

BEING, MOVING, AND ENFORCING JUSTICE IN THE CITY

by

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## Abstract

In the metropolitan environment, marginalized spaces – and the people inhabiting them – are often associated with unproductivity, incompatibility, immorality, or even criminality. The ways in which certain agents (superheroes, for example) traverse the city can act against this practice of socio-spatial Othering, for they have the personal mobility required to experience the city's marginalized spaces and peoples on an intimate level. However, while mobility by itself can allow one to *access* these spaces/peoples, it does not always allow them to truly *understand* them. The line between intimate engagement and total objectification is quite thin, and it often comes down to the individual superhero to determine which side of this line their enhanced access and perspectives will lead them. If they belong to one or more marginalized communities, then they are likely in a position to resist the notion that the city's fragments and citizens need to be alienated in order to be understood – and combatted. Diversity *and* mobility, therefore, in the context of law enforcement, are crucial for resisting practices that lead to spaces and communities being overlooked, or worse. Pluralizing the possible approaches to the enforcement of justice – in terms of who does the enforcing and the methods by which they do it – is ultimately beneficial for all of society, for longstanding prejudices can be exposed and the harm that follows them reduced.

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## **Contents**

Introduction.....	1
Section I.....	3
Section II.....	11
Section III.....	19
Section IV.....	23
Section V.....	33
Conclusions.....	44
Works Cited.....	48

## Figures

1	From <i>Detective Comics</i> , Vol. 3: <i>League of Shadows</i> .....	14
2	From <i>Batwoman</i> Vol. 2: <i>Hydrology</i> .....	18
3	From <i>Detective Comics</i> , Vol. 2: <i>The Victim Syndicate</i> .....	20
4	From <i>Batwoman</i> , Vol. 2: <i>Hydrology</i> .....	20
5	From <i>Detective Comics</i> , Vol. 3: <i>League of Shadows</i> .....	21
6	From <i>Batwoman</i> , Vol. 3: <i>World's Finest</i> .....	24
7	From <i>Batwoman: Elegy</i> .....	31
8	From <i>Detective Comics</i> , Vol. 2: <i>The Victim Syndicate</i> .....	38
9	From <i>Detective Comics</i> , Vol. 2: <i>The Victim Syndicate</i> .....	39
10	From <i>Batwoman: The Many Arms of Death</i> .....	40
11	From <i>Batwoman: Elegy</i> .....	43

## Introduction

The vastness and complexity of a large city requires us to “compartmentalize” that city into more easily digestible parcels. Metropolitan citizens tend to understand the plurality of urban spaces, and the various communities that inhabit them, in terms of oversimplified labels that often refer to class, ethnicity, sexuality, or religion. When certain socio-geographical zones are defined in accordance with their occupants’ demographic, the city becomes a site of fragmentation, with certain people and spaces demarcated based on their difference from the assumed norm of the white, straight, able-bodied, Christian male. While there is nothing inherently problematic about acknowledging and appreciating difference, the practice of constructing a mental image of a city based *more* on difference than interconnectivity leads to communities that are not only distinct, but “Othered”: their respective demographics become associated with unproductivity, incompatibility, or even criminality.

The first section of this Major Research Paper closely examines the meaning of fragmentation, and outlines some of the reasons why the city seems to be organized around these principles/practices. I discuss how fragmentation has been perpetuated through urban design and the distribution of wealth, as well as through literature, theory, and popular culture. In the following section, I discuss the ways in which the longstanding practice of fragmentation can be overcome: I explore the value of seeing and understanding the city’s various Othered fragments on an intimate level, and how alternative methods of urban mobility can allow certain agents (like comic book superheroes) to do so. I then argue that increased knowledge of a city’s fragments can, in some circumstances, inhibit social

interconnectivity between an individual urban agent and their environment; and I ultimately resolve the issue by proposing that said urban agent tends to understand and organize their experience of the city's fragments based on their personal identity. For example, two superheroes operating in the same city can have similar experiences of said city – because they can navigate, penetrate, survey, and transcend it with identical levels of agency – but they can have different *perceptions* of the city. Based on what they look for and focus on, they can draw different meanings, narratives, and conclusions. One might use his/her near-omniscient knowledge of the city to even further Other its fragments, reducing these fragments to data, trends, and potential threats; and one might translate his/her intimate knowledge of the city into an intimate relationship with the city, appreciating what certain spaces *mean*, and who certain peoples really *are*.

Comparing two of DC's superheroes, Batman and Batwoman (along with a few others), I explore the ways in which one's gender, sexuality, and other personal identity markers can determine how a super-mobile urban agent understands their urban environment. In the last section, I apply this line of thinking to our current socio-political climate, for I argue that the institution of law enforcement can benefit from the model of diversity *and* visceral experience as demonstrated by certain fictional vigilantes. I do not propose that law enforcement agencies invest in super-suits and high-tech gear for enhanced mobilization; but I do propose that if authoritative agents simply see more of the city's marginalized spaces and peoples – through a non-discriminatory lens – then these agents can build an understanding of said city based on unbiased, personal experience. They can resist the existing programs by which urban fragments are physically, culturally, and socially rendered as incompatible with the “norm.” I conclude that one way to



encourage that key prerequisite – a gaze of non-judgment – is to adopt a more collaborative approach to “justice” and its application. Law enforcement based on a model of exploration, experience, and diversity, therefore, can help reduce occurrences in which socio-spatial fragments are misrepresented and consequently targeted.

## **Section I**

### **What is a “Fragmented” City, and Why is it Fragmented?**

The difference that exists between boroughs, communities, neighbourhoods, and districts is fundamentally a good thing, for diversity breathes the life of culture into any city. However, almost as soon as diversity became a defining characteristic of large cities – particularly in North America – so too did discrimination. Following large influxes of immigration and industrial development that took place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, both city planners and city dwellers in cities like New York attempted to easily make sense of the chaos by applying over-simplified labels to the metropolis. As a result, the city is a fragmented place – but when I say “fragmented,” I don’t refer to the fact that the city is a place of plurality. I refer to the barriers, both physical and social, that restrict the exchange of people, information, resources, understanding, and respect between the aforementioned boroughs, communities, neighbourhoods, and districts. I refer to the historical practices and beliefs that originally erected these barriers, and that to this day relegate certain peoples to certain places, and associate these places and peoples with depravity and/or wasteful unproductivity.

Always being reshaped and expanded, The North American city was never a “stable” entity – but during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, foreign or displaced peoples caused cities like New York to see significant changes in demographics at the same time they were seeing spatial development and economic upheaval, and so the instability of urbanity suddenly became a genuine concern when it was tied in with an influx of immigrant culture. Low-income tenements and factories were erected to house and employ foreign communities, while the languages, foods, and customs of these groups were brought to the public sphere. Urban instability was attributed to the arrival of non-white, non-Anglophone, and non-Christian peoples, and the United States government consequently began implementing policies that attempted to “actively control peripheral development that was resulting in an unruly sprawl of slums, *ethnic* enclaves, factories, and suburbs” (Heise, 84-5, emphasis added). The City Practical movement – whose proponents envisioned a “monofunctionalist” city; a “gigantic depot and distributing apparatus for sorting and circulating people and products” (85) – was the movement that championed the idea of “controlling” urban instability. To achieve their goal of a monofunctionalist city, the City Practical movement introduced zoning laws that allocated certain spaces for certain purposes in an effort to control which communities existed where, and to render the city “legible”: i.e., a place that is comprehensible by way of logical interpretation. Urban zones were formed based on principles of keeping Otherness and poverty grouped together, and in this way, the first urban zoning laws “enacted a spatial and mathematical formulation of power by mapping, gridding, and compartmentalizing the city from a top-down perspective” (85). In other words, American cities were designed under the assumption that functionality was the standard of urbanity, and that to achieve this

functionality, poor needed to be kept apart from rich, wasteful from productive, and familiar from foreign. To this day, urban policy practices continue to allocate wealth, privilege, and infrastructure only to those regions that generate wealth in turn, complete a necessary function, or are “legible” (i.e., comprehensible to the dominant demographic).

