Marvel Comics and New York Stories: Anti-Heroes and Street Level Vigilantes Daredevil and The Punisher

Jesse Allen

Graduate Center, City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, and the History Commons

Recommended Citation


https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/402

This Thesis is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
Marvel Comics and New York Stories: Anti-Heroes and Street Level Vigilantes
Daredevil and The Punisher

By: Jesse Allen
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Thesis Adviser: Cindy Lobel

Approved

Executive Officer: Matt Gold

The City University of New York
Marvel Comics and New York Stories: Anti-Heroes and Street Level Vigilantes
Daredevil and The Punisher

By: Jesse Allen
Thesis Adviser: Cindy Lobel

Abstract

This thesis argues that the creation of street level, vigilante heroes The Punisher and Daredevil created by Marvel Comics authors and illustrators in the late 1970s and early 1980s reflected the socio-economic environment of New York City at this same moment in history. By examining an era of New York that was fiscally and socially tense along with the development of characters created by the New York based Marvel Comics, I aim to show how their creation was directly related to the environment which they were produced in.
Acknowledgements

In writing this thesis I would first like to thank the IDP program and my undergraduate professors at Trinity College for which this would not have been possible. Seth Markle, Stephen Valocchi and Johnny Williams. I would also like to thank the professors at CUNY who saw me through a difficult period in figuring out what direction this thesis would go and giving me the freedom to allow it to develop as it has. First and foremost huge thanks goes to my advisor and overall guide to this project Cindy Lobel, then to Robert Singer, Robert Reid Pharr, Jonathan Gray, and Shifra Sharlin.

To my father, thank you for sticking by me and being supportive while I navigated my way through academia. To Pamela Donaroma, thank you for being there for me, I appreciate it. Finally I’d like to thank my friends from Middletown, CT. While this thesis is the culmination of my academic years, in actuality it took a lifetime to write, and they have been supportive of me throughout.
Table of Contents

Approval ........................................................................................................ ii
Abstract ........................................................................................................ iii
Acknowledgements .................................................................................... iv
List of Figures ............................................................................................. vi
Introduction ................................................................................................. 1
Crumbling Foundations: New York In Turmoil ............................................ 6
Gangs, Graffiti & Bernhard Goetz .............................................................. 11
The Rise of Comic Book Companies ......................................................... 17
A History Of American Vigilantism ............................................................ 26
The Post Vietnam Era ................................................................................... 33
Guardian of Hell’s Kitchen: Frank Miller and the Transformation of Daredevil ...... 45
Conclusion .................................................................................................... 65
Bibliography ................................................................................................. 68
List of Figures

Figure 1. “Blackout ’77: Once More With Looting.” Time. 25, August 1977.................8
Figure 2. “Crime: Why and What To Do.” Time. 30, June 1975 .........................8
Figure 3. “Youth Crime.” Time. 11, July 1977 ..................................................8
Figure 4. “The Goetz Case.” Time. 8, April 1985 .............................................8
Figure 5. “Are You Ready For The New Ultra-Violence?” New York. 12, June 1972 ...12
Figure 6. Walter Hill dir. The Warriors. Paramount Pictures, 1979, Film Poster.........12
Figure 7. Michael Winner dir. Death Wish. Paramount Pictures, 1974, Film Poster......15
Figure 8. “I’m Sorry But It Had To Be Done.” The Daily News, 2, January 1985.......15
Figure 9. Action Comics #1, DC Comics, June 1938.......................................18
Figure 10. Detective Comics #31, DC Comics, September 1939.........................18
Figure 11. Captain America #1, Marvel Comics, March 1941............................20
Figure 12. Crime Suspense Stories #22, EC Comics, May 1954...........................22
Figure 13. Fantastic Four #1, Marvel Comics, November 1961..........................24
Figure 14. Amazing Fantasy #15, Marvel Comics, August 1962..........................24
Figure 15. Guardian Angels, Photo Credit: Bruce Davidson............................28
Figure 16. Detective Comics #27, DC Comics, May 1939.................................30
Figure 17. Batman #230, DC Comics, March 1971..........................................30
Figure 18. Martin Scorsese’s Taxi Driver, Columbia Pictures 1976......................37
Figure 19. Captain America #241, Marvel Comics, January 1979.......................39
Figure 20. Captain America #241, Marvel Comics, January 1979.......................39
Figure 21. The Punisher #1, Marvel Comics, January 1986...............................43
Figure 22. *Daredevil* #227, Marvel Comics, February 1986

Figure 23. Times Square Photo 1970s

Figure 24. Hell’s Kitchen rooftop photo

Figure 25. Hell’s Kitchen rooftop illustration by Frank Miller

Figure 26. *Daredevil* #53, Marvel Comics, June 1969

Figure 27. *Daredevil* #184, Marvel Comics, July 1982

Figure 28. Panels from *Daredevil* #179, Marvel Comics, February 1982

Figure 29. Panels from *Daredevil* #179, Marvel Comics, February 1982

Figure 30. Times Square Kung Fu Supply Store, Early 1980s

Figure 31. *Daredevil* #175, Marvel Comics, October 1981

Figure 32. Last Panel, p. 30 *Daredevil* #233, Marvel Comics, August 1986
Introduction

New York has long been a media center. Music, film, theatre, literature, books and magazines, modern art, photography, design, advertising, television and radio broadcasting, and fashion design are among the media industries which draw people to work in New York City. One industry, which began in the shadows of the publishing industry as a whole, has been the creation and production of Comic Books. The industry, which started in New York and has spread throughout America, has blossomed from printing newsstand periodicals to also producing graphic novels and digital comics. In 2013 the comic book market as a whole in North America hit $870 million in sales.\(^1\) And yet, unlike some other industries, comic books have been understudied by scholars. This thesis will address this breach, asking, “Why is the study of graphic narrative or comic books important? And how does this medium relate to the study of New York City?”

How have comic books contributed to a cultural zeitgeist - which New York helped shape - in relation to urbanity and American culture as a whole, and how do the characters of these graphic narratives reflect the culture during the time they are written and drawn? Like films, magazines, books, and commercial advertising, comic books reflect and reinscribe modern popular culture with myths and insights that then become a part of that culture.

New York City has been the working locale for comic book companies since the inception of Marvel and DC Comics in the 1930’s. Both companies have set the template

---

for contemporary superhero-based comics. Marvel and DC originated in New York City in the 1930s and both went on to publish stories that covered a wide spectrum of graphic narratives, ranging from detective, romance, war and horror stories to an emerging genre: the superhero story. Pre World War II superhero stories were gaining in popularity with such DC titles as Batman and Superman and Marvel’s Captain America. However after the war ended, the popularity of costumed heroes dwindled and both companies went back to supplementing their withering superhero titles with crime, horror and romance stories. The widely publicized book *Seduction of the Innocent*, written by Frederic Wertham – a noted psychiatrist - published in 1954, caused a public outcry over the contents of comic books whose gory and risqué images were supposedly corrupting America’s youth. The comics code was invented and the gritty horror and detective stories were now toned down.

Throughout the 1950s, the popularity of DC Comics’ Batman and Superman titles rose steadily as issues featuring caped crusaders climbed in sales. While Batman and Superman were created in New York City, they fought their battles in the imagined environs of Metropolis and Gotham City. Hints of the urban landscape suggest New York, but no specific landmarks appear in the books. The supra world in which these DC characters and others exist, with no ‘real’ cities transposed onto their universe of characters makes their stories fantastic fables, a mythology for a generation of readers.

But beginning with the introduction of the Fantastic Four, the Amazing Spiderman and the Avengers, Marvel’s superheroes have real New York addresses and their drama is the drama of the Marvel universe as it functions within a real New York. The comics feature different aspects of city life the superheroes’ fantastic battles along with their mundane
lives happen in New York locales. Along the way, an image of New York emerges that mirrors what is happening in real headlines reflecting aspects of lived experience throughout the city at the time of publication.

The specialization of super and non-super characters are reflective of the varied professions and class positions that are realistically palpable in the city. Journalists, photographers, reporters, lawyers, scientists, engineers, soldiers, bartenders, and homeless people all exist as a part of the narrative that is Gotham. The tabloids that appear in the Marvel Universe mirror the tabloid tradition in New York City. Printed daily, periodicals like the *Daily News* and the *New York Post* relayed eye-catching titles, shocking images and awe-inspiring stories. They were written and produced not so much for substance but to relay shock value, draw in readers/customers and continue the drama of the city.

This thesis focuses on two specific characters in the Marvel universe- Daredevil and The Punisher - who gained popularity in the early to mid 1980s. What both Daredevil and Punisher have in common with each other is that they have no powers yet they don costumes and fight crime. These characters represent an “everyman” notion of vigilantism, that gained unprecedented popularity at least in certain segments of the public imagination in the 1980s. Daredevil and Punisher titles rose in popularity as street level heroes and they represent a spectrum of vigilantism with Daredevil seeking justice and The Punisher seeking vengeance.

In the early 1980’s the reality of crime in the streets and the subways of New York City received national attention. Racial disputes, massive poverty, grit, grime, danger and daily tension associated with living in the city became the image of New
York City. As scholar Alex Vitale explains: “everyday [people saw] . . . the growth of disorder. Dirt, vandalism, visible homelessness, panhandling, prostitution, and graffiti were all daily indignities to be managed by city residents.” Magazine and newspaper headlines reflected this frustration with the quality of life for residents, and the threat of becoming a victim of living in New York City. A distrust of police by minority residents arose in several neighborhoods in Harlem, the Bronx and Brooklyn as well as the Lower East Side of Manhattan as youth gangs and criminal organizations terrorized and exploited residents. Police were also at odds with a city that could not afford to pay them. Major strikes by police, sanitation and teachers unions paralyzed the city at key junctures during the late 1960’s, throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. As a result some citizens took matters into their own hands. Curtis Sliwa started the Guardian Angels in 1979, recruiting young men to patrol the subway system in order to prevent muggings, drug dealing and other criminal activity.

The reports of crime in New York City - particularly street crime in commercial centers like Times Square, city parks and subways - became synonymous with the identity of New York. On the eve of December 22, 1984, Bernard Goetz shot 4 teenagers he reported were threatening to rob him on the subway, critically wounding one. As the story unfolded, more than a few New Yorkers voiced their opinions that Goetz should be awarded a medal, and that he was a hero rather than villain. The sentiment that criminals intimidate subway passengers was widespread and Goetz’s violent response echoed that

---

sentiment. One year after the Goetz shooting, Marvel comics released a 5 issue mini series featuring one of its guest characters, The Punisher.

