Batman and Robin in the Nude, Or Class and Its Exceptions
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Extrapolation; Summer 2006; 47, 2; ProQuest Direct Complete
pg. 187

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liminal: adjective; Etymology: Latin *limin-*, *limen* threshold

1: of or relating to a sensory threshold
2: barely perceptible[1]

1. of or relating to a transitional or initial stage
2. at a boundary or threshold[2]

I. Absurdly So

■ Two components of the fictional world of superheroes that have been routinely ridiculed, both from within the subculture of comic book fandom and within mainstream culture, are the superhero costume and the adolescent sidekick. Both seem ludicrous in the abstract as well as their mimetic representations; but the idea of hypermuscular men and women dressed in revealing spandex and masks, adorned with capes, and marked by iconographic designs, followed around by similarly dressed adolescent girls and boys who share their heroic ideologies, is the very heart of the superhero genre. If transposed into the real world, the iconography would simply buckle under the weight of its own absurdity—a man *dressed as* a bat, followed by an adolescent *dressed as* a robin? As Mark Leigh and Mike Lepine make abundantly clear in their satiric look at the genre, *How to be a Superhero* (1992), "The heyday of the Boy

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Wonder was really the 1940s—before the concept of the modern teenager had been invented. Today's youth is, frankly, far less suited to crimefighting—and far more suited to sweeping up at the local 7-11" (102). In M. Night Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* (2000) both costumes and sidekicks are eschewed in order to achieve a more realistic superheroic vision—only by stripping the hero of his iconic costume and the presence of a sidekick (although it may be argued that the protagonist's son plays a similar role), can the hero operate within Shyamalan's mimetic representation of the "real" world rather than its mythic representation as portrayed in comic books.

But in the fictional world of superheroes, both costuming and the sidekick are necessary for inclusion of the superhero in the symbolic order of superheroics and their acceptance as heroes within the public sphere. Previous readings of sidekicks and costumes have been too simplistic: More than simply acting as decorative conventions of the genre, these components act on ideological and symbolic levels, helping to show the structure of class systems and the incorporation of law and power within these structures. By working through these absurd notions of sidekicks and costumes, a clearer understanding of the relationship between the law, liminality, and the structure of class systems can be achieved, both within the fictional worlds of superheroes, and in the "real" world. Batman/Bruce Wayne is exemplary of these notions in that he is an upper class citizen who works to uphold the law through outlawed means, and by showing how he constructs his identity as Batman, with both costuming and a sidekick, the liminal modalities inherent within the system of law can be elucidated. For this, a number of Batman narratives will be considered, with some comparative analysis both to mainstream heroes in the Marvel and DC universes as well as with "alternative" heroes from publishers such as Valiant, Milestone, King Hell, and Image. Hegemonic capitalism—and by that I mean the system of commodification and capitalization of all social components in contemporary life as well as that form of consumerism that implies a necessary homogeneity and regulation of socio-cultural interaction on the part of its citizens—while it is manifold and ubiquitous, inadvertently creates slippage, for spaces and phases of liminality, and it is within this "gap" of commodification that superheroes, with their complex relationship with the law, operate. In other words, superheroes exists at once outside of capitalism and commodification, and yet are only possible through the production of legal and capital spaces produced by capitalist practices.

II. Liminality and the Caped Crusader

Within the diegesis of their respective comic book universes, the Justice League of America and the Avengers[3] are exempt from interference by the law due to their sanctioning by the American government (as well as the United

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Nations). The teams clearly operate in agreement with the concerns of hegemonic capitalism and as such require no means to pull them into a liminal position of effectiveness, which individual heroes do. Heroes that fail to garner government sanction are considered outlaws/menaces to the established order (Spider-Man, the X-Men, the Hulk) or must be explicit agents of hegemonic capitalism to exist in a position of effectiveness (Iron Man, the Fantastic Four). Tony Stark's employment of Iron Man through Stark Industries clearly aligns Iron Man with the efforts of capitalism, thereby protecting him from the law, a maneuver that Bruce Wayne is unable to affect in order to provide Batman with the same sort of protection. Iron Man, and his technological focus, is a clear representation of Stark Industries' concerns, while Batman is hardly an appropriate spokesman for Wayne Enterprises, due to his status as urban legend and his violent vigilante tactics; Stark is so appropriately aligned with the concerns of capital and the state that in recent storylines he was appointed Secretary of Defense to the American President. The Fantastic Four, with its familial appearance, position themselves in support of the domestic concerns of hegemony (which is not to say that they are primarily concerned with the workplace and the home, but rather with *generationality*, which will be examined further below). Daredevil, the Marvel vigilante most comparable to Batman, exists in a position similar to Batman, seen as a necessary nuisance in a contested cityscape—as such, he avoids the law simply because the law fails to operate within his neighborhood of Hell's Kitchen; when Matthew Murdock was revealed as Daredevil, not only did doubt on the part of the public slow his prosecution, but when coupled with the ineffectiveness of state sanctioned legal actors, years transpired before Murdock was held accountable for his vigilantism. Moreover, unlike Batman, Daredevil has not operated as part of a superteam, which can be recognized as the hegemonic validation of the hero's efforts; Batman's inclusion in the Justice League is wholly based upon Robin's ability to position Batman as *ur-class*[4] through his position as a *liminal attractor.* Because Robin is a liminal entity, through his adoption, Batman is interpellated into a position of similar liminality, a liminality that is similar to that which law enforcement agents are held within, able to uphold the law while simultaneously breaking it.

