Keywords for Comics Studies

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Edited by Ramzi Fawaz, Shelley Streeby, and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley

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Edited by
Ramzi Fawaz, Shelley Streeby, Deborah Elizabeth Whaley

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS New York

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New York
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References to internet websites (URLs) were accurate at the time of writing. Neither the author nor New York University Press is responsible for URLs that may have expired or changed since the manuscript was prepared.

Cataloging-in-Publication data is available from the publisher

New York University Press books are printed on acid-free paper, and their binding materials are chosen for strength and durability. We strive to use environmentally responsible suppliers and materials to the greatest extent possible in publishing our books.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Also available as an ebook

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Introduction

Ramzi Fawaz, Shelley Streeby, and
Deborah Elizabeth Whaley

Writers, artists, inkers, editors, and readers of comic books and comic book adaptions leave an indelible imprint on cultures across the globe. Popular film adaptions of classical comics characters and narratives, including *Black Panther*, *Wonder Woman*, *Avengers*, and the *X-Men* series, yield immense profit because of an ongoing yearning to witness strength, perseverance, and heroism in the face of social struggle, political uncertainty, and the many forms of global cruelty and wickedness. Small-screen televisual and digital adaptions of wildly popular comic book series, from the earliest iterations of *Superman* and *Batman* to the twenty-first-century installments of *The Flash*, *Black Lightning*, *Luke Cage*, *Jessica Jones*, *Batwoman*, and *Supergirl*, underscore that widespread interest in heroic narratives and increasingly diverse representations of heroic power in comics media remains an enduring impulse over decades of cultural production and across multiple visual platforms.

In the academy, we often refer to the various forms of comics as sequential art, which is somewhat of a catchall for all kinds of images in sequence, whether in the form of anime, manga, comic books, graphic novels, zines, television, animation, and film creations and adaptions. Our authors discuss these many forms in this volume. Deborah Elizabeth Whaley has coined the sophisticated process of reading comics as "optic cognitive"—that is, the ways in which image and text are simultaneously encoded and decoded and deeply understood by readers and viewers. This eschews the enduring but misguided understanding of comics as a remedial form, thereby understanding comics as a highly elaborate process of meaning making to take in, deconstruct, and reconstruct multiple forms of visual information, from drawn figures and shapes, to text, to color, to the size and shape of a sequential panel, a page, or an entire printed, bound book.

The thrill, excitement, and the materiality of comic books—the feel of turning pages between your fingers; looking to the right, left, top, and bottom; pausing on images and rereading the narratives again and again—spark interest among the editors, authors, and artists in *Keywords for Comics Studies*. This volume gathers a series of rich and timely meditations on comics' extraordinary multiplicity—that is, the medium's capacity to multiply meaning through a vast number of variables in the reading and viewing experience. By taking time to unpack an equally wide range of such variables—from the cultural meanings attached to ink on paper, to the conceptual possibilities of narratives told in visual sequences, to the deep affective and cultural attachments built around enduring comics characters such as Archie and the X-Men—*Keywords for Comics Studies* recognizes and honors the heterogeneity of the medium, its myriad stories, and its aesthetic forms. Moreover, all contributors to this project know

that we are in good company and joining a growing list of *Keywords* volumes on the ideas, theories, words, movements, and forms in American culture, media, disability, Latinx, Asian American, and African American studies. Taken as a whole, this volume forcefully contends that comics are an aesthetic medium that also doubles as a conceptual terrain upon which the most central concerns of humanistic inquiry have and continue to be spectacularly rendered.

