

Queering imaginaries_s

De-Bunniex, a comic superhero



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Introduction

The present research derives from the personal need of a hero. Currently, in society abuse is embedded in common behavior and one feels isolated when tries to ask for help. To imagine someone/something who could rapidly rescue me –or whoever who could feel in danger in a situation of harassment–, with a shade of revenge, seems like a – imaginary – relief, or at least this is how I have been picturing it when I faced sexist, homophobic, racist, classist –among others– situations in Utrecht. Everything around seemed to be a plot, where everyone was allied in order to make one feel insecure and vulnerable. I was unable to recall any of the superheroes that I know and with who I could identify.

I realized that those feelings about the 'imaginary relief' could be related to the lack of superheroes who could accomplish my expectations –e.g.: a feminist superhero– and I started to wonder what are the images of superheroes that actually surround us. Then, I understood that despite the great variety of representative comics which cover topics such as LGBTQ+, queer, people of color, different religions or sexual orientations, there are not superheroes who really embodied those characteristics. Consequently, the need for a feminist savior beyond the earthly powers –biopowers¹– became an imperative for me. That is the reason why I decided to work on a comic² superhero who will try to challenge contemporary hegemonic representations by the queerization of the character.

In order to do so, I will first explore what are the current images of superheroes that revolve around Western societies of which I am part of. I chose two different comics which includes more representative superheroes in terms of religion, gender, class and so on and I will analyze their roles. Secondly, I propose my own queer superhero based on gender studies theories in an attempt to challenge dominant categories of identity on which some people do not fit in.

Following, I will expose what is the importance of the cultural representations and imaginaries which I will analyze in my research because the relevance of the comic lies in the impact that it may have on the social context that it belongs to. Furthermore, I will introduce my research questions and

1 The notion of biopower is explained in the next Chapter on Methodology, p.10.

2 As it will be exposed in Chapter 1, cartooning world is huge and very rich in terms of complexity and variety. So, despite I mention complicated graphic novels such as *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel (2006), the word *comic* in this research is aimed to popular comic series or stripes –that can be very rich in terms of the plot or characters–, however their target audience is broader, unlike underground comic, graphic novels or even manga series such as *Ghost in the Shell* –Japanese media franchise originally published as a manga series written and illustrated by Masamune Shirow–. The aim of this research is not to investigate queer comic world on itself –which would require a vast research–, but to look at the current representations in more feminist-oriented popular comics.

expose the chapters of the thesis.³

Cultural Representation

This master in gender studies has sparked my interest to work on a comic project which would be comprised of social meanings, cultural (re)signification and which could potentially reach personal experiences. I came across different authors such as Avery F. Gordon, Gloria Wekker, C.L. Quinan – among many others– on previous topics like power impact in everyday life practices, cultural archives or queer representation which has served as a source of inspiration and increased my interest in challenging societal images. I will first disclose how popular meanings are created and how it is related to the significance of social experience.

The importance of cultural representations and shared meanings within a society has been eloquently exposed by relevant scholars such as Stuart Hall in his book *Representation* (2013):

“Culture is not so much a set of things –novels and paintings or TV programs and comics– as a process, a set of practices. Primary, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meaning. The emphasis on cultural practices is important. It is participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects and events. Things 'in themselves' rarely, if ever, have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning”. (Hall, 2013).

Thus, meanings are produced by the people who inhabit a certain place, in a precise historical moment and they are in constant change.

Moreover, their significance is power-differentiated depending on the value that is given to those meanings. Consequently, cultural representations are unevenly empowered, thus affecting people's life events unequally. Hall (2013) explains it as follows:

3 Before we move to the chapters, I would like to mention that the grammar and vocabulary used in this work corresponds to the English level that I could afford in terms of time and financial resources. It means that I prepared myself to achieve the certificate that I was required -which means that my English should be already enough- but I did not have the means to find someone to check my thesis in order to have a standard/academic vocabulary. I am aware of the language that I used, it might not be completely accurate and sometimes difficult to understand. Nevertheless, I tried to balance it with a clear edition of the text. Furthermore, I consider that at the same time this statement serves to position my self and my work. On the one hand, I believe that the accessibility to English is related to one's possibilities regarding time and economy. On the other hand, I am glad that my work is accessible for people who may have a similar level in English. Lastly, I want to recognize the effort that it requires for the teachers to read my work. I am very grateful for it during this master.

“It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them –*how we represent* them– that we give them a meaning. In part, we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretations, which we bring to them into *everyday practices*. On the other hand, culture practices carry meaning and *value* for us, which need to be meaningfully interpreted by *others*, or which depend on meaning for their effective operation. Culture in this sense permeates all of society”. (Ibid., 2013).

When taking into account Hall's (2013) words, a comic could serve to give meaning, value, references and a place in society –visibility– to people who identify as queer or to those who do not identify with normative identities and feel excluded –or not included as desired– from social life⁴. Furthermore, culture as an exchange of meaning would have an effect in daily life experiences with new understandings and feelings to what 'queer' represents. As it has been exposed, these roles of the comics are representations that reproduce and perpetuate social power structures. Besides, I consider that in giving a queer subject the role of superhero –as it is my intention– we are empowering it, while at the same time we are challenging normative standards of what counts as queer; not as a marginal or bizarre subject –not in the sense of non-normative– as it usually appears in mainstream media, but an empowered and self-determined one.

All in all, if we turn back to my rescuer comic idea, my research focus is on how superheroes are currently represented from an intersectional⁵ perspective in popular comics.

Secondly, my intention is to argue what does mean 'queer' and/or 'to queer' and how it could be applied to a superhero. Finally, a sub-question that will be included is: How could we create a queer-oriented comic character in based on the more recent theories in Gender Studies in order to make a comic superhero proposal⁶?

4 It is important to mention here that some people that identify as queer, might not be willing to be included in society as a process of normalization. My intention here is not to include queer identities within normalizing social discourses, but to queer cultural representations that could permeate social relations between people and people's imaginary.

5 Intersectional here is understood as “a theoretical and political tool for challenging prevailing homogenized, white, middle-class conceptualizations of a feminist subject and feminist politics in which the category of sex was considered to be primary vector of social power relations.” (Górska, 2016). So intersectionality will be used to fully grasp the power-differentiated meanings of the popular representations in feminist comic superheroes. I will pay special attention to the grammars of power such as religion, racialized subjects, sexual identities, gender related topics, able-bodiness and so on. That is the reason I highlight queer roles, but intersectionally speaking.

6 Due to the characteristics and time required for the present MA thesis, the materialization of the comic proposal won't be

To answer these questions, I will provide a theoretical framework in Chapter 1 in which I will expose the feminist methodology that I followed from which my research has been developed. In Chapter 2, I will explore into comic representation. In order to provide an answer to the first research question, I chose two current comics to unveil their content and to analyze the role of their superheroes from an intersectional point of view.

Chapter 3 will introduce my own queer superhero. First, a definition of queer will be theorized. Then, I will expose the characteristics of the role and their superpowers, using relevant bibliography in gender studies.

Lastly, in Chapter 4, the core of this research will unfold. The need of new cultural imaginaries on which to inscribe new future possibilities of existence will be unraveled. The very aim of this superhero proposal is to challenge what counts as real in the current Western societies on which I am personally immersed in and to re-think the limitations placed on of reality-fiction dichotomies.

feasible. Nevertheless, the final objective is to co-create the comic with people who have suffered from different kinds of street harassment in the Netherlands. My wish is to carry out some interviews with persons who have experienced some type of abuse in to include their stories in the plot, in order to be the most representative as possible. Ideally my intention is to approach some organizations such as Stop StreetHarassment –‘SSH’, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to documenting and addressing and ending gender-based street harassment worldwide– and try to arrange some interviews with participants who would be willing to participate in this project and share their stories.

Methodology

In this chapter, the methods and principal theories that I used for my research are described. I would like to bring first some considerations that are crucial in feminist research practice. I personally find very relevant the knowledges that we produce within gender studies. Since we study the systematic exclusions derived from social power inequalities, the information that is derived from our activities should, at least, recognize these power relations that influence the process of knowledge production in order to avoid irresponsible knowledges. I explain next what does this responsibility consists of.

Feminist scholars have questioned traditional knowledge production. That is to say, they have sought to contest male-heterosexual-white-middle-class based knowledge, for instance, recognizing other knowing subjects – black, woman, homosexual, non-Christian, poor, etc.— challenging their position as just the object of study. S. Hesse-Biber and D. Piatelli in the chapter *From Theory to Method and back again* (Handbook of Feminist Research, 2012), who explore feminist research methods from its beginnings, claim that: “Feminists have challenged these principles (of the scientific model of research: verification, generalization, objectivity, value-neutrality, unity of science) and argued that they are rooted in a historical, positivist, androcentric paradigm that produces biased research and supports an objective, hierarchical approach to knowledge building” (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, p.143). These investigations that are mentioned here are unaware of the implications that the knowledge they produce have for the subjects they target. For instance, the hierarchical relationship established among the researcher -male- and the object of study -woman- in traditional knowledge production reinforces the differences of power in the man/woman social division, what is assumed to be the scientific truth. I consider that because I am a student of gender studies, I own a responsibility regarding the knowledges I want to produce. I mean that my research has been shaped by the feminist struggle of producing alternative knowledge that recognizes the bias regarding power, through exposing it instead of pursuing an analysis which rejects power inequalities. Consequently, in the process of writing this essay, thus producing my own results and parcel of knowledge, I tried to take into account certain considerations to give it a perspective which would be aware of the history of the knowledge production system. Following, I explain further what are those concerns, namely my self-position, power and relations, which have influenced the political core of this work and aim to make clear what are the ethics behind

my research.

The first consideration that I bore in mind was my position as a researcher in relation to the objects I analyze. K. Thiele (2015) states in her article *The arena of knowledges: Virginia Woolf and the Feminist Practice of Situated Knowledges*: “One of the most central results from the history of feminism is that with ample empirical proof feminism made clear how women have for the largest part of (human) history been absent(ed) as the subjects of knowledge production” (Thiele, p.2). It means that women have been traditionally neglected as knowing subjects, so scientific production results being mostly male originated. Nevertheless, the knowledge that has been historically elaborated results to be not only male but Western, middle-class, heterosexual, white centered and, what is more, appropriating just the figure of knowledge producer but not the object of study. As Thiele (2015) claims, not only women have been targeted as the object of study, but “we find a multiplicity of 'others' who are subjected/subjugated as object of knowledge” (Ibid, p.5). In this research, there is a researcher –me– and a subject(ed) object(s) of study –the superheroes–. I consider that this creates a power relation in which I decide, from my privileged position of student, to choose an object that I will investigate, in this case, superheroes who represent actual subjects –a Muslim woman and a transgender woman–. Hence, there exists a relation between my empowered position as a researcher and my object of study of which I am aware of and which I systematically try to include in my decisions, statements and conclusions with methodological tools. For instance, naming and exposing the cultural and social context that surround me and the objects that I analyze in every chapter already provides a non-neutral location to the elements that conform this research and the recognition of the unequal distribution of power between us. Next, I expose the politics surrounding the power which I am referring, and the choices I made in order to make it explicit it as much as it has been possible.

Following the above exposed, I assume that this thesis represents a parcel of knowledge which is subjected to power relations. K. Thiele's (2015) explains it as follows:

“What became evident then was that the question of knowledge cannot be separated from the questions of where it speaks from, whom it represents and how it is produced. Knowledge and its results – 'truths' (in the plural, but not to be misunderstood as relativist) – never emerge from political vacuum, they do not 'fall from heaven', but they emerge from within specific socio-political and historical conditions. Knowledge is therefore always a question of power.” (Thiele, p.6).

Consequently, the knowledge that I am producing is shaped by the conditions that affect my personal situation in relation to my precise socio-political condition and historical moment. For instance, due to my life experiences and my political standpoint, I identify myself as a transfeminist. It means that in my personal feminist struggles I try to firstly recognize my own privileges whereas I try to empower transgender people through my political/personal actions: it could be a demonstration, my daily life or the choices regarding my thesis –transgender superhero—. Thus, in order to give a principal role to the power relations and power structures which operate within society making them explicit during this research, I chose to work from an intersectional point of view.

Intersectionality, as it was mentioned in the introductory chapter, is used in this research as a methodological tool, but also as a personal choice which positions me and the focus I want to give to this work. M. Górska (2016) points it out in her chapter *Doing Intersectionality: Analyzing Materiality and Power*: "...intersectionality has become a tool for analyzing operations of not only gender, race, sexuality and class but also diverse dynamics of living within structural operations of power such as dis/ability, queerness, migration, aging, beauty, mental and physical norms and more." (Górska, p.116-117). Thus, an intersectional focus provides to my research a more accurate understanding of the empowerment/disempowerment of certain subjectivities regarding the categories above exposed, whereas it allows me to give light to –some of– my blind spots due to my own personal location within society. Intersectionality, then, not only recognizes those grammars of power that differentiate subjects, but it creates awareness of one's position and privileges regarding the others.

More precisely, my research's aim is to encourage abject subjectivities in Western societies, that is to say, those that have been socially defined in opposition to the hegemonic identities –traditionally male-heterosexual-white-middle-class– as the uncanny, the negligible, the marginal, through better representations in popular media in order to visibilize them. As other feminist scholars have done: "Hence, feminist have called for a decentering of the white, male subject in research, allowing for a multiplicity of voices and diverse research issues to be brought to the forefront –producing more complete and trustworthy research–." (Hesse-Biber and Piatelly, p.144). Mine is a contribution to empower other identities and perspectives that have been traditionally excluded, from my privileged position of student and knowledge producer within academia, in an attempt to diversify what is derived from scientific research. Namely, I theoretically argue the significance of empowering certain groups by

providing cultural references on which people can identify with and feel represented.

