



CREaTE

Canterbury Research and Theses Environment

Canterbury Christ Church University's repository of research outputs

<http://create.canterbury.ac.uk>

Please cite this publication as follows:

Goodrum, M. (2014) 'Oh c'mon, those stories can't count in continuity!' Squirrel Girl and the problem of female power. *Studies in Comics*, 5 (1). pp. 97-115. ISSN 2040-3232.

Link to official URL (if available):

http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/stic.5.1.97_1

This version is made available in accordance with publishers' policies. All material made available by CReaTE is protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

Contact: create.library@canterbury.ac.uk



‘Oh c’mon, those stories can’t count in continuity!’ Squirrel Girl and the problem of female power

Michael Goodrum, University of Essex

Abstract

The history of superheroines is one of tensions, contradictions and difficulties. Squirrel Girl is no stranger to these, and her journey through the last twenty years of Marvel comic books has not been easy. In her debut in *Marvel Super-Heroes* #8 (S. Ditko and W. Murray, 1992), Squirrel Girl failed to become Iron Man’s sidekick even though she saved him from Doctor Doom. Despite initial success, at least in terms of the narrative, Squirrel Girl disappeared for over ten years. When she reappeared in 2005, Squirrel Girl was in rather less illustrious surroundings – outside continuity. This article tracks the career of Squirrel Girl, focusing on strategies of narrative and visual representation and the relationship of the character to the structuring principle of continuity. Squirrel Girl demonstrates the ability to wield considerable power outside continuity but even here, where the victories of a woman can be easily disavowed thanks to their structural position within the Marvel universe, Squirrel Girl is still problematic. Various strategies of containment are implemented and this article will engage with these, demonstrating continuity and discontinuity in these policies as Squirrel Girl is ultimately drawn into continuity. Through a close critical reading of Squirrel Girl’s appearances, then, this article will provide initial insights into how powerful women are simultaneously promoted and contained by superhero narratives.

Keywords

[continuity](#)

squirrel girl

gender

comic books

superheroines

[Marvel](#)

The history of superheroines is one of tensions, contradictions and difficulties. Squirrel Girl is no stranger to these, and her journey through the last twenty years of Marvel comic books has not been easy. Her debut in *Marvel Super-Heroes #8* (S. Ditko and W. Murray, 1992) saw Squirrel Girl save Iron Man from Dr. Doom and yet still fail to become his sidekick; despite, or perhaps because of, this martial prowess, Squirrel Girl disappeared for over ten years. When she reappeared, Squirrel Girl was in rather less illustrious surroundings, at least in terms of a comic book universe firmly based on hierarchical principles of continuity. Her next appearance was in *Great Lakes Avengers: Misassembled* (D. Slott and P. Pelletier, 2005), a humorous commentary on superhero narratives as well as a story in its own right; it also falls outside continuity and therefore its events do not ‘count’ in the ‘real’ Marvel universe. High-profile superheroines such as Wonder Woman or the Black Widow may seem like a more logical place to begin an exploration of the problematic representation of female power given that they enjoy a privileged position within comic book hierarchies. However, Squirrel Girl’s interactions

between margins and mainstream, her journey from the periphery of Marvel superhero comic books to their very core, association with the Avengers, makes her an ideal subject for analysis as she works to reveal the way in which hierarchies function. Squirrel Girl moves between 'inside' and 'outside' continuity, drawing attention to both the way in which it structures comic book universes and the way in which those universes themselves are constituted.

When first introduced in *Marvel Super-Heroes* #8 (1992), Squirrel Girl desperately tries to impress Iron Man so that he will take her on as his 'fighting pard' (Ditko 1992: n.p.). She demonstrates her powers, such as the ability to 'jump, climb, hop', a small 'knuckle spike' that can be used for fighting and 'finger claws' that are 'too small' for that purpose; she can also communicate with squirrels and is 'extra, extra nimble' (Ditko 1992: n.p.). Iron Man is unimpressed and Squirrel Girl's demonstration ultimately serves to distract him from an attack by Dr. Doom, which leads to both Iron Man and Squirrel Girl being captured. Immobilized and unable to resist, Iron Man is saved from certain death by a colony of squirrels summoned by Squirrel Girl and Doom is forced to flee. Despite this, Iron Man tells Squirrel Girl to go back to school (she is 14 years old) and to contact him again if she still wants to be a superhero when she finishes college. This was to be Squirrel Girl's last appearance in comic books, let alone continuity, for over a decade.

Continuity is the ordering principle of a comic book publisher's universe. It is, however, far from straightforward. Richard Reynolds has identified three different forms of

