

**THE PRACTICE OF EVERYDAY CRIMEFIGHTING:
URBAN SPACE IN THREE ERAS OF BATMAN COMICS**

by

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B.A. (Hon), University of Alberta, 2013.

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(English)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

December 2016

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Abstract

This thesis project uses the spatial theory of Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* to articulate an incipient delinquency in the movement of the superhero – in this case, The Batman – by examining three different serial runs of comic: the Golden Age pulp of the 1940s, Frank Miller's seminal *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Scott Snyder's 2011 "Court of Owls" story arc. The attendant images of diegetic urban space are crucial to this analysis and, by examining the narratives imbued therein, offer a new approach to the superhero comic beyond mere historical referent.

Preface

The majority of this thesis is unpublished work by the author, Stephen Cook. An early form of the chapter “The State vs Batman: Miller’s Libertarian Fantasy in *The Dark Knight Returns*” was presented at the U of T’s graduate conference on April 27th, 2016 while an initial draft of the chapter “Occupy Gotham: The Trickle-Down Evil-conomy of Snyder’s ‘Court of Owls’” was presented at UBC’s Endnotes graduate student conference on May 20th, 2016. The entirety of this thesis constitutes original, independent work by the author.

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Acknowledgements

My gratitude first to Dr. Kevin McNeilly for supporting me throughout the entirety of this project; if not for his energy and encouragement, it would have been a rather sordid affair. And to Dr. Glenn Deer, who graciously offered his time and insight as second reader.

I am indebted to the UBC English Graduate program for providing me with an outstanding educational experience and to the many instructors who made it so. To the Government of Canada for providing me with the generous funding of the SSHRC. And to those loveable misfits who were my peers and friends – the cohort, the caucus, the computer lab crew, The Prose (Go Prose!). I refer to groups of people in an attempt to be as all-encompassing as possible. If I were to put together a comprehensive list, ultimately – tragically – some crucial player would inevitably go unmentioned, only for me to reread this Acknowledgement page in the years to come and cry out, “alas, I forgot to include _____!” So here’s to you, _____ (you know who you are).

Special mention to Courtney Heffernan and Tanishka Gupta who – as my roommates – were unfairly subjected to my slovenly ways but served out their individual sentences with admirable grace and empathy.

This thesis is the culmination of two and a half years of a life lived in Vancouver, an era of countless ups, downs, feathers in cap, black eyes, trysts, heartbreaks, and rain (but hey – it’s better than snow). It was a time and place I will not soon forget.

Dedication

Dedicated to my mother and father, for being so kind as to give me life.

And to Divya Nanray, whose selfless support resulted in this project's completion.

Chapter 1: Introduction

I remember the first Batman comics I ever read. The afterschool care I was sent to as an elementary student had a small collection of single issue comics from the late eighties – *Alf*, *Master of Kung-Fu*, and *The Transformers* among them – but the real treasures were issues 608 and 609 of *Detective Comics*, starring the Caped Crusader and an unknown – even to an ever-faithful *Batman: The Animated Series* adept like myself – villain, “Anarky.” The two-part arc was appropriately titled “Anarky in Gotham City,” an insidious-sounding prospect to a child whose only knowledge of the word was connoted with chaos, disorder and despair. Yet the story is fascinating for challenging the role of Batman amid the moving parts and moralities of the city. Anarky, purposefully masked like a gilded facsimile of Alan Moore’s *V for Vendetta* (Foreword 3), attempts to ferment revolution amidst the population of Gotham City, berating a weak and ineffectual system that privileges the few. In the arc’s climax, Anarky engineers a confrontation between police and the denizens of a tent-city who have been evicted for a slated building project. Although Batman is victor, the event leaves him shaken at the close; “He only wanted to set the world straight,” the Caped Crusader admits to Commissioner Gordon, “and I can’t find it in my heart to blame him for that” (22).

That story has stuck with me through thousands of other Batplots and derring-do, from the Godfather-esque *Long Halloween* comic miniseries to director Christopher Nolan’s vaunted Dark Knight Trilogy to the filmic aberration that is this summer’s *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. It has stuck with me because it complicates the role of the superhero – indeed, the very notion of heroism – in a cityscape whose institutions fail the vulnerable to which they have

dedicated themselves. It presented a world where what is lawful is not always what is right and the gleaming towers of the metropolis do not raise all, a world not so unlike my own. Because while the tragedy of Two-Face or Mr. Freeze might stir empathy in our hearts, it does not stir our minds. “Anarky in Gotham City” was a superhero narrative of rare breed: a laudation of the delinquent rather than uncritical pillar of the status quo.

The cover of *Detective Comics* 609 depicts its central confrontation: an army of police officers, gigantic Batman figure overhead, opposite to an array of citizens similarly overseen by an enlarged and figurative Anarky; the shadow of a skyscraper lies between them. In “Anarky in Gotham City,” Batman may be aligned with the forces of law and order but, given more than 75 years of publication history, this has not always been the case – bringing me to the project at hand. With this thesis, I look to Batman comic exemplars to examine how this icon of considerable pop culture capital operates within the narratives produced by the fiction’s carefully-controlled urban images and representations of criminality. Examining several volumes of texts from three distinct time periods – the early Golden Age, Frank Miller’s 1986 *The Dark Knight Returns* and Scott Snyder’s 2011 “Court of Owls” *Batman* arc – I will demonstrate how a delinquent Batman can be articulated through the prism of Michel de Certeau’s principle of the individual power inside officiated structures as outlined in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1981), with especial attention paid to the *movement* of the masked vigilante through the diegetic city.

Important to note is that this is not a historiography of the character and that there are several reasons for the selectivity of this project. One is that there are vast swathes of canon

and history that are of very little interest to the kind of urban analysis I wish to undertake. The 50s and 60s – notably after the establishment of the Comics Code Authority, a time period oft-referred to as the “Silver Age” of comics – are full of Batplots more akin to science fiction; *Batman #113*, to cite one of many, features The Batman traveling to the planet Zur-En-Arrh to battle giant robots. Another reason is the unfeasibility of nuanced analysis of both the written and visual in a project of any larger scope; however, the selections, such as they are, are particularly representative of their respective eras as canonical beginnings and reboots: the Golden Age marks the very beginning of the Batman mythos, Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* revolutionized the property following the company-wide restart of maxi-series *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, and Scott Snyder’s *Batman* run follows the “New 52” reboot. And a final reason is simple readability: the early *Detective Comics* are worth attention as they mark a cultural shift, but the vast majority of comics have always been cheaply-produced trash. *The Dark Knight Returns* and Snyder’s *Batman* may not be high literature, but they are most certainly some of the finest written mainstream superhero comics of the contemporary period.

The three core chapters that comprise this project will be separated into these three distinct eras. The first deals with the initial relation of the urban to the genre, tracing how the early Batman comics of 1939-1940 were successors to the detective serials that preceded them; besides the addition of distinct costume, these initial forays mirrored the narrative structure of pulp antecedents like *The Shadow* or *The Phantom*. These texts still demonstrate a prevailing concern with the urban environment; before the parade of likewise masked supervillains, superheroes predominantly fought common thugs and street gangs. Yet, as I illustrate through *Batman* as exemplar, what is commonly forgotten in the generic history is how these

superpowered figures radically changed the sense of one's relation to the urban through the diegetic traversal of space. If one might consider the essential core of the superhero narrative as escapist fantasy, although this is certainly a conceit to be contested, the new visualization of movement offered by the emerging superhero resists the prescribed paths of the city block. More formally, the comic medium's manipulation of page and panel are able to accent these new dimensions – the vertical edge of the image often serving as the vertical footpath for the ascending hero – and reconfigure the conceptualization of space into one that can be resisted and mastered, even against the very authoritarian structures involved in its creation.

