Comic book readers around the world know that the medium’s unforgettable heroes and villains are capable of leaping out of their pages and into our lives. Upholding “truth, justice, and the American way” with super-powered strength and agility that is “faster than a speeding bullet,” Superman emerged from his Kryptonian rocket ship and onto the American cultural landscape, an origin story told and retold countless times to no less fanfare. Iconic Spider-Man inspired a generation of youths who related to his soft-spoken geekiness, yet reveled in the “great power” he gained from a spider bite—also saddling him with the proverbial “great responsibility.” Wonder Woman’s golden “lasso of truth,” originally forged from the magic girdle of Aphrodite, gave the world a woman super-empowered to squeeze the truth out of even the toughest villain. Captain America, Batman, and Green Lantern: the list goes on, and yet so many have become mainstays in American popular culture, nearly universally recognizable and often deeply loved.

Comic book lore inspired generations of readers—even members of the criminal justice community who work with real-life criminal offenders. Such was the case with Judge Jack Love of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Judge Love sentenced the very first offender to electronic monitoring after reading a Spider-Man story in which the superhero is tagged with a device that tracks his movements. Judge Love saw the potential for such a
Holy Criminology, Batman!

device to keep tabs on probationers and developed electronic monitoring, now commonly used in community corrections across the country.¹

Although comic books are far from manuals for how to run the criminal justice system, we can learn much about American society by interrogating the ways in which cultural meanings about crime and justice are negotiated and contested within them. In this context, comic books offer expressions of contemporary life that tap into our hopes, fears, personal insecurities, and uncertainties about the future, as do popular media in general. Comic books, particularly those of the superhero genre, are replete with themes of crime and justice, yet are frequently ignored by criminologists.² We explore the ways in which meanings about crime and justice are negotiated and contested in comic books and the way these imaginings form part of a broader cultural context in which readers absorb, reproduce, and resist notions of justice.

We examine comic books in terms of what criminologist Stephanie Kane described as an “experimental ethnographic space,” a place occupied by characters as its virtual inhabitants.³ Indeed, the world of Superman drops the reader into a kind of alternate America, where Smallville and Metropolis act as proxies for real American towns and cities. Batman invites us into a dark and dystopic Gotham where we meet the Riddler and the Penguin and get lost in the dark passageways of Wayne Manor or vicariously play with the technological gadgetry of a reclusive and crime-obsessed millionaire. Through extended virtual visits to these imaginary worlds, we paid attention to both the visuals and the text—the juxtaposition of which provides a wealth of opportunities for interpretation.

“[C]omics are more flexible than theater, deeper than cinema,” explains Pulitzer Prize–winning comic creator Art Spiegelman in a 1991 New York Times interview.⁴ Comic creator Scott McCloud states that the “heart of comics lies in the space between the panels—where the reader’s imagination makes still pictures come alive!”⁵ Unlike other mediums such as film or television, comic books rely much more heavily on the reader as participant—to use his or her imagination to fill in “the gutter,” or space between the panels. McCloud further explains that the more abstract the artistic rendering, the more the reader fills in, or creates his or her own level of detail. Comic books then provide a means for exploring images of villains, heroes, and notions of justice in a participatory and fluid medium.⁶
Like other scholars who have investigated the relationship between cultural artifacts and fandom, our approach also considers the plurality of the audience and explores the ways in which devoted readers, sometimes colloquially referred to as “fanboys,” not only absorb comic book narratives but also may actively negotiate and shape the narratives themselves. At times, readers have directly influenced plot lines, such as in DC Comics’ decision to let voters decide whether the second Batman sidekick Robin (a.k.a. Jason Todd) lives or dies at the hand of the Joker in *A Death in the Family* (1988). Invited to call a hotline, over ten thousand readers voted by a narrow margin for Robin to meet his demise. Readers may also influence the storylines in a more subtle process, by using their economic power to purchase one comic book over another.