This thesis aims to illuminate how the creation and/or reinterpretation of both Daredevil and the Punisher in the Marvel universe reflected the zeitgeist of crime fighting heroism in New York at the time they were written. The popularity of these titles reflected an emerging trend in comics where heroes did not just fight fantastic aliens from space or unbelievable villains with immense superpowers, but they fought the everyday scourges of drug use, physical intimidation, exploitation and life threatening situations that made daily headlines. As precursors to such famous anti hero comic book series such as DC’s *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, Daredevil and the Punisher were created by writers who, in the Marvel tradition, based their stories off of their own lived environment, New York City. As characters, Daredevil and the Punisher also reflect the pathos of those living in such conditions wherein justice is not so absolute. Although there may be an attempt to rid the city of crime in the abstract, they become caught up in the philosophical conundrums associated with taking the law into their own hands.
Crumbling Foundations: New York In Turmoil

The mid to late 1960’s represented a marked shift in the culture, economics and social makeup of New York City. Deindustrialization, white flight and financial mismanagement were factors that contributed to New York’s decline. After World War II the national economy grew to the extent that returning soldiers could afford their own homes and education was funded by the GI bill – for some. Real estate practices and racialized residential zoning or “red lining” allowed for the upward mobility of white ethnics yet prohibited the same mobility for Black or Latino people looking for homes in similar neighborhoods. People from the city who could, were taking advantage of this prosperous time and moving out of their New York City residences to the suburbs of Long Island and New Jersey. As historian Joshua Freeman states,

> From 1950 to 1990 major cities saw a precipitous decline in population, in New York, the population dropped less than ten percent but it was dramatically transformed. An estimated 2 million lower income Puerto Ricans and black migrants from the south replaced an equal number of middle class whites, who left for the suburbs.³

This dramatic shift in the population caused rifts in white ethnic communities and social tensions overall.

The ethos of liberalism and cosmopolitanism that permeated the city in terms of politics and culture post-WWII withered as social tensions simmered. As middle-class, white ethnics (Irish, Italian, Eastern European and Jewish) moved to the suburbs, Puerto

Rican and African American migrants from the south replaced them at work and in their former residences. But job opportunities were drying up. Due to deindustrialization New York City lost 300,000 manufacturing jobs and over 600,000 jobs as a whole. A number of those jobs were municipal jobs including police officers. In 1975 the nation’s financial capital came within inches of declaring bankruptcy. In the next five years, as cuts continued, the police force would shrink by 34%, while serious crime increased by 40%. Two state-created agencies – the emergency Financial Control board and the municipal Assistance Corporation took over operation of the city’s budgets, union contracts, and finances. The price that the city paid was not only the loss of control of the city’s books to independent agencies, but also deep cuts in social programs, parks and libraries.4 By the mid 1970s New York’s subway system was falling apart both structurally as well as socially. Crime was rampant and graffiti scarred nearly every inch of subway cars. Years of delayed maintenance left crumbling infrastructure and obsolete technology. A subway derailment or collision occurred every 15 days.5

In 1977 Ed Koch was elected mayor, as a “liberal with sanity” gaining the political support of white ethnics who still resided in the city. Koch was critical of the old social welfare system. In order, to bring back the city from the desperate financial straights of the Beame years he limited government spending. By 1981 Koch had balanced NYC’s budget, which allowed for the city to now take part in the growth the national economy was experiencing.

5 Ibid.
During the 1960s the city’s crime rate increased steadily, not leveling out until the mid seventies. In December of 1980, the New York Times reported a crime index that was 60% above the rest of the country. New York, with the nation’s leading percentage of robberies, claimed the dubious honor of having the highest rate of street crime of any
American city. From 1985 to 1990, murders increased by over 60 percent from 1384 to 2245, an all time high. Several notable events affected how New Yorkers as a public body viewed crime that influenced their daily lives as well as popular culture that represented New York as ‘Fear City’. One incident that helped shape public perception of crime in NYC was the 1977 blackout where New York City and Westchester County suffered a major power failure. In contrast to a 1965 blackout that was relatively peaceful, the 1977 blackout featured major property damage and numerous cases of looting. As a New York Times article states:

Looting appeared to be the worst public safety problem. The police later came back in force and arrested numerous bottle throwers. Some of those taken into custody were still carrying television and hi-fi sets and stolen clothing when they were taken into the station houses. The police said that as of 1 a.m. there had been 309 arrests throughout the city, nearly all for looting.

The looting that occurred was not by any means an aberration brought on by a power outage and opportunistic residents. The sociological factors that compounded pressure on neighborhoods most affected by looting were significant. New York was in dire financial straits on the verge of filing for bankruptcy. High unemployment, crime, and a general sense of hopelessness permeated the lives of those who were living in inner

---

cities that were the epicenter of what analysts were calling an urban crisis. The chaos and violence that culminated on that hot July night represented an era in which New York was embroiled in financial and social turmoil.

In the 1970s another phenomenon gripped New York City and boosted its image as a fearsome place to live - the rise of youth gangs. New York City has quite possibly the longest history of gangs in the United States going back to before the Civil War with gangs that populated the notorious Five Points neighborhood, including the Bowery Boys, and the Dead Rabbits who were involved in local politics as well and the precursor to more organized Italian and Irish criminal organizations. But youth gangs in the late 1960s and 1970s - who were immortalized in the musical West Side Story in 1957 – became a visible threat and indication of a society spun out of control. The main difference between gangs of a previous generation and gangs of the 1970s was access to firepower and ability to inflict damage on targets or enemies. The youth gangs made up of teenagers fought with names such as the Saints or the Bishops and later the Savage Skulls, the Ghetto Brothers and the Black Spades. While they fought with each other in their neighborhoods, they also terrorized passengers on the subways and on the streets. Their looks were intimidating and they would often attack or ‘wolfpack’ a victim in order to rob or assault them.

The idea of the New York street gang was rendered in the 1979 movie The Warriors, about a gang from Coney island who, after being accused of murdering a rival gang’s leader at a meeting ion the Bronx had to ‘bop’ – 70s slang for fight – their way back to Coney Island.  

---

10 Fig. 6 Walter Hill dir. The Warriors. Paramount Pictures, 1979, Film.
colorful gangs, reflecting the look and swagger—tough image—of the 70s youth gang. In a New York Magazine article, “Are You Ready For The New Ultra-Violence”, the author Gene Weingarten writes:

Without much notice, it seems, street gangs have again become a problem in New York, this time on a scale and with a potential for violence that may be unprecedented—the near certainty of gunplay and a high probability of mindless, trivially motivated homicide. Chains, knives, fists, and, of course, those crude and unreliable homemade affairs called zip guns were the staples in the more vicious gang wars in the 1940s and 1950s. At first, these new gangs—or "cliques" as they prefer to be called—showed little interest in violence just for the hell of it. When they began, much of their anger was tightly focused on the dope traffic in their midst. Independent of one another, many gangs began a reign of terror against pushers. The city has never before seen so much factory-made firepower in so many youthful, organized hands. 11

Fig.5

“Are You Ready For The New Ultra-Violence?”
New York.12, June 1972

Fig.6

Walter Hill dir. The Warriors.
Paramount Pictures, 1979

For many, street gangs were a visible manifestation of crime gone awry in the city. Another visible marker of said crime was graffiti, especially on the subway. While graffiti developed in the 1970s and 80s into an internationally recognized art form via films and media documenting the NYC born youth movement of music and art now known as Hip Hop. For many subway riders, the bold, scrawled and spray painted names of graffiti writers on the insides and outsides of trains was an indication of lawlessness and disorder. Along with minimal surveillance and lack of station and train clean up due to funding cuts, the trains themselves broke down frequently.

Mass transit became a powerful symbol of New York’s rise in crime. New York City’s iconic subway system served as a means of uniting the city’s boroughs and allowing for the cosmopolitanism that has made New York into a “global city”. Yet in the 1970s and 80s the subway took on a sinister public perception as it symbolized acts of interpersonal aggression throughout the city. As Daredevil artist and writer Frank Miller explains, “I never stopped loving the city, but having a knife in your face can really change your day…I like to play into very daily fears…Why else do stories on subways?”

The emergence of graffiti as a popular art form / pastime / form of vandalism largely created by New York City’s teenagers added to the perception that the city had lost control of the subway system. While created by youth of various racial backgrounds, graffiti largely became associated with Black and Latino youth as did criminal activity. As scholar Michael Brooks states:

---

12 Frank Miller, Interview, Amazing Heroes #69, (New York: Amazing Heroes 1985.) 4
It was almost inevitable that middle class (read white) New Yorker would interpret the outburst in graffiti in terms of a power struggle between them and us. ‘Them’ was a young male, probably Puerto Rican or Black. ‘Us’ was the average, productive, law-abiding (again read white) citizen. The person who ought to be served and protected by the city authorities…The subway, which had once been a cause of the city’s growth, had now become a preeminent symbol of urban collapse. 

In Dec. of 1984, four Black teenagers were shot on the subway by a lone gunman. As details emerged about the shooting, the victims and the shooter, the city’s racial divide and frustration with crime rose to the surface. The story of Bernhard Goetz - a thin White man - and the young men he shot, including the critically injured Darrell Cabey, became the premiere New York vigilante story. Goetz claims that he shot the four youths in self-defense after being threatened and intimidated. The Youths countered that they had indeed asked Goetz for money but did not attempt to mug him. Goetz originally fled the scene but eventually turned himself in. Newspapers and tabloids reported the shocking story to intense public response.

*New York Post’s* December 24th, 1984 headline “Death Wish Shooter” compared Goetz to *Death Wish* \(^{14}\) protagonist Paul Kersey \(^{15}\). This headline immediately associates Goetz’s shooting with the vengeance meted out by Charles Bronson’s character in *Death Wish*. Goetz becomes an unlikely hero or rather anti-hero as the shooting is re-active and not proactive – self defense - wherein the measure of defense is questionable. While New Yorkers were divided about the shooting, the trial of Goetz is even more indicative

\(^{13}\) Michael Brooks. “Stories and Verdicts: Bernhard Goetz and New York In Crisis”. *College Literature*. (West Chester University. 1998) 81

\(^{14}\) Michael Winner, *Death Wish*, Paramount Pictures, 1974, Film.

of the support for Goetz that a segment of the public shared. As a *New York Times* article reported:

The calls came into a hot line that the police had set up for information that might lead them to the neatly dressed man in wire-rim glasses who disappeared into a dark subway tunnel in lower Manhattan after the shooting. Hundreds of the callers praised him. Some volunteered to help pay for the gunman's defense if he was arrested, and a few suggested that he should run for mayor. At a City Hall news conference yesterday, Mayor Koch condemned the shooting and declared that "vigilantism will not be tolerated in this city. We will not permit people to take the law into their own hands," the Mayor said. "You are not going to have instant justice meted out by anybody, because that is not justice."16

The law aside, however, social scientists and community groups saw the support for the gunman as a sign that some New Yorkers had nearly given up hope that ordinary measures could ever make the city's subways and streets safe. "There is a lot of frustration with crime, and people view this with a sense of fair play, as a way of getting back," said David Abrahamsen, a New York psychiatrist and author of "The Mind of the Accused." "The reaction could be something of a warning."17

---


A significant number of members on the jury for Goetz’s criminal trial had either experienced first hand being mugged or faced daily the possibility of being mugged. “Clearly the jury members shared Goetz’s concerns, and after extended scrutiny they didn’t find his actions beyond the limits of reasonableness” explains Michael Brooks.\(^{18}\) It was in this context that the comic book reading public begins to look at characters that counteract social pathology with a pathological response.