The axes of class and age intersect in such a way that the superhero sidekick exists in a position of *liminal attraction*, allowing adult superheroes to appropriate their sidekick's position to affect their hegemonic designs from a position of ur-class. It is vital to understand this position shared by sidekicks as liminal attractors: By existing as they do outside of the traditional hierarchy of class as orphans, as wards of the state, not as prescribed members of any particular class, their alignment with adult heroes allows those adults to share the position of classlessness—they too, in their way, become wards (and guardians) of the state. It is clear that billionaire industrialist Bruce Wayne exists as

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a part of the hegemonic and hierarchicalized order of the class system, and that Robin surely does not. Through Bruce Wayne's adoption of the various Robins, he is able to reposition Batman *outside* of the class system as it is ordered, within which order Bruce Wayne is constrained by the limitations of his class (upper class apolitical ideologies, etc.). He is thus able to work from a position of liminality wherein he cannot be affected by the law while simultaneously garnering its sanction for his actions (Cf. Mitchell 1991).

By way of clarifying some of the terminology I employ, it is worth quoting Victor Turner to frame this discussion of liminality: "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arraigned by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 1969, 95). Moreover, Turner ascribes a form of invisibility to the liminal entity—as they exist between states, they can easily escape notice. For superheroes, this invisibility is embodied in the formulation of costumes that obscure the body, which also provides the distinction between secret and private identities that are so essential to the genre. These costumes are symbolic constructions, arrayed to denote the incorporation of the wearer into the symbolic/mythic sphere of superheroics;[5] Turner further remarks that "The transitional-being or 'liminal *persona*' is defined by a name and by a set of symbols" (Turner 1967, 95, author's emphasis), and this seems to further anticipate the superhero as a liminal entity, arrayed in both a "name" (the superheroic identity) and "symbols" (which are generally seen as emblematic logos, i.e. Superman's "S," Batman's bat symbol, Spider-Man's spider motif and chest emblem, etc.). But what is most important herein is the societal alignment of the superhero figure through this adoption of the logo with a form of exploitation that relies on easily commodified bodies. Hegemonic capitalism relies on these logos to commodify and exploit superheroic bodies; this symbolic acquisition also helps to denote an ideological alignment.

While hegemonic capitalism is a discernable structure, having socio-cultural boundaries and distinction, within every system is the capacity for its anti-structure—not that which works against the system, but that which has been incorporated within the system and implicitly helps to reinforce that system, what is also referred to as the incorporation of the negative (Taussig 1997, 1999). The notion of superhero community is illustrative of the notion of "communitas"—an anti-structure that has been sanctioned by society (which may be a capitalist act of inclusion): "What is certain is that no society can function adequately without this dialectic [of communitas and structure]. Exaggeration of structure may well lead to pathological manifestations of communitas outside or against 'the law'" (Turner 1969, 129). The superhero community, which relies on the symbolic code of the costume to demarcate itself from lay citizenry, acts as a form of communitas in that it is the willful sanctioning of a group of people by the structured community that, while it

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upholds its parent community, exists wholly separate and embodies contrary but complimentary ideologies. Rather than the structured life of its parent system, the superhero community acts fluidly, existing without rank, without sexual binarism (or sex at all), shrouded in darkness and generally invisible to the structured world. And so, for the law to sanction vigilantes is the law working to uphold its system—if it were to fail, then the results would be comparable to those in Alan Moore's *Watchmen* where citizens protest the presence of the superhero communitas, eventually prohibiting them altogether, a trope which has recently returned in the pages of Marvel comics (2006's "Civil War" storyline). It is better for the structure to accommodate the anti-structure and thereby perpetuate itself, albeit in slightly different form, than to outlaw the anti-structure and divide itself.

At this point it is necessary to understand the axes of class and age and how Robin represents these forces in the superhero narrative: Children exist outside of class, tacitly imbued with class only through the presence of their parents. From infancy to adolescence children are free from the constraints of hegemonic class systems, as they largely have little access to money (only through their parents in the form of gifts and allowances) and have no ability to make their own decisions pertaining to their social position. Thus, being of young enough age marks one as existing outside of class, while still remaining within the structure as long as parents exist (or exert control over the child). Since the position of superhero is at once removed from the class system and meant to uphold it, and childhood removes the character further from the constraints of class, the marriage of these two elements helps to secure the characters as existing in the position of ur-class, untouched by the law and oblivious to the constraints of hegemonic capitalism (while simultaneously enforcing both), which might also be construed as a form of "bare life" (Agamben 1998 [1995]). Robin, through the characterization of both Dick Grayson and Jason Todd, embodies this ur-class, this position of liminality, and as such, regardless of who now wears the Robin costume, acts to remove Batman from the system of class hierarchies that would normally limit his effectiveness, and allows him to act as a liminal entity, sanctioned and empowered by the law.

