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## Fans in the Gutter: People of Color in Comics Fandom

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**Abstract:** Fandom and so called “geek culture” have often been characterized as a haven for the marginalized, a place where those who fit in nowhere else have been able to form communities around a shared appreciation of media. However, evidence shows that the experiences of people of color in comic book fandom differ from the experiences of white comic fans. A pilot study was conducted in Los Angeles in the summer of 2018, including five semi structured interviews of Los Angeles area comic book fans who identified as people of color. This data was augmented by data from an online survey of 31 self-identified comic fans over eighteen of any ethnicity which sought to identify how fans reacted to the idea of racial diversity among comic book characters, and in what contexts most fan interactions took place. Results indicate that people of color in fandom often perceive fandom as less accepting than the popular impression.

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The representation of marginalized peoples in comic books has been a topic of debate and literary analysis for many years. Prior to the 1970s, comic book creators used popular racial stereotypes as a narrative shorthand to communicate “otherness” to the audience (Howard 2013). People of color occupied limited narrative roles, with Black characters often cast as servants, and Asian characters in the role of stereotypical “yellow peril” villains (Strömberg 2010). On the heels of changing social attitudes and the weakening of the Comics Code Authority, a censorship body created in 1954 to govern comic book content, there was an increase in prominent characters of color such as Luke Cage, Storm, and Black Lightning in the 70s and 80s. Comics became more diverse, a trend that has continued at varying speeds ever since (Nama 2011). Many argued that this equalization of cultural representation allowed fans of color to better engage with the work (Brown 2000). Others argued that this inclusion was nothing more than a cynical cash grab with no moral standing behind it (McWilliams 2013).

Within these debates the focus has most often been placed upon the works themselves, their creators, and the other ancillary media derived from comic books. Comparatively limited attention has been directed to the effect the absence and eventual inclusion of diversity in comics books has had on readers’ relations with each other. Further, little has been written at all about the role of diversity in the fandom that has emerged and developed around comic books and specific characters.

In the recent past, the industry has evolved and expanded, and it is now commonplace for producers of comic books to engage with readers not only at events such as conventions and bookstore signings, but directly through social media, creating an important new dynamic within the social world of comic books. Thus, new questions regarding the relationship between comic books and society are emerging: How do the cultural identities of fans shape their engagement with comic books and with one another? How do fans interact and shape the identity of their fandom? To what extent is the value of inclusivity purportedly promoted by some comic book series embraced and practiced among fans who follow these socially-conscious texts? To what extent does the media and the comic book industry take into account the social relations of fans, especially relations shaped by diversity issues for the purposes of generating profits and/or promoting greater understanding and tolerance for cultural difference within society?

This study concerns itself with the social construction of fandom and explores, through an ethnographic lens, how fans define themselves and treat each other, rather than the nature and origins of fandoms. For many years fandoms were seen as mirrors of popular culture and society as a whole, only reflecting what they were shown and the social structures of other groups (Brown 1997). However, many fan communities today operate as their own independent culture groups. While they still form around particular media, their values are not shaped by the values of that media. Instead, some fandom units now actively pursue changes not only in media, but in social structures as well (Lopez-Kido 2012). In essence, fandoms now have the power to shape society. It is for this reason that I focus on people of color in comic book fandom. While it is true that the social structures of fandom mirror structures of exclusion in the rest of society, fan culture's capacity for social activism can help map out solutions for problems of social exclusion in society at large. The abundance of texts discussing racial diversity and representation within comic books and their relation to fans of color provide a wealth of background information, making comic book fandom a natural area to begin studying this topic.

In the pages below, I convey the results of a preliminary study that was conducted among comic book fans of color in Los Angeles in summer 2018. I collected data using ethnographic methods complemented with surveys. The results of my study suggest the expressions and practices of comic book fans of color are often marked by ambivalence, especially in relationship to participating in fandoms. Fans of color appear to experience their fan interests solo or else carefully curate their fan social groups in order to avoid conflict within their fan community. Based on these findings I argue race relations and representations of race often qualify as taboo subjects within the broader culture group of comic book fandom. Although comic book fans of color do not explicitly discuss matters of race, their actions and preferences appear to be shaped by these concerns, and their ambivalence may be interpreted as a reflection of these concerns as well. Anthropologist Mary Douglas' concept "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966) is useful for illuminating these responses. Douglas argues cultures are defined by what they shun just as much as what they value. When applied to comic book fans, ambivalence and careful approaches to interacting appear as the "dirty response" of fans who feel out of place but at the same time illuminate the scaffolding of a social order within the world of comic book fans. Comic book fans take pride in critiquing the establishment and innovating inclusive characters and narratives; however, as my study suggests, not all fans perceive themselves as part of this social world, and the progressive ethos associated with the world of comic books has its limitations. Douglas's notions of dirt and purity, help us to consider the racial dimensions of comic book fandom and underscores the comic book fandom as a valuable unit to think with.