As anthropologist Matthew Wolf-Meyer points out, fans communicate through specific language and inside knowledge that is indicative of cultural importance while serving to distinguish them from outsiders. More casual readers are easily recognized by their inability to communicate this insider knowledge. Fans, on the other hand, submerge themselves in the minutiae. There are voluminous weekly podcasts available online, many with related forums drawing thousands of members, devoted to discussion and commentary on each week’s comic book releases. At a New York City-based comic book and graphic novel meet-up, group members described their consumption of comic books and graphic novels in an indulgent, pleasure-oriented way, planning their next purchase and reveling in the “first time” they read a certain comic book or graphic novel.

The format of the comic books, the seductive illustrations coupled with captivating dialogue boxes, draws in readers, who then encounter the medium’s dominant themes and messages. We suggest that the repetition of cultural meanings in comic book narratives often reinforces particular notions of justice, especially the punishment philosophies of retributive justice and incapacitation. Further, we argue that these types of punishments are meted out by crime-fighting heroes and superheroes who are depicted as predominantly white males defending a nostalgic American way of life. These particularities of the comic book formula, which we describe in this book, are important to explore and interrogate. Like most other popular culture artifacts, they contribute to the retributive discourse that legal studies scholar David Garland points out dominates our social responses to crime.
To bolster our analysis of crime-and-justice content, we conducted focus groups with a purposive sample of comic readers in order to understand the intensity of the connection between the readers and their participation in the world of comic books, both inside and outside the text. By "outside the text," we mean that we will situate comic books within the larger environment of popular cultural fandom. As participant observers over a period of several years, we spent hours in comic books stores, attended comic book conventions, conferences, reading groups, and book signings, monitored relevant online discussion boards and Twitter feeds, and listened to weekly comic book-focused podcasts.

Realizing that comic books continue to reflect the social environment from which they emerge, we began our sampling after the terrorist events of September 11, 2001. In particular, themes related to global terrorist threats have proliferated, and the "death" of Captain America has been analyzed as commentary on the ineffectiveness of patriotic American superheroes to fight for justice in our multicultural and morally vague postmodern world. Over the past several years, more diverse, complex characters have appeared. For example, in pre-9/11 comic books, whenever Arabs and Muslims were depicted, they were almost always villains, whereas since 2001, heroic Arabs and Muslims have been depicted in such best-selling books as *X-Men: Messiah Complex* and *The Losers*. Notably, after 9/11 comic books created a space for a new characterization of Arabs, possibly as a counter-reaction to more stereotypical constructions in media discourse. Although the fundamental formula in many comic books, which we will discuss in the following chapters, remains identifiable, we believe that contemporary comic books are best understood in terms of this post-9/11 shift in plots and characters.

Throughout the book, we will refer to a cross-section of two hundred contemporary American comic books, published from 2001 until 2010, which includes icons such as *Batman*, *Captain America*, *Spider-Man*, *Wonder Woman*, and *Superman* (see appendix A). The vast majority of the comic books we consider were published by DC or Marvel, which together comprise approximately 70 percent of the annual market share (see table 1.1). Most of the books in our sample belong to the superhero genre. Unlike other mediums such as movies, television, and video games, the superhero genre dominates the landscape of comic books, perhaps because it is the originator of most of the superhero characters that remain
influential today. Yet, this has occurred despite many examples of notable non-superhero comics (e.g., *Maus*, *Persepolis*, *Optic Nerve*, etc.) that have achieved critical acclaim. Regardless, non-superhero titles are poor sellers relative to the superhero genre and do not drive monthly sales, according to the comic book distributors’ monthly sales data.

We allowed the lived experience to dictate our methods and subject material by tapping into both best-selling comic books and those that have achieved critical acclaim or are considered important by readers themselves. Based on our ethnographic engagement with the world of comics, we paid particular attention to the books that bloggers, message boards, forums, focus groups, and members of the comic book community identified as important, controversial, popular, influential, or otherwise interesting.

Next, we ensured that our sample is representative of what sells best, making the assumption that popularity is a reasonable proxy for cultural influence. We based our sample on the monthly comic books distribution rankings using the ICv2 (Internal Correspondence version 2), which provides a ranking of direct market sales to comic book stores although it does not compile data on sales from “big box” stores like Barnes & Noble. Using their website, we accessed sales data for the time period between March 2003 and August 2009. Our sample included dozens of the one hundred most popular comic book series and many of the one hundred most popular graphic novels based on a popularity index (see appendix A for more information about our popularity index). Through our popularity index we confirmed that our purposive sample tapped into the content that an allegedly objective measure of popularity—sales—would have also suggested. In addition, we read several more titles, bringing our total sample to nearly two hundred.

