

Superheroes and Comic Book Vigilantes Versus Real Life Vigilantes:  
An Anthropological Answer to the Kick-Ass Paradox

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This article explores comic book superheroes and vigilantes through an anthropological lens to tackle the paradox offered by Mark Millar's (2010) *Kick-Ass*: why have comic books not inspired more real life vigilantism? Applying social science literature on vigilantism, social banditry and death squads to fictional characters and contexts this article explores the gaps between vigilante fact and vigilante fiction. It takes as it's starting point Ray Abrahams (1998) observation that three factors lend themselves to the emergence of vigilantism; dissatisfaction with justice, awareness of other vigilantes and a pre-existing social or cultural template. Given the prevalence of comic book superheroes and vigilantes as cultural template, this paper reappraises the limits of Abraham's model and reflects on the ambiguities of vigilante fact and fiction.

The eponymous hero in Mark Millar's *Kick-Ass* asks 'Why do you think nobody's tried to be a superhero before?' (Millar 2010, p.11). The idea strikes a chord with comic book fans as it represents a thought which has occurred to most of us. Having studied real life vigilantes for my doctoral research this question is intriguing. Ordinary patterns for the adoption of vigilantism would seem to suggest that a richer mythology of vigilantism ought to lead to a greater propensity towards vigilante activity. If the same factors that motivate vigilantes in comic books - such as crime, social issues, corruption and ineffective policing - exist in real life, why is vigilantism not more common in the 'real' world? This paper explores why such an expectation is theoretically justified, but also why in turn we have yet to see it realised. In doing so I highlight not only the limits within the academic vigilantism literature, but also offer an explanation to the *Kick-Ass* paradox. While I recognise the paradox proffered by Millar was in fact 'why do comic book fans not become superheroes?' - it strikes me that viewing this question from the lens of vigilantism is more productive. The answer to Millar's original question is simple. First, most readers do not have superpowers, and second, those without superpowers can not afford the technical wizardry of a Batman or Tony Stark-like figure. The absence of superheroes is therefore attributable to a lack of super-ness. The absence of vigilantes is not. For those so inclined, vigilantism is a relatively easily achieved objective. The question then is why do comic book readers not follow in the footsteps of their superheroes and fictional vigilantes in taking justice into their own hands given that anyone has the potential to do so.

It perhaps seems a little strange that a social anthropologist should be writing about superhero genre superheroes (from here on referred to as superheroes). As a discipline social anthropology is more or less defined by the ethnographic method and participant observation -

research techniques which prioritise face to face engagement with those we research. While such on-site research is impossible in a comic book universe, my enthusiasm for the genre is frequently piqued by overlap between the themes encountered within comic book fantasy and in my anthropological research on popular justice. My doctoral research focused on lynchings in Guatemala. These were not racially motivated attacks, as the word *linchamientos* perhaps suggests, but a wave of attacks which spread across the country in the late 1990's and early 2000's which saw citizens taking justice into their own hands. Alleged criminals and other perceived social deviants were attacked following the inefficient provision of state justice in the aftermath of thirty-six years of civil war (Burrell & Weston 2008). The echoes of 'justice', 'morality' and 'retribution' are not far from the pages of vigilante and superhero comic books. Nonetheless having listened to the testimonies of those caught up in the violence, the disjuncture between the fantasy and reality of vigilantism remains a stark one. In turning my attentions towards comic books I do not wish to belittle the real suffering which often leads to, and frequently results from, real vigilantism. Instead my aim here is to use an anthropological lens to examine a particular disjuncture between expectation and reality. This paper will draw on the literature around social banditry, heroism, and state justice, to explore the overlaps and interplay between comic and real world vigilantism.