III. Process and Transformation: Entrance into the Symbolic-Ideological Sphere

> The neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status. The ordeals and humilities. . . to which neophytes are submitted represent partly a destruction of the previous status and partly a tempering of their essence in order to prepare them to cope with their new responsibilities and restrain them in advance from abusing their new privileges. They have to be shown that in themselves

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> they are clay or dust, mere matter, whose form is impressed upon them by society. (Turner 1969, 103)

The line of demarcation between the identity of Bruce Wayne and Batman is necessarily blurred: The adoption of costume designates Bruce Wayne as existing in the realm of superheroes and villains, as a component of the mythic landscape of superheroics, and as complicit in conflicts in defense of the established order. But the costume acts as a floating signifier: Once Batman's ideologies are secured and sanctioned by the system, anyone can wear the costume and be similarly sanctioned. As noted by Richard Reynolds and Mila Bongco in their cursory studies of the superhero costume, the adoption of the costume sets the wearer apart from a society that subscribes to conventional fashion, marking the costume-wearer as a member of a particular subculture; superheroes, and the totemic appropriation evidenced in many costumes, place themselves as shaman-like figures, meant at once to "heal" society of its ills, and to provide "spiritual" (read "lawful") guidance. The costume, as a mark of difference, separates the wearer from the culture at large, positioning him or her in the subculture of those marked by the law, as either superhero or villain; as Scott Bukatman argues, the wearing of "costume and logo constitute the superhero body as *publicly* marked" and constitutive of "a '*symbolic* birth,' or *rebirth* into the symbolic" (101, author's emphasis). This symbolic rebirth depends upon the inscription of the body, the acquisition of logo, thereby initiating the wearer into the restraints of hegemonic capitalism that enforces lawfulness, and capitalizes on the commercialization inherent in the use of the logo. In much the same way that police officers and soldiers are costume-wearers, so are superheroes and villains, dependent upon symbols of difference to separate them from the public. The lawful uniform declares the wearer as existing in a liminal position in relation to traditional power structures, allowing them to protect society by breaking the law: Police officers, by marking themselves as such through their costumes/uniforms, can break minor laws in order to uphold broader societal laws, i.e. speed limits can be broken to catch speeding cars, criminals can be wounded or killed in order to protect law-abiding citizens. To wit:

> The state can indicate either explicitly or implicitly that actions of its servants are legal or acceptable exceptions from normal behavior or the unsanctioned actions of individual officials who will be disciplined. . . However, many activities described by the label of *state crime*. . . are not appropriate to such expectations [of disciplinary response]. They include detentions, searches of property and persons, censorship, and physical and psychological pressures that state critics may call criminal but which the laws of the state permit its authorities. (Sharkansky 36, author's emphasis)

Thus while these law-enforcement agents work within the law, and are subject to it when dressed as civilians, when marked as sanctioned by the government

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(in their official uniforms), they are placed liminally, able to act outside of the law with the implicit sanction of the government. It is in part the invisibility inherent in liminal states, the obscuring of individual identity through uniformity of dress, which allows law enforcement agents to act illegally as they are unseen and thereby unremarked upon in their lack of differentiation. Similarly, superheroes, being able to uphold "justice" while breaking laws—what would normally be considered vigilantism—must identify themselves as existing in this liminal position of protector, allowing them to uphold the law while simultaneously defying it. Supervillains must, then, to evidence their similar positioning outside the system of laws, dress accordingly—supervillain costumes are worn to similarly position villains as outside of society, but as working against hegemonic capitalism (notice the rather popular lack of logos among supervillains in favor of dark color schemes). While they maintain motifs, they are rarely emblematized in a simple icon, and as such work to defy capitalism on a discrete level. The act of "dressing up," partaking of this symbolic order of costuming, is meant to signify this transition into a liminal position of non-interference: Superheroes are simply vigilantes with costumes. Superhero costumes denote a position of ur-class: Superheroes exist within/out of the class system, meant to uphold the class systems and to maintain power relations beneficial for the upper class (as well as the ur-class of superheroes). The symbolic discourse of superhero fashion, its reliance upon totemic animals, its appropriation of classist modes of dress (capes, and fetish wear in the forms of masks, tights, boots), marks superheroes as existing outside of the class system while they also exist in the highest tier of hegemonic hierarchy (as both spiritual leaders and members of the upper class). While costumes designate the symbolic position of the wearer, the adoption of a sidekick denotes his or her ideological stance: the law must be eternal, and only through the generational education and resulting reinforcement of the law that is implied in the adoption of sidekicks is this ideological position signified. Thus sidekicks are symbols in and of themselves, and their adoption is like the acquisition of any other symbol (or in the case of superheroes, the logo).

Batman's primary purpose is one of maintaining hegemonic stability and the position of the upper class,[6] of which Bruce Wayne is a part. As William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson have argued:[7] "Bruce is a super-citizen, the Batman is a super-cop and both strive to make Gotham City a better place to live, that is, to make it accord with their own values" (Uricchio 202). Bruce Wayne's originating event, the killing of his parents over a necklace (a symbol of upper class status) by a criminal (a member of the lower class), grounds Bruce Wayne's motivations in the preservation of hegemonic order, and particularly one based upon class hierarchies and the privilege of power. The superhero is meant to enforce the status quo: To act as a revolutionary is to attempt to subvert the system, is to act against hegemony, is to declare oneself a villain

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rather than a hero, is to commit "evil" rather than the "good" of combating subversion.[8] Although superhero methods are not legally sanctioned, their ends are, and as such allow them to exist within a liminal state of legal non-interference, tacitly approved by the law. But sanctioning requires both ideological and symbolic exhibition, and the donning of a costume alone is not enough to garner this lawful authorization.