In the second chapter I examine Frank Miller's seminal *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) for its legacy as a text whose author's libertarian leanings shine through a narrative that is thoroughly resistant to authority. Set in a thinly-veiled dystopian vision of 1980s New York, Miller's text is virulently anti-establishment, both politically and as a meta-commentary on the superhero's unreached potential. I thus examine how the conflict of produced space and the experiential of the pedestrian is enacted through *TDKR's* uniquely politicized encounters between Batman and his foes. Topography is essential to these interactions as the text directly lampoons and subsequently foregoes the high-flying acrobatics and skyscraper-skipping of the Golden Age and instead opts for brutal street-level brawls. Miller illustrates these battles as locations for the exercise of power in spite of larger, often authoritarian constructions, privileging the movement of space to the authorized structures of place.

The third chapter addresses Scott Snyder's "Court of Owls" arc of the *Batman* comic. Snyder's work reveals an obsession with the urban both as involved actor in set action and as

functioning social organism. Nearly every issue opens with a building description, detailing both its history and design features, that is crucial to the episode either thematically or – much more cleverly – as a demonstration of Batman’s mastery over place and space. This ability to navigate the spaces of Gotham City is crucial to victory and is, like Miller’s text, apt as a translation of de Certeau’s everyday practices to the realm of the comic, undermining the prescribed constructions of set places. “The Court of Owls” features a synonymously-titled anonymous group of masked (and owl-themed) hyper-rich as its primary villain. The mystery of the Court’s existence is slowly drawn out as a sort of hidden history in which Gotham City has been controlled and shaped by the shadowy group since its very foundation. Yet Batman’s struggle against the Court is one in which his own role is called into question, too often slipping into one of ownership rather than protection and especially illustrated through the fetishization of panoramic vistas: beautiful, legible, *controllable*. Images are central to the comic and so it is the images of the city – and all their attendant implications – that are crucial for analysis.

As comics scribe Scott McCloud notes, the abstraction of the comic creates an effect of “amplification through simplification” (30). The stripped-down images of the comic amplify specific aspects of the art; so while the rippling abs of the spandex-tight supersuit denotes strength, the low-rise grime and rolling smoke of a warehouse district under moonlit sky betrays a specific vision of the city as noxious, mysterious, and, given the narratives therein, dangerous. Gotham City is a simulation of the everyday American everycity that both reflects and informs the perceived reality of the reader. The abstractions of the fictional city, entwined with the folkloric potential of the superhero, are rife with meaning for the conception of the

lived city; The Batman lurks in Gotham just as he might in New York, Los Angeles or even Vancouver.

Chapter 2: The Golden Age – Dawn of the (Delinquent) Superhero

In 2016, the superhero is a mass media phenomenon. They adorn lunchboxes, inhabit interactive worlds, and break box office records while their recognizable iconography is plastered on every manner of commodity to satiate an increasingly nostalgia-driven hyper-consumptive culture that is just as likely to see a spandex-and-capes film as it is to track every casting announcement, development still or industry tweet from its production. The superhero is many – intergalactic police officers, fugitive mutants, government experiments, international armsdealers, mercs with a mouth – and in this oversaturated sky of numberless lights, it is easy to forget that there was a first, a solar system of a single star predicated on a single medium: *Action Comics'* Superman. The Man of Steel's appearance in 1938's issue #1 refitted the heroics of pulp fiction and began the process toward the urbanization of such adventure narratives.

Superman is a hero whose amazing talents were weighed against a modern conception of power; he is able to “hurdle a twenty-story building... run faster than an express train... and [...] nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin” (“Superman, Champion” 14). His movement, so often employing the z-axis of high leaps and cross-building bravado, undermines the prescribed paths of the city-grid, reconceptualising the simulated environment of the diegetic cityspace. This resistance to the authorized path is, in de Certeau's thought, delinquent, as it is the “privilege of the *tour* over the *state*” (130). This chapter looks to The Batman as imitator and inheritor to Superman's delinquent traversal of space but also how the property's lineage – from the 19th-century mysteries of the city to more contemporary adventures pulps to the detective fiction genre – licenses the urban social organism under its

purview. The Batman of the vaunted “Golden Age” of the early 40s is a figure whose relationship to the urban environment is fluid and dynamic, undermining perceived constructions while upending the social order through the dichotomy of secret identity.

The story of Batman actually begins with the initial publication of Superman in May 1938. The brainchild of childhood friends Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the Man of Steel was inspired by science fiction and fantasy, sharing much the same powers and origins as Philip Wylie’s protagonist in the 1930 novel *Gladiator*. Siegel and Shuster’s early forays have him battling “against the forces of evil and oppression” (“Superman Declares” 164), choice selections include ending the war mongering machinations of a munitions dealer (“Revolution” 40), convincing a mine owner to improve safety conditions (“The Blakely” 54), tearing down a slum to force the construction of “splendid housing conditions” (“Superman in the Slums” 120), and even ending on-site murders meant to “slow up th’ erection” of a building by a rival construction group (“Superman #2” 308). The setting of these adventures is varied, moving from abstract cities to small towns and foreign locales; Metropolis, Superman’s now near-synonymous point-of-call, would not be introduced until issue 16 of *Action Comics*. Chambliss and Svitavsky point to the urbanity of the superhero genre as a narrative of a “reconstructed” American hero who now faces “conflicts internalized within the city” rather than the frontier narrative of other pulp antecedents (17), yet for these early Superman adventures such borders remain to be so clearly-defined. Batman’s domain, however, was – from the very beginning – centered on the city.

Appearing nearly a year after *Action Comics* #1, the “Bat-Man” of cartoonist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger was a costumed re-imagination of the detective strain of pulp fiction. His first story in *Detective Comics* #27, “The Case of the Chemical Syndicate,” is part-and-parcel a recreation of The Shadow’s “Partners of Peril” short story (Foreword 8). And the majority of early Batman stories are very much crime mysteries, solving murders or thefts that – although oftentimes extraordinary as in the case with recurring villain The Joker – rarely devolve into the fantastical; the machinations of gangsters, and too often the racist caricatures of the yellow peril, form the central antagonism. The Batman acts as a kind of vengeful spirit – the adjective *Weird* repeatedly used as a constant reminder – sharing the aura of the supernatural with immediate predecessor The Shadow who likewise employed an alter ego (sometimes multiple) as cover.

Thus it is the medium that made The Batman unique among his detective pedigree. Excessively loud costume aside, the visual potentiality of the comic also encouraged inventive displays of movement. Immediate predecessor Superman leaps over homes to travel to “the governor’s estate” (“*Superman, Champion*” 15) or “toward the city” (“*Revolution*” 23) – in almost identically-reproduced panels – and runs across telephone poles between skyscrapers (“*Revolution*” 25), displaying amazing powers amid the everyday. Batman appropriately recreates these theatrics in a depowered mimicry of a proto-parkour. Accordingly, on the cover of *Detective Comics* #27 that promises “the amazing and unique adventures of The Batman!” (11), the masked vigilante swings across rooftops via a thin rope as he simultaneously headlocks a gangster, two other crooks looking on from the vantage of the reader. Not uncommon for covers of this era, the scene never actually occurs but by the following issue of *Detective*

Comics this alt-movement is a mainstay. In a particularly illustrative scene from the following issue, *The Batman*, evading police, “dives off the roof [of a skyscraper]... he turns a complete somersault in mid-air and... lands on his feet on the penthouse roof below” (20) before “lassoing a flagpole jutting out on a nearby building” and swinging “out into space...!” (20-21). Nearly an entire page of panel is dedicated to this movement – not yet evolved beyond the three row format of newspaper strip collections – highlighting the spectacle of the manoeuvre. “He got away all right” exclaims one cop to another who, headless in astonishment, follows “and how he got away... whew!” (21).¹ Important to this, even more pronounced than the feats of Superman, is the ever-present illustrated city. The famous cover to *Action Comics* #1 sees Superman lifting a car in a seemingly abstract dirtyyard, illustrative of that property’s less all-encompassing concern with its urban setting.

