

The Batman's Gotham City™: Story, Ideology, Performance

The trademark affixed to Batman's Gotham City™ suggests something of its special status. Plastered across games, amusement park rides, toys, and other collectables, Gotham City as brand is a highly valued asset not only of the Batman franchise, but of the larger corporate entities of DC Comics and Warner Bros. As a place marker and invocation of urban space, Gotham City's protected legal status in fact extends to little more than a ten-letter sequence. It lacks borders, elected officials, citizens – none of which is surprising given its fictional status. But it does have a history and a raison d'être, and with them an accretion of representational strategies, icons, and of course, characters. This essay will side-step the value of Gotham City as intellectual property and generator of profits, looking at it instead as a generative element in the production of Batman narratives and related ideological value systems, both of which offer an opportunity to rethink urban cartographies as enacted rather than objective spaces.

As the Riddler once put it, “When is a man a city?” “When it's Batman or when it's Gotham.... It's huge and contradictory and dark and funny and threatening.” (Gaiman 1989) It is difficult to argue with this broad spectrum of descriptors. And yet the Riddler's remarks regarding the mutual definition of the character and the city bring with them a crucial implication. The interdependence of the Batman and Gotham City is as essential to sustaining the logic behind the endless iterations of the narrative as the Batman's oft-invoked origin story. In fact, the origin story sets the terms not only for a

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narrative economy that has driven over seventy years of comics, films, acted and animated television episodes, games and other tangibles, but it establishes the link between character and setting, defining forever the nature of Gotham. The darkly lit crime-ridden streets of Gotham set the stage for the birth of the Batman, a primal scene in which young Bruce Wayne witnessed the murder of his parents. And those same streets and conditions provide the locus, condition and cause for Batman's obsessive battle with crime. Gotham's value in this case is far greater than mere setting for the adventures of a superhero: it turns on its generative relationship to the narrative, the source of the franchise's endless iteration.

We will also be concerned with value of a different sort: the ideological notions bound up in Gotham's history and particularly its pas de deux with the Batman character. Gotham City seems ideologically skewed, locked forever by the origin story into a place of property crime, where the extraordinarily wealthy Bruce Wayne disguises himself to combat obsessively the most trivial of transgressions. Sometimes crime serves as the vocabulary of his equally obsessed counterparts (Batman's Joker, Riddler, Penguin, etc.). In many of these narratives, Gotham provides little more than generic urban backdrop against which grandiose rhetorical flourishes compel spectacular scenes of confrontation. But at other times, Gotham's dark passages and anonymous urban canyons are home to far more familiar notions of transgression: crimes against property and threats to life and limb. In those narratives – populated not by super villains but by nameless crime bosses, thugs and petty criminals like those responsible for the death of little Bruce Wayne's parents in the origin story – we can find evidence of a preoccupation with property crimes. But this recursive fixation comes with a refusal to address or even suggest that

the city itself is a generator of social inequities such as poverty, poor living conditions and inadequate education, corruption and the absence of opportunity. By day, the wealthy Bruce Wayne seems unable to change these conditions despite the Wayne Foundation's charities and his own civic engagement (indeed, his disproportionate wealth might be seen as symptomatic of the problem of inequitable wealth distribution, a point underscored by his day job as a playboy); by night, the Batman obsessively enforces the laws of the propertied classes against those who would illegally share the profits. The reluctance across the vast majority of Batman narratives to address underlying social inequities and urban conditions is as striking as the unity of Wayne/Batman figure as both paragon of wealth and vigilante enforcer of the law.

By the conclusion of the essay, we will trace the intertwined uses of the city for purposes of story and ideological implication, mapping Gotham's particular geographies through their sites of enactment. Because we can only know this imaginary city through its moments of character-driven action and articulation, we might re-read the corpus of bat-texts as something of a performative cartography, a space continually (re-) produced and modified through the actions of its inhabitants. Fleeting encounters, everyday routines, and affective intensities are the stuff of 'non-representational' theory, and we will conclude by exploring the affordances of this turn in cartographic theory for our understanding of Gotham.

