Blurring boundaries, crossing divides: An interview with Will Brooker

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Abstract:

In February 2013, media scholar Professor Will Brooker launched *My So Called Secret Identity*; a collaborative web-comic (with work from Sarah Zaidan and Suze Shore, amongst others) that offers a different depiction of women in comics than was largely evident in previous works. As writer of the comic, Brooker blurs and crosses the divides between fan, producer and academic. In this interview, we explore these issues, while also touching upon Brooker's work in fan studies and the current state of the field, the somewhat limited representations of gender in comics, and how MSCSI is engaging successfully and innovatively with an online readership.

Keywords: Comics, fandom, gender, social media, feminism.

Introduction

Media scholar Will Brooker has written widely on modern pop culture and fandom, although he is perhaps best known for his academic work on *Batman*, including 2003's *Batman Unmasked* and the more recent *Hunting The Dark Knight* (2012). Recently, however he has also taken on Batgirl who, he writes, has always seemed a wasted character: 'I wanted to like Barbara [Gordon]. I just wasn't getting much to work with' (http://mindlessones.com/2011/11/09/from-killer-moth-to-killing-joke-batgirl-a-life-in-pictures). In the same blog post on the *Mindless Ones* website Brooker undertook a visual analysis of the character's history, detailing the tropes inherent in comics about superheroines and the apologetic, self-consciously klutzy tone in which Barbara Gordon's voice is written: 'There's the constant reminder, from her own narration, that maybe Barbara simply isn't good enough even to tackle low-level thugs. She makes mistakes, gets knocked out, slips up, fakes confidence.'

Brooker concludes his post with the words 'We are building a better Batgirl. Look out for her.' The better Batgirl envisioned by Brooker evolved into *My So-Called Secret Identity*, a collaborative web-comic written by Brooker and featuring artwork by Sarah Zaidan and

Suze Shore, amongst others, which Brooker describes as 'an experiment: a non-commercial project to prompt discussion and maybe suggest a different way of doing things, in terms of approach, aesthetic and practice' (http://mindlessones.com/2011/11/09/from-killer-moth-to-killing-joke-batgirl-a-life-in-pictures). In their introduction to 'Toward a Feminist Superhero: An Interview with Will Brooker, Sarah Zaidan and Suze Shore' (2013, forthcoming), Carlen Lavigne, Kate Roddy, and Suzanne Scott note that

> Though *My So-Called Secret Identity* remains intertextually indebted to Batgirl, its "different way of doing things" suggests that fans' transformative impulse might move beyond the text itself to comment on industrial inequities and the gendered nature of comic book content and culture.

It is this 'transformative impulse' which we wanted to examine in this interview for the Fan Studies Network special issue of *Participations*. Brooker, with *My So-Called Secret Identity,* crosses the divides between fan, producer and academic. This, along with the role that the internet has played in forging the comic, from the original *Mindless Ones* blog post and its comments, to Suze Shore's website on which Brooker realised she was the right person to approach about the project, and the creation of a *My So-Called Secret Identity* Facebook group, Pinterest and two Twitter accounts, means that he is in a unique position to comment on some of the themes debated and discussed in this special issue, in addition to being a supporter of the Fan Studies Network. As he writes,

> [*My So-Called Secret* Identity] is a specific kind of 'fanfic' as it's kind of professional and semi-official – it's a way of putting criticism and research into practice (doing differently, rather than just pointing out what other people are doing wrong) – it involves ethics (trying to live up to your political aims with a commercial product in a marketplace) and cross-platform marketing (again, now I'm doing it, rather than just studying it). (Email to the authors, 2013.)

We hope that this interview will encourage scholars and fans to think about fan production and fan studies in new ways, and will add to the conversation that began, as Lavigne, Roddy, and Scott note, in the comments section of the *Mindless Ones* blog post, and continued in *Transformative Works and Cultures*.

Before *My So-Called Secret Identity*

BJ &LB: *In your autobiographical piece for* Infinite Earths*, you recount* Deviant Glam*, a fanzine you ran in the 1990s. Can you tell us more about this? How important was this experience for you?*

WB: Overall, the significance of *Deviant Glam* was as one of many fanzines I've edited during

my life -- I was a big organiser of clubs and organisations when I was little, and each club usually had its own magazine. (When I say 'clubs and organisations', I mean me and a couple of neighbour kids from up the road, meeting in our back gardens to dig holes, play house or climb trees; and I say 'magazine', but in some cases these publications were a single sheet of paper with the Rules of the Rainbow Gang – '#1: every member must wear a different coloured sweater' – written in crayon.)

