories were initially limited in their engagement on social issues and were frequently reduced to fantasy stories against absurd villains and the emphatic support of the infallibility of government institutions. In short order, however, events of the 1960's returned superheroes to the position of social critics and advocates.

With the rise of the counterculture, opposition to the Vietnam War, protests for civil rights, and the assassinations of respected government and civilian leaders, comic books risked becoming ossified by not exploring the issues of the day. The Underground Comix movement produced provocative comic books without Code approval and included works by Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman, and Gilbert Shelton¹². While still operating under the auspices of the Code, Marvel Comics began telling stories that suggested an adversarial relationship between their superheroes and the authorities¹³. Spiderman, for example, was frequently a target of police suspicion and was often derided by the general public¹⁴. The extent of his countercultural role seems tame by current standards, but the stance of making superheroes the "other" was controversial in an era that demanded comic book characters support the dominant morality¹⁵. With significant works being created in the Underground Comix movement and with superheroes increasingly identifying with the counterculture, superhero comic books reconnected with political issues and advocacy. With the publication of *X-Men* in 1963, superhero stories explored how certain groups in America are isolated and oppressed. *X-Men* story arcs examined many of the themes

¹² Sanders, "Icons of the Alternate Culture: The Themes and Functions of Underground Comix*."

¹³ Mann, *Comic Book Confidential*.

¹⁴ Palumbo, "The Marvel Comics Group's Spider-Man Is an Existentialist Super-Hero; or 'Life Has No Meaning Without My Latest Marvels!'"

¹⁵ Mondello, "Spider-Man: Superhero in the Liberal Tradition."

of the 1960's including violence versus non-violence in civil rights activism, integration versus separation, and the protection of minority rights in the face of majority prejudice. Additionally, while World War II enlisted superheroes in a propaganda role for the U.S. government, superhero participation in the Vietnam War was limited and frequently morally ambiguous. On one of his rare visits to the warfront, Captain America suggests that a peace settlement is the best solution to the conflict ¹⁶. In considering his own loyalty to the ambitions of the U.S. government, he states:

"In a world rife with injustice and endless war, who's to say the rebels are wrong? But, I've never learned to play by today's new rules! I've spent a lifetime defending the flag, and the law! Perhaps I should have battled less, and questioned more!" ¹⁷.

In terms of the Captain's relationship to the Nixon administration, Marvel even produced a series of stories dealing with the Watergate scandal. Captain America investigates a government, right-wing organization called the Committee to Regain America's Principles (CRAP), modeled closely after Nixon's own Committee to Reelect the President (CREEP). After uncovering an administration steeped in conspiracy and the wholesale disregard of citizens' civil liberties, he states that he will only fight for "The American Dream" and no longer support the government of the United States ¹⁸. It is also during this time that Captain America took on The Falcon, one of the very first African American superheroes in mainstream comics, as a partner. The idea of a "Code" that quarantined superhero comics from public debate was increasingly becoming untenable. Understanding that readers wanted superhero advocacy greater than support for anti-littering campaigns and improving youth hygiene, the Code was revised in 1971. Alterations

¹⁶ Tierney, "Did Captain America Really Sleep Through Vietnam?".

¹⁷ Lee, Colan, and Sinnott, *Captain America #122*, 2-3.

¹⁸ Tierney, "Did Captain America Really Sleep Through Vietnam?".

included the allowance for the "sympathetic depiction of criminal behavior" and the showing of "corruption among public officials" ¹⁹. With these exceptions and with the Code retreating towards irrelevance over the next two decades, superhero stories were able to frankly and aggressively advocate on public concerns.

Superheroes were ahead of public sentiment and public policy at the onset of the AIDS crisis. Marvel's Canadian superhero team *Alpha Flight* sympathetically portrayed a gay superhero that faced the disease in 1986, when widespread paranoia and homophobia made the topic taboo to discuss in other media ²⁰. DC's *The New Guardians* featured perhaps the most extensive early portrayal of AIDS in a superhero comic with a group of heroes forced to confront their own suspicions and prejudices after one is bitten by the HIV positive super villain Hemoglobin ²¹.

This advocacy on topics frequently ignored and hidden by other media extended beyond AIDS, as well. Captain America openly accepted a gay soldier in 1982 ²², nearly two decades before the military seriously began consideration of ending its policy of excluding gays and lesbians. Much like Superman's campaign against the Ku Klux Klan a generation before, *Green Lantern* aggressively pursued a group perpetrating hate crimes against GLBT youth in 2002 ²³.