The Rise of Comic Book Companies

When Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster introduced Superman in *Action Comics # 1*, the company that would become DC Comics was at the forefront of a revolution. The Superhero had been born. In his red and blue tights reminiscent of carnival wrestlers, Superman became the morally centered hero with extraordinary powers who fought for “truth, justice and the American way”. Superman’s alter ego was “mild mannered Clark Kent” who was a reporter for the Daily Planet with a crush on his co-worker Lois Lane. When the city of Metropolis was in peril, Clark became the dashing Superman, saving the day.

DC Comics’ successor to Superman was another “long underwear hero” and the contrast to the god-like Superman. The Batman, who was introduced by artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger, was an amalgamation of characters riffing off Douglas Fairbank’s 1920s role of Zorro and the 1934 pulp character the Bat. The Batman, who had no super powers, did have a tragic backstory that was his reason d’etre for protecting Gotham city. As a child, Bruce Wayne was out with his family when criminals robbed and murdered his parents in front of him. Left emotionally scarred, but materially wealthy, Wayne trained physically and mentally to become a skilled detective and crime fighter as the Batman.  

Superman and Batman, the forerunners of the superhero genre in comic books laid the foundation for a new pop mythology. Their exploits read like mirror images of

---

19 Fig.7 *Action Comics #1 DC Comics, 1939.*  
20 Fig.8 Batman as featured in *Detective Comics #31, 1939.*
each other. Superman was of the future, from a distant planet imbued with powers beyond that of mortal man. He could fly, deflect bullets, toss cars without a second thought. His stories were fantastic, modernist tropes that looked ahead as he stood, hands on hips doing the same, gazing out on the city of Metropolis. Batman on the other hand, took his cues from the pulp novels and detective stories that were popular at the time. Fighting gangsters, haunting the gritty streets of Gotham after dark, Batman played Hades - Lord of the underworld to Superman’s Zeus – God of Olympus. While Batman was a wealthy pillar of the community, he was also a vigilante and thus not directly connected with the police. While Superman was ostensibly a good guy, bright and shiny for everyone to see, the Batman worked in the shadows and could be mistaken for a “bad guy” from the sheer intimidation of his macabre costume.

Action Comics #1
DC Comics, June 1938

Detective Comics #31
DC Comics, September, 1939
While Superman and Batman maintained the lion’s share of the comic book market with DC introducing new and successful characters such as the Flash, Green Lantern and Wonder Woman, another comic book company started making waves. In 1940, Marvel Comics, formerly Timely Comics, introduced the world to Captain America, a super soldier whose patriotic costume and adventures made him a popular World War II-era character. Captain America’s popularity was largely derived from the dynamic artwork of Jack Kirby and writing of Joe Simon. The covers and pages of *Captain America*, were particularly concerned with wiping out America’s real life enemies - the Axis powers - and their caricatures along with imaginary fascist threats like the super villain Red Skull. The cathartic battle sequences of Captain America beating Hitler played well with American audiences. “Unlike Batman or Superman, Captain America had permission to kill,” notes comic book author and historian Grant Morrison. Captain America was wildly popular with readers back home and soldiers abroad fighting in the trenches.

---

21 Fig.9 *Captain America #1*, Marvel Comics, 1941.
When World War II ended in 1945, the popularity of superhero comics waned as well. The real life threat of Hitler and the Axis powers had dissipated and the heroics of a comic book fantasy were no longer needed or simply failed in comparison to the sacrifices of real soldiers. While Batman and Superman continued to sell at a steady rate, sales for Captain America dropped off and by 1950 the title was cancelled.\textsuperscript{23} Another blow to superhero comics came in the form of Dr. Frederic Wertham’s 1954 book \textit{Seduction of the Innocent} that criticized “crime comics” (which grouped hard boiled detective stories with horror and superhero tales as well) depictions of sex, violence, and drug use. Wertham insisted that comics created this same behavior in children, which he blamed for the rise in incidents of juvenile delinquency. In this era of McCarthyism and social paranoia about the corruption of morals, Wertham’s \textit{Seduction} added superhero comic books to the list of low culture to be avoided by respectable folks.

The Comics Code Authority was thus born out of Wertham’s proclamation of youth corruption by comics.²⁴ Comics company publishers were now subject to the Comics Code, shackling creators with restrictions that hampered their story lines. Because of Wertham’s *Seduction*, over a dozen comic book publishers went out of business. The narrow confines of the Comics Code forced the reduction in titles produced by the comics industry. “According to the new Comics Code, covers could not include the words *horror* and *terror*; under no circumstances were zombies, vampires, ghouls, or werewolves permitted to appear anywhere in the comics….there could be no sympathy created for criminals and no disrespect for the sanctity of marriage.”²⁵ Comic books – rightly or wrongly – had served as the target for producing immorality according to Wertham.

---

²⁴ Fig.12 An example used by Wertham was this issue of EC Comics’ *Crime Suspense Stories #22, 1954*

The Comics Code hit comic book companies hard and Timely comics was no exception. Timely folded, became Atlas Comics for a period and then eventually Marvel comics was born. Marvel comics revived *Captain America* and published romance comics, westerns, monster titles, and a slew of sci-fi and plot twisting stories with titles like “Journey into Mystery,” “Strange Tales,” and “Tales To Astonish.” Stanley Lieber, who later changed his name to Stan Lee recruited artist Jack Kirby who contributed on past Marvel titles to work on a new title – *The Fantastic Four*.

*The Fantastic Four*, introduced in 1961 featured a family who fought evil and amongst themselves. Their squabbles and flawed personalities made them human while their powers made them extraordinary. Released at the height the Cold War and in the

---

26 Fig. 13 *The Fantastic Four #1*, Marvel Comics, 1961
aftermath of the McCarthy era, the Fantastic Four represented America in so many ways as people as well as superheroes. As four scientists on an outer space expedition, Reed Richards, Sue Storm, Ben Grimm and Johnny Storm were exposed to radiation and given superpowers. Reed Richards became Mister Fantastic whose body was capable of stretching and contorting with supernatural elasticity. Sue Storm as the Invisible Woman had the power to create invisible force fields for protection and become invisible herself, while her younger brother Johnny would burst into fire, control and manipulate flames as well as fly around with a fiery tail. Ben Grimm became the Thing, a squat, human rock formation with super strength.

While the Fantastic Four gained super powers that made them “fantastic” it was their familial interactions that made them interesting. The Fantastic Four wore no masks nor were their identities protected like those of Superman, Batman or other DC characters. The FF lived and worked in the Baxter building, located in midtown Manhattan. Although they were not all blood relations, they represented a McCarthy-era nuclear family. Reed and Sue became parental figures, while Johnny acted out as a “hot headed” young brother, and Ben was infantilized as the Thing becoming the group’s reactionary id.

The Fantastic Four represented a change in the way that comics were written and perceived. Readers of Batman and Superman could identify and marvel at the heroics, but the group dynamics of the Fantastic Four made them human and interesting as well as heroic. Marvel characters that followed had a relatability about their character that, in conjunction with their heroics, made them appealing to reader’s vulnerabilities as well as their hopes. Along with artist Steve Ditko, Stan Lee co-created The Amazing Spiderman,
another defining title in the Marvel pantheon. Why did Spider Man and his alter ego Peter Parker become Marvel’s next hit? Teenagers read comic books and before Spiderman, superheroes had largely been adult men. By casting an admittedly nerdy teenaged outcast who lived with his Aunt and Uncle in Queens, NY, Lee and Ditko were able to draw upon an audience sympathetic to the hero’s plight. Spiderman became a powerful crime fighter who swung between New York skyscrapers with web shooters created by Parker’s gifted mind. Teenagers could empathize with Parker’s social plight and the vicarious thrill of becoming a costumed hero.

Fig.13

Fantastic Four #1
Marvel Comics, November 1961

Amazing Fantasy #1
Marvel Comics, August 1962

What separated Marvel and DC comics was not so much the originality or creativity of their characters but their approach to storytelling and how superheroes were portrayed relative to their audience. DC superheroes were mythologized, put onto a

27 Fig.14 Spiderman’s first appearance in Amazing Fantasy #15, Marvel Comics, 1962
pedestal, battled fantastic villains in imaginary landscapes, much like the gods of Mount Olympus. Marvel characters were reported on in newspaper headlines that mirrored New York tabloids. They held New York addresses—Spiderman was from Forrest Hill Queens, the Fantastic Four’s Headquarters were located prominently in mid-town and Daredevil hailed from Hell’s Kitchen. Marvel Superhero battles were often within and above the already complex urban landscape of buildings and built environment in downtown Manhattan. Kids who grew up in New York City identified with Marvel characters. DMC, an MC with pioneering New York Hip Hop group Run DMC recalls his youth reading Marvel titles: “I was strictly a Marvel Comics head; Avengers, Iron Man, Captain America, The Hulk, Iron Fist, you name it. I loved Marvel because it was the city; it was all New York. The same backdrop I was living in this universe was in the Marvel universe”. The Marvel universe and the real world were threaded into each other in such a way where contemporary social issues could be explored with the metaphor of the superhero living amongst the general populace. Marvel’s early heroes were based in the hometown of their creators, which also happened to be in large part, a cultural touchstone for the rest of America.