Coogan notes that there are three defining aspects to superheroes: mission, powers and identity. "The superhero's mission is pro-social and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda" (Coogan 2009, p.77). This mission is what makes the superhero heroic. Powers on the other hand are the aspect which makes this heroism super (Coogan 2009, p.78). The final aspect, identity, is generally expressed through a costume and codename (Coogan 2009, p.78-82), a trope which differentiates superheroes from other heroic fictional characters with superhuman powers. "These three elements – mission, powers, and identity, or MPI – establish the core of the genre. But, as with other genres, specific superheroes exist who do not fully demonstrate these three elements, and heroes from other genres may exist who display all three elements but should not be regarded as superheroes" (Coogan 2009, p.82). The Hulk is an example of an often missionless hero (Coogan 2009, p.82); Batman is a superhero without powers (Coogan 2009, p.83). Buffy the Vampire Slayer has special powers, a secret identity (although no costume) and a mission, yet is perhaps best not thought of as a superhero as she fits more coherently within the category of slayers dating back to Van Helsing (Coogan 2009, p.86) or a hero genre encapsulating Luke Skywalker and Beowulf (Coogan 2009, p.84-86). Such liminal characters show the category of the superhero to be one that overlaps with others, but at the core lie these three defining characteristics.

Similarly a concrete definition of vigilantism is hampered by the disjuncture between the 'ideal type' and the more nuanced experienced realities. Vigilantes are entwined in a tripartite relationship involving 'the state', 'good citizens' and 'criminals' (Abrahams 1998, p.9), whereby real or perceived inadequacies of state criminal justice provisions lead to 'good citizens' taking justice into their own hands. This often takes the form of violent punishment of those perceived to be 'criminals', although it may also extend into 'vigilance' (Abrahams 1998, p.5) as a pre-emptive prevention. But good citizens themselves become criminals through their violence.

Conversely, as is seen later in relation to Nigeria and Mozambique, vigilantes may be co-opted by the state and given legal or formal legitimacy. Equally state agents can become vigilantes when acting outside of the legally mandated roles. For the purpose of this article, the term vigilante will be used to mean those non-state actors who use violence against criminals and perceived social deviants in a way intended to equate with popular ideas of justice.

Generally there is a distinction between superhero-genre superheroes and comic book vigilantes in that superheroes largely (with exceptions) act as enhanced police officers unbound by legal restrictions (bypassing rules regarding surveillance or the use of force for example) in ways that police are unable to - but they rarely punish criminals. Superheroes generally use force as part of apprehending the criminals in order to turn them over to the police. In other words, superheroes rely on and reinforce the existing judicial system; they do not attempt to replace it. Vigilantes on the other hand often disagree with aspects of the judicial system and enact punishment (often through killing offenders). The line between arrest and punishment is generally the line that divides the superhero from the vigilante. There are many exceptions including Golden Age Batman, Superman and Green Lantern who all killed criminals. More recently in *The Longbow Hunters* (Grell 1991), the Green Arrow killed those who tortured the Black Canary, and has done more killing since. Superheroes acting more militarily, rather than in relation to criminal justice, also lead to the collapse of these distinctions. Certain superheroes such as Wolverine, who is liable to kill while in a berserker rage, also step across this divide. But when superheroes kill the abnormality of the situation is generally emphasised and discussed within the comic book. As such, superheroes generally offer a blueprint for non-fatal vigilante violence.

There is a second type of comic book which needs discussing separately; those concerned with non-super-powered vigilantes. Characters such as The Watchmen's Rorschach (and his inspiration Mr A), The Punisher and various characters in Frank Miller's Sin City are explicitly vigilantes and often use fatal force. They often co-exist alongside super-powered superheroes, yet have no superpowers themselves. But without the super-powers, and with more morally ambiguous missions, it would be wrong to amalgamate the superhero genre with the vigilante genre. Vigilante comics share DNA with films such as *Death Wish* and *Taxi Driver* and take their inspiration from similar sources such as the real-life subway vigilante Bernie Goetz (Cline 2010). The fact that these characters often co-exist alongside superheroes allows comic books to discuss varying vigilante ideologies. As such the wider vigilante genre (including comic books) and the superhero genre will be treated as separate, yet intertwined genres – both offering subtly different (but overlapping) models of vigilantism whereby individuals use violence towards a 'greater good'.