## **Research Methods**

This study primarily utilized two methodologies, semi-structured interviews and an online survey. Ethnographic work within three Los Angeles area comic book shops was attempted and abandoned early on. While, anthropologists demonstrate that commercial spaces are also cultural spaces the challenge of observing behavior within a commercial setting where buying and selling can limit the amount of time an individual may spend at the site made the ethnographic component prohibitively time consuming given the time frame of the project (Miller 1998). IRB approval was obtained for the interviews and survey and both provided useable data on different facets of the fan experience.

### *Semi-Structured Interviews:*

My semi-structured interviews sought to assess how people of color define the nature of their fandom, identify with a fan group, and perceive and relate to others in the fan group. I limited the study to participants who identified as people of color, but were otherwise open to any gender identity, sexual orientation, and age over eighteen. A total of five interview participants were found.

Participants were interviewed in a few different ways, either in person, via telephone, or online communication. Participants were asked about their histories as fans, their interactions with other fans, and how they define the line between fans and non-fans.

Orme's methodology informed my field research. Orme interviewed female comic book fans outside of the context of the comic book store or convention because those were places where they felt uncomfortable expressing their opinions (Orme 2016). My participants also seemed to speak freely about their marginalization in the fan community when interviewed in private. This observation shaped my view of power dynamics within stores and fueled my decision to limit participant observation.

Once completed, the interview answers were taken and memoed. I looked for key themes within the answers, and compared the ways each respondent addressed those themes.

### *Surveys:*

Adapting Gagliardo's methodology a survey was used to collect a broad swath of data on adult comic book fans of any ethnic identity (Gagliardo 2013). This data provides a view of the landscape of fan categories translated into percentages.

One of the primary points of inquiry was the degree to which respondents felt comic books addressed the issue of racial diversity and what demographic groups were most or least in favor of diversity in comics. Additionally, the survey was intended to gauge how different age brackets in fandom broke down along racial and gender lines.

Below is a table that summarizes my methods, their parameters and outcomes:

**Table 1. Summary of Research Methods, Parameters and Outcomes**

METHOD	PARAMETERS	OUTCOMES
Participant Observation	Two hours at each location over the course of two weeks	Participant observation was limited due to field conditions
Survey	Series of 7 questions disseminated via fliers in comic shops and online via the SurveyMonkey website. Accessed via URL or QR code.	Collected 31 responses: 52% White 16 % Mixed Race 13 % Latinx 7 % Asian American 6 % American Indian 6 % African American 45% People of color 3% "Human" (1 respondent)
Semi-Structured Interview	Series of 10 questions administered either in person, over the phone, or over the computer.	Collected 5 interviews.: -1 in person -3 over the internet - 1 over the phone.  Participants were ages 21 to 39.  -2 African American males, -1 African American/Mexican gender nonbinary person, -1 Asian American male -1 Latinx male

Findings:

*Survey Results:*

**Table 2. Summary of Survey Responses**

SURVEY QUESTION	RESPONDENT	RESULTS
What is your opinion of racial diversity in comics?	All	13% Comics are diverse enough 29% Comics could be slightly more diverse 55% Comics are not diverse enough 3% I do not care about diversity in comics
What is your opinion of racial diversity in comics?	Respondents of color	7% Comics are diverse enough 57% Comics could be slightly more diverse 36% Comics are not diverse enough 0% I do not care about diversity in comics
What is your opinion of racial diversity in comics?	White respondents	19% Comics are diverse enough 50% Comics could be slightly more diverse 25% Comics are not diverse enough 6% I do not care about diversity in comics
In what context do you primarily interact with other fans?	All	29% In person at stores 8% With close friends 4% At conventions 46% Online 13% No regular interaction

In what context do you primarily interact with other fans?	Respondents of Color	7% In person at stores 7% With close friends 7% At conventions 29% Online 50% No regular interaction
In what context do you primarily interact with other fans?	White Respondents	29% In person at stores 5% With close friends 0% At conventions 33% Online 33% No regular interaction

*Semi-Structured Interviews:*

The five interview subjects consisted of two men who identified as African American, one 39 and one 32. They will be referred to as Hank and Warren respectively. One identified as Cuban, 43 and male and will be referred to as Alex. The other two subjects were 21 years of age. One is male, identifies as Asian American, and will be referred to as Scott. The other identifies as Gender Nonbinary (thus, per their request, will be referred to with They/Their pronouns), African-American/Hispanic, and will be referred to as Bobby.