**Cultural Criminology and Comic Books**

In analyzing contemporary comic books, we employ a cultural criminological framework, suggesting that the cultural meaning and symbolic importance of comic books represents a viable area of exploration for criminologists. Cultural criminology is an evolving theoretical perspective influenced by various critical approaches such as labeling theory, postmodernist analysis,
social constructionism, and critical criminology, among others. Cultural criminologists describe the contemporary media environment as “an infinite hall of mediated mirrors” in which fast-paced packages of information and entertainment are constantly produced and reproduced, resulting in “a circulating cultural fluidity that overwhelms any certain distinction between an event and its representation.” This connects to notions described by theorists as “postmodern” or “late modern,” in which “popular cultural signs and media images increasingly dominate our sense of reality and the way we define ourselves and the world around us.” In postmodern thought, images of reality increasingly constitute reality itself. Or, as Jean Baudrillard theorized, society exists in the hyperreal; images of images of images begin to replace the original until all that resonates and contains cultural meaning is the facsimile.

Accordingly, there is an increasing convergence of fiction and nonfiction in our everyday lives. For example, entertainment is fused with news, news commentary is often indistinguishable from news reporting, and prime-time entertainment has increasingly turned to crime-related “reality” shows packaged and sold as raw and unfiltered reality (e.g. COPS and the SWAT franchises). Here, we are not suggesting that one is unable to distinguish between fiction and reality, but rather recognizing that, as cultural studies scholar John Storey points out, “the distinction between the two has become less and less important.” In this context of the blurring between fact and fiction and the increasing significance of popular culture on public discourse, it is no longer advisable for criminologists to ignore what Nicole Rafter calls “popular criminology,” or the criminological imaginings that lie at the intersection of academic criminology and popular culture.

Our interest lies in exploring how the portrayal of crime and justice in comic books contributes to conceptions of when, where, and against whom violence is appropriate and to the intensity with which readers connect to the reading experience portraying that violence. As criminologist Jock Young states, the mass media “does not cause aggression so much as provide a script or narrative which suggests when violence is appropriate, against whom, for what reasons and with what effects, together with images of those against whom violence is permitted and prohibited.”

Consumption of comic books is a rich and meaningful experience for readers. Comic books (the most impactful, at least) connect with readers
at a visceral level—evoking emotional responses that we link to criminologist Jack Katz’s concept of engagement in a “ritual moral exercise.” In his analysis of news media, Katz is suggesting that readers do not seek out crime news to get to the “truth” of any matter. Instead they seek to confront moral concerns. The consumption of news stories is a way for readers to work out their moral anxieties. Katz writes, “Although each may read in isolation, phenomenologically the experience may be a collective, emotional ‘effervescence’ of moral indignation.” In a similar fashion, we suggest that comic books, with their recurring themes of crime and punishment, provide a means for readers to work through moral dilemmas. Even as heroes often show restraint, the violent graphics and extended fight scenes have a retributive emotional resonance. David Garland describes this engagement, pointing out that punishment evokes a range of emotions, from resentment, defined as moving “the ‘indifferent bystander’ to feel strongly that action must be taken to put right the injustice” to an even more base sentiment of sadistic gratification in the suffering of others inflicted through punitive power.

Reading comic books is a way of experiencing and expressing retribution and vengeance that is short-lived and contained within the context of “fantasy” (i.e., there’s a time and place for vengeance). Such real-life violence perpetrated in a civilized society would be deemed at the very least unacceptable, if not criminal. In fact, at the moment of consumption, readers themselves express a visceral, emotional desire to engage violently with the bad guys. For example, during the course of our study, we found several readers expressing sentiments such as, “[S]ometimes bad people deserve a beating” and “just need to be throttled” or, more succinctly, “[W]e want blood.” At the same time, they are careful to highlight that the comic book universe is not “our reality” and that to engage in “the real world” as a “superhero” would be foolhardy if not suicidal.