28 Jason Newman, Interview. Fuse.TV.com Jan, 2014
A History Of American Vigilantism

In the 1970s and 80s, law enforcement in New York City was overwhelmed and underpaid. Racial tensions were high and many ethnic groups did not believe that they were receiving justice comparable to other groups. In areas where there was a large transitory population like midtown and Times Square, individual assaults were a threat as well. While movies showcased such figures as Paul Kersey in the 1974 film *Death Wish* and Travis Bickle in the 1976 film *Taxi Driver*, there were actually very few noted vigilante individuals in New York City aside from Bernhard Goetz. A common vigilante profile or action is one who tries to assert control where he/she believe there is none, and so they act outside of the established authority or law. Many may support this endeavor because they too feel powerless, or support the vigilante’s aims over the law. In American history vigilante groups have notably gone outside the law to enforce social codes, but the origins of American vigilantism began in an era of frontier expansion where those trekking west had no formal law or response to crime.

Voluntary *Vigilance committees* in the Old West comprised of the community’s men banded together to protect their families and communities against real or imagined threats but also to protect against dangers to their property, power and privileges. These committees were often short lived and were comprised of rigid chains of command, written by laws and para-military rituals. While their leadership was composed of the elite of frontier society, their members were made up of a middle strata. These Vigilance
Committees singled out and attacked those from marginal and lower classes. “Vigilantes blacklisted, harassed, banished, flogged, tarred and feathered, tortured, mutilated, and killed their victims”.29 The vigilante groups would enforce their law and order to sustain their property, lifestyle and values (as well as social hierarchy) against any threat.

Lacking a formalized police force, court system or corrections programs, justice was meted out as the heads of these societies saw fit. Vigilantes in this sense believed they are preserving moral codes, traditions and the status quo of established society. Lynchings carried out by mobs to enforce retributive justice in the late 19th and early 20th century were high in number. “Between 1882 and 1951, angry crowds lynched about 4,730 victims. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the number of people killed by lynch mobs exceeded the number of court-ordered executions.”30 Mob violence and lynching in the South as well as the North revealed ugly racial tensions as white supremacists formed groups such as the Ku Klux Klan or acted out as a mob to terrorize black residents from voting, gaining employment or settling down and living in their immediate or surrounding communities.

In cities as in frontier communities, Vigilante groups were proactive instead of reactive when carrying out their terrorism on any particular target. A different model emerged in New York City in the mid to late 1970s and carried over into the 1980s. Violence committed against individuals in subways and busy thoroughfares such as Times Square were often random and anonymous. Victims were often intimidated,

30 Ibid
assaulted and robbed. Soon a group was formed by a New York resident to combat this street violence.

In 1979, Curtis Sliwa formed the Guardian Angels in NYC. Sliwa created the group because of widespread muggings and assaults on the New York Subway system. “Known by their signature red berets, the Angels’ persona stood for justice and the empowerment of individuals. Today, The Guardian Angels have expanded into 14 countries and over 140 cities.”31 Members from all five boroughs joined Sliwa in patrolling subway stations – primarily in Manhattan – and Times Square, making citizens

arrests. The Guardian Angels made their presence felt, often intimidating drug dealers to leave their post.\footnote{Marino, 2003} The Guardian Angels were at first rejected by then Mayor Ed Koch but Koch later recanted his objection.

Sliwa’s Guardian Angels was the most widely-known NY vigilante group of the 1970s. As crime, and national coverage of crime in New York, increased, so did recognition of Sliwa’s group. The Guardian Angels’ appearance echoed other para-military and community organizations such as the Black Panthers and the Young Lords, and yet their mission was not relegated to a specific community, but to the heart of the commercial thoroughfare and high crime area, Times Square. In a sense the Guardian Angels’ no-nonsense appearance gave them a mythical quality. They were ‘do-gooders’ but cool and street wise. The general republic responded ambivalently to this harsh image.

From pulp novels to comic books, streetwise detectives often reflected this stolid, urban pose. Authors such as Dashiell Hammett, Caroll John Daly and Raymond Chandler popularized a form of fiction known as \textit{Hard Boiled} whose detective characters such as Sam Spade, Terry Mack, and Phillip Marlowe confronted criminals with little pretense and often violently.\footnote{Barkham, 2016} Their attitude in dealing with criminals was known as \textit{hard boiled} or tough. These detectives became the prototype for street level superheroes and costumed vigilantes in comic books.

\begin{flushright}
\footnote{Marino, 2003} Bruce Davidson; Photo; Guardian Angels aboard the NYC subway, late 70s, \footnote{Barkham, 2016} Max Allan Collins, ed. William L. DeAndrea, ”The Hard Boiled Detective” \textit{Encyclopedia Mysteriosa}. Macmillan. 1994
\end{flushright}
One of the most iconic costumed vigilantes to arise from the comic book universe is, of course Batman. Batman who first appeared in the pages of Detective Comics and then in his own series rivaled Superman in myth and persona. Batman was from Earth, a man with no powers who was rendered powerless as a child when his parents were murdered in the back streets of Gotham City before his eyes. By day Bruce Wayne was a reclusive millionaire – having inherited his wealth from his slain parents – and by night he fought crime, apprehending criminals using expensive and innovative gadgets and intense physical training. On his chest, Batman wore the emblem of the bat – a creature of the night. That symbol informed the design of his costume in other ways – ears of the bat formed the shape of his mask and the pointed cape resembled the shape of the bats wings. The villains who surrounded Batman were colorful, costumed and lacked

---

34 Fig.16-17, *Detective Comics* #27 1939; *Batman* #230, DC Comics 1971
superpowers. Ordinary criminals bent on causing mayhem for profit or power, the Joker, Penguin, the Riddler, Catwoman, Two Face, and Scarecrow terrorized Gotham.

In secret Batman met with the police commissioner, but their relationship was never made public. Batman was acting outside the law as a vigilante. The crux of the Batman storyline was that his night identity remained separate and hidden from who he was in society – Bruce Wayne. In some ways Batman became a link between serialized pulp detective novels that were popular in the 1930s and 40s and the superhero comics that came after. Batman represented a mix of the fantastic – Bruce Wayne’s unlimited resources to outfit his vigilante ventures – and the gritty pathology of the hard boiled detective who stalked the streets at night looking for justice. However it could be argued that the justice Batman sought was of a personal nature. Every criminal apprehended was his parents’ killer, every crime prevented was the wish that he could have prevented the original crime that inspired him to become the Batman.

Batman’s Gotham is the antithesis of Superman’s Metropolis. Metropolis is a city of the future, a world of shiny facades and forward looking potential while Gotham is the city of the past, crumbling brick alleyways, shady characters shuffling between shadows cast by buildings built in bygone era. Batman’s writer and editor Dennis O’Neil explains, “Batman’s Gotham City is Manhattan below Fourteenth Street at eleven minutes past midnight on the coldest night in November.”35 In this way Batman is a vigilante who is trying to save the past while Superman is trying to prevent the future from being destroyed.

---

Batman was a product of the late 1930s and early 1940s. The creation of his character was worlds away from the troubled antiheroes who either debuted in the 1980s or were characters who were written with contemporary themes in mind. In the Marvel world, vigilantes hailed largely from New York City and, depending on the era in which they were written, reflected the society around them. Daredevil was created in 1964, but the Daredevil of the 1980s inhabited a world and neighborhood far different from the one his character’s previous writers created for him. The Punisher, who first appeared in 1974 reflected a returning soldier’s narrative that mirrored other fictional tropes of the era, specifically Martin Scorcese’s 1976 antihero from the movie *Taxi Driver* - Travis Bickle.

While the Punisher makes cameo appearances, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, his popularity increases and the topics of the stories of which he is a part reflect contemporary social issues of the era. Both Daredevil and the Punisher’s individual response to crime and injustice outside of the law reflect the times in which they were written. As scholar Mike Dubose states: “It was the popular culture of the era that pointed out how Reaganism emphasized a system of law and order based on politics as opposed to a system of justice based on morality. As such vigilantism, politics, and morals are all key factors which define how heroism operated in the 1980s” ³⁶

The Post Vietnam Era

In the early 1970s, comic books took steps to reflect social realities. In May of 1971, Marvel published a three-issue run of Spiderman dealing with Peter Parker’s friend Norman Osborne and his drug use. Disregarding the Comics Code was groundbreaking in the comics world. Those issues did not adhere to or feature the comics code on the cover, but were popular among readers nonetheless. Two weeks later, DC comics published a two-part story in Green Lantern/Green Arrow issues 85 & 86 dealing with Green Arrow’s sidekick Speedy who was addicted to heroin. When asked about breaking from the comics code, Stan Lee replied:

The Code mentioned that you mustn't mention drugs and, according to their rules, they were right. So I didn't even get mad at them then. I said, 'Screw it' and just took the Code seal off for those three issues. Then we went back to the Code again. I never thought about the Code when I was writing a story, because basically I never wanted to do anything that was to my mind too violent or too sexy. I was aware that young people were reading these books, and had there not been a Code, I don't think that I would have done the stories any differently.

Lee’s was successful in making the decision to not use the code in order to print what he felt was an appropriate and socially relevant story. This success was reflected in sales and DC’s follow up printing of Green Lantern/Green Arrow. Lee’s decision also allowed for more socially relevant stories to be printed. It also allowed for comic book authors and illustrators to experiment with different stories and not be so hampered by an outdated code.

Marvel was also at the forefront of creating characters that were more inclusive, specifically casting African American characters where in comics land there previously had been none. The Black Panther (Fantastic Four #52 in 1966) was the first Black (African) character to appear in comic books. The first African American to appear was the Falcon (Captain America #134, 1971) who was Captain America’s partner. In 1972, Luke Cage became the first African American superhero with his own series, “Luke Cage: Hero for Hire”. Luke Cage represented a new and different aspect of storytelling for Marvel characters. He was a “hero for hire” meaning that his heroism came at a price. This innovation reflected the simple, reality that he had to pay his rent. Unlike the Fantastic Four or the Avengers, Luke Cage came from the ghetto and did not have unlimited resources. His headquarters was a small apartment above a Times Square movie theatre. The image and representation of the hero was changing for Marvel heroes, and the street-level hero became a popular character in the Marvel universe.