Whereas Philip Marlowe may describe the seedy streets of 1930s Los Angeles with inventive written metaphor, the city of the superhero is a visual vocabulary. Skyscrapers loom in the background to scenes of action, sometimes parallel to the high-flying acrobatics of the costumed hero in order to present the street as from the God’s eye view. Ndalians writes that the early superhero was attuned to the then-emerging vantages provided by height and flight, offering the “possibility of new modes of architectural and urbanistic imagination” (7). She connects Superman especially to the utopian aspirations expressed in the New York World’s Fair, he being a literal Man of Tomorrow come from the planet Krypton “whose inhabitants had evolved, after millions of years, to physical perfection” (“Superman vs” 211). And while

¹ I have opted to bold and underline quotations as they appear in the original comic source material. I have not, however, chosen to mimic the aesthetic of the all text capitalization for the sake of comfortable legibility.

Metropolis may not live up to such aspirations, Superman's crusades against corruption express a socially progressive desire at their foundation. Batman's playground – initially New York before being retconned into Gotham City in *Batman #4* – never quite captures this same impulse. Batman's adherence to the plots of detective fictions ferment the manufacture of a rotten city to which the Batman reacts; he may fight crime, but he does not improve lives. And these central antagonisms of street crime reflect the narrative of the noxious urban space so integral to earlier American fictions, like George Lippard's *The Quaker City*, that sees in the city a breakdown of morality; the city itself appears as villain.

The primarily nocturnal scenes of Batman stories lend themselves to a conception of the treacherous, unknowable city. Unlike later depictions in *The Dark Knight Returns* or Snyder's *Batman* run, this ominous facet of the city is not tied to some oligarchian exploitation but expressed as an inherent architectural uncanny. The visual urban is itself threatening, an inherent quality that reflects the rural core of the average American narrative. A particularly memorable panel from *Detective Comics #29* gestures to this danger: an embodied view from the street as a tall orange building leans at nearly a 45 degree angle, threatening the street below. But two-thirds of the way up this concrete cliff face is the caped figure of The Batman, floodlit by full moon, using suction pads to "climb to the penthouse" to face a foe (28). From the street, the city crushes, is impenetrable, and only the superhuman is able to circumvent the maze. Yet on this same page of the looming city are juxtaposed panels of a close-up Batman scaling the perfectly straight wall and his triumph over the prescriptions of the vertical, a triumph fully expressed in the final panel of the page: Batman, now on the ledge of the "penthouse garden roof," stands in victorious pose.

The collocation of the vertical wall, Batman attached, and the view from the street, buildings ominously looming over the path of the pedestrian, reconfigures the “sheer face” as no longer impenetrable wall but climbable (with special equipment, granted) and conquerable. The paths of the pedestrian, its sidewalks and crosswalks and very ground-level topography, are further side-stepped by the acrobatics of the Caped Crusader. De Certeau describes such prescriptions as “an ensemble of possibilities... and interdictions” (98). The path of the walker is at least partially determined by the constructed order but also “increases the number of possibilities (for example, by creating shortcuts and detours) and prohibitions (for example, he forbids himself to take paths generally considered accessible or even obligatory)” (98). The significance of The Batman’s locomotive emancipation is as a graphic display of these practices elevated by fantasy to reconfigure those possibilities and prohibitions. By leaping from rooftop to rooftop, swinging from building to building, or even – as he is sometimes wont to do – employing the Batgryo or Batplane, The Batman escapes the constraints of prescribed paths of movement, the “grid” of the city-construct. In one scene from *Detective Comics #40*, Batman and the Boy Wonder roll up to the gates of the fictional motion picture company, Argus Pictures. As the two exit their vehicle, Batman declares that a signpost “says no admittance... but that doesn’t mean us, **Robin!**” (218, emphasis in original).

This movement of the superhero is a narrative act of delinquency, one that, in the thought of de Certeau, does not live “on the margins but in the interstices of the codes that it undoes and displaces” (131). The codes of the city – signposts of limitation, the street-level pedestrian-path, demarcating curbs between sidewalk and road, the pavement itself – are shed by the fanciful gymnastics of the Golden Age hero, the language of the pedestrian rewritten

through this new urban representation. And it is only through the visual medium of the comic that this reconceptualization can be fully realized, the *vision* of the city superseding any description of it. Juxtaposed panels allow for multiple views of the same physical space, complicating perceptions and imbued narratives in a manner that the technical specifications of cinema had yet been able to achieve.

But unlike the diegetic *physical* traversal of The Batman identity, the alter-ego/secret identity – in this case, Bruce Wayne – anonymously weaves through the social fabric of the city, performing a kind of Benjaminian *flaneur*. Although “young socialite” (“Chemical Syndicate” 12) Bruce Wayne does not necessarily fit Benjamin’s description of the “unwilling detective” (40), his “indolence” nonetheless covers the “watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant” (41). The first Batman story begins with a social call – Bruce Wayne meeting with Commissionaire Gordon – during which the commissioner answers the phone, informs Bruce that “old Lambert has been murdered at his mansion” (12) and makes the bizarre choice to invite his friend to the crime scene. The guise of the socialite – present, observant, but not active – serves the detective impetus of the series; Bruce overhears arguments, such as between director and producer shortly before an on-set murder (“Beware” 215), or reads the room of a party, such as the at the “ballroom of the Wylie mansion” (“Prophetic Pictures” 308), or any number of other examples wherein a pronounced crowd anonymity allows the millionaire playboy to investigate without being scrutinized. The Batman may break the physical intersections of the city but it is Bruce Wayne who silently stalks the social organism, a “*man of the crowd*” (49). Only taken together is the Batman/Bruce Wayne figure able to reach its apex as deft traveller of the city, master of its physical and social spaces.

The Batman demonstrates the power of the individual to overcome emplaced constructions – in the case of early Gotham City, not so much an authoritative power as an urban uncanny, a city forever bathed in shadow and populated by thieves and murderers. The Golden Age adventures introduce readers to the delinquent movement of the superhero and the reconceptualization of space through new, aerial-inspired representations of the city. Moreover, unlike later interpretations of the character – Batman was actually *deputized* in the '66 TV series – the early comics present a Batman firmly rooted in the margins; police are not afraid to shoot at the mysterious masked vigilante (“Batman #1” 191). Yet as “law-breaking” Batman and “law-abiding” Bruce Wayne he moves between these worlds, between wealth and poverty, and all the while investigating both. The one man of multiple identities fleshes out this false division while simultaneously demonstrating a superior command over its segregationist principles. Vigilante, lawbreaker, delinquent: The Batman empowers the individual in the face of the villainous city-monster and the prescriptions of its entwined spatial and social order.

