

introduction

116 | discovering paradise islands: the politics and pleasures of feminist utopias, a conversation

Ramzi Fawaz, Justin Hall and Helen M. Kinsella

Helen: Welcome and thank you for joining in this conversation. Let me say a few brief words by way of introduction. I am an associate professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the author of *The Image Before the Weapon: A Critical History of the Distinction between Combatant and Civilian* (Kinsella, 2011), as well as articles on contemporary political theory, feminist theories, international law, gender and armed conflict. I am currently at work on a second book analysing the role of sleep in war. Ramzi Fawaz is an assistant professor of English at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He is the author of *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (2016), as well as numerous articles on queer and feminist cultural politics. Ramzi is currently at work on a new book, *Queer Forms*, which explores the aesthetic innovations that took shape in 1970s American popular culture as a response to new conceptions of gender and sexuality emerging from the movements for women’s and gay liberation. Justin Hall, an assistant professor of Comics at the California College of the Arts and a Fulbright Scholar, is the creator of the comic book series *True Travel Tales* (2002), *Hard to Swallow* (with Dave Davenport, 2006) and *Glamazonia* (2010). He is also the editor of *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics* (2012), as well as the creator of a forthcoming feature-length documentary about its production. Ramzi and Justin are two pre-eminent scholars and historians of comics and their place in contemporary culture. We all would like to thank Margaret A. Miller for her invaluable assistance in curating this conversation.

This conversation took place in August 2016, before the release of the film *Wonder Woman* (2017). However, Ramzi Fawaz’s (2017) review in *The Los Angeles Review of Books* is available at: <http://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2017/07/16/notes-on-wonder-woman/>.

Among the many commonalities that I see in your creative works is the central role that fantasy plays in the construction of the narrative. Fantasy is, of course, a complex concept, but I draw here from the feminist theorist Joan Scott (2011, p. xx), who describes fantasy as not only the 'setting for desire' but also as that which 'reproduces and masks conflict ... and contradiction'. It does so by allowing for or producing our own sense of narrative coherence, even while continually disrupting that coherence. For me, these elements of desire, conflict and narrative coherency (of self or of history) are found within the utopian/dystopian genre—are they for you?

Ramzi: I believe that utopia in all its forms—whether conceived of as a distinct literary genre, an affective impulse or desire, or a fully formed blueprint of an ideal or perfected world—requires fantasy as its conceptual engine. In my scholarship on popular fantasy genres, like superhero comics and Afrofuturist cinema, I conceive of fantasy as a faculty of the imagination or a creative capacity that allows one to take cognitive leaps in order to conceive of the world otherwise. This view of fantasy veers away from traditional Marxist or psychoanalytic approaches, which tend to view fantasy as either pure ideology—that is, a set of fabricated or socially constructed stories we tell to smooth over the real conditions of our existence—or psychic scenarios that allow us to cope with the traumatic psychological costs of oppressive familial and social structures. While I certainly agree with Scott that fantasy can both set the stage for a range of desires and simultaneously reproduce or 'mask conflict ... and contradiction', I tend to stress the component of fantasy that is about the innovation or invention of something new, or the articulation of seemingly impossible desires, identities or ways of life in terms that are legible to others and yet have the potential to jolt one out of habituated modes of thinking and seeing. In this sense, I build on the work of a range of feminist political and cultural theorists, including Donna Haraway, Linda Zerilli and Jane Bennett, who have all in different ways understood fantasy as a cognitive faculty that inaugurates new conceptions of the self and one's social relationships.

Fantasy then, might be understood as a distinct way of thinking that actively places current norms, assumptions and frameworks into novel or surprising contexts so that we might see the world anew. This is why fantasy as a popular *genre* (rather than as a cognitive faculty or capacity) is often populated by seemingly impossible phenomena, including magic, time travel, ghosts and hauntings, body morphing, and the animation of objects, among countless other enchanting (and sometimes terrifying) 'unrealities'. These kinds of impossible happenings exist at such a radical remove from ordinary life that they can simultaneously reveal to us the enchanted or wondrous elements of our everyday world and provide something that stands totally outside of that world and hence requires us to re-evaluate or rethink what counts as possible or viable under present conditions.

For me the usefulness or efficacy of a concept like utopia has never been that it stands in for a coherent or fully realised 'perfect' world (what Frederic Jameson [2005] terms the 'utopian program' or 'blueprint'). Rather, it represents the potential outcome of *fantasising as a creative practice*, whereby we take intellectual leaps of the imagination by conceiving how the world might look differently if this or that element of it was radically transformed. In Jameson's (*ibid.*, p. XX) magisterial reconsideration of utopia as a political weapon for dialectical critique, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, he calls on readers to conceive of utopia within a framework that he calls 'the future as disruption'. In this model, our very ability to imagine the world differently makes the future itself a recurrent interference pattern that jolts, scatters or disorganises present logics in the hopes of

producing an altered horizon of possibility. This is by no means the only or singularly political use of utopia, but it is an especially potent one. It seems to me that productive 'disruption' necessarily requires the ability to fantasise, which is not simply speculating about or projecting into an unknown future but actually bringing into being that which did not previously exist.

Helen: Ramzi, you introduce an orthogonal, rather than sequential, temporality. This, I think, we see in speculative fiction where time is made to bend back on itself, so to speak, passing in different measures and tempos, most often against narrative teleology or realism. Yet, perhaps paradoxically and perhaps not, time is often conceived of in terms of generations. (I am thinking of Octavia Butler's [2004] use of time travel and supernatural possession, but in regard to US chattel slavery and its reproduction.)

Justin: There are also profound generational differences in the act of conceiving of fantasy and utopia. While I agree with Ramzi that a utopian vision represents a more profound break with the present world than most speculative fiction, one generation's utopia can still only truly make sense when read within its own cultural context. Returning to Joan Scott's (2011) description of fantasy that you brought up, I think immediately of the comics of Tom of Finland (for a collection of his works, see Hanson, Fritz and Koop, eds., 2005), as well as the reactions to his work by later generations of both producers and consumers of queer art. 'Tom of Finland' was the pseudonym for the Finnish artist Touko Laaksonen (1920–1991), who began creating gay, pornographic, sequential art in 1965, publishing and distributing the work illegally in Europe and abroad. From 1968 to 1986 he produced twenty-six booklets featuring his character Kake (the name means 'butch' in Finnish). They were wordless comics, expressive works of arts, and the first LGBTQ comics in the modern sense of the words. They postulated a world in which there were essentially no women, and all the men loved sex with other men. Furthermore, the men were all hot, splendidly endowed and ready to go. While there are depictions of violence and what appears to be rape, these comics present a fantastical, consensual dominance play that is celebratory and joyful. I want to underscore the politics of such portrayal and how significant it is to recognise that this violence is only one of the 'settings for desire'. And it exists, in part, because of a second 'setting for desire': a homophobic, closeted society.