Additionally, superhero comics' efforts at combating injustice were not confined to the United States. In *Batman: Death of Innocents*, Batman campaigns against the worldwide use and sale of landmines ²⁴. The progressive and overtly political stance of superheroes in comics was mirrored in other media, as well. The 1978 television series *The Incredible Hulk* routinely made

¹⁹ Thompson and Thompson, "Crack in the Code."

²⁰ McAllister, "Comic Books and AIDS."

²¹ Englehart and Bates, *The New Guardians*.

²² Witt, Sherry, and Marcus, *Out in All Directions: Almanac of Gay and Lesbian America*.

²³ Palmer-Mehta and Hay, "A Superhero for Gays?: Gay Masculinity and Green Lantern."

²⁴ O'Neil, *Batman: Death of Innocents*.

social concerns the central plot point of many of its episodes ²⁵. Over its run, the show advocated for substance abuse treatment, mental health programs for child abusers, and even explored the concept of “ownership” of Native American art. In the cinemas, films like Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* metaphorically explored the issue of surveillance, militarism, and the futility of asymmetrical war in the post 9/11 period. More generally, Hall ²⁶ notes that superhero stories about September 11 often provided the most compelling media perspective on both the event and its implications.

While this is not intended to be an exhaustive report of all superhero engagement on social and political issues, the frequency and depth with which superhero stories advocated on topics of concern is clearly in evidence. It would seem that some aspects of the genre perhaps make superhero stories more suited to engagement than other media. Some of the defining characteristics of superheroes include the possession of a secret identity, super powers, and a mission. The central feature of many of the previously mentioned social and political concerns is providing justice to those who have been marginalized and made powerless. In such cases, traditional outlets of institutional justice have been made inaccessible for those victimized. Thus, the idea of individuals committed to justice with powers greater than oppressive institutional forces makes for an ideal narrative vehicle. What’s more, the “secret” nature of superhero identity provides an apt salvation metaphor for those who have had their identity annihilated ²⁷. With the superhero’s unique position to fight for the invisible and oppressed, it is hardly surprising that research has consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of using

²⁵ Brown, “Hulk Smashed! The Rhetoric of Alcoholism in Television’s Incredible Hulk.”

²⁶ “9/11: A Graphic Depiction.”

²⁷ Palmer-Mehta and Hay, “A Superhero for Gays?: Gay Masculinity and Green Lantern.”

superhero stories as tools for teaching people of all ages about justice related issues²⁸. With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that superhero comic books have explored the issue of human trafficking as an opportunity to raise awareness for more than a decade.

The Human Trade

Even though institutionalized slavery was outlawed worldwide by the mid-1800s, human trafficking and smuggling have become some of highest revenue producing illegal activities over the past three decades, which plague the entire world. In this illegal trade, men, women and children are lured, defrauded, manipulated or straight out kidnapped by various means into what has become known as modern day slavery.

For several decades, the international community has tried to universally agree on a distinct definition for human trafficking and human smuggling. A consensus was finally reached in the formulation of the “The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime”, which was adopted by the General Assembly in November 2000 and entered into force 2003, creating the main international instrument in the fight against transnational organized crime. The Convention is supplemented by three Protocols, which target specific areas and forms of organized crime: the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children; the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air; and the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition²⁹.

²⁸ Branscum and Sharma, “Comic Books an Untapped Medium for Health Promotion.”; Decker and Castro, “Teaching History with Comic Books: A Case Study of Violence. War, and the Graphic Novel.”

²⁹ UNODC, “Convention on Transnational Organized Crime.”

The UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons ³⁰ describes the process of human trafficking under Article 3 to involve the “recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring or receiving a person through a use of force, coercion or other means, for the purpose of exploiting them” further outlining that exploitation shall include “at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” ³¹.

Many people associate human trafficking solely with sexual exploitation, which does constitute a main concern for many countries around the globe ³². However, as the UN Protocol outlines, many forms of exploitation can occur aside from that, including labor exploitation ³³, bonded labor or servitude ³⁴, which is “the status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or of those of a person under his control as security for a debt” ³⁵, child trafficking for adoptions ³⁶, trafficking of organs ³⁷, exploitation of children as child soldiers ³⁸ or any other form of organized exploitation for economic gain.

The actual extent of human trafficking is difficult to estimate due to the clandestine nature of the trade with humans, which mostly remain unnoticed by the general public. Bales ³⁹ estimated that

³⁰ “United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime And The Protocols Thereto.”