The term “practical” in City Practical really sums up the ideology – and the lasting ramifications – of the movement: that which was functional was seen as ideal, and anything that did not contribute to or reflect this ideal had the potential to destabilize it. The result of these early twentieth-century zoning laws influenced the appearance of urban centres, and by extension, the ways in which they were perceived in the minds of their inhabitants. To this day, those regions that do not produce capital or whose function cannot be easily understood are all too often seen as Other – they are regarded as unfathomable, as something mysterious and dangerous. Thomas Heise states that “twentieth-century sociology, criminology, bio-medical discourse, and urban planning have not been shy about labeling poor, queer, ethnic, and racial communities in rundown sectors of cities as underworlds of criminal pathology, sexual perversion, and delinquency” (7). The term “underworld” was often applied to these communities (and by extension, the regions they inhabited) because they deviated from the ideals of practicality, homogeneity, and easy legibility. Heise argues that the derisive term is “by definition spatial (‘under’) and social (‘world’) ... [for] it collapses social and spatial marginality into each other like a clamshell, creating a newly compacted site of cultural waste abjection and exclusion where myriad fears and fantasies can be located” (9).

Furthermore, where certain racial groups and religious communities were relegated to various urban ghettos and abhorrent tenements, other subcultures that had no

spaces – marginal or otherwise – allocated to them were forced to establish their own. For example, in early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century New York, queer subcultures were forced to use alternative spaces such underground cafes, public toilets, bars, and clubs to allow their culture to live, for these liminal areas were the only available sites for non-hegemonic people to interact in the (semi)public sphere. In addition, redlining (i.e., racial segregation) in the United States meant that the influx of Eastern European immigrants and Black migrants from the South coming to New York in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were also forced into areas that were demarcated as “slums.” Black communities in Manhattan were relegated to neighbourhoods in Brooklyn and Harlem, where they were subject to unwarranted raids and forced home entries from police. Because the City Practical movement “sought to eliminate the wasteful inefficiencies and disruptions of non-normative sexual, racial, and lower-class communities” (81), and regions such as Harlem or the Lower East side fit this definition, these communities were forced to sidelines while the city’s “main” spaces – those that are maintained or accessible – were reserved for straight, upper-class people of Western European descent.

As crucial as it is to understand how the city is fragmented, and to be aware of the reasons this fragmentation originally began, it is also of particular pertinence to uncover why it is that the city still *remains* a place of systemic Othering and cultural ignorance. Certainly, we can identify the “specific actors who contribute to constructing metropolitan space according to their relative position in metropolitan discourse” (Fricke and Gualini, n. pag.); or in other words, those in power who design cities in such a way that reflects their needs and desires. Those metropolitan “actors” that occupy the highest positions of authority are the ones who typically benefit from maintaining hegemony, limiting the

redistribution of wealth, or otherwise perpetuating socio-spatial fragmentation. Therefore, they keep physical spaces, like social positions, segregated “relative to other locations (as standing above, below or in-between them) and by the distance that separates them” (Bourdieu, 106-7); and thus these agents ensure that both physical locations and social statuses are characterized by their position amidst a hierarchal scheme of socio-spatial juxtapositions.

However, it is not just these “actors” that enforce the neatly digestible hierarchy of status and space: throughout the last two centuries, certain aspects of art and literature have enforced the designs and agendas of these “actors.” That is, as easy as it is to blame “the man” for the city’s fragmentation, partly to blame are those who *represent* the city. Until very recently, the urban ethnographer has been a privileged individual who, like the City Practical designer, wants a “legible” and “ordered” city that easily maps depravity and judgment onto women, people of colour, lower classes, and those of diverse sexual orientation. For example, “slumming” narratives of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century helped make popular the concept of the fragmented city, for they were “premised upon the idea that the urban experience was invariably piecemeal and disjointed and that parts of the city were nearly unknowable as a result of uneven development’s geographic spatialization of ethnic and class difference” (Heise, 41-42). The narratives of the slummer painted a picture of neighbourhoods that were fetishized because they were fragmented – the fact that there was lots of crime in “sordid” ethnic neighbourhoods informed readers’ understandings of, and overall interest in, their city (Heise, 30).

In addition to the slummer, another figure that haunted urban streets in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was the flâneur. While the early twentieth-century slummer may have

examined what he or she perceived as the city's dangerous-yet-titillating regions, the flâneur was a gentleman of slow-paced leisure, one who liked to stroll along the safe and affluent districts of the city. However, both the slummer and the flâneur had in common that they analyzed the city from a position of detached objectivity; both believed that they could understand the city by passing through spaces and objectively reducing them to easily compartmentalized terms.

The history of flânerie can be traced back to fin-de-siècle Paris, when the gentleman of means and leisure would peruse the safe, well-lit, and enclosed arcades of the city. The idea of the flâneur, as made popular by Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup> did not typically venture into “slums” or any areas of diversity, and thus he was not truly attuned to his *entire* city. Because the flâneur only operates in spaces of privilege, he enforces social stratification – the physical space in which the flâneur operates reflects the social space of the elite. He walks only in spaces of affluence, while disregarding all other areas in the city where crime proliferates. Thus, the flâneur enacts the institutional value system of marginalizing any and all demographics beyond that of the homogenous elite. Furthermore, like the spaces through which he travels, the demographic of the flâneur is homogeneously male, white, and wealthy<sup>2</sup>.

Considering the fact that both the slummer and flâneur were very privileged individuals of an exclusive demographic, and recognizing that the former fetishized the city's marginalized zones as much as he or she Othered them while the latter overlooked

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<sup>1</sup> By way of his adaptation of Baudelaire: see “The *Flaneur*.” *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, pp. 35-66.

<sup>2</sup> See Deborah Parsons's *Streetwalking in the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity*, p. 4

the “slum” areas entirely, these two figures helped establish the notion that the city’s spaces are either legible or illegible, male or female, safe or unsafe, sinful or virtuous, or rich or poor. Following the lead of urban design and policy practices, the slummer and flâneur set this binary mode of looking at the city into popular narrative discourse, a mode of looking (and thinking) that has manifested in the ultimate, most long-lasting binary in the metropolitan world: the belief that some regions and their inhabitants are “us,” and some are “them.”

The subgenre of superhero fiction well illustrates how this binary has been absorbed into popular culture. For example, DC Comics’s Gotham City represents an exaggeration of urban duality, a stylized version of the disparity between innocence and depravity. First depicted in the late 1930’s, Gotham City reflected anxieties that the Modern city was an entity all together “out of control,” one that required a hyper-capable authoritative agent to re-establish law and order. In early Batman comics, and even in fairly recent film adaptations (such as Christopher Nolan’s 2005 *Batman Begins*), helpless citizens (typically white and/or female) cannot walk alone at night in the “wrong” parts of Gotham, such as “the Narrows,” without becoming victims of a violent assault and/or robbery.

Appearing and re-appearing in narratives throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> (and some instances 21<sup>st</sup>) centuries, the trope of the “binary city” has been internalized by the audiences that consume these narratives. If television, film, and literature set in urban environments depict certain spaces and people as safely familiar and others as dangerously exotic, or if they depict only spaces that resemble the former, those who do not have any first-hand experience with downtown urban centres construct an understanding of the city based on

these selective depictions. As a result, many citizens who reside in the “safe” microcosms of suburbia or more rural locations construct an identity for urban “underworld” fragments that fits the narrative they have been taught – they strip the city’s fragmented spaces of their complexity by designating them simply as “Other.” What is lost in this attitude is the understanding that each fragment has its own layers: it is true that the greater entity of the city is separated into fragments on one plane, but it is also true that each individual fragment can be further divided and interpreted on an orthogonal plane.

Certain city dwellers, as represented in fiction and non-fiction, may have absorbed the engrained beliefs that inhibit mutual understanding between urban regions and the people within them, but the definition of these figures is subject to change with paradigm shifts. For example, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the definition of flâneur referred to a man who is more interested in gossip and fashion than women – which, given the heavily coded language surrounding queer culture, was likely a by-word for gay male. At one point, the flâneur was often used to refer to a police officer; while in Québec, the term refers to a con man (Elkin, 10). The transmutability of the flâneur’s identity is ultimately a good thing for the future of urban citizenship, for if the figure has problematic elements, at least it is open-ended. Part of its history belongs to dominant culture (male, rich, heterosexual, etc.), but it has been expanded to include subversive culture (i.e., gay, criminal, or otherwise “illegible” peoples). The flâneur, while trying to make the city legible, is itself partially illegible. It is subject to reconfiguration.