It's really a remarkable thing. Prior to this work, gay men were viewed through a vaudevillian lens and, if not depicted as freaks, were portrayed as tragic, effete creatures destined for dreadful deaths. Tom of Finland created this vibrant and vital gay utopia where the men are all incredibly masculine, magnetic and powerful. It's a masculine utopia for homosexuals who were decidedly not pathological or ashamed. To draw and circulate these images, and the potential they capture, was an incredibly radical proposition at a time when it was not only nearly inconceivable culturally and visually, it was legally prohibited to own, distribute and sell such works.

Tom essentially created the gay-leather aesthetic, drawing inspiration from policemen, labourers and bikers, but also the military and, specifically, the Nazis. This is yet a third setting for desire, as Tom was obsessed with the German soldiers of his youth and their uniforms (which were, after all, produced by Hugo Boss!). Indeed, certain Nazi stylings can still be found in leather-men outfits today and are associated with a certain kind of hyper-masculinity. His imagery and aesthetic for masculine gay men remains, and it has been very hard to get out of the shadow of Tom of Finland. It is only recently that we are seeing different aesthetics of queer masculinity, fetishism and eroticism being presented.

Tom's settings for desire are different from that of current gay erotic comics in large part because of changing political needs and sensibilities. Tom eroticised the German soldiers of his youth, which seems distasteful now, but also responded to the lack of joyful images of gay sexuality by creating a utopian vision of male desire, which is not as groundbreaking and necessary now as it was then. The subsequent generational attitude shift is exemplified in the work of G.B. Jones, the punk zinester, filmmaker and musician who created the art series *Tom Girls* (1985–1991) as a lesbian feminist reworking of Tom of Finland's drawings; she paid homage to Tom's work at the same time that she subverted it in the context of her own generation's queer politics and values.

Helen: Justin, what I think this example does—in addition to helping us sort through the meanings and contexts of these different settings for desire—is also to encourage us to grapple with the second element of Scott's definition of fantasy, namely its relationship to conflict. One could read Tom of Finland as offering a utopia free of conflict and, indeed, one in which certain forms of conflict (e.g. National Socialism) are not masked or neutered but are invoked within it as desirable and pleasurable. Or better, perhaps it helps us to ask further about the relationship between fantasy and conflict.

Ramzi: If we understand utopia, and the capacity for fantasising that it requires, as a kind of disruption of present logics, then it necessarily invites conflict—not only conflict between the world as it is and as it could be but also between competing or incommensurate utopian visions in any give historical moment or across time. Fantasy can also be a space for testing out the social, cultural and political effects of conflicting ideas around what constitutes a truly 'better' or more desirable world—or even the very idea of what counts as the collective good. This is beautifully modeled in Joanna Russ' feminist science fiction novel *The Female Man* (1975), which posits a utopian ideal of alliances between women in the *very failure* of any single utopian vision, blueprint or plan for women's social and political bonds to dominate feminist thought. In other words, the novel sees the embrace of conflict, disagreement and difference between women as itself a utopian response to feminist attempts to posit the category of 'Woman' as a universally shared label (ironically, this very desire to unify women under a single category is itself utopian in the sense of being a wish-fulfillment for conflict-free relations between women).

In the novel, four women from different versions of Earth (which exist in parallel dimensions) find themselves slipping into one another's realities for reasons they initially cannot explain. The women come from radically different timelines including: one in which all men have been extinct for more than 10,000 years; another in which the Great Depression never ended; and another that appears very much like the American 1970s, with its sexual revolution and budding feminist movement. Near the conclusion of the text, we learn that the women—Janet, Jeannine, Joanna (presumably a fictionalised version of Russ herself) and Jael—are technically the same woman, or least share the same genetic line in four alternate dimensions. Yet, as Donna Haraway (1985) underscores in her classic essay 'A manifesto for cyborgs', far from producing a unified identity, or making a so-called 'complete' woman out of these different 'versions' of the same genetic specimen, the four J's find themselves at odds about nearly everything.

Rather than producing fusion then, their encounters proliferate endless fission: between them multiply differences of political outlook, affective orientation, aesthetic and erotic tastes, and gender expression, to name a few. It turns out that Jael, the fourth J, comes from a future Earth where men and women have been in a seemingly interminable war that has led to a stalemate. She has used advanced inter-

dimensional-travel technology to collate other versions of herself in order to ask their advice on how the people of her world might move beyond this violent impasse. In one of the book's revelatory denouements, Jael informs the morally superior Janet, who comes from an all-female Earth in which it is claimed that men simply went extinct, that her version of Earth actually represents one outcome of the war taking place in Jael's dimension. Jael implies that on Janet's world, women genocidally wiped out men 10,000 years before and eliminated all traces of their violence in order to give the impression that their current utopia sprang organically from the natural extinction of men from an incurable disease.

The revelation stresses that all utopias that are based on eliminating conflict, difference or dissensus come at an exceptionally steep price—usually large-scale violence—and that women, no more or less than men, are also active agents in history who must take responsibility for their political longings, including the desire to create the seemingly universal category of 'Woman', even if it means exterminating everyone who cannot be subsumed within this term. If, as Justin points out, gay male erotic utopias like those imagined by Tom of Finland respond to homophobic discourses that paint gay men as unhappy, pathological and deviant by presenting a seemingly conflict-free realm of libidinal pleasure, narratives like Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* respond to left-wing utopian visions of unity among oppressed groups, such as women, by imagining how differences *between* women might be highlighted as productive political resources rather than as impediments to collective action.

This concept is vividly on display in contemporary intersectional feminist and queer cultural production, which consistently represents a utopian desire for our society to adequately recognise and develop substantive responses to real-life heterogeneity and to account for or thickly describe the complexity of a variety of lived experiences of gender, race, sexuality, disability, class and countless other social positions. In this vein, we might think of the Wachowski sisters' epic fantasy television series *Sens8* (2015–present), which follows the increasingly interconnected lives of eight people (each living in a different global city from Mumbai to San Francisco) who form a psychic cluster; the series' eight heroes share a telepathic rapport that crosses continents, allowing them to exchange memories, skills, feelings and sensations, as well as 'visit' with one another by projecting their presence elsewhere. We might also consider in this category J.J. Abrams's monumentally successful television series *Lost* (2004–2010), a fantasy-adventure narrative that follows the trials of a dwindling group of survivors from a trans-Pacific airplane crash trapped on a mysterious time-traveling island.