In the early 1970s America was at the tail end of the Vietnam War. Images of the American soldier had changed dramatically since World War II and the Korean War. Returning soldiers from Vietnam had fought in a war that was being questioned by a public critical of America’s involvement. Left with a lack of purpose and questioning their own duties, some soldiers felt haunted by their experience. Some were left in a permanent state of combat-fighting “shell shock” or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (yet to be defined by the American Medical Association) after witnessing new and brutal forms of warfare. After fighting for their country, many soldiers came back to the same country, psychologically affected and with little support or employment opportunities.
Films like Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* in 1976 and Michael Cimino’s *Deerhunter* in 1978 chronicled the lives of soldiers returning from Vietnam. Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* became an iconic New York film. Along with documenting the descent into delusion of main character Travis Bickle as played by Robert DeNiro, it also showcased Times’ Square in the midst of its disreputable phase of open prostitution, proliferation of drug use and sales and sense of inevitable danger. Bickle plays a Vietnam vet who gets a job as a NYC taxi driver. The taxi serves as the audience’s wide angle lens to New York in 1976 with Bickle’s delusional sense of purpose as its narration. Bickle sees himself as a savior assigned to solve New York’s insurmountable social problems, promising? forecasting? “a real rain who will come and wash all the scum off the streets”. Aside from his failed attempts at relationships and generally fitting in with society, Bickle’s sense of moral duty pushes him to become a hero in his own mind and eradicate what he sees as a threat to innocence. Shaving his head into a warrior’s Mohawk, arming himself in preparation for war, Bickle sets off on a fatal mission to kill a pimp who is hustling an underage girl who was one of Bickle’s fares. An outsider’s view of New York, and perhaps a feeling of helplessness motivate his futile mission. Racial tensions between individuals as well as camera pans that act as Bickle’s gaze reveal a distance between him and African Americans, who intimidated him. It also reveals a city that with this distance, is all the more tense and adds to the atmosphere and perception of danger.

The idea of the returning Vietnam vet, who fails to integrate into society or in his attempts to do so, is shown that the world is still a warzone, was embodied in the Marvel Comics’ character, “The Punisher”. The Punisher’s incarnation in 1974 first appeared in *Amazing Spiderman* #129 with the title’s hero in the Punisher’s rifle crosshairs. The
Punisher as a character was an entre’ for the Marvel Comics era of the anti-hero – a hero who exacts out a form of justice that, while it helps some, is not in line with legitimate authority and in some cases deliberately dismisses said authority as ineffectual. Stan Lee suggested calling the character the Punisher because with the Assassin “there’s just too much of a negative connotation to that word.” While The Punisher did go on to become one of the more, if not the most, lethal characters in the Marvel Universe, his compelling characteristic was that he fought on the side of justice yet outside of the law.

The Punisher sees crime as a non-nuanced aberration of civil order that needs to be brought to justice. If anybody gets in his way then they, friend or foe, will be “punished” as well. In the mid to late 1970’s popular films Death Wish and Taxi Driver echoed this sentiment. Death Wish starring Charles Bronson was released the same year that the Punisher made his first appearance. After attackers break into in his Manhattan apartment rape his wife and daughter, Bronson’s character, Paul Kersey, begins gunning down criminals as he makes his way through the city. Death Wish’s popularity with audiences perhaps reflected the rising crime rates in major American cities but particularly New York. Frank Castle, the marine whose family was murdered by the Mafia, became the Punisher after the law could not bring his family’s murderers to justice. The Punisher became a vigilante who not only punished criminals, but in some cases lethally terminated them for their crimes. As an archetype of the returning veteran of the 1970s, Frank Castle used his military training to bring definitive “bad guys” to justice while evading or fighting “good guys” such as Captain America, Spiderman and Daredevil. Castle’s transformation into the Punisher is similar to Bickle’s transformation

---

into the vigilante he becomes as the Taxi Driver. With knowledge of an impressive array of weaponry and military fighting tactics, the Punisher is an adversary to criminals as well as law enforcement.

Fig. 18

Martin Scorcese dir. Taxi Driver
1976 Paramount Pictures

The Punisher is a metaphorical inversion of one of Marvel’s other popular characters, Captain America. While Captain America serves and represents a national body, the American flag his costume’s defining feature, the Punisher ostensibly represents an abstract notion of absolute justice. The means he uses to fight crime comes directly from his military training. Sent over the edge, Frank Castle dons a black and white costume complete with a “death’s head” that covers his torso. The death’s head logo has a historical trajectory that ranges from being used by the Nazis to being appropriated by American biker gang, The Hell’s Angels as well as the American Marine

Fig. 18 Robert DeNiro as Travis Bickle in Martin Scorcese’s Taxi Driver, Columbia Pictures, 1976, Film.
Corps. Besides the intimidating costume, The Punisher has no powers and no mask. His only weapons are an immense arsenal of modified firearms, and a strict, obsessive adherence to the law. The Punisher was written as an antihero, consumed by vengeance who unleashes his – in his mind justified – wrath on criminals.

Captain America fought with a morality of a clear notion of right and wrong, with murder being wrong. The Punisher was moral as well. However, his morality is based on a two dimensional notion of Justice wherein you’re either innocent or guilty within the realm of established law and order but will be dealt with outside of the confines of that establishment, which makes him a vigilante. In *Captain America* #241, “Fear Grows In Brooklyn” Captain America thwarts the Punisher’s capture of a mob courier who is relaying information to two different crime groups. The Punisher, it seems, is going to kill the courier but Captain America steps in.

*Captain America*: Listen to me! I understand your cause – Maybe more than you know – But I can’t let you murder those men! They have rights- just as you do! No men can be denied those rights or else none of us have any rights!

*Punisher*: Once I believed that, too – Captain! But that was before everyone I ever cared about died at the hands of underworld hitmen! This is a war, and crime is the enemy! There’s only one way to fight it!

*Captain America*: Sure it’s a war – but if you fight on their terms, you’re no better than they are!  

---

40 Mike W. Barr, *Captain America* #241, Marvel Comics, Jan. 1979, Fig. 19-20
Their exchange explains their two positions, one of idealism and one of resigned duty; two soldiers from two different generations fighting two different wars, one who represents the national promise of the American dream and the other reacting to the dismal urban reality of crime and violence. Steve Rogers aka Captain America was created in the late 1930s as a soldier and imbued with his strength by the U.S. government and therefore sanctioned as an agent of the system. At that time Captain America was a symbol of American hope and optimism. Frank Castle was a soldier too, but did not receive support or justice from the government against the criminals who killed his family and thus became the Punisher, an outlaw enforcing the law. In a sense, the Punisher mirrors of the conservative response to crime, which in the 1980s is represented by President Reagan’s law enforcement policies.

While the Punisher had tense relationships and questionable partnerships with other superheroes and costumed vigilantes, a clear reason necessitated that he enter these relationships. In Daredevil’s “Child’s Play” run (issues 182-184) which featured the
Punisher, their mutual aim was to prevent the kidnapping and narcotics distribution in Hell’s Kitchen and throughout the city. Daredevil, while an antihero in his own right, still plays the moral center to the Punisher’s lethal version of justice. While the Daredevil still guards his identity of Matt Murdock, a lawyer by day, Frank Castle is always the Punisher. Most comic book characters have an alter ego, a civilian version if you will, but the Punisher does not. He is always “on”, always fighting his personal war and therefore not conflicted about having another identity that his vigilantism might affect. Daredevil’s story lines involve the personal complications of being a vigilante and a human being with relationships and goals. When the Punisher ‘fights’ Daredevil, he does so without conviction because he knows that Daredevil is fighting for the same justice, but will not use the same methods as he. On a rooftop where they have the kidnapper in custody, Daredevil tries to apprehend the Punisher:

*Daredevil:* You don’t scare me, Punisher. I’ve done my homework – and I know you’re missing me on purpose. You’ve killed dozens in your time. But you’ve never harmed an innocent. You won’t kill me.41

The Punisher is hyper-focused ideologically and will stop at nothing to reach his goals and so while he incapacitates the kidnappers he and Daredevil are going after, Daredevil still believes he needs to be imprisoned because of his methods.

From the late 1960s until the late 1970s, crime was a looming presence in New York, enhanced by an atmosphere of perceived fear. Graffiti, the remains of burned down buildings (the assumed result of arson), homeless men - a large number of whom were mentally unstable - pimps, prostitutes and drug dealers were the visible props of

41 Frank Miller, *Daredevil* #183, Marvel Comics, June, 1982
New York City’s neighborhoods including iconic Greenwich Village, Harlem and Times Square. The explosion of crack cocaine that scorched the city and aided the rise in crime in New York City during the 1980s brought with it access to unimaginable profits and violence into the inner city but also the city as a whole. The public outcry over crack yielded mandatory minimum sentencing laws by the mid-to-late 1980s. As a result, the prison population increased dramatically, and disproportionately included young African American and Latino men.

The economy of New York City shifted so dramatically that deindustrialization increased unemployment levels for a significant number of New York’s workers. Those who bore the brunt of this deindustrialization were inner city, minority residents. As Dunlap and Johnson state, “By all measures of economic change, inner-city minority residents were literally left behind. For inner-city minority youths and for many adults, virtually no legal jobs were available in their communities or among their networks of associates”\(^{42}\). Crack cocaine provided an economic solution to out-of-work youth but also a seductive profit motive that sidestepped traditional employment entirely. Because crack cocaine was so profitable and easy to produce, the organized, chain-of-command criminal organizations were broken down into smaller groups or “crews” and some actors, extremely young and ambitious, acted on their own, often arming themselves for interactions with their competition as well as their customer base.

The penalty for the possession of crack cocaine as opposed to powdered cocaine was disproportionately harsh, creating a cycle where young Black and Latino men were

---

incarcerated at higher rates than their white counterparts who were in possession of powdered cocaine. This disproportionate punitive measure did not rid the streets of crack or the violence that accompanied its use and sale. But it debilitated and criminalized the communities previously suffering from unemployment, underemployment and poverty. The public, political, and policy reaction en masse from President Ronald Reagan, to New York Mayor Ed Koch and New York governor Mario Cuomo was far from sympathetic to the causes of drug use and sales but rather emotionally responsive to the measures by which the symptoms were to be dealt with.

In June 1986, New York City mayor Ed Koch demanded the death penalty for any drug dealer convicted of possessing at least a kilogram (2.2 pounds) of either cocaine or heroin. Two months later, Mario Cuomo, governor of New York State, regarded as a more temperate politician than Koch (and opposed to the death penalty), called for a life sentence for anyone convicted of selling three vials of crack—at that time, a quantity of the drug which sold on the street for $50. In September, during the debates over a new federal drug bill, Claude Pepper, a Florida representative (now deceased) said cynically, "Right now, you could put an amendment through to hang, draw, and quarter" drug dealers. "That's what happens when you get an emotional issue like this," he added.43

The phenomenon of crack cocaine exacerbated the public’s consciousness of an already crime-ridden city. Tolerance and liberal-minded reforms were swept to the side for fear of losing control of the city. A few Marvel comics characters, including Daredevil and Spiderman tackled the issue of drug use and sales in the city. However it’s the Punisher whose recourse to vigilante justice leads him to enforce a mandatory

---

minimum sentence on offenders without any thought to what their rights might be. From his first appearance, the Punisher was an anti-hero whose ventures included actual ‘capital’ punishment of criminals rather than capture or rehabilitation.