continuity: serial, hierarchical and structural (1992: 38–52). Serial and hierarchical continuity are relatively simple. The former deals with the notion that current events must be in keeping with those that have preceded them, the latter with the idea that victories or defeats form a kind of ‘league table’ of superheroes and villains and therefore a means of predicting who would win in a fight based on previous encounters. Structural continuity is the combination of both these forms and more besides; in short, all events both recorded and unrecorded but ‘inescapably implied by continuity’ (Reynolds 1992: 42). There are further issues to bear in mind with regard to continuity, though – as an ordering principle, it is far from stable. When it comes to predictions of who would win a particular fight, there are points as mundane as the fact that power sets may change, new fighting techniques may be developed, more may be learned about weaknesses of opponents, etc. Of rather greater concern is the fact that continuity may be entirely overhauled, as happened in DC’s *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985). The purpose of continuity, then, is to create a hierarchy of narratives, defining what is and what is not included; those narratives that fall within continuity will supersede events depicted in those that are excluded from its reach. A further category could be proposed to complement Reynolds’ structure: an archive of lapsed acceptability, or stories that were once canon that through subsequent developments have been ‘relegated’ to a space outside continuity. Such stories fit in Reynolds’ framework by virtue of the fact that they do not challenge continuity from within, but the fit is rather uncomfortable and exerts a quietly disruptive influence. Given the proliferation of information about comic books on the Internet, and the fact that the erased stories still exist in physical form, these narratives remain ever present despite their apparent erasure. Even with its shortcomings,

continuity is fiercely policed and this is the significance of the quotation in the title of this article: no matter what Squirrel Girl is able to achieve outside continuity, her actions there ultimately count for nothing from the perspective of those committed to foundational principles of superhero comic books. The division between inside and outside, nonsensical to those not immersed in comic book culture, was neatly summed up by Alan Moore in the preface to *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?*, a non-canon Superman story: 'this is an imaginary story... Aren't they all?' (Moore and Swan 2010: n.p.). Whatever Squirrel Girl achieves outside continuity will have no bearing on the Marvel universe and this becomes important when the sheer scale of Squirrel Girl's achievements is realized and placed in the wider context of comic book superheroines.

A serious attitude towards the vast majority of superhero narratives is necessary for their 'success'. Squirrel Girl, with her parodic approach and slippage in and out of continuity, routinely challenges this seriousness and raises questions of both the representation of women in comic books and the functioning of continuity. Squirrel Girl's ability to defeat high-profile characters in the Marvel universe draws attention to the ways in which continuity and the construction of superheroines are ridiculous; at one point in *GLA: Misassembled* (2005), Squirrel Girl has an aside where she asks for a show of hands as to who has defeated Dr. Doom, a humorous means of drawing attention to her prowess in continuity that she uses to establish a position of leadership outside it. The comic book rams this point home in a further aside when Monkey Joe, her first squirrel companion, clarifies that it was not a Doombot, a robot double of Dr. Doom, a device that could be used as a means of reducing Squirrel Girl's achievement and therefore moving her down

the 'league table' of superheroes. Squirrel Girl's playful appropriation of the structuring principles of the comic book universe reveals them and highlights their ridiculousness. Squirrel Girl's critical approach is furthered through an assault on continuity (through her mock appeal to it), and also through the character's refusal to occupy a position of seriousness demanded by continuity. Despite her criticism, however, Squirrel Girl offers no radical alternative to the norms enshrined in continuity through constant repetition: forms are repeated in order to criticize them.

Continuity can also be approached through the question of performativity. As Judith Butler remarks:

That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (Butler 2007: 192–93)

It is not only superheroines such as Squirrel Girl that emerge through sustained, repetitive 'performativity', but also continuity itself. Through repetition, certain elements of superhero comic books become accepted as the stable ground from which narratives can emerge; that repetition also ultimately comes to police what is acceptable in terms of both continuity and gender. Borders of acceptability are defined and defended through

repetition, with breaks in this repetition being seen as undesirable because of their disruptive impact on established norms. This disruption could be as basic as a character winning a fight or displaying a power that should be beyond their capabilities, or saying something that goes against previous utterances. Squirrel Girl problematizes continuity and gender through explicitly drawing attention to the practices that underpin constructions of both and, through revealing their machinery, exposes them as historical constructions rather than unquestionable manifestations of the 'natural order', or as just 'the way things should be'. That continuity can be overhauled, and things once accepted readily discarded, also exposes the vulnerability of the system. However, Squirrel Girl does not set out to entirely remove these things, and can be seen as postmodern in the sense discussed by Linda Hutcheon as a 'fundamentally contradictory enterprise' that sets out to 'use and abuse, install and then subvert convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and, of course, to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past' (1986: 180). This is most clearly represented through Squirrel Girl's attitude to continuity, a structure she calls into question yet relies upon and in relation to which she is inevitably defined. Continuity constructs the hierarchies of the comic book universe, and through her relationship to it Squirrel Girl engages with a further point of Hutcheon's, that postmodernism sets out to 'exploit and undercut' practices of elitism yet the deference she shows to some established heroes, clearly demonstrated both inside and outside continuity, works to reinscribe the very thing she critiques (1986: 182). Ultimately, Squirrel Girl's project is postponed, perhaps indefinitely, through being drawn into the

silencing embrace of continuity and then discarded again when her vehicle, *New Avengers* (B. Bendis and M. Deodato, 2011), ceased publication in a continuity reshuffle.

It is not only continuity that Squirrel Girl renders problematic; there is also the question of the visual representation of women. Unlike the machinery of continuity, women are generally far from invisible and women's role as sexual spectacle in comic books is closely tied to both audience and creative teams. Superhero comic books are seen as not only overwhelmingly male but also adolescent, two factors that have a significant impact on the way women are drawn. Given the projected audience of adolescent males, the sexualized representation of women has been repeated and normalized over a number of years, a practice that has largely gone without comment within the comic books.