Finally, to illustrate the consequences of the lack of diversity in popular images I bring here the brave speech of Lana Wachowski⁷ for the Human Rights Campaign's annual gala dinner in San Francisco on October 20, 2012 in which she described the difficulties she faced during her transition, especially when she was young: “ the absence of words to defend myself, without examples, without models, I began to believe voices in my head –that I was a freak, that I am broken, that there is something wrong with me, that I will never be lovable–.” (Wachowski, 2012). With these words Lana (2012) described the complicated situation in which she found herself as a teenager, when she realized that she did not identify with the gender she was assigned and, furthermore, when she could not find any other person or reference to understand and/or to feel that she was not alone and wrong.

This situation is the reason that led her to give the speech for the HRC and appear in public for the first time in her life. Lana Wachowski considered that exposing her publicly as a transgender woman could serve as an example for other people in the same circumstances. Here is the closing of her talk which in my opinion contains the *leitmotif* of the present research:

“Invisibility is indivisible from visibility; for the transgender, this is not simply a philosophical conundrum, it can be the difference between life and death. [...] I am here because Mr. Henderson taught me that there are some things we do for ourselves, but there are some things we do for others. I am here because when I was young, I wanted very badly to be a writer, I wanted to be a filmmaker, but *I couldn't find anyone like me in the world* and it felt like my dreams were foreclosed simply because my gender was less typical than others. If I can be that person for someone else then the sacrifice of my private civic life may have value. I know I am also here because of the strength and courage and love that I am blessed to receive from my wife, my family and my friends. And in this way, I hope to offer their love in the form of my materiality to a project like this one started by the HRC, so that this world that we imagine in this room might be used to gain access to other rooms, to *other worlds previously unimaginable*. Thank you very much.” (Wachowski, 2012).

⁷ Lana Wachowski is one of the directors of the film *The Matrix*, next to her sister Lily Wachowski. Lana in her speech for HRC in 2012 talked publicly for the first time about her identity as a transgender woman. She focused on her painful childhood, for example, when she planned to commit suicide because she did not feel understood and the importance of coming out as a transgender woman as an act of responsibility and commitment towards people who may have the same feelings as her during her past.

This research supports the idea of Lana Wachowski of imagining new worlds that give space to more people to fully exist, I mean to be visible and recognized. The creation of diverse cultural examples and models are essential in order to materialize a future that could include a more complex range of identities which are systematically disempowered by social invisibilization or misrepresentation. Nevertheless, a great number of scholars, artists, collectives, organizations all over the world are committed with the elaboration of more representative popular images that are having an impact on media representation as it will be exemplified with the analysis of the two comics for the present work. Following, the selection process of these feminist comics is exposed.

Selecting superheroes

In order to choose the characters I analyzed, I made a literature review on current comic superheroes. Nevertheless, comic world is great and truly complex, so I followed certain criteria to narrow down my research based on the interest and topics relevant to this work. I did my search on the most influential publishing companies such as *Marvel*⁸ or *DC*⁹, compilations like *No straight lines: four decades of queer comic* (2012) or blogs like *blogdesuperheroes.es*. Here the two comics that will be explored are briefly introduced in order to better understand the criteria that are explained after:

- **Qahera:** is presented as a webcomic. Her author is Deena Mohamed, 22 years old, Egyptian artist. Qahera is a female Muslim superhero who combats misogyny and Islamophobia in Cairo. The author has published eight different series of comics which contain feminist topics such as women's choices, accountability or sexual harassment.
- **Chalice –Alters–:** Chalice is the first transgender superhero. The plot revolves around a near future in which some people –the Alters– present certain mutations which endow them with 'hyper-advantages'. It is written by Paul Jerkins –who has been working for years in Marvel as well– and draw by Leila Leiz and Tamara Bonvillain. The comic belongs to the company Aftershock comics.

8 Marvel: American publisher of comic books and related media. In 2009 this company was acquired by The Walt Disney Company.

9 DC: is an American comic book publisher, subsidiary of Warner Bros. Entertainment.

For selecting these comics I first decided to focus on the most recent publications on comic. My thesis' aim is to explore new imaginaries and to break boundaries of what counts as real/fiction in order to create alternative future possibilities. Consequently, I decided to choose comics which are currently produced. It does not mean that some important figures and the history of crucial comics for the feminist past have not been taken into account. On the contrary, during my research, I have learned about the development of significative superhero comics such as *Wonder Woman*¹⁰ –one of the first women superheroes and feminist icon for some people–, *Miss Fury*¹¹ –first female superhero created by a woman–, *Glory*¹² –which breaks with the standards of feminine beauty– or *Tank girl*¹³ –and her role of 'antihero'– which have had a crucial role in the feminist comic production. Nevertheless, I focused on what is now being produced in popular comic, what that represents, so where we are currently headed in terms of images in order to take advantage of what comes next.

A second characteristic that I took into account was their skills. The superheroes that were selected are endowed with superpowers. Superpowers, in the same manner as the position of 'superhero main characters', have belonged to traditional and normative roles throughout history, so I decided to consider superheroes who possess superpowers. From my point of view, this is also related to the above exposed in the sense of that if we do not challenge our possibilities, even imaginarily, we cannot move forward. First, we need to imagine, defying our reality, then we will do it. Superheroes that are given superpowers who are not male-heterosexual-white are decentering traditional roles opening space for new empowered subjects.

A third consideration that I bore in mind was a feminist orientation: Qahera fights against misogyny and wears hijab and Chalice, Alters' main character, is a transgender woman. In order to expose what are the most alternative superheroes in popular media, I decided to include comics which would content feminist-oriented plots or characters ¹⁴.

Furthermore, I decided to make my choice the most intersectional as possible. I found Qahera's religious orientation and transgender identity of Chalice very relevant for my research –with all of their

10 *Wonder Woman*, William Moulton Marston, *All Star Comics* #8 (December 1941): DC Comics.

11 *Miss Fury*, Tarpé Mills, *Bell Syndicate* (April 1941): Marvel Comics.

12 *Glory*, Rob Liefeld, *Youngblood Strikefile* #1 (1993): Extreme Studios.

13 *Tank Girl*, Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin, *Titan Comics* (1988).

14 It would be interesting to research traditional male superheroes in popular culture and to analyze them from an intersectional queer perspective. However, the aim of my work is to step further into already existing feminist representations, troubling them on base to queer theories.

intersections such as gender, sexual orientation, location, etc.—. These defining characteristics of their identity are crucial to gender studies. As it will be explained in the next chapter, both characters embody relevant feminist debates that question issues such as agency or body representation.

Another distinction that seemed to me relevant during my selection of comics was the position of 'main role'. All of the chosen characters are the main subjects of the plot. The central role of a comic is endowed with a position of power in terms of representation which secondary roles are less likely to have. Thus, these comic roles are already empowered because of their location and this is important as it is more probable that they become people's inspirations and influence.

Another concern was related to the kind of comic I wanted to use and its targeted audience. The comic selection belongs to popular culture, they all do not belong to the underground comic world or to mainstream media as male heroes do. They all are popularly known, however, they do not have a recognized or privileged position as their male counterparts or more normative or sexualized female superheroes. My intention is to influence somehow popular representations; if I had chosen underground comics, which usually more require sophisticated literacies, I would be aiming to a more specific audience. On the other hand, in the case of mainstream media happens that in order to become 'mainstream' you have to fit into certain canons and stereotypes, which is completely the opposite of my objective. My intention is to actually challenge cultural imaginaries and to create alternative possibilities of existence.

Lastly, I decided to avoid supervillains to keep away from stereotypes such as the *femme fatale* — who uses their sexuality to catch male heroes—, revengers because of heartbreak —usually related to male partners—and so on, which already abound in cultural representation. I personally appreciate the female super villains who step out of social conventions. However, I found more relevant to choose characters compromised with the world that surround them and have a political focus on their actions.

Content analysis

In order to answer my first research question on how are superheroes are currently represented from an intersectional perspective in popular comics, I chose to carry out analysis content as a method.

The importance of content analysis within feminist studies, in relation to cultural representation

has been eloquently exposed by Süheyla Kirca (1999):

“Feminist intervention in popular culture might offer feminist politics a pragmatic strategy to shift the balance of power and prepare the ground for change, and thus help transform society. Since popular culture is a significant site for struggle over meaning, which offers the culture's dominant definitions of women and men it is, therefore, crucial to intervene in the mainstream to make feminist meanings a part of everyday common sense.” (Kirca, p.205).

In her words, Kirca (1999) perfectly describes my thesis' aim of disclosing and challenging cultural meanings in order to reach daily life experiences. The idea is to undermine dominant representations that determine people's actions in the base to their identity through the intervention in media images. That is the reason why I selected content analysis as a means which will introduce me to the meanings in comic representation.

A second question that I would like to discuss, because it is related to the importance of this analysis, is that content analysis is an 'unobtrusive method', so a method that does not intervene with the object of study (P. L. Leavy, in S. Hesse-Biber & D. Piatelli, 2012, p.229). My departing point is that cultural representations, such as comic, reflect norms, patterns and images of a certain society. Thus, as Reinharz (1992) points out:

“We can learn about social life, such as norms, values, socialization, or social stratification, by looking at the texts we produce, which reflect macrosocial processes and our worldview. Furthermore, cultural artifacts do not simply reflect social norms and values; texts are central to how norms and values come to be shaped.” (Reinharz, p.151).

Content analysis is a method which allows scrutinizing society's images and representations without invading it, unlike other methods like ethnography or interviews where the researcher becomes part of the object of study. I consider these cultural artifacts as a piece of social material, that can be taken as a portion of reality and be modified to shape life experience again.

Furthermore, my purpose of analyzing the content of the comics goes beyond of observation and understanding. Leavy (2007) claims that: “By investigating culture in general, and popular culture

more specifically, dominant narratives, images, ideas, and stereotyped representations can be exposed and challenged.” (P.L. Leavy, p.224). So, looking at those artifacts and disclosing their meanings –what is said, what is not said, how, and so on– will allow understanding what configures popular imaginaries and, besides, it will open the door to contest and modify its images. For instance, analyzing the categories that define popular superheroes permits first to expose what are the dominant identities whereas it is possible to examine which identities are invisibilized in order to empower them.

Lastly, the research question that has led the content analysis is the following:

-How are the superheroes represented from an intersectional point of view, namely regarding their gender, sexuality, race, body representation, class, religion, disability, age,...?

All in all, through this method I explore two different comics, a combination of image and text that condense social meanings, in order to disclose what current superheroes represent.

Comic superhero proposal

On the other hand, in order to answer my last research question on *how can we create a queer comic superhero in base to the more recent theories in Gender Studies?* I use different scholar texts.

- *Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway (1991)

One of the main objectives of my thesis is to create a queer role located in the center of a plot, and whose background is founded on gender studies theories. I consider that such representations should have strong-based arguments that support them. As I pointed out before, it is crucial creating valuable and responsible images that could produce new discourses, thus new imaginaries that subvert normative imperatives in society. If there are produced new subjectivities who can perform in worlds that overcome social realities, that break imaginary limitations, we are creating different futures towards we can move.

That is the reason because I have chosen Donna Haraway's figuration of the 'cyborg' (*Manifiesto Cyborg*, 1991) as the base of the main character in my comic proposal. Haraway describes it as: “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction (...) The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century.” (Haraway, p.149). The cyborg is configured to

overcome restrictive binaries as those of nature-culture, social reality-fiction or gender. It embraces the technological and natural constructiveness of the subjects that I would like to highlight in order to undermine wrongful representations in mainstream media and to diversify popular images. So to deconstruct traditional categories of superheroes.

- *Testo Junkie*, P.B. Preciado

I decided to theoretically argue the superpowers of my superhero with Paul Preciado's chapter *The pharmacopornographic era* (Testo Junkie, 2008) on global powers in capitalist societies. Preciado affirms in his chapter:

“Science (...) works as a material-discursive apparatus of bodily production. Technoscience has established its material authority by transforming the concepts of the psyche, libido, consciousness, femininity and masculinity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, intersexuality and transsexuality into tangible realities. They are manifest in commercial chemical substances and molecules, biotype bodies, and fungible technological goods managed by multinationals.” (Preciado, p.34).

I develop the character's superpowers on the basis of those materialities of bodily production that represent the engine of modern societies; concretely sex, pharmacology and desire. Following the argument of this author, if the superhero possesses extraordinary powers, which allows them to control or self-produced substances which are at the base of capitalist interest, is undermining global multinational powers, whereas is able to affect people's lives. Besides, I considered to use Preciado's (2008) theories because this philosopher is one of the most important figures in the development of queer theories, based on poststructuralist authors such as Foucault and his notions of biopower¹⁵ and discourses or Derrida's deconstruction.

- Lacan and the desire

¹⁵ Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1978) argues that biopower is a technology which appeared in the late eighteenth century for managing populations which was at the base of the development of capitalism: “During the classical period, there was a rapid development of various disciplines [...]. There was also the emergence, in the field of political practices and economic observation of the problems of birthrate, longevity, public health, housing, and migration. Hence, there was a numerous about training the actions of bodies, biopower is about managing the births, deaths, reproduction and illnesses of a population, marking the beginning of an era of 'biopowers'.” (Foucault, p.140).

Lastly, psychoanalytical resources on desire will be included complementing Preciado's (2008) above exposed theory. The superpowers that I propose are also theoretically grounded on Lacan's (1999) claims on the functioning of the desires. It means that the superhero that I propose owns the power of modificating, eliminating or creating desires. In order to do so, the superhero possesses the capacity of producing certain substances which are central in the global market of the pharmacological industry and that are related to the imagination, namely serotonin and risperidone. Consequently, these extraordinary powers are aimed to undermine global production of drugs – by self-production– whereas are used against the villains in order to subvert their evil desires. The main idea is that the villains are prevented of action when their desires are eliminated.¹⁶

Conclusions

The methods that have been selected for the present research allow me to depict a general image of current feminist comic superheroes from an intersectional point of view and to analyze the roles that they contain. Furthermore, alongside relevant scholar texts such as D. Haraway or P.B. Preciado, it is possible to propose a comic more aware and committed to more representative and inclusive images towards certain social groups and which at the same time undermine oppressive normative ideas that may broaden the horizon for the coming generations to fully exist.