Insofar as comic books primarily consist of narratives of violence, crime, and justice, reading them is itself a transgression. Readers express this notion by stating, “All justice is based somewhat on revenge” and “It feels good to punish.” One comic book fan even likened the comic book world to the “porn world” for having a formula with a similar teaser style, a hyperreality of violence that often culminates in virtual “blood on our claws.” Put even more starkly, one blogger wrote in regard to his love of the *Moon Knight* series, “I gotta’ say, it feels sick of me to think it, but I love
reading *Moon Knight*, because deep down I know his moral compass, his concept of justice, are both totally fucking wrong.”

Through our analysis and exploration of the way fans receive these comic books messages, we offer an explanation for how comic books contribute to and reflect a larger popular discourse on crime and justice in America. Within the comic book narratives come ideological moments frequently representing American-style apocalyptic justice. We explore superheroes as they navigate paths to justice that operate outside the rule of law. Here, we find that in administering extralegal justice, heroes make “deathworthiness” calculations along the way, deciding whether to kill villains or let them live. We center this discussion in the context of legal proceedings regarding death-eligibility decisions made by prosecutors, noting that comic books explore deathworthiness in fictional contexts free from legal constraints, but ripe with emotional satisfaction for readers. Not all villains or characters are deathworthy. It is through these deliberations of deathworthiness that we find the notion of contextual justice. Rather than deathworthiness decisions being made solely on the basis of the legal culpability of the offender, we find that such decisions hinge on the intrinsic nature of the hero him/herself. Readers judge the heroes’ actions through the lens of contextual justice. Whether the actions of the hero are accepted as legitimate or not by the readers rests largely on the character traits of the hero rather than the nature of the crime.

We also find that comic books frequently engage in a retributive tease—a reliance on retributive, get-tough rhetoric that is fashioned as messianic. Yet, the action often falls short of the promise of retribution and instead relies on incapacitation as the preferred path to justice. We refer to this as “apocalyptic incapacitation,” or incapacitation that occurs in the context of retributive rhetoric and posturing. For many, it is among the more satisfying elements of comic book consumption.

The reliance on incapacitation, administered rhetorically as retribution and most often by a white male hero, is undoubtedly a product of the formulaic nature of the medium and its dependence on recirculating popular characters through the years. These stories must ratchet up the action without necessarily disrupting the comic book world’s basic social landscape. This is not necessarily surprising, as many have interpreted superheroes as keepers of the status quo. Most famously, Umberto Eco argued that the comic book medium itself leaves no room for counterhegemonic
ideology. However, we suggest that, at times, there are expressions of resistance to be found, particularly at the intersection of race, gender, sexual orientation, and heroism in a post-9/11 context. Our findings are similar to those of popular culture scholar Jeff Williams, who acknowledges that most of mainstream comics reinforce the status quo while independently published books are more likely to challenge the current social order and raise ideological questions that confront the prevailing paradigm.34

**Comic Book Culture**

Fans of comic books are far removed from the persistent loner-geek stereotype. In fact, the consumption of comic books and comic-inspired media is far from an isolated, solitary act. We found that fans are quite eager to share their impressions and understandings with other like-minded individuals as part of a larger subcultural community. As John Fiske suggests in *Understanding Popular Culture*, texts (or film, video games, television, or any other form of entertainment media) are not, in and of themselves, meaningful. He states, “Popular texts are to be used, consumed, and discarded, for they function only as agents in the social circulation of meaning and pleasure; as objects they are impoverished.”35

Over the years, comic book fans have developed a thriving community. In the 1960s fans assembled for their own comic “cons,” or conventions. Today, these conventions rank among the most popular destinations for comic book fans around the country, including cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, and Seattle. When first launched in 1970, the San Diego comic book convention attracted about three hundred fans, yet more recently annual comic book conventions have drawn tens of thousands of fans and are now held in several major cities, with the largest cons operating on both coasts. For example, a recent San Diego Comic Con attracted a crowd of at least 130,000, and the New York Comic Con attendance has more than quadrupled from approximately 20,000 at its 2006 revival to approximately 95,000 in 2010.36 Here, at these multimedia extravaganzas, fans relish the opportunity to meet face to face with creators and artists, often requesting autographs or pitching their own story ideas or artwork.

