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Genre, Form, and Subversion in *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon*
Table of Contents

Genre, Form, and Subversion in *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* .............................................. 1

Chapter One: How to Buck Convention...the Marvel Way! .......................................................... 9

Chapter Two: Temporal Tricks and Other Storytelling Shenanigans ........................................ 22

Chapter Three: Language as Character ...................................................................................... 37

Chapter Four: The Subversion of the (Super)Hero Archetype ..................................................... 67

In Summation: Subversion in *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* .............................................. 92

Works Cited..................................................................................................................................... 95
Despite the widespread acceptance of the Comics medium as a viable art form for expression and analysis, the mainstream superhero comic book genre has often been the target of critical ridicule in the popular eye. This lambasting began in the middle of the twentieth century with anti-Comics icons such as Dr. Fredric Wertham calling the legitimacy of the entire medium into question for its alleged delinquent effects on youth readership (Dunlavey 87). To opponents like Wertham and the Senate subcommittee to which he testified, Comics was invalidated by its content, most specifically those of the superhero genre, where violence, sexuality, and gore abound\(^1\) (86). Though Wertham’s studies were later discredited the fervor remained: reacting to the recent passing of comics entrepreneur Stan Lee, whose work at Marvel Comics is recognized for popularizing many of the tropes of the superhero comics genre, television pundit Bill Maher articulates on his *Real Time Blog* the perspective of the ongoing dismissal of the medium of Comics:

> …twenty years or so ago, something happened – adults decided they didn’t have to give up kid stuff. And so they pretended comic books were actually sophisticated literature. And because America has over 4,500 colleges – which means we need more professors than we have smart people – some dumb people got to be professors by writing theses with titles like Otherness and Heterodoxy in the Silver Surfer. […] I don’t think it’s a huge stretch to suggest that Donald Trump could only get elected in a country that thinks comic books are important. (Maher)

\(^1\) In testimony to the Senate Subcommittee charged with evaluating Comics’s role in a perceived “rise in juvenile delinquency”, *MAD Magazine* and EC Comics editor Bill Gaines responded to claims that the cover of his own horror-theme comic, replete with with gore in the form of a awe-wielding maniac hold the severed head of his victim, was in fine taste “for the cover of a horror comic”. As recounted in *The Comic Book History of Comics*, Gaines went on to outline what in his mind would constitute poor taste: “A cover in bad taste, for example, might be defined as holding the head a little higher so that the blood could be seen dripping from it.” (Dunlavey 87)
Initially the focus of criticism for the deviant nature of their content, Maher’s dismissal of the Comics form for being “kid stuff” reflects the changing sentiment that the content of comics is not too gruesome nor shocking, but too childish in its gruesomeness and shock. Whether he intends them to be or not, Maher’s words are the return to an argument from half a century ago: both he and Wertham take issue with the content of the Comics form, whether sanctimonious or unabashedly critical, as a result of the perceived shortcomings of their content. For each man the subject matter is evidence enough of the works’ lack of legitimacy. Yet both men make a crucial error in their analysis: a fallacy of composition that has them speaking of the whole (the Comics medium) when they mean to speak of one of its composites (the superhero genre). The only note of specificity that the Maher provides singles out an admittedly obtuse Marvel superhero from the 1960s, and Wertham’s most eye-popping arguments in Seduction of the Innocent -- accusations of protofascist ideologies, allegations of homoeroticism in the trope of the kid sidekick, whispers of bondage and fetishism in Wonder Woman -- hinge upon the reader assuming that when Wertham says Comics he means superhero comic books. Certainly none of these characteristics appeared in Archie or Garfield.

Argumentative fallacy aside, some of the criticisms levied at the superhero Comics genre are well-founded, if not the product of explicit intent on the part of the progenitors of the genre. In particular, Maher’s claims that the genre lacks sophistication might have legs: as recounted in Marvel Comics: the Untold Story, the infamous “illusion of change” instituted by Marvel patriarch Stan Lee to preserve the company’s most lucrative characters meant that “the characters should never evolve too much, lest their portrayals conflict with what licensees had planned for other media...the final page of each ‘adventure’ saw a return to the status quo, carefully reset for the following month’s tale” (Howe 182). This stagnation results in decades of
superhero stories that go nowhere of consequence, and the adoption of the Comics Code Authority in 1954 meant that superhero stories were even more limited in scope, resulting in the “Silver Age” stories that certainly fit Maher’s dressing down of the genre (61). With the repealing of the CCA and the growing acceptance of all Comics genres as academic fodder, however, what was once nearly the death knell for the genre has shifted to become one of its greatest strengths - if a creative team is clever. Though structural expectations and assumptions of the superhero comic book genre remain, a growing number of authors and artists are using those same expectations can be leveraged to great effect.