Chapter 3: The State vs Batman –

Miller's Libertarian Fantasy in *The Dark Knight Returns*

Any study of The Batman would be incomplete without the inclusion of Frank Miller's seminal *The Dark Knight Returns*. Its serialized release in 1986 marked a watershed moment in comics history, the four-part series – alongside its counterpart of the same year, Alan Moore's *Watchmen* – pushing the superhero into the vaunted arena of the “graphic novel.” Its cultural legacy – rescuing the brooding Dark Knight from the vestiges of Adam West camp – has made it the most critically-considered of the Batcomic canon, analysis ranging everywhere from its regeneration of the frontier myth (Finigan) to the gender performance of its characters (Salyers). In this chapter, I examine how *The Dark Knight Returns* (henceforth shortened to *TDKR*) questions the role of the superhero, refashioning Batman from the voice of Silver Age status quo to an anti-authoritarian figure and especially how this is established through the Batman's interaction with the urban, acting as a destabilizing figure amid the authoritative concept of “The City.” Miller's text privileges the movement, and ultimate violence, of the street over authoritarian structures that form the idea of the city, mirroring de Certeau's model of the resistant everyday while interrogating the function of the superhero as mythic figure.

Besides ushering in a new era of comic book respectability, *The Dark Knight Returns* was instrumental in redefining the property in both its past and present forms. Geoff Klock reads *TDKR* through the lens of Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence, calling it one of the first truly “revisionary” superhero comics that reimagines the convoluted history of Batman – from the pulp hero of the 1940s to the campy crusader of the 1966 television series – but, rather than

adding another incongruent piece to the canon, forces, according to Klock, these “weak readings” into Miller’s “own strong vision” (29). Suddenly, the Batmobile is a tank, the yellow emblazoned bat symbol on the Batsuit acts as target to draw fire on a hidden metal plate and batarangs – rather than harmlessly knock weapons out of bad guys’ hands – immobilize through multiple puncture wounds. Klock maintains that Miller’s portrayal “leaves readers with the impression that all of Batman’s fights must have been of this kind” (31), sublimating the storied history through a new grim and gritty prism.

This overwriting gestures to the text’s awareness of its pedigree and subsequent interrogation of its parts. As Miller’s Batman cycles through the various plumages of differing eras, from the blues of the Golden Age’s limited color palette to a more modernized grey and black, the display never allows the reader to forget its metatextual origin. Thus it is easy – imperative, even – to understand Miller’s project as engaging with and interrogating the generic conventions and plotting of the superhero narrative itself. Besides this critical awareness, the overwriting of Batpast is also integral as an essential “grounding” of the mythos, foregoing the fantastic in favor of an exaggerated reality more reflective of the contemporary urban. Batman, for the first time since perhaps the Golden Age of the 1940s, actually lives and breathes in a Gotham City that mimics the contemporary urban condition.

And certainly, one of the strongest thrusts into this mimicry of the contemporary urban is Miller’s pronounced emphasis on transforming Gotham City into a facsimile of New York. Although by 1994 Dennis O’Neil would describe Gotham as “Manhattan below Fourteenth Street at eleven minutes past midnight on the coldest night in November” (Afterword 344), the years preceding *TDKR*’s publication gave the city no particular identity, it acting as “a kind of

abstract fictional stand-in for any urban setting” (Klock 29). DC Comics, unlike Marvel and its New York-centered antics, has always used purely fictional cities as setting. Yet in Miller’s first and few vistas of the Gotham City skyline a layover panel belonging to one of the novel’s recurring television personalities highlights “Gotham’s magnificent Twin Towers” (11). The name dropping of the twin towers is a semiotic linkage to the real-life World Trade Center but also contains imagery resplendent with the abstraction of the comic. The Twin Towers of Gotham bear no visual similarity to their New York counterparts; they absolutely tower over any other building on the Gotham skyline, a hulking mass that no more resembles a skyscraper than the hulking mass of muscle that is The Batman resembles a human being. And it is worth digressing on this notion of abstraction – Scott McCloud’s adage of “amplification through simplification” (30) and the “ability of cartoons to **focus** our attention on an idea” (31).

The abstraction of Miller’s urban space – linked with the real-world through its connection to one of New York’s most recognized former landmarks – is itself representative of the abstracted focus of *TDKR* as a whole. Limited glimpses of the architectural style give two incongruent visages: one, an exaggerated neo-futurism featuring slick lines and gargoyles that resemble jetplane fuselages (46); and two, a marble white, golden-domed roof that more resembles the roof of a basilica than a hub of commerce (49). They gesture towards the central precepts of Miller’s work: an exaggerated reality – buildings that cannot exist alongside equally implausible superheroic feats, reflecting on the Golden Age origins and the utopian futurist foundation of the genre – that runs in parallel to a metatextual awareness of its own origin – that is, the sanctity of the generic conventions at which Miller takes aim. These features exist side-by-side, like the towers themselves, and the buildings’ use as battleground and upturning

of the standard superhero venture further expresses this parallelism. Yet the central effect of this semiotic linkage remains the infusion of the reality of urban space into a universe that has often relied on abstract fictional spaces in its storytelling.

Miller's text makes this connection explicit through other means – a caricature of Ronald Reagan appears as president while the violence and gang mentality of The Mutant Gang adhere to the narratives of the urban panic of the 1980s – a discourse that, according to media critic Steve Macek, “naturalizes poverty and urban decline” and “projects the sources of the system's failures onto the system's victims” (137) – but it is the twin towers that, as centerpiece for the Two-Face confrontation of the novel's first of four chapters, expresses the impotence of generic plotting through the consequence of its setting.

Of the four confrontations that act as the climax to each of *TDKR*'s chapters, Two-Face's is the most archetypal. It is a standard supervillain ploy to threaten a building/monument with destruction – the once again front-and-centre “twin towers” – unless paid off with a ransom. The dual skyscrapers are supposed to match Two-Face's tic – the obsession with doubles and duality – but in his televised message to Gotham, another tired trope of the genre, even Two-Face seems to not be fully committed to the role: “The price is five million dollars. I would have made it two - - but I've got bills to pay...” (50) He references the tic itself in that he “would” have made it two and gives the somewhat dubious reasoning that he has “bills to pay,” a step outside of precedence that foreshadows the coming break from convention.

This break is best expressed in the final page of the chapter. The top panel opens the page with Batman facing a kneeling and defeated Two-Face, his back to the reader, seemingly

on the verge of being swallowed into the infinite folds of the hero's cape. Colourist Lynn Varley has opted not to colour the panel's contents – the only instance of this within the novel – but allows the contrast of the stark black ink and white page to illustrate the scene. As a result, the section is also perhaps most illustrative of its form, foregoing any semblance of the experiential palette for the purely fictional contrast of pure black-and-white. Matching this self-revealing gesture, The Batman is in his most mythic pose: no longer the novel's standard muscle-bound giant, he appears as a terrifying creature, head emerging from boundless cloth, hunched over the small form of a vanquished foe. Two-Face, for his part, pleads: "... What are you so **mad** about, Bats? I've... been a sport... You have to admit *that* -- I played along... And you... You took your joke about as far as it could go..." (55). This dialogue is unique as the only text in the series to be wrapped in a distinctly *yellow* speech bubble. This coloration could be, in one estimation, a decision made in order to make the text pop from the colourless panel but, if so, it would have to be an extremely confounding signal from a text so meticulously aware of the form and conventions; yellow is traditionally relegated as the indicative colour of the omniscient author – whether writer or editor – whose text block nominally recounts past events or fills in gaps of the reader's knowledge. Characters do not speak in yellow speech bubbles yet in this instance the signifiers are mixed; authorial comment and character speech become one, giving Harvey's words particular meta-significance. His complaint that he has "been a sport" and that Batman has taken the "joke about as far as it could go" gesture to the entire confrontation as just another standard exchange in the cookie-cutter roles the two have been assigned as foes and the status of the genre as a whole. The middle section of the layout – in which framed profiles of Two-Face and Batman are mirrored along a horizontal axis – is indicative of Miller's view of