¹⁶ Unlike Qahera's or Chalice's superpowers that I analyze in the next chapter, these superpowers allow eliminating power operations of the villains from its roots. Instead of using strength, fighting skills, for eliminating the subject itself, in this case, my superhero deconstructs the idea of superpower. The popular meaning of power is subverted, focusing on the center of the power operations of population control.

Representation in comic

The aim of this chapter is to explore what are the themes which appear in current comic production in popular culture. Following the criteria that I mentioned in the chapter of Methodology, the comics I selected bring to the forefront relevant topics such as agency or body representation which would give me an idea about what are the meanings behind the roles of Qahera and Chalice and how are related to feminist debates.

In order to do so, I analyze the images and texts within the two comics. Particularly, the focus is on the roles of the main characters, the problems they solve and, more importantly, the power relations established between the different characters. My idea is to use the information about the themes that appear in the stripes, in which I will pay special attention to body representation, religion, gender, race, class or sexual orientation in order to use them as the base from which I will depart towards my comic proposal.

Nevertheless, I will first make an overview of the comic realm to explain what is its importance within cultural representation, how it is related to my choice of a comic as a means to challenge popular imaginaries and my selection of a superhero as the main character.

Comic world

The world of the comic is characterized by its variety and plurality. The comic's definition that Mc Cloud (1993), author of the book *Understanding comics: The invisible art* points out that a comic is: "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response to the viewer." (S. McCloud, p.9). Comic, then, is mainly aimed to transmit information, to have an impact on the reader, with more or less care with regard to the aesthetics.

However, there exists a great diversity regarding the formats, genres, themes, artists,... Comic itself is just a word which contains an infinite number of ideas and images (Ibid, p.6). Within a comic, there exist two differentiated parts, image and text, that can be combined at creators' will with endless possibilities.

So, what is interesting about the images in a comic? S. McCloud (1993) goes on explaining it in this interesting manner: “Why is our culture so in thrall to the simplify reality of the cartoon? Defining the cartoon would take up as much space as defining comics, but for now I'm gonna examine the cartooning as a form of *amplification through simplification*.” (Ibid, p.30). Personally speaking, I consider that cartoons, in the same way as comics as a whole, are means through which reality is condensed. A great amount of information can be represented in just one vignette, everything at once, which is perceived by the reader straightforwardly. In the case of comic, the powerful transmitting force of the image works in combination with the text to convey the meanings to people. That is the reason why I found comics a valuable channel through which new images and meanings could flow. Despite the fact that complex theories would be behind the stripes, they will arrive at the reader simplified in terms of image and text. The aim is that the final result represents an elaborate but accessible informational set.

Furthermore, what is also significant about comics is that the image works as: “a vacuum into which identity and awareness are pulled, an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it!” (Ibid, p.36). Thus, part of the power of comics is the capacity to transport us to other worlds and to transform or make us identify with others. In my opinion, it gives to the reader the opportunity to –imaginarily– embody other realities, empathizing and visualizing what other people experience by providing other perspectives. In this case, it would serve to enrich popular understandings about queer subjectivities¹⁷.

The significance of comic is, in this case, in enabling the reader to identify their self with the superhero. It provides the person a different point of view, more challenging than established assumptions such as gender binaries –by, for instance, creating more acceptance for people who do not identify as woman/men as it will be explained in Chapter 3– because the superhero does not define their self as either of the social gender roles. Comic can also defy people's ideas about normative living

17 The identification reader-comic character is at the very base of the impact of comics in society. McClouds (1993) claims that: “Storytellers in all media know that a sure indicator of audience involvement is the degree to which the audience identifies with a story's character. And since viewer-identification is a specialty of cartooning, cartoons have historically held an advantage in breaking into world popular culture.” (Ibid, p.42). The comic has great potential of serving as a story through which the reader can feel identified with, acting as a means to reach popular culture. As it was explained in the Introduction, people within a certain society give meaning to people, objects and events through cultural practices (Hall, 2013). Comic enters to popular culture by identification, which has an effect on the target audience, creating an exchange of meanings – the information is represented in social culture, the audience interprets it, the result reaches again popular culture– that permeated daily life experiences.

standards like heterosexuality by, for example, challenging traditional images of the family. Or in the case of people who already identify as queer, comic provides references in society and offers an empowered representation of the self.

We need queer superheroes!

On the other hand, in what regards the text in comic, it can cover very diverse genres – adventure, erotic, science fiction, western...– and complexity –strips, comic books, webcomics or graphic novels–. For instance, queer and LGBTQ+ comic is an extensive *world* on itself. As the author of the broad compilation *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comic* Justin Hall (2013) states: “I set out to make *No Straight Lines* the definitive anthology of queer comics. In the most profound sense, I failed. The world of LGBTQ cartooning is even richer and deeper than I could have imagined at the beginning of the long process it took to produce this book.” (Hall, p.7). When I started this research, I arrived at the same conclusion: it seems impossible to cover such an enormous cultural field. Comic is overwhelmingly extensive and one has to narrow down the focus to be precise in analyzing it.

On the other hand, despite the vast variety of comic genres and complexity the 'privileged' position of superhero is still reserved for a few roles, with no chance for queer characters to perform it, which is also remarked by the editor of this queer collection J.Hall (2013):

“In the past, the mainstream never touched LGBTQ characters except in a derogatory or fetishistic fashion; that’s different now in the age of well-rounded lesbian superheroes and sympathetic gay Archie characters. Still, it remains the job of mainstream comics to assimilate LGBTQ characters, while it falls to queer comics to dissect queer identities and examine in more profound ways the queer experience.” (Hall, p.7).

There is a lack of mainstream queer characters and, what is more, the empowered position of superhero is mostly performed by normative roles. There not exists comic references in popular culture for those who identify with queer identities and for those who do not understand what queer can be. These representations are relegated to secondary roles or do not perform empowered characters in popular media, which reinforces the dominant idea that queer subjectivities are marginal identities.

Moreover, the importance of queering comics have been pointed out by scholars such as C.

Quinan (2007) in her text *Queering categories: Alison Bechdel's Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Quinan explores the excellent graphic novel *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel which includes a complex queer argumentation and style. This graphic memoir tells the story of Alison's family, especially in relation to her father, their sexual orientation and the uncertainty about the possible suicide of his father. However, its importance lies not only in the content of its argument but also in Bechdel's way to combine graphic novel's elements:

“In this joining of the comic strip with high-quality prose, it forces us to question our assumptions about content, genre and form, while also asking us to consider what is deemed a 'classic' or what is included in the literary canon. Indeed, in its combination of traditionally 'high art' with 'low art', *Fun Home* troubles – or perhaps queers – categories.” (Quinan, p.2).

So what turns into a queer comic Bechdel's graphic novel, it is not only the content of the script but the transgression of the elements which compose the comic. Breaking the boundaries in traditional assumptions of what comic contains or what is 'high-low art', Bechdel is already working for a more queer representation.

To sum up, on the one hand, there is a current steadily increasing diversity among the main comic characters, even in mainstream representation: trans characters –*Coagula*¹⁸ –, non-normative roles –*Jenny Sparks*¹⁹, *Painkiller Jane*²⁰ –, homosexual affairs –*Dykes to Watch out for*²¹ *Bitch Planet*²² –, superheroes coming out as bisexual –*Catwoman*²³ – or pansexual –*Deadpool*²⁴ –. However, it should be taken into account that in popular culture feminine characters sometimes tend to be still generally oversexualized –*She-Hulk*²⁵, *Batwoman*²⁶ – or fails to be so homonormative²⁷. That is the reason why I decided to start my thesis analyzing popular comics which are more feminist-oriented, closer to my

18 *Coagula*, Rachel Pollack, *Doom Patrol* vol. 2, #70 (September 1993): DC Comics.

19 *Jenny Sparks*, Warren Ellis & Tom Raney, *Stormwatch* #37 (1997): Wildstorm.

20 *Painkiller Jane*, Jimmy Palmiotti & Joe Quesada, *22 Brides* #1 (1996): Event Comics.

21 *Dykes to watch out for*, Alison Bechdel (1990), NY: Firebrand Books.

22 *Bitch Planet*, Valentine de Landro #1 (December 2014): Image comic.

23 *Catwoman*, Bob Kane & Bill Finger, *Batman* #1 (1954): DC Comics.

24 *Deadpool*, Rob Liefeld, *The new mutants* #98 (1991): Marvel Comics.

25 *She-Hulk*, Stan Lee & John Buscema, *Savage She Hulk* #1 (1980): Marvel Comics.

26 *Batwoman*, Sheldon Moldoff & Bob Kane, *Detective comics* #233 (July 1956): DC Comics.

27 Homonormativity: “A politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.” (L.Duggan, p.175, 2003).

own ideal, in order to explore what are the current representations in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, class and so on. The focus will be on the roles, stereotypes and power relations they represent from an intersectional framework, to establish the baseline from which I will develop my own comic proposal.

In the next section, I explore the comics *Qahera* and *Alters* which I relate with different debates in gender studies. Firstly, I introduce the comics and their main characters, following I bring the main feminist theories related to them and, finally, I analyze their content.

Qahera



D.Mohammed. "A superhero in Cairo". April 4, 2016. In blog: <http://qaherathesuperhero.com>

Qahera is the name of the Muslim protagonist of the webcomic with the same name, drawn by the young artist Deena Mohammed from El Cairo. It is online published, both in English and Arab, and is drawn in black and white.

Qahera is a superhero who fights against misogyny, Islamophobia and Western stereotypes of Muslim women. She owns different superpowers such as superhearing –which allows her to hear from very far inappropriate comments aimed at women or cries for help–, flying and martial art skills. She uses a sword to defend herself.

Regarding her outfit, she wears a long black dress tied with black ribbons, which covers her body entirely. Her head is also covered with a black hijab, which uses to hide half of her face sometimes when defending herself and a pair of boots which resemble martial arts shoes. She hardly uses makeup –the comic is in black and white, but her lips seem to be on lipstick– or another type of ornaments.

I decided to include this comic in my analysis because I consider that it makes a positive and inspiring representation of a Muslim woman. As I pointed out before, my intention is to create a queer character in the most inclusive manner. So religion and, more precisely, religion in relation to Muslim women stereotypes within Western societies, seems to me a very useful example. Intersectionality allows us to understand how the use of the hijab, which makes visible the religious orientation of a Muslim woman, empowers/disempowers her in Occidental societies in relation to her class, sexual orientation, race and so on.

Furthermore, the use of different veils within Islamic societies by women has been for years one of the most repeated topics within feminist studies. There have been, and there still are, different debates between feminist scholars around the use of the hijab –chador, niqab, burka, etc.– the subjugation of women or secular/post-secular politics in relation to Muslim women. For instance, relevant scholars have brought to the forefront intense discussions such as Susan Moller Okin (1999) and her well-known article *Is multiculturalism bad for women?* who considers that multiculturalist practices within neoliberal societies represent a danger for women who are part of minority groups; or Saba Mahmood (2001) who argues in favor of the agency²⁸ of Islamic communities of women in

²⁸ Mahmood defines in her text *Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival* (2001) human agency in feminism as: “one that seeks to locate the political and moral autonomy of the subject in the face of power.” (Mahmood, p.203).

Egypt.²⁹ My aim is to make a positive representation of a queer comic character and, in this case, a Muslim woman who advocates the use of hijab against white-European feminist argumentations will serve as an example that brings to the forefront intersectional aspects to reflect about in relation to my superhero proposal. Religion and its relation to queer identity seem to me a crucial topic that I would like to include in the comic. Deena Mohammed states on her website:

"I've always kind of wanted to do a webcomic starring a badass Muslim superhero who defends women against the kind of stupid idiocy we have to put up with every day whilst shutting up all the white feminists who try to co-opt the struggle. I actually sincerely want to develop this because do you REALIZE the potential behind a hijab/niqabi superhero like her outfit comes with a ready-made abaya-cape and a mask...?".³⁰ D. Mohammed (30th July 2013). *Qahera First Comic*. Recovered from: <http://qaherathesuperhero.com/post/64031330049>

D. Mohammed empowers her superhero through the use of the hijab and fights against white feminists who want to 'rescue' oppressed Muslim woman, victimizing and invisibilizing them from feminist struggles. This comic example serves as a reflection of the current situation of feminist debates around religion in Western societies and its intersections with gender or class for instance. Furthermore, it exposes how certain identity categories are disempowered due to their misrepresentations in media as Muslim women as in Western societies for instance.

On the other hand, there exist other Muslim women superheroes, however, Qahera includes certain characteristics that I find more relevant for my research:

First of all, Qahera wears a hijab and it makes a difference with other Muslim superheroes such as *Kamala Khan*, a Marvel production comic about a Muslim American-Pakistani teenager from New Jersey. She was the first Muslim character to headline her own comic book. As it has been exposed,

²⁹ My intention here is not to theorize about this topics –for instance, if there is agency or not in the use of the hijab– but to state what is my position regarding it as I consider it an important part of my research. I believe that it is not my task to judge whoever independent and rational woman who fights for her self-determination, and I will assume that that person is capable enough to make her own decisions. Therefore, I consider my struggle whoever's woman struggle who fights for her emancipation and rights, from whatever religious orientation that she practices as far as it respects the other's.

³⁰ D. Mohammed (30th July 2013). *Qahera First Comic*. Recovered from: <http://qaherathesuperhero.com/post/64031330049>

wearing the hijab is crucial regarding visibility and identification and Kamala Khan does not wear it. That is why I discarded this character because wearing the hijab is currently questioned within Western societies and has created an important debate in feminist circles in relation to whether women who decide to use the veil are oppressed. Thus, I consider that Qahera is an example of Muslim woman who deconstructs Western stereotypes of disempowered women in Islamist cultures.