In his study of the social significance of the fan subcultural community, researcher and professor of communication, journalism, and cinematic
The New York City Comic Con, 2011. The popularity of comic book conventions, known as “cons,” grew significantly after they were reinvented as popular culture, multimedia extravaganzas. (Photo: Nickie D. Phillips)

A fan dressed as Superman poses at San Diego Comic Con, 2009. (Photo: Nickie D. Phillips)
Henry Jenkins describes fans not as mere consumers but as “active social producers and manipulators of meaning.” He writes,

Viewed in this fashion, fans become a model of the type of textual “poaching.” . . . Their activities pose important questions about the ability of media producers to constrain the creation and circulation of meanings. Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media.

Similarly, a study of the comic book fan culture finds that readers are active participants in the medium and may, at times, influence the direction of the storylines. Beginning in the 1950s, many comic books actively encouraged participation of the fans by allowing feedback in the ever-popular letters pages commonly found in the back of monthly issues. Recognizing the significance of reader contributions, the letters pages were a way to form a sense of community among the readers and creators. The letters serve as a place for readers to express admiration for the heroes, to condemn the current story trajectory, or to offer suggestions for future directions. While many mainstream comic books have eliminated pages for printing fan letters, contributing to the letters pages continues to remain a badge of honor, with comic book fans bragging that “my letter” was printed in past issues and noting that names and addresses were routinely printed in the letters pages. The sense of community that was forged with the letters pages continues to evolve on the Internet, where comic fan pages are numerous and readers post (frequently anonymous) comments and reviews on various blogs, forums, and web pages.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, as long-term comic book fans came of age, many transitioned from fan to creator. Creators and writers such as Joss Whedon (Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel, Serenity, and Dollhouse), Kevin Smith (Daredevil: Guardian Devil, Daredevil: Daredevil ½, Spider-Man/Black Cat: The Evil That Men Do, Batman: Cacophony), Brian K. Vaughn (Y The Last Man, Ex Machina) and J. M. Straczynski (Amazing Spider-Man, Fantastic Four, Silver Surfer: Requiem, The Brave and the Bold) are among the most successful “fanboy creators.” These writers often transition to a variety of other mediums and back, from comic books to television to film. Similarly, Valerie D’Orazio, who wrote Emma Frost Origins, sent in her first pitch for a
Punisher storyline at age thirteen, and Greg Pak, who has written *Magneto: Testament* and *Planet Hulk*, among other critically acclaimed books, was a comics fan as a youth. Fans who had previously contributed to letters pages and followed storylines for years were now in the position of creator, shaping narratives and contributing to the mythology of the heroes they had grown to love and the villains they despised.

### The Mainstream

Although “comic book culture” (i.e., annual comic cons and myriad cultural artifacts pertaining to comic books and superheroes) remains vibrant, overall, sales of monthly comic books have declined over the past several years. In fact, without merchandising and wildly successful movie franchises, the state of the comic book industry is somewhat tenuous. The cultural influence is vast, but since the mid-twentieth century, actual readership has declined precipitously and now exists as a subculture.

Although estimated readership in the United States is disputed, the comic book industry reports a total of $681 million in comic book and graphic novel sales in 2009, down 5 percent from 2008. Most recently, an increasing number of titles have become available in electronic and online formats in the hopes of attracting new readers. It is too early to retrieve accurate sales numbers on comic books sold in digital form. However, it is clear that Marvel and DC consistently top the list of publishers by sales earnings, trailed by independent publishers. Additionally, comic book–related merchandise brings in significant revenue. Marvel earned $15 million from licensed merchandise in 1995.