Superheroine body standards are neatly summed up by Squirrel Girl who, while reading a superhero comic book, remarks 'Oh, my! This poor lady! I think all her internal organs got squeezed up into her chest', a critique which is all the more damning as it originates in the material being criticized (Slott and Pelletier 2005: n.p.). As with Squirrel Girl's approach to continuity, by drawing attention to female body standards they are rendered ridiculous. The comic book goes on, however, to provide a reason for such depictions, stating that they have come about because 'most comic book writers are overweight men in their thirties with bad hairlines who never got any action in high school! Or college!' (Slott and Pelletier 2005: n.p.) Although a humorous aside, like so many things in *GLA: Misassembled* (2005) (itself a parodic reference to the Avengers title, *Avengers:*

Disassembled (2004-5), a title of great solemnity and seriousness) it engages with a long-standing convention that the creators of superheroes are men who write for a male

audience – who, it is implied, share the experiences of the writers. Stereotypes of readers are reinforced when they are directly told that ‘life’s too short for this kinda crap. Go outside and live, y’hear me? Live!’ Nothing is said about the relationship between female creators and characters but it is dangerous to assume that, simply because of their sex, women will take a different approach to the characterization of superheroines, or even if they did that they would be able to get consent for it from an editorial team who might be male and have significant interest in maintaining existing conventions to please existing audiences. Overall, little thought is given to offering women that are fully rounded in terms of character rather than secondary sexual characteristics.

Squirrel Girl, however, is a different proposition. As a reviewer remarked on her return to continuity in *New Avengers* #15 (2011)

As much as SG might have been played as a fun gag character in recent years, this issue goes a long way towards painting her as a more fleshed out human being with real desires. Bendis [the writer, Brian Michael Bendis] hasn't quite found a truly unique voice for her yet, but regardless, it's nice to see her offering something more than comic relief. (Schedeen 2011)

The narrative strategies used to develop this position seem to be at odds with one another: first, Squirrel Girl is positioned as a throwback to the simplistic superhero narratives of the Golden Age and second, she is identified as a metatextual critic (at least in *GLA: Misassembled* (2005)), able to exist both within the narrative and as an interested

spectator outside it. This has the potential to sound more sophisticated and complex than it actually is – commentary generally takes the form of a ‘public service announcement’ before the narrative begins that alerts readers to aspects of its content, whether that be the nature of violence or representations of women. This is possible outside continuity where audiences expect conventions to be called into question, or are at least more open to the idea, but as Squirrel Girl is inexorably drawn into more mainstream narratives her ability to criticize from within is gradually eroded. Reliance on continuity and its forms begins to replace criticism.

DC, the other main publisher of superhero comic books, has also attempted to engage with visual representations of women through one of its most maligned female characters, Power Girl. In a world of impossibly proportioned heroines, Power Girl takes this to new heights and flaunts the fact through what has become known, among both fans and critics, as a ‘boob window’. Power Girl’s costume is the standard superheroine affair, looking rather a lot like a gymnast’s leotard; the point of contention, however, is a ‘window’ that reveals a great deal of Power Girl’s expansive cleavage. A point such as this cannot be allowed to pass without reference to Laura Mulvey’s idea of woman as occupying a position of ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’. Comic books in general, and the ‘boob window’ in particular, ‘build the way she [that is, woman] is to be looked at into the spectacle itself’, normalizing the sexual objectification of women as part of the visual spectacle of comic books (Mulvey 1975: 17). In what could be interpreted as an attempt to counter mounting criticism of the costume, DC featured a discussion where Cyclone, another superheroine, states that Power Girl’s costume is:

Perfect for who you are and what you do. It's all about contradictions. The hole draws the eye precisely where everyone knows they're not supposed to look, putting anyone you're dealing with off-balance. The name says 'girl', but the costume says 'woman'. (Van Meter 2010~~09~~: n.p.)

Although this acknowledges a debate over the costume and, as a result, the representation of women, it seems to be an attempt to reclaim gratuitous display as a form of female empowerment; a parallel can be seen in projects of positioning the Playboy bunny as a symbol of female strength and independence (Levy 2005). Ultimately, Cyclone's comment seems to suggest that a woman is defined by her breasts, a reductive approach that would never be applied in the same way to a superhero. The boob window sexualizes and regulates the way the character is seen; windows are, after all, meant to be looked through. The exchange between Cyclone and Power Girl, however, comes from a female creative team and therefore cannot purely be seen as an attempt, by men, to engineer a new framework in which audiences remain free to ogle Power Girl while granting the character some kind of illusory empowerment.

The fact that many superheroine bodies share common hypersexualized features such as large breasts, long legs, elfin waists and perfect flowing hair, all presented in the skimpiest of costumes, raises the question as to why particular characteristics are chosen over others. Superheroes are also hypersexualized but there seems to be a crucial difference between men and women. The built male body, while sexually objectified, is

also a means of conveying power and authority and, while musculature is on display through the tight-fitting costumes of the men, it is not 'on display' in the same way as the bodies of superheroines, who seemingly exist as display first and agent second. Superhero bodies exist as a consequence of what superheroes must do in the narrative; superheroine narratives, to some extent, operate as a means of organizing the body of their protagonist into a series of poses that constructs the narrative. Both bodily representations are motivated by desire and, in the case of the female body, it is a desire for a body that cannot possibly exist outside the pages of the comic book (not that the male bodies on offer are readily available in reality) – and although desire is not necessarily restricted to its heterosexual variant, narratives are constructed in such a way as to encourage heteronormative readings.

