New Tools for Storytelling: Flexible Ethnicity and Adaptation in Comics & Television

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New Tools for Storytelling:
Flexible Ethnicity and Adaptation in Comics & Television

by

Abby E. Barlok

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New Tools for Storytelling: Flexible Ethnicity and Adaptation in Comics & Television
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Conclusion</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

1. Examples of all-white comics  
   - Page 4
2. Generic male and female superheroes  
   - Page 4
3. Self-Identity in McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*  
   - Page 6
4. Sam Wilson as the new Captain America  
   - Page 8
5. The new female Thor  
   - Page 9
6. Kamala’s first appearance in *Captain Marvel*  
   - Page 11
7. Cultural Exchange in *Ms. Marvel*  
   - Page 12
8. Kamala being enveloped in the Terrigen Mists  
   - Page 13
9. Kamala Khan’s Individuality  
   - Page 15
10. Kamala Khan’s Positive Effect in Present-Day  
    - Page 16
11. Meiko’s Death Scene  
    - Page 26
12. Poussey’s Death Scene  
    - Page 29
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines different forms of storytelling by using graphic novels, comic books and television series to efficiently do so. The first chapter features a fairly new comic called *Ms. Marvel* where the superhero is a teenage Muslim instead of the traditional blue-eyed, blonde-haired superhero. The chapter describes Marvel Comics’ direction of changing ethnicity, sex, gender, etc. to better suit the vastly-growing and diverse consumer market. Chapter two concentrates on the tool of flashbacks in a comic called *Bitch Planet* and in a television show called *Orange is the New Black*. The use of flashbacks is investigated, further demonstrating its ability to humanize characters.

Chapter three focuses on adaptation as a form, tracing its roots from creation to present-day. In the chapter, I discuss the call and current need for changes within adaptations. I also examine an original comic called *Preacher*, while also comparing it to the newly-finished TV series adaptation by the same name.

Throughout the three chapters, portable ethnicity, flashbacks and adaptation are all a common theme and all play a part in the storytelling of these pieces.
Chapter One
Flexible and Portable Ethnicity in Marvel Comics

Marvel Comics’ recent development of a full slate of multicultural replacements for the brand’s traditional heroes includes an Afro-Latino Spiderman, a female Thor, an African American Captain America, and a Middle Eastern Ms. Marvel, who is also happens to be a practicing Muslim. This new angle, by Marvel, comes at a time when diversity is a popular topic of interest with customer consumption. For instance, in Understanding Comics, Scott McCloud argues that “[w]hen you see a photo or realistic drawing of a face, you see it as the face of another. When you enter the world of the cartoon, you see yourself” (McCloud, pp. 36). This capacity to see one’s self in the protagonists of Marvel Comics’ flagship superhero titles has compelled a paradigmatic shift in the company’s strategy to connect with a more demographically diverse readership in the 21st century. McCloud’s assertion suggests a socio-cultural imperative that takes on specific economic and market-based strategies for Marvel Comics, a company that enjoys the tremendous expansion of its fan base due to the enormous popularity of superhero films, but continues to struggle to sustain its comic book readership in the digital, social media era.

Stephanie Kerschbaum’s Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference engages certain concepts from disability studies in-order-to account for the over-determining features of market forces vis-à-vis ethnic diversity. Kerschbaum’s concept of “flexible listening,” a term that “invites all individuals to reflect on the effects of interpersonal difference (Vidali),” is an important tool for making critical interventions in this peculiar moment in
Marvel’s history. In the 21st century, ethnicity sells. By 2050, white Americans will be a minority in this nation and statisticians from a variety of fields, including politics and corporate America, are fastidiously detailing the enhanced buying power (i.e. economic and political power) of various ethnic groups within the United States. For Marilyn Halter, this phenomenon produces and informs the concept of “portable ethnicity,” which is constructed on “symbolic structures rather than on concrete cultural practices” (Pisarz-Ramírez). And in her study, *Shopping for Identity*, she argues that corporations tend to generate contemporary product offerings based not on established cultural practices but on symbolic structures that make expeditious sense in the 21st century market place.

This chapter examines the symbolic deployment of race and ethnicity in present-day comics and focuses specifically on the racial and ethnic shifts (or adjustments) made in one of Marvel Comics flagship titles. At issue here is the transformation of Ms. Marvel from a blonde military pilot who could fly, shrug off bullets and shoot energy blasts from her hands into Kamala Khan, who is a Muslim teenager from New Jersey who can grow and shrink different parts of her body. Her powers eventually develop into full-blown shape-shifting abilities. Kamala’s shape-shifting abilities are indicative of the malleability of identity in the story worlds of 21st century comics and her religion, gender, and ethnic identity attempt to reflect the rich demographic constitution of this diverse moment in the United States.

**Self-Identity**

Since its creation, comic book creators have embraced the goal of targeting what they believed was their largest audience. Historically, this audience has been young
Caucasian males. If we observe comics from the early 1920’s to early 1930’s, such as *The Funnies*, *The BEANO* and *The Dandy*, we see that all the characters have one very apparent trait. All of the characters are Caucasian and mostly male.

Moving forward in history to the late 30’s and 40’s, we see the same trend. Action, Detective, Marvel, and Flash Comics all featured male, Caucasian superheroes. The superheroes, including Captain America, Superman, the Flash and the Green Lantern are all a “man’s man,” who are admired for being traditionally masculine. They are not your normal, awkward everyday slender or out-of-shape men. They are ripped, smooth-talking, dashing, attractive heterosexual men…
The popularity of the Caucasian superhero sprung, not because of disinterest within other ethnic groups, but due to the hefty price tag of a comic book. “Historically, a socioeconomic factor of lower household incomes limited the means and abilities for children of ethnic minorities to participate in comics reading” (Brown). In turn, Caucasian males were seen as the ideal target group, furthermore, tailoring to them, creating such superheroes as Superman, Batman and the Flash. Jennifer Escalas argues “consumer researchers have recognized that we consume in ways that are consistent with our own sense of self” (Escalas). Early comic book creators saw themselves in these superheroes. Research in the *Journal of Consumer Research* has revealed that “we are motivated to consume identity-consistent products” (Escalas). In fact, “important thought leaders in our field have described and documented that consumers use possessions and brands to create their self-identities and communicate these selves to others and to themselves” (Escalas).

Staying true to identity-consistent products, a cartoon or comic is a perfect example. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud highlights that cartoons have a special power that allows viewers to focus their attention on an idea. “Universality of cartoon imagery is the more cartoony a face is, the more people it could be said to describe. Common wisdom holds that the photograph and the realistic pictures are the icons that most resemble their real-life counterparts. When we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details” (McCloud, pp. 31).
When Caucasian female characters were introduced to comics, it wasn’t singularly a response to women consumers’ desires, but another way to appeal to young white male readers. These women were anything but average women. Characters, such as Wonder Woman and Ms. Marvel were heavily sexualized with robust breasts, impossibly small waistlines, flowing hair, and conventionally beautiful faces. Male consumers visualized not only that they were Thor or Wolverine, but that they could land such women.

For example, Captain America has always been a white male since his creation. Readers over time have adopted the idea that he is one particular ideal of male heroism. This process deeply affects the consumer. If you, as the reader, are not Caucasian and you don’t have brown hair, have certain color eyes and an outstanding physique, you are the Other. “To understand the symbolic and dichotomous relationship between Captain American/U.S./Self and the Supervillain/Geo-rival/Other, attention must be paid to the history of the Captain America icon itself” (Dittmer). This same text further illustrates the relationship between Superman and Captain America. Captain America is the classic
American soldier eager to fight for “truth, justice and the American way.” Superman is an alien that comes to earth “embodying the ultimate American immigrant,” adopting America as his homeland. If you don’t associate yourself with Captain America or with Superman, this fragmented representation of identity can be isolating. It enables children and even adults to question their own individual identity and need for social attachment.