Beyond Heroic Narratives and on to the (Inter)Disciplines: The Scholarly Impact of Comics Studies

The last half decade has signaled a renaissance in comics studies unprecedented in the history of humanities scholarship in the US. Between 2015 and 2016 alone, more than twelve highly anticipated monographs on comics and sequential art appeared from leading academic presses, among them Bart Beaty's *Twelve-Cent Archie* (Rutgers University Press), Scott Bukatman's *Hellboy's World* (University of California Press), andré carrington's *Speculative Blackness* (University of Minnesota Press), Hillary Chute's *Disaster Drawn* (Harvard University Press), Ramzi Fawaz's *The New Mutants* (New York University Press), Nick Sousanis's *Unflattening* (Harvard University Press), Frederick Louis Aldama's *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics* (University of Arizona Press), and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley's *Black Women in Sequence* (University of Washington Press). Moreover, during this same period, comics scholars organized the Comics Studies Society, the first international association dedicated to supporting the study of graphic narrative and sequential art; the Modern Language Association (MLA) approved an official Comics and Graphic Narratives Forum and accepted more comics-themed panels for its annual conference than at any time previously in MLA history; the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* celebrated more than a decade of publication; *The Blacker the Ink*, a groundbreaking 2015 anthology of scholarly essays on "constructions of black identity in comics and sequential art," co-edited by John Jennings and Frances Gateward, won the Eisner Award, the most prestigious honor granted in the field of comics publishing; the academic journal *American Literature* published an award-winning special issue on queer theory and comics studies, edited by Darieck Scott and Ramzi Fawaz, the first of its kind in any academic publishing venue; and the inaugural Queers and Comics Conference, the largest gathering of LGBTQ+ comics artists, writers, and scholars in the world, debuted at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City. This potent moment of scholarly and institutional efflorescence has been accompanied by a wave of similar milestones in comics cultural production, including a Broadway musical adaptation of Alison Bechdel's extraordinarily successful graphic memoir *Fun Home*, Roxane Gay and Ta-Nehisi Coates's celebrated runs on the *Black Panther* comics series, historian Jill Lepore's best-selling book *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, and Nick Drnaso's nomination for the Man Booker Prize for his graphic novel *Sabrina*. In 2019, the *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (*PMLA*) published a Theories and Methodologies Forum on Hillary Chute's *Why Comics?*; this was the first time that the flagship journal of the MLA had ever dedicated an entire section to a discussion of the comics medium. It is not an understatement to say that comics studies is booming and here to stay.

Our *Keywords* volume creates a new toolbox for comics studies by providing short, user-friendly, analytical essays on the most significant concepts, questions, and debates in this vibrant field. Inspired in part by Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), our authors analyze "the issues and

problems" that are "there inside the vocabulary," as Williams put it in his introduction to the first edition of his classic cultural studies text. As it was for Williams, our inquiry is interdisciplinary, straddling "an area where several disciplines converge but in general do not meet." It is also "necessarily unfinished and incomplete," since it involves live struggles and debates over historically changing meanings. But while Williams sought to analyze "a vocabulary of meanings in a deliberately selected area of argument and concern" that centered on the terms *culture*, *class*, *art*, *industry*, and *democracy*, which he could "feel" as "a kind of structure," our focus, like those of the other NYU *Keywords* volumes, is a field imaginary in motion—in this case, the burgeoning field of comics studies.

While comics studies today is indebted to British cultural studies, and although each of Williams's structuring terms shows up frequently within individual essays, only one—*Industry*—is a keyword in the present volume. Still, there are many convergences, including our shared purpose of thinking about these vocabularies in not only historical but also aesthetic terms; it is too rarely recalled that the first entry in Williams's *Keywords* is "Aesthetics." Although we have no other common terms, a few are close: Williams's "Creative" becomes "Creator," his "Formalist" is "Form," and "Racial" shifts to "Race" in our *Keywords* volume. We also share terms, parts of words, and methodologies with other books in the NYU *Keywords* series, especially with Burgett and Hendler's foundational *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, partly because of the impact of American studies scholarship on comics studies.