I ran a fairly ambitious fanzine called *S.O.S.* when I was fifteen years old, about computer games, TV and movies, and sold it to students and teachers at my school. That was my first word-processed and photocopied publication. The logos and the illustrations were all hand-drawn.

At sixteen, I rebranded it as a kind of 1980s 'lifestyle' magazine, called *Frisko*, including comics, music, shopping, fashion, even food. One of *Frisko*'s innovations was that I hand-coloured every cover individually. From that, I moved onto some professional journalism for a major computer games magazine called *Crash*: you can still see some of my juvenile work here: http://www.crashonline.org.uk/51/runagain.htm

So *Deviant Glam* (1993) was essentially another landmark between *The Rainbow Gang* magazine (1975), *Small Wonder* (1990) and *Cinema Journal* (2012). It was distributed by post to a small readership around the United Kingdom, and was very much linked to the small press comics industry of the time, which in turn was part of the culture of mainstream comics' letter-columns.

I got to know a number of people simply because DC Comics printed full addresses on their letters pages, and other fans wrote to me. I met a number of them, went out with them socially, stayed at their houses around the UK, and exchanged extensive correspondence with them.

It was an important experience socially – I made a lot of new friends and had experiences I would otherwise have missed – and it was a very useful exercise in learning how to script comics. The readership was only small but they were critical, close examiners -- we were all diehard fans and paid great attention to detail – and it was my first experience of writing scripts for other people to draw. Previously I'd always drawn comics (not very well) on my own. Like all writing, the work I did for those fanzines – reviews, articles, short stories, interviews – helped me to improve my style and develop a 'voice'. I think everything I've ever written is a step towards getting better at writing.

With hindsight, *Deviant Glam* and the small-press industry that surrounded it was very much like an analogue, paper-and-photocopy, proto-version of joining the internet and developing a persona within an online community. We were all in our early twenties, living in tiny bedsits, eating cheaply and earning very little, but as editors of our fanzines, or writers and artists of comics, we could project a bigger and more charismatic version of ourselves, construct new identities, and acquire a kind of minor reputation based on what we said we were and how we said it, rather than how we actually came across in real life.

At around this time, writers and artists who are now international megastars were writing in very small magazines, so I actually appeared in the same issue as people like Grant

Morrison, and used to have long and friendly conversations with authors like Alan Moore. They were, of course, already several leagues ahead of me in terms of fame and success, but it felt like we knew some of the same people and were part of the same networks – with them at the centre and me at the margins.

As I tried to explore in *Crisis on Inbetween Earths*, there was a genuine sense of slippage between authors and readers, creators and fans, but also between fact and fiction. Because comics like *Zenith*, *Shade*, *Sandman* and *Doom Patrol* were so contemporary and intelligent, informed by current fashion and incorporating music lyrics, they seemed to blur more easily with the everyday world than traditional superhero comics had – and in turn, I and the people I mixed with would very much model ourselves and our lives on characters like Zenith, Shade, Crazy Jane and Morpheus.

Again, I know Grant Morrison has spoken of a very similar process, on a different scale of celebrity. He also deliberately fashioned various personae as a comic book writer – progressing through different types such as the angry young rebel, the fey indie-boy and the S&M shaman – and also, in a process partly conscious and partly automatic, found his life echoing the events of the comics he was creating.

They were strange and precious days.

BJ &LB: *You've recently taken over the role as editor for* Cinema Journal*. How have you found this process so far, with the shift from being author/reader to editor?*

WB: I don't think I would have been appointed as editor of *Cinema Journal* if I hadn't already had significant editing experience. I have put together a few books – *Postmodern AfterImages, The Audience Studies Reader* and *The Blade Runner Experience*, and more recently, an In Focus section for *Cinema Journal* itself, so I am familiar with the process and I think I am now quite good at editing – as with everything, you learn from your previous mistakes.

Essentially, editing *Cinema Journal* is like editing four short books every year, with four deadlines every year. So it is a lot of work. It differs from my earlier experiences of editing mainly in that it's much more of a team effort, and I have an absolutely stellar group of people working with me. I have been fortunate so far in that I've been able to delegate duties to my masthead team, which means my role has mainly been decision-making and final checking. I do think it's important that I personally read and approve everything that is published under the *Cinema Journal* banner, but nobody could do this alone.

I am almost ashamed to admit this, but it's inevitably the case: I have never, ever read an issue of *Cinema Journal* as closely and thoroughly as I have my own first issue.

BJ &LB: *You've written the scripts for* MSCSI*. How different did you find this writing experience, as compared to the academic articles or books you've done? Do you perceive them as having vastly different audiences?*

WB: It is a different process, but not radically different, and I imagine it will reach a different audience, but not radically different. That is to say, there are significant overlaps in both cases.