Three distinct themes emerge from the interviews that reveal commonalities in their experiences despite the participants' disparate backgrounds. The first is a different sense of what defines a fan than has been presented in the past. The second is an understanding that diversity and representation in comic books matters greatly, but that there is a deficiency at present. The third is an understanding that while their own communities might be inclusive, fandom at large can be hostile.

*Defining Fandom*

"However you fan, you're doing it right" says Bobby when questioned about what distinguishes a fan versus a non-fan. Much of the ethnographic work on comic book fandom and "nerd culture" in general characterizes a kind of gatekeeping that arises when fans test the status of other fans by quizzing them on certain significant texts, or knowledge committed to memory related to the object of fandom (Orme 2016; Wertley 2014). The participants in my study take a different approach.

Both Bobby and Scott have open interpretations of what a comic book fan is. In their views, anyone who loves something that comes from comic books can be considered a comic book fan even if this love came from movies, television, or toys. In fact, Bobby looks on their past as someone who would gate keep in the traditional way with shame and a certain amount of disdain for their past behavior. "I had my [expletive] Peter Parker phase where I looked down on anyone who didn't read the same things I had." This fluid approach to cultural membership echoes Dick Hebdige's observation that despite differing levels of commitment, members of youth subcultures were united by a common cultural language (Hebdige 1979). For Bobby and Scott, the only ones who are not fans are the dismissive and joyless who either don't care about comic books or actively disdain them. "A non-comic book fan is someone who finds no enjoyment in reading them" says Scott or "dismisses their artistic merit."

Hank, by his own admission does not often interact with other fans, but attends comic conventions where people will try to quiz his knowledge in the same fashion portrayed in Wertley's ethnography. Hank pays this little mind and feels no obligation to prove his fan identity to anyone. "People try to pull that [quizzing] on me, but it doesn't bother me if I don't know DC comics because I know X-Men better than them." A formerly avid comic reader, Hank now mostly keeps up with the goings on in comics second hand via comic book encyclopedias, which recap major events throughout the decades, but does not feel this diminishes his status as a fan.

### *The Case for Diversity*

All five note that comic books have an issue when it comes to representing diversity. When asked their opinions of such characters in comics, Bobby's response was a particularly venomous "where are they?" Jeffrey Brown's work on black comic book fans talks about how black children have been denied characters with whom they can identify, and Bobby's comments bear this out (Brown 2001). "When your hair doesn't fit in the Batman mask, that has an effect on a kid," Bobby goes on to say, noting that while they did not understand at a young age the importance of representation, little things like that always made them feel like an outsider.

Scott and Warren both identified early on with characters who could be any race because their costumes covered their whole bodies. Warren expresses a particular affinity for characters "in their armor" where he could imagine himself in the role. Scott, like Bobby, did not consciously give race much thought as a young child, believing that the feeling of not being represented was simply a symptom of how fantastical the stories were. It was not until a heroic, prominent, Asian American character showed up in the comic *The Walking Dead* that Scott really began thinking about representation and believes that it changed how he thought about himself and his own identity.

There is a definite optimism. Some, like Hank and Bobby, are cautious and wary, while Scott and Alex are more confident that positive change is underway. Hank and Bobby's reticence comes from how they believe black characters in the past have been portrayed with little depth. Alex sees progress in the recent uptick in diverse characters and the casting of people of color as traditionally white characters. Scott believes that there's always a new story to tell and that someone will always need their stories told.

### *The Fandom Minefield*

In the context of our exchange, Scott was comfortable talking about his opinions on diversity, but he says that in the wider world of fandom, there are people who are not receptive to the idea. A friend made a comment Scott insists was innocent but still hurtful where he claimed that "diversity doesn't improve the story." Intentional or not, Scott admits to feeling marginalized. Though he says his experience "is not broken compared to a white fan," he still feels like bringing up race in fandom is a way to get hurtful comments thrown around. Scott's discussion of his experience with marginalization in fandom is consistent across the interviews. Participants, even if they do not claim personal experience with marginalization in fandom, take it as a given that POC have it tough in fandom, and that if they haven't experienced it firsthand, it is because they have carefully avoided it.