³¹ “What Is Human Trafficking?”.

³² Blackburn, Taylor, and Davis, “Understanding the Complexities of Human Trafficking and Child Sexual Exploitation: The Case of Southeast Asia”; *ibid.*; Breuil et al., “Human Trafficking Revisited: Legal, Enforcement and Ethnographic Narratives on Sex Trafficking to Western Europe.”; Okojie, “International Trafficking of Women for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation and Prostitution: The Nigerian Case”; Rand, “It Can’t Happen in My Backyard: The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Girls in the United States.”; Subedi, “Trafficking in Girls and Women in Nepal for Commercial Sexual Exploitation: Emerging Concerns and Gaps.”

³³ Richards, *The Trafficking of Migrant Workers: What Are the Links Between Labour Trafficking and Corruption?*.

³⁴ Androff, “Contemporary Forms of Slavery: Implications and Challenges.”; Sigmon, “Combating Modern-Day Slavery: Issues in Identifying and Assisting Victims of Human Trafficking Worldwide.”

³⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery.”

³⁶ Leifsen, “Child Trafficking and Formalisation: The Case of International Adoption from Ecuador.”

³⁷ Meyer, “Trafficking in Human Organs in Europe: A Myth or an Actual Threat?”.

³⁸ Becker, “Child Soldiers.”

³⁹ *Disposable People : New Slavery in the Global Economy*.

as many as 27 million people are exploited as slaves including exploitation through bonded labor, forced labor forced child labor and sexual slavery. In contrast, The International Labor Organization sets the number at 12.3 million , while the U.S. Government estimates 800,000 people to be trafficked across borders each year, with millions more being trafficked within nations ⁴⁰. The United Nations estimate that 2.5 million people are subject to forced labor, including sexual exploitation, as a result of trafficking affecting approximately 161 countries worldwide. The majority of victims, 56% are from Asia and the Pacific are between the ages of 18 and 24, however an estimated 1.2 million children are believed to be trafficked annually as well. Close to half of all victims are used for commercial sexual exploitation, mostly targeting women and girls, compared to about 1/3 of all victims who experience forced economic exploitation. Overall the estimated global annual profits from all forms of human trafficking are believed to be as high as US\$ 31.6 billion ⁴¹.

In comparison to human trafficking, article 3 of the Smuggling of Migrants Protocol supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime defines the smuggling of migrants as the "procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident." ⁴²

Most definitions separate human trafficking from human smuggling through the elements of force, fraud and coercion, a clear exploitation phase in human trafficking cases, as well as the fact that the primary focus of human smuggling lies on the illegal crossing of international borders. While the UN Convention neatly defines human trafficking and smuggling as two

⁴⁰ Lusk and Lucas, "The Challenge of Human Trafficking and Contemporary Slavery."

⁴¹ Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking, *Human Trafficking: The Facts*.

⁴² "United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime And The Protocols Thereto."

distinct and different forms of the trade with humans, reality proves that the two forms do in fact overlap in numerous areas. Many instances are known, which begin as cases of human smuggling including consenting parties, which can turn into human trafficking once the illegally smuggled migrants face force or fraud or even exploitation at the destination ⁴³. It is therefore possible for illegal migrants to find themselves in truly life threatening situations, as pointed out by ⁴⁴:

“Significant violations of human rights may occur even though the smuggling process began with a consensual relationship. Smugglers may physically abuse the humans they move, subject them to overcrowding, or deprive them of food or water or needed medical care.”

As such both, human trafficking and human smuggling have evolved into popular processes to exploit vulnerable migrants oftentimes leading to unspeakable human miseries.

Method

For purposes of this research, we chose to focus on the treatment of human trafficking in superhero comic books. To identify relevant issues and story arcs, we searched several key comic-focused databases including *Comic Book Resources*, *Comics Worth Reading*, *Comic Vine*, *Comic Book Database*, *Grand Comics Database*, and *Comic Book DB* ⁴⁵. Our search focused on key words related to human trafficking in the synopses of superhero comics. These key words included “human trafficking,” “human smuggling,” “sexual slavery,” “child soldiers,” and

⁴³ Peterka-Benton, “Human Smuggling in Austria: A Comparative Analysis of Data on Smuggled Migrants from Former Yugoslavia and the Russian Federation.”

⁴⁴ Stoecker and Shelley, *Human Traffic and Transnational Crime : Eurasian and American Perspectives*, 66.

⁴⁵ “Comic Book Database”; “Comic Book DB”; “Comic Book Resources”; “Comic Vine”; “Comics Worth Reading”; “Grand Comics Database.”