Both *Sens8* and *Lost* respond to one of the most potent and troubling realities of contemporary life: the fact that globalisation simultaneously interlinks vastly different people across the planet through satellite communications technology, international travel, the internet and global consumerism, while at the same time it keeps us intensely isolated from the very people whose lives, experiences and identities we encounter through mass media and commodity culture. In these shows, fantasy in the form of telepathic rappings and time travel, highlights or makes visible the kinds of bonds that people are capable of forging (or perhaps have already forged through digital encounters rather than face-to-face rapport) in a globalised world, but often fail to pursue because of the demand of neo-liberal capitalism to prioritise individual self-interest. Far from smoothing over or making invisible conflicts between people unevenly distributed across the social field, these television series attempt to render the rich complexity of real-world social and political relations between seemingly disparate individuals by directly

representing each character entering the lives of people from vastly different ethnic and racial backgrounds, religious beliefs, gender and sexual identities, aesthetic tastes, and political commitments.

Helen: I am glad you brought this up—I want to touch on two things in these examples. One, of course, is the wrestling with temporality (which appears to be one of our leitmotifs). The concept of thinking *outside* the present moment may be motivated by the contemporary moment, while seeking confirmation for non-normative individual and collective existence *in* the contemporary moment. On the one hand, this move seems to confirm, as Donna Haraway (1991, p. 149) suggests, that ‘the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion’. But on the other hand, I am well aware of the problem that Russ (1981) first identified—namely, the tendency to create a ‘galactic suburbia’ in which conventional, traditional narratives of race, gender and sex are merely *placed in* the future, rather than *rethought as* our future. What is your sense of this tension?

Justin: ‘Galactic suburbia’ is a great way to phrase it! And it’s one of my frustrations with so much speculative fiction in comics. I’m thinking of Naoki Urasawa’s *Pluto* (2003), which was a grittier reworking of one of Osamu Tezuka’s most famous ‘Astro Boy’ (1952–1968) storylines. While Urasawa’s reimagining is decidedly more adult than Tezuka’s original work, the gender roles are infuriatingly old-fashioned. He postulates a world of robotic AI where the ‘female’ robots want families and can sense emotions, while the ‘male’ robots are fighters and detectives. Compare this to *Oh Human Star* (2012), Blue Delliquanti’s comics series that also imagines a future of robotic AI integrated with humans, but which is much more sophisticated about how gender and sexuality might play out in such a landscape. The protagonist Alastair wakes up in an artificial body created by his partner Brendan, to realise that Brendan has also created a second, female body for Alastair’s consciousness. This is an example of queer feminist cartoonists thinking in more sophisticated ways about the future than their straight male counterparts. While identity doesn’t have to define creative output (after all, some of the best queer comics have been made by cis straight people, such as Alan Moore, Donna Barr and Gilbert Hernandez), personal politics can certainly trigger a more expansive and subversive imagination—which is what we need to break out of galactic suburbia!

I’d like to bring up the generational issue again, though. We’re talking about the ability to rethink identity narratives in speculative futures as opposed to simply replicating old tropes, and I would argue that this is impossible without first covering basic representation and visibility. This was certainly the first project in what I would call literary (as opposed to erotic or gag strip) LGBTQ comics, and it continues in all of the slice-of-life, journalism and memoir comics on the shelves and on the web to this day. Alison Bechdel (2008 [1987–2008], p. xv), when writing about creating her strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, said that she had set out to ‘make lesbians visible’. Queer cartoonists had to shout, ‘Hey, we exist in this world!’ before we could imagine other worlds. Mind you, there was major speculative fiction done in queer comics as early as Roberta Gregory’s remarkable *Winging It* (1988), but even she started out with slice-of-life and memoir comics in *Dynamite Damsels* (1976). I would say that the majority of the work from the 1960s to the 2000s was about visibility and representation. Mind you, there was a lot of variation in theme and content within that project, from the early underground comix coming-out stories, to the punk zines that questioned mainstream gay culture as much as the hetero world, to the emergence of trans and non-binary comics.

There’s been a real explosion of queer comics in the last five years or so—often taking place on the web or fueled by crowd-sourced funding—that is about imagining a more inclusive future, a more dynamic

future, a queerer and more feminist future. You see it in collections like the *Beyond* anthology (Monster and Stotts, eds., 2015), which is all LGBTQ sci-fi. Here's a quote from their mission statement:

In both sci-fi and fantasy and comics there is a long history of allegorical and implied queerness—using the trappings of genre to code characters and themes as queer while keeping them superficially straight enough to not make waves, or queering them in ways tied to their general otherness (like gender-flexible shapeshifters or gay aliens from single-sex species). Queer representation is better now than it was in even the recent past, but **we want more**. We want to see people like us as heroes—slaying dragons, piloting spaceships, getting into trouble, and saving the day—without having to read their queerness from between the lines. (Monster, 2013)

As you can see, they're bringing the project of visibility and representation into speculative genres.

Helen: Justin, you're so right to bring representation and visibility to the fore. It's also another way in which past/present/future inform one another—namely, how particular individuals and collectives come into sight as both actual and potential and, in turn, create what Ursula K. Le Guin (2001 [1985]) called an 'archaeology of the future'. The way I understand that phrase is as gesturing towards the diffuseness of temporality, refusing a linear one.

Ramzi: Since any utopia or utopian project is always conceived of in relation to a particular historical moment—that is, as a response to what is happening in a specific place and time—utopias do not unfold in a linear succession but rather accumulate or expand in number. In other words, every historical moment incites the production of numerous utopian projects rather than extending a single larger project with a clearly defined telos or endpoint. Individual utopias or utopian projects may aspire to a linear or sequential movement toward certain social, political or cultural ideals—a world without pollution, a time after capitalism, the dismantling of the nation state or the development of an interplanetary United Nations, among others—but the actual production of utopian fantasies or visions is itself never an orderly, linear practice. Rather, the invention of utopias can more accurately be understood as a ceaseless accumulation of ideas, experiments and possibilities projected into an indefinite future.

The 'generation' is an important category of analysis when considering utopias, because a generation is composed of numerous disparate individuals who nonetheless have a widely shared experience of historical events or phenomena to which other cohorts of humans before or after will never have full access. This means that those utopian visions that become popular, widely shared or taken up by a given generation are symptomatic of the aspirations, world views and investments of a wide swathe of people at any one moment. For example, the generation we call 'Millennials' have never experienced a world without digital cultures; they are also a cohort of humans who have lived during the ascendance of global climate change and understand the fundamental shaping order of American global politics to be 'the war on terror', not the Cold War as it was for the Baby Boomers. Even a single generation before the Millennials can remember a world without the internet or with the American fight against global Communism. The very distinctness of this generational experience not only means that Millennials have shared historical coordinates but also a general (or generalisable) affective or emotional orientation towards those coordinates. This is, of course, what the great cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1977) called the 'structure of feeling' that organises the worldview or outlook of a given generation.