What perspective consumers want to see on comic book shelves is their own sense of self and their own story. An African American male from Harlem wants to envision that he is or could be the revamped Captain America. A female wants to envision that she’s the new Wolverine, starting fights, slashing through her enemies. A gay male wants to flip through the pages and see a story about his similar sexual encounters. “Media representations are key everyday agents of imagination; they constitute fundamental resources and facilitators of this collective imaging” (Polson). That’s why it is imperative for Marvel to continue producing diverse characters in which we can identify.

Redefining Marvel

With companies, such as Milestone Media, EC Comics and others paving the way for the future (of comics), evidence of change has become more-and-more apparent in the contemporary moment. This shift is reflected in Marvel Comics’ recent development of a full-slate of multicultural replacements for the brand’s traditional heroes. Spider-man, traditionally known as Peter Parker is now portrayed by an Afro-Latino youth named Miles Morales. “Miles Morales was created by writer Brian Michael Bendis and artist Sara Pichelli, with Bendis and Marvel editor-in-chief Axel Alonso drawing inspiration
from both U.S. President Barack Obama and American actor Donald Glover” (Gonzalez). Morales possesses the same powers as Peter Parker after being bitten by a genetically engineered spider. He has an African American father and a Puerto Rican mother. Morales claimed the role of Spider-man when the original, Peter Parker, was killed.

Captain America, once known as Steve Rogers (Caucasian), is now Sam Wilson. Wilson, who inherited the shield after Rogers’ retirement, may already seem familiar to fans. This is due-to-the-fact that he was once the Falcon and partner/sidekick to Rogers. Wilson is African American and grew up in Harlem. He is an expert with martial arts (thanks to Steve Rogers) and is able to telepathically control birds. “Wilson becoming a character that's as iconic as Captain America is Marvel's biggest move toward inclusion. Wilson isn't perfect, and his story — a hero exposed to racism and violence — couldn't be more different from his predecessor's” (Abad-Santos).

Thor, once a white male named Thor Odinson, is now a female named Dr. Jane Foster. Foster, a former girlfriend of Thor, has taken the hero’s place after he was found unworthy to wield his own hammer. In a turn of events, Foster is simultaneously battling breast cancer while serving as the hero. For all of its godlike features, the power of Thor is not helping with her illness. “Marvel's decision to put the power of Thor into a woman's hands may have been greeted with derision or open hostility by a pocket of their audience, but nine months out from when it was announced, the first five issues of Jason Aaron and Russell Dauterman's Thor have sold over 100,000 more copies than the last
time the character had a renumbered solo title, 2012’s *Thor: God of Thunder*” (Polo).

Polo further explains, “A frequent fan reaction in some circles of the established audience for comic books is that companies are ‘pandering’ to a ‘vocal minority’ when making comics about or for women, especially in cases like *Thor*, when a female character is swapped into the identity of a male one. It's a reaction that is more and more frequently being called into question by the undeniable success of *Thor* and other books like *Batgirl*, *Ms. Marvel*, *Lumberjanes* and *Bitch Planet* that are not merely led by women but outright looking for a feminine audience” (Polo). Jane Foster’s gender and illness concerns address niche audiences that work across traditional diversity issues, making it truly successful.

![The new female Thor](image)

This success is not only evident due to the diversification of minor characters or special attention to niche audiences. Marvel is featuring minorities in major roles. Black characters, who are typically either sidekicks or advisers/assistants now are the highlighted superhero (such as Miles Morales). Female characters, who are even further neglected, usually serve as the love interest or a damsel in distress. Jane Foster is Marvel’s exception to the rule.
Another change occurring with Marvel, DC Comics and others is sexuality. In Marvel’s *Runaways*, there are several characters who are either gay, lesbian or bisexual. With such a diverse population and consumer market in this world and in comic book readers, we see that Marvel is answering the need for change by producing characters that are more reflective of our culture. “In essence, we're all the same. We're all comic book readers and comic books are and should be for everyone” (Inferiorego). “It's important to educate a whole new generation of readers to show them that it doesn't matter where you're from, what you look like, or who you love every different type of person on this planet is still a person.”

An additional trend amongst the new flagship titles is the addition of writers and artists that are of the same ethnicity as the main characters.

“Comic books, and in particularly the dominant genre of superhero comic books, have proven fertile ground for stereotyped depictions of race. The potential for superficiality and stereotyping here is dangerously high. Yet in recent years, some comic creators have demonstrated that the superhero genre’s own conventions can invite a more nuanced depictions of minority identity. Race is contemporary comics proves to be anything but simplistic. If some titles reveal deceptively soothing stereotypes lurking behind their veneers of diversity, then others show complex considerations of identity” (Singer).

Marvel eliminated this potential for superficiality and stereotyping with several of their titles, including *The Hulk*, which has a Korean-American lead character written and drawn by a Korean-American creative team. Another example is *Black Panther*, which features a black superhero, and is written and drawn by Ta-Nehisi Coates and Brian Stelfreeze, who are also Black.
Ms. Marvel

Another transition in Marvel Comics is the diversification of Ms. Marvel from a blonde haired, blue-eyed military pilot to Kamala Khan, a Muslim teenager from New Jersey. Khan, born in Jersey City, is the daughter of Pakistani immigrants. Kamala, portrayed as the outcast of her family, is widely curious, has an interest in “the geeky stuff,” and has a love of the original Ms. Marvel, Carol Danvers. She is a deliberate departure from the Carol Danvers Ms. Marvel created in 1968.

Writer, G. Willow Wilson, who herself is Muslim, is one of the creators of Kamala Khan, (the first Muslim to headline her own comic book). Wilson, who’s not a fan of the word, “diversity” states, “let’s scrap the word diversity entirely and replace it with authenticity and realism” (Wilson). She notes, “We are at a point in history when the role of religion is at a tremendous inflection point. What I didn’t realize was that the anxieties felt by young Muslims are also felt by young Mormons, evangelicals, orthodox Jews, and others. A h-u-g-e reason Ms. Marvel has struck the chord it has is because it deals with the role of traditionalist faith in the context of social justice, and there was – apparently – an untapped audience of people from a wide variety of faith backgrounds who were eager for a story like this” (Bacon). Wilson further points out that titles, such as Luke Cage, Black Panther and Batgirl aren’t successful simply because of the diversity factor, but because of “it’s strong sense of place” (Bacon).
Inside the issue:

Ms. Marvel #1 opens (page 1 and 2) with Kamala and her friend, Nakia, in a convenience store. Kamala is slumped over looking in the hot sandwich display. Kamala says, “Delicious, delicious infidel meat...” Nakia replies, “Seriously Kamala, I don’t understand why you do this to yourself.” Bruno, the shop employee and Kamala’s friend, comments “Either eat the bacon or stick to your principles.” Suddenly, a group of Nakia and Kamala’s classmates walk in. The male jock extends an invitation to a party, saying, “You guys should come too. If, uh, you’re allowed to do that kind of stuff.” One of the last exchanges is when the one girl in the group tells Nakia, “Your headscarf is so pretty, Nakia. I love that color. No one pressured you to start wearing it, right? Your father or somebody? Nobody’s going to like, honor kill you? I’m just concerned.”

The highlight of the new Ms. Marvel Volume 1 is the combination of a Muslim character and Muslim writer. In this early exchange in the series, readers are privy to seeing what an Islam-practicing individual is subjected to on a daily basis. As mentioned before, the result is the depletion of stereotyping. Readers are not seeing what a Caucasian writer believes to be an obvious question to a Muslim. Readers are
witnessing, firsthand, an exchange that G. Willow Wilson may have had with another individual, a group of individuals or on a regular basis. As Wilson diverts from using of the word “diversity,” and instead uses “authenticity” and “realism,” one can say that a Muslim writer bringing attention to Muslim interactions brings the same sense of authenticity and realism to the character and storyline.

The story develops with Kamala pushing the boundaries at home, sneaking out to the party that was earlier mentioned. After being teased by classmates, she leaves upset and disappointed. During her walk home, Jersey City suddenly becomes engulfed in the Terrigen Mists (mutant-causing substance created by the vapors of Terrigen Crystals) and Khan is enveloped in it. *This mist has been seen in numerous titles, including The Avengers, Iron Man, The Uncanny Inhumans, Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D, Inhumanity, etc.