Bobby has a similar story to Scott's, where a white friend and fellow fan reacted poorly (though more violently than Scott's friend) to talking about diversifying comic books. Bobby claims only a couple of close friends as their regular mode of interaction with other fans, though they never link this habit with the previous hostile encounter. Similarly, Warren claims a small group of what he calls "cool, inclusive fans" as the reason he has never encountered discrimination in fandom. Warren is the only one to candidly say that he curates his interactions in order to avoid drawing the ire of less inclusive fans. Scott appears to be the most socially active of the five when it comes to meeting and interacting with other fans. Rather than carefully curating a group, Scott spends time at comic book stores and conventions, but implicit in this is his understanding that he must always be wary in mixed company and, as Goffman wrote "calculating about the impression he is making to a degree...others are not."

Where Hank seems bothered is when this kind of conflict extends to the realm of cosplay (from "costume-play," the practice of dressing up as a favored character). Hank feels a certain amount of obligation to dress up as Black characters," but with the dearth of characters fitting that description compared to white characters, he sometimes dresses as white characters. This earns him scorn for not staying in his lane, so to speak. "How dare I dress as someone who isn't black?" he asks, mimicking the outrage of his questioner. "Meanwhile, a white person can dress as whoever they want." Hank's experiences are reminiscent of Goffman's observation that stigmatized individuals, even when accepted into the mainstream, are expected to act as representatives of their entire community and their acceptance is conditional upon the fact that their difference never makes those in the mainstream uncomfortable (Goffman 1963).

Across the five there is a sense of imbalance in the world of fandom. "I can just now experience what ten-year-old white kids have been able to experience for over a hundred years," Bobby says. However, they go on to say, with a degree of wicked optimism, "the people who don't want diversity won't last in fandom. It's moving forward too fast for them."

### **Discussion:**

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways that fans of color interact with each other and interrogate whether hegemonic notions of privilege based on race shape fandom experiences for people of color. At the core of the study was the belief that people of color inherently had a more difficult time in fandom than white fans, and that, like the female fans of Orme and Scott's work, they would need to form safe enclaves for themselves, or else withdraw from participation with fans altogether (Orme 2016; Scott 2013).

Looking at the interview subjects, this seems largely true. Warren and Bobby have found enclaves, Hank deals with gatekeeping, and Scott with microaggressions. Obviously, a 31-person survey cannot hope to fully grasp the ideals and practices of fandom, but the results do seem to support this idea. Fans of color in this sample are more likely to withdraw from fan interaction entirely. The comic book store, long considered the bastion of fan interaction is mostly white in this sample, echoing Orme and Scott's similar findings on women in fandom. As if to accentuate this similarity, while there were no women among the interviewees, those who responded to the survey showed similar experiences to the POC respondents, a lack of in person interaction with other fans, with women of color in the survey predominantly claiming not to interact with other fans at all, compared to white female respondents, who primarily interact

with other fans online. My sample also showed comic book stores to be predominantly male, despite women outnumbering men in the sample as a whole.

While the majority of the participants in the survey do believe in increased racial diversity in comics, those who do not are predominantly white. In connection with Hank and Bobby's beliefs that white fans do not need to care about diversity because they have always been represented, and Scott's experience at the movies, it would seem that fandom, or at least white fandom, does consider discussions of diversity to be "matter out of place."

The concept of "matter out of place" is that a culture's values are based on what it shuns as much as what it accepts. It is, fittingly, a major part of the aesthetics and design of comic books themselves. Comic book writer Scott McCloud writes about how a story is divided between panels, but what happens in between the panels means as much as what happens inside of them (McCloud 1994). Between the panels, in the margins, what comic artists call the "gutter," is where the movement happens.

The idea that racial diversity in fandom is something new, brought on by the newfound popularity that comics have attained, has some merit. A majority of the respondents to the survey were 35 or younger. However, research into Science Fiction and Fantasy fandoms has shown people of color to be historically present but silent (Reid 2014). Bobby and Scott's stories of inheriting fandom from older relatives, as well as Hank's mere presence, show that People of Color have been in fandom for quite some time, but like female fans, invisible, shunned to the gutters.