Both of these models are played with in *Kick-Ass*, particularly in the film version (Vaughan 2010). Inspired by comic books the film's eponymous character becomes a costumed hero who then gains powers of sorts when he is stabbed and run over by a car leaving him with nerve damage which leaves him with a massive tolerance for pain (in the comic book he gains no such power). This ability leads to him being captured on video fending off a brutal attack by a gang. The recording becomes an on-line viral hit and Kick-Ass himself becomes an inspiration

to others. Not wishing to spoil the book or film, generally speaking Kick-Ass is inept at using violence and it is his ability to take a beating (with or without powers) which casts him as heroic, and his use of violence is generally defensive and proportional. However, alongside Kick-Ass the unpowered Big Daddy (who in the film dresses like Batman and speaks like Adam West) and his young daughter Hit-Girl use often fatal violence against criminals in what is clearly outright vigilantism with none of the limits imposed upon superheroes. As such, both models of super-heroic and outright vigilantism are offered up in the film.

Superhero and vigilante based comic books are predominantly consumed in North America, Europe and Japan. Comic strips may be popular throughout the world and comic books are also produced elsewhere (for example see Beck (1999) on Swahili comics and comic books) but production and consumption of superhero and vigilante comic books (and graphic novels) elsewhere is a small fraction of that in North America, Europe and Japan. The influence comic books have on the world is increasingly hard to avoid: a multi-billion dollar industry which saw 5.63 million comic books sold in the United States in January 2010 alone (Comic Chronicles 2010); an art-form which increasingly dominates Hollywood's output; a genre with millions of fans, spanning from children to the current President of the United States (he allegedly collects Conan and Spiderman comics - Los Angeles Time 2008). It is therefore not too far a stretch to imagine that comics impact on people's perception of vigilantism.

Real world vigilantism consists of individuals or groups taking justice into their own hands outside of state justice systems. It is a global phenomenon occurring within urban and rural areas, in economically developed and less developed countries and across a broad spectrum of political contexts (Pratten & Sen 2008). Ray Abrahams (1998) notes that there are three key factors which lend themselves to the establishment of vigilantism: first, dissatisfaction with present levels of order and justice; second, experience and awareness of such actions elsewhere and thirdly a pre-existing social and cultural template. These factors can be clearly mapped onto Guatemalan vigilantism (Weston 2008) and lead to the emergent behaviour of vigilantes.

Superheroes exist in universes where justice is fetishised and villainy is caricatured. But as with fairy tales (Bettleheim 1976) narratives reflect and comment upon reality. They instil values and moral behaviour in children (Vollum & Adkinson 2003) while also allowing adult readers to explore the complexities of moral issues through the use of hypothetical situations and by pushing behaviours to logical or illogical extremities. While these situations are often literally cartoonish they are still anchored in real world issues and as such vigilante comic books might be expected to affect opinions in the real world and to reflect real world issues in themselves. If the real world and comic books both impact on one another we ought ask 'do vigilante comic books impact on the three determinant factors Abraham's links to onset vigilantism?' In relation to the first of Abraham's factors, dissatisfaction with justice, comic book vigilantes may slightly exacerbate expectation of justice. The concrete answers and tidy outcomes of particular stories may shape readers notion of justice to some extent. This may in turn contribute to dissatisfaction with the limits, and often inadequacies of 'real life' justice systems. But inferring too much correlation here would imply an inability of the audience to

distinguish between fantasy and reality, thus I would expect the impact of comic books on dissatisfaction with justice to be negligible at best. Seeing justice being dispensed in comics is unlikely to have a direct impact on expectation regarding real world justice in most instances where people are largely satisfied with their real world justice system. Watching detectives on *CSI* or *Law and Order* solve a murder rarely changes expectations regarding real detectives; consumption of comic book superheroes affects us no differently.