Squirrel Girl both conforms to and contests notions of the superheroine as set out through repeated performance. Her costume, although still revealing, is more akin to that of a superhero – its combination of fur bodice and forearms over a skin-tight black costume is functional (emphasized through the addition of a utility belt) and, as costumes go, relatively discreet. Still muscular, Squirrel Girl is, however, more realistically proportioned and her short, scruffy, hair does not conjure the same connotations of dominant conceptions of feminine perfection as the long, perfectly maintained hair of a superheroine such as Wonder Woman. There is, though, a correlation between Squirrel Girl's appearance and her position with regard to continuity. As Squirrel Girl is increasingly drawn into continuity, while not reaching the proportions of other superheroines (apart from in Wolverine's sexual fantasy in *Wolverine* #8 (P. Cornell and

A. Davis, 2013), a development that suggests the function well-endowed superheroines may serve for sections of the male audience), she can be seen as being drawn in an increasingly attractive way. An approach of this nature suggests that female characters in comic books exist primarily as spectacle and this is reinforced through the fact that her metatextual role diminishes within the confines of continuity; in fact, her speaking role is reduced, but this is largely in keeping with the more subservient role Squirrel Girl plays as the nanny to the baby of two Avengers.

Figure 1: © Marvel (2014) Panel taken from *Marvel Super-Heroes #8* (1992).

Figure 2: © Marvel (2014) Panel ~~detail~~ taken from *GLA: Misassembled #1* (2005).

Rather than attempting to reconcile existing iniquities to new ideals, as Power Girl attempts to do, Squirrel Girl offers a different approach. Squirrel Girl is critical of the representation of women in comic books; the purpose of these illustrations, from Squirrel Girl's perspective, is summed up in the titles of the fictional comic books she is reading, *Heave* and *Age of Consent*, both of which feature scantily clad women on their front cover. As a relatively new character existing outside continuity, Squirrel Girl represents a fresh start, a means of offering representational innovation in a genre where images of women tend to, as Mitra Emad argues, 'legitimise dominant power positions' instead of contesting them (Emad 2006: 957). Squirrel Girl's refusal to accept the impossibly proportioned heroines of comic books also draws attention to the ridiculousness of these depictions, something that simply does not, or cannot, happen in continuity. To acknowledge such inflated physiques is to call into question, as Squirrel Girl does, the

very point of superheroines and to cease taking them seriously, at least in narrative terms. Calling into question one element of continuity, however, tends to have the effect of subjecting further parts of it to critique, eroding the investment of belief that is essential to its continuation. Once Squirrel Girl re-enters continuity, however, she no longer comments on the impossible bodies around her and in fact, if only at the level of fantasy, comes to occupy one.

Although still possessing the levels of physical fitness expected of a superheroine, Squirrel Girl does not conform to other expectations. Other superheroines, as Squirrel Girl actively points out, are hyper-sexualized through physique, posture and costume, but this is something that Squirrel Girl largely avoids. More realistically proportioned, Squirrel Girl is also only depicted in the same, literally, explicit detail once, and that is in a fantasy sequence. Instead of a mature, sexualized figure, Squirrel Girl is represented as a wholesome, fun-loving adolescent – effectively, as an idealized reinterpretation of a ‘Golden Age’ or early ‘Silver Age’ superhero, relatively untouched by irony, sexuality or adult themes. These desires were specifically cited by Squirrel Girl’s original author, Will Murray, who stated that with Squirrel Girl he ‘wanted to do something fun... [because] the early Marvel Comics of 1962–65, before they got so serious, were the ones I had fondest memories of’, a position that makes it clear that Squirrel Girl was a nostalgic creation. Murray also discusses his childhood love of Marvel comic books and this exuberance comes through in the character (Murray 2010: n.p.). Narratives may have been more straightforward in the early 1960s, but a time of purely ‘fun’ comic books never existed, as demonstrated by comic book criticism of the 1940s and 1950s,

particularly that of Fredric Wertham and his allegations about potential links between comic books, sexual deviancy and juvenile delinquency; the fact that something did not exist, however, is no barrier to it being referenced nostalgically – nostalgia frequently recreates a past that exists only in imagination.

Appearance is only one way in which characters are defined. In superhero comic books, violence is another, and battles can be seen as one of the most prominent factors in determining the success of a superhero comic book. Fights themselves, and the way they are represented, are part of the foundation of superhero comic books; the way in which Squirrel Girl's fights are represented contest this central element. Whereas other heroines are frequently manoeuvred into positions intended to demonstrate their impressive physiques, many of Squirrel Girl's confrontations take place either off-panel or in silhouette. Strategies of representation are foregrounded as a result and questions are raised as to why Squirrel Girl's fights are not depicted in the same level of detail. Fights between men are also rendered in intense detail but for a different purpose: male conflicts demonstrate the power of those concerned and provide opportunities for oppositional ideologies to be tested and for the normative position of the superhero to triumph; provided, that is, these conflicts are approached with the seriousness demanded by continuity. Superheroines, on the other hand, offer spectacle and their fights the prospect of two women grappling with one another like so much cheap pornography. Although superheroines and their villainous counterparts can still be identified with opposing ideas, any ideological associations are to a large extent marginalized by the nature of the individuals fighting and the fight itself. In terms of gender, Squirrel Girl's

different representation means she does not fit comfortably with the expectations created through ‘sustained social performances’ and, through drawing attention to herself, she also draws attention to and destabilizes the practices used in the depiction of other women.