The question of the teenage sidekick then arises: How are readers to reconcile the decision of youth to emulate their idols, as is the case with Robin (and Batman), Wonder Girl (Wonder Woman), Aqualad (Aquaman), Kid Flash (Flash) and Arsenal/Speedy (Green Arrow)? At some point each of these child protégés has been required to fill the shoes of their mentors, either in adopting their costume[9] or by becoming adult versions of their childhood identities, which emphasizes the position of these adolescent heroes as liminally positioned (and possibly marginalized). The Teen Titans, also known as the New Titans or simply the Titans — comprised at its creation wholly of adolescent sidekicks — established a precedent for the relationship of teenage superteams with hegemonic capitalism: Because of the heroes' positions as adolescents, they manage to escape the notice of capitalist power structures by evading the need to work, as well as the inability to be capitalized upon—they are liminal consuming entities, neither having concrete desires nor the money to fulfill them. In the most recent iteration of the Teen Titans, the group members meet at Titan's Tower (in San Francisco) for weekends away from home (and their supervising superhero partner), spending weekends fighting crime as a group of superheroes in training, which weirdly reinforces the re-creation of superhero practice.

The notion of a generational power system is both inherent in the adoption of sidekicks (as they will themselves eventually become adult superheroes, have sidekicks of their own, and endlessly perpetuate the system), and a necessity in order to declare an ideological intention for the system to perpetuate; it is a kind of temporally oriented kinship claim. There is something innately radical in the notion of the one-man army: He supposes that dramatic change will occur within his lifetime and that he will be the cause of it—that there is no need for any sort of generational policing as the new system will defy that sort of agency; the new world will need no law (Cf. Hardt and Negri 2000). But for Batman — and the school of superheroes that congregate *en masse* (e.g. the Justice League and the Avengers) — the presupposition is that only through the power of the group, only through a system of ritualized and institutionalized power and policing will change, however gradual, take place. And it is this slow change that hegemonic capitalism authorizes, and thus, it helps to sanction those heroes who clearly align themselves with such a system of order. With respect to the Fantastic Four, their familial concerns are most easily represented in the form of Franklin and Valeria, the children of

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Reed and Sue Richards, who, not only (at times) gifted with incredible powers but also the utopian political ideologies of their parents, embody this *generationality*: Not only will his parents' generation be succeeded, but it will be succeeded by more powerful and more capable heroes.

Once the position of ur-class liminality is achieved, the hero must still be inscribed by society as operating with its sanction as a lawful representative, and this occurs in the public display of power in the contest of ideological difference inherent in superhero/supervillain conflicts. Thus, in this public display of intention, the vigilante is interpellated into the position of superhero — from lawlessness to lawfulness in the public display of sanctioning elements. So, in the display of costume (the marked body), generationality (the sidekick), and the ideological alignment with the law, those who might otherwise be considered to be acting outside of the law are interpellated into a position of liminality and thence legal effectiveness. Thus, it is not simply the acquisition of symbolically and ideologically liminal tropes (costume, sidekick), but the *display* of these tropes that proves necessary to sanction the hero. Only in the case of Icon (examined below), is this a problematic configuration, and it is in those nascent heroes from the Golden Age that these rules of lawfulness are most flagrantly disputed.

As he was depicted in the 1930s, Superman, until he was sanctioned by the law, positioned himself through seemingly selfless acts of heroism, all in support of the state, and it was through this—and seemingly the novelty of his appearance—that he was properly interpellated into a position of effectiveness and unassailability. That, or the fact that there was no one to contest him if he were to act in an anarchic way (it is often recalled that he was the DC universe's first superhero). In Batman's early adventures he had no interest in being accepted by the state, and so he saw no need to be properly interpellated into the power structure. When he chose to become so, he displayed the tropes of costume and sidekick to mark himself as having ideological intentions based, in part, on the generational struggle for good emblematized in the possession/training of a sidekick to carry on the Manichean pseudo-utopian battle against evil-doers. For the other heroes that followed in the wake of Superman and Batman, after the first appearance of Robin, the sidekick became an essential component. Each hero was suddenly saddled with this emblem of generationality, and this helped to solidify the convention as well as mark the necessity of governmental sanction (and how a hero might go about achieving such).[10] Additionally, the early heroes (in the 1940s) were all quickly sent to Europe to wage war against fascism, and this, in itself, helped to garner them sanctions for their actions—by opposing that which opposes capitalism and democracy, vigilantes quickly became the apparent tools of the state; "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

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IV. Birds of a Feather: Batman's Acquisition of Liminality

The motivation behind Bruce Wayne's actions to adopt the various children who became Robin is necessarily obscured. It might be seen are purely selfless—an effort to help the oppressed—or, conversely, as a perverse act of homosexual desire (as Fredric Wertham would have readers believe), or, for the sake of this argument, as an attempt to uphold capitalism by employing its most-sacrificial subjects while simultaneously appropriating the untouchable aspects of classlessness that the character of Robin personifies. If a Robin dies, as Jason Todd eventually did (only to be brought back to life in 2005 as part of DC Comics' "Infinite Crisis" storyline), it fails to affect capitalism in an adverse way. When readers attempt to understand the relationship between Bruce Wayne and his ward (whoever that ward might be at any given time), the legacy of Fredric Wertham exerts its influence over possible readings: Almost invariably, Batman and Robin are read as gay men living in a homosexual Eden, Wayne Manor, much like Wertham's horribly myopic, oft-quoted description of their life:

> They live in sumptuous quarters, with beautiful flowers in large vases, and have a butler, Alfred. . . .It is like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together. Sometimes they are shown on the couch, Bruce reclining with Dick sitting next to him, jacket off, collar open, and his hand on his friend's arm. (Wertham 190)[11]

If they were homosexual, it would only act to compound their problematic status in relation to dominant social powers, but their sexual inclination is of no importance at all; rather it is their positions within/without the class system that require them to have a relationship, and homosexual or not, Robin is a necessary political agent allowing Batman to operate within a culture that might normally disdain his presence and treat him as a nuisance rather than that essential force within Gotham City he is often seen to be. In fact, this ambiguity in sexuality that is inherent in the sidekick relationship acts in support of the liminal position of the characters. As Turner notes, "liminality is frequently likened to death. . . to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality" (Turner 1969, 95); and it is Robin's compounded liminal position that allows Batman to adopt his own liminal status.