So, for instance, the generation of Americans who lived through the Great Depression shared a certain kind of affective experience of collective life, including an intense sense of class consciousness, a commitment to anti-fascism, and a belief in the power of government to act as a check on unrestrained capitalism. These beliefs are what allowed the Depression-era generation to invest in the utopian promise of a large-scale political project like the New Deal. This is not to say that generations can't share or mutually invest in various utopian visions, but that the utopian visions of each generation will be distinct to the conditions of their existence. And that's why utopia is always a moving target, rather than a single fixed outcome that is the product of a linear progression.

Helen: Ramzi, when you speak of the utopian vision of each generation, it occurs to me that feminist science fiction of the early 1960s and 1970s did have a common utopian vision—namely, that of separatism. This was certainly in relation to feminist theorising and politics of the time, although separatism has a longer history, of course. Has the condition of our times made that no longer possible? I am thinking of who and how one would be separatist, along which lines or elements of identity and form? It appears to me that our grasp of intersectionality makes the predicate for separatism more challenging.

Justin: So how do you think the current generation approaches it? You don't see separatist fantasies such as Tom of Finland's, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (2001 [1915]), or even Wonder Woman's Paradise Island (Marston, 1998 [1941]) anymore. Those earlier creators had to eliminate all the people who were oppressing them in order to create a utopian life, a utopian world. I don't see that so much anymore. Rather, I see an embracing of different kinds of people, of intersectionality and difference.

Ramzi: There are, of course, numerous kinds of separatism across a vast range of political leanings: everything from the most conservative forms of white nationalism and fundamentalist religious cults to the most egalitarian hippy communes or radical lesbian farms and intentional living communities. At base, separatism implies a wilful, collectively enacted division of a single group from a larger society with the interest of materialising shared political goals and, in some instances, developing a self-sustaining autonomous community. The concept of separatism can be seen as utopian in a number of ways, including the wish to live, work and socialise among people who share a common identity, political values, lineage or worldview; to distance oneself from violent, oppressive or unequal elements of a larger society that seem deleterious to human progress and health; and to bring into being a fully functioning alternative social world.

In the 1970s, various factions of the radical left became invested in separatism as a conceptual tool to deal with seemingly intractable systems of oppression such as patriarchy, homophobia and racism. For some, it was enough to organise political cells or living collectives that met in living rooms and community centers. For others, including some radical lesbian feminists, true separatism required the development of a fully autonomous society composed of communes, systems of barter and exchange, and communications networks that would allow women-identified women to live wholly outside the normative structures of American society.

In this period, separatism became a powerful framework for collective action on the left, because it articulated the need of oppressed people like women, ethnic and racial minorities, queer folk and others to share their experiences, pool resources for their mutual flourishing, and imagine what the world might be like if they were surrounded by others like themselves. Among radical feminists, separatism was an attempt to understand exactly what women might be like in the absence of patriarchal domination and

incessant comparisons to men. Outside of political action groups, coffee klatches and consciousness-raising groups, women in the modern US had never had the opportunity to live autonomously from men in any substantive way. In this sense, separatism was a truly radical thought experiment in how social relationships could be reconstituted outside dominant systems of power.

One aspect of separatism that no longer fits within contemporary intersectional feminist politics and theory is its essentialism. Most separatisms, including those of the radical feminist left in the 1970s, assume that a community can be forged out of a singularly shared identity understood and experienced in the same way by all its members. As Justin has pointed out, this idea is simply no longer tenable within the framework of a postmodern left politics that embraces difference and where a range of liberal values like inclusion and diversity stand at the core of our programme. But there is another component to separatism that lives on powerfully in our contemporary politics: the goal of either physically or conceptually separating oneself from larger structures of domination and oppression. An intersectional politics might decry the narrow essentialism of separatist thinking (and it may point out the unrealistic, if not wholly undesirable, outcome of a monolithic, conflict-free community attempting to live autonomously in an increasingly diverse world). Yet that same politics cannot so easily dispense with the necessary cognitive practice of separating oneself from entrenched logics, structures and institutions of power in order to think more clearly about strategies for dismantling or reforming them.

This was the central utopian project of feminist consciousness-raising in the 1970s, which established the utopian idea that one could, even for a brief time, separate oneself from the violent weight of patriarchy, misogyny and sexism by sitting in a room with other women and engaging in dynamic dialogue about shared experiences of oppression. While forging bonds of solidarity through conversation, this practice was intended to encourage women to develop political concepts and concrete actions to combat patriarchy. The same thing is true of Black Nationalism and its creative counterpart, Afrofuturism, a subgenre of science fiction that concerns itself with African Americans' uses of advanced science and technology for their own social and political uplift. Taken together, Black Nationalism and Afrofuturism comprised a political vision and aesthetic genre built around the idea of African Americans producing their own self-sustaining social worlds, or else imaginatively settling on another planet, in order to divest themselves of the psychic and social costs of white supremacy, racism and imperialism.

All of this is to say that while separatism appears to have gone out of vogue as a viable political project in our current moment, which valorises inclusion and alliances across difference, separatism remains an exceptionally useful thought experiment for conceiving of forms of life divested of institutional and structural oppression. Just as the essentialism of classic forms of left separatism is ultimately untenable, so too a contemporary form of essentialising around the fantasy of universal inclusion is just as problematic. When we make inclusion the core of all of our politics, as some intersectional and contemporary queer politics do, we lose the value of distinction or the potential insights and pleasures that might be gleaned from carving out distinct spaces for various identity groups, even if those spaces are provisional or open to reorganisation.

Justin: I will bring in Wonder Woman here (Marston, 1998 [1941]). It is interesting to think of the creation of Paradise Island as a traditional separatist utopia, along the lines you're describing, Ramzi. Wonder Woman's creator and outspoken feminist, William Moulton Marston, made it very clear that the Amazons

were running a society better than men ever could, away from patriarchal oppression. Even though it was a monarchy ruled by a queen, it was perfectly conceived with love and wisdom, honouring Aphrodite and Athena. The Amazons were required by Athena to wear the old shackles they had received from Hercules' army, however, to remind them of 'man's duplicity'. These shackles are called the 'bracelets of submission', but were also used to deflect bullets; they are symbols of oppression and slavery reclaimed by the Amazons as items of humility but also of power and defense.

The way in which the comics industry has approached that material has shifted since Marston's death in 1947. In 1987, they renamed the Amazon's home 'Themyscira' because they thought 'Paradise Island' was a little too goofy. In *The New 52* (Berganza and Harras, 2011–2016) reboot of the DC universe in 2011, the Amazons are much more violent and morally problematic: they scour the seas to rape male sailors in order to produce babies; they keep the girls, who grow up into the next generation of Amazons; and they use the boys as coins in bartering for weapons with Hephaestus. The origin of Wonder Woman herself was also changed in this version. The original origin story is a powerful tale of a female virgin birth; Hippolyta wants a child, so she creates a statue of a girl baby from the clay of Paradise Island into which the deities of Olympus breathe life and power. In *The New 52*, that is all a myth Hippolyta creates to deflect Hera's jealousy, because Zeus is actually Wonder Woman's father. All of this is in flux again in the current Wonder Woman run, in which it is finally openly acknowledged that the Amazons have sexual and romantic relations with each other. We can see how Marston's original separatist utopia has changed as it has been passed along through decades of comics creators.