Differences in the representations of Squirrel Girl’s battles also call into question the issue of female power. The explicit detail apparent in most superhero, and indeed superheroine, battles are absent from those featuring Squirrel Girl. Although fights between superpowered women can be read as an exercise in female empowerment, it is also possible to interpret them as being staged for sexual gratification. It is precisely this point that is made in *The Avengers vs. The X-Men #6* (AVX, D. Slott and K. Cook, 2012) when half a page is given over to Hawkeye, a male Avenger, fantasizing about Spider-Woman fighting, in turn, Emma Frost, Storm and Psylocke (Loeb and Adams 2012: n.p.). AVX #6 (2012) features a number of battles between the eponymous antagonistic groups, and each ends with a caption announcing the winner; in the case of Hawkeye’s fantasy, the winner is declared to be ‘you!’, establishing a clear idea of the audience the creative team has in mind. Each confrontation, consisting of a single image, arranges the women in overtly sexualized positions, most apparent in the fact that Emma Frost is straddling Spider-Woman who, although pinned to the ground, is doing her best to tear off Emma Frost’s costume, starting with the material covering the breasts. Bodies, and the interactions between them, are sexualized to an alarming degree and the desirability of this is reinforced through both the caption that declares the reader to have won by

viewing this, but also through Hawkeye's expression of complete happiness as he imagines these fights.

In contrast to this, and to the representation of men fighting, Squirrel Girl's battles largely take place outside the panel. The decision to place Squirrel Girl's victories out of sight, or to only make them visible through an obscured line of sight, seems to resonate with the pattern of the reinforcement of male power. By fighting off-panel, or in silhouette, Squirrel Girl resists the representational strategies used for other women, but at a cost. Instead of the reader being able to sexually objectify her body, and therefore reduce the exercise of female power to sexual spectacle, Squirrel Girl's actions are contained through the fact that it is difficult to provide an accurate account of them. It therefore becomes possible, to a certain extent, to deny that Squirrel Girl has been able to achieve the things she is reported to have achieved. When coupled with the fact that many of her most famous victories occur outside continuity, Squirrel Girl's power is being positioned as a source of amusement, another way of containing the potential threat she poses to the conventional masculine order. Squirrel Girl does, however, resume her metatextual role in *AVX #6* (2012) and in doing so is drawn in an entirely new way for the character. In an overtly cute rendering intended to reproduce the art style of comic books for young girls, Squirrel Girl and Pixie (of the X-Men) battle each other through a role-playing game using small figurines to represent other characters; Squirrel Girl, engaging with representations of the female form, declares that the figurine of her makes her 'look fat'. The game is interrupted by the Thing, who tells the girls that the figurines they are using are not toys but rather images made by 'the Puppet Master... outta his mind-control clay'

(Slott and Cook 2012: n.p.). Squirrel Girl and Pixie subsequently read about the war between the Avengers and X-Men and wonder if they caused the conflict, thus exposing the entire fabricated battle (intended to produce a new status quo for the relaunch of the Marvel universe in late 2012) as a construct designed to sell comic books. In this respect the series proved very successful as it dominated the sales charts for its duration; despite this success, the comedic Squirrel Girl story calls into question the basis of the conflict, making the major crossover event seem like an accident, at least in terms of the narrative of her story, and more broadly suggests a certain degree of cynicism about manufacturing conflict for financial motives and to resolve problems with continuity. Conflict is also used as a means of infantilizing Squirrel Girl, who is drawn in a cutesy way and, rather than fighting herself, engages in a role-playing dice game involving toys. Not only does Squirrel Girl not fight in this story, she makes fighting seem contrived and silly, while the juvenile art style resists sexualization and suggests that those who engage seriously with superhero battles (it may be only a game, but both players want to win) are themselves juvenile.

Battles are not only represented in a different way for Squirrel Girl, they are also approached in a way that calls into question the elements that seek to promote, and naturalize, masculine supremacy. For instance, in *The Thing* #8 (D. Slott and K. Dwyer, 2006), the Thing is being fought to a standstill by Bi-Beast in Central Park. Instead of attempting to contribute additional muscle to the battle, Squirrel Girl uses her ability to communicate with squirrels to ask those in the park to gather together the worst smelling rubbish they can find. By virtue of Bi-Beast having two noses he is more distracted by