In the US context, though perhaps no less globally, comics are not only popular entertainment but cultural objects that magnetized nationwide debates over censorship, youth rebellion, multiculturalism, and literacy while producing some of the most enduring fictional characters in US literary production. They are the cultural studies objects par excellence, demanding to be accounted for from a rich interdisciplinary perspective that considers the conditions of their production, aesthetic and formal codes, circulation, and audience reception. Building on earlier cultural studies frameworks as well as new approaches to comics studies, we believe that our *Keywords for Comics Studies* volume, shaped by an interdisciplinary cultural studies vision, provides scholars and nonacademic readers alike with a wide range of terms that speak to the formal and historical specificities of the medium while also showing how the key aesthetic, political, and cultural questions comics raise have wide-reaching relevance to the humanities.

Certainly, comics studies is not a new field, emerging as far back as Gilbert Seldes's classic 1957 study of American popular culture, *The Seven Lively Arts*, and most explicitly with the publication of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* in 1993. Yet the recent exponential growth of comics scholarship and intellectual communities points to the field's newfound relevance to a range of humanities disciplines and interdisciplinary formations, including media and cultural studies; art history; women's, gender, and sexuality studies; ethnic studies; American studies; history; anthropology; the medical humanities; and beyond. Quite simply, the recent renaissance in comics studies is in large part due to the field's increasing interdisciplinarity and the daring scholarship of a new generation of researchers who have explored the medium's unique formal properties in direct relation to its distinct historical, political, and cultural contexts of production and circulation. Some of the field's most classical debates regarding the value of lowbrow cultural forms, the distinct formal and aesthetic affordances of hand-drawn and sequential art, the effects of print circulation, and the development of nontraditional and youth audiences have

been either placed into new contexts or else revalued for their generative insights into the reading experience.

The relative obscurity and marginality of comics studies have often resulted from two factors. First, there is the traditional dismissal of so-called lowbrow or popular culture forms as undeserving of legitimate study in the humanities, a critique that has generated enough intellectual heat over a half century of scholarship and is now considered a cliché (though for that reason, it is no less relevant today). Second, traditionally formalist approaches to comics, which attempted to clarify the aesthetic stakes of the medium and its unique artistic contributions to visual culture, have sometimes unwittingly confounded those who are either unfamiliar with comics or not predisposed to take them seriously. The production of specialized formal vocabularies for studying distinct mediums of artistic production is certainly not unique to comics studies; in fact, the development of such a vocabulary for comics remains a necessary part of the field's constitution and provides the groundwork for any cross-disciplinary discussion of the medium's specificity as a distinct and valuable cultural product. Yet an already existing bias against comics as a "trash" medium in the US and European intellectual imagination, combined with a perception of specialization in the field as an extension of "fannish" overenthusiasm for comics among a niche cadre of scholars, often creates a conceptual gap between the generative formal work of comics scholars and this work's potential broader appeal to the humanities. In other words, comics studies is quietly generating some of the most important frameworks for exploring the aesthetic work of visual print culture for decades while often being dismissed for its very precision and focus.

One problematic effect of developing such vocabularies has also been a tendency to approach comics from one or two vantage points—including historical context, politics and ideology, business history, or aesthetic theory—while neglecting their simultaneous or interconnected weave. Alternatively, many scholars have focused intently on the biographical lives of particular comics artists and writers in an effort to recuperate the denigrated creative labor of important comics practitioners. This work has been essential to underscoring the imaginative power of comics as a medium driven by numerous artistic minds working in every subfield of comics production from independent to mainstream. Yet a persistent focus on the individual biographies of creators can also limit interpretative possibilities of actual comics texts by reducing readings of comics content to authorial intention or else canonizing a small number of vaunted creators, reifying the cult of the genius rather than expanding our understanding of the medium and its possibilities. On this latter point, one need only consider the fact that the vast range of comics scholarship up until 2014 focused extensively on a short list of celebrated creators such as Art Spiegelman, R. Crumb, Alison Bechdel, Alan Moore, and Marjane Satrapi, with a few additional outliers. Without question, these authors and their rich imaginative oeuvres deserve continued scholarly attention, but we contend that their aesthetic accomplishments should not obscure the compelling creative output of thousands of other comics creators working in numerous genres and styles to expand and reinvent what sequential art constitutes. For all the vibrant scholarship emerging around comics today, the medium remains a largely unplumbed and uncanonized field of lesser known texts. Go to a local comic book store and dip your hand at random into any long box containing back issues of comics from any period or in any genre, and you'll likely have in your hand a comic book that no scholar has ever published about in a peer-reviewed journal. To point out these conceptual limitations is not to denigrate the development of