“bonded labor or servitude.” As this is an investigation of the treatment of human trafficking in titles targeted towards a mass audience, the search was limited to the superhero comics of Marvel and DC who control nearly 60% of the comics market⁴⁶. The time frame for the search was limited from 1991 to 2011. The start date for our investigation was chosen as this is traditionally considered to be the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a dramatic increase in the mobility of populations throughout the world. In some instances, trafficking was considered only a peripheral plot point and such comic stories were not included in the analysis (alien slave races and the like). As such, this is not intended to be an exhaustive categorization of all treatments of human trafficking in the comic book medium, but, rather, an investigation of several instances where mainstream, superhero titles directly engaged the topic. With this in mind, the following issues and story arcs were selected for analysis: *Wonder Woman: The Hiketeia*⁴⁷, *Punisher MAX: The Slavers*⁴⁸, *Wolverine: The Brotherhood* and *Wolverine: Coyote Crossing*⁴⁹, *Ghost Rider #5*⁵⁰, *Batman: Ultimate Evil*⁵¹, and *Unknown Soldier: Haunted House* (Dysart & Ponticelli, 2009). For each of these examples, we identified how the topic of human trafficking was treated by looking at basic patterns and trends of the human trafficking process. This process usually includes three distinct steps, which all can vary greatly within each other: recruitment/abduction from victim’s place of origin, transfer nationally or internationally, and exploitation at the destination. Based on these considerations, our content analysis focused on the identification of the following items:

1. Recruitment (type of recruitment, location, targeted group, traffickers)

⁴⁶ McAllister, “Ownership Concentration in the US Comic Book Industry.”

⁴⁷ Rucka, Jones, and Von Grawbadger, *Wonder Woman: The Hiketeia*.

⁴⁸ Ennis and Fernandez, *Punisher MAX: The Slavers*.

⁴⁹ Rucka and Fernandez, *Wolverine: Coyote Crossing*; Rucka and Robertson, *Wolverine: The Brotherhood*.

⁵⁰ Williams, Clark, and Arturo, *Ghost Rider #5*.

⁵¹ Vachss, *Batman: Ultimate Evil*.

2. Transportation (type of transportation, transnational or local, groups involved in transport)
3. Type of Exploitation (forms of exploitation, location – country, specific location of exploitation)
4. Response of Superhero Character (to both the traffickers and the trafficked persons)

After completing this analysis, we contrasted superhero treatments with how the issue is explored in *Borderland*⁵², *You're not for sale*⁵³, and *Evelina*⁵⁴. These are educational comics created by the International Organization for Migration, the Council of Europe and Cause Vision to inform at-risk populations about the dangers of human trafficking. *Borderland* combines seven stories about human trafficking which are all based on testimonies of real Ukrainian human trafficking victims with an expectation to explore human trafficking from a new perspective. This comic book is authored by Olga Trusova, who came to the Ukraine as a Fulbright Fellow collaborating with the International organization for Migration, and by Dan Archer, who considers himself a comic journalist with an emphasis of representing news stories in a visually appealing way⁵⁵. *You're not for sale* is a contribution to the Council of Europe action to combat human trafficking and protect its victims, by alerting the Councils 47 member states to this obvious human rights violation. This campaign was one of many to appear shortly after the adoption of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, which was adopted by its member states in 2005 marking the first European-wide treaty

⁵² Archer and Trusova, *Borderland: Seven Stories as Told by Victims of Human Trafficking*.

⁵³ Council of Europe, *You're Not for Sale*.

⁵⁴ Emoto and Gomez-Murphy, *Evelina*.

⁵⁵ Archer and Trusova, *Borderland: Seven Stories as Told by Victims of Human Trafficking*.

of that nature ⁵⁶. Lastly, *Evelina*, was developed as an educational Manga by the non-profit organization CauseVision, which is planned to be “distributed through local grass roots organizations and international organizations that work in target communities, as well as to children and women in order to raise awareness about the risks of human trafficking” ⁵⁷.

Recently the founder of CauseVision, the photojournalist and author Natsuko Utsumi, visited with teachers in Mexico City, which resulted in a demand of over 50,000 copies of *Evelina*, they would like to distribute to students and their families (Utsumi, personal communication, May 16, 2012).