The 2013 limited series *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* is notable for a number of stylistic choices that deviate from previous superhero stories, removing the title character’s trademark costume, super-powered teammates and any sense of intellectual, physical, or moral superiority. Each deviation from expectation recasts central character Clint Barton, alias Hawkeye, as a hard-boiled Everyman, a ‘hero of the people’ far removed from his more prominent Avenger alter ego. If the effect is to make the hero seem more less absurd in the eyes of detractors like Wertham and Maher, this cosmetic revision is insufficient: without an equal emphasis on storytelling, Barton’s escapades are still of the stuff at which Wertham balked and Maher scoffs. The truly revelatory aspect of *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* lies not in its base deviations, but in that its creative team - writer Matt Fraction and illustrator David Aja - intended its superficial departures as a kind of literary rope-a-dope. Fraction and Aja recognized the atypical superhero with which they were working and crafted their storytelling tropes to put emphasis on the uniquely atypically qualities of their leading man.

In this study I adopt a structuralist approach to address how Matt Fraction and David Aja’s run on *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* embraces and subverts the expectations of the
work’s content and genre to emphasize the unique qualities of the character at the core of the story. The first chapter serves as a literary review of the Comics medium, including prevailing approaches to the literature’s study and the characteristics that have come to represent the genre of the superhero comic. Douglas Wolk’s study of the development of critical Comics attitudes in *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* will serve to center the conversation on both medium and genre expectations for Fraction and Aja’s stories, and the theoretical groundwork done by Scott McCloud (*Understanding Comics*) and Will Eisner (*Comics and Sequential Art*) to evaluate what constitutes the form of the Comic will be utilized to ground the medium in established structural patterns.

The second chapter explores the usage of time in *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* vol. 4, issue 1, “Lucky” and vol. 4, issue 2, “The Vagabond Code”, and how their subversion of the temporally linear narrative of the superhero comic book form serves to emphasize the development of traditionally “superheroic” qualities in main character Clint Barton. Marc Singer’s analysis of time usage in *The Invisibles* will serve as companion criticism through which I will compare how use of time and sequence is received in other examples of Comics media.

The third chapter explores the visual components of *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* vol. 4, issue 1, “Lucky”, vol. 4, issue 11, “Pizza is my Business” and vol. 4, issue 19, “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke”, addressing semiotics in the Comics medium through the usage (or lack) of language in these issues of the *Hawkeye* series. Saussure’s work with semiotics and “sign” theory, coupled McCloud’s work defining space between the ideal and real, will help to establish how these two stories develop the characteristics expected of the superhero genre through unconventional means: the absence of diegetic dialogue. David Berona’s critical analysis of *The
System and Duncan Randy’s analysis of shape and color as replacements for the symbolic system of language will be used as critical sources from which to understand how the stylistic choices made by Fraction and Aja have been interpreted in works across the Comics medium.

The fourth chapter of my thesis will analyze the usage of Clint Barton as a “hero” in <i>Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon</i> vol 4, issue 1, “Lucky”, vol. 4, issue 2, “The Vagabond Code”, vol. 4, issue 6, “Six Nights in the Life Of…” vol. 4, issue 11, “Pizza is my Business”, and vol. 4, issue 19, “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke”. These issues identify him as a poor specimen for the role due to his many lapses in judgment and professional conduct, yet it is these same shortcomings that reinforce his identity as an ideal hero in the <i>Hawkeye</i> series. Joseph Campbell’s work with the Hero Journey serves to illustrate how Clint Barton’s unique style and approach to heroism does not discount him from the title.

The predominant focus of this project is in the structural elements of the <i>Hawkeye</i> stories, notably those which deal with time, sequence, and the semiotic representation of non-textual language. Fraction and Aja center key issues of “other”ness in the stories, delving deeply into the arenas of race, gender, and disability studies; this project takes specific interest in the depiction of the “other” as it relates to those structural elements listed above. There is ample room for broader and more immersive scopes of study with regard to how Fraction and Aja fashion their central character. An analysis could be made of Clint’s childhood trauma surrounding deafness in “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke” and its impact on his isolation and “other”ness as an adult as well as the way that his characterization contributes to the concept of Mitchell and Synder’s “narrative prosthesis”; similarly, the representation of gender and sex in “The Vagabond Code”, “Six Days in the Life Of…”, and “Pizza is My Business” could be used to read <i>Hawkeye</i> as a simultaneously progressive and regressive text, a work that defies the traditional tropes of male-
female characterization rampant in the superhero comic book genre by employing even more degrading and dismissive representations. The vilification of the eastern European “Tracksuit Mafia” throughout the Hawkeye run, as well as its repeated disempowerment of nonwhite families and cultures, evokes a deep-set xenophobia that can be traced back to the superhero and adventure comic books of the 1930s and invites a consideration of race and cultural “other”ing in the business of both the detective and superhero genres.2