While under the spell of the mist, Kamala envisions Carol Danvers. Danvers first scolds Khan for disobeying her parents as Khan replies that her wish is to become Ms. Marvel. When the mist lifts, Khan subconsciously transforms into a replica of the
blonde-haired, blue-eyed hero. This transformation is an excellent example of global imagination. The world, before Kamala Khan, envisioned Carol Danvers, your typical Caucasian superhero, as the only Ms. Marvel. Since her introduction in 1968, Carol has, for the most part, stayed the same. Because “global imagination refers to a collective way of seeing, understanding and feeling...,” (Orgad) we are told, along with Kamala, that to be Ms. Marvel is to look like the original Ms. Marvel that society has deemed suitable.

Whether we know what the original Ms. Marvel looks like on a conscious level (being an avid comic book reader) or we know her on a subconscious level (through repeated images with commercialization), the outcome is irrelevant. With Marvel and other companies resetting the button with more diverse characters, more culturally relevant story-lines and the tackling of current issues, the idea of global imagination will become more open when it comes to the world of comic book characters and identities.

When Kamala first shape-shifts, she decides that mirroring Carol Danvers is not what she wants to do or who she wants to be as a hero. Before, Kamala felt as though her differences as a Pakistani teenager were a bad thing, but when she looks like Danvers, she decides she dislikes losing that individuality. It’s the power and strength of Danvers that is valuable, not physical beauty. In Ms. Marvel #1, Kamala confesses, “I always thought that if I had amazing hair, if I could pull off great boots, if I could fly -- that would make me feel strong, that would make me happy. But the hair gets in my face, the boots pinch and this leotard is giving me an epic wedgie. Maybe putting on a costume doesn’t make you brave. Maybe it’s something else.” From this point on, Khan
becomes her own Ms. Marvel, battling not only super-villains, but real-life conflicts at home, with her faith and religious duties.

The critical response to this new Ms. Marvel is that people are ecstatic about this feel-good comic book hero that portrays ordinary problems that pertain to family, faith, culture and youth. Kamala Khan not only battles bad guys, but has to then answer to her parents why she’s late for dinner. Brett White of *Comic Book Resources* claims that, “with Kamala Khan, the daughter of Pakistani immigrants living in Jersey City, Marvel Comics has shown yet again that it wants to include groups of the American population that have yet to be personally inspired by their heroes.”
Portable and Flexible Ethnicity

Marilyn Halter suggests that “American society is not a melting pot, but a salad bar - a bazaar in which the purveyors of goods and services spend close to two billion dollars a year marketing the foods, clothing, objects, vacations, and events that help people express their ethnic identities” (Halter). In Shopping for Identity, Halter goes on to argue that “as immigrant groups gain economic security, they tend to reinforce, not relinquish, their ethnic identification. And the marketplace has responded to this phenomenon by both tweaking old products and inventing new ones, vigorously seizing the opportunities offered by the marking of ethnicity” (Halter). Halter makes the important point that underscores Marvel’s cultural transformation. A diverse consumer market demands a more diverse everything. Halter might agree that Marvel Comics is answering by diversifying these generic, static heroes. On the other hand, G. Willow Wilson states, “The direct market and the book market have diverged. Never the twain shall meet. We need to accept this and move on, and market accordingly” (Wilson).

“On a practical level, this is not a story about “diversity” at all. It’s a story about the rise
of Young Adult comics. If you look at it that way, the things that sell and don’t sell (and the markets they sell in vs. the markets they don’t sell in) start to make a different kind of sense. It’s not ‘diversity’ that draws those elusive untapped audiences, it’s *particularity.* This is a vital distinction nobody seems to make. This goes back to authenticity and realism” (Wilson).

While Halter and Wilson may have differing views as to why Ms. Marvel might be popular, another opinion is Stephanie Kershbaum’s. Kershbaum suggests that we view difference as a marking, instead of a static entity. There’s no denying that difference changes rapidly and often. Acknowledging marking of difference commands that we contemplate that, “speakers and audiences alike display and respond to markers of difference, those rhetorical cues that signal the presence of difference between two or more participants” (Kershbaum). Marvel stepped up to the plate welcoming this difference (and the difference of people) with their new transformation.

As with any organization and institution, diversity is not strictly a social justice issue, but also directly associated with its market value. Kershbaum details the idea of flexible listening as an important tool, especially in the success of the new revamped characters and titles. The response to a demand for difference in diversity, in all things, has resulted in increased readership, sales and fandom. This form of difference that Marvel has embarked on is not only changing comics in general, but the way in which we view other products in the world. In a world that is remarkably diverse, comic book readers refuse to see the same conventional heroes we’ve grown accustomed to since the birth of comics. Instead, readers of all races, gender, and ethnicity want to self-identify
with heroes that reflect the diverse background and changing demographics of American society in the 21st Century.
Chapter 2
Flashbacks to the Present: A Look into Intersectional Characters’
Climb to Non-Compliance

*Bitch Planet*, a comic book series that focuses on women who have been imprisoned at an off-planet prison, and *Orange is the New Black*, a Netflix series that revolves around a woman sentenced to 15 months in Litchfield penitentiary, both use a common literary technique referred to as a flashback. Flashbacks give the viewer an inside look at significant events and experiences that influence the main characters’ present-day narrative. Narrative arcs, in both OITNB and Bitch Planet, move back and forth through time, presenting how the women were arrested, in addition to their various experiences inside the prison. Women experience oppression in varying conditions and in varying degrees of severity. Through flashbacks in both formats, the viewer/reader is able “to witness this oppression firsthand, gathering that cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society” (Vidal). Since intersectionality is the study of intersecting oppressions, a prison system is a perfect example of this.

In this chapter, I conduct a brief comparative analysis of *Orange is the New Black* and *Bitch Planet*, revealing the similarities and differences in the deployment of flashbacks within the two forms. While examining the structural device, I demonstrate how flashbacks are used to thoroughly develop origin stories, further revealing the
reasoning behind the female characters’ rise to non-compliance while helping the audience understand the levels of oppression interconnected in all the characters’ lives.

More specifically, my paper examines the stories of Bitch Planet’s Meiko Maki and Orange is the New Black’s Poussey Washington. I review Meiko’s origin story using a flashback issue (#6) solely dedicated to Meiko and the events that led to her incarceration, paying close attention to the cause and effect of her non-compliance. This issue incorporates a retro vibe that suits the flashback nature of the story using unique effects, such as distinct pointillism and coloration. I also analyze Poussey Washington’s flashback in Season 4, episode 13, “Toast Can’t Never Be Bread Again,” justifying the intense necessity for its presence in the episode and season.

In both the literary and film world, these two forms of flashbacks are key to humanizing prisoners who are often judged for their crimes, given a number, put into a cell and forgotten. Not only is a flashback an excellent tool “to reveal information about the character or story that you can't reveal any other way, but it can reveal emotional as well as physical information; it can reveal thoughts, memories or dreams” (Field). While directors and writers have different reasoning for using flashbacks, “its primary purpose is to bridge time, place and action to reveal a past emotional event or physical conflict that affects the character” (Field).

Prison Life

“In recent years, U.S. prison inmates have been beaten with fists and batons, stomped on, kicked, shot, stunned with electronic devices, doused with chemical sprays, choked, and slammed face first onto concrete floors by the officers whose job it is to guard them,” Human Rights Watch says (Sherwood).
An overview report titled “Rights For All” by Amnesty International found:

“Some prisoners are abused by other inmates, and guards fail to protect them. Others are assaulted by the guards themselves. Women and men are subjected to sexual, as well as physical, abuse. Overcrowded and underfunded prisons, many of them privatized, control inmates by isolating them for long periods and by using methods of restraint that are cruel, degrading and sometimes life-threatening. Victims include pregnant women, the mentally ill and even children.”