the field or to suggest that comics studies is in any way uniquely problematic compared to other media-specific areas of study. Rather it is to illuminate some of comics studies' perceived stumbling blocks as well as some of the ways in which the field's most generative contributions to the study of visual culture have been unfairly elided, glossed over, or misunderstood.

The dramatic growth of recent comics scholarship at the highest levels of academic research and publishing is, in part, a direct outcome of contemporary comics scholars' work to vastly expand the coordinates or variables by which the medium is understood without losing its attention to media specificity, which defined its most daring early interventions. Contemporary comics scholarship (covering nearly two decades of recent academic production) has increasingly considered the medium's unique aesthetic qualities alongside the relationship of comics to distinct audiences and their practices of reading; political, social, and intellectual history; the evolution of print technologies and methods of distribution; the shifting demographics of creators; the corporatization of comics production; the development of underground comics communities; fan writing and association; transmedia uses of comics; and much more. It is at this moment when comics studies are being reinvented for an interdisciplinary audience willing to rethink earlier dismissals of the field that a *Keywords for Comics Studies* volume is most necessary and relevant. Despite the widespread interest in comics—whether among digital humanists seeking to expand the range of their multimedia teaching sources, art historians attempting to recover obscured histories of illustration and printmaking, or queer studies scholars tracing the evolution of alternative sexual cultures in visual art and fandom—there exists no single anthology, encyclopedia, or reference guide that enumerates the key concepts, debates, and histories that animate the field for an interdisciplinary audience. This means that countless scholars are teaching and studying comics without a shared vocabulary to instruct students on how to read and engage this dynamic and multifaceted medium across multiple genres and styles. This volume bridges that gap.

What Goes into the Toolbox: Building a Comics Studies Vocabulary

Comics is a widely accessible mode of popular culture and a distinct art form; thus, *Keywords for Comics Studies* necessarily includes a range of terms that link the political and historical dimensions of cultural production with aesthetics and creative production, one of the signal strengths of comics studies since its inception. We believe this will make *Keywords for Comics Studies* relevant to any scholar interested in popular culture, media, art, and other forms of cultural production. With this in mind, we have crafted a list of keywords that carefully toggles back and forth between aesthetic terms that are distinct to the medium of comics but also relevant to a vast range of cultural forms and terms that capture the kind of cultural, political, and historical debates that comics have fomented due to their changing content and public perceptions of their uses and misuses. Consequently, unlike other *Keywords* volumes, we include certain technical terms such as *editor*, *ink*, *gutter*, and *creator* alongside more classically conceptual terms such as *disability*, *lowbrow*, *genre*, and *fantasy*.

These former keywords not only describe elements of craft or creative labor in comics but are deeply contentious, ambivalent ideas in the field that have rich conceptual meaning beyond the limits of comics. For instance, *ink* refers not only to the long history of technical transformations in four-color printing technology but also to (1) the ways skin tone (and hence racial

representation) has shifted in comics and other print media across time, (2) how the often-unrecognized creative labor of inkers has shaped the medium, and (3) how recent innovations in digital coloring technologies affect contemporary representational politics of comics and the creative labor required to produce sequential narratives. Similarly, a term such as *creator* opens up long-running questions about authorship and proper ownership of intellectual property, the collaborative nature of comics art, and the very meaning of creative labor in the culture industry. In our list, we never include a technical term that is not also a conceptual "problem" for the field or comics studies and more broadly, for cultural studies, too. We see this as being especially helpful for people teaching about comics because the essays will both provide students basic definitional understanding of terms specific to comics and stress the cultural politics and broader conceptual stakes of these terms.