Secondly, Qahera is written and drawn by an author who does not belong to a multinational company like Marvel. D. Mohammed is a Muslim woman who experiences the events that she draws about, which add to me a more valuable and specific perspective. That is because it represents a source of first-hand knowledge from personal experience, in contrast to other comics which are drawn just for commercial purposes.

The importance of partial perspectives and subjugated positions has been largely discussed by feminist scholars like D. Haraway (1988) in *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*:

“ The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies governing the relations of what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility. Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object.” (Haraway, pp.580-583).

Haraway argues for a feminist objectivity which is the result of embodied and situated accounts of partial reality, in contrast to disembodied and irresponsible accounts of reality such as the 'modest witness'³¹. Personally speaking, I am interested in this comic because I consider it a partial and situated perspective of a Muslim woman who faces misogyny by men and exclusion by Western feminists. For instance, the author draws comics on accountability which supports my argument of Qahera as a source of objective knowledge, as Donna Haraway (1988) suggests in *Situated Knowledges*.

Lastly, I considered to include *Dust* as well, Sunni Muslim female superhero who wears an abaya

31 Figure proposed by D. Haraway in her text *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium* (1997) to represent the traditional scientific who: “Enhancing their agency through their masculine virtue exercised in carefully regulated 'public' spaces, modest men were to be self-invisible, transparent, so that their reports would not be polluted with the body.” (Haraway, p.32). So that the knowledge they produced, was based on disembodied accounts of reality, universal truths and objectivity.

and niqab³² . Nevertheless, Dust does not have a main role –the reasons why I chose only main roles are already mentioned in the chapter of Methodology, p.4– and it is also a Marvel's production, so Qahera was still more appealing to me because of her author positioning.

Content

D. Mohammed has published eight short webcomics on her blog, from 3-8 pages each. I have explored all of them, looking into the topics and images that are represented. Following, there are summarized the main themes and concepts of each comic that, from my point of view, derive from its lecture. It is important to mention that my insights are also based on the comments that Mohammed always adds at the end of every comic, where she mostly explains her personal views on the issues that appear in the plots, which has been very useful in order to understand what she really wants to communicate.

The eight comics that Mohammed presents to us are:

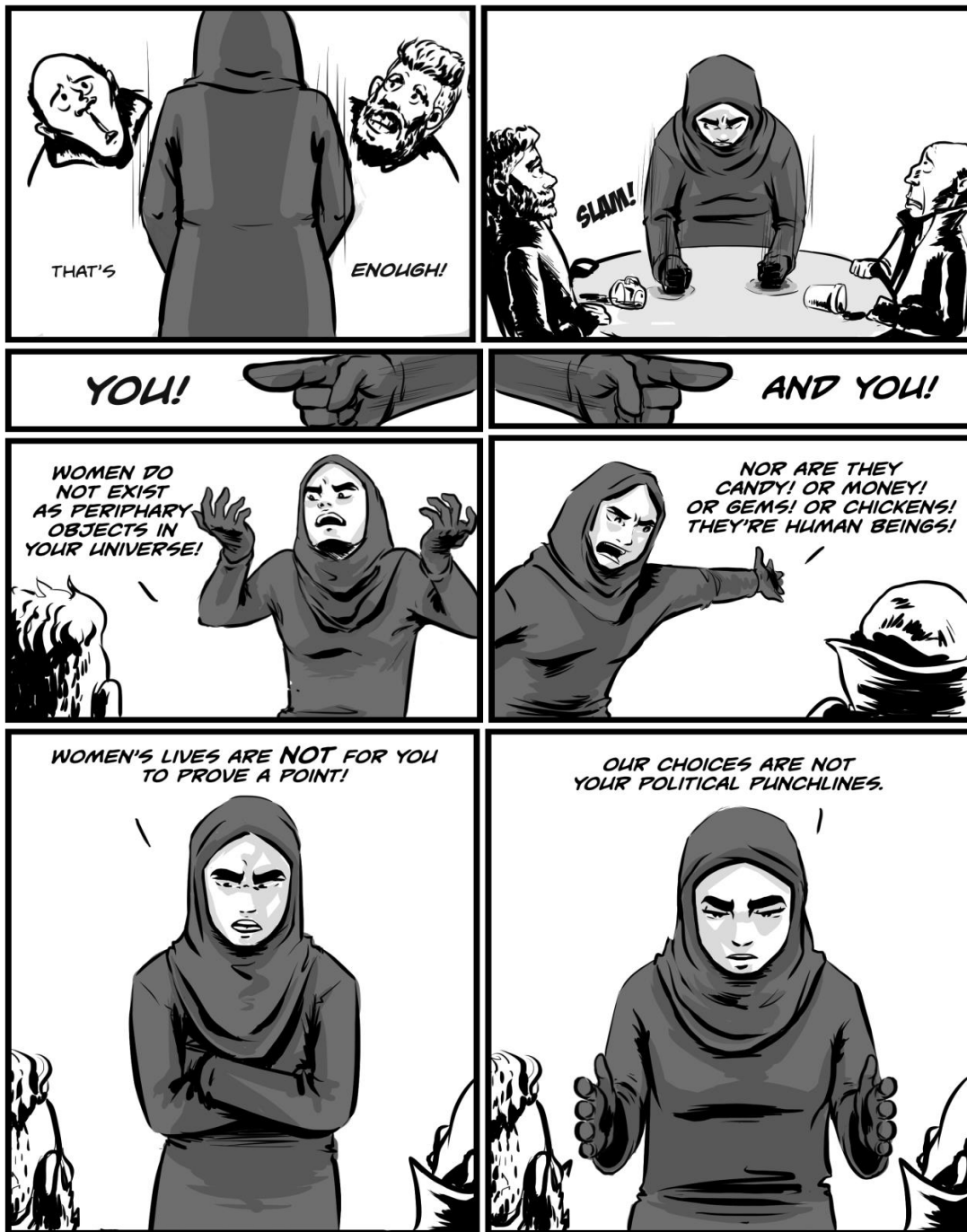
- Brainstorm: which mainly addresses Muslim women oppression by both Islamic patriarchy and white feminists.
- On Femen: a reflection on an action of the activist group Femen in a Mosque.
- On street harassment: this comic is about the quotidian situation of a woman on the street who is harassed by men, and who is also ignored by the police, alleging that her clothes were not appropriate.
- On protests: in Deena's words this a tribute to all women who stands up and go to protests, the real-life superheroes, that are invisibilized in statistics to discredit their participation in revolutionary movements.
- On music (or sort of): this is a short comic on misogynist popular music and the use of violence.
- On accountability: this is a comic about the conflict between Israel and Palestina, its relations with Islam and accountability.
- On women choices: the plot of this comic turns around the use of headscarves, based on the conversation between a Western white man and a Muslim man. The first one argues against the women covering with religious clothes such as hijab in public spaces; and the other, who discusses in favor of veiling comparing women with goods.

32 Abaya: overgarment that covers almost all of the body. Niqab: a veil that covers all parts of the head and face except for the eyes.

- On flight: this is a comic which revolves around a woman who is helped by Qahera, but who recriminates her privilege because she owns superpowers.

Generally speaking, despite the brevity of some of the comics, Deena Mohammed has the capacity to open complex debates around truly relevant topics, with simple images and texts, which will serve as an inspirational source for my comic proposal. For instance, she draws in her comics about misogyny, feminism and religion, women's visibility, agency, manliness, the importance of positive cultural representations regarding women, whiteness,... I will tackle next to the themes that I considered more relevant in relation to this research and that will serve to improve the focus of my own comic.

One of the more recurrent issues in her comics is the agency of Muslim women. Mohammed draws on the victimizing discourses usually hold by patriarchal societies –both Western and Egyptian– and white feminists, which erase their capacity to elaborate their own decisions such as wearing or not the hijab. The following vignettes illustrate it:



D.Mohammed. "On women's choice". July 18, 2015. In blog: <http://qaherathesuperhero.com/post/125314061196>



D.Mohammed. "Brainstorm". June 30, 2013. In blog: <http://qaherathesuperhero.com/post/64031330049>

As I explained at the beginning of this chapter, different scholars have widely studied and theorized about women's agency, and more specifically, on women's agency in relation to religion. This represents a pivotal topic which, from my point of view, would be appropriate to include in a feminist comic if my intention is to be representative. For example, giving the superhero a religious orientation, or various beliefs, or problematizing it adding a non-normative sexual orientation of a non-Western subject within a Western society. In the next chapter, it will be explained how queer theories work to deconstruct hegemonic identity categories and this example could work precisely in the same manner. That is to say, complexifying dominant categories that normativize people's lives, invisibilizing many

others like feminist Muslim communities.

Furthermore, the previous theme is related to other feminist debate: 'sisterhood', which is also recurrent in the comics. Audre Lorde (1984) in her text *Age, race, class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference* claimed, similarly to Mohammed position in relation to this issue, claims that: "By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not, in fact, exist." (Lorde, p.116). The controversy surrounding sorority among feminists seems to me a crucial question in so far as it drags the focus to intersectional issues. As a white-European feminist who attempts to represent subjects in comic in an inclusive manner, it results unavoidable centering the aim in portraying the differences which exist among people in society that Lorde (1984) highlights.





D. Mohammed. "On Femen". July 20, 2013. In blog: <http://qaherathesuperhero.com/post/61173083361>

A last relevant problem that Mohammed tackles in her comics is accountability. There is a comic named *On accountability* which illustrates a conversation between Qahera and a few men in a cafe, in which they discuss their responsibility towards the conflict between Palestinian and Israeli. However, there is another comic *On flight* which from my point of view opens an interesting debate about the question of accountability in relation to the position of superhero. In it, Qahera rescues a woman whose bag is

stolen by some children. Despite the heroic gesture, that woman recriminates to Qahera that she is a privileged woman because she can fly and, other people like her brother who had to immigrate, are not that lucky and she could actually use that superpower for different purposes. Here is the vignette that illustrates it:



D.Mohammed. "On flight". August 25, 2015. In blog: <http://qaherathesuperhero.com/post/127596119696>

This comic opens two different questions in relation to the position of the role of superhero. First of all, it has to do with the privilege of being a superhero. It creates a differentiated power relation as a figure, between it and the rest of the roles. In this case, Qahera is questioned because of her flying power and she realizes the impossibility for some people to see the sky. It seems that the artist is reflecting on the situatedness of the superhero, in contrast to the inhabitants of El Cairo who live in precarious

conditions and from whose location —I consider she is playing with the idea of high/low class— cannot see above from their bottom position. However, the privileged position of the superhero allows Qahera to have the advantage to see better in relation to those who are disempowered. Consequently, being a superhero represents the power of vision, having the access to knowledge that is not accessible to the rest of characters.

On the other hand, it raises a debate in relation to victimization because the superhero's duty has been traditionally rescuing victims of whatever villain, disaster or misfortune. This comic represents the controversy regarding the role of the superhero and their accountability in relation to power. In this case, Mohammed at the end of the comic draws Qahera buying plane tickets for that woman for visiting her brother. I consider that in this situation the superhero uses her privilege to benefit another person, however, it does not solve the power inequality. On the contrary, it reinforces the empowered position of Qahera and despite the fact that is a good action, it does not change anything and, what is more, that person does not improve her situation. As previously said, it is my aim to balance the power relations between the main character and the rest of roles, so this debate results truly relevant. For instance, not victimizing the secondary roles giving them tools/skills/devices by the superhero that could improve their situation, not needing anymore someone else's help —the power superiority of the superhero would be still implicit, but it is improved sharing the powers— and/or undermining what has been traditionally understood in the category of superhero, for instance: queering the category, so breaking the social constructions around it —indestructible, heterosexual, gendered, emotionless, inaccessible and so on—. This last option would increase the probability of the reader to identify with the superhero, preserving its empowered position, while making it closer to real experience.

To sum up, Qahera's comic serves to illustrate some of the topics that I consider pivotal in my proposal and that have guided the choices I made. More precisely, agency regarding women's choices; sisterhood and the differences that separate struggles according to power relations within Western societies and the privileged position of the roles of superhero. As it will be explained further in the next chapter, when theorizing about my proposal, the final objective is that through the queerization of the comic, highlighting the power/disempowered subjects and categories, some of the previous controversies become less problematic. For instance, challenging the limits of the socially imposed categories such as woman/man, heterosexual/homosexual, high/low class, natural/fictional, and so on.

ALTERS



Alters 2017, # 1, p.1.

These series belong to Aftershock productions³³ and narrates the fictional story of the first transgender superhero in comic on who I will mainly focus. It has been released this year, the 23rd of May and my analysis is based on the two first colorful comics. The plot revolves around a near future in which some people, the Alters, start to undergo certain mutations, which give them certain advantages. The evil

³³ Comic book company, which was launched in 2015. A great part of the team has worked previously for international companies such as Marvel or DC comics as both the co-founders Lee Kramer and Joe Pruet, Senior Vice President Mike Zagari or Alters' writer Paul Jenkins. However, they present their self as a current independent company on their website.

villain Matter Man wants to have all the Alters under his control who considers them a danger to society.

The protagonist is Chalice who lives as Charlie for her family because she has started her hormonal treatment and is concerned with that her transition is going to hurt her relatives. Thus, she is living a double transition, from human to Alter, from Charlie to Chalice. She is the middle sister of three siblings, one of them who is dealing with cerebral palsy. She has a complicated relationship with her father, who seems to be more on the side of Matter Man because he is afraid of the Alters.