Fandom presents itself as a culture where the hierarchy is based on knowledge and acquisition of materials. I believe that it is time to reevaluate that idea. That race matters in fandom may seem obvious, since it has long been known that race (a concept that exists exclusively as a social force rather than a biological reality) is a major player in world culture, but that is the very point. Previous scholarship on the subject predominantly ignored race in fandom. I believe it is likely to have been an issue for the 50 percent of people of color respondents who do not regularly interact with other fans. It was an issue for Bobby growing up, for Scott with his friend, for Warren seeking his enclave, and for Hank, lambasted for daring to step outside the lines of respectability as laid down by the fandom hegemony, lines which are irrefutably racial.

I do not know that I believe all of fandom to be consciously discriminatory. There are, almost certainly, some in fandom who are outright racists, but I think the majority really believe it to be a non-issue. To reiterate what Bobby and Hank said separately, white people do not have to worry about this, as it has never affected them, whereas it is omnipresent for fans of color.

### **Conclusion:**

The early scholarship on fandom has been characterized as an attempt to legitimize the area as a field of study. Even with the uptick in popularity in comic books and their associated media, there is a tendency to see comic books and their fans as frivolous. Neither should be dismissed so easily. Comic book fandom represents a microcosm of society, a group built around an outcast identity that still upholds structures of inequality present in the rest of society. Fandom shows us how people twice stigmatized survive in the community and work to make it more habitable. Just as fandoms show us a microcosm of conflict, they can show us methods for



conflict resolution. The more the experiences of the marginalized in fandom are studied, the more fandoms can be spaces of change.

It has been asked why people of color would even seek to identify with comic books and their fandoms if their reality is not presented in the texts. Based on my interviews they do feel there is an element of reality presented. Bobby and Scott both identified with Spider-Man as a socially awkward, occasionally angry teenager. There is a baseline humanity to some stories that attracts readers, who then stay with the media and the fandom despite its deficiencies. Yet, they are not passive consumers. They support and push for greater diversity, trying to make comic books into the kinds of media they wish they had been able to consume as children, something that reflects their experiences in a multifaceted way.

This change cannot only come from the media. Diversification of the media, in this case comic books, is important. The survey sample indicates that both majority and minority fans expect more in terms of diversity, but it is fans of color who understand the urgency of the issue. As the majority of my interview subjects expressed, white fans don't have to care because they don't see the problem as vividly as fans of color do. However, there are structural issues within the community that need to be addressed alongside the media content.

Discussion and implementation of diversity causes backlash that directly affects the experiences of fans of color. Why does this backlash happen and how can it be addressed? The data collected here may not be able to present answers, but it does indicate where further study might be conducted. The meritocracy approach to fandom needs to be reevaluated and the division of experiences between people of color (as well as other marginalized identities) and white, straight, cisgender male fans needs to be further studied.

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APPENDIX 1:

*INTERVIEW QUESTIONS*

1. Hi, how are you? Thank you for agreeing to do this. If you'll just take this IRB form and sign it and get it back to me when you're done.
2. How old are you? (**Age**)
3. At what age did you become interested in comic books? (**Entry into Fandom**)
4. What kind of people do you think are comic book fans? (**Impression of Peers**)
5. How do you define comic book fandom? (**Impression of Community**)
6. What do you think of the state of representation of comics (race, gender, sexuality)? (**Impression of Media**)
7. Do you think comics have changed in this respect recently? (**Evolution of Media**)
8. Do you think your experience as a fan is different from a white fan? (**Conception of community structure**)
  - a. If so, how? (**Conception of community structure**)
9. Do you feel comic book fandom cares about race? (**Conception of Community Opinions**)
10. Has anyone ever told you that you are not a "true fan?" (**Experience with discrimination**)

APPENDIX 2:

*SURVEY QUESTIONS*

- Please read the next three pages of documents carefully.
  - Please check "I consent" if you agree to have your responses recorded and used in this academic research project. If you do not wish to consent please leave this survey. Do not submit a survey without consent.
- What is your age?
  - Under 18
  - 19-14
  - 25-34
  - 35-44
  - 45-54
  - 55-54
  - 65 or older
- What is your gender?
  - Male
  - Female
  - Other
- Please describe your race/ethnicity
- How long have you been involved in comic book fandom?
  - Less than six months
  - Six months to a year

- One to two years
  - Three to four years
  - Five to six years
  - Seven to eight years
  - Nine to ten years
  - 11 years or more
- In what context do you interact with other fans
  - In person at stores
  - At conventions
  - Online
  - No regular interaction
  - Other
    - Please specify
- How do you feel about the state of racial diversity in comic books?
  - Comics are too diverse.
  - Comics are diverse enough.
  - I do not care about diversity in comics.
  - Comics could be slightly more diverse.
  - Comics are not diverse enough.