Die-hard fans follow monthly installments of a title in the form of “flop-pies” (or “issues”) with stapled bindings. These story arcs are frequently collected into books and marketed as “trade paperbacks” or “graphic novels.” Occasionally, self-contained works exist from the start as graphic novels. A number of genres populate comic books (e.g., romance, horror, crime, war, autobiographical, westerns, etc.), as well as hybrids. For example, many superhero comics may include characteristics of the romance genre and/or the horror genre. However, in terms of sales, the overwhelmingly predominant genre is that of the superhero. In fact, Henry Jenkins documents that the superhero genre has become so accepted as the dominant paradigm
that when creators attempt to push boundaries within the genre, for example, offering different structure and aesthetics than the traditional fare, fans frequently express their rancor.\

We find that across the various types of comics, themes of crime and justice abound, acting as a connecting thread throughout the medium. However, we acknowledge that the creative content of the books is somewhat constrained in the following ways: through editorial control, by virtue of successful spin-offs into other media, and because of the formulaic nature of the genre and readers’ expectations of continuity. These categories are not exhaustive, but are presented to give some idea of how the content, including themes of crime and justice, is at times influenced by concerns other than the creative imaginations of the writers, artists, pencillers, colorists, and letterers.

**Editorial Control and Technological Advancements**

Historically, mainstream comic book content was, to a large extent, a product of self-censorship based on criteria outlined in the Comics Code. The Comics Code was developed as a reaction to public and political outcry against
graphic depictions of violence and other abhorrent behavior appearing in comic books during the late 1940s and 1950s. Though the indignation was primarily directed toward comics in the crime and horror genres (as opposed to the superhero books), nearly every publisher voluntarily submitted to the Code to maintain sales. Throughout the next several decades, the Code was subject to revisions and eventually abandoned. Currently, Marvel and DC implement their own internal standards dictating content. (See chapter 2 for a more in-depth discussion of the significance of the Comics Code.)

Story arcs are as much driven by the editors as by the creators, if not more so. Since profit motives drive the industry, publishers and editors have an incentive to provide content that they believe will be most attractive to the consumer. At times, this undoubtedly influences the ways in which crime and violence are portrayed. On her Occasional Superheroine blog, Valerie D’Orazio describes her experiences working on the editorial team at one of the major comic book corporations (presumed to be DC Comics) and meetings where concern for sales drove decisions to move the stories to a more violent, gritty edge. She relates an interesting, and perhaps outrageous, account of editorial influence. She writes, “So our books changed. There was rape, and murder, torture, death, and mutilation. Superheroes did amoral or outright evil things and the line between good and bad was blurred.” In her post, she expresses her discomfort with one particular storyline and the decision to victimize “the most innocent, virginal, good-natured ‘nice’ character they could find and ravage her not

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http://www.diamondcomics.com/public/default.asp?t=1&m=1&c=3&s=5&ai=90742
once but *twice.*” Most disturbingly, she recalls the enthusiasm with which
the editors embraced the violence: “It started with my associate editor run-
ning gleefully into our boss’s office, several boards of art in his hand. ‘The
rape pages are in!’”

The appearance of more graphic violence and sexual content over the
past several years has partly been attributed to the “aging” comic book fans
and their desire for more mature material. As readers age, the editors find
themselves in the position of offering content that appeals to the older base
as well as attracting new, younger readers. We suggest that the content of
the books reflects the larger, white male heteronormative social context
from which these books emerge. Most editors and creators of the titles in
our sample are white men, and it is through this patriarchal lens that jus-
tice is served.

**Spin-Offs**

Whereas the contemporary comic book industry may target a subcultural
niche, the mythology of superheroes reverberates throughout society and
spins off into toys, video games, movies, and television shows. Since 1990, the
number of commercially successful movies inspired by comic books or super-
 hero tales has grown substantially. The two top-grossing films released in the
United States in 2008 were comic book inspired—*The Dark Knight* and *Iron
Man.* In fact, only a few weeks after the DVD release, *The Dark Knight* soared
to number two on the all-time domestic box office gross. In addition, both
Marvel and DC have released several motion comics, a combination of art and
dialogue from the comic book pages with animated transitions between panels
and voiceover, compatible for computers and mobile devices. These releases
include titles such as Marvel’s *Spider-Woman, Iron Man: Extremis,* and *Aston-
ishing X-Men* and DC’s *Superman: Red Son* and *Batgirl: Year One.* Moreover,
video games are a 37-billion-dollar industry worldwide, with a portion of the
comic book–inspired games selling several million copies per title. Other,
unforeseeable changes in content and distribution are probably on the horizon
due to the corporate restructuring of DC Comics into DC Entertainment and
the acquisition of Marvel Entertainment by Walt Disney Co. in 2009.