the two as doppelgangers (“Twilight of the Idols” 36). Two-Face’s warped mentality in its physical form is mirrored by the recurring panel of Batman’s inspiration and ultimate idealized self, the bat he calls “the fiercest **survivor** – the purest **warrior**” (19); Harvey is, as Batman admits, a “reflection” (55). That final Batman image, of the cowl completely in shadow and the length of the forehead suggesting the head’s downward tilt, can be read as a realization of regret for Harvey’s hopelessness but it is Batman’s speech bubble – that he sees “a reflection” – that suggests he could feasibly be considering his own legacy. The chapter ends atypically with an embrace in the shadows, foregoing the banal battles of yesteryear and the melodramatic triumph of “good” over “evil.” This failure and its lack of consequence to the overarching plot – Two-Face is not seen or mentioned again – also demonstrates the text’s diminishment of the authoritative structures that encompass place.

Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, makes a distinction between space and place, place imparting an “indication of stability” (117) and a defined, distinct location opposed to space’s “intersections of mobile elements.” Space is, as de Certeau writes, “like the word when it is spoken” (117). This simile is particularly relevant in discerning de Certeau’s project as it gestures to his own assertions of the resistant power of the spoken, the battle “between the artificial languages of a regulated operativity and the modes of speech of social groups [that] has always been the scene of battles and compromises” (6). We can thus consider place as an *authorized* conception – the creation of architects, urbanists and city planners that sanction officiated histories. Ole Frahm, in reading de Certeau’s “Walking in the City” chapter, similarly reads a competition between the panoramic “total picture of the city” (108) and the “spatial practice” of the pedestrian – a discontinuous experience that cannot be fully captured

and one, according to Frahm, that is “irritated by the entangled coexistence of heterogeneous elements in the city” (Frahm 33). Frahm posits a struggle between these two perspectives on the city, one that “tries to control the city by the gaze” while “the other tries to escape this very control” (34). The traversal of space by the pedestrian is then an act that undermines the “readable” and reducible city-construct for it reinforces the irreducible and unknowable: “To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent in search of a proper.” (103)

While it would be bizarre to the point of comedy to consider Batman as a pedestrian-figure, his movement, like most superheroes, foregoes the prescribed paths of the city-construct – the “privilege of the *tour* over the *state*” (130) – and is thus, in de Certeau’s own formulation, delinquent. Miller’s own privileging of space over place is further reflective of this destabilizing delinquency. Two-Face’s confrontation is a confrontation with *place*, with the defined borders of the “twin towers” set against the skyline, the central symbolic figure in the panoptic gaze of one of Miller’s few city vistas. It is the *topical*, one of de Certeau’s “defining places” just as the plot that accompanies it is a Silver Age generic staple.

In stark contrast to the ultimate impotency of the Two-Face chapter is the following confrontation with the Mutant Gang and, in particular, the Mutant Gang Leader. The battleground is not a named place or street, not even a building. Instead, it is in the mud of a storm drainage, the very muck that serves as the foundation for any city. The Dark Knight’s ability to operate in this environment, to traverse this distinct space that is distinctly unnamed and unmarked as any particular place but a “pipe” (95), is crucial to his victory; having already failed to defeat the Mutant Gang Leader once earlier in the chapter, it is the fact that “**nobody’s** very fast when he’s thigh-deep in **mud**” and the throwing of mud into his opponent’s eyes (100)

that secures The Batman's victory. Yet besides upholding mastery of space as key to victory, the scene is a critical demonstration of Miller's vigilante vision subverting the common heroic paradigm as the superhero supersedes the state.

The chapter's climactic confrontation occurs directly following the Mayor of Gotham's attempt to hold a "**consultation** with the Mutant Leader" (91). But, as a news anchor reports, the meeting ends with the Mutant Leader ripping "the Mayor's throat out with his teeth" (91). This failure of government within *The Dark Knight Returns* can be read, as Theo Finigen argues, as demonstrative of Lawrence and Jewett's proposed American Monomyth of "a community in a harmonious paradise" that is "threatened by evil" in which "a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task" (6). The Monomyth, as Lawrence and Jewett warn, requires the failure of democratic institutions to make way for the Edenic paradise's fascistic one-man redemption (338). However, Miller's text portrays government as authoritarian, even dystopian, as star-spangled jackboots guard the White House (84) and an aged President Reagan (implying successive terms of office) orders Superman to kill Batman (185). Thus the Caped Crusader's street-level escapades might be more accurately construed as a libertarian resistance against dystopic power systems.

This tension between the everyday fist and the maneuvering politico is even expressed formally by the final page of the battle (102). As the top half of the page visually trumpets the triumph of the Dark Knight over the fallen Mutant Leader, drenched in mud and all, no less than 9 of Miller's favored tight square panels, mimicking the curved shape of the television, adorn the bottom half of the page. Figures of various political capital – doctor, priest, lawyer, etc. – appear to give their soundbite as to the new status quo established by The Batman. But it is the

self-styled Son of Batman whose voice rings loudest – or, at least, is given emphasis by repeated appearance – announcing that the Batsymbol is the “mark of the **future**” (102). It is at this moment that the superheroic narrative of protecting the city is subsumed by an imposition of the individual will over the state; Batman has not just acted as vigilante but has negotiated, through the hyperviolence of the comic, a peace the Mayor of Gotham could not. The top vista of the triumphant Dark Knight is also notable for its lack of a clearly defined border, the brown of the muck spilling into the text bubbles below. Batman’s brave new Gotham is a world whose borders become ill-defined, no longer constrained by the imposition of traditional authority or the Sunday school sermons of the Silver Age.

The following chapter “The Dark Knight Falls” – in which Batman faces favourite foe The Joker – further accents this divorce from standard comic book fare. Miller, in an interview with Christopher Sharrett, calls Two-Face the Batman’s doppelganger while The Joker is “an antithesis, a force for chaos” and “Batman’s most maddening opponent,” representing the “chaos Batman despises, the chaos that killed his parents” (36). If Two-Face is the villain to be defeated and, in the case of *TDKR*, the one whose presence reveals the essential vapidness of the typical superhero role as through a doppelganger’s reflection, then The Joker, as classic rogue, is the old status quo to which Miller’s brave new vision is enacted with unpredictable results. At one point the Clown Prince of Crime takes a child hostage at gunpoint; The Batman’s inner monologue mocks that The Joker is “playing the **wrong** game,” the “old game” (144) before the Caped Crusader pierces his eye with a batarang. Once again, the conflict is lampooned as a game and one to which The Joker’s archaic ways are no longer fit. And, once again, the conflict is won by those who master the traversal of space, whether it be Batman in the Hall of Mirrors

or the new Robin on the theme park rollercoaster. Yet The Joker's chapter does not end with a whimper as with Two-Face but with another earth-shattering development as the villain, having been paralyzed by The Batman, chooses to twist his own neck and take his own life. Eco's Oneric climate, in which no hero ages and timelines become blurred to serve publication perpetuity (16), is more illustratively broken than the defeat of Two-Face or even the Mutant Gang Leader who each, as befitting the traditional single issue narrative, disappear from the plot, relegated to prison or asylum somewhere behind-the-curtain without any embellishment or detail. Joker's fate is total in its finality and even his body breaks the boundaries of the single issue by bleeding into the next; the fourth and final chapter of *TDKR* opens with newly-minted Commissioner Yindel and the Gotham PD finding the corpse and making the assumption that it could be "no suicide" (154). For this perceived transgression, at least within the diegetic confines of the novel, Batman will have to reap the fury of the state in the form of its stalwart defender, Superman; "Bruce," the Man of Steel inwardly laments, "it's over" (160).

