

Review

Love, Sex, Gender, and Superheroes

Jeffery Brown (2022)

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Reviewed by Frazer Heritage

Affiliation

Frazer Heritage

he/him/his

Department of Criminology and Sociology, Birmingham City University, UK

email: frazer.heritage@bcu.ac.uk

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Jeffery Brown's monograph is a highly engaging, well written and thought-provoking dive into how gender and sexuality are represented within both comic books and media associated with comic books (e.g. film adaptations). Brown draws on a wide variety of social theories to explore how a range of gendered topics are discussed and represented, from pornographic superhero parodies (Chapter 1) to images used to signify female orgasms (Chapter 9). What unifies the topics explored is a clear discussion of theories about gender and sexuality (such as hegemonic masculinity, homosociality and the phallus), which are illustrated with either pictures or well-known examples.

In the introduction, Brown demonstrates the importance of analysing superheroes and notes the prominence of sex [in](#) comic books. Importantly, this chapter also demonstrates how normative notions of masculinity/femininity inform the construction of superheroes. Brown makes clear links between French philosophical writings on the body (e.g. the work of Foucault) and the representation of bodies within comic books. In Chapter 1, Brown continues to make strong links between theoretical and philosophical concepts (e.g. work on the Phallus and the separation between Phallus and penis) and comic books/adaptations from comic books. In Chapter 2, Brown interrogates the representation of women, in particular femme fatales. Chapter 3 dives into multiple nuances and facets of hegemonic masculinity, which helps to frame findings provided in later chapters. In this chapter, Brown also explores notions associated with homosociality and how homosocial bonds can be confused with homosexual¹ ones (e.g. how Batman and Robin are often seen as gay). Chapter 4 explores normativities associated with marriage and domestic life, with attention given to the domestication of (typically heterosexual) superheroes. Chapter 5 turns to explore how kisses signify sexual/romantic desire and can be used to signify marriage. Brown draws particular attention to the recent trend [of including in](#) LGBTQ+ kisses and shows the parallels between different-sex and same-sex couple's kisses. Chapter 6 turns to how androids and robots are often given gendered bodies and behave in gendered ways. Chapter 7 explores the comic book trope of 'body-swapping' and the more recent addition of transgender characters to comic books – which is most welcome, given their slow but much-needed inclusion. Chapter 8 was a somewhat difficult read due to the nature of the topic: a critical analysis of violence and sexual assault. This chapter deals with topics that can be emotionally distressing, but which are highly relevant. Here, Brown demonstrates how such violence can lead to sexual intercourse between superheroes, which in turn creates a link between violence and sex. This chapter also deals with sexual assault – particularly

using examples of men who are sexually assaulted by women. Chapter 9 deals with orgasms and the allegory of power running through a superhero's body as representative of orgasms. Finally, Brown provides a concluding chapter that reiterates the importance of looking at superheroes and comic books through a critical lens.

Brown is incredibly meticulous in the discussion of social theory by ensuring that philosophical arguments are appropriately caveated. Of particular relevance to readers of *Gender and Language* is Brown's careful discussion of how media practices shape society and how norms associated with gender/sexuality are sustained through this genre. This is particularly important given the extensive body of previous work on the normalisation of gender-based violence in the media and the potential harms this can cause. A range of examples of readings of the text are provided: some are literal readings, while some I would argue required more interpretation, as certain representations are taken as allegorical for other issues. This is somewhat reminiscent of Baxter's 'reading against the grain' approach, which encourages several readings of a text (see Baxter 2008).

My primary criticism of Brown's work rests on the methodologies: it is unclear what methodologies have been employed to explore the representation of gender/sexuality beyond illustrative examples. While Brown's work should be lauded for the numerous examples provided, it is unclear how and why these examples were chosen and how representative they are. For example, it might have been beneficial to construct a corpus and explore whether features identified are present in 'x' number of comic books. Similarly, it could have been interesting to apply preestablished multimodal critical discursive methods to a range of comic book scenes, or even to develop a unique methodological approach for exploring the representation of gender/sexuality within comic books. Thus, while this book might be useful as background reading – and good as a way of introducing people from a sociological background to the broader issues of gender representation in comic books – it may be less useful for scholars interested in replicating systematic analyses of these texts.

Thus, the focus of this book is on the broader contextualisation of examples rather than detailed linguistic analysis. This is likely because Brown comes from a cultural studies background. Nevertheless, this monograph provides an interesting foundation for research into gender and language, and there are several obvious routes to expanding on Brown's work from a linguistic perspective.

Despite the criticisms, I also want to praise this volume for touching on a range of sensitive topics and dealing with them in an appropriate way. Throughout, it is obvious that Brown has worked to ensure sensitive topics are approached from an inclusive perspective. The breadth of topics covered in this monograph is simply outstanding. For those interested in gender-based media representations (more broadly than just in terms of language), this is a must-read book.

References

Baxter, Judith (2008) Feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis: a new theoretical and methodological approach? In Kate Harrington, Lia Litosseliti, Helen Sauntson and Jane Sunderland (eds) *Gender and Language Research Methodologies* 243–255. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Notes

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¹ Although the term 'gay' is more appropriate here, 'homosexual' has been used to contrast with 'homosocial'.