Locating Gotham City

Despite its trademarked status, Gotham City is pinned between the twin challenges of trademark dilution (it remains a widely used sobriquet for New York City, frequently

appearing in book titles and everyday parlance) and its ample historical precedent. In use as early as the 15th century to refer to places with foolish inhabitants, it was picked up by Washington Irving in the early 19th century as a term for New York in his satire Salmagundi (1807). By the century's end, Jacob Riis would document the squalid living conditions of Gotham Court in his exposé of tenement life in New York City's lower East Side in How the Other Half Lives (1890). In fact, the confusion between New York and Gotham may owe something to the fact that Batman's home was New York City until he moved to Gotham in Detective Comics 48 (February 1941), and Gotham is explicitly modeled on the 'dark and brooding' aspects of New York City's architecture and atmosphere. Dennis O'Neil, long-time Batman editor, made the reference explicit in the bat-bible issued for continuity purposes to Batman's creators, describing Gotham as "a distillation of everything that's dark, moody and frightening about New York. It's Hell's Kitchen. The Lower East Side. Bed Stuy. The South Bronx. Soho and Tribeca off the main thoroughfares at three in the morning" (O'Neil 1989). Writing a few years later, O'Neil softened his characterization slightly, but maintained the same conflation when he described Gotham as "Manhattan below 14th Street at eleven minutes past midnight on the coldest night in November" (O'Neil 1994: 344). Frank Miller wrote that "Metropolis is New York in the daytime; Gotham City is New York at night" (cf. MacDonald and Sanderson 2006). DC Comics president and publisher Paul Levitz described Gotham as "New York from 14th Street down, the older buildings, more brick-and-mortar as opposed to steel-and-glass" (cf. Rousseau 2008). And New York Times journalist William Safire seemed to get O'Neil's message, describing Gotham City as "New York below 14th Street, from SoHo to Greenwich Village, the Bowery, Little Italy, Chinatown, and the

sinister areas around the base of the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges” (Safire 1995). For the (trademark) record, DC is careful to state that Gotham and New York City exist separately from one another.

The diegetic history of Gotham City is amply documented on the pages of [Wikipedia](#) and a number of fan websites, offering comparisons of the city’s various maps, architectural references, locations, episodes, variations in reference (for example Batman artist Neil Adams and director Christopher Nolan both see Gotham as Chicago), and of course, artists’ interpretations. As such, it enjoys a visibility and reception history that would be the envy of many moderately sized ‘real world’ cities. Like the character of the Batman himself, the representation of the city undulated throughout its long history, reflecting the concerns of the day: depression and urban decay; war and the need to look beyond urban conditions in the interests of fighting a larger enemy; the post-war era with its reorientation to civilian and above all family life; the uncertainties of the 1960s and 1970s manifest in the counter culture, camp, and beyond; and the gritty 1980s marked by media representations of urban crime, governmental corruption; and the steady slide into darker, more obsessive concerns that have continued to the present. With the exception of a few periods in which Gotham might have been mistaken for Superman’s far more sunny and optimistic Metropolis (and during which time, the bat was also a creature of the day), and despite a few curious sojourns to other times, Gotham has through it all remained an emphatically American inner city, indebted to the urban photographic tradition of Charles Sheeler and Dorothea Lange, informed by the compositional angularity and lighting contrasts of Art Deco and German Expressionism, and responsive to the vocabulary of film noir. Stylistic variations were many, as artists and set designers

moved among gothic, machine age, and retro-futurist references. But through it all, dark shadows and extreme angles enabled a half-hidden Batman, perched on ledges and brooding with the gargoyles, to revel in his outsider status, swooping down as needed by the citizenry.

If Gotham is both rooted in New York and torn among stylistic references, a specific tonality nevertheless persists and dominates. Fritz Lang's Metropolis meets Peter Kuper's The System; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's Empire meets Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle (Thissen 2001). It is difficult not to read retrospectively the stinging ambivalence that has characterized the recent critical fascination with the modern urban condition back into earlier renderings of Gotham. The far simpler rendering style of the comics' early years avails itself of a bleak reading. And at the same time, this contemporary attitude has crystallized into the iconography that now serves as shorthand for an urban space and condition. This is perhaps nowhere more clear than on sites where Gotham's iconography is reduced to silhouettes of darkened skyscrapers, urban canyons and lonely streets – comic book covers, games, toys, even Gotham-decorated birthday cakes. Cities of course are more than spatial amalgams, and O'Neil's invocation of time and temperature evokes the stark conditions that accompany the desolate-to-threatening Gotham scene. Add to this space the human factor – endemic corruption, urban blight, and rampant criminality – and the dark and decaying spaces of the city take on the feel of a dystopian nightmare.