The battle between DC Comics' most recognizable icons that concludes "The Dark Knight Falls" and the entire *TDKR* saga is given greater significance when considered within the history of the canon. Predating the vaunted *Justice League*, the Batman and Superman crossover series *World's Finest* began in 1941 and was published regularly until 1986 (following the company-wide canon-reboot of the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* maxiseries event). Although the two heroes were made to fight in select instances over this long publication history, the predominant characterization of their relationship has been one of friendship and shared values; *TDKR* marks a turning point in that this relationship is malformed into one of tension, the two separated by

a vast ideological gulf. In the last moments of their fight, Batman's monologue reads as if to comment on the genre and wasted folkloric potential of the superhero:

We could have **changed** the **world**... now... **look** at us... I've become... a **political liability**... and you... you're a joke... (194)

The Batman of *TDKR* is Miller's ultimate libertarian fantasy, individual will built on the dictum "that the world only makes **sense** when you force it to" (192) while Superman is transformed into little more than a pawn of the state. Batman laments that the Man of Steel has always "known just what to say," that is, "'Yes – you always say yes – to anyone with a **badge** – or a **flag**" (190). And Superman's subservience to the aged President Reagan acts as a kind of parallel narrative to The Batman's ongoing crusade in Gotham City – clandestine meetings in the Whitehouse lead to interventions in a "police action" (160) against the Russian menace and an extended sequence involving the Man of Tomorrow's absorption of a nuclear blast.

Beyond this dialogic writing of Superman as a stand-in for authority, the parallel Batman-Superman plots also reveal a dueling topography. Although the supergod does touch ground in limited engagements as Clark Kent (118, 160, 197-8) or else while in combat (129, 130, 189-95), flight is consistently highlighted as his defining method of movement. His first "appearance" is no more than a blue streak that, after crashing into a wall, "**hurls** itself into the **sky**" (113). And when ordered by the President to take down the troublesome Batman after he has saved Gotham from rioting following the electromagnetic shutdown caused by a Russian nuke, Superman issues his challenge by inscribing "WHERE?" into the snow by Wayne's feet via "a blast of heat – from the sky" (187). Although, as I have argued previously, this movement can be considered as undermining the prescribed paths of the city grid, Superman's alliance to

authority and this same spatial definition is reinforced by the first – and only, for any character – first person perspective to which he is associated.

The third chapter, “*Hunt the Dark Knight*,” begins with four small rectangular panels (106). The first depicts gray clouds, parting in the second to reveal a coastline before giving way to a top-down of the city’s towers and, finally, the street itself, complete with cars and trucks. The sequential movement is the perspective of one who falls; however, the adorning text boxes, coloured blue, link the perspective to an as-of-yet unidentified Superman. “Bruce,” the text reads, identifying The Batman by his given name, “you idiot. You’ll ruin everything.” (106). If the reader is unfamiliar with Superman’s ability to fly, they will be formally introduced via the aforementioned blue streak that forms his first appearance. Yet what is most important in this initial perspective is how Superman is given over to the God’s eye view, the “celestial eye” (Certeau 92) that totalizes and makes the city readable. Superman is the “voyeur-god created by [the] fiction” (93) of the panorama-city that “must disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them” (93). His Kryptonian origins notwithstanding, Superman here embodies this divorce from the pedestrian experience.

The opening image of the final climactic battle is a powerful representation of Miller’s anti-establishment fantasy: the Man of Steel hovering above the street, inked and obscured by shadow, while the Dark Knight stands defiantly below, bathed in the light of the streetlamp; silhouetted buildings adorn the background (192). It is significant that the confrontation is performed on the site of Crime Alley, the folkloric name for an anonymous space known only for its role as setting for the murder of Thomas and Martha Wayne. Superman’s final defeat here at the hands of The Batman – the closing act of the text – is then the full realization of

multiple intersecting forms of narrative. It is the potential of the superhero genre trumping traditional sermons of reductive and simplistic flag-waving morality, Miller's libertarian revolution kicking back at the authority of encroaching government and, implicitly, the dueling voices of the urban space: the hegemony of the idealized city undermined by the disruptive experience of the pedestrian.

By grounding and rewriting the heroics of the superhero into a more grim and gritty realism (for which the 90s comic mainstream would attempt to mimic without an ounce of nuance), Miller returns to the lived reality of urban experience and entwines the Caped Crusader's resistance to imposed authority with the urban representation – and one particularly shaped by its semiotic linkages to 1980s New York - in which he traverses. The plots – and in particular how their final climaxes are enacted – lambast the low-stakes vaudeville of the Silver Age and champion individual will – in this case, The Batman's – over the state in a new superheroic paradigm of revolution rather than the traditional defence of the status quo. Miller also privileges the destabilizing and delinquent forms of space and movement in a manner that mirrors the “stories” of de Certeau's thought, forming a new mythic folklore that, while more concerned with individual will than the social groups to which de Certeau dedicates himself, nonetheless revitalizes the urban space of the comic with new potentialities. The Practice of Everyday Crimefighting, then, is one that undermines the authoritative conception of the city-construct and offers an approach that can offer new insights into the diegetic space of the urban comic.

Chapter 4: Occupy Gotham –

The Trickle-Down Evil-conomy of Snyder’s “Court of Owls”

William Uricchio identifies two manner of Batman villain: those “self-referential” criminals whose crimes in some way mirror the troubled psyche of the Caped Crusader, popular villains like The Joker or even Two-Face, and those “everyday criminals that reflect and extend to the realities of the urban condition” (124). And while this delineation is not always so clear-cut – villains like Black Mask often bridge the gap between costumed freak and Mafioso – Uricchio gives voice to a tension that haunts most narratives of the superhero genre, between the exaggerated comic-spun decadence of the average Batplot and the urban setting ostensibly modeled after the world of the contemporary North American city dweller. In this chapter, I examine Scott Snyder’s “Court of Owls” arc, serialized from 2011-2012, as a groundbreaking refashioning of the Batman mythos that gestures towards a new social awareness, addressing the regressive politics of which Uricchio lambasts, while simultaneously undermining the conception of a singular, legible city-construct. Unlike Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, The Batman is not characterized as a freedom-fighting champion but as a problematic authoritarian figure who straddles between desiring to either protect or control Gotham City.

Scott Snyder’s “Court of Owls” arc was produced as part of the 2011 “New 52” company-wide reboot, following longtime DC editor Julie Schwartz’ precept that every few decades production requires that writers “give the universe an enema” (Johnston). Official materials purport the lineup would “introduce readers to a more modern, diverse DC Universe” that would “relate to real world situations, interactions, tragedy and triumph” (Doran). Snyder’s run

on *Batman* quickly distinguished itself in sales and critical favour, offering a new villain in the form of The Court of Owls and a narrative obsessively concerned with the urban space of Gotham City. Gotham has repeatedly served as a representation of the worst of the American urban nightmare – even Grant Morrison’s colorful mid-aughts run is rife with the fear of external attack by both international coalitions and Latin American drug cartels. Snyder’s “Court of Owls” arc presents a distinct paradigm shift from many of The Batman’s usual conflicts in that the poisonous urban space is no longer the result, to quote Henri Lefebvre, of “mystifying notions” that contend that the contemporary urban is a product “of some putative ‘sickness’ of society” (99). And while Snyder hardly ferments revolution, the main villain of the series does gesture to an awareness of Gotham’s fallen state not as some moral failing but a societal one.