In *Hunting the Dark Knight*, for instance, there are certainly passages where I tried to hook the reader on a sense of rhythm and resonance, and pull them along with my argument through words – so some of the prose in that 'academic' book is not so very different from creative writing. I consciously wrote some of it like a speech, a form of oratory, with an attempt to convince and persuade.

Similarly, in *MSCSI* there are moments where I deliberately wanted to make a point - about the typical fate of female characters for instance – and I worked it into dialogue. So there are points in that creative fiction that you could call polemic – I hope they are not preachy - and there are certainly many aspects that critically reflect on, subvert or parody mainstream conventions of superhero comics (specifically the Batman mythos).

Overall, too, *Hunting the Dark Knight* follows a very deliberate structure that I don't see as very different from telling a story. It starts at one point, takes us through various stages, then aims to return us to a point like the beginning, but with a transformed perspective. The chapters could not be in any other order – they are meant to build up to the climax. I think the book has five chapters, which is exactly the same number of episodes as the first volume of *MSCSI*. No doubt there are similarities, as a consequence, in the function of those chapters – the first inevitably sets things rolling, the second and third develop and ramp things up, the fourth takes us to the edge of a crescendo, and the fifth has to deliver and wrap up the whole.

My academic books seem to reach a fairly broad popular audience so again, I think there should be some overlap between the readership for *Hunting the Dark Knight* and *MSCSI*. I wrote articles for *Total Film, The Independent, Newsweek, io9.com* and *The Guardian* based on *Hunting the Dark Knight*, so the ideas in the book readily transferred to a more journalistic, less academic platform.

Almost all the 'fan mail' I receive is from young men though – most of whom were already fans of the subjects I write about – and I am hoping that *MSCSI* will appeal to girls and women who might not usually pick up a superhero comic. As noted, we have deliberately pitched it to look distinct from a conventional superhero title.

It's possible that Batman fans might not enjoy *MSCSI*, because it is in some ways a criticism and parody of the patriarchal, rigid, grim-and-gritty archetype that some fans like to see in Batman. But if they don't like it, there are quite enough macho, muscular Batman stories for those people. There are not enough stories about people like Catherine Abigail Daniels, as far as I'm concerned.

Critiquing gender in comics

BJ &LB: *Tell us some more about Catherine Abigail Daniels. How did the idea for* MSCSI *come about?*

WB: A number of real-world factors converged to spark *My So-Called Secret Identity*. The pre-history of the project dates back to Summer 2011, when I'd just finished my last book on Batman. I followed a link on Reddit.com to the DeviantArt site of Jennifer Vaiano (http://noflutter.deviantart.com/), who had posted some steampunk versions of Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn. I asked her if she'd do me a steampunk Batgirl, and one morning – while I was staying in Buffalo on vacation – a gorgeous piece of original art unscrolled into my inbox. That was the first time I'd commissioned someone to draw a design from my brief – at least, since my small-press comic days of the early 1990s – and it was a new thrill for me.

I asked Jen to draw me some more sketches, this time as paid commissions, to establish what a female city vigilante might look like if she didn't have a skintight costume, but just put together an outfit from the kind of thing we can all buy in stores and find in our wardrobes – a polo-neck, cargo pants, boots and a belt.

Around the same time as this, October 2011, I visited the comic shop near my home institution, Kingston University. I walked in and half a dozen young lads, including the owner, were sitting around playing video games. They stared at me as if I'd walked into their front room, and kept staring while I looked at the comics. This was soon after the release of the New 52, so the comics on display were titles like Red Hood and the Outlaws, with the notorious Starfire-in-swimsuit scenes, Catwoman #1 and the rebooted Batgirl. So not only was I in this dingy shop that felt like a teenage boy's bedroom, but most of the comics on the racks offered glossy, cheesecake pin-ups of women. It made me feel disappointed about what had become the norm in superhero comics, and frustrated that they couldn't be different.

I left within a couple of minutes and never went back, but it struck me that if someone like me feels uncomfortable walking into a comic shop, it's no wonder most teenage girls and adult women wouldn't set foot inside one.

Later that day, I led an induction session for the year's new intake of PhD students. I looked around at the room full of young women – so smart, determined, keen and committed – and remembered that in the original comic, Batgirl was meant to be a PhD student. Why do we never see women like this in comics – women who are normal, likeable and just really, really clever?