the smell than the Thing, so Thing is able to emerge triumphant from the fight (Slott and Dwyer 2006: n.p.). A similar story is told in *GLX-Mas Special* (D. Slott and M. Haley, 2006) when Squirrel Girl encounters Dum-Dum Dugan, a leading SHIELD agent, caught up in pitched battle with Mechanised Organism Designed Only for Killing (MODOK). As with meeting the Thing, her first reaction is to be starstruck – Squirrel Girl tells the Thing that he is on her lunchbox and Dugan that she has his trading card. This continues a pattern established in her debut through her attitudes of deference to Iron Man, a pattern that suggests a continued subservience to patriarchal forms that also flags those structures as ridiculous. Squirrel Girl may be deferential but she produces the breakthrough, not those to whom she defers. In the fight with MODOK, Squirrel Girl yet again proves capable of winning a fight that cannot be won through purely pitting brute force against brute force. While she mashes nuts into MODOK's open circuitry, her squirrel companion, Tippy Toe, ventures inside MODOK's mechanical shell and begins to destroy the machinery from the inside, literally a surgical strike. Her strategy is far more successful than that of Dugan, and MODOK is rapidly defeated (Slott and Haley 2006b: n.p.). Again, conventional masculine attitudes to conflict found in superhero comic books are shown to be severely limited and the unorthodox approach adopted by Squirrel Girl allows her to defeat apparently far stronger opposition. Although explicitly constructed as comedic, the recourse to humour can be seen as a method of containing the potential threat of these victories to the established masculine order. She is 'laughed out' of continuity. This laughter, however, destabilizes continuity by exposing the seriousness necessary for its continuation as inherently ridiculous; the question of why a woman with squirrel powers who fights crime is more ridiculous than a man, without powers, who

dresses up as a bat to fight crime is a question that can only be answered with reference to the gravitas awarded by respective positions with regard to continuity. Another way in which Squirrel Girl's victory is limited is that she fails in her domestic duties – when she is defeating MODOK, Squirrel Girl is actually supposed to be buying eggnog and toilet paper for the rest of the GLX-Men. The failure in the domestic sphere seems to suggest that it is difficult, if not impossible, for a woman to exist in both the private and public spheres – that her ventures into the manly realm of superhero adventures somehow diminish her capability to fulfil her 'natural' feminine function. The adventures themselves, however, are also called into question through where the stories fall in regard to continuity.

GLX-Mas Special (2006) falls into the category of an 'imaginary story', that is, one that has no bearing on continuity. *The Thing* (2006) mini-series, however, falls inside continuity; Squirrel Girl's defeat of MODOK may not 'count', but Bi-Beast must go down as having been beaten by Squirrel Girl and the Thing. It may seem contradictory to position violence as a means of demonstrating Squirrel Girl's ability to destabilize existing hierarchies when violence has traditionally been seen as the basis for masculine domination, but it is Squirrel Girl's ability to subvert expectations and conventional understandings of violence that opens up new possibilities. The comic book mobilizes means of containing these new openings and restricting their revolutionary potential through continuity, humour or both, but it cannot change the fact that they continue to exist as potential. These moments could also be interpreted, as Fredric Jameson suggests, as a search 'not for consensus, but very precisely for "instabilities"', as a practice of

paralogism, in which the point is not to reach agreement but to undermine from within the very framework' that had both constructed, and been constructed by, previous narratives and the ideologies enshrined within them (Jameson 2005: xix). Rather than events that open a space which is then sealed off, Squirrel Girl narratives could be interpreted as a means of constantly testing the weak points of the framework they inhabit in terms of continuity and the representation of women in superhero comic books.

Conventions related to sexuality, body image and gender relations are assaulted but not overhauled by Squirrel Girl. She conforms to certain gendered expectations but by no means does Squirrel Girl reinforce them. In addition to flagging tensions in these expectations and demonstrating that not all women fit neatly into the category laid out for them, and in fact do not want to do so, Squirrel Girl also acknowledges, and distances herself from, prevalent comic book representations of women, indicating that alternatives are available; she also begins to problematize strict gender divisions through her possession of 'nutsacks' (Slott and Pelletier 2005: n.p.). To clarify, Squirrel Girl has pouches on her utility belts that are full of nuts, to which she refers as nutsacks, something that Doorman, another member of the Great Lakes Avengers, finds a source of great amusement. Here, laughter is again mobilized as a mechanism of containment, a means of enforcing strict gender boundaries.

Outside continuity, Squirrel Girl occupies a position of significant power. In her official online 'Powergrid' rating, a chart is used to demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of Marvel characters, Squirrel Girl achieves seven, the highest possible score, on every

aspect of her character (Marvel Universe Wiki 2012). The situation is rather different, however, in the comic books inside continuity (Squirrel Girl's Power Grid rating is also very different in *Women of Marvel: Celebrating Seven Decades Handbook* (J. Christiansen and M. O'Sullivan, 2010) where her scores range between one and four, making her distinctly average, although she is acknowledged as 'a surprisingly fierce and formidable unarmed combatant'. The Internet can be humorous but, in print, the representation must be serious). Her power, in fact, is the reason Squirrel Girl leaves her first superhero team. In *Age of Heroes #3* (D. Slott and T. Templeton, 2010), Squirrel Girl states that 'the GLA have what it takes to be a really great team... [but] I'm the one holding them back' because while she is in the team the others will simply let her do all the fighting (Slott and Templeton 2010: n.p.). Squirrel Girl's departure indicates the destabilizing impact of a powerful woman. The Avengers are able to cope with the presence of powerful women because the men in the team are stronger, a situation that does not apply to the Great Lakes Avengers. After leaving the GLA and re-entering continuity, Squirrel Girl becomes a nanny to Danielle, the baby of two Avengers, Luke Cage and Jessica Jones. This seems a backward step for a character that had been routinely defeating some of the most powerful villains in the Marvel universe. It is, however, a move that gets Squirrel Girl into continuity, something that seemed unlikely given her propensity to expose frailties in that system. Even here, gestures towards her abilities remain, as do strategies of representation.

