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Authors	Alley–Young, Gordon
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Gotham City Living: The Social Dynamics in the Batman Comics and Media, by Erica McCrystal. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 217 pp.

Gordon Alley-Young

Erica McCrystal's *Gotham City Living: The Social Dynamics in the Batman Comics and Media* is an illuminating tome that chronicles the dimensions of Batman's Gotham City, in film, television and print as a playground for the popular imagination where competing standpoints on identity and villainy play out. McCrystal's scholarship largely focuses on popular culture vis-à-vis Victorian and detective literature, the gothic and the nature of heroics and villainy, the latter of which is a subject of her podcast series *Villains 101*. Readers unfamiliar with Batman will appreciate McCrystal's cultural study of the fictional urban city in the popular imagination, one that simultaneously thrives on and is eroded by its own degradation. McCrystal deftly moves across a vast number and variety of texts in crafting her analysis and in the process she seamlessly bridges her readings of text and illustration to the nuanced meanings underlying filmic/televisual cinematography, direction and performance. McCrystal's take on how the apocryphal environs of Gotham produces the characters and content of the Batman franchise is as much about the project of forging a united and multicultural America from the Second World War onwards as it grapples to reconcile the disenfranchisement of its many marginalised citizens against the unchecked privilege of its elite. McCrystal's approach, which looks at how the city of Gotham is signified as a microcosm of dynamic social change in America, differentiates her work from other books that examine Batman mainly in terms of character study and/or audience analysis (e.g. Will Brooker's *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman*).

The introduction to the book provides a brief orientation to understanding the visual style (i.e. nondescript studio backlot to idiosyncratic to gothic). McCrystal's notes on the visual character of the city might perhaps be best captured by Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum, in that Gotham is meant to encapsulate all of America across various eras but with no one singular referent. Melanie Klein's concept of projected identification, as used by media theorists to explain how we reify our fears and anxieties through media landscapes of urban decay and violence, captures how McCrystal orients readers to the character of Gotham City. In the chapters that follow, McCrystal explores how the city is constructed in ways that prefigure the trajectories of its youth and criminals and how the city constructs gendered/sexualised, raced and class stratified realities. McCrystal's analysis succeeds in reading the cultural codes and ideologies underlying the construction of the various iterations of Gotham City across genres.

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Gotham City Living is significant for the scope of the work surveyed, work spanning over eighty years (1939–2020) of graphic, televisual and filmic texts that speaks to the creative works of a countless number of cultural workers including writers, graphic artists, animators, cinematographers and designers. In "Chaos, Order, and Liminality", McCrystal compares late nineteenth century London and Gotham City, noting, "Gothic cities seem simultaneously infinite and suffocating, as they arouse the fear of the unknown" (311). Her background in gothic literature is interlaced throughout the chapters in this volume as she frames Gotham City as alternately dark, uncertain, decaying, fear–inducing and/or romantic. That said, each of the six chapters of the book also work as standalone readings.

The first chapter, "Youth and Gotham City: Raising Criminals, Training Vigilantes, and Influencing Readers," introduces the moral campaigns of the 1940s–1950s that were prompted by the perceived effects of sex and violence depicted in comic books on youth delinquency. This panic led to the creation of 1954's Comics Code (CC). Ironically the CC was in part responding to comics depicting some of the same situations of violence and danger enveloping its young urban readers like the dark shadows that characterise popular depictions of Gotham's streets. Jake Palermo argues of pre-code comics, "[t]he best horror reflects the time and place of its audience, and for this wartime period, there were many uncertainties".

McCrystal subsequently argues that the regulations adhered to by the creators of the original CC (1954–89), the CC Authority (CCA), had negatively affected representations of characters who are Black, Indigenous and/or Persons of Color (BIPOC). In Chapter Four, "Pluralism and Identity Formation: Race and Ethnicity in Gotham City", McCrystal argues "Batman comics have not historically encouraged stereotyping; rather, they have discouraged prejudiced thinking", though she concedes that "this came at the cost of whitewashing and apparent neglect" (104, 126). Fryberg and Eason argue that a framework for examining bias must include both acts of commission and omission to fully understand bias, prejudice and discrimination (554). Otherwise we run the risk of misreading the CC creators' motivations.

The CC's attitude to LGBTQIA+ representation perhaps provides a sense of its creators' intentions. Comic book historian Alan Kistler cites how the CC broadly specified that "sexual abnormalities are unacceptable" and that "[s]ex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden". Kistler argues, "[t]here were no written definitions, no list of previous rulings to argue precedent. They would tell you if something was unacceptable and that was usually that". Kistler references how, before the CC, Charlton Comics depicted a scientist who has sex reassignment surgery, likely inspired by Christine Jorgensen, but this would not be published under the CC. McCrystal observes how African–American actor Eartha Kitt was cast as Catwoman on television (1967–68) in a battle of wits with Batman but "any indication of any sexual energy between her and Batman would be socially taboo" (112). The Television Code (TC) in effect at the time included the language from the 1952 TC that "[r]acial or nationality types shall not be shown on television in such a manner as to ridicule the race or nationality" (3), and that "[i]llicit sex relations are not treated as commendable" (2). Did the Batman producers deem Batman and Catwoman's relationship to be illicit according to the TC? Hollywood's Hayes Code (1934–68) at the same time unambiguously banned miscegenation (Lewis). Either way, we must ask if BIPOC omission/absenting was intended to avoid misrepresentation or something more insidious perpetuated by white industry leaders.