Regarding her representation, Chalice prepares herself when turns into the superhero. She wears a blonde long wig, a very colorful suit composed by a short skirt and a top, high heeled boots and a cap. She uses makeup and draws a black cross which covers her left eye. However, Chalice only exposes herself as a feminine woman when she performs as a superhero. In her daily life, she is Charlie for her family and everyone else. She uses casual traditional masculine clothes and often wears a baseball cap—in case she has to hide the wounds from fights against villains— and she does not use makeup or wig. (Image in the next page).



Alters 2017, # 1, p.5.

What is interesting about this comic, is not only the recognized role that is finally given to a transgender

superhero but the diversity among the secondary roles. For instance, I found crucial the visibility given to a person with functional diversity, her brother. Furthermore, many Alters have to face other disadvantages or being marginalized, for instance: a homeless character, Morphs –an Alter– who breaks his neck, a character with PTSD –post-traumatic stress disorder– among others. All in all, just the name of the title 'Alters' already offers an idea of the care of this comic for representing the subalterns, so those socially disempowered due to their sexual orientation, gender expression, class, diversity, religion, age and so on.

On the other hand, I selected this comic because it brings to the forefront different debates within feminist studies about the body, representation and identity which I would like to include in my comic proposal. For example, what Meri Torras (2007) calls, in her article *The crime of the body: from body's evidence to the body in evidence*, the body: “as the place of the inscription of the generic sexual differentiation.” (Torras, p.11). So, Torras proposes that it is in the body where sexual differentiation is inscribed, so bodies are conformed by cultural constructs such as sexual distinction. Besides, the author in her text explores the hegemonic categories, particularly men/heterosexual, that have traditionally shaped bodies and, at the same time, have influenced our culture:

“The body cannot be thought as a prior and formative, alien to culture and its codes. It does not exist beyond or behind the discourse, the power of discourse and the discourse of power. The body is the representation of the body, the body has a performative existence within the cultural framework –with its codes– that makes it *visible*. More than *having* a body or *being* a body, we *become* a body and we negotiate it, in an intertwined process with our becoming subjects, that is individuals, certainly, but within coordinates that make us identifiable, recognizable, at the same time that they subject us to their determinations of being, to be, to appear or to become.” (Torras, p.20).

The body comes to be when is read in society within the cultural conventions that are subjected to power discourses. We become visible as subjects in our performance in society, which represents a process that is involved with intricate hegemonic meanings, organized in categories, that are power differentiated. Simultaneously, this process configures the cultural reality and its representations; bodies and culture are mutually constructed. Consequently, exposing the significance of those

representations in cultural manifestations, for instance, comics it would be possible to disclose some of the meanings that configure the bodies. In this case, in order to be visible as a woman, Chalice follows traditional dressing female codes, wears a long wig and uses makeup. Her body is represented fit and thin, with curved hips which provide her with a slender figure that follows the female standards of conventional beauty. Consequently, the image that this role is portraying is that in order to be a *woman* –so to be socially read as a woman– is not enough to identify as such, one has to follow the codes. Thus, the experience of *woman* is normativized by norms of behavior that discipline the bodies, whereas they are represented in popular images that reinforce such codes.

A last important point related to the empowering of identity categories that Torras (2007) highlights is that there exist non-hegemonic categories which are derived from the binaries such as men/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, constructed in opposition to dominant categories as the reversed, the impure. Hence, in order to challenge the already existing strong identity categories, so to empower the abjected, they should be constructed not in opposition to the hegemonic, which will reinforce them, but in a different way. Or as other feminist scholars that Torras (2007) proposes: from *mestizaje* as places of resistance, proposed by María Lugones (1994); crossing the preservative boundaries of the binaries as recommended by Diana Fuss (1991); or an autographical textual gestuality that allow's oneself to be multiple at the same time as Shirley Neuman (1991) suggests. (Torras, p.13). Consequently, in order to challenge the representations in the comic, my purpose is to blend categories like woman, lesbian or transexual, to make visible other forms of identities in a different manner, to avoid reinforcing the dominant and normative categories. For instance, a transgender person who identifies as woman but does not follow social standards of female beauty or dressing codes. In the next chapter, this idea will be developed next to other queer theories.

Nevertheless, what results imperative in this case, when analyzing a comic which represents a transgender woman in popular culture, is to bring some debates surrounding the construction of the trans identity. I selected a text of Miquel Missé (2013), sociologist and trans activist who has worked for the depathologization of the trans community in Barcelona. Missé in his text *The impact of the pathologization in the construction of the subjectivity of trans people* analyzes the medical discourses surrounding the identity and sexuality of the trans community throughout history and how it has influenced what he considers 'the normative transsexuality' (Missé, p.51). The author argues that the

medical system of the diagnosis of transsexuality has derived in a normativizing box of sex and gender, from which non-normative identities must go through, to become part of the heterosexual system man/woman with which to normalize trans identities. That means that there exists a correct and determined manner of being a transsexual. E.g.: a transgender woman as heterosexual, but not lesbian. Thus, following the above exposed, to challenge the normative category of transgender it should be necessary to defy already existing definitional characteristics of transgender, to visibilize other transsexual experiences. E.g.: a transgender man who decides not to go through the operating room. So to live as a man with a vagina, that deconstructs the sex-gender hegemonic binary. As it has been exposed throughout this research, cultural artifacts such as comics can serve to modify cultural meanings, influencing dominant assumptions like those derived from medical discourses about transgender people. Thus, representing different experiences which are invisibilized by hegemonic images could serve to empower them while serving to defy normative identities.

Furthermore, Missé (2013) discusses in his text about the influence of medical discourses of the transgender experience in the collective imaginary. In his opinion, these are based on the diagnosis required to obtain the hormonal treatment, the access to the documents of identity and surgical operation. In Spain, in order to obtain the diagnosis of gender identity disorder, one has to present a determined number of characteristics such as wish to live in another gender since childhood, to feel the rejection of the sexual features of the self-body or even rejection of sexual relationships. The author continues:

“A parallel phenomenon (to medical discourses) might be occurring: based on repeating once and again how it has and does not have to be a trans person, many of us, especially the younger ones, have incorporated the medical discourses to define themselves and to explain to themselves [...]. The body that one wishes has to do with the bodily representations that surround us and their meanings.” (Ibid, p.61). Hence, the normativizing medical discourses are shaping great part of the transsexual experience and invisibilizing other trans identities, as those of the people who do not consider hormonal, surgical treatment or do not identify with the rigid feminine/masculine ideas of the medical diagnosis.³⁴(Ibid, p.59)

34 Following this debate of the pathologization of trans subjectivities through the medical discourse, Missé in his text brings to the forefront an interesting debate within the transgender community and in which I consider I should position myself. On one hand, there exist certain communities of transgender people who reclaim the traditional categories of men/woman that differentiate them and reject political ideas derived from queer theory as those that have been exposed

Lastly, the solution to transphobia within society in Missé's opinion would be "completely out of our bodies, it would be in our cultural references and, above all, in assuming that masculinity and femininity, men and woman, have more to do with culture than with nature." (Missé, p.73). The author supports the idea of the constructiveness of our bodies and their modification through popular representation. Hence, what is represented and how, especially regarding characters who embody certain identities, carries a great responsibility towards those who are being portrayed. Thus, comic as a means where to inscribe non-normative subjectivities could potentially empower transgender people if those representations were consciously and responsibly created.

Content

During the analysis of the Alters' comic, I rapidly realized that it represents an effort to make visible the otherness³⁵. In the first two issues of the comic, the authors already settle debates such as normative identities, alterity, gender stereotypes, functional diversity –disability– and agency, terrorism and Islamophobia, deviation from the norm and punishment, orientalism, accountability,... So it opens a wide range of topics and questions. However, some of them like gender roles were already mentioned in the analysis of Qahera, so I explore those which are related to the theories I mentioned at the beginning of this section and are relevant for this research as body representation and non-normative identities.

One of the most illustrating pages that I found related to normativity are the following (next page):

of challenging hegemonic categories. However, for another sector of the community: "For legitimizing the binomial, it is necessary to invisibilize and pathologize all the other options that exist." (Missé, p.88). It is my intention to queer social imaginaries in a way which would include invisibilized realities such as transgender people that identify with non-normative sexual orientation or express their gender out of traditional categories. In my opinion, it does not mean that for people who wish to cast themselves in traditional gender/sex identities would be excluded. My aim, considering that I am not a transgender person and due to my personal experiences with trans people and transfeminist movements, it is to empower those subjectivities that are doubly excluded: by society because they do not fit the diagnosis; and by transgender people who reclaim traditional models.

³⁵ The concept of *otherness* is central on how minority and majority identities are constructed. Zygmunt Bauman defines it as follows in *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991): "In dichotomies crucial for the practice and vision of social order the differentiating power hides as a rule behind one of the members of the opposition. The second member is but the other of the first, the opposite (degraded, suppressed, exiled) side of the first and its creation. Thus, abnormality is the other of the norm...woman the other of man, stranger is the other of native, foreigner the other of state subject, enemy the other of friend." (Bauman, p.8)





There are different references that I found truly relevant in this page. Firstly, the normalizing discourse of Matter Man. In the first panel, in a televised speech, the villain announces that another Alter has burst into the public space, which immediately confirms that there exists an *in/out* in the public domain. It means that one exists but the crucial is to be visible within that space until then there is nothing to be worried about. An Alter out of the public is not threatening. This fact is important because it means that while *Alter-ity* is far from public reach, it is not visible and do not alter the normal functioning of society, everything is fine. However, what is at stake in this example is the concept of *otherness* which is central to understand the construction of the social identities. Otherness differentiates the self from the other – who is constructed in opposition– organized in identity dichotomies, e.g. 'them' versus 'us', 'men' versus 'woman' (Bauman, p.8). Besides, the construction of the other implies ideas of similarity and difference that incorporate power inequalities: the other is built as the abnormal. The other contradicts the norm, establishing hierarchical relationships among these binaries oppositions. Thus, the social identity of the Alters is constructed according to the majority's identity as the different, the abject.

However, what happens when the Alters manifest themselves? In the next panel Matter Man 'reminds' to the citizens that “all alterations are enemies of the state unless they report directly to me. Anyone displaying such tendencies will be required to pledge allegiance.” (*Alters*, #1, p.16). This statement can be read as if every alteration to the norm will be a menace to society unless they succumb to the normalizing forces of the main Alter –Matter Man, the good Alter–, the state and express loyalty to them. This argumentation led me to the previously explained idea of 'normative transsexuality' derived from medical discourses and that configures the popular images of transgender woman/man that fit into traditional standards of gender roles. In the same way that people in order to reach hormone treatments, identity documents and surgery have to declare themselves as mentally ill, while affirming to recognize themselves in reductionist categories of either man or woman experiences, the Alters have to go through the regulatory practices of the normalizing powers in society if they want to become visible in public spaces. In line with Torras (2017), our bodies become visible when following cultural standard codes that make them identifiable (Torras, p.20). So bodies and cultural practices are mutually constructed and represent power relations that categorize individuals in society.

Thus, this comic page is in relation to my research as it revolves around the idea of representing

non-normative subjectivities in popular media. So in the same way that the Alters, the intention is to challenge the normativizing forces in society, as the medical discourse for some transgender people. Contrary to reality, in Alters the side of *the goods* is occupied by the difference, so the alterity and its tendencies, giving to it an empowered image; whereas the side of the villains is represented by the norm.

A second consideration is the image that Chalice, the protagonist, portrays. When she performs as the superhero —so as Chalice her felt identity— also transforms completely her look. As Charly, she gives a traditional image of a masculine guy —short hair, pants, no makeup,...— which is intended as well to her family's well-being. However, when she prepares herself as Chalice uses traditional feminine clothes and complements —long wig, make-up, waxed,etc.—, that provides her a conventional female look. The combination of mini top, which highlights her breast, and the mini skirt that exposes her muscular abdominals, creates a hyper-feminized and normative image of a woman.



Alters 2017, # 1, p.11.

This image though could result problematic when analyzed from the idea of 'normative transsexuality'. On one hand, Chalice is empowered through the use of clothes and complements, allowing herself to express and expose her identity as a woman. Nevertheless, regarding normativizing processes and hegemonic identity categories, this example of transgender experience could invisibilize other non-normative identities such as transgender women who do not want to fit into social standards. Furthermore, Missé (2007) highlights that the effects of the medical process and normativization of transgender persons serve as a function. It works to reinforce the heteropatriarchal system based on the binomial division of the population into male/female, the superiority of men that justifies traditional characteristics for femininity/masculinity which naturalizes the attraction between both

sexes for the reproduction of the species (Missé, p.85). As it was pointed out before, within Western societies we are surrounded by images of hyper-feminized or hyper-masculinized transsexual subjects. The medical devices that allowed many people to achieve the identity they desired have created a parallel discourse of normative roles for transgender people (Ibid,p.55). Those roles are interwoven with gender/sex traditional binaries, which invisibilize a great part of the trans community who do not identify themselves into those traditional categories that are at the base of heterosexual hegemonic discourses. Consequently, Chalice's portrait would be in some way reinforcing the concept of the transsexual normativity as she embodies dominant gender/sex identities. That is the reason why in my comic proposal the intention is to queer traditional categories, so to construct them differently from the norm, to open space for those who do not fit into the heteronormative gender/sex molds.

Conclusions

This chapter has served to illustrate the power behind the comics as a means through which we can potentially challenge the meanings that surround us. Furthermore, I have exposed the lack on queer-oriented superheroes despite the variety that we find in relation to genres or themes.

On the other hand, I have analyzed two different comics. The study of the comic Qahera has served to bring to the forefront crucial intersectional issues related to power and oppression, whereas Alter's have shown that, in fact, hegemonic categories should be undermined in order to visibilize certain subjectivities. Moreover, Alters has served to put in the center of sight the themes of body representation and its relation to hegemonic identity categories in relation to transgender people. Though this is a precise example, it has served to disclose the relation gender/sex in society and how it operates to perpetuate dominant discourses whereas invisibilizes certain identities. Furthermore, this mechanism of normativization manifests itself through cultural representations and popular media as a necessary process for preserving the heteropatriarchal system which perpetuates unequal power relations between social categories. In this way, challenging popular images that repeat the same standards of the social order would help to deconstruct traditional identity binaries.