With these types of testimonies, it’s not surprising to read in the news about a prison guard injuring or killing an inmate. It’s also common, among the general population, to not be sympathetic towards an inmate’s treatment. “According to reports, in 2012, Darren Rainey, a man serving a two-year prison sentence, defecated in his cell and refused to clean it up. In response, guards allegedly forced Rainey to stand in a tiny shower cell under scalding hot water for almost two hours. Fellow inmates reported that Rainey screamed in agony until his skin literally separated from his body. Rainey was found lifeless in the shower stall – apparently boiled to death at the hands of his guards (Henry).” Rainey was serving a sentence for a nonviolent crime of cocaine possession. In September, 2015, forty-five-year-old Carlos Mercado, who had been arrested for selling two packets of heroin in 2013, fell out of the holding pen when the guard opened up the door. Three minutes elapsed before anybody bothered to help him; two times, guards stepped over his prone body. He died the next day, fifteen hours after he was brought to Riker’s Island. Mercado died due to complications related to diabetes (Gonnerman).

On the evening of April 21, 2015 at the Fishkill Correctional Facility, inmate Samuel Harrell packed his bags and announced that he was going home, though he still had several years left to serve on his drug sentence. Not long after, he got into a confrontation with correction officers, was thrown to the floor and was handcuffed. As
many as 20 officers repeatedly kicked and punched Mr. Harrell, who was black, with some of them shouting racial slurs. More than a dozen inmate witnesses claimed, “Like he was a trampoline, they were jumping on him.” Mr. Harrell was then thrown down a staircase. One inmate reported seeing him lying on the landing, “bent in an impossible position.” The inmate noted, “His eyes were open, but they weren’t looking at anything. (Lynch)” Samuel Harrell had a history of bipolar disorder, which contributed to his belief that his sister was there to pick him up years before his sentence was completed.

For women, it’s just as demeaning. “In many women’s prisons, male corrections officers are allowed to watch the women when they are dressing, showering, or using the toilet, and some guards regularly harass women prisoners. Women also report groping and other sexual abuse by male staff during pat frisks and searches” (ACLU). “In the United States, sexual abuse by guards in women’s prisons is so notorious and widespread that it has been described as “an institutionalized component of punishment behind prison walls” (Hathaway). “Conditions in women’s prisons are reprehensible— summarized by Kim Buchanan of Harvard Law School, “women in prisons across the United States are subjected to diverse and systematic forms of sexual abuse: vaginal and anal rape; forced oral sex and forced digital penetration; quid pro quo coercion of sex for drugs, favors, or protection; abusive pat searches and strip searches; observation by male guards while naked or toileting; groping; verbal harassment; and sexual threats” (Hathaway).

As we proceed throughout this chapter, we will focus on the tools used in both platforms to further demonstrate that inmates are real people. They had a life before prison, and certainly they had a childhood and a life before crime. They have a story and perhaps even a reason behind the crime(s) they committed. “It is often said that the
measure of a civilized society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. (Henry)"

Tools, such as flashbacks, can help jumpstart the process of giving the non-compliant, a heartbeat again.

**Bitch Planet**

In a near-future, women can be sent to a prison planet called “Bitch Planet” for any number of unclear crimes that fall under the umbrella of being “noncompliant.

“Those branded as “non-compliant” – those women who refuse to be dumb and pretty, who will not accept being the property of a father or husband, women who insist on maintaining agency, women who are sexually independent, too stubborn, too fat, too Black, or too queer – are shipped to the Auxiliary Compliance Outpost, a.k.a. “Bitch Planet,” an off world penal colony” (Popdose). On Bitch Planet, the women prisoners survive tough conditions, and are under constant surveillance: forms of observation range from sadistic prison guards to recording devices. This practice, while not innovative, are purposely exaggerated in the comic book series (to show the severity of actual prison life), regurgitating the practices surrounding Bentham’s panopticon in the 18th century. According to Bentham’s model, “prisoners were to be housed in single cells on circular tiers, all facing a multi-level guard tower” (Davis, pp. 46). This served a dual purpose: inmates were blinded from seeing one another and the warden, while providing constant and complete visual access for the warden.

“Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a
machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. To achieve this, it is at once too much and too little that the prisoner should be constantly observed by an inspector: too little, for what matters is that he knows himself to be observed; too much, because he has no need in fact of being so. In view of this, Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so” (Foucault, Chapter 3).

These factors, whether architectural as then or technological as it is now and in

*Bitch Planet’s* future realm, accomplishes one thing effectively: this form of surveillance unethically strips prisoners of their privacy, dehumanizing them in the process.

“The connection between a loss of privacy and dehumanization is of course, a well-known and ancient fact, and one for which we don’t need to appeal to science fiction to illustrate. It is employed the world over in every prison and detention camp. It is at the root of interrogation techniques that begin by stripping a person literally and figuratively of everything they own. Our thought experiment merely shows us the logical endgame. Prisoners might hide their resentment, or bravely resist torture (at least for a time) but when we lose the very capacity to have privileged access to our psychological information — the capacity for self-knowledge, so to speak, we literally lose ourselves (Lynch).”

A past inmate described constant surveillance, overcrowding and solitary confinement as living in a cage.

“There is no way to articulate the excruciating torture of sensory deprivation. Picture living in a cage, about the size of a bathroom. You are there 23 hours a day, day in and day out, year in and year out. You are allowed one hour a day out in a cage the size of a tiny living room. You are allowed one five-minute phone call every six months, which is monitored. Your mail and reading material is maliciously scrutinized and censored. When leaving your cage, you are subjected to a dehumanizing strip search which includes a genital and anal probe, and then handcuffed. You are completely under the control of prison guards who carry pepper gas and long, black batons that some refer to as “spic and nigger beaters (Ross).”
With the inhumane treatment of prisoners practiced daily in our prison systems and the common belief that a prisoner is only a statistic or an object, it’s difficult for the general public to acknowledge the fact that humanity does indeed lie within prison walls. Forms of media magnifying the abuses and structures of American prison systems, although sometimes educational, aren’t always effective in providing evidence that a prisoner is actually a person who has a past rather than just a present.

In the case of *Bitch Planet*, creator Kelly Sue DeConnick does an extraordinary job of marrying the characters’ present with their past using the technique of flashback. Through the characters’ origin stories, we see a showcasing of a realistic mix of intersectional women with different socio-economic backgrounds, body types, races, and sexualities who have been convicted of crimes that range from the expected, such as murder, to smaller offenses such as disobeying one’s husband, having a temper, being obese, ugly, etc. DeConnick uses every third issue to provide the backstory of a specific character, showcasing their rise to non-compliance.

**Bitch Planet’s Megaton - Issue #5**

To better understand the importance of Meiko Maki’s flashback issue, we must first visit issue #5. By this issue, we know that Earth has fallen under the power of the Council of Fathers. To please the “Fathers,” the warden enters a team of Bitch Planet prisoners into the “Megaton,” which is a brutal televised sport traditionally played by men only. To practice, a scrimmage is orchestrated between the female team and the BP guards. The scrimmage from the start is unfairly matched, and even when petitions are made, the fouls are overlooked. One inmate says, “They don’t care, Marilyn. They
change the rules when it suits them.” In a final push to score, Meiko’s instructions are to get the ball and to head to the wall. After she scores, a guard grabs her by the head and breaks her neck. “Who’s laughing now,” he utters.