Chapter Two, "Beyond Batman: Gender in Gotham City", McCrystal argues that Gotham's superheroines "simultaneously embrace their gender and put pressure on stereotypical understandings of femininity" (50). McCrystal observes but does not belabour the compulsory heteronormative forces driving the introduction of Batwoman in 1956. Chapter Two complements Chapter One in discussing Gotham as a gendered metropolis where young women of the city are marginalised and thus constructed as more susceptible to sexualised violence, powerlessness and limited life choices Specifically, Chapter Two details the excessive use of gendered violence against Katherine Gordon in the graphic novel *The Killing Joke* (Moore et al). This incidence brings home the point of how Gotham, as a physical space of gender violence and disenfranchisement, and characters like Katherine Gordon, whose subjectivity is displaced by treating her as an object upon which violence is enacted, start to converge into one physical entity. Chapter Two sets the stage for Chapter Three, "The Sexualized Theatre: Violence, Power, and Liberation", where McCrystal analyses sexualisation, sexual expression and sexuality through Gotham's history. A notable section of this chapter applies rape theory to the relationship of Kate and Natalia (Batwoman and Nocturna) in a storyline introduced into Batwoman comics in 2014 whereby the latter regularly puts the former into an unconscious state to take advantage of her sexually. McCrystal explores popular readings of this storyline, including the sexualisation of women and lesbians for the straight male gaze. She also explores how the story flips the script on the familiar rape narrative by focusing on female–on–female violence, by orienting readers to a rape narrative that does not feature overt physical violence and how it shows the susceptibility of even the most powerful individuals to rape. This storyline seemingly evokes the cultural phenomenon of date rape drugs and establishes that while Batwoman, like Gotham itself, is indestructible, she is not invulnerable.

Chapter Five, "From the Slums to the Manors: Gotham City's Class Disparity", reads Gotham through a Marxist lens to understand class formation and disparity in a city where "space formerly representing industry is now aligned with criminality", in films such as Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* in 2008, as criminals are left to only those areas where once industry infrastructure, now abandoned, thrived (142). In Tim Burton's *Batman Returns* (2000), McCrystal reads a symbolic vampire capitalist feeding off the lifeblood (electricity) of Gotham. In 2009, reel translated to real as *New York Magazine* styled a photo of Bernard Madoff to look like the Joker (Anthony). The discussion of the confluence of class hierarchy and capitalism in Chapter Five provides a natural opening for Chapter Six, "Criminal Productivity: Gotham City's Most Wanted and Most Needed". McCrystal posits that "[t]he city cannot be trusted or truly known, especially through varying depictions, as it is an agent of chaos, an infernal organism that perpetually breeds criminality", thus "Gotham necessitates a hero who is a criminal himself" (161, 155). McCrystal reads the city through different theories of crime from Émile Durkheim (i.e. criminals and crime clarify Gotham's moral boundaries) (161), to Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque (i.e. degradation made visible through grotesque realism) (162). This variable approach is fitting for a fictional city that is everything and nothing all at once.

McCrystal draws upon historical research, policy, and theories ranging from Karl Marx and Frederick Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*, to Judith Butler's theory of the gender performative from her work *Gender Trouble*, to Tanya Horeck's *Public Rape* when reading Gotham, a subject that is structured but dynamic. *Gotham City Living* excels when McCrystal adjusts her criticism to provide space for emerging and needed representations to grow, even when

that growth is uneven and problematic at first, when previously they were afforded no space within Gotham city limits (such as individuals who are transgendered and BIPOC who find a place within Gotham post–CC). *Gotham City Living* has the potential to be valuable to scholars from the disciplines of youth and popular cultural studies, visual communications, sociology, and women and gender studies. The depth of critical analysis around the impact of the CC on BIPOC representation could be heightened, however, McCrystal evades the trap of appearing pedantic and dogmatic in her analysis thus allowing the reader to consider different voices that weigh in on key points of analysis. McCrystal's approach fosters engagement with her audience's diverse standpoints thus acknowledging the polysemic nature of these popular cultural texts. McCrystal's ability to keep the conversation open and negotiable, together with her ability to navigate and maintain focus when reading and interpreting across a vast and varied capta–set, bodes well for her continuing success.

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Gordon Alley-Young is a Brooklyn, New York based Professor of Speech Communication. His work examines popular education films, identity politics in period dramas, critical cultural studies of journalism and the interplay of communications media and terrorism. His article "Marine or Mercy: Constructing Self, RASM, Nation, and Leadership in Eurovision and French Presidential Politics" was published in Jayne Cubbage's *Critical Race Media Literacy: Themes and Strategies for Media Education* (Routledge, 2018). He teaches on the Communications & Performing Arts faculty of Kingsborough Community College–City University of New York.