The next section is a comic proposal based on gender studies theories. It argues for the queerization of a superhero in order to create a character that could serve to deconstruct the previously mentioned identity categories from an intersectional perspective. It means that this

superhero attempts to embody a role who, at least, does not repeat hegemonic categories and it is aware of their privileges.

De-Bunniex, a queer character proposal

Queering superheroes

Learning from the analysis of the above-exposed comics and from situating them into current feminist debates and theories, my intention now is to explore how the normative figure of superhero could be queered. Queer studies is a vast field of different perspectives, sometimes contradictory, that is why I decided to focus on theories aimed at the *norms* that dictate people's acceptable actions according to their personal identities, so queer as a progressive act. Other scholars, instead, are more focused on the politics of queer as an identity (Namaste K., 1994; Doty, A. 1993). My arguments though are mainly based on Jakobsen's (1998) article *Queer is? Queer does? Normativity and the Problem of Resistance* which supports the idea of *queer* as an active resistance to the norm in opposition of queer as a noun or identity position; so as an identity of *doing* instead of an identity of *being* (Jakobsen, p.516). Namely, I argue for the queerization of the character drawing on the resistance to the normativizing processes in society, however, taking into account the particularities that identity categories entangle and the complexities that exist between social norms and normativity that conform the politics of the *doing* that Jakobsen (1998) proposes in this text.

My proposal is to contradict³⁶ these identity categories in cultural representations in order to destabilize the predictive power of the codes of conduct, broadening fixed possibilities of social performance. Furthermore, these incongruent behaviors should be performed repeatedly to denaturalize popular assumptions regarding social binaries such as men/woman that are maintained through the iteration of patterns of conduct. As it will be explained in the next section, this last idea is based on Judith Butler's (1999) concept of performativity. Following, I introduce the theories that support these ideas for the queerization of the figure of the superhero.

To queer

As it has been previously introduced, the way I propose to queer the identity categories through the figure of superhero is the repetition of patterns of behavior that contradict what is socially expected

³⁶ Contradiction signifies to act differently, not necessarily in opposition, as it is socially expected depending on personal identities. For instance, resisting the dressing codes for men or the imposed standards of beauty for women.

according to binary oppositions –what is to be a woman/man, what is to be heterosexual/homosexual, what is natural/cultural– in order to disempower social norms of conduct. Next, I explore how those norms that dictate people's actions in society function and what is their relation to queerization.

Janet R. Jakobsen (1998) raises the complications of the static definition of queer as the 'resistance to the norm and normativity' which is not necessarily a progressive act (Jakobsen, p.512). It means that resisting does not imply action or forward movement –it is similar to passive actions like to remain or withstand– and, moreover, resisting does not recognize the complexities of the socio-historical conditions that the normativizing processes entangle for certain subjects in order to act. For instance, intersectional grammars of power condition to the people when resisting social norms, usually being easier for those who are empowered. Consequently, to resist will depend on the precise location of the person in relation to the norms they want to challenge.

On the other hand, what influences the range of actions in society that a person may have, are determined not by: “what the possibilities are in a given political moment but how we think about possibility, its conditions, its imagination.” (Jakobsen, p.514). Thus, in order to challenge the norms that dictate the acceptable actions of the subject in a certain society –organized and determined by identity categories–behavior codes could be firstly challenged by the representation of the unexpected, in a way which would destabilize regulated possibilities of performance. Secondly, to perpetually repeat them in sequences of performative acts –understood in a Butlerian manner³⁷–in order to denaturalize them, which would imply action in opposition to more static definitions of queering. In the context of developing alternatives in the genre of comics, such a way of challenging the norms would be including alternative representations of superheroes.

Moreover, taking into account how the possibilities of action can be imagined, the comic could function as well as an imaginative realm where to queer the possibilities of action. The combination of image and text could broaden the limits of the social norms, that are governed by normativizing rules. However, in order to clarify the statement above, it is necessary to discuss further how hegemonic categories can be destabilized.

How do we resist to the norm in an active manner? And, specifically in the context of the comic,

³⁷ Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1999) affirms that normative gender roles are repetitions of behaviors: “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.” (Butler, p.43). Thus gender through the iteration of patterns of action appears as naturalized and determined.

how can its characters be queered in a way that does not reinforce the socially imposed binaries such as gender or sexual orientation? Firstly, it is important to define what are those norms that regulate subjects in relation to normativity and the normal. For Jakobsen (1998) “*normativity* is a field of power, a set of relations that can be thought of as a network of norms, that forms the possibilities for and limits of action. *Norms* are the imperatives that materialize particular bodies and actions...”)The *normal* could be simply the average, the every day, or the commonsensical.” (Jakobsen, p.517). Hence, identity categories such as heterosexual become the norm through its materialization in, for instance, laws – regulating marriage or parenting– or media representation –through the repetitions of images of successful traditional families or couples– Besides, the norms become the average of behaviors –those that are more visible– that produces the hegemonic heteronormativity, that is to say, the imperative that regulates individuals' actions. To sum up, on one hand, we find hierarchically structured binaries through which reality is constructed such as men/woman, heterosexual/homosexual or black/white that, on the other hand, become normalized through practice.

Nevertheless, categories do not operate alone. Monique Wittig (1992) claims that the norms that constitute *women* also constitute heterosexuality, as *woman* is the subject of heterosexuality (Jakobsen, p.521). The power operations that influence the experience of gender are connected to the identity categories that conform the sexual orientation. Thus if the gender of a certain person is socially read as female is going to be assumed as straight. Consequently, in the case of a transgender person who identifies as a woman, she will be assumed and represented as straight in society, hiding a wide range of transgender people who identify as a woman but do not identify as heterosexual. Besides, these identity binaries work together in a complex network of connections intersected by hegemonic regimes of power around race, class, age, and so on. That is what Jakobsen (1998) names as the *additional norms* which are: “precisely the ones you would expect –white, male, middle-class, Christian– and the tightness of this network explains how in homophobic discourses all the homos turn out to look like the white guys on the other side [...]. Given such networks, our task is not to pull out the 'truly' resistant from the 'kinda' (subversive or not) but to shift, to queer, the network as a whole.” (Jakobsen, p.524). The set of norms works as complex system of intertwined connections of power oppressions that have to be entirely challenged in order to be effective –not as an *add-on* of categories but as a network, just to be clear because Jakobsen naming of *additional norms* might result confusing–. That is

why I decided to combine intersectionality which I find related to the additional norms –in that it situates subjects unequally—and queer theory, in order to represent reality differently directed towards a more inclusive and representative society. Hence, to queer categories should not only be related to the norms but with the power operations behind those identities that are hierarchically empowered and not exclusively to gender/sex binary constructions.

As it was previously mentioned in Chapter 2, in the section of Alters, this complex network of categories and their power relations create a dominant normativity which invisibilizes personal realities, configure popular meanings and create the images that surround us. Contradiction then could help to undermine normativity and its norms because if the norm is refused by the performance of the unexpected and through the iteration of the illogical, the norm cannot be predicted anymore and loses its value. For instance, to contest Missé's 'normative transsexuality' would be interesting to depict transgender women who do not dress in female traditional clothes – not necessarily masculine garments— and identify as lesbian, next to transgender women who do not use feminine clothes either and identify themselves as straight.

The debates around how to *do queer* are infinite and the possibilities how to enact queering practices are endless. The categories that define us are countless and, in my opinion, there is not a right manner to *do queer*. Furthermore, there are certain considerations that must be taken into account. For instance, due to the complex networks on which identity categories operate, when trying to contradict patterns of behavior in the manner that I propose – acting differently to the norm, unexpectedly—, there is a risk of working in opposition to the norm. This would be reinforcing the binary that, in a certain moment, I try to challenge³⁸because identities are organized in dichotomies which are established in opposition to one another. Thus, I might not be destabilizing social divisions continuously but I won't be systematically reproducing ubiquitous hegemonic categories that are configured as norms.

The comic superhero proposal that I introduce below is based on theories which follow a queer logic, that is to say, it pursues actively resisting to the norm. The final aim is to theorize a comic

38 Jakobsen (1998) states: “Opposition to the norm, rather than pointing us to this complex of norms, can present the problem of being definitionally determined by what we would resist. The need to avoid such a trap is motivated by the overdetermined and thus (un)necessary limits set by the binary structure itself: one reason that homo is unable to queer itself effectively is that it is defined by, even as it defines, hetero[...] if one's position is relationally defined over against the norm, one does not necessarily move out of the definitional terms of the binary itself.” (Jakobsen, p.522)

character according to the ideas above exposed, in which it was highlighted the deconstruction of social binaries, through the contradiction of the acts and their iteration for their denaturalization. The comic serves as the canvas where to inscribe these queer acts, however, it is necessary to complement these ideas with other gender studies texts in order to portray invisibilized subjects that are systematically excluded and/or misrepresented configuring cultural representations that affect our identities.

Why imagine...differently. De-Bunniex, a queer superhero

This section introduces my theoretical comic proposal for the figure of superhero which departs from the figuration of the *cyborg* of Donna Haraway (*Cyborg Manifesto*, 1984). The cyborg that this author proposes is configured to overcome restrictive binaries as those of nature-culture, social reality-fiction, gender or sexuality. It embraces the technological and natural constructiveness of the subjects that I would like to highlight –in a similar manner to the *becoming of the bodies* proposed by Torras (2007) that was exposed in Chapter 2– in order to undermine wrongful representations of certain excluded social groups in popular media, especially regarding gender and sexual identity. Haraway (1984) asserts:

“Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. The international women's movements have constructed 'women's experience', as well as uncovered or discovered this crucial collective object. This experience is a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.” (Haraway, p.149).

These words point out that what counts as real is a construction of the social experience and of what is imagined as possible. The notion of possibility opens the space for political change, for reinvention and for challenging what is assumed to be a natural given as 'women's experience'. Thus, whatever other identity experience can be potentially reinscribed or differently imagined, hence creating the possibility to live it diversely.

Furthermore, imagination here takes a political role that it is crucial to mention in relation to this research. J. Latimer and Beverly Skeggs (2011) in their article *The politics of imagination: Keeping Open and Critical* claims that: “Imagination can be understood as a (temporary) site of resistance and alterity, that opens up the possibility of difference and even change.” (Latimer, J. & Skeggs, B., p.404). The power to imagine lies on its opportunity to create spaces where to act to resist, for instance, to the norm and where to inscribe other ways to understand the difference, as it could be the case of the otherness. Furthermore, the authors drawing on Foucault (2000) suggest that: “imagination can be also understood not just as topic and resource, but as a space to be found in between discursive and material events and practices, that is potentially transformative as a force, that transforms the present by opening up a different past and a different future.” (Latimer, J. & Skeggs, B., p. 395). I found very interesting the potential of imagination not only to keep open new futures but as a means to rewrite the past. Hence, the political impact of imagination goes beyond of possible futures as it can work to change the meanings of previous experiences affecting, then, the present. The fictional character of a queer superhero may influence people's imagination, what could serve to reformulate past normative experiences, whereas it creates new possibilities to progressively resist present norms. Blurring the imaginary lines of the future will allow challenging what counts as real in the present.

The superhero

In what follows, I will describe the figure of the superhero which represents an attempt to challenge hegemonic categories in order to subvert what is assumed as natural. I first introduce the real statue that has inspired the fictional character. Next, I describe my proposal of superhero. I focus on their physical characteristics, particularly, their body and eyes. Finally, the superpowers of the character are theorized.

The statue

The superhero is a character based in one of the most famous monuments in Utrecht, named *Thinker on a Rock* or the *Rabbit Statue*. It is a bronze sculpture created by the British artist Barry Flanagan which represents a combination of a hare with *The Thinker* by Auguste Rodin. As its name suggests, the

sculpture has the shape of a rabbit sitting on a rock, with their head laying on their hand, looking to nowhere with a thoughtful pose. Its body gives the impression that is made in just one piece, with no differentiation of any part —except for the eyes and facial expression— and it is perceived as made of a heterogeneous black material. Symbolically, it resembles the thinker male body of Rodin, however, this creation opens space for other interpretations such as mine of a genderless body. Besides, I found this representation very illustrative regarding the concepts and theories explored in this chapter. For instance, there are no signs of gender assignation so it could wander between different genders and its materiality allows to connect it to Braidotti's critiques on the traditional medical representation of the body that will be further explained.



The statue is placed at the heart of the city —looking to Neude's square and their back to Voorstraat street— where it has been observing the city life and its inhabitants during years. The choice of the statue and its location has not been arbitrary. The plot has been thought to develop principally in the area where it used to be placed the inner city's Red Light District of Utrecht and where it is said that small criminals, bike thieves and other popularly known people —because they seem bizarre or striking due to their clothes, disability or because they are homeless— wander especially during the evening/nights. So, my choice is an attempt to recognize them and to change misconceptions of this

zone —such as a dark area or dangerous— that I have been witnessing for almost four years, basically because I have been working in a restaurant placed in Voorstrat.

De-Bunniex



Leyla, Ali (2017), *De-Bunniex*. Utrecht. This illustration has been created by the artist exclusively for the present work.