While the popularity of comic book–inspired media attests to the broad
cultural impact of these characters, there is concern among comic book
fans that the motion picture and video game industries wield influence on
the development of the characters and the direction of the story arcs in
the comic books rather than the other way around. Comic book publish-
ers may devote titles to single characters or teams, not because they believe
the characters necessarily appeal to readers but because they believe the
characters will transition well to major motion pictures. Here, comic books
are less the creative genesis and more a supplement to licensed material
produced and marketed in other formats. The mythology bounces from
medium to medium and back again, transforming cultural meanings of
crime and justice. For example, the transformation of Nick Fury from a
white hero to an African American hero in The Ultimates comic book orig-
inated with the hopes of casting the immensely popular Samuel L. Jackson
in the Iron Man movies. Ultimately, heroes and villains are recast and rei-
imagined through these various mediums, influencing popular conceptions
of heroism, villainy, and paths to justice.

Formulaic Nature of the Superhero Genre and Continuity

The formulaic constraints on mainstream superhero comic books affect the
content, including the portrayals of crime and justice. For example, we found
that peacemaking was an unlikely path to justice for superheroes due to the
constraints of the medium. Alternatives to retributive justice are occasionally
sought among superheroes, but usually only if the series is short-lived and
not part of a larger, mainstream continuity.

Though superhero comics may be consumed as free-standing, individ-
ual works, the vast majority of these story arcs fit into a larger, ongoing
super-plot, referred to as “continuity.” For example, most DC comics take
place in the context of the “DC Universe,” and therefore comics relate to
each other and establish an overarching continuity. Within this universe,
there may be multiple appearances of the same heroes and villains in co-
occurring titles (e.g., Superman may simultaneously appear in the Super-
man title as well as in Justice League of America and Action Comics). At
times, a single narrative event may occur as a limited-run title (e.g., DC’s
Blackest Night and Brightest Day, and Marvel’s Civil War or Secret Inva-
sion) that unites the heroes and villains into what is known as a “crossover
event.” The repercussions of a crossover event often impact characters in
the decades that follow. Author and cultural commentator Roz Kaveney writes that by the 1960s and ’70s, single-issue stories gave way to longer, more complex tales, with characters appearing and reappearing. In fact, by the 1980s, they were less “about individual fine issues of comics or even one good issue after another, but about runs of comics where a long game was played, or special short runs when a writer and artist were allowed to do something remarkable.”

Because continuity for many characters has existed over decades, liberties have been taken to reimagine and reset characters, and so the continuity is not logical in all cases. In some cases, when continuity becomes too complex and convoluted, it must be reset, or “retconned.” Through retcon, or “retroactive continuity,” characters may be updated and plots may be revised to allow forward momentum. For example, the acclaimed DC Comics’ 1985 series *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was an effort by the editors to revamp and simplify their multiple universes, which had become unwieldy, and to allow new readers a “jumping on” point.

To further complicate matters, some storylines involve DC or Marvel universe characters acting in arcs labeled as “noncontinuity.” These stories may involve the same characters and settings, but for the most part do not impact the larger continuity. Overall, this state of affairs may make it difficult for casual readers to find a comfortable point of entry and may further create a sense of subcultural insularity that is hard to penetrate if one is not fully immersed as a long-standing and faithful reader. The comic book impenetrability is similar to that of other popular culture niches such as Dungeons & Dragons role-playing games, Magic: The Gathering card games, and daytime television soap operas. However, to a greater extent than with these previous examples, comic book insularity spawns an external pantheon of entertainment products that go well beyond the subculture. The importance of this study is that we explore the insular nature of the medium’s crime and justice themes, as well as follow its ripple effects into the larger cultural constructions of crime and justice.