At the same time, I was writing a series of articles for the blog *Mindless Ones*, which had started to focus on my annoyance with the character of Barbara Gordon/Batgirl, and the way she'd been treated over the years.

http://mindlessones.com/2011/06/08/batgirl-dance/
http://mindlessones.com/2011/10/19/meanwhile-in-1971-a-life-in-continuity/
http://mindlessones.com/2011/11/09/from-killer-moth-to-killing-joke-batgirl-a-life-in-pictures/

Batgirl had just been brought back in the New 52 and been miraculously given the power to walk again, after having had her spine damaged in *The Killing Joke* some 25 years earlier. I'm a great admirer of Gail Simone's work, but to my mind, the editorial decision to bring back Barbara Gordon as Batgirl, restoring her ability not just to walk but to jump around rooftops, and compressing her history as both Batgirl and Oracle to just a few years, was unfortunate. I think Simone has done wonderful things with Barbara Gordon as Oracle and the predominantly-female cast of **Birds of Prey**, but the new Batgirl didn't sit right with me. Again, this isn't a criticism of the author, but of the editorial decision behind it.

Although I'd never really studied Batgirl, I tried to give the character a chance, but it was hard to really root for her in terms of the way she was written and drawn. I started wondering how I'd do it differently, and decided that if I was ever given the chance, I'd pitch it as Barbara Gordon in the Vertigo imprint of the 1990s.

I was going to simply write some pages of script, commission some artwork and post it up on *Mindless Ones* as a hypothetical pitch, a story that could have (should have) happened but was never produced. I found a cartoon by Suze Shore, a Canadian illustrator, pointing out the ludicrously skimpy nature of Poison Ivy's outfit in the *Arkham Asylum* videogame. I approached her to draw me some more sketches and coloured portraits.

Working with Suze, I realised that the idea really had potential, and her enthusiasm for the project spurred me on. I enlisted my former PhD student, Sarah Zaidan, and then simply approached artists whose work I came across online.

Hanie Mohd was becoming well-known for her portraits of superheroines in knitwear and sweaters; I found Paige Halsey Warren through her awesome Busty Girl Comics, and Sandra Salsbury through her role as Reddit's house illustrator. Clay Rodery was also suggested to me by a contact on Reddit's Batman forum. I found Rachael Smith, who contributed some lovely, quirky cartoon interpretations of Cat, on Twitter; Twitter also led me to contact Lea Hernandez. Karin Idering and Carl Hoare were friends, or friends of friends, on Facebook.

Within a month of contacting Suze I'd recognised that it couldn't actually be about Batgirl anymore, for obvious copyright reasons. So I scrapped the specifically Batgirl stuff, kept the basic template of Ph.D student in a 1990s American city full of larger-than-life costumed characters, and built it up in a different way.

Almost all the creative team were female, and they were all enthusiastic about representing women in a different, more realistic and relatable way.

BJ &LB: *You mention Gail Simone in the* Transformative Works and Cultures *interview but since then she has been let go by DC. Has or will this affect future issues of, or attitudes to the point you want to make in,* MSCSI*, and how do paratextual events within broader comics (not just the Bat- or other superhero universes) affect your ideas?*

WB: Well, apparently she was *rehired* the following week. The resignation of long-term DC editor Karen Berger, followed immediately by Gail Simone's firing-by-email, did seem to

confirm that we were doing an important and valuable thing by launching a female-centred, overwhelmingly female-produced superhero comic – particularly as Berger worked on the Vertigo imprint, which was a particular influence on *MSCSI*, and of course Simone is best known for *Batgirl* (and previously, *Oracle/Birds of Prey*).

But as *MSCSI* has taken, to date, about 14 months to get from an idea to the final stages of a completed issue 1, it is not going to be shaped directly by external industry news. The process is far slower than that. I wrote all five scripts for the first volume, or story arc, by the end of 2011.

The hurried re-hiring of Gail Simone, while obviously great news for her and a positive outcome overall, still doesn't make a lot of difference to the gender imbalance within DC Comics as a whole.

BJ &LB: *Tied to that question, how did critiquing female superheroines generally (and the Bat-universe in particular) in this format differ to academic criticism? What were you able to do here that you couldn't elsewhere? And do you think* MSCSI *will open up ways for academics to engage in criticism in different ways?*

WB: Essentially, the difference is between telling someone else what they are doing wrong, and trying to do it better yourself. If anything, it is more challenging. It's not hard to find fault with someone else's texts, and I think it is probably harder to make your own.

By creating my own comic book project, I am implicitly saying I think this is better, at least in some ways, than the comics I was criticising in my three articles on the blog *Mindless Ones* during Autumn 2011, and that it solves or avoids at least some of the problems I was identifying in other people's work. That is quite a position to put yourself in.