For the second factor, regarding experience and knowledge of such actions elsewhere, to be affected by comic book vigilantes would largely rely upon comic books depicting incidents of real life vigilantism, which they rarely do. In looking here at comic books one is forced to acknowledge the closeness of this factor and the third - a social or cultural template. Surely awareness of real life vigilantism is just another social template. This forces us to infer that Abrahams believes that the concrete reality of real vigilantism is substantially different to other templates. It is a greater leap for potential vigilantes to mimic the actions of comic book vigilantes where there is no real world 'test case' demonstrating how the public and state will respond. Without a real life case study to copy, vigilantism does not seem to be a concrete option, therefore maintaining distinctions between fantasy and reality. In contrast the real world/fantasy distinction is far more porous when we come to consider Abraham's third factor- the influence of pre-existing social and cultural templates.

In Guatemala pre-existing social and cultural templates were diffuse. A civil patrol system where rural male citizens were armed and trained to act as *de facto* military was instigated during the conflict which saw a large cross-section of the public instilled with the values of taking justice into their own hands (Burrell & Weston 2008, Godoy 2006). Additionally Maya sometimes draw on pre or post conquest incarnations of customary law, where punishments were often corporal and sometimes fatal (Gutiérrez & Kobrak 2001) as non-state alternative forms of justice. I have even heard of folk heroes such as Tecún Umán, who was killed while fighting the Conquistador Don Pedro de Alvarado, being cited as inspiration behind ideals of non-state justice. Beyond Guatemala the new incarnation of the Minutemen patrolling the US/Mexico border potentially take inspiration from the Ku Klux Klan, the Bald Knobbers or the Battle of the Alamo as inspiring templates depending upon the various levels of intolerance or patriotism that spur their actions. Their chosen name also clearly demonstrates that they have also taken inspiration from the Minutemen from the American War of Independence. Such social and cultural precedents also exist internally within comic book worlds; Batman for instance inspires the Sons of Batman (Miller 1986) and is pre-existed by the Judson Caspian's incarnation of the Reaper (Detective Comics 1987: #575-578) as a prior Gotham vigilante (both lack superpowers and use fatal force). Vigilantes are inspired by other vigilantes as well as quasi-vigilantes and others who fight against perceived injustices in various forms. Comic book characters, be they superheroes or non-super vigilantes, clearly offer myth-like potential for inspiring vigilantism.

One might perhaps argue that there are people out there who consider themselves real life superheroes, costume wearing people out to make the world a better place. A look at the Real Life Superheroes website ([reallifesuperheroes.org](http://reallifesuperheroes.org)) suggests that this is an honourably

intentioned extension of cosplay (costumed play), blogging and civic-mindedness rather than individuals engaged in vigilantism. They do not seem to be taking justice into their own hands. At least not very often. As such the superhero genre can be seen here to inspire admirably moral action, but not vigilantism. One might also argue that infrequent acts of vigilantism which do occasionally occur in countries with high levels of consumption of vigilante comic books and films may have been inspired, in part, by those comic books. But the rates of vigilantism are far lower in Europe, North America and Japan than across Africa, Latin America and the Indian sub-continent where consumption of these materials is lower and vigilantism is more prevalent. We have a profusion of media directly representing vigilantism in the west, but we do not have a corresponding abundance of vigilantism. Are our lives so affluent and trouble free that we are in no need of real life heroes?

### **Heroes and Social Bandits**

Central to the Kick-Ass paradox lies the ideas of heroism, hero worship and the ambiguity of heroes. To disentangle these issues I turn to literature on social banditry, a term popularised by the historian Eric Hobsbawm (1969). Social bandits, according to Hobsbawm, are outlaws on the rural fringes of many societies considered to be heroes by the disenfranchised, poor or working class masses due to their embodiment of popular resistance. Figures such as Dick Turpin in the United Kingdom, Pancho Villa in Mexico or Ned Kelly in Australia represent archetypal examples of such figures as men who challenged the ruling elites through criminal or dissenting actions and in doing so became heroes to many. Historical, and sometimes contemporary, examples can be found in most countries. Robin Hood mythologises such actions with a rose-tinted hue, robbing from the rich to give to the poor. While such sentiments are sometimes echoed in real-life Robin Hoods (The Guardian 2009) more often their acts are more self-serving, as was the case with Dick Turpin who robbed from the rich without the redistributive follow up. They are also more frequently quite ambiguous characters, as is the case with Pancho Villa, a hero for Mexicans but frequently seen as a villain by those from the US due to his seizure of hacienda lands on US soil for Mexicans. As a result of such ambiguities the anthropologist Anton Blok (1972) challenged Hobsbawm's thesis as being too idealistic, noting that such individuals, while sometimes held aloft as heroes, are not necessarily viewed as being entirely or necessarily valiant. Such bandits are often severely detrimental to rural populations (Sant Cassia 1993).