Helen: Your exchange touches on another trend in feminist theorising: queer and feminist theory may have been first understood synergistically, but they are now often posed in rather brute opposition (e.g. queer is about sex, feminism is about gender). Do you pick up on that tension in comics?

Justin: I would say no; with this generation of comic creators there is actually more synergy. For example, *The Big Feminist But* (Bell, Lust and Brown, eds., 2014), a recent feminist comics anthology, includes queer creators of all stripes in it, while some of the earlier women's anthologies such as *Twisted Sisters* (Noomin, ed., 1991) did not. Literary queer comics did, however, begin in feminist underground comix, with Trina Robbins' (2016 [1972]) three-page story 'Sandy comes out' in the first issue of the *Wimmen's Comix* series. The story was based upon and partly written by Sandy Crumb, the sister of the famous cartoonist Robert Crumb. She had left her husband with her baby and moved into her brother's place in 1969; Robbins heard that she was having problems there and asked Sandy to be her roommate. They became friends, but after Sandy came out of the closet she moved into a gay hippy commune in the Haight Ashbury neighbourhood of San Francisco. Robbins created 'Sandy comes out' about Sandy Crumb's experiences, even though she herself was straight. Of course, this was an earlier era of identity politics, and Mary Wings, a young artist living in Oregon at the time, read the story and was incensed that a straight woman should create the first lesbian coming-out story in comics. So Wings made the world's first lesbian comic book, *Come Out Comix* (1974), photocopying and stapling it in the basement of a radical women's karate cooperative and selling it by mail order for a dollar. It was pretty raw, but it was earnest! Wings went on to make better comics, but then she left the art form to write the first lesbian detective novels. Now, Wings and Robbins are good friends.

So here we see the opposite happening from what you were describing, Helen. Synergies were more difficult earlier in comics and have become easier. And the current generation—third-wave feminists who

grew up with punk and RiotGrrrl—understand that gender is not binary. They understand that you have to include trans and non-binary people when talking about feminism. They understand race and class when talking about feminism. They understand all of this like it's in their blood.

Helen: And, yet, there is that fascinating *Guardian* article, which pointed out that 'speculative fiction publishing is plagued by "structural, institutional, personal, universal" racism, according to a new report that found less than 2% of more than 2000 SF stories published last year were by black writers' (Flood, 2016). In that article, Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor is quoted as follows: 'Hell, this is a large part of why I started writing ... because as a reader I wasn't seeing the stories I wanted to read, the characters I wanted to read, the dearth of diversity' (*ibid.*). I am also thinking of andré m. carrington's book *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (2016), which, in one way, theorises the relationship of blackness to speculative fiction as survival.

Justin: I'll just say that there are both authors and industry at issue. Le Guin was very clear that her science fiction futures and also her fantasy realities were dominated by people of colour—that they were representative of the real world, in which most people are not white. So she was furious when her *Earthsea* trilogy (Le Guin, 1977) was adapted into film and had nearly all white actors (*Earthsea*, 2004). She said that the cast should have been almost entirely brown and black. And even though Octavia Butler's (1987) main characters were black women, the original publications of her science fiction books had white women on the covers.

Helen: In the introduction to *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, editor Sheree R. Thomas (2001, p. 15) wrote, 'For me, "science fiction" is the state of being black on the planet. Living, observing, exploring what it means to be human in times and spaces that clearly devalue that humanity'. So, perhaps we see utopia/dystopia as negotiations of survival—in which visibility and representation (as Justin first brought to our attention) are crucial.

Ramzi: Visibility and representation are indeed crucial, but so is the work of interpretation itself. As andré m. carrington (2016) brilliantly argues in *Speculative Blackness*, in an exceptionally white genre like science fiction, the actual presence of blackness or black bodies is necessarily a kind of speculation that minority readers can project into a text, thereby reading against its exclusions or omissions. carrington is trying, in part, to explain why African Americans have found science fiction so conceptually useful and so intensely entertaining and life-affirming when most of American SF stories exclude black bodies, lives and histories; in his framework, the interpretative work of fans is just as important as actual representations of African Americans in these texts. These fans understand that the limitations of the representations apparent on screen or in literary texts do not diminish the conceptual possibilities that science fiction offers as a genre.

Helen: These limitations and negotiations appear in multiple different forms, wherein the exclusions or omissions are not solely conceptual—nor are the challenges. Justin, your discussion of the commercial production and distribution of the work highlights the significance of economic systems and the need for a continual, careful critique of their operations. In teaching feminist theory, something that has always struck me is how collectives such as the Redstockings or the Combahee River Collective (1986) made this critique central to their liberation. The CRC statement states: 'We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and

imperialism as well as patriarchy' (*ibid.*). Jewelle Gomez and Octavia Butler, along with numerous others, continually remind us that slavery was an economic system upon which capitalism depended, and still does in particular and general form. Is this recognition of the political-economic systems central to contemporary speculative fiction? And if so, what is its relation to our discussions around race/gender/sex? Finally, to overburden these questions, surely such systems and environmental degradation are linked, no?

Justin: The idea of ecological fairness has been a part of feminist utopias for quite a while. Joan Slonczewski's *A Door Into Ocean* (1986), for example, is very much a critique of a patriarchal society that is not connected to nature. Even earlier than that, Gilman's *Herland* published in 1915 and Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1994 [1666]) back in 1666 have some ecological themes. But in general, utopian fiction tends to gloss over the difficult decisions on how to make things work economically. Pretty much across the board, feminist utopias have few if any classes and seemingly boundless resources. Paradise Island has a Queen, but everyone else—the scientists, hunters, warriors and artists—seem to be equal politically and economically. Everybody bows to Queen Hippolyta, but she is completely approachable.

This is true even in Tom of Finland's utopian vision, where you don't see class really play out except as a dominance fantasy. It's a very different attitude from the work of erotic artists like Gengoroh Tagame, whose *Pride* (2014 [2004–2005]) series, for example, examines the power dynamics in an American POW camp during World War II. His Japanese protagonist must trade sexual favours with the abusive American guards in exchange for food and medicines. The fact that he ultimately loves being a sexual slave is in tension with the very politically charged power dynamic in the camp, and it is completely different from Tom of Finland's more utopian approach to sexual role play. Regardless, if utopian visions are actually going to point the way towards political change, they may need to grapple with how labour is constructed in a perfect society. However, as Ramzi said earlier, utopian projects are really about radical imagination and not about the realities of political and economic transformation. Interestingly enough, dystopias seem more likely to think about labour, resources and economic realities. Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro's *Bitch Planet* (2015), which is a marvellous feminist sci-fi dystopian comic series that plays with 'girl-prison' exploitation tropes, certainly deploys these concepts.