Second, our *Keywords* oscillate between concepts that consistently reappear across time in the history of comics—including *collecting*, *funnies*, *seriality*, and *caricature*—and those that are of a more recent vintage such as *zine*, *webcomics*, *diversity*, *trans-/**, or *cosplay*. We believe it is important to cover classical elements of comics and remain up to date with where the cultural field is today. These latter terms also speak to the increasing interdisciplinarity of comics by showing how the current study of graphic narrative and sequential art requires a basic understanding of digital media cultures, performance, audience reception, race, gender, sexuality, and ability, among others. For example, *cosplay*, a term that refers to fans who dress up as versions of their favorite comic book and fantasy characters, has become an incredibly popular phenomenon at comic book conventions and other fan venues. Cosplay is especially celebrated and taken up by queer, feminist, and minority fan communities who use the practice to perform or inhabit a vast range of fantasy identities, including characters traditionally presented as white, straight, and normatively gendered. Cosplay then has extremely important links to key conceptual questions in cultural studies, including practices of appropriation, "camp performance," disidentification, reparative reading, and the production of counterpublics. By offering essays that theorize these expanded locations for the field and offer grounded assessments of previous approaches to studying different aspects of comics production and circulation, *Keywords for Comics Studies* can function as a resource guide for young scholars needing an orientation or starting point for their research.

Since so much of comics research and teaching relies on historically constituted genre categories within the larger field of comics production, we provide space for terms that speak to distinct genres—such as superhero comics, alternative comics, and memoirs—but that also have rich uses beyond the limits of generic constraints. For example, we include terms like *universe*, *nostalgia*, and *pornography*, which refer to specific elements of genre comics (such as superhero, memoir, and erotic comics) but have wide-ranging relevance to literary and cultural production. We also carefully selected a small handful of terms that are simultaneously specific to comics culture—*Archie*, *X-Men*, *EC Comics*, *Watchmen*, *Love and Rockets*—and thus garner enough attention to exist and work as theoretical terms. For instance, the X-Men, traditionally the name given to a popular team of mutant superheroes invented by creators at Marvel Comics in the early 1960s, has since become an iconic reference point for the idea of diversity and multiculturalism in mainstream superhero comics. Similarly, Archie, once the red-haired title character of a comic strip about middle American high schoolers, has come to embody the notion of ideal "Americanness" as well as its potential subversion. These terms are not intended

as comprehensive but rather as touchstones in a larger lexicon.

Ultimately, our list is distinguished by its synthetic approach to the study of comics form and content (seeing the two as interwoven rather than isolated), its inclusion of terms that have relevance to multiple fields and disciplines simultaneously, its use of terms that are both specific to the comics medium and encompass broader debates in the humanities, and its attention to historical and methodological change in comics studies. Our list of contributors represents a variety of interdisciplinary thinkers, including scholars from literary studies; art history; visual cultural studies; American studies; performance studies; women's, gender, and sexuality studies; comparative literature; African American studies; sociology; disability studies; and more. Since these scholars also use many approaches outside of comics studies to explore the medium from their distinct locations, their essays provide potential readers a wealth of different intellectual vantage points from which they might approach comics without denigrating or eliding the field's most foundational interventions in the study of this important print media. In this sense, we see the volume as a foundation for and an incitement to producing more innovative and intellectually capacious scholarship on comics. We see the true value of this book lying not only in its ability to produce powerful interdisciplinary vocabulary for comics studies but also in its commitment to linking the questions, concepts, and debates in comics studies to cultural studies writ large.

In the Gutter: Teaching *Keywords for Comics Studies*

The popular comic strip and Afroanime television show *The Boondocks* is best understood when one contemplates its chief creator, Aaron McGruder, as one trained in the field of African American studies at the University of Maryland. His images and narratives are not created in isolation. Rather, his work is informed by the history of people of African descent living in America, and Japanese comics and anime is an influence for him, as it is for a large majority of comic creators today, especially regarding how characters are drawn and how they move in and through space and time. Afroanime can be understood as an articulation of Black cultural idioms, signifiers, and historical and contemporary narratives of agency and action with the visual cues and complex, postmodern narratives of Japanese comic production. In this sense, Afroanime itself is an example of the work that *Keywords* does in connecting the dots between the historical, social, political, and material. Comics studies, as readers will see in the following entries, constitutes the interpretive space between narrative and visuality in sequential works.