Results

The comparative content analysis of the following comic books dealing with the subject matter of human trafficking revealed some interesting results:

1. Wonder Woman: The Hiketeia
2. Punisher MAX: The Slavers
3. Wolverine: The Brotherhood
4. Wolverine: Coyote Crossing
5. Ghost Rider #5
6. Batman: Ultimate Evil
7. Unknown Soldier: Haunted House

Wonder Woman: The Hiketeia focuses on a girl who approaches Wonder Woman for protection. She enters into a religious bond with her where she trades loyalty for safety. The girl has killed a group of traffickers who took her sister. She is wanted by authorities and by Batman. Wonder Woman offers her protection, but has some reservation about doing so (though she feels sympathy for the girl’s impulse for revenge). Danielle’s sister was trafficked when she received an offer by “talent scouts” to join an “entertainment group” that promised to make her a star.

⁵⁶ COE Convention, “Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings.”

⁵⁷ Cause Vision, “About : Cause Vision.”

The trafficking group said that she had to work to cover the cost of transportation from her hometown to the city. The work was posing for nude photos and ultimately coerced prostitution.

In *Punisher MAX: The Slavers*, Frank Castle is engaged in a typical Punisher story (namely the brutal execution of organized criminals). During sweep of the city's underworld, he encounters a desperate woman held by the gangsters. After saving the woman's life, he learns that the woman has escaped an extensive human trafficking operation based in Eastern Europe that forces women into prostitution. After uncovering more about her horrific circumstances (which includes the death of her infant child) Castle's bloody mantra of vengeance is then fully directed towards the trafficking organization.

Wolverine: The Brotherhood tells of teen girls are kidnapped by an "end times" militia/cult. After being kidnapped, the girls are made into forced "brides" to service the cult leader with support and cooperation from corrupt local officials in small town Idaho. Families seeking the return of their daughters face threats from law enforcement with liberation of the girls falling onto the shoulders of Wolverine.

Departing from the overt good and evil of the trafficking narrative, *Wolverine: Coyote Crossing* focuses on the voluntary (but ultimately exploitive) human smuggling trade. The story focuses on a human smuggling operation from Mexico to El Paso, Texas. Poor Mexican migrants are provided transport in exchange for swallowing balloons filled with drugs to be smuggled into the U.S. After 19 illegal migrants die in an unventilated tractor trailer during transport, Wolverine intervenes to find the leader of the organization responsible.

Ghost Rider #5 explores the journey of the "new" Ghost Rider, Alejandra, who was recently selected by supernatural forces to be the "next" Rider. In this capacity, she is sent out to be "the

spirit of vengeance” and seek “those most deserving of fire”⁵⁸. The trafficking presented in the story focuses on the coerced abduction of children in rural Mexico. The organization responsible is presented as large and multi-layered. Though the nature of their exploitation is not overtly stated, it is implied that it is horrific and unpleasant with the children described as being mere “produce for the market.” As someone who was trafficked as a child, Alejandra feels enormous personal conviction in destroying the organization and its leaders.

Part comic book, part educational and advocacy piece, *Batman: Ultimate Evil* explores trafficking in the fictional country of Udon Khai. The authors state the country was created to serve as a loose proxy for Thailand. After learning about child sex trafficking, Batman goes to Udon Khai. Using a false identity, Bruce Wayne goes through layers of contacts before arriving at a location to purchase a trafficked young girl. Working with a local guerilla group, he locates the girl’s home village and learns that the large families and limited resources make child selling a profitable (but largely hidden business). After taking down the trafficking organization in Udon Khai, the conclusion of the book makes comparisons (though briefly and vaguely) to drug addicted sex workers in the U.S.

With meticulous research and precise details, *Unknown Soldier: Haunted House* explores the trafficking of child soldiers and sex slaves by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda. The story focuses on Dr. Lwanga Moses. An immigrant child of Ugandan parents, he returns to his homeland to assist in helping to rebuild the country. At a refugee camp outside of Acholiland, he witnesses a boy assaulted by the LRA. Overcome with rage, he mutilates his face and wages a one-man war against Joseph Kony’s group. The description the abduction of children and forced military service/sexual slavery in Uganda is quite accurately portrayed. The

⁵⁸ Williams, Clark, and Arturo, *Ghost Rider #5*, 6.

latter portion of the story focuses on his rescue of captured girls taken from a Catholic orphanage. While vengeance is certainly a story focus, the country's crushing poverty, corrupt officials, and exploitation by the U.S. government are prominent story features. Thus, while the reader may get satisfaction from Moses' revenge, there is an uneasy impression that vengeance will do little to stop the systemic problems that created the trafficking in the first place.