Meiko’s death scene

Meiko Maki

Issue #6 reveals Meiko’s childhood, growing up with her music teacher mother, engineer father, and one older sister. Showcasing a little of her own non-compliance, Meiko’s mother uses violin lessons as a cover to teach children prohibited subjects, such as calculus. Her father, Mack Meiko, believes in treating his children as equals, and includes and educates Meiko while creating his ship designs for the Protectorate. When an unfortunate mistake in a design catches the eye of one of Mack’s superiors, the Maki family’s lives are turned upside-down. Doug requests to speak to Mack one-on-one. When he shows up to the Maki house, he’s dressed in an Asian robe jabbering non-stop about Sake and how beautiful the Maki women are. Doug announces that in exchange for his silence on the design mishap, he’d like one of Mack’s daughters. “I’m not good at meeting people. You have two daughters, Makoto. You can’t already have plans for both of them,” explains Doug. Outraged, Mack throws Doug out of the house and tells
his wife, Yume, he’ll turn himself in for his family’s safety. The next day, Mack decides to call Doug. Before he can do so, his secretary interrupts to tell him that Mirai, Meiko’s sister, is in the hospital. As it turns out, she “tried to hurt herself.” We find out that Mirai consumed an allergen to trigger anaphylaxis, a master plan generated by Meiko. Mirai asks her parents, “Are you mad? Meiko said I had to or else they’d send Daddy away.” While everyone is at the hospital, Meiko slips away to visit Doug. Doug asks, “Do you know why you’re here, Meiko?” She responds, “For my family.” Meiko then strangles Doug with the string from her violin.

Through Meiko’s actions, we see a woman of color protecting her family in a white man’s world. Doug Braxton, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed male walks into the Maki house demanding Meiko or Mirai in exchange for his silence. Doug, who is accustomed to white male privilege, knows he has the potential to ruin the Maki family and their lives as they know it. Instead, Meiko decides to ruin his first. While assessing the situation, one could call it purely self-defense or perhaps simply justifiable cause. Through Meiko’s situation, the reader witnesses the thin line between the humanity and complexity of crime and compliance. Meiko protects her family at any cost against a permanent danger. Doug, who threatens the Maki family, could temporarily be silenced if Meiko volunteers to be his property. But for how long? Instead, Meiko decides to eliminate the problem altogether. Although we are not privy to Meiko’s thoughts on the topic, we can assume there was an inner conflict between remaining compliant (potentially risking ), and deciding to murder another human being to save her sister’s youth, and her parents’ lives.
Poussey Washington

OITNB Episode 4x12

Two common themes in the fourth season of *Orange is the New Black* are regret and time travel. As defined, “time travel is the concept of movement between certain points in time (Time Travel. Wikipedia).” In episode 12, we witness the death of a prominent character named Poussey Washington. Based on the statistics and evidence provided above, we know that prisoners are systematically stripped of their rights, dignity and humanity once they enter the prison gates. To fully understand the concept of a human life being lost, the OITNB creators used their own time-travelling device in the form of flashbacks.

To understand the complexity of Poussey Washington’s flashback episode, we first have to briefly examine the “scene of the crime” in the previous chapter. Certain elements not only structure the scene leading up to Poussey’s death, but introduce a unique level of foreshadowing implemented throughout episode 13. The episode opens with Poussey and three other prisoners discussing the events that occurred the previous night, when a prison guard forced several inmates to fight one other. The girls, seeking revenge, plan a peaceful protest. During the protest, the inmates stand firmly on the cafeteria tables. As the guards start pulling them down, “Crazy Eyes” becomes spooked by her actions the previous night (she was one of the inmates required to fight). She becomes frantic and in the commotion, a guard kneels on Poussey’s back for an extended period of time. This action, in fact, kills her. Her lifeless body remains on the ground as inmates gather, stunned by their friend’s lifeless body.
A specific piece of dialogue (within episode 12) contributes to the writers’ efforts to humanize Poussey in this episode. In the scene, rather than using a flashback, a memory is used instead: While with her girlfriend, Brook Soso, in what the inmates call “the time machine,” Poussey mutters, “You know, this is the most normal thing I’ve done in a while.” Brook comments on how prison life is similar to a horror movie. Poussey says, “It’s the kind you have to run to your mom to at the end, so she can hug you and tell you it was all made up.” She then shares that her mom was a really good hugger with very long arms that could double up around a person. She smiles as she reminisces and the audience is reminded that Poussey has/had a family, a childhood and a life before and outside the confines of Litchfield.

Although flashbacks are not commonly viewed as time travelling devices, as a viewer we become a witness to a journey that allows us to temporarily become a virtual time traveler. While watching, we see Poussey present-day lying on the floor, and then we’re transported to a time when she’s alive and well in the past. Although we’re not
physically taking the journey with her to learn about her past, we’re mentally transported to a time when we can connect to the character on a humanistic level.

**Episode 13**

*(Flashback)* Episode 13 begins with Poussey, alive and well, on a New York City bus with two friends. She’s in street clothes, sporting a different hairstyle, and talking about her upcoming trip to Amsterdam. The group intends to see *The Roots*, but is surprised when the band “The Rootz” takes the stage instead. When they’re about to watch the set, a man steals Poussey's phone. As she chases after him, she finds herself lost in an unfamiliar city. She asks a stranger to use his phone, but he doesn’t oblige. During this exchange, the prison guard, who eventually kills her, walks by with a couple of his friends. The two do not take notice of one another. Poussey asks a drag queen if she can use her phone. Fortunately, Poussey is rescued by a group of drag queens who take her to a party where words such as, “perform, jump, share, dance and kiss” are displayed on big screens. The attendees do as the words command, foreshadowing Poussey’s future of prison life, where such commands are given daily. After the party, Poussey uses a drag queen’s phone to contact her friends and sets off again — this time on the bike handlebars of an improv performer dressed as a Buddhist monk. Poussey and the "monk" head towards the river, where they sit together by the water, telling stories. At the end, Poussey smiles meaningfully at the camera, looking happy and excited for the next chapter of her life. The scene goes black.

*(Present Day)* At Litchfield, the cafeteria workers arrive for work the following morning. As they approach, they see that Poussey’s body is still lying on the floor.
the flashback, we see Poussey vibrant and full of life on the bus with her friends. In the cafeteria, we see her lifeless body inhumanely displayed and neglected. An inmate asks, “How could they not move it?” They too have begun referring to the body as an object rather than a human being. Another inmate says, “Leaving her like this, you’d think they’d have some humanness in them.”

Each clique at Litchfield, although grieving in different ways, all has one thing in common; remembering Poussey Washington as a living, breathing human life. When Warden Caputo asks a prisoner, Tasha "Taystee" Jefferson, if Poussey provoked the guards in any way (because of conflicting reports from the guards that she had a weapon), she says, “What are you asking me? If she deserved to die?” Caputo then tells her about the speculation of a weapon. Taystee replies, “Like hell she did! But what does that matter anyhow? She got held down and down and down until she could never get back up again. Ever! And ain’t nothing she could’ve done that called for that. Man, she was my friend! Not ‘Inmate Washington,’ but my friend.” Another inmate, Galina "Red" Reznikov, reads an insert from a book about gardens to some of the other inmates. She shares that Poussey was the one to show her the book, mentioning she might like it. Red vows to start a garden again, “for our humanity, for this family, and for that little girl on the floor in the cafeteria.” Red gives the group members instructions to start making lists. She explains,” One of the items on that list should be, “how can we protect ourselves and the garden?”

Although the contrast between the appalling events at the prison (following the death of Poussey) and the dream-like flashbacks could give a viewer whiplash, the creators of the show effectively demonstrate what they intended to. Through the inmates’
grief and the carefully structured flashbacks, they refurbish the image of “Inmate Washington,” into Ms. Poussey Washington: daughter, girlfriend, and friend. The show clearly states that Poussey lived a full, happy life, making her death in prison even more unjust. Her final smile and gaze directed towards the camera tugs the viewers’ heartstrings one last time, exemplifying the fullness of this human life and magnifying the extreme loss of the same.

**Conclusion**

In *Orange is the New Black* and *Bitch Planet*, there are important comparative similarities between Poussey Washington and Meiko Maki. Together, these characters fall victim to a prison system that believes that no prisoners matter. Meiko is confronted at a young age with an impossible decision: should she save her family or allow it to be ripped apart? Poussey, after being kicked out of West Point, is working a dead-end job at Dave & Busters. Knowing she wants more, she quits her job and starts selling the rest of her stash, in order to fund her trip to Amsterdam. Although both committed serious offenses, the audience can see the characters’ practical reasoning behind the two crimes.