For an entry into the pedagogical work of *Keywords*, we see the concept and the space of the gutter—where readers and viewers engage in interpretation and fill in the narrative with their own references in history, culture, and social relations—as the "key" part. Since our volume has a commitment to this space—that is, the space of the reader's meaning making that is in concert with, and paradoxically also in opposition to, what lies before them on the page—we weight this project in terms of its place in various concepts of "the classroom." For us, the classroom is more than a physical space with students and instructors. The classroom is the conversations readers will have with others in a multitude of spaces—in hallways, on public transportation, and online—as well as the journey of writing and seeking to understand and work within the comics form anew. A high school teacher may choose select entries in this volume in a way that aids students with the space of the gutter, to craft lectures, and to help provide an

intensified context for the forms of sequential art, artistic practice, and the impact of genres, characters, and the complex identities that one negotiates as learners of comics and learners of the world. How might the form of manga help one understand the Japanese comics and animation shorts and features that have an immense impact on artists and writers of comics today, McGruder included? In what ways might we consider how the concept of borders strengthens our understanding of the geographical markers that are as much analytical as they are material and tied to emerging categories such as Latinx? As a pedagogical tool, the entries here do not consist of a monolith of understanding or the last definitive word on any given term, practice, or genre; each entry is an opening for everyday readers; students; researchers; art practitioners; film, television, and animation producers; and certainly instructors to travel with and beyond us into the sequential art and interpretive space of the gutter.

In tandem with this volume, many exercises will assist a variety of educational levels and learning spaces. Instructors who have no training in the drawing of comics can begin units on the form or a discussion of a particular work with a simple and powerful exercise to emphasize the impact of comics and the use of icons and iconography to convey larger ideas. Readers might find an exercise of artist and cultural critic Joel Gill instructive in this regard. He conducts talks with an adjacent workshop where he asks participants to draw a few simple forms: a house, a car, a flower, and the sun. The artistry of the mixed audience is irrelevant. A learning aspect from this is that as participants share their images, differences abound among them in terms of identity, but all have drawn basically the same image for each form. This is not because we are all the same or because we all think the same; it is because our experiences and reference points of understanding are as much individualist as they are shared within common contexts of culture. This is an entry space into the gutter in order to begin to contemplate what is shared, specific, and contested as we think about iconography and signs that are used to move from the simple to the complex and from the individual to universal, even when no words or narrative are present. Perhaps this is what draws instructors to the form as a way of engaging learners in interdisciplinary and multicognitive ways. Indeed, many instructors teach graphic novels, comic books, animation, and film adaptions of sequential art in courses as an entry point into understanding constructions of identity and difference, illuminating the affective experience of distinct historical moments, and exploring aesthetic exchanges, both appropriative and genuine, between cultures and geographical locations. For example, blockbuster film and television productions, prominently addressed in Matt Yockey's opening entry, "Adaptation," might be used by media and communications scholars to teach about global media markets, fandom, media production, the business of comics, and multiple narrative forms. Educators in business may instruct students to reimagine human resource business cases that rely on problem making and problem solving in the form of a graphic novel. Many business cases *as* graphic novels have become best sellers, such as Richard Horwath's *StrategyMan vs. the Anti-strategy Squad* (2018); these graphic case studies help readers see, through simultaneous reading and viewing, integral steps in management and human resource decision-making. Health practitioners and community workers can use comics to better communicate to and with community members about health practices, including developing and distributing accessible visual information about conditions, treatment, patient care, and community health philosophies; social studies instructors can use comics to convey how social relations,