Outside continuity, Squirrel Girl's fights took place largely out of sight and very little changes inside it. In *New Avengers #15* (2011), two male superheroes are shown sparring

in intimate detail, every blow lovingly rendered. When Squirrel Girl begins sparring with Wolverine, and not only sparring with but defeating him, the battle is shown in silhouette and her victory, thanks to a hastily summoned squirrel army, is greeted with a less than rapturous response. Instead of congratulating Squirrel Girl, Ms Marvel says ‘I’m gonna heave’ and Luke Cage, referring to the squirrels, asks her to ‘keep those away from the baby’, meaning that Squirrel Girl ends up apologizing rather than savouring a victory over one of the most able fighters in the Marvel universe (Bendis and Deodato 2011: n.p.). An impressive achievement is therefore reduced to a cause for an apology and the power demonstrated by Squirrel Girl is, to some extent, contained by disapproval and her willingness to bow to it. The readiness with which Squirrel Girl accepts the impropriety of her actions demonstrates the extent to which she has internalized disciplinary processes, and the fact that other women find her actions physically sickening works towards normalizing a subservient position for women. The fact that Squirrel Girl won through summoning an army of squirrels is also crucial here as it is unconventional and something that is, perhaps, more difficult to believe; it certainly lacks the air of seriousness required for superheroes within the bounds of continuity. Were these not contained, Squirrel Girl’s victory would have the potential to destabilize continuity from within by exposing the functions of belief necessary to keep it from descending into farce, which is, after all, a difficult task given the characters and narratives featured within it.

Discourses of limitation are balanced by those of empowerment, however. In the course of *New Avengers* #15 (2011), it is revealed that Squirrel Girl is attending New York

University, evidence of a desire for self-improvement and awareness that there is more to life than violence. Alas, violence even impinges on this aspect of Squirrel Girl's life when she prevents a female student from being raped. As with the fight against Wolverine, though, everything is shown in silhouette; even while attacking potential rapists, Squirrel Girl's power must be contained. Any comments related to the use of violence by men to control and forcibly access female sexuality are prevented when giant robots in the service of the Red Skull attack. Forced to flee, Squirrel Girl only turns to face the robots when, after a near miss, her tail is set alight. Her anger inflamed, Squirrel Girl destroys four of the machines – or, at least, the reader is able to infer this is what she does. The action, as ever, takes place off panel. In the subsequent issue, Daredevil's fight with the same kind of machines would be depicted in comprehensive detail; for Squirrel Girl, the only thing clearly on display were the wounds she suffered during the fighting, positioning her as 'less than' her male counterparts who usually only acquire surface wounds that make the damage suffered attractive rather than actual, a means of demonstrating masculinity instead of weakness. Squirrel Girl therefore appears more vulnerable than her male counterparts and the prominent depiction of her wounds may well linger longer in readers' minds than her inferred destruction of four robots that had the temerity to burn her tail.

Many of the tensions around Squirrel Girl are encapsulated in a panel in 'Welcome Home, Squirrel Girl!', a story published in *I Am An Avenger* #1 (A. Zalben and T. Fowler, 2010). Squirrel Girl arrives in New York unheralded, unrecognized, unnoticed – even while riding the subway with Tippy Toe, her second squirrel companion, perched on

her shoulder. Two panels form the centre piece of the story: one shows Squirrel Girl looking up at Iron Man flying overhead and the other is an aerial view of Squirrel Girl, surrounded by civilians. In positioning Squirrel Girl with the 'ordinary' people, audiences can identify with her and share in her admiration for the superhero above her. The emphasis on 'above her' is reinforced through the fact that Iron Man's shadow falls on Squirrel Girl, placing her, literally, in his shadow. Squirrel Girl is not being welcomed home, she has returned home to welcome others, even if it goes unnoticed. However, these panels occur in a comic book called *I Am An Avenger* (2010), a statement that carries with it connotations of being part of the most significant team in the Marvel universe. When an onlooker says 'I guess that's why we live here, huh?' and Squirrel Girl replies 'yup', they mean very different things (Zalben and Fowler 2010: n.p.). The onlooker means that he derives a sense of security from knowing superheroes are there; Squirrel Girl means that she is a superhero, albeit one on a different plane to the one flying above her. The choice of Iron Man is also significant as he had rejected her as a sidekick and now she is, at least according to the title of this issue, an Avenger. This represents the negotiation between being inside and outside continuity. Squirrel Girl is symbolically empowered through her association with the Avengers at the same time as her shift into continuity restricts, although not completely, her access to improbable victories. Representational strategies continue to contain her potential, both in combat and in the sense of being 'below' Iron Man, and the shift into continuity also tends to work against her alternative solutions in combat, incorporating her into a more conventional superhero universe. Most likely engineered as an attempt to make the character less humorous, the move from margin to mainstream makes her less threatening

(to villains and to continuity) as she no longer poses unconventional strategies that prove more effective than those used by men to maintain dominant power relations. In short, Squirrel Girl's shift into continuity brings with it an increase in status, at least according to the terms that structure the Marvel universe, but a decrease in potential. This, of course, remains in flux. As comic books continue to be published, Squirrel Girl's role may continue to evolve and she may stabilize in continuity, continuing much as at present; she could begin to incorporate more of her alternative strategies; or she could slip gradually back outside continuity. It is this movement, this slippage between continuity and that which it cannot accept, that makes Squirrel Girl such a fascinating character. Whether inside or outside continuity, what matters is that Squirrel Girl has demonstrated that other possibilities exist for women in superhero comic books.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Robert Crawford for furnishing me with a copy of the Will Murray interview in *Ditkomania* #79 and to the anonymous reviewers at *SiC* for their instructive feedback on two drafts of this article. I would also like to thank Fiona Venn and Amanda Flather for their thoughts and encouragement. I am grateful to Marvel for permission to reproduce the images in this piece.