So it is the difference between criticising and creating -- between finding fault with someone else's art, and offering a possible solution through your own. I don't see those as binary oppositions, because reviews, criticism and rhetoric are a form of art, and a comic can also work as a form of textual criticism – but I do think there is a distinction between saying 'we have a problem' and saying 'here's my answer to that problem'; here's my way of doing things differently.

There is an established tradition of research-through-practice, and it is generally accepted that academics can pose research questions through, for instance, digital art, dance, films and creative writing. I didn't approach *MSCSI* explicitly as a form of practice-led research – it really is as simple as me thinking 'I'm not happy with the way things are, so rather than wait for someone else to do it, I'll give it a shot myself' – but it could be located within that context.

As such, many academics have already done something similar. One of the artists on the project, Sarah Zaidan, even completed her PhD through digital comic book art – I supervised it. I'm not suggesting that everyone should do this sort of thing, by any means – that Matt Hills should stop criticising *Torchwood* and write his own scripts for it – but I think it's an interesting exercise and a valid alternative to more traditional research.

My So-Called Secret Identity: Blurring the boundaries and crossing the divides

BJ &LB: *It seemed clear that the original* Batgirl *project you had planned, intended to be a scrapbook of script extracts, etc., links very closely to other fan works. Although the project has evolved and now contains a cast of original characters you make the point that it still intends to critique and parody Batman, something a lot of fan produced works do. (Perhaps playing Devil's advocate we could also draw comparison to* Fifty Shades of Grey*'s genesis as fan fiction and its move to published, original work.) How far would you consider* MSCSI *a piece of fan fiction?*

WB: That wouldn't be the first term I would use – I would be more likely to think of it as an 'analogue', according to a fairly long-standing convention in comics whereby many superhero publishers have a character a lot like Superman. Most specifically, the project feels to me like what Alan Moore was doing with *Watchmen*, taking a set of generic types and freeing them in a new universe so they could explore those character types, transcend them and also comment on the conventions of the source material.

There is a distinction that *Watchmen* developed analogues of the Charlton Comics character (Blue Beetle becomes Nite Owl, and so on) with DC Comics' approval and at their suggestion.

So *MSCSI* is perhaps better compared to what Warren Ellis did in *The Authority* with his Midnighter and Apollo (Batman and Superman), or what Pat Mills did in *Marshall Law* (The Private Eye and the Public Spirit, parodies again of Batman and Superman), or what Ellis did with figures like Doc Savage (= Doc Brass) and Johnny Storm (= William Leather), or indeed with what Moore has done with 'Jimmy' Bond and Emma Night (= Emma Peel and M from James Bond) in *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*.

I'm not saying '*MSCSI* should be compared to *Watchmen*', or any of these highly-respected and groundbreaking comic books, in anything except a shared approach and relationship to genre conventions, existing characters and source materials.

As such, it could also be compared to *Fifty Shades of Grey* (and any other unpublished, lesser-known fan fiction); it could also be compared to Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution*, which is a Sherlock Holmes novel in all but name, or to John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius*, or Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

That is, they are all a kind of fan-fiction, engaging with a matrix of existing texts in order to comment on and explore them; but they are also all the same kind of valuable literary experiment.

I'd only object to people calling *MSCSI* 'fan fiction' if they were using it to mean something amateurish and low quality. If they include Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* as 'fan fiction' (and indeed, Nicholson Baker's memoir *U and I*, about John Updike's writing,

takes this to an even more meta-level), then fine, this is all fan fiction. So is *Wicked*, so is *Wild Sargasso Sea,* so is *Macbeth*.

BJ &LB: *Staying with the theme of scrapbooking and fan production, you suggest in the* TWC *interview that "scrapbooking, especially in its digital form of Pinterest, has associations of more 'feminine' creative work, which distinguishes the project helpfully from mainstream superhero comics for teenage boys and young men." Have you created a pinboard for* MSCSI *and/or do you plan to? And how has that more feminine aspect of creation and collaboration affected the way you approached and worked on this project? Do you think working with predominantly female artists affected that collaborative process?*

WB: Yes, we do already have a Pinterest for *MSCSI*.   http://pinterest.com/catabidaniels/. Sarah's work often involves collage and scrapbooking – whether with 'real life' materials or photoshop – and this approach remains very important to *MSCSI*. The project was originally going to simply be a scrapbook – not a finished story at all, but an archive suggesting a possible story, a proposal for a story, a hypothetical history of a comic that didn't exist but should have – and this early concept is retained in the finished version, in a modified form.

Firstly, it is the aesthetic through which we see inside Cat's head, in the 'mind-map' pages – as a book, marked with notes, scraps, photos, arrows, swatches of materials and post-its.