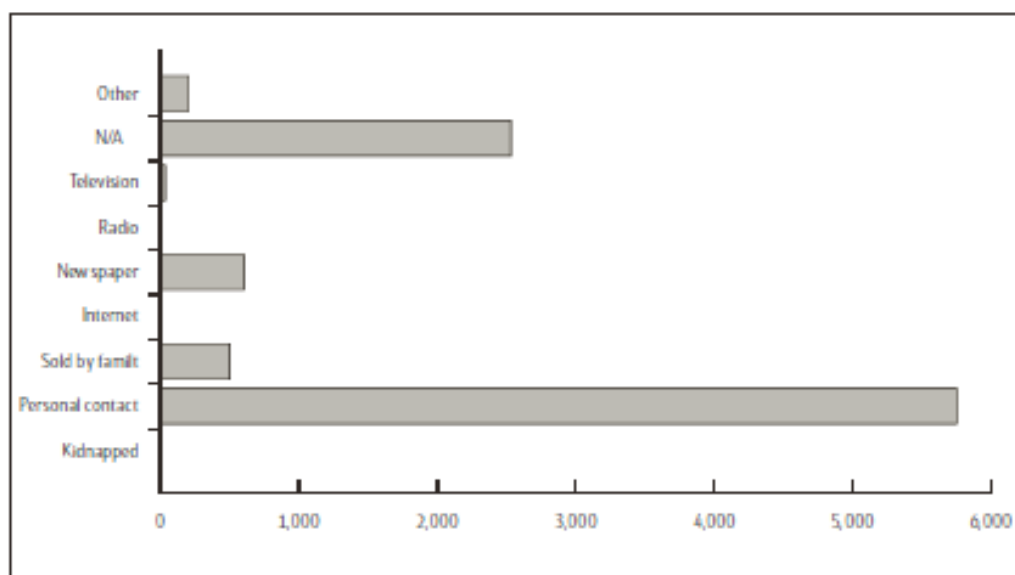
In regards to the type of human trafficking depicted, five of the books, including *Wonder Woman*, *the Punisher*, *Wolverine Brotherhood*, *Batman*, and *Unknown Soldier*, specifically deal with sexual exploitation. This is not surprising, as many people associate sexual slavery with human trafficking, not knowing that there are many different forms of exploitation that are utilized by trafficking organizations, such as previously noted. Two of the comic books mention child trafficking, with the *Unknown Soldier* (aside from a sexual exploitation storyline) focusing on child soldiers, and *Ghost Rider* suggesting it, without specifying any details as to how the children are being used. Lastly, *Wolverine Coyote Crossing* actually depicts the process of human smuggling, which at first sight may not fit into this analysis of human trafficking story lines. Looking more closely as the story develops, however, one can detect, how smuggling operations sometimes turn into a process that includes force and coercion, which, following UN definitions, would actually constitute human trafficking.

A successful human trafficking organization, will utilize traffickers who either force or convince their victims to leave their homes to travel with them. Many different methods are being used by traffickers including recruitment via informal networks of families and/or friends, advertisements offering job or study abroad, false marriage offers, purchasing children from their parents or complete coercion through abduction or kidnapping. According to the IOM Counter Trafficking

Database, utilizing victim data from 78 countries collected between 1999 and 2006, “46 percent of victims knew their recruiter and 54 percent were recruited by strangers.”⁵⁹

As the following figure shows, the majority of recruitment strategies involve some kind of developed personal contact between the traffickers and victims, followed by newspaper ads and direct sale by family members. These strategies generally allow for a smooth transport to the final destination where exploitation will occur, as most victims are unaware about their final destiny. Therefore kidnapping as a recruitment method is hardly used.

Figure 1. Number of victims by recruitment method ⁶⁰



Source: IOM Counter-Trafficking Database.

The analysis of comic books reveals that four of them mention forced abduction as primary recruitment method, as depicted in *Ghost Rider*, *Wolverine: The Brotherhood*, the *Punisher* and

⁵⁹ UNODC, “Convention on Transnational Organized Crime,” 12.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Unknown Soldier. In *Batman*, children were bought from their parents with limited knowledge about their future fate, and *Wonder Woman* depicts deception by promises of legitimate employment in the entertainment industry to lure girls into forced prostitution. *Wolverine Coyote Crossing*, as mentioned above, deals with a human smuggling operation and as it is very typical in these situations, migrants contact the smugglers on their own free will, because they need this illegal service provider to cross the U.S./Mexican border. At this early stage of the process, migrants are consenting partners in an illegal operation.