While he had been featured in comic books for over a decade, it wasn’t until the mid 1980’s that the Punisher starred in his first mini series, a five-issue run entitled “Circle of Blood”⁴⁴. Released in January of 1986, the first issue was written by Steven Grant and illustrated by Mike Zeck and Mike Vosburg. The cover shows a wide-eyed

---

⁴⁴ Fig.19 *The Punisher, Circle of Blood, #1* Marvel Comics 1986
Punisher with his back against a brick wall. He is holding up a garbage can and firing two guns with ample visual fire power being released from the barrels. Incarcerated at Riker’s Island, The Punisher is aided in escape by a vigilante citizen group named the Trust who not only kills criminals but aims to brainwash other criminals into joining a Punishment Squad of retributive justice that would eliminate crime by killing other criminals. When the Punisher is released by the Trust, he creates a situation wherein gang members are at war and reasons that they will eventually kill themselves. When he realizes that innocent people are being murdered in the crossfire, he forces a truce between gang members and turns on the Trust in recognition of the futility and insanity of their mission. True to the Punisher’s paradoxical and contradictory nature he implicates the warden of Riker’s Island and members of the Trust for helping him escape prison as well as engaging in other illegal activities.

The idealistically absolutist nature of both the Punisher and the Trust’s goals to eliminate crime is accomplished by creating a zero sum game wherein criminals eliminate themselves. The Punisher then implicates the forces that helped him but not by surrendering himself, a parallel to the complicated views on vigilantism. Castle wants to rid the immediate symptoms of crime, criminals themselves and not necessarily the social conditions that aid in creating the motivation for crime in the first place. In this sense, The Punisher stands for “the law” which takes the person and the personal responsibility out of the response and punishment for crime.

The release of “Circle of Blood” came one year after Bernhard Goetz was arrested for shooting four young, black men in a subway car in December, 1984. While public support was not unanimous for Goetz’s actions, he did receive a fair amount of
praise or at the very least a weary acceptance from a portion of New Yorkers. While not seeking out lawbreakers like comic book vigilantes such as The Punisher, Goetz’s use of self-defense with firearms was seen as a vigilante act because its extremity played on other issues that factored into New Yorkers’ frustration with daily acts of perceived criminal intimidation.

As the national and local (NYC) political, social and economic stage shifted in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, Marvel characters followed suit. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Punisher appeared as a guest character in *Amazing Spiderman* and *Spectacular Spiderman* as well as in the pages of *Captain America* and *Daredevil*. The Punisher served as the antithesis of the law abiding and law enforcing aspects of his colleagues and adversaries. The stark costume and big guns of the Punisher stood up against the good-natured antics of Spiderman and the patriotic fervor of Captain America. The Punisher represented a new era of ideological absolutism that did not suffer criminals gladly.

Guardian of Hell’s Kitchen: Frank Miller and the Transformation of Daredevil
Marvel Comics’ character Daredevil as created by Stan Lee, Bill Everett and Jack Kirby in 1964, is born Matt Murdock and is abandoned by his mother and raised by his father, “Battlin’” Jack Murdock. Jack is a ‘washed-up’ boxer who is trying to make ends meet, and has to do so by throwing fights fixed by gangsters. Jack raises Matt with firm discipline, urging him to work hard and not fall behind in his studies by playing in the streets with his neighborhood friends. Matt, who was once a precocious and mischievous youngster who was quick to taunt his peers and get into schoolyard scrapes, has now become a loner and is taunted by cries of “Daredevil” by the neighborhood kids who see him playing alone on the rooftops of Manhattan. Because of pressure from his father, Matt dutifully studies while the neighborhood kids are playing. One day while walking in his neighborhood, Matt sees an old man about to be hit by a truck. Instinctively he jumps in front of the truck and shoves the old man to safety. Matt loses his sight but
because he comes in contact with radiation from the truck that hit him, his other senses become enhanced. Matt learns to use his enhanced senses to balance out his blindness both physically and mentally. Jack, feeling the social and financial pressure of raising a blind son, decides to take a morally questionable but lucrative fight. In one fateful fight arranged by the gangster ‘The Fixer’, Jack decides not to throw the fight, because his son, Matt will be there. When leaving the arena, Jack is accosted by The Fixer’s men and eventually killed. Matt decides to don a costume and confront the Fixer and his cronies and bring them to justice, using his expert fighting skills and his weapon/aid of choice - a cane.

In comparison to Marvel’s flagship characters, Spiderman, the Fantastic Four, the Avengers, the X-Men and Captain America, Daredevil had a difficult time rising above mediocrity. The development of Daredevil and his alter ego Matt Murdock had the potential for intriguing development but was stuck in the ‘potential’ stage for years. Conceptually, a blind lawyer who fights crime by day according to society’s rules and then steps out of those rules at night to fight the underworld that society can’t touch is the bedrock of superhero stories. Whether the villains are too powerful or simply, as in reality untouchable despite the law of the land. While these themes were explored to some extent, a hero is only as it good as his villains and Daredevil’s left a lot to be desired. Early foes of Daredevil: the Owl, Leapfrog, the Jester, Stiltman and ubiquitous New York gangster tropes provided for adventurous plotlines but did not offer the psychological tension of being a teenager and closeted superhero such as Spiderman or the family dynamics of the Fantastic Four. While the art and concept of Daredevil as a blind superhero were intriguing enough, the pathos of Matt Murdock as a man, besides
his noble dedication to justice, was lacking. All of that changed with the recruitment of artist and writer Frank Miller in the early 1980’s. Miller provided pathos and - living in New York City’s Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood – an experiential knowledge of Daredevil’s environs that allowed him to write plotlines that mirrored the daily drama of his gritty urban environment.

Miller’s Daredevil was well-placed in the dystopic New York of the popular imagination of the 1970s. Images of bombed-out buildings in the South Bronx left vacant while dogs roamed the streets, riots in Harlem and Brooklyn that left scorched buildings and landscapes, graffiti-covered subways, errant youth gangs sporting colors and large, loud radios branded “ghetto blasters” all created the perception that New York was an apocalyptic wasteland. Frank Miller was able to convey this sense of urban landscape. Miller, a Vermont native, moved to New York and ended up living in Hell’s Kitchen when he began drawing and eventually writing the Daredevil title.

Enthralled by the city, Miller “hung out in the lobbies of DC and Marvel, pestered editors…when he wasn’t scraping together rent money from ad agency jobs and carpentry work.”\textsuperscript{45} With brazen determination, he looked up Neal Adams in the phone book and called him. Miller impressed Adams with his persistence and Adams helped him get a job with Gold Key comics in 1978. After penciling various issues for D.C. and Marvel, Miller worked on Spiderman and was given Marvel’s floundering title Daredevil to work with. With Daredevil, Miller could display / showcase his signature noir style. “I had done a couple issues of Spectacular Spider-Man and I looked at Daredevil, [who]

was blind. All of a sudden I realized that I could do all my crime stories through this character,” Miller recalled. Miller transformed a mundane hero into a struggling character with genuine pathos surrounded by characters echoing the dark and gritty streets on which he lived.

When Miller took over the medicore title as penciller and writer, both the illustrations of Daredevil in New York, specifically Hell’s Kitchen and Times Square, became a more vivid affair as Miller’s renderings were able to capture the gritty landscape with clarity. After Miller began writing the character, Daredevil and Matt Murdock (his alter ego) became darker, Daredevil’s enemies more lethal that reflect Miller’s Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood and the crime and prostitution haven next door – Times Square.

Miller’s art evoked a noirish tone that echoed EC Comics 1950s thrillers, the very same books that were scrutinized by Fredrick Wertham for corrupting youth. In Daredevil, Miller was able to illustrate a modern noir of backstreets New York with characters who made up the environment: longshoremen hanging out at the local bar, young Black men in Times Square with large radios, down and out homeless people begging for money. This attention to detail in people as well as architecture gave the reader the sense they were in the real New York. As Miller states in an interview with Peter Sanderson:

New York has become accepted as being representative of urban life. But what New York is not is a series of buildings that are recognizable; New York is a state

of mind. It is more important for me to convince the reader that he is in New York than for me to draw New York.47

Times Square became the image that represented New York in social and moral decay in the late 70s and early 80s. One of the main entry points for New York City was by bus and Port Authority became an entry point for travelers and those seeking to partake in the vice offered by Port Authority’s nearby neighborhood of Times Square. The look and feel of entering New York became for residents and tourists alike an experience of real and perceived danger. What Travis Bickle describes as “scum” that needs to be washed away was largely the visibly present sex and pornography market, flashy and aggressive pimps, scantily clad prostitutes (male, female, and transgender), drug addled and homeless people, runaways and young toughs.

Fig. 23 Times Square Photo 1970s

47 Frank Miller and Klaus Janson, Daredevil Omnibus. New York: Marvel Comics. 2013
Times Square epitomized the bright lights and big-city legend of New York. However those bright lights of Broadway theatres and the nostalgic movie houses of the early twentieth century also went hand-in-hand with an environment of open sexuality, prostitution, drug use, homelessness and assaults. The history of Times Square that leads up to its eventual identification as the city’s central locale for vice is not so innocent and has always mixed sex and entertainment in some form or another. The “Great White Way” as Times Square was once called was host to middle class Burlesque shows and theatres boasting chorus lines of “pretty girls” most famously, Ziegfield’s follies. Prostitution was always present, yet its visibility fluctuated, depending on the era. “In Times Square’s foundling years sex was not merely a voracious pleasure experienced from an orchestra row seat, but a fully interactive amusement to a far greater degree even in the notorious era of the peep show in the 1960s and 1970s,” explains writer Anthony Bianco. It was the visibility of the peep shows and the sex trade in general that lent Times Square of the 1970s and 1980s its seedy reputation.