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Generating Narratives and Ideology

As mentioned at the outset, a number of these associations are driven by the Batman character's origin story, and the elegance of this particular narrative universe can be found in the efficient coherence of the character's defining elements and his diegetic universe. The invocation of the bat, a nocturnal flying mammal, brings with it not only the fear that Bruce Wayne hoped to induce in criminals, but a preferred time of day (night), locations (the eaves of isolated buildings), and associations of darkness, silence, and surprise. The contrast to Superman's rather garish ensemble, best appreciated in radiant sunlight and in the public spaces of Metropolis, couldn't be sharper. **[fig.1; fig.2]**

One of the Batman's striking narrative features is the endless reiteration of his original trauma: first in Detective Comics 33 (Fox and Kane 1939) and next in Batman 1 (Finger and Kane 1940). Then it has reappeared many hundreds of times over the intervening years. Batman continuously avenges his parents' murder by apprehending those perpetrators who blight Gotham's landscape, in the process metaphorically reenacting the primal scene. Terms like obsession, revenge and trauma are central to the character's brand of justice, and they are particularly salient when directed towards faceless thugs, nameless hirelings, and episode-specific crime bosses. By contrast, those episodes that pit the Batman against costumed super villains such as the Joker and Penguin, even though driven by the same narrative engine, are nevertheless distinguished by the fact that all of the characters mirror the Batman in having generative origin stories, obsessions, and an overall demeanor that we (with luck) will never encounter in real life. Their world is self referential, in contrast to the episodes with everyday criminals that reflect and extend to the realities of the urban condition.

Batman's origin story is centrally bound up with Gotham – a prosperous family out for an evening in the city ... the theater district with its shadowy alleys and unsavory urban mix ... an attempted robbery ... a struggle ... a shot ... then two.... Echoing the logic of Germany's 'street films' such as Die Strasse (Grune, 1923) and Dirnentragödie (Rahn, 1927), Gotham's respectable classes are endangered when they venture into the wrong neighborhoods. The death of Bruce Wayne's parents takes place in the Gotham that will forever serve as Batman's domain – a Gotham generally characterized by darkness, debris and physical dereliction, and a portion of the city inhabited by the unruly and criminal underclass. [fig.3] The parallels noted earlier by Dennis O'Neil to the Bronx or Bed Stuy or downtown Manhattan at three in the morning point to places still resonant as sites of danger for the well-heeled, and it is this nexus of time, space and the potential for violent crime that serves as the defining springboard for the character of the Batman and his subsequent obsessive reenactments of his defining trauma. Gotham, in this sense, is inseparable from the narrative logic of the character, and serves not only as a background but as a *condition* for the iterative generation of endless stories.

Frank Miller said, "Batman only really works as a character if the world is essentially a malevolent, frightening place" (cf. Miller 1986: 37). This depiction of Gotham helps Batman to work as a character by persuading the reader to empathize uncritically with the hero's actions. Gotham – or at least the parts inhabited by the Batman – is indeed 'dark, moody and frightening.' But we might more closely examine what comes along with our instinctual flight response, and, if we are witness to crime, the uncritical empathy that accompanies those who, like the Batman, restore order. The origin story so important to the Batman's narrative logic and the generative place of Gotham City within it carries

more than just the basis for iterative enactments of revenge, obsession and justice set in a malevolent urban space. It also establishes a particular relationship to authority and property rights. Batman's childhood trauma stemmed from an incident in which resistance to a petty violation of property rights (the theft of a necklace) gave rise to a capital crime (murder). Bruce Wayne's wealthy father was willing to give up his and his wife's lives to defend property – a necklace – and to uphold the law. The motive for the robbery was unspoken, undifferentiated from the sorts of petty street crime that plague most large American cities (although in some later retellings, it was occasionally positioned within larger frameworks of meaning). The motive for defending property was equally unspoken, in the way that 'doing the right thing' needs no reflection or articulation. And the son followed in his father's footsteps, with an obsessive twist.

'Uncritical empathy' seems a reasonable response to a child's oath to extract justice for the death of his parents. And it may even extend to a man, particularly one battling to extract justice in an urban setting that looks 'as if hell had erupted through the sidewalks.'