Modern superhero genre comic books deal with the complexities behind heroism like no other medium. Questions such as 'who will watch the watchmen?' (Moore & Gibbons 1986) are relatively profound avenues of thought which are explored by a majority of consumers of superhero comics and related media. Discussion over the appropriate use of force, the use of fatal force, the morality of vigilantism, the relationship between the state and vigilantes, hero worship and other issues are common arcs in popular comic series'. Anti-heroes like The Punisher, Rorschach or Mr A challenge the category of hero, exploring the subtleties of violence and morality. But amidst this murky greyness however comic books often paint morality as black and white. When Hartigan castrates and beats the child molester Roarke Jr to death in *Sin City: That Yellow Bastard* (1996), when Rorschach avenges the death of Blair Roche (Moore &

Gibbons 1986) or when The Green Arrow avenges the torture of the Black Canary (Grell 1991), we are not expected to feel anything other than empathy with the protagonist. This is über-justice; starker, more clear cut, more definitive justice casts bright light over the grey morality found elsewhere. Unlike the real world we are not fed the story through second hand reporting. We voyeuristically follow protagonists as events lead to (or in Rorschach's case flash back to) the traumatic event which justifies the reaction. Witnessing the atrocity and hearing the thoughts of those engaged forces us to take a particular side, adopt a particular perspective. In this way justice is fetishised. There is no doubt that Hartigan is right to commit murder. Consequently not all comic books are like Batman which divides readers between those who wish he would kill the Joker and those who empathise with his 'no killing' (post-60's) code. Morality is grey but sometimes comic book superheroes and vigilantes have to do dark things.

In comic books, heroes can become public enemies overnight but equally villains can become heroes. Similar inversions can be seen in Dennis Rodgers' excellent anthropological analysis of Nicaraguan vigilantes in the *barrios* of Managua where he looks at a gang who were initially viewed as having a cohesive social effect locally due to their 'golden rule' which insisted that they were 'not to prey on local neighbourhood inhabitants'. (Rodgers 2008: 351) and in addition, due to territoriality, they also protected locals from gangs from other neighbourhoods. Subsequently this gang 'turned bad' as crack cocaine became more central to their endeavours and the sale of narcotics within their community led to escalation in violence between themselves and those they had formerly protected. Such switching is an everyday encounter for the superhero comic book fan. Batman has the likes of Azrael, The Reaper and Jason Todd (as the Red Hood) moving in the former direction and the likes of Catwoman and more recently The Riddler moving in the other. The need for characters to have arcs produces such inversions routinely in the superhero genre. Exposure to such arcs, familiarity with the greyness of morality and the temporal and inter-personal subjectivity of heroism lend themselves to questioning the morality of 'heroes' rather than over-simplified idolisation. As such comic books force readers to question the rightness and pitfalls of social bandits and vigilantes making us question the concept of heroism. While vigilante comic books do not generally depict social reality, through fantasy we are shown the complexity of the moral decisions encountered by protagonists. Such awareness does not necessarily lend itself to copycats. It lends itself to appraisal of the rightness of such actions. Belk also observes:

"Heroes and villains [...] are social types by which we pass judgements on ourselves. They express cultural values by representing that which the society reveres as being admirable and desirable as well as that which the society fears and considers to be deviant." (Belk 1989: 414).