The Court of Owls, for which the arc is named, is a secret society of hyper-rich who have guided Gotham’s development for centuries. Their goal is not some bank heist or maze of riddles but complete political control of Gotham enacted through bloodshed and assassination. The Court is able to remain undetected by the World’s Greatest Detective until it comes into conflict with his alter-ego Bruce Wayne – and, tellingly, only doing so as a result of his pledge to fund a major urban renewal project. Thus the dilapidation of Gotham is implicitly connected to the strangling control of the Court, removing the woes of the contemporary cityscape from the shoulders of the victimized underclass and asking the reader to consider how urban space is constructed – by whom, for whom, and for what purpose – while also bringing into painful awareness the wide gap between the elite in their towers and those forgotten on the street. Accordingly, a strong effort is made to contrast those scenes of wealth and power-brokering with the view from the street. Three opening frames reflect this depiction: a rat picking through

a dumpster as a group of homeless people gather around a fire outside an abandoned theatre, a skyscraper inked only in black shadow towering over low-rises venting grey smoke, and, finally, Arkham Asylum obscured by a gate (*Court of Owls* 3). The second image is a particularly strong signifier of this Gotham and its central players – a worm’s eye view of the skyscraper – and foreshadows the power dynamics of the city. The duality of the superhero identity is also employed in this juxtaposition – billionaire Bruce Wayne hosts tuxedo-strewn charity events while Batman visits grisly crime scenes that evoke the grime and colour palette of that 90s classic of the urban nightmare, *Se7en*. The Court straddles these two worlds – of the political and the superhero – to maintain a “trickle-down evil-conomy,” a conception eerily resonant with the text’s simultaneous publication with the Occupy movement as it captures the zeitgeist rhetoric of the 1% brought to its zany, conspiratorial comic book conclusion.

The first official statement produced by Occupy Wall Street rallied against power centers derived from economics rather than a democratic cross-section of citizenry:

As one people, united, we acknowledge the reality: that the future of the human race requires the cooperation of its members... but corporations do not seek consent to extract wealth from the people and the Earth; and that no true democracy is attainable when the process is determined by economic power. We come to you at a time when corporations, which place profit over people, self-interest over justice, and oppression over equality, run our governments. (Daniel)

The Court of Owls, then, is particularly fascinating as a distinctly corporate entity. Although toward the end of the arc the identity of two prominent members are revealed – the heads of

the Powers family who, in some media, birth the archnemesis of Bruce Wayne's bat-successor, Terry McGinnis – one of the defining features of the group is their shared anonymity. Members of The Court of Owls hide behind owl-motif masks and act as a collective, individual identity obscured by like-made suits and dresses delineated along gendered lines. And although the reader is never privy to any individual or explicit managerial hierarchy, it is telling that while the men dress in distinct business attire and are present to welcome Batman to the Court's labyrinth (*Court of Owls* 92) or unleash an army of assassins – known as "Talons" – upon Gotham (158), the women dress in evening gowns – sometimes identical, as in the portrait of the Court's 2006 iteration (69). If the Court of Owls is a corporate identity, it is one unsurprisingly centered on the presence of the white male.

The Court is also depicted as solely white and, complementarily, its members have a tendency to appear blonde-haired. On one wavelength this could be gesturing to the Aryan ideology espoused by the Nazis, driving home the white supremacist make-up of the organization, but more convincingly – given the problematic prevalence of white characters throughout Snyder's run – it indicates the incestuous nature of power and wealth. In one of the first volume's central events, Batman is trapped in a secret underground labyrinth, complete with Minotaur-like Talon. As he battles his opponent, Court members cheer on their champion from above the maze. Batman, delirious from days of sleepless pursuit, flits between seeing the reality – distinctly blonde men and women – and nightmarish fantasy – hunched human-owl hybrids with claws bursting from elongated limbs; the abhorrence of these creatures in the eyes of Batman is the abhorrence of incestuous gene-mixing. Even later, in perfect state of mind, the first view of the Powers matriarch has her wielding the same horrid claw of the owl-

hybrid, an artistic flourish harkening back to Batman's unhinged true-sight (*City of Owls* 99). Moreso, the events in the labyrinth seem to play off as a family affair; the Court defers to "the littlest" (*Court of Owls* 120) – a young Owl-masked girl in pink dress with matching doll – in whether to continue the torture and later wheels around an elderly matron who refers to another member as "my dear" (136). If power and wealth in Gotham has been hoarded among the corporate figure of the Court, it would appear to remain a family business. The Court is then a closed circle: of wealth, of race and – if not biologically then gesturing towards socially – incestuous. It is an uncaring hyper-elite that controls Gotham from the shadows; Batman's struggle against the group, however, is one in which his *tactical* ability is able to trump their *strategic* assets.

Last chapter I read the privileging of space over place within the pages of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* but, in all its beautiful complexity, the delineation of the two is not always so clearcut for, as de Certeau declares, "*space is a practiced place*" (117). It is defined by the tactical operations of the pedestrian-subject and the power of "stories," defining spatial experiences whose labor "constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places" (118). In Snyder's "Court of Owls" arc, Batman's ability to operate – and operate triumphantly against the agents of The Court of Owls – is defined by his knowledge of the stories of these places, places that, it should be noted, are both literally – through a dummy architectural fund – and figuratively – via their political power – the product of the Court's influence. Only one such instance of this mastery is an early confrontation at "the original Wayne tower" (*Court of Owls* 29). Bruce Wayne is meeting with Mayoral candidate Lincoln March at the top of the tower, a high power meeting between billionaire and politician with a view of the kingdom below, when

the two are interrupted by one of the Court's Talon assassins. As Bruce Wayne and the Talon crash through the glass of the viewing room and tumble down to the street below, it is the Batman's knowledge of the little-known thirteenth gargoyle of the tower – the chapter opening with a monologue regarding the building's architectural history and distinctive gargoyle features – that gives him a foothold to prevent a fatal collision with the ground below (46). This formulation – of opening description and later corresponding mastery of place and space by the Batman – is repeated in several of the arc's set pieces. Another particularly striking exemplar occurs in the labyrinth sequence. After several days of exhausting combat, Batman is able to set off an explosion that creates a passage into an underground portion of the Gotham river, a movement made possible by his knowledge of "the taste of the water in the fountain." Batman takes an almost uncharacteristic moment of exuberance to monologue that the Court "can't hide from me. I know this city, down to its foundation" (*Court of Owls* 131). This knowledge is the essential tool that ensures the Caped Crusader's ultimate triumph over the shadowy court, a knowledge of practice that trumps the strategic forces of wealth and political power.