## Section II

### Overcoming Urban Fragmentation

A fragment by definition is a *distinct* piece of the whole, and so a key facet of fragmentation is the demarcation of space via borders and boundaries. Maintaining distinction between pieces involves restricting the exchange of people, resources, and information that flows between them. Re-establishing this exchange is one of the best ways to overcome fragmentation, for it facilitates mutual understanding between all socio-spatial fragments of the city. Returning to the example of *Batman Begins* (2005), wealthy philanthropist Thomas Wayne (Batman's father) dedicates his resources to dissolving Gotham's fragmentation by designing and constructing a "new cheap, public transportation system, to unite the city." Thomas Wayne is aware that urban spaces, and the ways in which they are connected (or rather disconnected), reflect economic and infrastructural patterns that "tend to coalesce around the subdivisions rather than the whole" (Fricke and Gualini, n. pag.). By employing his resources and authority in an attempt to unify Gotham City, Wayne facilitates practices that reinstitute the idea of the city as a diverse yet *whole* entity. Aware of the fact that an individual can navigate the city only insofar as its design and infrastructure allow them to do so, and insofar as their social status permits, Wayne attempted to redistribute the access to mobility so as to make it available to all Gothamites, regardless of social standing. Beyond the benefit of just enabling transportation, Wayne's monorail system facilitated *understanding*: when urban citizens can get to a certain area in the city, they can experience it first-hand; and when they experience it first-hand, they can perceive all sorts of things – such as how polite people are, what sort of graffiti is on the

walls, what the pervading smells are – that either cannot be, or just are not, fully conveyed through popular narrative.

That being said, public transit will not always provide the right sort of access to the right parts of the city, for the right sort of person. The true nature and value of the city's eclectic, so-called "illegible" spaces can only be understood when they are seen on an intimate level, and to see them on this level, personal mobility is crucial. Recalling Section I, each of the city's fragments has its own layer of depth, complexity, and history. Understanding that fragment, therefore, requires an intimate knowledge of its levels – an urban agent who gets to a fragment with ease and efficiency, and experiences its physicality in an intimate way, is well primed to glean deeper understandings of that fragment's true culture, history, and people. Lauren Elkin, speaking of her experience in metropolitan centres across five countries and three continents, recalls that "I had to walk around to understand where I was in space, how places related to each other" (6). Walking, Elkin goes on to say, "helps you piece a city together, connecting up neighbourhoods that might otherwise have remained discrete entities, different planets bound to each other, sustained yet remote" (21). When it is used to know how the city's fragments *relate* to each other, rather than to *compare* them to each other (as the slummer did), walking is a valuable tool in the effort to better access, see, and hopefully understand the city's fragments.

Pedestrianism, however, can take place only in the spaces that permit bipedal mobility – any urban agent navigating the city on foot can access only those spaces that are designed to be accessed. Even those urban dwellers who explore out-of-the-way places (i.e., the slummer) must contend with the fact that the vast majority of the city is taken up

by impassable spaces such as vertical wall surfaces, rooftops, or otherwise inaccessible architectural components. To appreciate how many urban spaces remain inaccessible via walking (or any vehicular form of transport, for that matter), one has to appreciate the limitations of the spaces that allow these modes of transport – such as streets and sidewalks. Rebecca Solnit, author of *wanderlust: A History of Walking*, states that “streets are the space left over between buildings... as more and more buildings arose, they became a continent, the remaining open space no longer like the sea but like rivers, canals, and streams running between land masses” (175). Pedestrian agents in the city – not just slummers and flâneurs, but all urban citizens – glean their knowledge of the city and its inhabitants through experiences that are as narrow in scope as the “streams” that afford them. Their “knowledge” only incorporates a fraction of what the city has to offer.

Every urban citizen must contend with the correlation between the availability of negotiable spaces and the acquisition of knowledge, but those urban agents who navigate the city with the intent of amassing, utilizing, and disseminating information – i.e., flâneurs and slummers – demonstrate the most problematic elements of this correlation. Because these agents can understand “underworld fragments” only insofar as they can access them, any conclusions they make fail to incorporate the full extent of available experiences to be had in these fragments. For instance, the figure of the urban detective – popularized in literature with characters like Sherlock Holmes and brought to the screen with mid-20<sup>th</sup> film noirs/police procedurals such as Jules Dassin’s *The Naked City* (1948) – attempts to penetrate the city, uncovering its hidden perpetrators and establishing motives; but like the slummer and flâneur, most detectives count on the fact that all the information they need can be found in those spaces that can be accessed on foot. When it comes to mastering

effective crime detection, an individual needs to get to the city’s “illegible underworld,” which is often comprised of niche, unconventional, and borderline inaccessible places. Many iconic characters in DC Comics have taken up the trope of the urban detective, but they have increased levels of agency that allows them to break the barriers of traditional mobility. Characters like Batman, through a combination of technology and physical discipline, have unhindered access to the entirety of the city’s spaces; and just as critically, because these characters have the ability to supersede the physical obstacles of urban environments, they can move *between* the city’s spaces with ease and efficiency. A super vigilante’s mobility allows them to get to their destination as the crow (or bat) flies, while urban walkers/drivers must adhere to the North-South/East-West grid pattern of streets. Returning to Solnit’s analogy, a figure like Batman can treat a city’s built-up spaces as he treats its streets: all space is fair game to use as “rivers” or “canals,” for such a figure scales, glides between, and otherwise traverses said buildings as a civilian traverses the

“leftover” spaces that have become the city’s streets (see fig. 1). The above panels illustrate not only that Batman defies pedestrianism (as well as the consequences of gravity); they also demonstrates how rote this defiance is for him. In the left portion of the page, he casually concludes his conversation at the same time as he leaps from a rooftop, and his body



Figure 1: From *Detective Comics*, Vol. 3: *League of Shadows*

language communicates both power and grace – he is clearly at home in the liminal zone of inter-building urban airspace. In the right panel, Batman, as well as Batwoman (who watches) are highly stylized silhouettes, dark figures that, along with the bats, are contrasted against glowing city lights and indigo sky. The art of traversing the city is translated into a visual language; the above panels do not advance plot so much as they revel in the contradiction between sheer extremity and sheer *ease* that characterizes super-vigilantes' modes of mobility.

By forging alternative paths such as these, DC's caped vigilantes navigate the fictional city of Gotham with a set of spatial practices that redefine the act of detective work. I borrow the phrase "spatial practices" from Michel De Certeau, who uses it to refer to alternative ways of mobilizing that are "deviations relative to a sort of 'literal meaning' defined by the urbanistic system" (100). In his text *The Practices of Everyday Life*, De Certeau argues that, given an individualized approach to walking in the city, metropolitan citizens are able to employ the act of pedestrian mobility in "styles" that do not fit the institutional understanding of the city, because walking in "styles" entails more than the strictly practical act of commuting, more than a set of abstract data used to quantify one's habitual routes into patterns and trends. When a metropolitan citizen's process of walking is individualized, he or she can explore the "art of composing a path" (De Certeau, 100), a way of reclaiming the spontaneous and original subtleties of pedestrian mobility.

While De Certeau argues that different "styles" of walking can be a rhetorical act of subversion, and Elkin endorses the act of walking to gain a holistic view of the city, I posit that an urban vigilante's alternative modes of navigating the city, radically different

than walking as they are, can be just as (or even more) subversive and/or holistic. If, as De Certeau claims, reclaiming walking as a uniquely individual practice speaks against the oppressive quantification, institutionalization, and conceptualization of the city, the individualization of mobility itself should theoretically serve as an even more effective way of a) acting against the socio-spatial stratification and fragmentation of the city, and b) “piecing the city together” (to use Elkin’s words) in the mind of the urban agent. For example, in the world of the pedestrian, the cityscape’s unyielding physicality inhibits the desire and/or capacity to forge new paths and construct a personalized understanding of the city. That is, the agency of the city seems to outweigh the agency of the “normal” citizen, whose environment has the power to tell that citizen what type of community they are in and what they can expect to happen. Factors that the urban citizen perceives – how the buildings in a given region appear, how they are organized, what sort of purpose they serve – impart a slew of implications whose power to shape this citizen’s worldview is only bolstered by their inability to challenge these signifiers (on a physical and psychological level). But in a super-suit laden with technology, the body is afforded agency with which it is able to push against the city’s physical and social authority – the city becomes negotiable and visible as it yields to a superhero’s agency of mobility.

The significance of this observation lies in the fact that we can recognize the ways in which our perception of a city is limited by the ways in which we navigate it. By flying, swinging, or grappling their way through the city, comic vigilantes can explore the aspects of spaces that exist behind the scenes, so to speak – the spaces that are taken for granted as peripheral simply because they are understood only as abstract concepts. Urban citizens know *of* certain areas, but they do not have the means or interest to

experience them first-hand. The docks of Gotham, for example, exist as abstract concepts in the minds of most civilians as a place for shipping and receiving, and as a site for the ramshackle tenements of Gotham's poorest. But in *Batwoman: Hydrology*, the titular hero travels to the docks to track down a man whom she suspects to have a connection to a mysterious villain seemingly intent on kidnapping the city's Latin American children. Batwoman learns that, somehow, the man's daughter has taken on the malicious spirit of the "Weeping Woman," becoming a living version of a Latin myth. The GCPD's detectives do not only dismiss the Weeping Woman as a cultural folklore, but they do not bother to follow the leads that would have taken them to Gotham's peripheral spaces where the proof resided. Unlike the police, Batwoman was able to establish the identity and motives of the Weeping Woman by allowing her investigation to lead her to *all* spaces and people that hold necessary answers. By simply going to the docks, she learned of the site-specific and culture-specific narratives that allowed her to solve the case and defeat the Weeping Woman.