But this view elides a significant absence. As Roberta Pearson and I argued, "this representation of Gotham certainly gives a compelling image of late-twentieth century urban decay, as any New Yorker can attest, and the astute reader will certainly see these conditions as a causal factor in the high Gotham crime rate. Yet, like the criminals, Gotham is largely removed from a socio-economic context. The narratives deal with the crime rate; they deal with criminal brutality, but not the brutalizing slum landlords; they deal with the greed of petty theft but not poverty and hopelessness – in short, they deal with the transgressions of the underclasses but not the conditions that give rise to these transgressions" (Uricchio and Pearson 1991: 206). And as suggested at the outset, the

general failure to address these conditions so central to the identity of Batman's Gotham takes on a particular character when we consider the character's larger conceit.

Millionaire ('billionaire' in some tellings of the tale) Bruce Wayne – playboy industrialist, landowner, and, it must be added, philanthropist – spends his days both accumulating capital and sharing his wealth through the Wayne Foundation. Wayne epitomizes an economic system of extreme wealth distribution: but where there are highs, there are sure to be lows. And while we are privy to life at the top in Wayne Manor, we see little of life at the other end of the spectrum, an end that drives its members to acts of desperation, risk and hopelessness. Indeed, the narrative effectively trades on the failure of trickle down economics to make a significant difference in the city's underclass. Despite the best efforts of one of Gotham's wealthiest residents, its streets remain crime-ridden and dangerous, and the nature of the crimes that Wayne-as-the-Batman obsessively fights by night remains petty even at its most grandiloquent. Again, this argument excludes the costumed super villains for whom economic drivers are not a primary motive but rather a site of expression, since they are bound up in logics and story economies that closely parallel the Batman's (little wonder that they predominate in an era increasingly sensitive to socio-economic contradiction). Significantly, the criminality in Gotham-as-the-Bronx or Bed Stuy or south of 14th Street at three in the morning has an additional characteristic: it excludes crime of the 'white collar' variety. The evils of market manipulation, insider trading, large-scale fraud – to mention acts that explicitly contravene the law – as well as the grey zone of influence peddling, speculation, and the many small and socially sanctioned acts that enable crimes against humanity, are all striking in their absence from Batman's world of crime fighting. And again, were this the

real world, one would likely find criminals of this variety on the various corporate boards which Bruce Wayne also inhabits, or at social gatherings at which he is a prized guest or even patron. The world of Bruce Wayne is complicit in the conditions that sustain Gotham's troubled criminal character, and that he polices by night as the Batman.

The ideological slippage seems easy to miss, particularly in a nation that unabashedly claims first place in the percentage of its citizens behind bars and clamors for ever-greater levels of crime fighting and ever-longer jail sentences. The 'uncritical empathy' generated and actively reinforced by the ever-refreshed origin story does much to keep our eye focused on petty hoodlums with grand plans, the ne'er-do-wells with broken noses, low foreheads, and in earlier generations of the comics, a decidedly ethnic appearance. But the contradictions of extreme capital accumulation, like the vague status of white collar crime, contradictions that directly contribute to the need for Bruce Wayne's night job, pass by largely unnoticed. The symbiosis of Bruce Wayne/Batman, each needing the other to support their own condition, plays out over bodies of the underclass in the streets of Gotham.

Performing Gotham

Gotham City is a trademarked term; it is the site of an origin myth and generator of a related iterative narrative; and it is both setting and condition for the Batman's Sisyphean struggle to extract justice from an irrepressible criminal underclass. But Gotham as a fictional, if heavily referenced, city offers something more. To Batman's writers and artists, it provides a site where the urban imagination takes form, resulting in maps, street plans, architectural details, and spaces of interaction. To fans of the Batman, it is a site of

the pleasures of accreted memory, of shifting connections and references, of obsessively chronicled details and hotly contested orthodoxies, and above all, it provides a space of shared interest, collective knowledge and social endeavor. And, were one to imagine Gotham through the narrative actions of its characters, we might find it to be an accumulation of enacted spaces, of landmarks and buildings and streets brought to life through action, event and reference: Crime Alley (aka Park Row), Arkham Asylum, Wayne Tower, Old Gotham, Amusement Mile, Blackgate Isle, and the many locations named for Batman's creators (from the Robert Kane Memorial Bridge to Grant Park). These shifting references and enacted spaces offer a particularly interesting take on the city, one of growing relevance for academic cartographers. And although embedded in a fictional universe, longue durée serial narratives of the type Batman emblemizes help to illuminate the workings of non-objectivist cartography in a compelling way – and with it, our understanding of the city.