In this sense superhero genre stories are not cultural directives to be imitated, but instead tools for thinking about society. This being the case we are as likely to avoid reprehensible qualities from the villains of comic books, as we are to draw upon the admirable qualities of heroes.

While little information exists on the demographics of comic book readers, personal experience suggests a broad spectrum of social and class backgrounds but a preponderance of

middle class readers, or at least moderate affluence, amongst a majority of readers. As such their dissatisfaction with the *status quo* will rarely be one directed towards anti-state sentiment. Their thirst for hero based comics is not derived from dissatisfaction with the state, but with escapism or the simple pleasures of a good book. Most superhero and vigilante comic book readers have an increase in potential blueprints for vigilantism which is countered by a diminished displeasure with current provision of justice which is further allied with a greater appreciation of the moral complexities entailed in taking justice into ones own hands. Additionally the majority of readers do not suffer the grinding poverty, continuous menace or the persistence of extreme crime to motivate them into vigilantism. Comic books perhaps then satisfy what little need there is for heroism in many reader's lives.

### **Vigilantes, the State and Death Squads**

While a significant part of the Kick-Ass paradox is explainable in relation to a lack of disenfranchisement and satisfaction with circumstances, it is impossible to consider issues of vigilantism without also looking towards the state. Being defined in relation to official or legitimate judicial practices, vigilantes inevitably have complex relationships with states. Guatemalan lynch mobs sent out distinctly mixed messages to the state, both imploring improvements in the state justice system while simultaneously further undermining it (Weston 2008). Similarly mixed messages were reciprocated by the Guatemalan state which condemned the attacks, set up anti-lynching public education campaigns yet almost never prosecuted assailants due to the popular public support for the attacks. In some contexts vigilante behaviour may even be legitimated by the state. The vigilante Bakassi Boys in Nigeria were adopted as part of the police force, having been co-opted by politicians who witnessed their effectiveness and local popularity (Smith 2008). Kyed (2008) explores similarly ambiguous state-sponsored 'vigilance' of policing organisations in Dombe, Mozambique. In developing countries states' reliance on non-state agents to carry out policing can be as much of an everyday problem as it is in the fantastical cities of Gotham, Metropolis or the Marvel Universe's New York. State/vigilante relations, both in reality as in comic books, are often far more complex than vigilantes being an affront to state justice. The potential distinction between state and vigilante breaks down still further however when one examines death squads.

Death squads represent agents of the state carrying out extrajudicial acts of violence (Afflito 2000). Like vigilantes, both real and fictional, they often target murderers, drug dealers and rapists, echoing the brutal justice of Marv, Hartigan, Wolverine or the Green Arrow. Unlike vigilantes they also target street children, trade unionists and political dissidents (Campbell, Brenner *et al* 2000). They most frequently consist of retired or off duty police or military acting beyond their ordinary state capacities. The relationship between these agents and the state is never formalised and the extent to which their actions are sanctioned or tolerated by the state is rarely clear. Violent acts are carried out anonymously. In parallel with their comic book counterparts 'cleansing' is often carried out by masked individuals in order to maintain deniability. Across contexts including the Brazilian *limpiezas* who target street children, the Ku Klux Klan in the southern United States following the Civil War (Campbell, Brenner *et al* 2000)



and recent violence in Iraq - death squads are a ubiquitous tool used by states or corrupted elements of the state to deliver their own brand of justice.

The fine line between death squads and populist vigilantes is perhaps why costumed heroes with ties to the state such as Batman and Superman necessarily strive to comply with strict 'no killing' policies. Batman's present informal relationship with Commissioner Gordon (although between the 1940's and 1960's he was a deputised member of Gotham's police force) would look distinctly death-squad-like if he killed the criminals he targeted. Yet without the perfectly executed violence brought about by Batman's ninja skills or the precision provided by Superman's superpowers the difference between a broken nose and nasal cartilage entering the brain and killing the victim is not a question of intent, but chance. In the real world vigilantes are often unconcerned with the physical safety of their targets. Disproportionality is one of the fundamental flaws with vigilantism. Vigilantism is frequently a spontaneous reaction to circumstances, consequently adrenaline, crowd psychology and social factors often feed into vigilantes, particularly when in group situations. As a result acts of retribution often go beyond what might be considered proportionate to the alleged transgressions of the offender, and it is not uncommon that death results from even the most trivial alleged misdemeanour.