Figure 2: From *Batwoman Vol. 2: Hydrology*

What's more, after Batwoman breaks into the GCPD's headquarters to investigate the official evidence on the case, she finds that the police *did* know that the docks were the place where the Weeping Woman first struck, but did not send any detectives to the scene. Where the police are not, Batwoman is willing and able to follow clues to their full conclusion – she does not disregard the spaces and peoples that to most seem negligible (see fig. 2). She knows that it is in those spaces, and through the people residing in them, that the most pertinent information – both cultural and investigatory – is often found. Illustrating this fact, the two-page layout is organized into a series of small panels, depicting the micro, nested within a large, colourless background depicting the macro. The nested panels are brightly lit, while the background is colourless – a tactic which suggesting that the space contains a hidden interiority that, while containing the most illuminating details, can be only found by way of a deep probing.

Re-evaluating what spaces “mean” and how they convey this meaning is a prerequisite step in the process of reconciling the city's long-standing history of “us” and



“them” fragmentation. Comic book vigilantes provide a lens through which to see how movement factors into the adaptability and subjectivity of spatial meaning. By simply getting around to as many places as possible, Gotham’s caped vigilantes are in a perfect position to begin challenging the historical narratives and worldviews that have contributed to urban fragmentation in the first place. That is, they demonstrate that if we are to understand the racial, ethnic, classist, and sexuality-based fragments of a city as more than a series of unknowable socio-spatial zones, these fragments need to be accessible (and where they are not accessible via traditional transit, another mode of mobility must be implemented), and all of their own unique spaces and peoples need to be experienced from top to bottom (in both a social and physical sense).

### **Section III**

#### **Seeing Is Not Always Knowing: How Mobility Can Be Problematic**

Moving through the city in alternative ways, and thereby intimately experiencing its diverse socio-spatial environment, allows the urban detective-vigilante to see *all* that their city has to offer. In this section, I recognize and attempt to reconcile the fact that for every time the ability to “see everything” results in the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding, it also engenders a set of problematic implications. If an urban vigilante takes for granted that he/she is able to travel to any destination at any time, and that the material environment exists only as a tool that affords tactical needs (such as mobility and surveillance), or as something to be quantified and solved, then that agent can easily

overlook the nuances that make places unique. The ideal urban agent would strike a balance between a system based solely on difference (such as the one applied by the flâneur or slummer) and a system based on a sort of omniscient, “Big Brother-esque” lens through which the city is forced into a falsely holistic scheme. In other words, the ideal agent would see the city as whole, but also appreciate the differences between its regions and peoples (without making judgments based off them); he or she would connect fragments but not homogenize them.



In what urbanism scholar Edward Dimendberg describes as the paradigm of “technological omnipotence” (38), technology is used to gather any and all information possible, and this information is, now more than ever, used to turn the unknown urban



perpetrator into a known figure in the eyes of law (or in Gotham’s case, the vigilante). Because super-vigilantes, through their technologically-afforded mobility, are able to survey the city from both above and within, they can gather information on the macro and micro scale. In hidden or inaccessible spaces, these agents can locate clues or track down perpetrators, engaging the city in all its most specific detail. Just as critically, though, they are able to observe Gotham from the air or from rooftops in

order to complete reconnaissance from a safe distance. In figure 2, for example, Batwoman “reads” the entirety of the city by transcending it with balletic ease. The stylization of her pose, denoting the grace and authority with which she moves through the air, suggests that Gotham is *hers* for the viewing. In figure 3, Batwoman abandons the established path (leaping from it) to gather intelligence in what is literally Gotham’s lowest aboveground space. These panels tell readers that, when necessary, a super-vigilante proceeds *through* the city with caution (in figure 3, Batwoman’s body is tense, at the ready) in order to read its spaces closely; and when appropriate, they glide *over* the city, reading multiple zones simultaneously. The latter view affords a large scope at the expense of small detail, while the former affords detail at the expense of large scope – but when one agent has access to both views, they see nearly all the information the city has to offer, without compromise.

The vertical distance that affords a God’s eye view enables ultra-mobile agents to “enclose and to order” the vast multiplicity of spaces they encounter at ground level (Dimenberg, 69); but this perspective is juxtaposed against their film-noir-detective-esque capacity to scrupulously investigate the city’s most specific areas from the ground



Figure 5: From *Detective Comics*, Vol. 3: *League of Shadows*

level. The Bat-vigilante's relation to Gotham is therefore complex; while they closely interact with the city's numerous, inaccessible, and diverse sites, they contextualize them within the perspective of a city seen from above – a massive entity, physically and psychologically distinct from themselves.

The issue of an urban agent's panoptic visuality cannot be discussed without bringing to mind the issue of that agent potentially reducing and objectifying said city to patterns of information, and using that information to justify and/or endorse urban fragmentation. To Batman, Gotham's fragmented spaces really do comprise an "underworld," for in the mind of a man who needs to understand, predict, and overcome anything that is to him anarchic or illegible, they are just sites that need to be quantified by his compulsively controlling brain, made to fit his definition of "just" and "ordered." In his effort to "shor[e] things up, making absolutely sure that each of the arenas [he] operates in is thoroughly protected" (Tynion IV, n.pag. – see fig. 5), Batman reduces Gotham's "underworld" fragments to levels of potential threat, and he subsequently perceives them in terms of what action is needed to neutralize that threat. In essence, just because Batman knows the city's most marginalized fragments *better* than most flaneurs, police detectives, or slummers, he does not necessarily know these fragments more *intimately*.

The same things that allow a bat-vigilante to connect with Gotham – enhanced mobility, increased access, and alternative perspectives – are the same things that can strip the city of any emotional value for that vigilante. Like Plato's *pharmakon*, super-mobility can act as the cure for the objectification of our environment, or as the poison that facilitates it. The question is, then, how does a detective-vigilante complete her tasks

of crime detection and intelligence gathering *without* completely objectifying her environment, reducing it to trends and data that render the city's underworld fragments as Othered identities that stand in opposition to her goals? The line between intimate engagement and total objectification is quite thin, and it often comes down to the individual vigilante to determine which side of this line her enhanced access and panoptic perspectives will lead her.

## Section IV

### **“What Can Batwoman Do That Batman Can’t?”**

In 1956, Detective Comics introduced “Kathy Kane,” the first iteration of the Batwoman character. She was meant to be a love interest for Batman: at the time, DC was facing criticisms for supposedly depicting homoerotic undertones between Batman and Robin (and of course, in the 1950's, these undertones were somehow indicative of perversion).<sup>3</sup> The current version of Batwoman, reintroduced in 2005, goes by the name Kate Kane, and she is gay. And even more unlike the 1950's “Kathy” Kane, Kate is not a foil, mysterious love interest, or sidekick: for over ten years, she had her own comic series (which, as of 2018, was unfortunately not renewed), and has appeared in numerous DC team-up events.

The character, in true Bat-family fashion, moves through Gotham with enhanced practices of mobility, and she therefore has the same access as Batman to its underworld

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Frederick Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, a questionably-researched psychological investigation of comics' supposedly deleterious effects on youth

fragments, and sees the full extent of their socio-spatial geography (see figs. 3 and 4). However, what makes her different from Batman is that she establishes meaningful friendships, relationships, and connections across all regions and demographics in the city. In Kate Kane's case, it seems as though her plural perspectives and extensive experience of her city results in a genuine connection to it.

As a fictional character, the ways in which she deviates from – and hopefully improves – problematic practices of *flâneurie*, slumming, and vigilantism are the result of her writers' ideological thinking. Kate Kane is what her creators have imagined an agent of justice *could* be; like all superheroes, she represents the parts of our psyche that simultaneously acknowledges the limitations of our current systems while suggesting the ways in which these limitations can be overcome. Where Batman's writers criticize the institution of law enforcement while presenting a way in which it could be bettered, Batwoman's writers do the same with the institution of vigilantism in Gotham. To that end, I believe that the authorial choice to distinguish Kate from the male, heterosexual norm cannot be separated from the choice to highlight her inclination to connect with Gotham, rather than objectify it. Her writers could have made her act in any way, or be any identity, but they paired social connectivity with femininity and homosexuality. I cannot speak to authors' intent, but I do not think this combination of alternative identity and alternative practices is a coincidence. And even if the writers are not consciously making a "statement," there is a statement to be read. Batwoman avoids becoming a sort of data-gathering "surveillance drone" because the *gaze* through which she views the city's fragments is tempered by her gender and sexuality: her demographic is not part of, or represented in, the histories of urban planning, *flâneuring*, slumming, and crime-detection





Figure 6: From *Batwoman*, Vol. 3: *World's Finest*

that, for over two hundred years, have perpetuated the belief that to analyze spaces is to be above, apart from, in control of, or in conflict with them.