There is one example of queer speculative fiction comics dealing directly with labour that I would like to mention. It's called 'The dragon slayer's son' (2015), a piece by the non-binary cartoonist Sfé Monster in the *Beyond* anthology I mentioned earlier. The protagonist is a trans boy named Brenn being raised by his mother, Eva, a trans woman who broke with her clan over gendered labour traditions: in their culture, men slay dragons and women do not, so Eva's decision to remain a dragon slayer after her transition meant her having to leave her clan. Now she is taking her son on his first dragon-slaying mission, where he will become a man. Brenn rebels against his mother's presumption, deciding not to kill the dragon in front of him. He says, 'I did not choose the way I was born a boy. But I can choose the way I become a man'. Monster is going after the concept of gendered labour, a very important project for second-wave feminism, but approaching it through the lens of queer theory as opposed to traditional feminist theory.

Ramzi: I find it difficult to critique feminist utopias for their failures to address class oppression, because after all, as Justin suggests, they are intended to be fantasies of *transcending* the conditions of capitalist economic exploitation. Feminist utopias like Gilman's *Herland* tend to present worlds where

capitalist competition, the unequal distribution of wealth, and the exploitation of bodies for labour are diminished or wholly eliminated through the institution of humane systems of communal exchange and sustainable practices of production and distribution of food, goods and labour. This is not so much an avoidance of dealing with the interlocking concerns of gender and class or economics as a way of rendering these issues in more egalitarian terms. There tends to be a consistent thread of ecological ethics running through feminist utopias, in part because of the association of women and their bodies with notions of organic wholeness and a seemingly innate female connection to planetary survival due to a presumed motherly instinct born of the capacity to reproduce (these are essentialist ideas held by a variety of feminist utopian writers, of course, but they drive a powerful ecological investment in many feminist utopias).

As Frederic Jameson (2005) reminds us, the paradigmatic example of utopian writing, Thomas More's *Utopia* (2014 [1516]), is an attempt to imagine a world without money or the organisation of a society around accumulated wealth. So it would make sense that, again as Justin suggested, feminist *dystopias* tend to be the place to look for extended meditations on the mutually reinforcing structures of gender, sexuality, and class or labour. But it's important to remember that radical feminist writers like Shulamith Firestone and Valerie Solanos always conceived of gendered oppression as highly classed and understood women's liberation as a project centrally tied to the overthrow of capitalism and the automation of all labour, including reproduction. It was Firestone (1972 [1970]) who famously argued that women's reproductive capacities was the foundational form of labour that provided the engine of capitalist economies, literally producing more viable living workers to feed this system. Firestone understood the ability of women to control their reproduction through the birth control pill to be a fundamental transformation in women's relationship to patriarchy, potentially offering them the most powerful tool to jam the machinery of capitalism and suspend the exploitation of their bodies for profit and the reproduction of the nuclear family. In a sense then, feminist utopian fiction often functions as a creative extension of these intellectual and theoretical critiques of the relationship between gender and sexual and class oppression—we might recall, for instance, that Gilman herself wrote a hugely popular study of the gendered division of labour in the modern US, titled *Women and Economics* (1994 [1898]) nearly fifteen years before publishing *Herland*.

Helen: This conversation reminds me of Wendy Brown's comment that the recent turn to intersectionality is taken too quickly as a solution for grasping identity. She writes, 'Intersectionality doesn't help us build theories of identity that reckon with those various kinds of powers and various kinds of histories, and in fact tends to elide them. It makes profoundly different subject-making powers close to equivalent. It abstracts from place, from history, and from particulars, and it tends to reify identity categories, and to make them transhistorical and even universal' (Cruz and Brown, 2016, p. 79). Would either of you agree?

Justin: I was just in the 'Gays in Comics' panel at ComicCon, which has been going on for about thirty years now. It's now called the 'Out in Comics' panel, thank god. I was sitting next to Magdalene Visaggio, an amazing trans-woman writer and the creator of the comic *Kim and Kim* (2016). And at one point she said, 'I am sick of cis, white, middle-aged men making all the characters. We should be representing ourselves, and trans women should be making trans characters'. I said, 'As a cis, white, middle-aged man ...' and she grabbed my arm and said, 'Oh my god, I meant to say straight also!' I replied, 'It's OK! I am absolutely a cis, white, middle-aged man. I am also gay, but that doesn't change my other categories'.

I then said that there are two projects that need to happen. One, we need to make sure that marginalised people are allowed their own voices. We need more creators from different backgrounds in comics, because they will explore diverse characters and themes from an insider's perspective. Trans creators need to be creating trans characters, without a doubt. The second project, though, is to exploit the transcendental potential of art and story and reach beyond our own lived experiences as creators in the same way we assume readers are able to reach beyond their own realities and identities. To be honest, if I thought this was impossible, I would lose all faith in art. I see this as a responsibility as well; I want to talk about my own crazy lived experience, but I also want to create stories of people who are radically different from me. In general, I want the worlds I create to mirror the diversity I experience around me in my life; not to do so would seem both dishonest and politically problematic. Of course, you have to do the homework when you're writing from a perspective different from your own. But it can and should be done.

Ramzi: The interactions you just described are symptomatic of the impasse that contemporary queer and feminist politics has reached around utopian thinking. That impasse might be described as a deep ambivalence between, on the one hand, a desire for widespread political, legal and social recognition of non-normative genders and sexualities (which requires concrete identities in whose names we seek to do justice) and, on the other, a desire to figure gender and sexuality as ceaselessly fluid, open-ended, mutable categories free from the limits of identity. In other words, we want our identity politics and our queer fluidity too. This demand for two seemingly incommensurate things often erupts in odd and contradictory frustrations, like the simultaneous demand for representational visibility of queer and gender transitive people and the claim that all such representations fail to capture the true complexity of these lives—or, as Justin experienced, the demand that all creative producers account for and represent a range of gendered and sexual experiences, alongside the suggestion that anyone who does not embody a specific sexual or gender identity does not have the license to speak from that experience.

I have been fascinated by this impasse, which informs my new book project, *Queer Forms*. In this book I argue that the utopian desire to expand the meanings, possibilities and definitions of gender and sexuality (a desire that has animated feminist and queer politics, activism, and intellectual thought for nearly five decades) also requires concrete representational forms or figures that can translate what it means to inhabit, experience or live gender and sexuality differently from one body to the next. This requires us to make use of cultural tools like art, literature, film, comics, theatre and other media to expand the range of figures or forms (in characters, narrative structures, metaphors and tropes) that can articulate varied experiences of gender and sexuality. This isn't just about representing more queer people or diversifying the field of characters (though it certainly includes that), but also developing innovative new formal structures through which we visualise, narrate or materialise these characters and their lived experiences.