The systematic orphaning of the Robins removes the implicit class of the characters, imposed by the presence of their parents, and allows them to enter their position as liminal attractors. Dick Grayson's parents were killed, as were Jason Todd's parents, while for later Robins this orphaning is more loosely constructed with Tim Drake's father in a coma (who later dies) and his mother dead, and Carrie Kelley's parents hardly existing. Rick Veitch's examination of sidekicks, *Bratpack* (1990), exposes the necessary orphaning of the sidekick, but places the agency of the parent's death not on the criminal element

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but the adult heroes that require the sidekicks for their capacity as liminal attractors, or as Veitch observes, the demands of capitalism, which, finally, are one and the same. Similarly, Bruce Wayne is orphaned but because of the obligations of his proclaimed duty (avenging his parent's deaths[12]), he must ingratiate himself into adulthood, training to become a superhero as well as inheriting his parents' fortune, both marking him as adult. As Dick Grayson explains to Tim Drake, "Science says I'm wrong to truly believe this, but I don't think Bruce was ever young. At least not after his parents were killed. I think he became an adult in that instant" (Wolfman 3). Grayson, while similarly acting to avenge his parents' deaths (as Jason Todd would later do), circumvents the entrapment of adulthood (and its class system) by being adopted by Bruce Wayne and simultaneously becoming Robin, thereby entering the position of liminal attractor and ur-class.

The four Robins, Dick Grayson, Jason Todd, Tim Drake, and Carrie Kelley, construct four parallel narratives of subversion by capitalism, all necessary to empower Bruce Wayne as a liminal entity. Bob Kane's introduction of Dick Grayson as Robin, the Boy Wonder, was accompanied by his characterization of the motivations behind Grayson's transformation into avenging adolescent sidekick: "A laughing, fighting, young daredevil who scoffs at danger like the legendary Robin Hood whose name and spirit he has adopted" (*Detective Comics* 38, Kane 129). Employing the myth of Robin Hood clearly positions Robin as acting *against* capitalism, robbing the rich and giving to the poor. In no sense was Robin Hood an agent of hegemonic order; Kane's disguising of Robin as an anti-establishmentarian misdirects readers, leading them away from the truth of Robin's hegemonic position, and from the liminal position that he allows Batman to assume. Robin, unlike the Robin Hood of myths, imposes rather than derides hegemonic order, a reality made evident in Grayson's maturation into Nightwing and his eventual employment as a police officer. Moreover, the maturation of Robin into Nightwing lays emphasis on the avian nature of the name, not the hero of myth; Robin retroactively becomes a bird rather than a modern iteration of Robin Hood.

Jason Todd is introduced into continuity twice, and both versions were lower class, the first being raised by circus performers in much the same way that Dick Grayson was, while the second was abandoned on the streets of Crime Alley—where Bruce Wayne's parents were killed. Jason's introduction is necessary to free Grayson from the position of Robin and allow his maturation into Nightwing, which helps to establish the generationality of Batman's intentions; the duplication of the originating acts that created the first Robin emphasize the need for the same components of liminal construction. Robin must be lower class, he must be orphaned, and he must have the proper motivation to act to restore hegemonic order (avenging his parents' deaths) — while there may be deviation as to the means to these ends (as evidenced in later

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versions of Robin), the ends must remain the same, not necessarily for the benefit of Robin, but for Bruce Wayne and Batman. The differences between the early Robins and Batman are the dimensions of class and age. Within Robin's lower class standing is some strength that Batman can only appropriate and never adopt as his own; within Robin's adolescence is a liminality that Batman must similarly appropriate. That Tim Drake, an upper class adolescent, can affect the same position of ur-class for Batman emphasizes that through the earlier construction of Robin as lower class, it is no longer necessary for the costume-wearer to actually be lower class. Robin acts as a symbolic construction, so regardless of who now wears the costume, the liminal affect that is produced remains the same.

Tim Drake's transformation into Robin is carefully framed through a critique of the power of costumes. The storyline that runs through *Batman* 455-457 (1990) concerns normal, lawful citizens who don a mask, under the influence of the Scarecrow (a long-time Batman villain), and commit murders. The adoption of these "evil" masks parallels Drake's adoption of the Robin costume to do good (although Drake doesn't actually dress as Robin until the very end of the storyline). Alan Grant quotes from the *Encyclopedia of Magic and Superstition* to elucidate the role of costume wearers:

> A masked person is not simply a man or woman whose real identity is hidden, but his is an enigmatic entity standing outside the sphere of ordinary conduct. . . enjoying a freedom of movement and conduct denied to ordinary men. The donning of a mask is believed to change a man's identity and faculties, for the assumed appearance is held to affect the wearer's inner nature and to assimilate it to that of the being represented by the mask. (34)

Drake's donning of the Robin costume is meant to symbolically empower him, not as a totemic robin, but as Dick Grayson-as-Robin, a complimentary aspect of Bruce Wayne-as-Batman. And unlike his predecessors who transcend class by existing outside of it, Drake simply moves his position laterally through symbolism. Drake moves from tacit compliance to active enforcement in much the same way that Bruce Wayne did before him, but because he is filling the role of Robin (the costume as representative of the aspects of the earlier Robins that allows Batman to exist within an ur-class position), he needn't fulfill all of the requirements that were essential in the ideological formation of Robin. The transformation in costume that occurs with Tim Drake's adoption of the Robin mantle is thus framed against Bruce Wayne's transformation. Drake's dress is decidedly darker than that of the previous Robins, marrying the costume worn by his predecessors with the costume of his mentor—it is dark, and has full-legged pants rather than shorts (which somehow seems to allay accusations of homoeroticism), exchanging camp for austerity.