That said, Batwoman the super-detective will, at times, need to position herself in relation to Gotham's spaces in one or more of the above ways. But because Kate Kane the civilian is a fully integrated part of Gotham's socio-cultural world, both her civilian and superhero identities will engage with this world on a personal level. Throughout the course of her life, Kate has been engaged (see fig. 6), held several relationships, and many meaningful friendships – social connections

that augment the ways in which Batwoman operates in the city. The above panel's form language, as well as its subject matter, communicate how Batwoman's life incorporates Kate Kane's – and vice versa. The images capture a moment of human connectivity and beauty; while by contrast, Batman's notable panels are all about moments of conflict or solitude. The background is composed only of non-representational colour, a tactic that keeps viewers' attention on Kate and Detective Sawyer, and communicates the emotional tone of the scene. A few leaves float through the air, suggesting in the subtlest possible way that Kate and Sawyer's kiss takes place in reality; but light and colour communicate the intimacy – even magic – of the moment better than an actual environment. By eliminating the need for a traditional "background," the artists ensure that this panel does one job only: there is no action, no fighting, and no detecting – it is solely about love. This

panel, in addition to communicating a very special moment in Batwoman's life (this proposal doubled as her way of revealing her identity), represents a tonal element that can never be found in Batman.

For over seven decades, both Batman and his alter ego Bruce Wayne have made famous the idea of the detached, cynical detectives. The undisputed master of brooding, Batman is a solitary figure who completes his detective work from an ivory tower of observation. His detachment from emotion is both celebrated and iconic – and while this disposition certainly has its advantages when fighting crime, and makes for a character with gravitas, it also reflects the same problematic tendencies of the flâneur, slummer, and film noir detective. That is, Batman distances himself from his city by viewing it with the eyes of an ethnographer – one who gathers information, stakes out places and people, and constructs an understanding of the city and its fragments through the lens of objectivity. Even when outside his bat-suit, he maintains the same detached disposition: the identity of “Bruce Wayne,” as the public knows him, is an act; this civilian identity is a performative persona.

Both in his costume and outside of it, Batman does what countless slummers and flaneurs have done before him: he dons a disguise or persona and builds an understanding of the city that is based on surface interactions with that city's regions. Because he reduces Gotham to mere data, foes, and obstacles, he does not see the subtle, third dimension of the fragments in which he operates. Applying his vision of “justice” and “order” to Gotham at his will, he forces that which is “criminal” to be changed or eliminated. In one of Batman's film adaptations, the caped crusader (Ben Affleck) sums up this prescriptive approach to justice when he states that “the world only makes sense if you *force* it to” (*Batman Vs.*



*Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), directed by Zack Snyder). Although Batman ultimately means well, his mandate shares similarities with that of the City Practical movement (discussed in Section I), in that both desire to distinguish that which is illegible, unsafe, criminal, or unordered from that which is legible, safe, innocent, and ordered.

By contrast, Kate Kane's understanding of Gotham City is based off the perspective of someone who herself belongs to marginalized communities, and thus she easily recognizes the narratives, histories, and colleagues that endorse the notion that Gotham's fragments need to be alienated in order to be understood – and combatted. According to Rebecca Solnit, “a city always contains more than any inhabitant can know, and a great city always makes the unknown and the possible spurs to the imagination” (171). Batman's attempt to make all of Gotham's underworld “known” is essentially an exercise in futility, for the cultural subtlety in each of the city's socio-spatial fragments is beyond the scope of one detective, even if that detective has the means to move about and survey these fragments beyond the usual capacity. Not only is Batman's quest to know all of Gotham futile, it also represents the very attitude that led to urban fragmentation in the first place: that everything “different” can be – *needs* to be – legible to the dominant demographic, and that the very concept of “legibility” itself can be defined only by this demographic. In other words, because Batman is wont to perceive Gotham according to his values, he cannot easily embrace the possibility that spaces and peoples can have value even if they do not adhere to his standards of “ordered.”

To understand how gender could be a significant factor in one's approach to vigilantism, I need to bring back the concept of the flâneur – or specifically, the flâneuse. The latter term refers to a female counterpart to the flâneur, but the two are fundamentally

different. The flâneuse emerged from the experience of walking the city as a woman, which historically and presently, is a radically different experience than walking the city as a man. The flâneur, and the male detectives and vigilantes he inspired, have the historical privilege of looking rather than being looked at, and thus these figures believe that the city would submit to their gaze and allow itself to be “understood.” Being denied the chance to peruse public spaces like the flâneur, and being confined to the realm of object rather than subject, women of the modern city could not practice similar tactics of looking. Even though by WWI “women’s presence on the street was confirmed ... this was dependent on the emergence of safe semi-public spaces in which women could spend time alone and unharassed” (Elkin, 15). While becoming tangible entities in the equation of city life, women who walked the city still could not traverse all of its regions with the same authority as the flâneur – the flâneuse did not have the all-penetrating gaze of her male-counterpart. There was one benefit to emerge from this double standard of urban existence, however: the flâneuse does not regard the city from the position of the objective, anonymous ethnographer, but as one who looks deeper, and is attuned to beneath-the-surface meanings behind regions, people, and events.

As male metropolitan figures became increasingly associated with the act of making the city fall into the binary scheme of “legible” and “illegible,” the feminine was increasingly associated with “the private, the traditional, and the anti-modern” (Elkin, 16). But representing the antithesis of “progressive” can be a very good thing, especially when it comes to de-objectifying the city, and appreciating, rather than fearing, the fact that to be different is to be unknown. Lauren Elkin states that “our culture needs the unfathomable to exist; it provides refuge from logic and scrutiny, and we have been

content to project it on to women” (89). If the domain of the unfathomable is to be associated with feminine, then the female detective is the agent best equipped to engage the unfathomable city. As a female detective, Batwoman does not wish to impose herself on Gotham’s “underworld” by removing or combatting its “mystery” and “danger,” or forcing it to comply with legible, productive society. She does not carry with her any assumptions or expectations as she enters her city’s underworld: Like Elkin, who has practiced flâneusing in New York, Paris, London, Venice, and Tokyo, Batwoman is “keenly attuned to the creative potential of the city” (11).

The ability to see the city in terms of potential for art/artistry – not exploitation or conflict – involves being receptive to what Robert MacFarlane calls “psychogeographical contours”: the variations of social, physical and cultural trends that reside in different places at various times, in the presence of various peoples (Elkin, 18-19). To get a sense of Gotham’s psychogeographical contours as she explores the city, Batwoman must:

record the experience as [she] go[es], in whatever medium [she] prefer[s]... catch the textual run off of the streets; the graffiti, the branded litter, the snatches of conversation. Cut for sign. Log the data stream. Be alert to the happenstance of metaphors, watch for visual rhymes, coincidences, analogies, family resemblances, the changing moods of the street” (18).

MacFarlane’s idea of psychogeography was at the time of its inception considered a man’s game, or “fraternity” (19), but the practices listed above seem best suited to those who are likely to pay attention to the spontaneous, the creative, the subtle – someone like the flâneuse.

One could argue that to reduce the city to trends and data is exactly what a detective needs; and as mentioned earlier, Batwoman does this to an extent – when she’s in her suit. But as a civilian, Kate Kane experiences the more human element of the city (i.e., the potential for creativity, spontaneity, and emotion); and what’s more, it turns out these experiences are highly beneficial when it comes to observing and understanding the city. Citing David Garrioch, Elkin demonstrates that in eighteenth century Paris,

the streets belonged to women ... at home they would sit out in the street together, practicing what two hundred years later Jane Jacobs call ‘eyes on the street’: they kept an eye on what was going on and were first to intervene in quarrels, plunging into separate men who were fighting ... They knew more about what was going on in the neighbourhood than anyone” (14).