Moreover, I suggest that this project must risk a certain provisional solidifying of every expression of gender and sexuality not as an identity but as an aesthetic form, figure or trope that can convey the affective force or sensory experience of what it means to be queer or non-normatively gendered in different contexts. That is to say, every time we offer up a representation of an alternative gender or sexuality, we are immediately excluding other ways of inhabiting these categories. If, as Joanna Russ

does in *The Female Man*, an author chooses to give shape to the problem of women's differences in the form of four white women from the same genetic line across multiple dimensions, that author has both given form to a particular feminist conflict and excluded other potent possibilities, such as four women from different ethno-racial backgrounds, or four trans women, or four women with completely different physiologies, etc. But that foreclosure is not permanent, and one might choose to narrate this story in a particular way in order to briefly and potently give shape to at least one such experience, which then demands a response in another representation, and another, and another. Giving concrete form to categories as seemingly heterogenous and expansive as gender and sexuality is often seen as intensely limiting.

Justin: And essentialist.

Ramzi: Indeed. Yet the problem is not with either pole—identity versus fluidity, lived experience versus representation—but with the fundamental misunderstanding of what is and isn't valuable about certain essentialist moves, including moments in which we give shape to distinct experiences of gender and sexuality, knowing in advance that the characters, figures, tropes or stories we use to do so will be limited. I think we need to become more generous and innovative in how we attempt to formally represent the experience of gender and sexual non-normativity, particularly by releasing the need for simple or direct representational expansiveness in terms of identities. This is undoubtedly important but not the limit-case for how creative production can help us translate or articulate different experiences of gender and sexuality.

Helen: The teaching of the older utopians is instructive in this regard. Even as I recognise the faults in their expression—e.g. the tendency to simply flip or invert patriarchy to matriarchy and to marshal a form of acceptable differences in pursuit of a unified society—I also insist upon their value. I do so because they mark a moment in which it became impossible to imagine politics without explicitly imagining women as necessary on their own terms.

Ramzi: I couldn't agree more. Justin has rightly mentioned Gilman's *Herland* a few times in this interview, and that text remains a touchstone for the kind of feminist utopian thinking you're describing. I recently taught *Herland* to a group of undergraduates in a course on community and belonging in twentieth-century US culture and politics. The book is famously the first fiction in US culture to explore the potential social and cultural structure of an all-female society. It is intriguingly narrated through the lens of a male scientist-adventurer who, along with his two companions, is among the first men to visit Herland in over 500 years. I asked students to suspend their judgments of the book as a viable blueprint of how the world could or should be—after all, the narrative implies that an ideal human society, as modeled by a highly advanced community of women, would be forged out of a single matrilineal genetic line and use eugenics as its primary tool for shaping a perfect world. The women of Herland live in a fully self-sustaining ecosystem in a remote mountain range, and they have carefully bred every species of plant and animal life (not to mention their own ability for asexual reproduction) to perfectly maintain their supply of food, control their population, and fulfill every necessity of daily life. This is not a vision one could easily assimilate to contemporary queer or feminist political standards (if at all), since it involves a

radical manipulation of the biological world and relies on a nearly homogenous population of like-minded citizens uniformly invested in maintaining the same social structure.

Instead of trying to critique the book within these terms, however, I wanted students to consider the book as a thought experiment. That is, I encouraged them to see the text as a work of fiction using utopian speculation shaped by ideas circulating in its own historical moment (eugenics, feminism, psychoanalysis, Darwinian thought, modern anthropology, etc.) to grapple with certain intractable problems in forging a feminist politics in the early twentieth century. For example, we dwelt on the fact that the book presents us with a deep contradiction that lies at the core of modern feminist thought. In her storytelling, Gilman makes an extremely compelling argument for the social construction of gender, showing how a society of women completely unaware of gender division would exhibit a vast range of traits commonly associated with men and, consequently, would not divide labour, intellectual pursuits, or cultural production along gendered lines. Yet Gilman also oddly reifies the biological divisions between men and women by making motherhood into a religion and depicting women as spiritually and physically bound together by their ability to reproduce. Rather than rail against the book for this contradiction, I asked students to explain why Gilman might simultaneously stress the social construction of gender *and* reassert the biological distinctness of women.

Approaching the novel from this perspective, students were able to make the keen observation that Gilman is struggling with the question of what might bind women together if they no longer are seen to share any essential gendered qualities. In other words, the book is trying to deal with an unexpected outcome of feminist thought itself: if you claim that gender is indeed a social construction, then what exactly binds women together outside of that category? Gilman claims reproduction as a universal binding category because she cannot imagine how to do justice to women as an oppressed group while also acknowledging their gendered status as illusory or ideologically constructed. Clearly, this is a limited vision that fails to include women who are unable to reproduce or have no investment in doing so, as well as totally overlooking the possibility of non-reproductive erotic desire between women (this vision also excludes the idea of gender transitivity or male reproduction).

Yet the book's conceptual limits also point to its great imaginative accomplishment: by elevating motherhood, and love of one's child, to the level of a spiritual calling, the book actually invents a form of love, intimacy and attachment that exceeds heterosexual romance and reproduction. That is, it highlights the value of emotional bonds between women, between women and children, and between people of different genders that are not reducible to the romantic couple as a primary social or intimate form. This is exceptionally important conceptual work that would later underwrite feminist and queer concepts like the woman-identified woman, the chosen family or alternative kinship networks, living collectives and friendship as a way of life (all of which were crucial to the expansion of non-normative intimate bonds in movements for women's and gay liberation in the 1970s). If we stop viewing classical feminist utopias as actual blueprints for an ideal world and start considering them as intellectual projects that respond to or work through conceptual impasses in feminist politics, we release our self-righteous judgment of their political failures and learn far more about their creative accomplishments.

Justin: And I think you can enjoy that and understand that it has its limits. I enjoy reading Tom of Finland, and I love imagining myself in his fantasy thought experiment—that I could fuck every guy in the

world, and they're all incredibly hot and want to fuck me too. But I don't actually want to live in a world without any women! Good lord, no.

Ramzi: I think it's safe to say that at the core of contemporary queer and feminist intersectional politics lies a utopian aspiration to account for, and develop substantive and ethical responses to, difference. That is, to *deal with* the problems and pleasures of difference in all its guises. We see this as a central value of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which posits black life as a register of human value across differences; in the Bernie Sanders campaign's commitment to addressing class inequality; in the Women's March's embrace of intersectional coalitional politics; and in struggles for transgender rights. I certainly embrace this mission, but as I've suggested earlier, I also think the commitment to respond substantively to differences often gets conflated with, or reduced to, a desire for universal inclusion. This desire to include everyone; to recognise and legitimate all viewpoints; to make all spaces safe, comfortable and emotionally or affectively accessible to everyone, while absolutely ethical and valuable in theory, can lead to a kind of bland, homogenous liberal politics where, ironically, we fail to acknowledge actual distinctions and differences within and among various groups.