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While largely concerned with the homogenization of the American class structure, *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) emphasizes the growing disparities of class masked by the myth of classlessness in the post-industrial Gotham City. Carrie Kelley's adoption of the Robin persona marks the transposition of the role from masculine to feminine while still marking Robin as being lower class (in a story written prior to the invention of Tim Drake and following the death of Jason Todd). Mila Bongco's reading of Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* is quite interesting; she reads the middle-age Bruce Wayne and Commissioner Jim Gordon as being ideologically identical: Conservative, ageist, and both endorsing the vigilante methods of Batman in his war against crime. It is only when Carrie Kelley saves Bruce Wayne from the Mutant leader that Bruce Wayne begins to see the strength of the previously maligned media-controlled generation that Carrie is a part of. Magically, Carrie is able to rejuvenate Bruce Wayne's ideological stance, recasting it as decidedly utopian — in opposition to Gordon's — and since Gordon and Batman cannot be portrayed as adversarial, the narrative must necessarily divide them. Batman then cripples The Joker, allies himself with the politically left-wing Oliver Queen (Green Arrow), assaults Superman (*the* agent of hegemonic capitalism, evidenced as such through his lapdog relationship with Ronald Reagan), takes control of outlaw gang The Mutants and begins an underground uprising against the hegemonic capitalism of Gotham City. This recasting of Robin makes perfect sense within the context of late-1980s superhero "deconstruction": The roles of Robin and Batman are reversed, which appears to cause some anxiety as evidenced in Batman's constant threatening of Carrie's employment, emphasizing both the worker-employer relation at the heart of capitalism and the anxiety over Robin's importance.

Batman's adoption of Robin is not so much the transfer of guardianship as it is an appropriation of Robin's classless state. If billionaire Bruce Wayne is to adhere to the limitations of his class, then his political effectiveness is limited; Robin, regardless of who wears the mantle, exists outside of class structure altogether, much like his namesake Robin Hood, and this is what Bruce Wayne is primarily interested in. From this position of classlessness, or "opposition" to hegemony, Batman can battle injustice without fear of interference on the part of the state and its agents. One need look no further than Batman's adventures in 2004-2005: Robin's move to neighboring Blüdhaven coincides with Batman's status as a wanted criminal.

V. Heroes on the Margin in Valiant, Image and Milestone Comics

Heroes in both the Valiant and Image Universes, which differ in a variety of ways from the Marvel and DC universes, operate *sans* sidekick, with only a costume to mark them as constituents of the ur-class position. As such, the

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heroes in the Valiant universe exist on the margin of society—largely unknown, and largely apolitical—as do the heroes of the Image universe, the exceptions, in both cases, being superteams sanctioned by the government (H.A.R.D. Corps and Secret Weapons in the former and Youngblood and Cyberforce, among others, in the latter). By and large, heroes are seen as vigilantes—if they are seen at all: Spawn, The Maxx, and Shadowman are all "underworld" heroes, operating within a sub-class sphere of poverty and marginality; X-O Manowar is authorized through his corporate sponsorship (like Iron Man, whom he resembles), but even then rarely engages in public displays of heroics; The Savage Dragon is sanctioned by the government as he acts as a police officer; and so on and so forth. As stated previously, in order to gain lawful sanction, heroes must succeed in the acquisition of liminality through the co-opting of an "orphaned" sidekick, the providence and empowerment of the government or capitalism, and the distinctive mark of the costume. Throughout the Valiant and Image universes, heroes eschew this incorporation into effective liminality by the avoidance of the first of these markers, mark themselves symbolically as liminal, and are only incorporated into the service of the law through the permission of the government, otherwise existing purposefully on the fringe.

On a reader-based level, sidekicks simply do not fit into the scheme of the Image universe. They are seen as tragically uncool and simply childish. But what is truly uncool is the cooperation with the law that the acquisition of a sidekick engenders—while Image was acting in the most capitalist of manners as a company (in the early and mid 1990s), they provided a discreet, and unremarked upon, anti-capitalist, pro-anarchy stance in their comics (outside of those sanctioned heroes), and the narratives reflected such. Spawn was blatantly disenfranchised: As a government agent he was systematically downsized and killed—his battle then was against the government that had replaced him, eradicating the need for him to be pro-government in any way. For him to be "centered" through the use of a sidekick, through some form of governmental sanction, would have been to posit a contradiction of motivations: Spawn could simply not achieve his goals of revenge against the government in the sway of lawful sanction. The Maxx shares one very important class related issue with Spawn, as they are both marginalized as homeless men, compounded by their seeming lack of sanity. The Maxx operates on a different conceptual plane than Spawn does, and whereas Spawn's concerns are terrestrial, and rather petty (revenge against those who had killed him), The Maxx's are existential, absurd, and as such he also requires no lawful sanction—his is a world without laws (other than those of nature); there is no sanction to be garnered. The Image universe is a dark one, with most of the heroes (even when they are seemingly sanctioned, as in the case of Youngblood) infused with a grittiness and overwhelming pessimism, leaving no room for youth in such a paradigm. It is no wonder then that the first wave of Image heroes were never successfully replaced,