The belief that intelligence is gained through stealthy, anonymous observation and calculated strategy – a belief held by Batman – is nullified when we consider the fact that for over two centuries, the flaneuse has gained just as much knowledge, if not more, by being directly engaged with the city on the ground level. The limitations of Batman’s “objective-facts-only” style of intelligence-gathering become apparent when we consider how much ephemeral and cultural information must fall under his radar. All of this information, which he regards as insignificant, can reveal subtle things about places and peoples – such as stories, themes, and tones. Rather than expose undisputable fact, these narrative-based data construct an alternative sort of truth, one that demonstrates how and why “fact and fiction are both indispensable ways of seeing” (Elkin, 247). The only way to see the metropolis in terms of its factual reality *and* its complex and evolving narrative

texture (the part of the city that is mythology, history, and potential) is to actually be a part of these narratives. Batwoman's involvement in Gotham's "story" further instigates her desire and ability to instigate social change in the city, for it *means* something to her personally. With the motivation of having something meaningful to lose, she works even harder to keep Gotham safe and equitable – and in the process, she becomes more involved in the city, making yet more social connections, which results in more meaningful stakes, which inspire further effort, and so forth. Batwoman, as a flaneuse, increases the efficacy of her detective work *because* she is involved, not in *spite* of being involved.

If a flaneuse-vigilante is going to be personally involved in the city, she must abandon the idea of anonymity: to be involved is to be visible. Batwoman's image – the way she is drawn, the design of her suit, her physical presence – accordingly drops the pretense of invisibility. Her gauntlets, gloves, utility belt, wig (yes, it is a wig), and bat-logo are



Figure 7: From *Batwoman: Elegy*

vividly red, which makes her overall in-uniform appearance quite unlike Batman's grey and black scheme (see fig. 7). Her eye-catching image nods to the history of women in the urban streets – always the looked at and never the looker, the early flaneuse was, from the moment she left her door, the object of the entire city's gaze. Not trying to hide her overt femininity-cum-noticeability, even taking pride in it, Batwoman reclaims the idea of

drawing the gaze as a source of power. She can remain hidden when she needs to, but the basis of her costume's design follows different principles than Batman's. His visual (and psychological) identity is that of the dark, the unseen, and the anonymous; hers, while partially composed of the same fabric (literally and figuratively), is an assertion of vibrant individuality. Batwoman is equal parts subject and object of the gaze, a synthesis of opposites that is reflected in her image, identity, and *modus operandi*.

At this point, I must make clear that the comparison of Batwoman to Batman is not meant to be a condemnation of the latter. While I have identified that Batman's practices, worldviews, and image reflect problematic elements of urban narratives, I do not regard the character, or his writers/artists, as insensitive or exclusionary. I just believe that at its core, Batman reflects the fact that concepts such as "justice," "detective," and "crime" are the products of a fragmentary rhetoric so engrained in North American history that it is difficult to identify and deconstruct. Batwoman is a vigilante who forwards the possibility of challenging this history; not because she is more "woke" than Batman, but because she (to some extent at least) comes from the demographic of the Othered, not the Otherer. Comparing Batwoman to Batman, my only goal is to demonstrate that two urban agents can have the same access to, and knowledge of, their city's socio-spatial fragments, but they might not have the same understanding of it. They can have the same view, but not the same perspective. They can have similar ideals – justice – but different definitions of it, and methods to enforce it. The determining factor comes down to the individual agent: in the context of authority figures, law enforcement personnel, or even everyday urban walkers, those who represent the non-dominant demographic – women, LGBTQ+, and

BIPOC (black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) – are not likely to see the city through the same Othering gaze as the flâneur, the traditional detective, and the male vigilante.

## **Section V**

### **Justice For All**

Kate Kane may have been inspired to don the Bat logo after a street encounter with Batman, but the events that would lead her toward the path of vigilantism began much earlier. Both of Kate's parents served in the Armed Forces, and after her mother was killed by enemy paramilitary, Kate enrolled in West Point military academy to serve alongside her father. However, her insatiable desire to help her fellow citizens was halted when the government denied her the permission to do so: after her relationship with another female cadet was reported to West Point's commanding officer, she was kicked out under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." A star military cadet, Kate had the capability, but not the sanction, to apply herself to a greater cause. As events would turn out, this was ultimately good for her; for after her expulsion – when she was destitute, struggling with alcoholism, and without direction – her encounter with Batman<sup>4</sup> brought her to the realization that a mask and cape could grant her the opportunity to her to serve people in her own way.

Clearly, few know better than Kate Kane that the idea of the authority figure, especially in the guise of the enforcer of "justice," can be incredibly exclusionary. The real damage of this, of course, is that if there is a lack of diversity in those who define and

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<sup>4</sup> He swooped in to stop her from being mugged, only to witness her incapacitate the mugger herself

enforce their ideas of justice or righteousness, then these ideals will continue to be entwined with longstanding, yet deeply problematic, practices. That is, if the only people in the position to enact measures that “fight injustice” are those who have internalized the practice of marginalizing that which is different, then those people and spaces that have been marginalizing will be overlooked – or worse.

Take the police, for example. When law enforcement fails to see value in difference – whether because of deliberate discrimination at the individual level or the general internalization of systemic discrimination – certain communities are oftentimes targeted, and their inhabitants profiled, arrested, and killed. As I write this paper in the summer of 2020, much of the world is mourning the loss of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, two among dozens of black individuals killed by police earlier this year. George Floyd was killed during an arrest when an officer knelt on his neck for an extended period of time, suffocating him. He was shopping at the time. Breonna Taylor was shot eight times, in her home, when three officers entered her premises while executing a search warrant. Both Taylor and Floyd were unarmed. In most large cities in North America, and many in Europe, protesters have gathered to voice their outrage over not only these cases, but the countless others to have occurred against BIPOC communities over the years, decades, and centuries.

Law enforcement is not as exclusionary as the army once was – certainly, Kate could have become a police officer if she desired. But the acts of violence and murder that are carried out against BIPOC (and LGBTQ+) community members tells us that the practice of criminalizing that which is Other still pervades heavily in the police services. Despite historical movements in support of abolition, emancipation, civil rights, and equal



representation, acts of discriminatory violence persist – the idea of law has been so warped by unequal power dynamics that it fails to see the blatant oppression of its own execution. So the fact that BIPOC peoples *can* become law enforcement agents does not change the fact that the police’s execution of justice is based on the exclusionary attitudes of the dominant white demographic. If these attitudes are to be de-constructed, several measures need to be taken: first, individuals need to be strictly screened before being authorized to wield a badge and a gun. Those candidates whose psychological profiles reveal a history of, or potential for, bigoted attitudes and/or abuse of power will only further pervert the idea of justice. Second, officers should be educated in matters such as critical thinking and political history – for those who are simply unaware of the complexities of socio-cultural tensions, the kinds of lessons found in the Humanities will expand worldviews and combat this ignorance. Third, law enforcers need to understand their jurisdiction as more than a site in which law is pitted against criminality. Police may not be as hyper-mobile as Gotham’s vigilantes, but they can take the time to interact with marginalized spaces on a level beyond that of driving through them in a squad car, responding to a call in their vicinity, or walking a beat through them. But as argued above, experiencing spaces intimately translates to understanding them more conscientiously only if an agent can see beyond cultural or personal biases. In other words, when law enforcement officers are mobile, they see things; but when they represent diverse backgrounds and worldviews, they are in a position to *understand* them – they can regard every space and person in the city as having value rather than stigma.

Vigilantism in comics is often used as a way to do what the law cannot or will not – it can *better* the idea of justice. Batman’s turn to vigilantism, for example, was

motivated by the complete corruption of Gotham's police service. In a town where criminal lords have almost every level of law enforcement and the court system in their back pockets, Batman represents something incorruptible, a symbol that there are forces that plunge, unafraid, into the depths of depravity and tirelessly work against criminality. At the same time though, vigilantism never *replaced* the idea of the police in Batman's mind – he worked with the best of them to rebuild a better system. However, after spending a long time as the ultimate authority figure in Gotham, Batman's own version of what a "just" city should look like takes on the risk of becoming exclusionary. Sure, he cannot be corrupted by external factors (people, money, etc.), but he can become corrupted just by being uncontested. As Senator June Finch (Holly Hunter) says in Zack Snyder's 2016 film *Batman Vs. Superman*, "in a democracy, 'good' is a conversation, not a unilateral decision."