Both story arcs present the flashbacks in chronological order, but *Bitch Planet* devotes more extensive coverage to the flashback itself. In fact, the story begins with Meiko’s sexual assault on BP, then flashes back to her childhood, then revisits her prison life once more. On the other hand, Poussey’s flashbacks and flash-forwards are consistently equal. Similarly, we witness the deaths of both characters initially and then proceed to learn about their lives.
As far as technical distinction between flashback styles, *Bitch Planet* incorporates the above-mentioned retro vibe, using unique effects such as distinct pointillism which give the panels a grainier look, reminiscent of old-school comics our parents might have purchased. In the present, we see smoother, crisper lines and fuller coloration. In numerous panels, the larger exposure of coloring looks as though it has water stains on it. Finally, the comic artist does an impeccable job showcasing the style of the time period through her depictions of architecture, clothing and furniture.

In *Orange is the New Black*, the audience already knows that Poussey has died. This leads one to assume that any scene with her in it is likely to be a flashback. The creators of the episode carefully showcase books, specific trends and distinct fashion into the episode to show that it only happened several years before her incarceration and death. For instance, a woman is reading a Michael Chabon book, entitled *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, on the subway. This book was published in 2007, so we can assume that the flashback dates later. In the scene on the street where Poussey passes her killer, we see that the boy looks almost exactly the same, narrowing the amount of time elapsed between scenes. When Poussey takes the picture of her friend in the club, she holds up a recognizable flip phone used predominantly during a specific time period.

In both the issue and the episode the creators accomplished their objective: they took the current, unjust practice of dehumanizing prisoners and successfully humanized two distinct characters. When we learn Poussey and Meiko’s backstories, we better understand their lives and become more attached to them. When Poussey and Meiko are lying lifeless on the floor, we don’t see them as objects (or things) as the guards and general public do. We see Meiko as the daughter and sister who risked it all because she
loved and was loved by her family. We see Poussey who loved her Mother’s hugs, went on wild adventures with friends in NYC and planned adventurous trips to countries, such as Amsterdam. Through flashbacks, the viewers are able to cope with these intersectional characters’ deaths because their stories finally had a chance to been heard.
Chapter 3

Adaptation in the Name of Preacher

Recently, adaptation has become even more popular with new shows, movies, plays, etc. debuting regularly. Shows, such as HBO’s *Game of Thrones* and *Big Little Lies*, and Netflix’s *Orange is the New Black*, all originally based off of pieces of literature, have pulled in major ratings in their new form. Movies, aligned with comic book and graphic novel titles, such as *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Watchmen* have received the same attention. What once was custom to repeat the same plot, characters and props, is now a thing of the past. The new fad is for directors, producers, composers, etc. to make the piece their own. In a *Handmaid’s Tale*, the character of Moira is not played by a Caucasian female, but a black actress named Samira Wiley. While writer, Margaret Atwood, textually demonstrated the act of sending blacks away, Bruce Miller (executive creator of the Hulu adaptation) wanted to visually orchestrate the intensity of this action on screen. He explains, “It’s easy to say ‘they sent off all the people of color,’ but seeing it all the time on a TV show is harder.” The same is true for AMC’s *Preacher*, where the female lead is not a Caucasian, blue-eyed, and blonde female as she is in the graphic novel, but a woman of color.

In this chapter, I review adaptation as a form, tracing its roots from creation to present-day. I will discuss the call and current need for changes within adaptations, such as difference in ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc., based on the ever-changing and diverse consumer market.

Lastly, I’ll examine an original comic called *Preacher*, while also comparing it to the newly-finished TV series adaptation by the same name. I talk about the many failed
attempts at adapting the comic to big and little screens and how Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg and Sam Catlin changed the game with their refusal to regurgitate an exact replica of the original.

Adaptation

Since its beginnings in the Shakespearean age, it quickly became evident that the use of adaptation to portray stories, poems, plays and literary works would become an exceedingly popular practice. Today, with new forms of visual media widely accessible to audiences, we are privy to even more of a rejuvenation of adaptation through popular comics, video games, graphic novels, paintings, novels and songs. Media platforms, such as television and cinema, have recently had great success in the entertainment space with adaptations.

In earlier attempts at adaptation, a common practice was to mirror the popular elements of the original. While proving a great sense of loyalty to the piece and its creator, it also proved to be quite stale and dated. Slowly, sudden differences, started to be instituted.

“They assumed an awareness of the original on the part of audiences, assumed the superiority of the original, cast the new text solely in its relationship to the original, and posted it as a singular act of an author/artist reworking elements of the original. An overarchings concern with the notion of ‘fidelity’ to the original – how well the new text cleaved to the old – this also ignored larger cultural and economic realities” (Wetmore).

Today, adaptations have mutated into a more complex art form. Directors, writers, painters, illustrators, etc. have become bored with the mere stagnancy in retelling one story with the same components. It was through a thirst for their own originality that
a new wave of adaptation was born. While adaptation is known for being a reworking of an original, the new task at hand is to put one’s own spin on it. These professionals, started producing works in altered formats, offering distinct differences with more than simply subtle techniques. Such items as race, sexuality, gender, geography, etc., have all become a topic of re-exploration. In Defence of Literary Adaptation as Cultural Production, Linda Hutcheon asks, “What if literature were not a one-stage art form at all? What if we accept that other artists, other creators, are needed to bring it to life?” Because of this, in schools, it is common for English teachers to reward their students by watching the film adaptation after reading the original literary work. Students not only compare and contrast the adaptation and the original, but can “create a better understanding of that text, particularly if the original work is perceived to be difficult because of its age, use of language or form” (Whelehan). In this way, adaptation truly thrives, “facilitating an understanding of social change, narrative form, cultural difference, commercial imperatives, power relationships and so much more” (Whelehan). For example, William Shakespeare produced timeless bodies of work that will continuously be relevant. With Romeo and Juliet, the classic portrayal of two star-crossed lovers, separated by their feuding families, has been adapted into plays, films, musicals, operas, commercials, television shows, art, etc. Shakespeare’s original foundation of love doomed by family influence and conflict stands the test of time. It’s the secondary details that are modified in order for the story to be successful in its modern-day resurgence.

In Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 adaptation, the modern-day twist is delivered with mid-90’s wardrobe, music, and props. Instead of Verona, Italy, the setting is Verona Beach,
“a modern-day city, with cars, high-rise buildings, gas stations, and hot dogs stands” (Godfree). The clothing has also been revolutionized. “The opening scene finds the Montague boys parading around in Hawaiian shirts and sporting unnaturally colored hair, while the Capulet boys favor leather and metal-heeled boots” (Godfree). Even the delivery of Shakespeare’s words show an underlying testament to contemporary lingo. As a result, the movie was a huge hit and today’s youth, familiar with texting, tweeting, and one minute Facebook videos, have learned an entire Shakespearean play.

On the other hand, with every popular fad, there are always skeptics. One naysayer might question the attractiveness of a repetitive storyline and the absence of originality while fans may say it’s the “attractiveness to the familiar and what they know won’t let them down, that is comforting” (Odinity). For this reason, some directors and producers are choosing to adapt previously published/released texts. “Adaptations inherently come with a pre-established fan base. If the original work has already gathered a following, then the possibilities of making money are greater than with an original script” (Odinity). Although this may be a possibility, one must also examine the existence of the original format. Proposed adaptations of vintage television shows, classic novels and movies and plays, are a lot easier to pitch than an art form, such as comics, that struggles to be considered art at all.

As mentioned in Chapter One, comics are often seen at the bottom of the fine art totem pole. In fact, a large majority of the consumer market feels that comics are not credible literary sources. "When I started working in comics it was almost like working at the bottom of the artistic barrel. To most people they were only just more interesting than patterned toilet paper” (Armstrong). Preacher editor (Issues 1-12), Stuart Moore,
explained that: “At a time when the comics industry was suffering a severe sales slump, this little book [Preacher] took off, defying all trends and climbing the charts. No graph, no calculator, no expert on the CompuServe Comics and Animation Forum could explain its success” (Ennis). It was one of the successes, along with Watchmen, Maus, V for Vendetta and Swamp Thing, which helped continue to pave the way to the evolution of comics.