Brothels disguised as massage parlors were interspersed throughout Times Square providing carnal pleasure for theatergoers or passersby throughout its history. The visibility of the sex trade, its central location in Manhattan and its proximity to Port Authority bus station all combined to give Times Square its reputation of disreputability. Despite its bawdy history, it was in fact reforms in prostitution laws in the 1960s that

---

48 Fig.23 1970’s Grindhouse Theatre’s in Time’s Square
made Times Square an abject center for sex and the sex trade. In 1967 the state legislature decreased period of incarceration for prostitution by from “up to a year in jail to a maximum of 15 days and a $250 fine.” Because of these changes in the law, Times Square saw an influx of prostitutes from out of town as well as from other areas of the city. In 1969, the law changed once again to include a penalty of 90 days in jail, and throughout the mid 1970s efforts made by lawmakers to contain the sex trade by keeping it off the streets and behind closed doors in brothels. As a result a division between “streetwalkers” and “call girls” grew. The visible prostitution grew in New York City areas such as Long Island City in Queens, Boreum Hill in Brooklyn and Park Avenue South in Manhattan throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s because of drug addiction and desperate economic conditions that prostitutes were facing.50

Because of its illicit nature, the sex trade attracted other forms of street crime and the neighborhood projected a general appearance and feeling of destitution. “A tenacious underclass of idlers, drunks, drug addicts, prostitutes (both heterosexual and homosexual), assorted misfits, and grifters had taken root on 42nd Street’s teeming sidewalks and in its uniquely accommodating movie theatres, cafeterias, bars and arcades.”51 Enough Times Square businesses operated on a 24 hour basis to give rest and recreation to those who were involved in the underground economy, those who were passing through or those who lived in the area. Times Square was “at the center of empire, the very square of time.” or of timelessness.52 Times Square provided 24-hour theatres, all night automats that


52 Ibid.
did not require wait staff and of course a booming sex trade all of which was facilitated partly by the transportation hub of Port Authority. While other heroes like the Avengers and the Fantastic Four had posh quarters on the Upper West Side or in Midtown, a good amount of the action within their titles’ pages happened in Times Square. But Daredevil and the Punisher, along with Luke Cage (whose apartment was above a Grindhouse theatre) both lived and fought their foes in this area.

Along with Grindhouse patrons, Times Square played host to thrill seekers engaging in illicit affairs from purchasing or selling drugs and sex. What made this situation possible was the availability of these pleasures and the anonymity to do so as provided in large part by the Port Authority bus station. Port Authority opened in 1951, providing transport to and from Manhattan from its mainland neighbors. Pleasure seekers could come into the city, engage in whatever activity they chose and leave in a relatively short time, which led to a very transitory environment with very transitory characters, willing to exploit or in a position to be exploited. Youth Gangs like the Times Square Boys or the Savage Skulls from the city would gang up on and mug or ‘wolfpack’ defenseless victims. 1957’s Broadway hit West Side Story was largely based on an incident in 1954 where a task force of 60 cops descended on young people and over 1,500 arrests were made. West Side Story also chronicled the transition of another famous (and infamous) New York neighborhood – Hell’s Kitchen.

53 Ibid

The neighborhood and visual aesthetic of Hell’s Kitchen itself became a character in *Daredevil*, its physical elements creating a dramatic atmosphere. Miller’s artwork was “filled with elevated trains, water towers, glass skyscrapers, and dive bars, all shoved into
thin claustrophobic angles”. Miller was clearly impressed with the rooftop environment, giving Daredevil an iconic battleground on which to fight villains. “There are really that many water towers. It’s not a joke,” quipped Miller.

Matt Murdock’s original origin story places him and his father in a non descript Manhattan neighborhood the “lower west side” which in 1964 is a boundless neighborhood; an unspecific locale that generalizes a working class immigrant experience. Throughout Daredevil’s run into Miller’s tenure as author, Murdock’s law practice is in a neighborhood that infers “somewhere in Manhattan” possibly Hell’s Kitchen but never mentioned by name. Frank Miller gives Matt Murdock/Daredevil a specific residence and origin in Hell’s Kitchen. Daredevil’s world is Hell’s Kitchen, which would seem like an obvious storytelling tool correlating the character of Daredevil and Hell’s Kitchen. Miller ties together Murdock’s Irish ancestry, his gritty street sensibility as well as an obvious nod to the name Daredevil.

The neighborhood of Hell’s Kitchen has a storied past beginning with its very name. The origin of the colorful name of “Hell’s Kitchen” is shrouded in rumor and conflicting historical reports. More than likely the neighborhood from 34th Street to 59th Street between Eighth Avenue and the West Side Highway, was named after the Dutch Heinrich’s “Hell’s Kitchen Gang” who used to cavort and do battle with other gangs such


56 Fig.24 Actual Hell’s Kitchen Rooftop, Fig.25 Frank Miller’s Rooftop
as the Gophers, the Gorillas and the Parlor Mob. West 39th Street between 10th and 11th Avenues was known as “Battle Row” because of the constant fighting.\textsuperscript{58}

Hell’s Kitchen was primarily an Irish Catholic neighborhood with rugged working class roots. For Hell’s Kitchen residents, the church, the local pub or saloon, and political clubhouses were hubs of activity that anchored the community. “The area’s most prominent social institutions – the church, the political clubhouse and the neighborhood saloon – were more than just gathering places. They were fortresses of stability in the midst of what was largely a migrant community.”\textsuperscript{59} These institutions provided necessary services to the Irish population but in some cases were meeting places for other groups as well. The Sacred Heart Church built on West 51\textsuperscript{st} St. and 10\textsuperscript{th} Ave., was a staple for its Irish parishioners but also provided services in Spanish to incoming Puerto Rican residents.

By the docks along the Hudson River, longshoremen would vie for jobs daily. In order to secure these positions, their employers would demand a percentage of their wages up front. Thus the business of loan sharking became a neighborhood industry. While white flight was a prominent feature for other NYC neighborhoods, Hell’s kitchen was a different story as Italian and Irish immigrants were entrenched in their legitimate and illegitimate careers. While middle class Irish could move out to Queens, New Jersey or Long Island, their working class neighbors had to stay and make a go of it. And because Hell’s Kitchen was affordable newer ethnic groups began moving into the neighborhood. “After World War II, low rents drew new waves of immigrants to Hell’s Kitchen, including many new arrivals from Puerto Rico. Their turf wars with their Irish

\textsuperscript{58} 1939 WPA Guide to New York City
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid
neighbors were romanticized in the 1957 musical ‘West Side Story’. A West Side Story was a tragedy, that became famous for showcasing the American story of interethnic violence in a new and foreboding neighborhood. While Puerto Rican residents did move in working class Irish residents continued to control the politics and underworld dealings in the area, especially a crew known as the Westies. “Two generations of Irish gangsters, nicknamed the Westies by the police and the press, operated in the neighborhood into the late 1980s. Murder, theft, arson, extortion, gambling, loan-sharking, liquor, drugs, nightclubs — the Westies did it all.” The Westies were a part of an Irish working class community that formed roots in Hell’s Kitchen almost a century before. A West Side Story illustrated the changes in the neighborhood between a group whose community has been entrenched in the neighborhood for years a group who because of economic reasons has been forced to move in. Through the drama of two youth gangs the interethnic tension and failure of urban renewal are showcased.

---


61 Ibid
The transformation of Daredevil from a morally centered but wooden, costumed crime fighter to a multidimensional, human vigilante battling psychotic criminals and hardcore gangsters in Hell’s Kitchen (as pictured in figures 1 through 2), was due in part to Miller’s own residence in the neighborhood.\textsuperscript{62} The crime and pathology that was threaded through Miller’s daily experiences in Hell’s Kitchen and Times Square resonated through the adventures of Daredevil. Miller, who had been mugged at knifepoint would often recount that trauma and translate that anger through his comics. The characters that Miller invented or invested with his own narrative direction, reflected the reality of what was happening to Miller or what he had read in daily newspapers. Gone were the larger than life, but comically inept villains of the 60’s and 70’s like the Owl, Stilt Man, and Leap Frog. In their stead were the Kingpin, Bullseye and Elektra. The Kingpin serves as Daredevil’s arch nemesis and city-wide crime boss and Bullseye

\textsuperscript{62} See Fig. 26, \textit{Daredevil} #53 Marvel Comics, 1963, Fig. 27 \textit{Daredevil} #184 Marvel Comics 1982
aids Kingpin as his assassin with the super human ability to always hit his target – often fatally. As another of Kingpin’s assassins, Elektra serves as a wild card - both Murdock’s lover and Daredevil’s foe. Recalling the mythological Greek princess by the same name, she is an enigmatic villain combining Miller’s fascination with Japanese and Chinese martial arts and a kung fu film aesthetic.

The story of Matt Murdock becoming Daredevil is one of vengeance that takes on new dimensions when Miller tells it. In Miller’s version, Murdock’s Dad is an alcoholic whose failures motivate Murdock to succeed in his studies but also cause him great pain. Throughout the rest of his adult life he is no longer a clear moral arbiter, but a traumatized soul always battling to stay afloat. In Miller’s tenure as author he focuses primarily on the interplay between Daredevil’s villains Kingpin, Bullseye and Elektra, often drawing out conflicted emotions in both Matt Murdock and Daredevil that test Murdock’s loyalty to the law and Daredevil’s moral code. The villains that surround Daredevil also echo Miller’s immediate environment in their portrayal of crimes pulled from daily headlines or seen and heard in the streets of Hell’s Kitchen and Times Square.

Beginning with Daredevil issue #168, Miller introduces Elektra and writes into the same storyline previously-used villains Bullseye and Amazing Spiderman’s, the Kingpin. These villains are fixtures in Times Square’s Grindhouse theatres that showed movies which highlighted violence, blood, crimes against “the man”, sex, kung-fu confrontations as well as mainstream Hollywood films. While showcasing multiple Kung Fu titles, vendors in the same vicinity of the theatres sold weapons displayed in these films – Shurikens or throwing stars, swords, Nun-chaku (nunchucks) or two fore arm
length wooden sticks connected by rope or a chain, Katana clubs and the Sai - a short impaling instrument.63

Both Bullseye and Elektra famously used these weapons in the pages of *Daredevil*. Miller writes a scene in issue #179 in which Elektra reenacts a rumor circulating throughout the city at the time that a woman was stabbing Times Square theatre goers with an ice pick, in order to intimidate another featured character in the Daredevil series, journalist Ben Ulrich.64 The set up that Miller provides reflects violent newspaper headlines of this era in New York.

Bullseye’s ability to hit targets from an unspecified distance made throwing stars an obvious choice. It was Elektra, Miller’s own creation that capitalized on the martial arts craze and made her a ninja assassin who was clad in a sexy bikini wielding Sai’s. Miller’s jab or full embrace of Jung’s “Elektra complex” is apparent as well. Elektra’s mother has been killed and she is fiercely loyal to her father, a wealthy business tycoon.

63 See Fig. 30 – Times Square Kung Fu supply store
64 See Fig. 28-29 Daredevil #179, Marvel Comics, 1981
Elektra became a fan favorite and became deeply integrated into the *Daredevil* story line. Yet even with Elektra, Miller pulled no punches. In the series run from issues #173 -181 Daredevil battled and aided Elektra while Matt Murdock had an affair with her, and yet at the end of the story line featuring her and Bullseye, Miller had her killed off. Eventually she was resurrected, to satisfy fans of Miller’s trademark urban ninja noir.