And second, we have a permanent space on the main website, originally called Scrapbook but now retitled Lookbook, where we show the process that went into the final comic through early sketches, character designs by different artists, rough work and discarded concepts. This space is also designed by Sarah and Lindsay Searles, our web developer, similarly to the mind-map, as a book: we could also see it as an album, treasure-chest, archive or memory box.

Scrapbooking, as an aesthetic, is central to *MSCSI* for a number of key reasons. It is an aesthetic that makes sense in terms of Cat's perspective. She is a voracious reader, very much at home in libraries but also always reading the signs and signifiers of the street, taking in the headlines of magazines and newspapers, processing information from different levels – from academic books to what someone's wearing – and fitting it together into a bigger picture.

It's an aesthetic that doesn't privilege any single style or representation. We see what Cat, Connie, Dahlia and Kyla look like in the comic itself, as drawn by Suze Shore, but we also see alternate, and to my mind, equally valid depictions of the same women by different artists - with slightly different faces, hair and body types.
MSCSI as a whole – in story and art – values and embraces change and variation. The only characters who thrive are those who change; the characters who can't change are doomed to failure.

Although this is of course the first story about Cat, I like the idea that there already exists a 'Cat Matrix', a range of different ways of depicting our main character and her

supporting cast (just as there are various different visions of Batman across various media). Not one of these is held up as an ideal. Sarah's Cat is different from Suze's Cat.

In story terms, the aesthetic also taps into the model of parallel universes, which will become more important in future arcs, but which we touch on in the final episode of the first volume. Without spoiling anything, we will see different versions of Cat in different worlds - a Cat of a different dress size, a different biological sex, a different ethnicity.

And Cat herself, throughout the three-volume narrative, goes through dramatic changes that have nothing to do with science fiction or magical transformation, but simply happen because she works out more at one point and develops a more athletic body, then becomes injured and inevitably puts on weight. She looks physically different in each volume of the story, and because of that she's treated a little differently, and feels a little differently about herself.

Another reason why we foreground the scrapbook aesthetic is simply because it distinguishes our project from conventional superhero comics. I'm not sure to what extent we can characterise scrapbooking as a 'feminine' art form – in *The Killing Joke* it's Commissioner Gordon who is compiling a scrapbook, while Barbara helps him – but it does look usefully different from the dominant artistic style of superhero comics, which are currently attempting a kind of videogame/cinematic mode, with digital colours, lens flare and effects. We wanted *MSCSI* to look immediately different from something like the New 52's *Red Hood and the Outlaws*. We've done that in a range of ways – by designing the website more like a fashion magazine or blog than a comic book, by employing watercolours instead of glossy digital effects, and by drawing on this particular scrapbook style, which thanks to Pinterest I think does currently connote a text for female readers, and which we hope will appeal to people who don't usually pick up a superhero story.

Finally, as to whether working with a predominantly female team shaped the collaborative process, and whether collaboration is itself more 'feminine' as a way of working: I don't know if that's the case. Stereotypically, I can imagine that there might be a perceived distinction between the 'great man' figure, the lone artist, and a notion of female community and workshopping – but on the other hand, DC Comics is based around teams of creators working together, and it's overwhelmingly a male industry.

Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy was not the work of one man, but a host of designers, actors, operators and editors – and yet the discourses around the production of his Batman films are characterised by macho ideas of pulling together, of doing things the hard way, of blood, sweat and tears.

So I don't think working in a group is in any way a fundamentally 'female' or 'feminine' approach. I did find that almost all the artists I worked with immediately understood and appreciated the idea of depicting female characters differently – but on the other hand, some of the more conventionally pretty, curvy, manga drawings of Cat are by a female artist, Jen Vaiano, and some of the most 'realistic' ones are by our one male contributor, Clay Rodery.

BJ &LB: *You noted in the* TWC *interview that you are blurring the boundaries between fan and producer with* MSCSI *and you've said here that you've received 'fan mail' for your academic work on* Batman *– how do you negotiate these boundaries and do you think there will be a difference in doing so as writer for* MSCSI?

WB: I see producer and fan as part of a spectrum or network, rather than binary opposites. I am a fan of some things, and some people are a fan of my work. I'm a fan of some people who are also a fan of my stuff. It is a criss-crossing relationship, not a contradiction.

My books on Batman could easily be seen as critical celebrations of the character – fan letters or even love letters to Batman; and in turn, I receive emails from people telling me they enjoyed my books. I'm sure most comic book writers were fans of the character, and have their own heroes in the industry, before they got a professional gig. Matt Hills has detailed the extent to which the current *Doctor Who* production team is made up of people who were originally 'just fans', and now are something a little different; 'fan-producers'.