Preacher

The Graphic Novel

*Preacher*, an American comic book series published by Vertigo, follows the story of Reverend, Jesse Custer in Annville, Texas. Jesse, while giving a sermon, becomes possessed by Genesis, and as a result the entire church, including the members are obliterated. Being the sole survivor, Jesse flees. Jesse finally begins to understand what kind of power he possesses (from Genesis) and as Book One unfolds, we are introduced to “the voice (of God?),” which is essentially the power of God. We are also introduced to several characters, including supporting leads, Tulip O’Hare, who is Jesse’s ex-girlfriend, and a vampire named Cassidy. Other secondary characters are the agents of Heaven and the Saint of Killers. After Jesse learns that God is MIA, he decides to make it his personal responsibility to find him and give him a piece of his mind.

The most significant moment in Book One (and perhaps the entire series) is the unearthing of Jesse’s past and his introduction to God and the church. Writer, Garth Ennis, uses flashbacks to orchestrate a monumental retelling of what can be thought of as a hideous upbringing. As one might think a Reverend’s youthful courtship with God and
religion as a peaceful one, Ennis shows Jesse’s journey to be quite the contrary. Jesse’s mother, Christina, is from the L’Angelles family, where the men serve as preachers and soldiers and the women solely as child bearers. Not a fan of her family legacy, Christina escapes. She later meets Jesse’s father, John, a U.S. Marine. The two fell in love and conceived Jesse. One day, Christina’s family finds John, Christina and Jesse. They are all taken back to the family home in Angelville and we are introduced to Christina’s hateful Mother. John and Christina are forced into marriage and the family of three are essentially imprisoned in the family house. During this time Jesse is introduced to the teachings of God, where he learns to not only love Him, but to fear Him as well.

One night, when John, Christina and Jesse try to escape, John is brutally killed. Later, Christina is taken to the swamp to also be killed. She attacks her Mother’s henchman, is shot in the head and falls into the swamp. Jesse is now on his own. We can see the extreme dysfunction instilled in the L’Angelles family by the frequent punishments Jesse receives; a popular one is Jesse being placed in an airtight coffin and lowered to the bottom of a body of water. These punishments lasted anywhere from a week to a full month.

It’s important to mention Jesse’s childhood and his relationship with God, as it sets the all-encompassing tone of dysfunction in Preacher itself. Jesse did not choose, based on his own freewill, to serve God. Rather, it’s his family’s legacy. His connection to God is not one of pure love, but of a combination of love, fear and hate. As mentioned previously, Ennis expertly uses flashbacks to illustrate Jesse’s childhood. We see a glimpse into Jesse’s punishments and we witness the severity of them. Jesse, while trapped underwater covered in a week’s worth of feces and vomit, does not survive by
picturing God on the other side of the coffin. Instead, he pictures John Wayne, which readers know was Jesse’s father’s hero. When this came to light in the story, I thought of Psalm 25, which teaches us to seek God in hard times. “20 Guard my life and rescue me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. 21 May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope, Lord, is in you.” Jesse did not seek God in this hard time.

Through the teachings of God, taught to him by his wicked Grandmother, he develops this complicated relationship with his faith. On one hand, Jesse has love for God, but on the other, he fears Him and even hates Him. His Grandmother, who again is teaching him the ways of religion, is also putting him in a coffin at the bottom of the water. In addition, she has his best friend and his parents slaughtered all in the name of furthering the family’s legacy. His relationship with God can’t be a loving one when this level of hate is involved. In exchange for His teachings, Jesse has lost everything that he ever held dear.

For these reasons, Jesse’s journey as a Reverend is a complicated one full of distrust and non-compliance. He’s vulgar, he fights, he drinks, and he fucks. All these actions don’t exactly exemplify conventional Preacher-like behavior, which is why his quest to find God, as an adult, is imperative. His obligation to learn about God and His teachings, as a child, were mandatory. He did what he had to, to survive. Now, of his own freewill, he is searching for answers; ones of a different kind.
Preacher

TV Series Adaptation

With a myriad of comic book adaptations gracing our television screens and hitting our local theaters, titles such as *Spiderman, The Shield, The Avengers, Arrow, Guardians of the Galaxy*, etc. all share a mutual PG/PG-13 flare. The newest trend, particularly in cinema, is the rated R approach. Movies, such as *Deadpool* and *Logan*, bring more graphic violence, gore and foul-mouthed superheroes. But with TV, this is a little more difficult to orchestrate. When it came to adapting a comic, such as *Preacher*, it took countless attempts (in both cinema and TV) by numerous optimists. “Various cinematic versions of the tale have been bouncing around in development since 1998, but none of the entities that toyed with the property managed to corral ‘Preacher’s’ dark, sacrilegious tone and also tame the plot’s sprawl” (McFarland). “In the 20 years since the comic was first published in 1995, Ennis has seen a series of would-be adapters and backers—from the likes of Sam Mendes, Kevin Smith, and Mark Steven Johnson—come and go, and rather cynically decided at that point that it was impossible” (Robinson). It would take the combination of AMC, Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg and Sam Catlin to execute this major undertaking.

Rogen, Goldberg and Catlin, all major fans of the comic, knew they’d have to take a different approach than their predecessors. The story of Jesse Custer couldn’t be told as Ennis originally wrote it. Instead, Rogen, Goldberg and Catlin maintain “the careful dance between impertinent humor and extreme violence contained in the source material, without being so married to the comic book’s structure that the show loses
focus” (McFarland). Ennis was on board with the decision from the beginning, as he witnessed all the attempts and failures beginning as early as the 1990’s. "It's a difficult beast, Preacher. There's nothing else quite like it," said Ennis. "If you put the comic on the screen, you would use it up in a season and a half. This is hardly the nature of the beast, the difference between pacing a TV show and a comic book” (Wigler). When showing action in a comic book, numerous panels are used to show one significant scene. For example, if there’s a scene with Cassidy and Fiore and DeBlanc fighting, it could go anywhere from one to five pages. In television, a fight scene, in real-time, takes a much shorter time. When Ennis commented, “It has to do with the difference in form between the screen and the page. That's the problem that I think Sam Catlin and his team have solved, which is really pacing,” (Sepinwall) he’s acknowledging that the continuous failed attempts at an adaptation of the comic was due to pacing issues.

Differences

Prequel

One of the most significant differences from comic book to television series is the use of Season 1 as a prequel. In the comic, there are only two pages devoted to Jesse’s preaching. With a title, such as Preacher, Rogen, Goldberg, Catlin and even Ennis felt it necessary to show more of Jesse in this light. The series not only shows Jesse actively preaching in Annville, but we see his struggle on a day-to-day basis making house calls, drinking alcohol in his truck, fighting with townsfolk, and trying to fix his dilapidated church. To no one’s surprise, Jesse is not openly liked by the majority of residents in
Annville. His non-compliant behavior with drinking, smoking, cussing, and fighting all contribute to the weekly town gossip. The first few episodes of the AMC series will seem unfamiliar to diehard readers of the comic. Rogen, Goldberg and Catlin diverge from the original, but make sure they stay loyal to the actual characters themselves. It is this sense of fidelity that pleases true fans of the show and Ennis’ original plan for an adaptation. By showing actual preaching in a church and the other duties Jesse has, in addition to the numerous flashbacks from Jesse’s past, we are allowed to witness substantial character development not afforded to us in the comic.

**Tulip’s Ethnicity**

In the comic, Jesse’s ex-girlfriend is Caucasian with blonde hair. Rogen, knowing that the comic was written over 20 years ago, advised a more modern revision. In the series, Ruth Negga, an Ethiopian-Irish actress, plays the role instead. Both versions of Tulip are fearless, have a rough edge, are foul-mouthed and engage in graphic violence. In the comic, Tulip prepares to kill a man (a hit). She is shown waiting on a street corner mouthing, “That’s him. That’s really him. Oh shit. I’ve really gotta do this - -” (Ennis). TV Tulip is shown in the pilot episode beating the pulp out of a man, holding her own in the fight in every way. She later kills the man by sticking a corn cob/husk down his throat.