Once the victims or unsuspecting migrants are in the hands of traffickers, the process moves to the second stage, which entails the transport of the victims to their final destination, which can either entail crossing borders covertly or overtly, or it simply means domestic transport from one region to another. Transportation routes and methods vary upon geographical conditions and can include trafficking by plane, boat, rail, ferry, road, or simply on foot. Related criminal offenses are “abuses of immigration and border control laws, corruption of officials, forgery of documents, acts of coercion against the victim, unlawful confinement, and the withholding of identity papers and other documents⁶¹.”

While most people probably assume that human trafficking is primarily done internationally, four of the analyzed books dealt primarily with domestic trafficking. In *Batman*, children of Udon Khai were bought from their parents, to stay inside the country for future sexual exploitation, a storyline that can also be found in *Wolverine Brotherhood* and *Wonder Woman*, which interestingly chose the United States as location for domestic trafficking. In *Unknown Soldier* as well, children are forced into military service/sexual exploitation within Uganda, their home country. Unfortunately none of the four books go into any detail about the specifics of the

⁶¹ Ibid., 13.

transport process. *Ghost Rider* and *Wolverine Coyote Crossing*, on the other hand, mention trucks as main transport method to move children and illegal migrants from Mexico into the United States. *The Punisher* details the story of one female victim, who was abducted from her village in Moldova and transported domestically to Moldova's capital where she was forced into prostitution. Later she was sold to a Rumanian, who brought her to America, to again work as a prostitute. The book does not explain the details of either transport, domestically or internationally.

For many years, human trafficking for sexual exploitation has dominated discussions on this very issue, which possibly serves as an explanation as to why the majority of reviewed comic books have indeed used that particular form of exploitation as their primary story line. *Wonder Woman* realistically introduces its readers to the fact that victims are often drugged or under the influence of alcohol to make them willing subjects for prostitution or pornography. Most of those victims disappear in underground brothels or camps as depicted in the *Punisher* and *Batman* stories. *Wolverine Brotherhood*, places sexual exploitation in a more specific context by abducting teen girls for forced marriage and sexual exploitation by the leader of the group. *Ghost Rider* is vague about the type of exploitation the children will encounter, however refers to children as "product" for the "market", and that the children's experience will be very unpleasant upon their arrival in the United States. The primary role of captured girls in *Unknown Soldier* too, is to serve as sex slaves for the men and boys in those militia groups, though it is noted that they are armed as well. *Wolverine Coyote Crossing*, morphs over into a process of human trafficking when the migrants are forced to swallow balloons filled with drugs during their transport. Furthermore they are subjected to inhumane travel conditions, which again hint at the exploitive character of this business.

Lastly the analysis tried to identify the superheroes' response to the traffickers/smugglers and the victims of their actions. In six of the seven comic books, the superheroes choose brute violence in response to their encounter with this subject matter. Only Wonder Woman does not follow this trajectory, by only tacitly approving the violence that was used against the traffickers in this story, while Batman, who tries to apprehend the girl under Wonder Woman's protection, outright rejects violence against the traffickers by demanding the vigilante anti-hero of this story to be turned over to the authorities. Interestingly none of the superheroes in those stories support the victims of trafficking, nor do they provide alternative avenues to prevent those illegal activities other than killing some or all members of the trafficking organizations involved. Solely the *Punisher* introduces the character of a social worker, who tries to help trafficking victims.

In contrast to these fictitious stories in the superhero universe, *Evelina*, *You're not for Sale* and *Borderland*, utilize the comic medium to provide easy-to-read materials for at-risk populations and the general public to raise awareness about human trafficking. Due to their educational nature and the obvious absence of a superhero character, those comics were not included in the content analysis, but instead will be treated as a separate category. *Evelina* follows a young Mexican girl, who is following her mother's cousin under false pretenses, only to find herself in forced prostitution in the United States. The story concludes seven years later, with Evelina now recruiting girls for the traffickers herself. The story is much more victim based, than the superhero comics, and even takes the fact into account, that many women eventually become part of the organization, while still under the control of its leaders. *Borderland* and *You're not for sale*, very broadly describe different forms of human trafficking, through stories based on real people. *You're not for sale* depicts trafficking for sexual exploitation, forced labor and bonded labor through four stories, all of which end up in this situation through deception through half-

truths or promises of employment. *Borderland* also based all its stories on true accounts of seven trafficking victims, who all but one end up in forced labor situations, in which they were subjected to inhumane and life threatening conditions. Interestingly, the topic of forced or bonded labor seems more prevalent in the educational comics than in the superhero comics, which mainly focus on sexual exploitation.