group identities, and shared histories are visually imagined and narrated in a range of aesthetic styles and comic book genres; and film scholars and practitioners can meditate on the aesthetic, production, reception, and narrative work of the moving image. The terms, genres, characters, and innovations in comics discussed here can play a part in and provide an opportunity to dive deep into the gutter—the open space of possibility between panels but also between conversations, comics texts, and readers—and to strengthen course content and engagement through the entries that inform the visual and written wonderment of the comics form. Instructors, artists, and students can take the terms that are sharply theoretical in this volume and create visual diagrams that draw from the explanations of our authors to bridge the written with the visual. Practitioners of sequential artworks will find our *Keywords* volume useful in making their art and narratives sharper and attuned to the various ideas and schools from which their work may draw and depart. Much of what occurs when we watch and read a sequential form is instinctive, happening in electric flashes of creative "optic-cognitive" work in the mind's eye; *Keywords for Comics Studies* helps in connecting these instinctive and canny interpretations enacted by comics fans and readers to the analytical and practical ideas that constitute an expansive field of inquiry.

Take, for example, just a small handful of contemporary flashpoints in comics cultural production that dovetail with learning opportunities in comics studies: The wildly successful film *Black Panther* (2018) ignited universities, high schools, and community centers to institute "Black Superhero Week" across the globe—this included screenings of documentaries and popular moving image depictions, tutorials on drawing characters that were ethnically specific instead of debased, forums on Black political leaders and activists that do the practical work of change every day, and collective readings of comics in libraries. The extraordinary and surprising global popularity of "boy love manga"—the genre of shojo and narrative of *shoen-ai*, which lovingly depict the blossoming of same-sex romance among adolescent boys—among women readers has caught the attention of gender and women's studies scholars; these researchers have developed sophisticated analyses of the unexpected forms of cross-gender and sexual identification boy love manga elicits from diverse readers internationally. The critical public response of readers and viewers on the aggressive and abusive relationship between the Batman franchise's Joker and Harley Quinn, their celebration of the queerness of Batwoman in her titles and Iceman in the X-Men franchise, and their embrace of Muslim characters like the new Ms. Marvel reflect audiences' sophisticated, even intersectional interpretations of their most cherished series and characters. Scholars in critical race and visual studies have rigorously traced the intertextual links between blaxploitation films, blaxplocomics, and the recent appearances of iconic Black superheroes like Luke Cage and Black Lightning in small-screen televisual adaptations; their analyses show how these depictions are both wedded to *and* seek to move beyond limited understandings of Blackness and its relationship to economic and social blight, class, power, gender, sexualities, and policing. The groundbreaking comics collection Jeff Yang's *Secret Identities: The Asian American Superhero Anthology* (2009) displays how comic artists and writers have historically depicted Asian immigration, transnational labor, US Japanese internment, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, American and Islamic conflict, and anti-Asian violence while grappling with broader issues of multiracial and ethnic Asian representation. And the list could go on. All of these scholarly and fan interventions are significant in helping us make sense of cultural

conflicts over the role that comic book representations play in the major debates of our time. For instance, when there is a public debate among readers and viewers over the whitewashed casting of Asian and Asian-inspired superheroic characters like Iron Fist and Major Motoko Kusanagi on the small and big screen, where should interested parties turn to engage with critical ideas on the debate? In moments like these, collections of comics like Yang's *Secret Identity*, which contains the original comics in which these characters appeared, and the essays in this *Keywords* volume can all offer a toolbox of images and concepts to encourage critical conversations on the history of racial representation, including the historical and contemporary social and political relations that continue to fetishize Asian bodies even as those bodies are repeatedly subjected to color-blind casting. We see the kaleidoscopic nature of the essays in this volume as making it exceptionally adaptable for entering countless conversations about the cultural power, utility, and futures of the comics medium. We thus encourage readers to approach the words, concepts, and movements within these pages as both a start and an invitation to edit and perform *a deep and fantastical dive into and beyond the sequential magic of the gutter*.