I think it's probably true to say that we are all fans in some way, and all producers in some way. I don't think I am in a particularly unusual position.

BJ &LB: *You're engaging with fans through social media as well as through an MSCSI message board, and you've also held fan art competitions (http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.533077263381341.114587.5288766238014005&type=3) and have dedicated spaces for fan art and fan fiction on the forum (http://mscsi.boards.net/index.cgi?board=fanworks&action=display&thread=51). Why have you chosen to encourage this kind of fan cultural production and how do you feel about it (from both the point of view of* MSCSI's creator and an academic studying media and culture)?

WB: There have been some interesting early signs. We had one awesome picture of Cat as a My Little Pony, submitted to our Facebook page. Someone sent me a work of fan art titled 'Your So-Called Secret Identity', and another friend sent me a specially-recorded CD of music he felt Urbanite would listen to.

That friend, Paul Harrison, has also written a spin-off story, set within the world of *MSCSI*, about a character mentioned in the script called The First of the Fleet. I'm not yet sure what he plans to do in terms of developing and producing the story further, but as this is someone I know, I feel able to impose certain friendly limits and boundaries. For instance, I'd probably ask to see the artwork and script before anything went public, and want to make sure it didn't contradict or conflict with my own interpretation of the *MSCSI* world and its history. I would also ask that I and at least the primary art team of Suze Shore and Sarah Zaidan – possibly also others like Jennifer Vaiano and Clay Rodery, who did important work on key characters – were credited as original creators, in this and any other spin-off.

In the run-up to the project's launch, I harnessed Paul's fan enthusiasm by asking him to run one of the MSCSI twitter accounts, under the name @UrbaniteRLS [real-life

superhero]. I explained the way I felt Urbanite would speak and tweet, the kind of hashtags he'd use and the tone he would take, and we riffed off that for a while in emails before the twitter account started up. At my suggestion, Paul has now designed a deliberately 1990s-style fitness and exercise website for Urbanite, called 'Staying Hard', so we have a very small ARG-type network going on there, with our characters running fictional websites.

I also dealt with another interesting example in late 2012, where a production team from LA and NYC wanted to buy the option to adapt the story to a live action version. This was based solely on the script and a few sketches, though I sent them a full document of artwork and character notes as we entered discussion. Again, a priority for me in that exchange was been establishing the amount of control I and the creative team will retain over the work – and I involved Sarah and Suze as much as possible.

BJ &LB: *On a related note, have you given any thought to way of dealing with fan works that you disapprove of and do you have the ethical right to close those meanings down?*

WB: I have given some thought to the possibility of other fan work based on *MSCSI*. I can't think that I would be anything other than thrilled and flattered if, say, a six year-old girl drew some pictures of Dahlia and Daisy and put them online. If someone wrote erotic fan fic about the characters, again I think I would regard that as a kind of homage and tribute, though personally I wouldn't see it as part of *MSCSI* canon.

I have deliberately chosen (up to this point) to make no profit for myself from *MSCSI*, and to donate my cut of the money to appropriate women's charities, so I would feel something had gone wrong if someone else was making a profit from the work, the world and its characters, without permission and approval.

The only other form of derivative work that would concern me would be, for instance, fan art depicting Cat being sexually assaulted or in pornographic poses, or racist images of Connie. I am very much open to the idea of texts in a dynamic, dialogic matrix of borrowing and cross-reference, so the concept of people deriving their own stories from mine is fine, but I would be unhappy with transformative work that seems to violate the political intentions of *MSCSI*.

I think in that case, I would have the absolute ethical right to enter a dialogue with the creators and request that they removed the art, explaining why I was uncomfortable with it.

Beyond that – if they refused – I honestly don't know what my legal rights are at this point. I am still much more a scholar than a business operator, but I guess I would have to learn what options were available to me, and exercise them as appropriate.

BJ &LB: *What future work do you have planned? How do you hope* MSCSI *will develop?*

WB: MSCSI is planned as a three-volume story, each volume consisting of five episodes. I have written the first five, closely plotted the second five and loosely outlined the third.

That would make up the 'Cat trilogy', concluding her particular character arc and narrative, and while there are doubtless more stories to tell about her, I think that is where I'd leave her for a while.

There's also a lot of potential for one-shots about the supporting cast – I have planned a few of those, each centering on a particular couple of characters – and Suze Shore had the neat idea of drawing very short gag strips, little light-hearted mini-episodes about Urbanite.