There are however cases where vigilantes are not only tolerated, but encouraged, as was noted earlier regarding Nigeria's Bakassi Boys (Smith 2008) and Mozambique's 'policing organisations' (Kyed 2008). The difference in these two cases is the relative 'weakness' of state authority. As Giddens notes, fundamental to the success of any state is "Who controls the means of violence, how complete such control is and to what ends it is deployed" (Giddens 1985: 2). A strong state, according to Giddens, is one which has both a monopoly on the means of violence and yet no need, or at least minimal needs, to use violence. A 'strong state' has the tools and personnel capable of using force if needed but relative stability means that it does not need to use such force to exert control. Even where non-state agents use violence which may be seen by many as legitimate, such as a husband avenging the death their wife, the state delegitimises this act through courts which declare it illegal and punish accordingly. Thus the state always has the last word on the legitimacy of violence. Control of the justice system along with the police sees the state maintain its monopoly on legitimate violence. A 'weak state' by contrast may have no centralised monopoly on the means of violence with violence used by diverse, seemingly legitimate, non-state actors or the state may be weak due to its need to use force regularly to exert its control over its citizens. As such it is quite clear that vigilantism is only tolerated in 'weak states' where the state is unable, or at times unwilling, to maintain its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Those states where comic books are most widely consumed are rarely 'weak states' of this type.

As such comic book vigilantism represents an unattainable ideal in 'strong states'. There is no tacit acceptance of vigilante practices in a properly functioning state. The best strong-state-based vigilantes can hope to become is a social-bandit-like anti-hero, working outside the law, commanding the respect of some and the disdain of others. In strong states the need to monopolise violence is too great to allow other groups any legitimacy. This is the fundamental barrier to vigilantism in strong states - the police and the courts are in charge of

justice. The one exception to this rule which springs to mind is Curtis Silwa's Guardian Angels (Guardian Angels 2010) which he established in 1979. Initially prevalent on New York's subways the group, often referred to as vigilantes, overcame initial suspicion to become an institution which is praised by the likes of the Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The key difference between this group and other vigilantes is that they are primarily concerned with violence prevention - to the extent that they are now more concerned with public education than direct intervention. When they did/do use force, they are trained in making citizens arrests. This perhaps then places them outside the category of vigilantes, as they do not take justice into their own hands to the fullest extent, choosing to pass targets over to the police unharmed. This perhaps places Guardian Angels closer to the superhero ideal of proportionate use of force and a complimentary relationship with the police. If you want to engage with deficiencies in justice while in a strong state, you need to sacrifice all other trappings of vigilantism: giving up any use of violence as retribution, complying with state law and developing greater accountability.

## Conclusion

I began this article by espousing my own interpretation of the Kick-Ass paradox, asking why do the cultural templates for vigilantism provided by superheroes and comic book vigilantes not result in more real life vigilantes. It is clear that in part the answer is that while these two genres in comic books may on the surface appear to espouse a cultural template for vigilantism, the reality is that their message is far more ambiguous. The superhero genre does not frequently force idolatry of heroes upon their readers but instead they often highlight the moral dilemmas of taking justice into ones own hands. Superheroes and comic book vigilantes are not normatively prescribing 'do this' - instead they suggest that 'doing this' is hard, morally dubious and not necessarily a good idea. Sometimes, such as with 'the Batman rule' - "no killing" (Rucka & Williams 2010) - extremities of violence are actively proscribed. Non-comic book, social or cultural templates for vigilantism are grounded in more prosaic and familiar settings making them more applicable to real life. The success of superhero and vigilante comic books is not tied to realism but to the successful wielding, reinterpretation and subversion of the tropes of the genre. The lack of comic books turning fans into vigilantes may be as much to do with the fact that superhero and vigilante genre comics satiate urges to 'resist', subverting such desires in readers, decreasing potential aggression or feelings of injustice rather than encouraging them.