References

Bendis, B. and Deodato, M. (2011), *The New Avengers: Fear Itself*, #15, New York: Marvel.

Butler, J. (2007), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge.

Christiansen, J. and O'Sullivan, M. (2010), *Women of Marvel: Celebrating Seven Decades Handbook*, New York: Marvel.

Cornell, P. and Davis, A. (2013), *Wolverine*, #8, New York: Marvel.

Ditko, S. and Murray, W. (1992), *Marvel Super-Heroes* #8, New York: Marvel.

Emad, M. (2006), 'Reading wonder woman's body: Mythologies of gender and nation', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 39:6, [pp. 954-984](#).

Hutcheon, L. (1986), 'The politics of postmodernism: Parody and history', *Cultural Critique*, 5, [pp. 179-207](#).

Jameson, F. (2005), 'Foreword', in J. Lyotard (ed.), *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. vii-xxi.

Johns, G. and Conner, A. (2005), *JSA Classified*, #1, New York: DC Comics.

Levy, A. (2005), 'Raunchiness is powerful? C'mon, girls', *The Washington Post*, 18

September, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/17/AR2005091700044.html>. Accessed 20 June 2014.-

Formatted: Default Paragraph Font

Loeb, J. and Adams, A. (2012), 'Spider Woman vs. X-Women (kinda)', in Axel Alonso and Nick Lowe (eds), *Avengers vs. X-Men: Versus*, #6, New York: Marvel, unpaginated.

Marvel Universe Wiki (2012), 'Squirrel Girl',

http://marvel.com/universe/Squirrel_Girlhttp://marvel.com/universe/Squirrel_Girl.

Accessed 4 December 2012.

Formatted: Font: Italic

Formatted: Default Paragraph Font

Formatted: Default Paragraph Font

Moore, A. and Swan, C. (2010), *Superman: Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?*, New York: DC Comics.

Mulvey, L. (1975), 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, 16:3, pp. 6-18.

Murray, W. (2010), 'I dated squirrel girl', *Ditkomania*, #79, May, unpaginated.

Nicieza, F. and Medina, P. (2006), 'First Kiss', in Tom Brevoort and A. Sitterson (eds), *I Heart Marvel: Masked Intentions*, New York: Marvel, unpaginated.

Nicieza, F., Slott, D. and Dwyer, K. (2007), *Deadpool/GLI Summer Fun Spectacular*, New York: Marvel.

Reynolds, R. (1992), *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press.

Schedeen, J. (2011), 'The *New Avengers* #15 review', *IGN*, 10 August,

~~<http://uk.ign.com/articles/2011/08/11/the-new-avengers-15->~~

~~review~~<http://uk.ign.com/articles/2011/08/11/the-new-avengers-15-review>. Accessed 16

October 2012.

Formatted: Default Paragraph Font

Formatted: Default Paragraph Font

Slott, D. and Cook, K. (2012), 'How we roll', in Axel Alonso and Nick Lowe (eds), *Avengers vs. X-Men: Versus*, #6, New York: Marvel, unpaginated.

Slott, D. and Dwyer, K. (2006), 'Last hand', *The Thing*, #8, New York: Marvel.

Slott, D. and Haley, M. (2006), *GLX-Mas Special*, New York: Marvel.

Slott, D. and Pelletier, P. (2005), *Great Lakes Avengers: Misassembled*, New York: Marvel.

Slott, D. and Templeton, T. (2010), *Age of Heroes*, #3, New York: Marvel.

[Van Meter, J., & Conner, A. \(2010\), 'Spin Cycle', in Dan DiDio and Rachel Gluckstern \(eds\), *Justice Society of America 80-Page Giant #1*, New York: DC Comics, unpaginated.](#)

Wertham, F. (1955), *Seduction of the Innocent*, London: Museum Press Ltd.

Zalben, A. and Fowler, T. (2010), 'Welcome home, squirrel girl!', [in Joe Quesada and Lauren Sankovitch \(eds\), *I Am An Avenger*, #1, New York: Marvel, unpaginated.](#)

Contributor details

Michael Goodrum completed his Ph.D. in the Department of History at the University of Essex in 2011. His thesis deployed a psychoanalytic framework and analysed the relationship between traumatic events in US history and superhero narratives, demonstrating how the latter were influenced by and simultaneously helped to influence contemporary responses to trauma. Other research interests include the representation of heroism in US popular culture and the history of protest songs. He has been published in *Social History* and *Literature Compass*.

Contact:

[Department of History](#)

[University of Essex](#)

[Colchester](#)

[Essex](#)

[CO4 3SQ](#)

E-mail: mgoodr@essex.ac.uk