Discussion

Having examined both the content of comics dealing with human trafficking and checking their accuracy when compared to real world circumstances, it is now important to consider assessment of the merit of these books in terms of awareness. Like the issue of human trafficking itself, there does not appear to be an easy answer in terms of evaluation.

When considering how trafficking is presented, many of the books skewed towards easy absolutes on what is a complicated and multi-faceted problem. The emphasis on abduction and sexual slavery (particularly as it relates to children) creates a more compelling superhero narrative. The idea of brute strength protecting innocence has almost been a generic requirement of the superhero since *Action Comics #1*. In this case, however, that tendency towards simplification could create a profound misunderstanding of human trafficking on the part of readers. As noted previously, human trafficking is frequently a symptom of economic desperation, social destruction, limited access to education, and the failure of governance. The victims of trafficking, while brutally exploited, frequently have some level of initial complicity in the process. By eliminating all of these issues and turning human trafficking into a “good people taken by the boogey men” story, readers (particularly younger ones) may see artificially simple solutions to the problem. This leads to the most concerning aspect of nearly all of these

comics: the superhero response. In many instances, the response is exclusively explicit and brutal violence against the traffickers. A sample of several statements made by superheroes about their intentions includes:

*“When will we shoot the poachers of children on sight?”*⁶²

*“I am the fury of innocence trampled and sullied. I am justice in its most ancient form... I am God’s clenched fist.”*⁶³

*“Let’s go kill every last one of these fucking little monsters.”*⁶⁴

*“I want to wrap his heart in barbed wire and fuck his corpse with it.”*⁶⁵

Such statements clearly show a military metaphor in finding solutions to human trafficking, while ignoring the structural, developmental, and institutional solutions that must be a part of solving this problem. The concern raised by this militarization of discourse related to human trafficking is not hypothetical. In 2012, the social media sensation of the *Invisible Children* viral video and the subsequent “KONY 2012” campaign created unprecedented national and international interest. While many praised the campaign for raising awareness of human trafficking in Uganda, there was marked concern in the development community about the proposed solution: military action to capture or kill Joseph Kony⁶⁶. This emphasis on military solutions to a multi-layered problem presents a concern consistent with what this analysis identified. While it should in no way be inferred that these comics in any way fostered this

⁶² Vachss, Barret, and Cowan, *Batman: Ultimate Evil*, 17.

⁶³ Williams, Clark, and Arturo, *Ghost Rider #5*, 11–12.

⁶⁴ Dysart and Ponticelli, *Unknown Soldier: Haunted House*, 1:51.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:122.

⁶⁶ Shaikh, “Invisible Children: Saviors or Sensationalists?”.

attitude, the reflection of this perspective in these superhero texts certainly merits serious scrutiny.

To fully dismiss the role these superhero stories can play in educating activists, however, would be similarly short sighted. Despite the excellent intentions and outreach to at-risk audiences of comic books like *You're not for sale*, *Evelina*, and *Borderland*, it is remarkably unlikely the dissemination of these books could approach the audience superhero comics enjoy. Thus, while the narrative structure of superhero stories may inhibit their accuracy in presenting social issues, the potential for awareness-raising cannot be overlooked. It should also be noted that audiences for superhero stories may be sophisticated enough to understand the medium should not be read literally. The generation that listened to "Clan of the Fiery Cross" story in the 1940's saw a Superman take down the KKK with his superhuman power. A decade later, those children became the civil rights activists who would fight injustice and segregation through the court system, protest, and civil disobedience. In short, the superhero story was understood as a source of education and inspiration and not read literally. Much like Stetson Kennedy's work on Superman, Dysart and Ponticelli's *Unknown Soldier* reflects serious research into the problems faced by Uganda. While there is an overt emphasis on individual violent action as a solution to human trafficking, analysis by history and political science educators suggests that it still provides an ideal starting point for young people to begin asking hard questions about the justice of a globalized world. As Decker and Castro argue, "*Unknown Soldier's* intended status as a popular art provides a gateway for deeper understanding by undergraduates *because* it is not a scholarly tome"⁶⁷. The challenge for creators, educators, and critics is continued exploration of

⁶⁷ "Teaching History with Comic Books: A Case Study of Violence, War, and the Graphic Novel.," 178.

superhero engagement with social issues, applauding the facilitation of advocacy, but carefully considering the point at which exploration becomes exploitation.

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