![Fig.28](image1.png)  
**Fig.28**  
Times Square Kung Fu Supply Store  
Early 1980s

![Fig.29](image2.png)  
**Fig.29**  
*Daredevil* #175  
Marvel Comics, 1981

The Kingpin AKA Wilson Fisk is another of Daredevil’s character-defining villains. This giant fat but muscled, bald gangster is introduced in the *Amazing Spiderman* #50. The Kingpin has no powers except for his immense size and thirst for dominance and he is a noted adversary to various Marvel Superheroes. The Kingpin’s background reads like a characteristic New York mobster trope wherein the Kingpin becomes one of the family. Like Spiderman, the Kingpin is bullied as a child because he is overweight, he works out to where he is a dangerous physical specimen and is noticed by a crime lord named Don Rigolletto. Hired as a bodyguard, Fisk eventually takes over
his own portion of Rigolleto’s criminal organization. The Kingpin then aims to be the most powerful crime lord in New York by organizing other criminal factions of New York under his wing. Kingpin battles other crime syndicates and organizations such as the Maggia (a thinly veiled nod to the Mafia) and HYDRA, an international terrorist organization. When he is not fighting them, the Kingpin is trying to incorporate them into his organization. With the series run, Daredevil’s “Gang War” issues #169-173 & #180, Kingpin strategizes with the assassin Bullseye how to take over various crime organizations and is foiled by Daredevil.

The theme of a unified criminal organization is not new to what? To this era?. Organized criminal allegiances exist not out of solidarity but to ensure power for those who were at the top of the pecking order. The Italian Mafia and the Irish mob are central groups in twentieth-century organized American crime. Of course, other ethnic groups were involved in organized criminal activity. However, the Irish Mob and the Italian Mafia not only were interwoven with supposedly legitimate business ventures but were also the subjects of films, books and comics (in many cases located in New York City) in a way that boosted their notoriety. In the 1970s the Westside Gang or ‘Westies’ controlled, gambling, loansharking, robbery, the fencing of stolen items, labor racketeering in Hell’s Kitchen. Micky Spillane controlled the criminal activity in Hell’s Kitchen, from the 1960s into the 70s when James Coonan a young upstart from the same neighborhood began making a bid for power. Coonan made an alliance with Paul Castellano of the Gambino crime family and Gambino soldier Roy DeMeo. Eventually Demeo murdered Spillane as a favor to Coonan who gained control of the Westies and Hell’s Kitchen. Coonan maintained his connection with the Gambino crime family, and
eventually became an associate with the Gambino’s infamous boss John Gotti after Paul Castellano’s murder. While Kingpin is not a mafia or mob boss, he does represent these archetypes with reality contributing features to the fictional character.

Immediately following the death of Elektra, Miller added another popular vigilante and New York based anti-hero *Daredevil*: the Punisher. Providing contrast to the sense of law abiding justice that Matt Murdock the lawyer and Daredevil the crime fighter shared versus the single minded vengeance of the Punisher, Miller was able to simultaneously give depth to Murdock while also showing his grief for former lover Elektra. The story line revolves around the dangers of using drugs but also the nasty trade that is interwoven with the drug trade, that of selling children. While both the Punisher and Daredevil are clearly against this atrocious crime, their methods of opposing it differ, causing fights between the two men. The Punisher’s black and white absolutism contrasted with Daredevil’s more nuanced and legalese form of justice clash amidst a very heavy storyline. In the end Daredevil makes his point, The Punisher shoots his gun and the kids are saved. The real crime is the existence and reality of child slavery involved in the drug trade.

Miller returned in the 7 issue *Daredevil* story line “Born Again” that was considerably edgy for Marvel comics in 1985. Bringing the seedier elements of popular culture like heroin use and exploitation through pornography to the forefront, “Born Again” examined a pathos that few if any comic book characters at the time were dealing with. Matt Murdock’s ex-girlfriend Karen Page who used to work for Matt at his law

---

office, left to pursue an acting career. While she had some success, dark times followed and she was forced to act in pornographic movies in Mexico. Karen became addicted to heroin and in desperate need of cash she sold the identity of Daredevil to the Kingpin. Kingpin was then able to wreak havoc on Matt Murdock’s personal life, eating at the Daredevil from the inside out. Kingpin falsifies evidence and links Matt to crimes he didn’t commit, leading to Matt’s being disbarred from practicing law. Meanwhile Kingpin, strikes at Matt where he lives, firebombing his apartment, drugging him and eventually getting him in a cab that drives into the East River. Left for dead, Matt eventually climbs out and is rescued by a nun who takes care of him in a Hell’s Kitchen church. Eventually Matt regains his composure as Daredevil and aids Karen in her recovery. The last panel shows Matt Murdock and Karen fashionably dressed walking through Hell’s Kitchen with the caption reading, “My name is Matt Murdock. I was blinded by radiation. My remaining senses function with superhuman sharpness. I live in Hell’s Kitchen and do my best to keep it clean. That’s all you need to know.”

Fig. 32

Last Panel, p. 30 Daredevil #233, Marvel Comics, August 1986

66 Frank, Miller, Daredevil #233 Aug. 1986 Marvel Comics
The “Born Again” storyline is the last issue that Miller wrote for this series in 1985. Miller’s talented script writing gives dimension to his characters. The subject matter he broaches is mature and echoes the dark dramas of the city. In “Born Again” Miller inverts all the archetypes typically afforded with sympathy. Matt’s love interest has sold him out, a police lieutenant sells out Murdock in hopes the Kingpin can help him, a nurse in the hospital where that lieutenant is being treated turns out to be an assassin, a decorated war veteran kills innocent people in a murderous rage.

One interpretation of the changes in *Daredevil* is the very literal evolution of a character whose experiences with villains, heroes, colleagues, lovers and deaths has driven him to become aggressive and bitter. Another could be that Frank Miller’s experience in Hell’s Kitchen and New York City centered the drama and psychology of *Daredevil* into a very timely and relevant context. And finally, a very overarching interpretation of the *Daredevil* is that the daily crime and drama occurring in New York City, trumped the science fiction and fantastic fictive villains and crisis. The *Daredevil* series became a reflection of a New York City not beset by an exotic foreign threat but by the grim inner workings of the city itself. The *Daredevil* series was there to reflect and share stories that would bring justice to a then, contemporary New York.
Conclusion

The Marvel Comics characters, The Punisher and Daredevil, were anti hero representatives of vigilante graphic narratives that were reflective of New York during a tumultuous period of social unrest and structural decay. For different reasons both characters struck a chord with readers as street level heroes they could relate to. As New York bred Marvel Comics vigilantes, these antiheroes also paved the way for critically acclaimed vigilante comics and graphic novels Watchmen and Batman: The Dark Knight Returns.

The Punisher’s intimidating yet striking image as a gun toting ex-soldier and vigilante with an imposing skull emblazoned on his torso battling street level gangsters, organized criminals or international terrorists became so popular that he became the star of his own series. However, as unique a character as he was in the Marvel universe as a non-superhero vigilante, it was exactly those qualities that connected him to the cultural zeitgeist of the moment in the New York context. New York newspapers had reported for over a decade stories of crime and intimidation on the subway and on the street culminating in the 1984 ‘Death Wish Shooter’ story of Bernard Goetz. When The Punisher miniseries was introduced a year later, his over the top vigilantism resonated with readers.

Daredevil’s story lines became at once more intimate as well as edgier and exciting when Frank Miller took over as writer and illustrator. Miller chose to focus on and incorporate elements of his New York environment that were Daredevil’s environment – especially Hell’s Kitchen. Incorporating the culture of kung-fu movies he
picked up in the Grindhouse theatres in Times Square as well as the stories he heard, and daily events that he witnessed as a resident of Hell’s Kitchen, Miller was able to develop story lines that read like crime noir because he was so close to the very element that he wrote about.

Comic books have a history of tackling diverse themes. For entertainment purposes, stories developed from pulp detective novels in the 1930s and soon began to cover crime dramas, romance, mystery, horror and humor, and stories about superheroes “saving the day”. One of the most recognizable superheroes, Superman, embodied a moral, physical and philosophical ethos that was representative of a national ideology in the era of his creation. Batman represented his opposite, a non-super human who was more of a detective who roamed the streets of Gotham thwarting crime. Both Superman and Batman lived in the fictional and created worlds of Metropolis and Gotham. Marvel Comics characters lived in the real world and originally most of them lived, as did their creators, in New York City.

As popularity for superhero comics waned in the 1950s, Marvel author Stan Lee had all but given up on the genre, but he gave Marvel new life with *The Fantastic Four* and *The Amazing Spiderman*. Both titles were based in New York and represented a contemporary pop cultural moment. Eventually more Marvel titles emerged that reflected the social and political movements of the fast changing 1960s and 70s. Spiderman was a nerdy teenager who lived in Queens and moonlighted as a photographer for a Manhattan newspaper. The X-Men were a metaphor for the civil rights movement as a band of marginalized mutants fought for humanity while they were ridiculed by society. The Black Panther, Falcon and Luke Cage were both African and African
American characters who fought alongside their white counterparts as equals and explored issues of race and class in their issues’ pages. In the 1970s, as comic book companies realized how popular it was if characters dealt with social issues. Companies were willing to challenge the restrictive comics code because of the relevance of their stories. While DC dealt with the issues of drug use—specifically in the Green Lantern/Green arrow series, it followed the lead of Marvel comics’ Stan Lee who threw out the code in order to address pertinent social issues. In the 1970s and 1980s, New York’s economic and social tensions provided creative fodder for comic book authors and illustrators to make compelling graphic narratives. The Punisher and Daredevil comic series in the 1980s provided a representation of antihero and vigilante sentiment.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

1939 WPA Guide to New York City


Kane, Bob and Uslain, Michael. *Batman in the Fifties* New York: DC Comics, 2002


Miller, Frank and Janson, Klaus. *Daredevil Omnibus.* New York: Marvel Comics. 2013


Morrison, Grant and Dave McKean. *Arkum Asylum.* London: Titan, 2005


Steranko, James. The Steranko History Of Comics. Reading, PA: Supergraphics, 1970


Secondary Sources


Andreiev, Glen. Examiner.com

Bainbridge, Jason. "This is the Authority. This Planet is Under Our Protection" — An Exegesis of Superheroes' Interrogations of Law” Law, Culture and the Humanities 2007


Drucker, Johanna. “What is Graphic about Graphic Novels? English Language Notes” 46.2 English Language Notes.pp 39-56, University of Virginia Fall / Winter 2008


Yockey, Matthew. “This Island Manhattan: New York City and the Space Race in *The Fantastic Four*” *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 6 (Spring 2005) by The University of Iowa