George Floyd and Breonna Taylor's deaths, along with the deaths of all the other BIPOC individuals targeted by police over the years, tells us that this conversation is either failing to re-imagine justice and how it is delivered, or it is not happening at all. Many of the protesters, lobby groups, and other organizations that represent marginalized and/or targeted peoples have identified that the failure to collaborate and overcome systemic discrimination comes not from individual officers, but the entire institution of the police. While this criticism has been made before,<sup>5</sup> the events of spring 2020 have spurred intense discussion surrounding the issue of defunding the police, either significantly or entirely – and the motion to do so has garnered unprecedented reception, in both politicians and citizens. Before Floyd and Taylor were killed, the most common

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<sup>5</sup> See Amna A. Akbar's "How Defund and Disband Became the Demands," from *The New York Review of Books*

response to anti-black violence at the hands of police was to call for the criminal prosecution of the guilty officers involved. Journalist Amna Akbar, reporting for *NYR Daily* on the current affair of “defund and disband” motions, states that in similar instances in the past, “most police are never charged for their violence. When they are, police unions provide officers paid counsel. Judges dismiss cases and juries acquit. In the rare case of a charge and a conviction, judges typically impose sentences less severe than is commonplace for far less serious crimes” (n.pag.). There is some slight consolation in the fact that the officer who kneeled on Floyd’s neck, Derek Chauvin, has been charged with second-degree murder, and the three accompanying officers have been charged with aiding and abetting second-degree murder, as well as manslaughter. However, while accountability provides some level of closure, it can in no way ensure that anti-BIPOC violence and murder will be deterred. As Akbar writes, the demands to defund and disband police services “reflect growing recognition that the problem is not individual police or isolated bad acts... The protesters are saying, loud and clear, that the only solution to the violence of policing is less policing—or maybe, none at all” (n.pag.).

The “defund and disband” movement is highly controversial, and the aim of this paper is not to condone or condemn it. Rather, I wish to draw attention to the fact that the movement’s supporters have honed in on a fundamental issue: the fact that “policing is different for different people and in different communities” (Akbar, n.pag.). Law enforcement policies are based on the reduction of the different to the Other, and of the Other to the criminal. If police services are defunded and disbanded, their biases would cease to be enacted at the expense of the Other; but whatever authoritative body follows is just as susceptible to exclusionary tendencies that lead to discrimination. Even if the

“enforcement” of the law takes on a non-authoritative stance, the administration of justice – through courts, judges, and juries – will still exist to some capacity. The real issue is that *any* body of authority is comprised of people, and people are always at risk of losing sight of their own subconscious tendency to Otherize. The question now becomes a matter of finding a way to keep the idea of authority and law enforcement alive in a form as close to its ideal as possible: i.e., a force that keeps peace, builds community, and provides emergency services when necessary.

The individuals that comprise Gotham’s crime-fighting syndicate, and their methods, may potentially lead us to solutions. The city’s caped crusaders de-fragment their environment by accessing its various people and places from many vantage points, and by drawing understanding from this sight. But a vigilante is only human, and they can only hold one “understanding” of the city at a time. So when this “understanding” begins to resemble quantification and reduction (as it does in Batman’s case), the introduction of one or more alternative perspectives can identify this trend and act against it. It is the *interaction* of the perspectives held by Batwoman and Batman that provide alternative understandings of the city, and how to best serve and protect it. Sometimes, their opinions come into conflict; but by collaborating and finding solutions through compromise and



Figure 8: From *Detective Comics, Vol. 2: The Victim Syndicate*

mutual understanding, they each can enact a mandate that (hopefully) considers all people and places in the city. And it is not just Batwoman who provides Gotham's vigilante scene with a level of diversity. Sure, she is gay and female, but she is also wealthy, white, able bodied, and in the physical prime of her life. Thus, Gotham has more vigilantes to help Batman continuously redefine his mission. For example, Batman carefully considers the insights and values of his sidekick, Red Robin (see figs 8 and 9). These depictions of Batman show the caped crusader allowing new voices to expand the scope of his mission, voices that challenge him to "see *past* the crime-fighting" (original emphasis) and focus his attention on rehabilitating offenders (Tynion IV, n.pag.). In the volume cited here, the team Batman assembles consists of diverse members of Gotham's vigilante community – such as the non-human Clayface, the poor and mute Orphan, and morally ambiguous figures

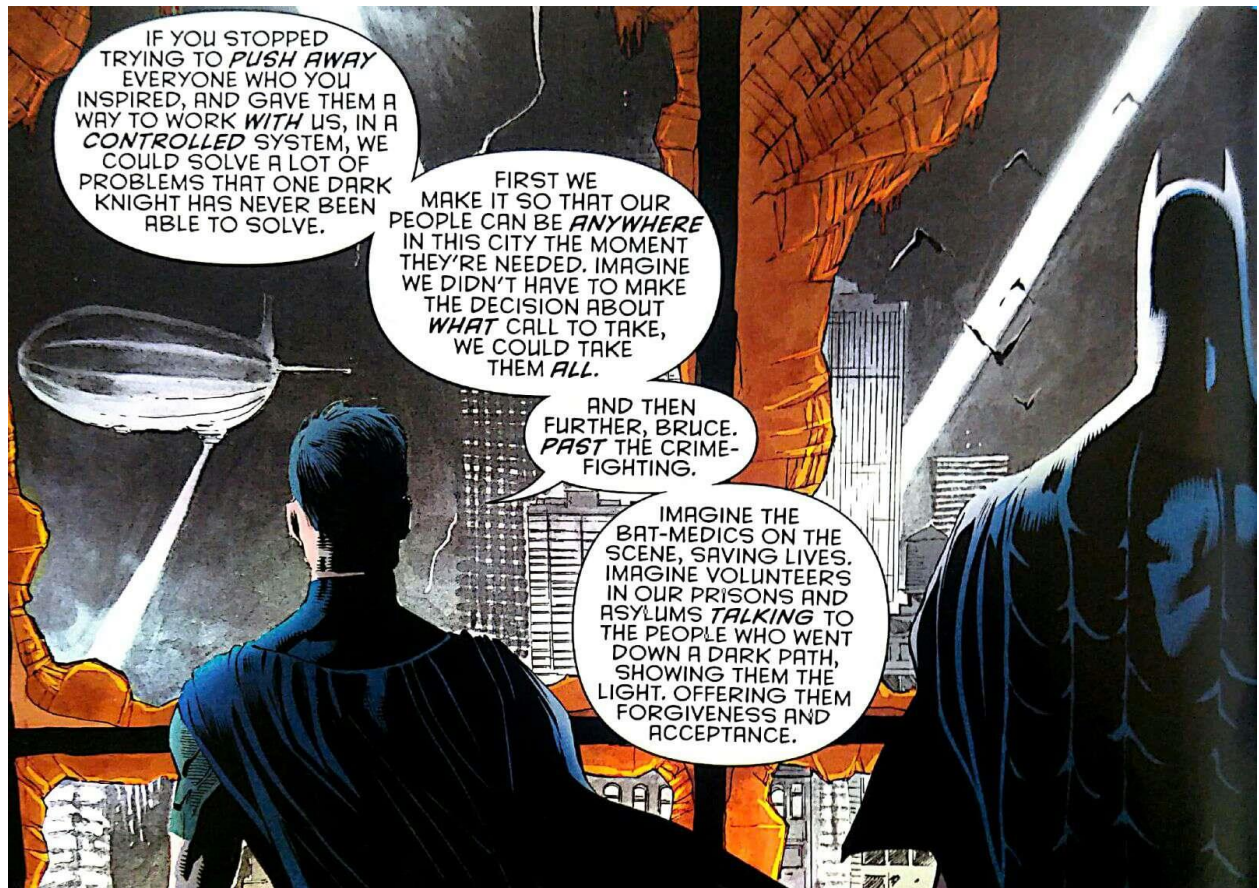


Figure 9: From *Detective Comics, Vol. 2: The Victim Syndicate*



like Red Hood – and throughout the story he learns to be receptive to the voices, intuitions, and experience that come from this eclectic assortment of vigilantes.

A collaborative approach to justice, such as the one adopted by Gotham's finest vigilantes, provides a more constructive outlet for crime fighting efforts. For example, Batwoman does not descend upon illegal gambling circles, prostitutes and johns, or small-scale drug users/dealers and perform citizen's arrests on these offenders. Offenses such as these are often the *result* of the marginalization of certain communities; the crimes in which Batwoman is interested are those of systemic origin. Often, she operates on an international scale, helping socio-spatial fragments in not only



Figure 10: From *Batwoman: The Many Arms of Death*

Gotham, but across the globe. For example, in the first volume of her *Rebirth* series, Kate Kane travels to Coryana, a small and remote island under the control of a matriarchal leader, a piratical mercenary named Safiya. Through flashbacks, it is revealed that Kate met Safiya before donning the cowl, and became romantically involved with her. During this time, she learned that while Safiya's operation (i.e., funding Coryana through piracy) is illegal, Safiyah herself is not devoid of a moral compass. She is a capable and caring leader whose main goal is not wealth or power – Safiya only steals from or otherwise interferes with cargo, equipment, and personnel associated with those corporations intent on exploiting Coryana's resources or people (see fig. 10).