Following I will describe the fictional character of the superhero, based on the *Thinker on a Rock* of Utrecht. The name I selected refers the non-human animal base of the character and includes the letter x as an allusion to the Spanish use of inclusive language.³⁹ The mission of this superhero is a great

³⁹ In the Spanish language, the names are usually female or male —which implies pointing out the gender constantly— and the plural tends to be always in masculine, invisibilizing female subjects. For instance, when naming a group of people,

one: they struggle for a better society in which everyone would feel accepted and included as desired, regardless of their identity, especially in relation to race, class, ableness, religion, gender,... Furthermore, as a feminist superhero, this character is very sensitive to the topics that have been previously exposed: female agency, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, fatphobia, racism and so on. They fight with their superpowers that will be later explained against the injustices perpetrated by power abusers in a capitalist context, concretely in Western societies such as Utrecht's. Moreover, they usually perform during the evenings/nights as they prefer to be anonymously in the shadows –they occupied a hidden boat in the sixties where they spend most of the light hours–until the world becomes a habitable place for all. However, they show up whenever is required covered by a black cloak to avoid being recognized –the society is not prepared for them–. Finally, it is important to mention that they own huge hare ears, so they can hear from very far when a person is in trouble.

Regarding the materiality of the superhero, this is rooted in Haraway's (1984) cyborg. I propose De-Bunniex as an 'assembled' subject. The character is meant to overcome the gender binarism or the division between human and animal, whereas at the same time it reconstructs the relation between nature and culture. The pieces that conform De-Bunniex's corporeality are made of an amalgam of flesh, blood, bionic body parts, vaginal discharge, lies, moss, urban waste, scars, scraps, endosymbiosis, inconsistencies, irony and desires. However, they seem to be made of just one single dark material as if the body had no divisions. In general, this character appears as a human-sized black rabbit, who does not wear any clothes or complements –just sporadically the cape–. Nevertheless, their face is humanized and they can speak human languages.

Furthermore, this character shows that we embody the cultural discourses and meanings that surround us. They are formed by the events and elements that are part of their experiences. Besides, it is not a complete body, on the contrary, it changes shape and components when De-Bunniex interacts with the environment, incorporating them to their materiality. In line with Torra's (2007) statements:

so *all people* –in Spanish it is *todos* being *-os* the male suffix and *-as* for the feminine– female subjects are removed and other people who do not identify as male. Consequently, there are several proposals of using gender neutral indicators such as @, *, e instead of *a/o* and the *x* which covers a wider range of gender identities. Furthermore, the use of the *x* has been called by A. Pérez Orozco (2014) in her book *Feminist subversion of the economy. Contributions to a debate on the capital-life conflict* as: “the *linguistic disobedience*, insofar as it breaks with the grammatical norm, that is, the use of the 'x' in cases where generics are not possible or in cases where it is desired to emphasize the plural character (current or desired) in terms of sexual and gender identity of the social group to which we are referring –since the language to use is not only sexist but binaristic–”. (Pérez Orozco, p.33). Hence, the substitution of *-a/-o*, *-as/-os* for *-x/-xs* for the names represents an attempt of defying the norm and the identity gender binaries.

"[the body] does not exist beyond or behind the discourse, the power of discourse and the discourse of power. The body is the representation of the body, the body has a performative existence within the cultural framework [with its codes] that makes it visible." (Torras,p.11). What could appear as a superpower, changing shape, actually illustrates the malleability of our bodies depending on the discourses on which we are immersed. So their body is literally the result of stories, experiences and interaction with other beings.

Besides, I decided that the character's eyes were designed as dragonflies', compound eyes, so each eye is composed of hundreds of little eyes that turn these insects into prodigies of vision. Braidotti (2011) uses Haraway's words in *Situated Knowledges* (1988) to suggest that: "we must learn to see in compound, multiple ways, in 'partial perspectives'; she (Haraway) calls it 'passionate detachment'[...]. Vision requires the feminist politics of locations, or self-reflexive positioning, which implies responsibility." (Braidotti, p.206). De-Bunniex owns the power of seeing, of visualizing from different locations other than themselves –understanding that *to see* implies *to feel* the others–, especially from subjugated positions of those who are disempowered. Thus, these eyes allow the superhero to be aware of their own privileges, so to have a better perception of their own positionality regarding others, with their limitations and responsibilities as an empowered role. Nevertheless, the aim of these eyes is not to fall in a totalizing gaze, "a view of infinite vision, that of the *God Trick*" as Haraway (1988) warns us in relation to the Western objectivity (Haraway, p.582). In this case, the vision is mediated by emotions, embodied and influenced by the experiences of the character and their location. These eyes reject distance from what is seen, whereas they reclaim responsibility of the constructiveness of the images that they produce. For example, in a hypothetical situation of abuse from one person to another, they would act as a saver using their superpowers and privileges but in a way that empowers the person in need, instead of victimizing them and creating a situation of dependency with the superhero⁴⁰. That is possible because De-Bunniex's eyes allow them *to see* and *feel* the others, their own privileges, the contexts and so to act in consequence.

On the other hand, this idea of a set up of pieces that conform De-Bunniex body is based as well

⁴⁰ One way through which the superhero could empower the persons in need would be by identification because they are represented not as a perfect figure but as a role who suffers the same exclusions as the rest of characters. However, who struggles for their own emancipation and it is already empowered. Moreover, my idea is that the relationship between De-Bunniex and the people they help do not finish after that the person is rescued, so that they remain connected somehow.

on Braidotti's (2011) theorization about *visibility* in an attempt to contest traditional conceptions of the representation of the human body:

“The idea of visibility [as leading principle in the scientific representation of the human body] is connected to a discursive dismemberment of the body [...]. Furthermore, clinical anatomy, with its sadistic subtext, is an exercise in mastery that aims at denying death. Because of its double empirical transcendental structure, the body can never be reduced just to a sum of detachable parts. The pursuit of complete visualization is an illusion that is doomed to fail. A slippage occurs from the need to visually represent empirical material to a mirage of absolute transparency, as if the scientific truth consisted simply in bringing something into visual representation.”(Braidotti, p.196).

Braidotti suggests that scientific tradition has been in charge of scrutinizing the body, in an attempt to reduce it to the sum of its parts, to create a totalizing vision of the body, of its truth, to own the body, thus to own life itself. The body parts of the superhero are not those of the corpses that science tries to possess, human material that could be dissected for scientific examination and truth revealing. It is the very embodiment of the human condition if we stick to Braidotti's claims; they 'is' because their parts are together, connected. They represent the scientific nightmare, they cannot be exposed, ripped to pieces because they would cease to be. Their parts would fall apart and lose their sense when separated from the whole; they become the irrepresentable, the unthinkable. It would mean that, for instance, their DNA could not be decoded, or be assigned a biological sex. Their scientific truth, their essence is impossible to be exposed, nor to be categorized or classified into social constructs.

Furthermore, De-Bunniex is made of assembled pieces, however, they do not deny death, they are death and life, as they are not born, they have not a beginning or end. They are a fictional character whose origin and age are unknown, however, who blurs the line between reality and fiction. According to Haraway's (1984) cyborg:

“In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense, a 'final' irony since the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic telos of the West's escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self-untied at last from all dependency, a man in space. An origin story in the 'Western' humanist sense depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate...” (Haraway, p.150-151).

They represent the incarnation of the overcoming of Western psychoanalytical complexes, as they are not originated from the unity with the mother or does not suffer the envy of the penis, around what is formed the phallogocentric⁴¹ thought. It means that in a sense, their desires and psyche overcome phallogocentric powers that are crucial to explaining male domination in our society. One example that illustrates this idea is that in their language is not male-centered and is gender inclusive.

Superpowers

As a superhero, the character is endowed with superpowers and special skills, which provides them a privileged position as it was explained in Chapter 2, p.4. On the one hand, some of their extraordinary abilities are their gender inclusive language or their compound eyes. On the other hand, it is my idea to assign to the role two superpowers: one based on the chapter *The pharmacopornographic era* of Paul B. Preciado (*Testo Junkie*, 2008) and the other is theoretically grounded on the manipulation of the desires from a psychoanalytical perspective.

P. B. Preciado in his book *Testo Junkie* (2008) analyzes the way in which political structures and power determine personal experiences, the experiences of the body and, consequently, the social roles that we perform in society which are central to the present work. The main argument is that the current capitalist model is based on two fundamental pillars: the pharmaceutical industry and pornography. Besides, alongside to the philosophical discourse that is focused on the 'pharmacopornographic' operations, the author recounts and theorizes his experience of self-applying testosterone. Preciado (2008) states that: "the real stake of capitalism today is the

41 Phallogocentrism of phallogocentrism: The privileging of the masculine –the phallus – in understanding meaning or social relations. This term evolved from deconstructionists who questioned the 'logocentrism' of Western literature and thought. The term is also associated with Lacanian psychoanalysis, which understands the entrance of subjects into language as a negotiation of the phallus and the Name of the Father. Feminists such as Luce Irigaray in her *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) illustrates how all Western languages, in all their features, are utterly and irredeemably male-engendered, male-constituted, and male-dominated. Discourse is 'phallogocentric' because it is centered and organized throughout by implicit recourse to the phallus both as its supposed ground (or logos) and as its prime signifier and power source; and not only in its vocabulary and syntax, but also in its rigorous rules of logic, its fixed classifications and oppositions, and its criteria for what we take to be valid evidence and objective knowledge.

pharmacopornographic control of subjectivity, whose products are serotonin, techno-blood and blood products, testosterone, antacids [...].” (Preciado,p.39). Following this statement, the control of capitalist societies rests on the production and control of goods related to the pharmacological industry and pornographic business, so on products associated with sex and drugs that have an influence in everyday life and affect individuals. What emerges from this statement is that what really dominates the world is the relationship between desire, pleasure and well-being that I assumed as the expected effects from the consumption of pharmacopornographic goods. Consequently, I considered these elements as the base of the superpowers of De-Bunniex in order to influence people's experiences and power structures. That is to say, to benefit those who may need it from their superhero empowered position, whereas they can undermine, for instance, pernicious hierarchical powers by the control of the production of goods/substances related to desire, pleasure and well-being out of the global market –so self-produced–.

Preciado (2008) continues: “the raw materials of today's production process are excitation, erection, ejaculation, and pleasure and feelings of self-satisfaction, omnipotent control and total destruction.” (Ibid,p.39). Consequently, not only the materials related to sex and drugs are related to social control but mostly hedonistic feelings associated with them. So the superpower that derives from the above ideas is that De-Bunniex could produce and/or control the production of serotonin –or Prozac, trade name, which is a worldwide antidepressant– in others that would be affecting pharmacological interests whereas it would be very powerful, for example, used against villains. Because serotonin is related to hormone control, emotions, psychological disorders or hallucinations, the superhero could cause a psychedelic trip and its attached emotions to their enemies from where to manipulate their imagination in order to head them to better purposes. How interesting would be to represent Geert Wilders having pleasure feelings while imagining people of color in The Netherlands? Or a misogynist enjoying picturing women not as objects but as determined subjects, who are empowered and independent?

The second superpower that I considered for De-Bunniex is the control of the desires, drawing on psychoanalytic theories about their functioning. Nevertheless, there exist certain differences between Lacan and Freud regarding the desire worthy to mention here and that clarify the superpower that I want to develop. The text by García Collado, F. J. (2013) *Analysis of the concept of desire in Plato*,

Freud and Lacan in the face of the crisis of the contemporary subject perfectly illustrates the discrepancy between the two authors and exposes the main points in relation to this superpower.

First of all, the Lacanian desire is based on the *lack* that is created after the separation of the child from the mother⁴². This detachment originates a gap that allows the child entering the language/symbolic realm but from where the desire is produced:

“The desire is linked to the fiction from which it is possible to satisfy again, fully, a perception already lived. However, from Lacan, desire will no longer remain anchored to that motion tied to necessity, but to the lack properly. To a ghost created by the signifying chain that, far from being based on necessity, is stuck in the lack. Specifically in the desire of the other, whose existence is, therefore, more fantastic than the Freudian. The ghost, according to Lacan, will occur when the child enters the language, in the sphere of the symbolic and the becoming of the imaginary; alluding thus –after the symbolic to the imaginary sphere– as the second of the three anchorages that form the Lacanian Borromean knot of the individual, consisting of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary.”(p.163)

Thus, for Lacan the desire is not a need in itself, but what he calls the ghost of a previously satisfied experience. That is to say, it is a fiction in a symbolic order that we seek to fulfill, to accomplish in order to be completed again and which is configured by the language and by what conforms the language – e.g. culture.

In a different way, for Freud, the desire serves a need and it is called drive:

"Desire's identity derives from a drive of the need to restore an earlier state which leaves aside the most common relation with a basic volitional impulse like that which is evoked daily by any subject: desire to sleep, desire to eat among others. Desire –as presented in *The Interpretation of Dreams*– responds to this identity. A change can only happen when, by some means (in the case of the child, by the care of others) is achieved the experience from the lived satisfaction that cancels the internal stimulus. An essential component of this experience is the appearance of a certain perception (nutrition, in our example) whose mental image is henceforth associated with the imprint left in memory by the excitement produced by necessity." (Ibid, p.164)

42 The unity of the child and the mother represents the feeling of completeness that is only felt once –in the childhood–, of being just one between the two of them, which disappears when they are separated by the Law of the Father. However, this event permits the infant to enter into the social realm, yet this opening, this whole, will be never fulfilled again and creates the lack which permits to desire others/other things apart from the mother.

Differently, for Freud, the desire belongs to a precise need –which is not just an organic drive though, not as an individual surrendered to pure survival– but creates an unbalanced state that should be restored. Furthermore, the psychoanalyst distinguishes between two different desires/drives: the *Wunsh* which corresponds to a desire that can be postponed – e.g. Virulent thirst in the middle of the night that is satisfied by the dream of drinking water– and the *Lust* more related to pleasure which is a vehement desire like to eat a whole cake (Ibid, p.165). The *Wunsh* is closer to Lacan's desire as it can be fulfilled in the symbolic order –e.g. A cigarette which is smoked to satisfy hunger because culturally we have learned to do so–. However, I chose Lacan's definition of desire due to its relation with personal fulfillment and the conceptualization of the lack that I find parallel to Preciado's (2008) theory above exposed on capitalist societies. Next, I introduce this link from which I develop the second superpower.