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the company instead delving into non-superhero titles, unable to infuse its dark universe with the light and levity necessary to maintain the tacit (and always unfulfilled) optimism of mainstream superhero comics: Batman and Captain America may never change the world, but they do take the time to sanction other heroes (in the form of their sidekicks) to carry on the fight for truth, justice and the American way, and it is this generational concern that concretizes the concerns of the superhero genre.

The two possible exceptions in the Image universe are Shadowhawk and Supreme. Shadowhawk was an Image universe hero that was quickly dropped in the shuffle of creators, and sales of the comic book relied primarily on a synthesis of gimmick die-cut and embossed covers and a storyline based on the mystery of the hero's identity. The mantle and costume of Shadowhawk are passed through a number of characters before the cycle finally stops, and while the transfer of the symbolic body is successful, the hero always remains on the margins. He never engages in the inscribing moment of ideological combat in the public sphere, is never able to separate himself from the mystery of his own identity and the pursuit of petty crime. This is surely not the case with the much more successful Supreme, who, like Superman — of which Supreme was a pastiche (in the Jamesonian sense[13]) — was attended to by a pastiche of the Silver Age Superman Family. But, like Superman before him, Supreme does not rely on the governmental validation of the system, but is rather able to assert his heroic role through selfless acts (in the face of seeming personal destruction). These sidekicks, like Superman's, are hardly necessary. But the familial construction, much like the Fantastic Four, implies generationality, and it is this that ultimately secures Supreme's heroic role.

To return briefly to the Valiant universe, the majority of the storylines in the titles published by Valiant revolve around marginalized conflicts (which is not to say that they fail to endanger terrestrial life, or even the universe itself) between two parties, both of which are unknown to the public (or have yet to enter into the public sphere fully): *X-O Manowar* depicts the secret war between X-O and the spider aliens; Shadowman is largely concerned with underworld criminals and Master Darque (the great villain of the Valiant universe); *Harbinger* concerns the ongoing conflict between a group of superpowered teens and their former benefactor, and so on. The Valiant universe fails to have supervillains in the traditional sense—there are no bank robberies for the Valiant heroes to contend with, only secret conspiracies. As such, there is no need for the heroes to enter into the public sphere, and thus, while they all wear costumes, there is no need for them to assemble the other tropes of superhero liminality or to garner governmental sanction.

Similarly, the heroes of the Milestone Universe, outside of Kobalt and Icon, exist as marginalized and unseen or lawless (the former being evidenced in such heroes as Xombi, the latter by Hardware and the Blood Syndicate), but

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both Kobalt and Icon are exceptional on a number of levels.[14] Kobalt, a white vigilante who positions himself on the margins, is honor-bound to train a former friend's teenage son to be a superhero—and implicitly to become his own sidekick. As such, Kobalt moves from nighttime adventures, obscured by darkness and mystery, to open confrontations in daylight: The adoption of the sidekick immediately positions Kobalt as sanctioned by the law, and whereas previously police had been puzzled and enraged by his actions, after the acquisition of Page (his sidekick), the police are immediately seen as cooperating with the masked (and aggressively dressed—in spikes and chains) vigilante.[15] Icon, although his adventuring begins with the acquisition of a sidekick—it is his sidekick Rocket's challenge to him that leads to his donning a costume and the beginning of his imposition of the law—is reacted to as being unlawful in his first contact with sanctioned agents of the law. The conclusion to draw from this disparity between Kobalt and Icon is that race is also a marker: Icon must first prove that he acts within the law (saving the mayor of the city) before he can be officially sanctioned—and even then he is eventually the subject of a smear campaign on the part of other blacks in the city, as he is increasingly seen as a tool of the government (even though the mayor is a black woman).[16] Thus, it is only a matter of time before Icon and Rocket are fully sanctioned and exist on the peripheries of class and able to affect their lawful and heroic ends. This is doubly ironic in that Icon's non-superhero persona is a wealthy, bourgeoisie Republican and Rocket a lower class teenager, subject to the travails of her class position (teenage pregnancy, school problems). Only in their superheroic identities can Rocket and Icon come to relate to one another; only in the absence of class are they equal citizens, simultaneously empowered and disempowered in this liminality, only able to communicate with one another in their superhero guise. When the costume is removed, they are returned to their normal class positions, and finally unable to relate to one another: Only in classlessness, in liminality, can they finally see beyond their ideological positions, only in communitas.