The artistic language of figure 10 complicates the idea of “criminality” and “justice” just as much as its plot and dialogue. Whenever Safiya is on Coryana, light is used in a painterly fashion – it is simultaneously intense and soft, as if the scene were captured at the “golden hour” – which lends an idyllic quality. But later in the volume, when Safiya leaves, the island is illustrated as a dark and hostile place. The presence of rogue mercenaries and their leader is equated with the visual tropes of glowing illumination, while their absence translates to darkness – a fact which suggests that, in Kate's mind, Coryana's idyllic status is inextricably entwined with its illegal operations. Even though the corporation that eventually takes over the island in Safiya's absence does so legally, and ends the piracy that once sustained it, their ownership of the land effectively removes the light and ends the paradise.

When Kate returns to the island several years later, as Batwoman, she approaches Safiyah not just as a criminal, but also as a *person*, with an identity comprised of more than her illegal acts. In order to solve the case that brought her back to Coryana, Kate

once again teams up with Safiya's old cohort of pirates, warlords and mercenaries. Working with a crew that normally operates on the other side of the law, Kate is able to save Coryana from destruction. After the case is resolved, before departing Coryana for the final time, Batwoman gives her motley, one-time team leave to stay on Coryana, unhindered, while they continue to enact piracy. This is something Batman would not do, for "crime" cannot be tolerated in his mind. However, in Kate's mind, an illicit act can contribute to something constructive and beneficial. Kate decided to work with and abet known criminals so she could save a place that she believes to be worth saving, a fragmented area that means something to not only her, but also Safiyah, her family-like circle of warlords, and the island's countless residents. Seeing the bigger picture, she opted not to indict the warlords for their crimes, for she knows that she will ultimately have done more "good" by allowing them to keep Coryana's people safe and happy.

Throughout *The Many Arms of Death*, as Kate Kane struggles with an existential crisis, she asks herself, "what can Batwoman do that Batman can't?" The answer lies not in what she is capable of doing, but rather what she *chooses* to do, and *why* she chooses to do it. Experiences such as her adventure on Coryana demonstrate the benefits of resisting the uncompromising, "moral high ground" approach to justice: Kate Kane (and other heroes of diverse backgrounds) can recognize and resist the longstanding practice of aligning the socio-spatially fragmented zones – those in the city, or anywhere in the world – with criminality. Therefore, her M.O consists of more than simply jumping into Gotham's "underworld" and beating up "bad guys."

That being said, she is certainly capable of doing this, and indeed will, if she needs to track down leads the old fashioned way; but her goal is to accomplish more than busting



Gotham's lower-level criminals. She is not afraid to exercise her physical and symbolic authority in order to get her job done, but where possible, she offers to help, protect, and rehabilitate offenders in exchange for information that will lead her to criminal leaders. For example, in the opening sequence to *Batwoman: Elegy*, Batwoman immobilizes a fleeing suspect without hesitation or difficulty, much like Batman would, but after this, her unique approach to vigilantism emerges: she questions the suspect while simultaneously playing



Figure 11: From *Batwoman: Elegy*

the part of good cop and bad cop (see fig. 11). After the routine process of intimidation, she extends the offer of support, protection, and rehabilitation, a genuine gesture that allows her to glean the intelligence necessary to further her investigation. Furthermore, the organization of the page is as unique as Batwoman's methods. Completely disregarding

conventional layout, artist John Williams III breaks these two pages into panels with jagged borders and geometric shapes – it is almost as though a new type of composition was established just for Batwoman, so that the visual style of her comic might break from the mold in the same way as her attitude to executing justice.

Just after this scene, she encounters Batman, and the two – both in costume – compare notes on the case, as they both seem to be investigating the same criminal organization. However, Batman concedes the case to her after Batwoman proves that she has amassed more accurate intelligence, and is better versed in the criminal syndicate they are seeking to infiltrate. In this short but telling sequence of events, readers are shown that Batwoman's approach to crime fighting is different than Batman's, and that her methods are equally or more effective than his. Like Bruce Wayne, Kate Kane is someone who technically enforces the law, but with her enhanced capability working in conjunction with her non-traditional gaze, practices, and attitudes towards understanding the city, she diversifies the *idea* of justice in Gotham – be it through her relationships, investigative techniques, or moral compass.

## **Conclusions**

Marginalized people and places continue to suffer for their ethnic, sexual, or religious backgrounds. Hearing, seeing, and otherwise experiencing these marginalized spaces and peoples can allow us to resist the narratives that led to, and perpetuated, their marginalization in the first place. But experiencing fragmented socio-spatial communities

is just a start. As discussed, the understanding and perspective that one draws from this experience is what matters when it comes to how “justice” is defined by municipal police, armed forces, international law enforcement, vigilantes, or any authoritative and/or punitive figures. And, as also discussed, the understanding that one draws from her/his experience can depend on her/his racial, gender, class, and sexual identities. Who we are – the complex combination of physiological, psychological, and social identities – determines what we see, how we see it, and what it means to us. When Lauren Elkin, for example, walks down the streets of the word’s metropolitan centres, “signals come in on [her] own personal frequency; they wouldn’t mean much to anyone else. We all have our own signals we’re listening for, or trying not to hear” (98). Just as different flâneurs and flâneuses are attuned to different things, and therefore construct different versions of the city in their respective minds, different crime fighters perceive their city in different ways and therefore have different approaches to fighting crime. Pluralizing the possible approaches is ultimately beneficial for all of society, for unconsciously engrained prejudices can be exposed, and the harm that follows these prejudices reduced.

What can Batwoman do that Batman cannot? She can be different. She can distinguish her methods and beliefs from his. It is true that she *could* do what Batman does – or what the flâneurs and detectives do – and she could do it in the same way; but if diverse people are depicted demonstrating “power” or “competence” according to the “traditional” models, then difference is ignored, as are the benefits of that difference. Conversation, for example, on the subject of how to best serve urban, national, and global citizens, is one of those benefits. Every enforcer of the law needs to be involved in this conversation (i.e., “what is justice”), and thus Gotham needs its primary law enforcer –

Batman – to be in collaboration with figures who disagree with him, such as his fellow Justice League members (Superman and Wonder Woman) and fellow Gotham-based vigilantes (Batwoman, Red Robin, Clayface, etc.). So it is only when the Bat-family or Justice League grows that his views on justice can also grow. If diversity and constant challenges to complacency can make the world’s most famous vigilante better, then these factors can, and will, make law enforcement better as well.

And yet, as much as this sentiment serves up a neatly wrapped conclusion, Kate Kane and other comic book superheroes cannot tell us how to completely eradicate discrimination in law enforcement. Batwoman comics merely represent what the benefits of a diverse approach to justice *could* look like – just like figures such as Captain America and Wonder Woman represent a stylized idea of what pure “goodness” could look like. Because comic book characters and premises are so idealized, there is inescapable tension between their depictions of “justice” and the ways in which this construct play out in the real world. But this tension is what gives meaning to superhero comics’ social commentary: if the genre is a forum for creatives to propose a version of justice that resonates with audiences, then these audiences are provided with a goal toward which they can strive. And more importantly, the act of striving can bridge the gap between idealism and reality. That is, if the “real world” in any way takes inspiration from comics – i.e., if law enforcement tangibly changes to resemble a more experiential and collaborative approach to justice – then the ideals presented via Batwoman cease to remain a matter of fiction. And if the “real world” does eventually resemble what was once just considered a fictitious ideal, then new ideals will need to be thought up so as to keep pushing aspects of society (such as law enforcement) to higher planes of idealization.

In other words, whatever state the world happens to be in, it can be re-imagined as, and hopefully made into, something better. But different creators imagine different ways in which this “betterment” can be achieved. For instance, Batman was created in order to critique the corruption of urban police services; but to critique the self-inflicted corruption of Batman (see pg. 33), Batwoman was (re)-created. Extrapolating from this trend, if and when problematic elements manifest in Batwoman’s methods, comic creators, writers, and artists will introduce voices that contend with – and thereby critique – her as well. The general idea of “improvement through reflection and discussion” is the theme in superhero fiction that I wish to apply to our real-world climate, more than one specific lesson concerning how to enact justice. Even if the day comes that law enforcement is as collaborative as Gotham’s vigilantes currently are, a set of comics writers will need to introduce new discussions, new ways to expand the idea of justice, and new ways to do so. When they do, we will have new ideals for which to strive – and eventually meet, and then update, and meet again.

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