**Tulip and Jesse’s Past**

In the AMC series, Jesse and Tulip are initially childhood friends. Jesse’s father disapproves of the relationship calling Tulip “trouble,” which caused Jesse and his father
to butt heads occasionally. The two sparked up a relationship that eventually went sour after a miscarriage. They parted ways and they hadn’t seen each other again until Annville years later. In the comic, their relationship is a lot more complicated. The two didn’t grow up together, but met the old-fashioned way in a bar. Readers will notice that Tulip is holding a serious grudge throughout the comic. We finally find out that Jesse simply abandoned her in Phoenix years earlier.

*Screen Rant* critic, Yasmin Kleinbart states, “While the comics certainly make Jesse and Tulip a believable couple, the show adds a little bit more depth. Instead of just a random bar encounter, we witness an extensive history between them, making us even more invested in their relationship” (Kleinbart). In the comic, Jesse and Tulip do meet in a bar, but that doesn’t necessarily lessen the sincerity or depth of their relationship. In the series, the two have a lifetime of history between them with a shared childhood, a miscarriage and a failed relationship. In the comic, the audience has to dig a little deeper. Jesse, knowing what his family is capable of, abandons Tulip. Jesse’s flashback to Phoenix, where he was last seen with Tulip, shows a glimpse into their relationship. The two exchange dialogue clearly sharing (with the readers) their intense feelings for one another. Jesse further hints that when Tulip comes back, he’s going to propose to her. He never gets that chance because his family catches up to him. They may not have the history that the TV series illustrates, but one can see Jesse’s monumental selflessness when it comes to Tulip. He’d rather eliminate himself, losing the love of his life, instead of putting her in danger. Above all, this is what true love is all about. When Jesse and Tulip are back together again, they make love continuously. It’s understood that they’ll
be together without any question. The two, who were torn apart for years, now can’t get enough of one another.

**Arseface: Likeable and Unlikeable**

Arseface in the comic is absolutely terrifying. He appears to be middle-aged (yet we are told he’s a younger boy) and is extremely difficult to look at with artist, Steve Dillon’s, incredible graphic detailing of his face wounds. His nickname comes from the fact that he tried to kill himself with a shotgun through the mouth, lived through the suicide attempt and was left with a butthole-like creation in his face. In the TV series, it is evident that Arseface (or Eugene Root) is a young boy full of curiosity and youthful innocence. He looks forward to Jesse’s house calls and is always looking for answers. This natural boyish purity makes him a likeable character rather than a frightening one. Although different in looks, the two characters share one thing in common, which is that both are comic relief in the storyline.

**The Love Triangle**

Rogen, Goldberg and Catlin not only altered the introductions of the three main characters, but also made changes to the significant love triangle that fuels the most prominent premise of the story. In both forms, the foundation is the same. Jesse and Tulip were once romantically involved. It’s irrelevant, at this point, whether that romance stemmed from a chance meeting at a bar or began as a childhood relationship. What stays true to Ennis’ original creation is the existence of the love triangle itself. In the comic, Tulip meets Cassidy on an individual basis (without Jesse). This is key to the
love triangle because it establishes an association between the two characters beyond/outside of the relationship between Tulip and Jesse. In the comic, Jesse meets Cassidy first and then Tulip follows. As we know, in both sources, Jesse and Tulip share a romantic past. In the text, Cassidy, first establishing a connection with Tulip, later develops a friendship and brotherhood with Jesse. Cassidy, who has lived thousands of years, truly values the sanctity of friendship, feeling love for both Tulip and Jesse. With Tulip, that love becomes more profound. In one panel, when Cassidy is seriously wounded and drunk, he professes his love for her. Instead of being flattered, Tulip scolds Cassidy for betraying Jesse.

Early on in the AMC series, Cassidy and Tulip sleep together. Due to a timeline and plot modification by Rogen, Goldberg and Catlin, the relationship between Cassidy and Tulip is tremendously sped up (compared to the comic). As we can see during the sex scene, Tulip has a blank face during the act, signifying she doesn’t want to do it. As far as reasoning, we conclude that Tulip engages in this behavior because of Jesse’s past betrayal. A major difference between the two love triangles is that in the series, Cassidy doesn’t exactly know who Tulip is to Jesse at the time of their sexual encounter. When he finds out, he is surprised that the Tulip he slept with is the “Tulip” his new friend spoke to him about in confidence. This buildup leaves viewers wondering what’s in store for Season Two.

While studying the history of adaptation, one might briefly believe that fidelity, to the originality of the piece, is key. In fact, in the early practices of adaptation, many clung to what they thought was the exact representation of the work, staying true to every
detail. Throughout this chapter, one learns that remaining compulsively loyal to the piece can be a mistake. As Ennis mentioned in interviews, he sold the rights to Preacher numerous times, but saw many fail. Rogen, Goldberg and Catlin, up for the challenge, changed the game by revamping what an adaptation could be. Not only did they change the storyline, but they diversified characters, altered the way the story was told and transformed the pace at which it was told.

As mentioned previously, the current need for changes within adaptations, such as difference in ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc., based on the ever-changing and diverse consumer market, is a current concern that Seth Rogen and company took seriously. With Preacher, “they have taken the most significant threads of the original and woven them into a new story. That’s the relationship between the two Preachers—different wholes assembled from the same parts” (Shepherd).
Overall Conclusion

For this thesis, I chose to examine the concepts of adaptation, flashbacks and portable ethnicity in order to underscore some of the tools used by writers, authors and comic book artists to convey contemporary stories. A driving interest in my research was to expand my understanding of the comic book and graphic narrative forms. What Scott McCloud refers to as “sequential art” is one of the oldest narrative forms, but my experience with it was fairly recent. The form’s impact on me as a reader and critical thinker will likely challenge me to continue reading comics for the foreseeable future. This project is only a beginning; my attempt to distill my enthusiasm and my critical reading experiences into critical writing about the power of storytelling in various genres and literary forms.

Chapter One revealed how flexible ethnicity in various Marvel Comics’ titles has created new consumer market buzz in recent years. Throughout the chapter I detailed evidence suggesting that Marvel’s plan has worked, at least in one of its newly revamped titles (Ms. Marvel is one of Marvel Comics’ highest selling digital comics). More recently, critics argue that Marvel’s portable ethnicity and experimentation with diversity is the reasoning behind the current slumping sales. While there are critics on both sides of this argument, only the future can predict the outcome.

Following the trend of portable ethnicity and non-compliance in Chapter One, we also witness similar behaviors in the next chapter. Chapter Two dives into a television series called Orange is the New Black and a comic series called Bitch Planet. I
demonstrated how both forms pay particular attention to flashbacks as a tool for humanizing characters, such as inmates who are often dehumanized. Through a structural tool called a flashback, we, as an audience, are able to learn about the characters as actual human beings. Both forms do an incredible job with the technique, making us care deeply for both Poussey Washington and Meiko Maki. It is because of this tool that that the TV and the comic series are both extremely successful. OITNB has recently been renewed for three more seasons (5, 6 & 7) and *Bitch Planet* is one of the most popular comics flying off shelves.

In addition to the methods discussed in the first two chapters, I chose to focus on the concept of adaptation for the finale. I briefly took a look at the form and discussed the call and current need for changes based on the ever-changing and diverse consumer market. I compared the TV series adaptation, *Preacher*, to the original comic (of the same name), critiquing the approach used by Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg and Sam Catlin over Garth Ennis’s method. Finally, I provided evidence as to why Rogen, Goldberg and Catlin reared off-course in Season One and how the fidelity of adaptation will increase as it becomes chronologically in sync with the comic in Season Two.

As mentioned previously, portable ethnicity, flashbacks and adaptation each play a vital role within the larger art form of storytelling. My experience with each of these three items is relatively new; but with these tools becoming more prevalent throughout the literary world and on TV, the possibilities, as we head toward the future of each field, are limitless. I therefore see myself continuing my studies long after completing this
thesis, knowing full well that the possibilities for my own discovery and further education are endless.
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