MSCSI is really an exercise in world-building, rather than just telling a single story. It is not consciously shaped by any 'rules' for cross-platform narratives, but inevitably it's informed by what I've learned from studying popular texts and reading other people's scholarship about them.

We already have a Facebook page with about 1200 fans, a Twitter account (@cat_abi_daniels) with over 500 followers, and a lively discussion board. We've created and distributed bonus deleted scenes, and commissioned a music vid of issue 1 that earned praise from the featured band, Throwing Muses. Badges and t-shirts for fans to wear at conventions, *MSCSI* mugs for people's offices and the possibility of people cosplaying the *MSCSI* characters are all ideas we are keen to encourage or implement even at this early stage.

Rather than cynically trying to construct this as a 'convergence culture' text from the ground up, I think we are simply aware that this mode of cross-platform storytelling would suit the project, and we are very open to creating or supporting those opportunities.

I am going to carry on my more traditional academic work, and may find a way to write a scholarly article that reflects on and incorporates the creative work of *MSCSI*. I see them currently as quite distinct approaches with some overlap, rather than two sides of the same approach, but I'd be interested to see if I can integrate the two of them more closely in future.

Looking ahead in fan studies

BJ &LB: *This special issue of* Participations *focusing on the Fan Studies Network is intended to foster collaboration between scholars and reflect on the current state of the fan studies field. How do you perceive its current form? For example, do you feel that social media has changed much, for both fans and fan scholars? Subsequently, how has this shaped how* MSCSI *is marketed to audiences?*

WB: I don't feel I am located specifically within fan studies. My recent work does discuss fans, but as part of a broader dialogic network – they are one term in the bigger 'matrix' that also includes previous texts, cultural contexts, spin-offs, parodies, adaptations, journalistic discourses, casual audiences, institutional frameworks and authorial intention. 'Fans' are a subset of 'audience', and 'audience' is just a part of what I am interested in.

Similarly, I don't identify particularly as a fan scholar or aca-fan. I think in this respect my feelings have changed since (say) ten years ago, when I wrote *Using the Force*. At that

juncture, there was perhaps more of a perceived need to address and acknowledge one's own investment in a popular franchise – as a defensive measure, as there was a seeming requirement to justify and assertively 'own' the fact that you'd written about something popular, and a strategic measure in that you had to assure the fans you were studying that you were 'one of them' and wouldn't misrepresent them. I don't think either of those measures are quite so necessary any more, as the study of popular texts and their passionate audiences has (I think) become more established academically over the past decade.

I don't personally feel that this approach should now need to come with such a set of disclaimers and self-reflective examinations. For me to declare 'I am a Batman aca-fan' at the start of a book should be as unnecessary as a Joycean scholar announcing that she is a fan of Irish literature, on the first page of a book about *Ulysses*. That you have an enthusiastic engagement in the subject is surely implicit in the fact that you write extensively about it, and that you are an expert is surely demonstrated by the level of detail and accuracy in your writing.

Essentially, I think the same should apply to popular culture as it does to more traditional forms of culture such as literary fiction and 16th century poetry. I wouldn't expect a scholarly book about Shakespeare to open with an autobiographical section about the author's experiences of reading Shakespeare at school, and an admission that 'as a straight man, I love Shakespeare'. It remains useful and valid to foreground your fan identity and personal experience as a fan if you are actively analysing your own engagement and using yourself as an object of enquiry, a case study to be rigorously interrogated – I think Matt Hills' examination of his own lifetime passions in *Fan Cultures* is a good example of this approach carried through valuably, without self-indulgence.

But I think the idea of identifying oneself as an academic who likes the stuff they are studying - which is what 'fan-scholar' seems to mean – is now less necessary, and even perhaps redundant, like an academic trend from the 90s and early 2000s. I think it may have been a symptom of an approach in the process of proving itself, finding itself and establishing itself.

On the other hand, it's easy for me to say that, because I did all that confessional business in my first three monographs between 2000 and 2003, and have got it out of my system. I wouldn't tell anyone else what to do.

Reading *MSCSI*

My So-Called Secret Identity is currently on Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/MySoCalledSecretIdentity) and Twitter (@cat_abi_daniels) as well as its dedicated website: www.mysocalledsecretidentity.com, which also includes sketches, designs and behind-the-scenes notes. Issue 1 will be online permanently, for free while subsequent issues will be funded by donations through the site (a suggested $5 minimum, with original art and other rewards for larger gifts). The money pays for the artists' fees and a proportion is then donated to a women's charity — for issues 4 and 5, the

team are funding www.awayout.co.uk, an outreach charity for women and young people. Brooker takes no profit from the project.

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