It is unfortunate that very little demographic data exists on comic readership. Comic Chronicles (2010) provide an excellent breakdown of which titles are read, but not who reads them. Shirrel Rhoades is forced to resort to guess work in his analysis of the comic book industry (Rhoades 2008, p.19). The relative wealth of comic book consumers may be inferred from the rising costs and continued consumption of comic books and graphic novels. Such expenses imply an element of class and a resultant relative satisfaction with the social *status quo* amongst the majority comic consumers. Extrapolating from the particularly high readership of Europe, America and Japan, it may be safe to assume that the majority of comic readers are coming from social backgrounds of relative personal safety and wealth where basic day to day survival needs are being met. The disenfranchisement or social struggles that may motivate actors to seek answers in cultural vigilante templates are not likely to exist in this situation. This

is compounded by the fact most comic sales occur in 'strong states' that have functioning justice systems which undermine the need for vigilantism and which would severely penalise any individuals who challenged their monopoly on legitimate violence. Given the context a majority of superhero and vigilante comic book readers find themselves in, should they become vigilantes their acts would be more morally dubious than if they were to do so in a more chaotic or crime laden contexts.

However I do not want to jump too far in suggesting that were superhero and vigilante comic books inserted into weak states *en masse* the impact might possibly be more pronounced. Without a concrete example it is impossible to predict. Nonetheless it raises some interesting cross cultural considerations. The high levels of consumption of superhero and vigilante comics in Europe, North America and Japan is grounded in diverse factors including a market for fantastical escapism, urban alienation and the expression of counter-hegemonic ideas (Nama 2009) among many other factors. Even if a profusion of comic books suddenly arrived in other contexts there is no guarantee they would be read due to divergent tastes in media consumption, differing cultural touchstones and alternative pantheons of heroes. Superhero comic books do not have the monopoly on the representation of superheroics either. Whether it be gods, mythical heroes or figures such as shamans many other groups are often held to have powers broadly equivalent to superheroes. There is even depiction of super heroic vigilantes beyond comic books. Smith notes how the aforementioned Nigerian Bakassi boys "achieved superhero status" when depicted in *Ikassaba*, a series of docudramas which were "fictional stories that drew on real-life exploits of the Bakassi Boys, representing them as heroes who are protected from harm by magical charms and able to detect innocence or guilt through the magical use of their machetes." (Smith 2009, p.438-439).

What this perhaps points towards is that social and cultural templates are different to Abrahams' other factors. 'Dissatisfaction with justice' is a potentially infinite cause which grows relative to both crime and expectation. One's dissatisfaction with the justice system continues to grow as crime increases, as the state or police fail in their duties or as one's expectations develop. It is often this mismatch between justice demanded and that supplied which sows the seeds for vigilante acts. This is far removed from the experiences of British or American comic book readers where our justice systems on the whole meet expectations. Abrahams' other two factors on the other hand, 'knowledge of such actions elsewhere' and 'pre-existing templates', are not similarly elastic, they are finite. Once individuals are aware of vigilante acts occurring elsewhere, increased awareness will not make them more likely to become a vigilante. Similarly a cultural template is relatively finite. Once there is a template, additional templates become unnecessary. In fact one might argue that the profusion of templates, of iterations of heroism and representations of the complexities of vigilantism actually undermines the initial impact of a blueprint. The more comics are consumed the less likely one is to consider the realities of vigilantism to be a good idea. As cultural templates comics may only demonstrate potential paths of action (while simultaneously sowing the seeds of doubt about the utility of such activities). To become reality, what is needed is a trigger; a social reality that motivates us to act and search for fitting cultural models as we endeavour to right perceived social wrongs. In a position of relative safety, where we are moderately satisfied with society, the complex moral

lives of our comic book superheroes and vigilantes makes the vigilante life seem quite unappealing. That is unless you had superpowers...

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