VI. Commodity and Liminality

Turner's discussions of liminality concerned pre-industrial societies (although he did mention contemporary examples in his work), and as such failed to incorporate the concerns of capitalism into his discussion of communitas and liminality. It can be assumed that in a capitalist system these forms of anti-structure are finally appropriated, commodified, and returned to the public in discrete form. While this study is explicitly concerned with superheroes and the interpellation of vigilantes into positions of subservience to the system of law, implicitly my concern is with the transcendence of class hierarchies. Thus, this study, much like Judith Butler's study of gender (1999 [1990]) and the possibilities of

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dressing drag to subvert the system of gendered identities, attempts to point towards ways out of the (seemingly totalizing) system of class. But whereas the adornment of drag is highly possible (if not plausible), the adoption of sidekicks for every citizen is entirely absurd. What is possible though is an adoption of the secondary traits that these vigilantes cum heroes exhibit. Capitalistic hegemony depends on economic constraints to limit the potential of its citizens, but if one finds ways out of the traditional economic and cultural system of control by acting ethically, by acting in the selfless defense of the social (if not the law itself), then one defies the control of the system. And this is compounded by generationality in that if one constructs an ethical system that allows the subversion of law for the pursuit of the greater good, then a system of perpetuated agency inevitably follows. This is not to say that the world of superheroes is necessarily more moral or ethical than our own reality, but rather that by transposing the model of heroic action to our own world — namely that of the citizen who can attain liminality within the system of law while simultaneously working for the greater good of humanity to our own world — that a more ethical world might be achieved. Thus, it is not the tropes of fashion and sidekicks that we must appropriate, but a new ethos.

Notes

1. "liminal" *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. 2002.
2. "liminal •*adj*." *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*. Ed. Judy Pearsall. Oxford University Press, 2001. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. My inclusion of these two definitions for the word "liminal," from two canonical dictionaries of the English language, is to point to the very ambiguity of the word. The word, like the status of liminality, defies precision; the purpose of this study is, in part, to explicate the nuances of the term and the status and to apply it to popular culture texts.
3. Marvel superheroes, interestingly, have largely eschewed the need for teenage sidekicks, instead having team books devoted to teenage superheroes and their exploits. (The principle exception to this rule is Captain America, first with Bucky, then the Falcon.) Although there have been a number of exceptions to this rule, by and large teenage heroes were required to congregate in a clique—an easily translated social formation for any high school student. In its own way then, the teenage fraternity of the superhero clique is a necessary precursor to the adult fraternity of the corporate conglomerate. The New Warriors, the New Mutants, A2, the Young Avengers, and X-Force (a renamed version of the New Mutants, drawn by Rob Liefield, and largely endemic of the early 1990s eradication of youth in comics) are all representative teams, and all but the last solely comprised of teenage heroes.
4. For my purposes, and a further explanation will ensue, "ur-class" is that position of existing within a class system but without class—superheroes are neither upper,

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middle or lower class, but rather something other. They exist as a member of a hyper-class, able to affect the class system (in some way) but being untouched by the class system. That is not to say that the costume wearers are themselves untouched, but simply that superheroes are untouchable by such worldly concerns.

5. Richard Reynolds' *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* and Mila Bongo's *Reading Comics* (which largely plagiarizes Reynolds) both examine costuming rather simplistically.
6. As Scott Bukatman has noted in his evaluation of the X-Men, Magneto is perceived as evil because of "his obsessions [which] are precisely... power, definition, and hierarchy" (Bukatman 121, my italics). Batman differs from Magneto in that his "obsession" with punishing criminals masks his sublimated concerns with hegemonic capitalism and the preservation of hierarchy whereas Magneto would see a new social order in place, wherein mutants rules over humans.
7. Uricchio, William and Roberta E. Pearson. "'I'm Not Fooled By That Cheap Disguise.'" *The Many Lives of the Batman*. Ed. William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson. New York: Routledge, 1991. 182-213.
8. See my "The World Ozymandias Made: Utopias in Superhero Comics," *Journal of Popular Culture* vol. 36 no. 3 (Winter 2003): 497-517.
9. After the death of Barry Allen, the Silver Age Flash, Kid Flash, Wally West, was required to take his place. Similarly, the original Robin, Dick Grayson, in adulthood, rather than adopting the mantle of Batman (since Bruce Wayne continued to carry it), had to formulate an adult identity of his own, that of Nightwing (a fusion of the Robin and Batman personas).
10. Robin first appeared in *Detective Comics* 29 (1939); Aqualad, Aquaman's sidekick, in *Adventure Comics* 260, (1959); Kid Flash, the Flash's sidekick, in *Flash* vol. 1 no. 110 (1959); Green Arrow's partner, Speedy appeared in *More Fun Comics* 73 (1941); and Wonder Woman's partner, Wonder Girl, later renamed Troia, first appeared in *The Brave and the Bold* 60 (1965).
11. For the curious reader, the best of these readings is offered by Andy Medhurst in his "Batman, Deviance and Camp." *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to A Superhero and his Media*. Ed. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio. New York: Routledge, 1991. 149-163.
12. Cf. *Detective Comics* 33, Kane 67.
13. Cf. Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Hal Foster, ed. Port Townsend, WA: Bay, 1983. 111-125.
14. Kobalt is a Batman-clone, although he eschews the cape and bat-ears on his costume for a more contemporaneously fashionable look, adorned with spikes and chains. But, unlike Batman, having a sidekick is antithetical to his techniques, which are often explicitly violent in nature. Icon, traditionally viewed as "the black Superman," is more than simply that, but is clearly a Superman-clone nonetheless. Interestingly, both heroes have sidekicks in the Milestone universe.
15. Cf. *Kobalt* 0 and 1 for his night adventures before Page is introduced; 4 and 5 detail Page's first public appearance and Kobalt's entrance into the public sphere.

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16. *Icon* 1-3 detail his first public appearances, the second issue devoted largely to his battle against the police in an attempt to assert his ideological position. *Icon* 17 concerns the public response to Icon's heroic actions on the part of white, hegemonic capitalism, which ultimately fail.

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