What follows is a study of an oft-neglected cultural artifact in criminology: the comic book. Our sample suggests that comic books, although diverse, most often reflect an ideological orientation that reinforces the dominant notions of retributive justice in American culture and celebrates nostalgic ideas about community through apocalyptic plots. Ironically, our sample also shows that retribution plays out as an incomplete project, leaving readers teased as to how violent a hero will be in pursuing justice.
during the battle between good and evil. This tease, though ideologically short of the promise of retribution underlying many of the storylines, nonetheless provides emotional satisfaction in the spectacularly violent and graphic ways in which restraint is ultimately accomplished.

The following two chapters provide a backdrop for our analysis. Although it is beyond the scope of our book to write a comprehensive history of crime and justice in comic books, chapters 2 and 3 offer a brief history for the purpose of providing some historical context to our analysis. We show that depictions of heroes and villains in comic books are a product of their social context and that much of the content is driven by industry concerns rather than the singular imaginings of any given creators. We specifically address the influence of the Comics Code and note how the industry’s self-censorship impacted the portrayals of crime and justice. In chapter 3, we show how the events of 9/11 reverberate in comic books by ushering in a reconsideration of the concept of heroism and serving as a cultural resource for dealing with anxieties in an era of uncertainty surrounding public safety. We also explore the shift in depictions of Arab and Muslim characters since 9/11. Together, chapters 2 and 3 set the stage for our analysis, which considers a wide range of comic books published after 9/11.

The remaining chapters of our book are devoted to the way the crime narrative generally plays out in contemporary best-selling comic books. We suggest that, like many popular cultural artifacts, comic books contribute to the larger discourse about crime and justice in America. We organize our analysis along the common narrative formula presented in these books; each of our chapters is a step along the “path to justice.” Our trajectory takes us from the crime problem, often imagined as apocalyptic in nature, to the villains as the embodiment of evil to the heroes and their portrayed racial, ethnic, and gender identities and sexual orientation to the various paths to justice they follow and ultimately to the criminal justice policy implications inherent in these stories. Along the way, we take account of the ways in which the meanings surrounding crime and justice circulate, giving special consideration to how these stories ultimately reinforce dominant notions of justice, portraying when, against whom, and in what context violence is appropriate. Throughout our analysis, we consider how the consumption of comic books serves as a vicarious transgression for readers. In this way, we engage with the readers to explore how these books serve as a way of confronting moral concerns and working out anxieties about fear of crime.
In chapter 4, we explore the crime problem as an apocalyptic crisis, noting that often comic books drop the reader into a catastrophic criminal event that threatens an idyllic social order. Heroes find themselves nostalgic for a more peaceful past as the world around them falls into a landscape of dystopic criminality and social disorder. The desire for the return to a better world drives the heroes’ utopian quests for justice. Understanding that criminal justice is itself a process, the purpose of these chapters is to uncover the circulating meanings surrounding the paths to justice in this common narrative formula.

Part of the importance of these circulating meanings lies in the power of media—including that of popular culture—to reflect and shape what type of person is considered a threat to the social order and what type of person may be considered heroic. In chapter 5, we examine the portrayal of those who threaten the social order, comic book villains, as characters with individual problems and pathologies. Comic books as a visual medium often portray villains as the embodiment of evil with their crooked faces and ugly exteriors.

On the flip side, in chapter 6, in our exploration of the hero, we explore vigilantism and the violent means through which heroes navigate their paths to justice. In chapters 7 and 8, we analyze how race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation are used to construct difference for both the heroes and the villains in ways that at times reinforce and reproduce stereotypes and at times recognize and reflect the diversity of the readers. We point out how the books portray a narrow notion of who and what type of person may be considered heroic. Rather than interrogate whether the books accurately reflect the “reality” of crime and justice in America, we suggest that the myths contained in these stories, specifically as they relate to heroes of difference, reverberate throughout the subculture and ultimately shape a larger cultural discourse.

Finally, in chapter 9 we confront the policy messages readers may take from comic books as part of an overall consumption of popular culture in a postmodern mediated environment. We show how retribution and incapacitation fare well in comic books, while calls for the rehabilitation of villains are conspicuously absent. Our goal is for the following chapters to provide information about the impact of popular culture in late modernity and, most importantly, about what we have come to expect from our heroes, ways in which we comprehend evil, and the strong cultural embrace of retributive justice.