The field of cartography has shifted over the past few decades from a largely technical enterprise concerned with the production of objective representations, whether static or dynamic, to approaches more behaviorist and culturalist in character. The availability of high-resolution satellite imaging, most recently in the form of Google maps, supported this shift in interest. Add to this the impact of thinkers such as Michel de Certeau, Gilles Deleuze, and Karen Barad who take up notions of creativity, improvisation and transmutation, and the conditions for new understandings of the spaces we inhabit and describe seem inescapable. Among the implications of the new cartography movement has been the deconstruction of older representation systems in terms of their power and knowledge claims, and a turn instead towards alternate mapping systems more sensitive

to the needs of marginal social formations and more responsive to the transient and dynamic character of social spaces. Among the theories with a specific impact on these strategies has been ‘non-representational’ theory associated primarily with Nigel Thrift (cf. Thrift 2007; Thrift and Dewsbury 2000: 411-432; Lorimer 2005: 83–94; Kwan 2007: 22-34; Kitchin and Dodge 2007: 331-334; and Laurier and Brown 2008: 201-216), and informed by the phenomenological tradition (Merleau-Ponty to Heidegger) as well as the work of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Latour and Serres.

‘Non-Representational’ theory examines the geographies of what happens, that is, how life, cities, the economy, landscapes, and so on are continually (re)produced and modified in ordinary actions. Everyday routines and interactions become the stuff of the geographer’s attention, as do fleeting encounters and even affective intensities (calling to mind Baudelaire’s notion of modernity as ‘the transient, the fleeting, the contingent’) (cf. Baudelaire 1972: 395-422). In a move that brings this aspect of geography extraordinarily close to certain strands of sociology, what is significant exists in and through practices, ephemeral and non-reproducible though they may be. Cartography, in this view, becomes something processual rather than representational (thus the oxymoronic moniker), and navigation becomes an act of bricolage as we piece together landmarks, memories, conversations, road conditions and buildings into a coherent and meaningful process.

And so the question, what is Gotham City? Beyond trademarked property, narrative generator and ideological conceit, it is an accumulation of narrative and graphic acts. We know Gotham through the actions of its inhabitants, and thus we know it not as an objective space, but as a highly selective and ever-shifting accretion of parts, of encounters between characters, favorite episodes, rendering styles, even perspectives.

Those few maps of Gotham that exist, attempting to define, fix and represent a fictional entity from an objectivist perspective, are from this view absurd, unless positioned within the tight semiotic frame of a particular story. But if we take Gotham as a site of performance and a set of enacted practices, we have something much closer to the experiential cartography just described. Gotham is not so much a site of contradiction as a palimpsest of half-remembered episodes, out-of-sequence encounters with the text, selectively accruing landmarks and ever-reinvented spaces. Gotham is a space where the variant renderings of decades of multi-authored Wayne Towers or Arkham Asylums do not so much compete with one another as inconsistency but rather cohere together as an experiential bricolage. It is a space whose dynamic flux is the source of its vitality.

This view emerges from our everyday encounters with ‘real’ cities as articulated by the non-representational turn in cartography, encounters that – extended to the world of Gotham City – provide a means of accounting for our familiarity in an always reinvented (transient, fleeting, contingent) place. And it offers a potentially powerful way to account for the experiences of those artists and writers who occupy themselves by creating the details that constitute this ever-shifting whole, as well as those readers whose engagements with the text allow them to navigate and make sense of the Gotham of their encounters, memories and dreams. Gotham City stands as an aggregation of the ever-changing events depicted on its rooftops, alleys and streets rather than as a stable and coherent street grid. It stands as an enacted space, a space whose identity and meanings are bound up in the dynamic logics of performance rather than the fixed terrain of material artifact.

The trademarked term ‘Gotham City’ indicates far less than the grand legal claims made on its behalf, and yet is positioned as a reality of last resort. By contrast, the accumulated actions of Gotham’s inhabitants, the ever-shifting character of its buildings, streets and vistas – together with the experiences of their authors and readers – constitute a rich and compelling set of practices, sharing much with our encounters with reality and potentially helping us to see reality more clearly.

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