Lacan (1999) in his Seminary V claims that: “If the relation of desire to object was not problematic there would be no subject to deal with in the analysis. Men, like animals, would go to their object, and they would not turn around this one. [...] that is to say, man enjoys to desire, hence the need to keep desire unsatisfied” (Lacan, p.25). What it is striking in Lacan's statement is that humans do not desire the object, but the pleasure of desiring in itself. That is the reason because the desire is always unaccomplished. Consequently, this superpower will be based on the completeness of the human desire. It means that the character would own the power of controlling desires of the villains⁴³, thus fulfilling them and, consequently, annihilating their human condition as desiring beings⁴⁴. If there is no desire, there won't be movement. The human could not be able, especially if we take into account what Paul Preciado (2008) proposes as the base of the world production such as pleasure or satisfaction, of being headed towards whatever object. Hence, the subject would remain trapped in an anodyne vacuum, so their evil and oppressive plans undesired. Besides, the desire anchored in Lacan's lack has been usually linked to consumerist societies. García Collado (2013) drawing on Marx highlights

43 It is important to mention here why I personally considered this kind of punishment. The use of the violence has been historically neglected to some minorities and social groups, for instance, women or transgender people –representation in media, popular songs, etc.–. Thus I consider empowering the fact that a queer character re-appropriates the use of violence and punishment to defend their self from power oppression. However, my idea was to bring it further and instead of bloody fights or weapons the focus is more political and gender oriented because of the theories that were chosen in order to support the superpowers.

44 Understanding here *desires* as those which are oppressive for others and power abusive –e.g. men's desires of women's control in patriarchal societies–. The lack of desire should not be misunderstood as an all type of uses for punishment because, for instance, for some asexual people the absence of sexual desire does not represent an issue, a dysfunction or something undesirable. This is a specific way of punishment within a precise political and cultural context.

that the commodities are firstly an external object which satisfies human needs of any class, whether this need comes from the stomach or the fantasy (García Collado, p.4). It could be said that the consumerist society takes account of the human condition of *ever satisfied being* to offer objects that promise fulfillment and satisfaction. Nevertheless, it is the desire's nature not to be satisfied, that is why the consumer continues consuming.

In the same line with the above exposed but related to sexual pleasure Braidotti (2011) asserts: "Pornography frustrates the very expectation it arouses: it cheats on us and, by not fulfilling us, it keeps consumers coming back for more: it is a generalized form of addiction." (Braidotti p.200). Braidotti with her words supports and brings together both Preciado's (2008) and Lacan's (1999) ideas of consumerist societies. On one hand, Western societies are based on promises and unsatisfied desires and, on the other hand, she points out pornography as one of the greatest addictions of our times, grounded on the same premises as Lacan's desires. Individuals move towards an end because they have desires; if those desires are fulfilled even imaginarily as in the case for instance of personal goals, the subject remains impassive. If one has no aims, desires, to what objective does the individual move forward? The author continues: "[pornography industry] frustrates the very desire it stimulated, the function of the entertainment industry is to promise more than it delivers." (Braidotti, p.209). We are constantly surrounded by images for consumption that once are acquired, and the desire satisfied, a new 'product' is created/launched producing new desires —e.g. when one buys a phone and a few months after appears the new model. The old one seems obsolete and one starts wishing new a one—. Same applies to pornography, goods, relationships, images, bodies, it is the motor of the S.XXI society of consumption. The idea is that De-Bunniex would stop perpetrators of inequalities to desire, to move, to operate when controlling the desiring drive of humans whereas is benefiting those who are disempowered.

The question at this point is how would the superhero prevent the villains to desire? One way that would allow the superhero to do so could be the production of a modification of risperidone —Risperdal, trade name—, an antipsychotic drug which could affect desires on an imaginary level. This type of medication is primarily used to manage psychosis —including delusions, hallucinations, paranoia, or disordered thoughts—, principally in schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. The aim is to affect the desires through its imagination in the symbolic order as in psychoanalysis theory. As it has been

exposed, according to Lacan the desires are created and modified by the language. This drug would remove the psychotic capacity of the enemies, so to imagine on a symbolic level, thus eliminating some of their desires. Thus the first superpower would help to induce different pleasurable/unpleasant images whereas this second extraordinary capacity would allow to remove them.

Conclusions

The objective of this chapter has been to theorize about the queerization of the role of the superhero in an intersectional manner, departing from a definition of queer which implies resisting to the norm, however, as an identity of *doing*. Furthermore, the challenge has been to include the particularities of the subjects regarding these norms that establish what are the acceptable actions in society and which create hierarchical identity relations.

Furthermore, in order to undermine these patterns of behavior, it has been proposed to represent contradictory acts that subvert normative identities and to repeat them systematically to denaturalize them. Consequently, the comic is meant as a means through which to imagine, as a political act, new possibilities of existence that creates new spaces on what counts as reality for those who are more disempowered.

Finally, the role of De-Bunniex has been introduced as a proposal of a queer superhero grounded on gender studies theories. They represent a character with feminist intentions who protects people from power oppression, stop villains' Machiavellian plans, however, whereas empower the victims from their privileged position. Moreover, this role owns as well certain skills –such as super ears or compound eyes—and two main superpowers. These later exceptional abilities allow De-Bunniex to manipulate the imagination of the oppressors and to control their desires in order to direct them to more inclusive actions and affections.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been a journey throughout the significative role that cultural representations have on hegemonic power relations and an attempt to contest them using comic as a means. The research questions that have led my analysis are: how are contemporary comic superheroes represented in popular media from an intersectional perspective? And consequently, how could be possible to queer them? My analysis of those questions has demonstrated that despite the current existence of a great variety among the images that surround us, they can still perpetuate mechanisms of exclusion and oppression for those who are socially disempowered. However, gender studies theories provide us with powerful tools that allow us to understand what are those representations and how to challenge them. Hence, I proposed a queer superhero that attempts to subvert these normative images drawing on feminist scholar texts.

Now, to round all my work off, I will highlight some of the main points of my research and take a closer look at the power of the imaginaries as a political question within normativizing forces which is the actual gist of the present work.

Summary

The introductory chapter opened with a personal concern on the incapacity to imagine a superhero who could accomplish my expectations of a feminist character. It served to illustrate the lack of diversity of superhero's roles in cultural representation that led me to research what are the images of comic superheroes in popular media and how could we diversify this type of character in order to make them more representative.

To give an answer to the previous questions, it was first exposed how popular representations and their meanings are constructed by the subjects who participate in a certain culture. Furthermore, it was emphasized the value that the artifacts that conform a determined culture possess which place them –objects, peoples, images, events– in a precise location into the social structures (Hall, 2013). Then, as I wanted to illustrate, the intervention on comic representation brings the possibility for us to change the images in society, thus influencing its significance and repercussions in people's life experiences.

Finally, I exposed the use of the comic as a means through which challenge traditional roles of

superhero giving way to other subjectivities -namely, queer identities- in a more representative manner, for instance, in terms of gender or sexual orientation that could serve as empowering images for those who feel excluded -or misrepresented- from social life.

Chapter 1 includes the theories and methods that I used to engage with my research questions. First of all, I highlighted the power relations existent within the knowledge production system, for what was crucial to expose the relation that is established between my self-position and the objects of study. Following, I justified the choice of an intersectional perspective in order to recognize the power inequalities in this work and to make this research more aware of its limitations.

Secondly, I exposed the criteria that I followed for selecting the two comic superheroes and summarized their content. The comics that were chosen include contemporary feminist-oriented superheroes, who own some extraordinary powers and target a broad audience. Moreover, I tried to make my choices the most intersectional as possible, that is to say, to be inclusive with the characters in terms of religion, race, gender, class and so on.

Next, I described content analysis as the method that I used to disclose the superheroes' representations in the comics. This non-invasive method allowed me to not only critically observe these materials that I selected but to analyze the images of the protagonist of the two comics and their social meanings. Finally, I described the main theories that I used in order to support my own queer comic superhero *De-Bunniex*. This character is mainly based on Haraway's (1991) figuration of the cyborg of her text *Cyborg Manifesto*. Besides, their superpowers are grounded on psychoanalytical theories such as Lacan's on the functioning of the human's desires and on P.B. Preciado (2008) chapter "The pharmacopornographic era".

Chapter 2 was mainly devoted to the relevance of comic as a form of cultural representation and to the analysis of the comics Qahera and Alters -their main characters- as that aim to intervene into hegemonic forms of popular images. I first introduced to the reader the significance of the comic world in relation to cultural representation and the themes that I considered more relevant for my research derived from feminist debates. That is to say, I looked for gender issues, body representation, agency or sexual orientation, for instance, and how they are materialize through the art of cartooning. Nevertheless, each comic brought to the forefront different topics: in the case of Qahera, the comic is more focused on women's choices, accountability or Orientalism, whereas Alters' analysis rose

questions about hegemonic categories, in/visibilization, or the impact of culture on our bodies. These issues are directly connected with how intersectionality operates and how subjects are empowered/disempowered in society as I exposed it, which justifies why intersectionality has taken a central position throughout this research.

Chapter 3 draws on queer theory and how this perspective could help to defy cultural representations in popular media. It also discusses De-Bunniex, a queer superhero that I develop. De-Bunniex is introduced as an alternative comic character that offers alternative forms of superhero representation.

Queer studies aim to trouble hegemonic categories that are socially assumed as natural and to destabilize binaries that are at the base of those dominant constructs like heterosexual -in opposition to homosexual- invisibilizing many people's reality. My proposal is a queer-based superhero which embodies an alternative character able to reinscribe individuals identities in a more representative manner. It means that the characteristics and superpowers of the role are based on ideas that pursue to empower those who, because of their identity, are more likely to suffer social exclusion. However, queer deconstruction presents complications as well. Due to the complex intersections of identity categories, it results difficult not to reinforce one of those binaries when trying to undermine another (Jakobsen, 1998). Nevertheless, I showed that it is possible to develop alternatives that contest reality assumptions, trying to avoid the repetition of normative patterns of behavior that are already present in all popular media to demarginalize non-normative identities.

Imagining

“What if we were to exercise the as yet undeclared right to dream?

What if we were to fantasize, even for a moment?

Let's project our vision beyond the current world of infamy

and imagine another possible world: a world...

Where the air will be clean of every poison
that doesn't come from human fears and human passions...

Where people will work to live and will not live to work...

Where cooks will not believe that lobsters just love to be boiled alive...

And historians will not believe that countries just love to be invaded...

And politicians will not believe that poor people just love to live on promises...
Where perfection will continue to be the absurd privilege of the gods,
but in this untidy and messed-up world,
every night is lived as if it is the last and every day as if it is the first."
The right to delirium" by Eduardo Galeano, 23rd of May, 2011⁴⁵.

This inspiring poem of Eduardo Galeano, Uruguayan writer and voice of Latin America people reinforces the idea that the world is an imagined reality tailor-made for just a few. The 'right to dream' that the author encourages us to exercise points out the chance that we have to defy what has been imposed to us as real, as natural, as the Truth. His verses expose challenging dichotomies in which he opposes two power-differentiated relations – poor/rich, human/animal, perfection/imperfection, nature/culture—that he ironically questions. In this sense, De-Bunniex is an imagined fiction which aims to subvert hegemonic realities and to rethink and intervene into the binaries that Galeano proposes to us. It represents the re-appropriation of our imaginations to create the world in which we want to live in, an opportunity to reinscribe what has been neglected and to what has been given to us as reality. The final purpose of the creation of De-Bunniex that I wanted to bring to the conclusions is that it embodies the *power* that we own as social agents in relation to cultural representation and the responsibility that we have as students of gender studies.

However, how did I engage 'the right to delirium' with gender studies? In my opinion, delirium is meant to overcome the borders of reality. In Western societies we are overwhelmingly surrounded by representations and images that constantly appear, repeating the same content, constraining the limits of the imaginable. Rosi Braidotti argues in her chapter *Images without imagination* (Nomadic Subject, 2011) that: "[the] Deficit in imaginary power and conceptual creativity is emerging as one of the defining features of our overvisualized culture." (Braidotti, p.204). Nowadays, we are daily exposed to images that are in lack of elaboration and which are carriers of messages that unceasingly depict the same normative realities. Those representations are both mutually co-produced and reinforced by social power structures and popular meanings. It is my belief that it is an important task for us as scholars of gender studies to produce alternative and elaborated discourses, as a way to anticipate

45 "*The right to delirium*" was recited by Eduardo Galeano in 2011 for a Catalan television in Spain. Poem and English translation can be found in:
<http://trianarts.com/eduardo-galeano-el-derecho-al-delirio/#sthash.BnXTF8YB.cRm7oOmE.dpbs4>

what will come next. In the same way that Sara Franklin (2000) defines it: “ 'Imaginary' in the quotidian sense of a realm of imagining the future, and re-imagining the borders of the real.” (S. Franklin, p.198), we have the tools to develop an alternative future if we broaden the limits of what counts as real. Only if there is space to imagine it first, then it would be possible for it to happen in the future.

This world that I am suggesting is, thus, queer as far as it is aware and responsible of what it imagines. It is a world which pursues resisting the norms by doing, however, taking into account the intersectional identities in order to create the possibilities for people to exist. As Haraway (1988) eloquently describes it:

“We do need an earthwide network of connections, including the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different –and power-differentiated– communities. We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life.” (Haraway, p.580).

The present analysis is a parcel of knowledge, a contribution to the network above mentioned that attempts to develop new meanings grounded on the experience of the gender studies community. Almost 30 years after from Haraway's words, gender studies have elaborated powerful tools with which to disclose how the actual world works, scrutinizing its meanings to create imaginaries where to inscribe a better future. With this work, I have illustrated that our bodies and our realities are constructions that can be modified and that cultural representation takes a central role. Hence, focusing on what the images that surround us represent and how to build popular references that empower different communities would create the opportunity to influence what is to come and challenge the world we want to develop.

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