I notice, for instance, that many of my most radicalised queer and feminist students seem to think of white, cis-gender, straight men as essentially a single unified homogenous group with no differences among them, and alternately seem to perceive trans women of colour as all uniformly oppressed and, as a result, necessarily heroic emblems of their political causes. They fail to consider that white, cis-gender, straight men might themselves also be oppressed by the system of patriarchy and be divided by countless differences of class, ethnic identity, religion, education, upbringing and geography, or that seemingly emblematic tokens of oppression like trans women of colour might also have quotidian everyday lives, be fallible, fail to identify with one another, or may simply not want to bear the burden of other people's political desires. This need for a universally inclusive politics often leads my students to recoil from older feminist utopias, which they see as failing to include a wide range of social subjects or marginalised people. What they miss in that assessment is how the creative accomplishments of those texts might offer conceptual tools for dealing with differences in the present. Tools can be remade, appropriated or placed into new contexts, and they can help us make sense of and respond to substantive differences rather than simply making us feel that we have safely included all oppressed people in every iteration of our politics.

Helen: And this requires that we negotiate rejection, exclusion and the antipathies of ourselves and others without collapsing them as pure oppression or injury.

Justin: I always think, what would happen to kink and kinky sex in a sex-positive, utopian world where there is no shame ...

Ramzi: I think sex is precisely the location that puts the most pressure on us to rethink the value of universal inclusion as the dominant goal, telos or underlying desire of queer and feminist utopian political projects. From one vantage point, especially in a society where consent is presumably a norm, sex is inherently *exclusive*: it is one location where we make countless decisions about who we will allow to touch our bodies, in what context, how it will be done, and with what conditions. Yet we also place a massive amount of utopian possibility on these encounters—how they might change us, allow us to access new sources of pleasure, connect with others at a visceral and embodied level, and reconnect with our

own bodies. This reality, namely that consensual sex relies on a highly developed form of exclusion combined with a near phantasmatic ideal of what sex can do for us, marks sex as a site of intense negotiation and a place where there remains the potential for rejection (and rejecting others) and painful hierarchies, but also playful and productive distinctions between those with whom we connect erotically and those with whom we find other powerful and meaningful kinds of bonds.

Conceptually speaking, this often goes categorically against our most utopian liberal desires or aspirations to embrace all people, to celebrate all bodies, to legitimise all manner of erotic desires, and to simply say 'yes' to all kinds of differences. When we recognise that this most intimate aspect of our lived experience functions as much by careful exclusion as inclusion, we can build an ethics from this recognition organised around the careful negotiation of differences in our broader intersectional politics. We can acknowledge that we do not all share the same preferences, personality traits, skill sets, experiences or desires, and that means that each of us will take on a range of roles in varied aspects of our social relations. If we refuse the idea of a conflict-free utopia, then we cannot alternatively conceive of a 'better' freer world without exclusions, preferences or interpersonal disagreement.

Justin: There is a mirroring of that in art production. I was on a panel at a comics convention about creating erotic work featuring bigger men of colour. My own erotic comics tend to focus on big muscle bears, because I like muscles. One chubby guy in the audience asked, 'Why doesn't your work represent people like me?' I said that you have two different responsibilities as an artist. You have to make work that represents the world around you to a certain extent and to be true to and respectful of that world. But the other part is that you have to remain true to yourself. So in erotic art I have to draw people to whom I am attracted. I do try to push that boundary, using my art to explore the horizons of my own sexual desires, and I think that makes for better comics. Tom of Finland's men are way too homogenous for my taste, whereas Gengoroh Tagame (2014 [2004–2005]), while he clearly has a type, offers up a much more interesting and satisfying range of men. But if I am not sexually attracted to a certain kind of person, I don't feel the need to include them in my erotic comics. On the other hand, as a reader of erotic comics, I find myself much more pliable; I love Colleen Coover's lesbian erotic comic *Small Favors* (2002), for example. While I'm not interested in seeing lesbian sex in person, in her comics I get to see the sex through her eyes, her drawings, her own desire, and that is both interesting and exciting. It goes back to what we were talking about earlier, about how art can allow us to transcend our own individual experiences and identities.

One other thought in regards to sex and utopias: I would also say that there is a utopian aspect to sex comics and erotica that is inherent to the genre. Anyone who has ever had sex knows that it's a complicated procedure and doesn't always go as planned. In even the darkest fantasies in erotica, however, the sex works perfectly: the anal bottom is as clean as a whistle, there are never any STIs, the top is always hard and never loses an erection, no one prematurely ejaculates ... These utopian concepts around sex in erotic fiction are a necessary part of the genre.

Helen: And, on that note, I want to return to the production of both of your works. Indeed, it's not hyperbole to say that each of you has inaugurated a new form of thinking about specific genres, and have ushered in new ways of thought and expression. How did this happen—is this our utopian future?

Justin: When I started making comics over fifteen years ago, LGBTQ comics existed in a parallel universe to the rest of the comic industry. They were primarily products of the queer media ghetto of gay/lesbian bookstores and queer newspapers, publishers and distributors. My generation of cartoonists worked hard to bring queer characters and themes, as well as queer comics themselves, to greater visibility, and I'm very proud of that; now there's a lesbian Batwoman and *Fun Home* (Bechdel, 2006) is a best seller.

As I say to my students, you need two things. You need the mainstream to assimilate and normalise queer identities in comics. You also need independent queer comics to poke fun at, to celebrate and to analyse queer identities from an insider's perspective, using all the scrappy DIY skills on which we underground cartoonists pride ourselves. The gay Archie character provides a role model for LGBTQ youth that literally saves lives, but it's up to someone like Burton Clarke in *Gay Comix* (Cruse, Triptow and Mangals, eds., 1980–1984, 1985–1998) to talk about internalised racism in the gay community, or Sasha Steinberg (2010–present) to talk about Stonewall from the point of view of the young trans women and drag queens who began the revolution, or Erika Moen in *DAR* (2009) to talk about how a self-identified lesbian wound up marrying a man and creating a new queer identity. Now a new, much larger generation of cartoonists is building on the visibility and representation work done by previous cartoonists and taking that into different genres. They're increasingly interested in imagining new queer possibilities and queer futures. They're using different technologies; they're on the web and they're international; they're using Kickstarter, Patreon and other crowdsourcing platforms. And the quality level is shockingly high. This is my utopia, a vibrant world of queer comics that keeps growing and transforming and challenging everything.

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