For all its resonance with the rhetoric of the Occupy movement, Snyder's text remains acutely aware of Batman's own role as an essentially authoritarian figure rather than liberating freedom-fighter; his urban renewal project, after all, includes building a "myriad of new **bat-bunkers**" in much the same way the Court has hidden lairs on the 13th floor of multiple building projects. The central conflict of the arc is repeatedly framed as one for a sort of spiritual *ownership* of the city, the series opening with Batman recounting a "Gotham Gazette" man-on-the-street weekly that asks "What is Gotham?" Answers include that "'Gotham is Two-Face,' meaning Gotham is a city at odds with itself." Or "'Gotham is Killer Croc.' Meaning that the city

is little more than a cannibalistic monster.” But, in a telling admission to the reader, Batman’s musing continues: “one of the most common answers to the ‘Gotham is’ question is ‘Batman.’ Gotham is ‘Batman.’ Gotham is ‘Batman’s city.’ Gotham is ‘the Bat...’ All answers I’m partial to, myself.” At the close of the first volume, former Robin Dick Grayson bitterly reproaches the Dark Knight, declaring that the Court is no more Gotham City than Batman. And, in a little lessons learned wrap-up at the close of the arc, Batman is able to admit to his former protégé that “Gotham isn’t Batman. Gotham isn’t the owls. Gotham is... Gotham is all of us.” Yet despite this gesturing to a social fabric that creates the city – and an us that perhaps includes the reader in its purview – the final image of the second volume’s main story arc is a single splash page of Bruce Wayne’s eye, the skyline of Gotham reflected in his iris as he declares that he will “be watching **always**” (*City of Owls* 143).

Although the violence of Batman’s confrontations with the Court laud the ability of a saboteur figure to unravel the authoritarian structures of a received city construction, panoramic views reinforce the notion of a singular, controllable city. Thus when Greg Capulo repeatedly illustrates the skyline of Gotham city, he reinforces the notion of the place as defined and readable. Yet these panoramas are, like the final splash image, often used as accompaniments to declarations of the principle actors’ desire to control that city – either a Court member unleashing an army of Talon upon the city, asking them to “**take gotham city**” (*Court of Owls* 158) or Bruce Wayne’s triumphant pose and subsequent view atop the aforementioned 13th gargoyle of the Wayne Tower, reiterating that he is “the only legend this city needs” (46). These readers desire to be *writers* of the city but, despite a certain mood and tone, Gotham remains elusive.

On page 83 of *Court of Owls*, a map of Gotham City haunts the background of Bruce Wayne's memories. Despite a size legend, the map communicates little to develop a harmonized whole of the metropolis. And while we must accept that this task is impossible – Gotham City is, surprise surprise, a fiction – Snyder's text resists any possibility of a totalizing vision of the city. To quote the Caped Crusader himself, "Because above everything, Gotham is... a **mystery**." The "Court of Owls" arc is thus able to subvert the notion of a readable city so integral to authorized histories and ideologies while also gesturing to those forces that wish to write those histories – like the well-meaning Batman or more nefarious Court of Owls. It offers a social awareness so sorely missing from the fictions of the superhero comic that cannot be construed as anything but reactionary – fighting crime in a city where crime is produced *ex nihilo*. Although the images of a comic book, like photos, are merely fetishized abstractions, they nonetheless contribute to the mythologies and narratives that are imbued in the contemporary North American urban experience. Thus while I will not hold my breath for the day Bruce Wayne puts up the cape and campaigns for institutional reform, Snyder's Gotham offers an alternative voice to the internal moral decay so integral to the mythos since Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* while also remaining critical of the Batman's generic function as an authoritarian figure. It is a narrative where the exaggerated representation of the failing American everycity is blamed on the actions of the powerful rather than the powerless, an accidental but timely call to "Occupy Gotham."

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In that final panel of “Anarky in Gotham,” after the Batman expresses empathy for the cause of his vanquished foe, he leaps off the building into the night, cloak unfurled. Commissioner Gordon drops his pipe in shock at the sight before him: a giant red A – the graffiti tag of Anarky – adorns the crusader’s cape, unbeknownst to its wearer. The scene might serve as an apt analogy for this thesis, in more ways than one. It serves to reflect the way in which I too have mapped an ideological construct onto The Batman, not anarchy but the spatial theory of Michel de Certeau. Borrowing various concepts from *The Practice of Everyday Life* – and especially the “Walking in the City” chapter – I have articulated an incipient delinquency in the movement of the superhero and how space can be traversed and privileged to empower an individual over emplaced conceptions, whether they be the Golden Age’s gothic dystopia, Frank Miller’s fascist American state or Snyder’s municipal illuminati. But this conception of a radical Batman is so often unknown, hidden beneath narratives of criminality all too in line with the reactionary politics of broken-door policing; the Batman mythos, as Urrichio and Pearson so neatly summarize, “deal with criminal brutality, but not the brutalizing slum landlords; they deal with the greed of petty theft but not poverty and hopelessness – in short, they deal with the transgressions of the underclasses but not the conditions that give rise to these conditions” (206). Urrichio elsewhere writes that the narratives of Batman comics are predicated on a defining and recurring origin – the murder of Bruce’s parents, Thomas and Martha Wayne – that is, in most accounts, the nightmare resultant of a property crime (126); Bruce Wayne’s crusade is then a middle-class revenge fantasy against the petty crimes of those struggling to

survive on the street. Nor can one ignore the fascistic impulse of the one-man redeemer, the iron will of the superhero who follows the failure of the democratic institutions they are ostensibly set to protect; as one character remarks in Christopher Nolan's well-received film *The Dark Knight* after the titular character has been compared to an appointed protector of Ancient Rome, "the last man who they appointed... was named Caesar and he never gave up his power." Although Miller may satirize this facet and Snyder complicate it by drawing a parallel between the hero and his illuminati foe, the anti-democratic compulsion described by Lawrence and Jewitt is a present reality.

But my application of spatial theory to articulate another, incipient angle to these narratives is not negated by these realities. I offer a first taste of an approach that addresses the reality of the superhero's diegetic space as facsimile of real urban environments and the ideological dimensions of that simulation. Much analysis has been done – my own earlier work included – to examine comics as historical referents; *Captain America* #1 of March 1941 famously has its hero punching Hitler, a precursor to the superhero-flavored propaganda that would be produced once America actually entered the war. In an exemplar of this manner of cultural historiography for the generalized superhero, John Donovan traces how "'Evil' was portrayed by the Communists" and transformed in the 1960s/1970s to villains that reflected "current societal issues such as racism, women's liberation and government corruption" (56). Yet to evoke these readings is often a matter of historical knowledge and plot summary rather than a consideration of the full potential of the visual to create its own meaning rather than simply assist as articulation of a surface connotation. I have here gestured to contemporary events of the comic's creation – as in the Occupy Movement and Snyder's "Court of Owls" – to

flesh-out the narratives imbued in the cityspace of Gotham instead of giving them primary significance. Because the reader will never come face-to-face with The Joker but will likely – assuming a predominantly urban North American audience – find themselves hurrying down a dark alley late at night, wondering what lurks in the shadows.

The relation of the superhero to their environment is one of those stories that “organize places through the displacements they ‘describe’” (116), acting to both define and obscure the limits and actions of the tactical pedestrian. De Certeau considers the manner in which an “accelerated succession of actions” multiply spaces, and remarks in parenthesis “as in the detective novel or certain folktales, though this spatializing frenzy nevertheless remains **circumscribed by the textual place**” (118, my emphasis). The visual of the comic overcomes this circumscription while its plots play out – sometimes as the detective novel, as I have argued is the case of The Batman – but most certainly like the folktale that produces meaning. The idea that the superhero is descendent of ancient myth, offering a new pantheon of gods, has been clumsily communicated many times. But the folkloric power of the superhero cannot be denied, providing tales of wonder that astonish and stimulate and all within a diegetic setting not so unlike the reader’s own world.

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