Structurally speaking, the various facets of Hawkeye’s formal telling demonstrate an intentional confounding of traditional superhero comic expectations. Through the nuanced delivery of a character better described as a struggling hero than a superhero, Matt Fraction and David Aja imbue Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon with a structural complexity atypical of the genre to match a character that is an equally atypical example of what it means to be heroic: as Hawkeye the man subverts and confounds what it means to be a superhero and plants his roots firmly in the moral “gray area”, so their story must likewise subvert and confound the boundaries of the traditional superhero comic book genre.

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2 any study looking to focus with specificity on the concepts of race and general difference in Comics would do well to begin with the works and contributions of Frederick Luis Aldama, notably his work with SÓL-CON and the Comics scholarship journal INKS
Chapter One: How to Buck Convention...the Marvel Way!

To begin a study of any work within the Comics medium, one must first have an understanding of how the medium itself is defined, how it functions, and how both definition and function imbue any work within the medium with a series of expectations and assumptions. This chapter aims to identify the specific boundaries and defining factors of both the Comics medium and the traditional superhero comic book in other to ground later discussion in the ways that Fraction and Aja both use the traditions of the medium and deviate from the expectations of the specific genre form. The goal of this chapter is the laying of an essential groundwork for later steps of the analysis: the demonstration that much of how Fraction and Aja deviate from the expectation of genre is not mere stylistic whim but intentional to their work’s larger themes.

Writing about the Comics as an extension of our concept of reading, Will Eisner remarks in *Comics and Sequential Art* that the medium presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regiments of art (eg. perspective, symmetry, brush stroke, etc.) and the regimens of literature (eg. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit.

(Eisner 8)

At the core of Eisner’s perception of the Comics form defined is not just that it involves both image and text -- a conscientious objector might argue that this positions any children’s picture book in the realm of Comics media -- but that the two separate artistic forms are intermingled. Eisner notes not just that a comic book includes both pictorial art and written word, but that the “regimens” - that is, the structure, or substance - of each becomes
“superimposed” onto the other (8). This vision of the compositional elements of Comics is much more than a picture underscored by text, as one might find in The Lorax; to fit Eiser’s definition of the Comics form the image and text work not only alongside but for each other, even as each other, in a joined effort to have an aesthetic effect on the the observer. Underscoring this point is Eisner’s assertion that there is a congruence in the processes by which we interpret text and image: though we presume the reading of text and the figurative “reading” of images to be procedurally different, a series of images and a section of text both rely upon fixed systems of shared formative experience and foreknowledge to function as intended. In order to successfully read anything, be it words or pictures, the reader must be acquainted with the systems in which that encoded information exists.

The idea of repetition and recognition is developed in the usage of what Eisner terms the symbolism and imagery that makes up the “‘grammar’ of Sequential Art” (8). He uses as an example the simultaneous systems of western textual reading practices and our shared conceptual understanding of our natural world and certain cultural constructs demonstrate that text and image are reliant upon a similar structural familiarity to be decoded as intended. Applied to a page from his The Spirit story “Gerhard Schnobble” (right), Eisner is able to demonstrate the simultaneous need for both textual and pictorial structural familiarity:

![Image of The Spirit story “Gerhard Schnobble”](image_url)
Eisner, Will. “The Story of Gerhard Shnobble” The Spirit (vol 1 #13), Quality Comics, pp.7

A description of the action in this panel can be diagrammed like a sentence. The predicates of the gun-shooting and the wrestling belong to separate clauses. The subject of “gun-shooting” is the crook, and Gerhard is the object direct. The many modifiers include the adverb “Bang, Bang” and the adjectives of visual language, such as posture, gesture, and grimace.

[...] The final transition requires the reader to break form the convention of the left-to-right sequence. The eye follows the air stream down past a nebulous background, onto the solid body on the ground; and then bounces back upward to view the half-tone cloud in which Gerhard is resurrected. This bounce is unique to the visual narrative. The reader must implicitly use a knowledge of physical laws (i.e. gravity, gases) to ‘read’ this passage. (10)

Eisner’s breakdown of his own work on The Spirit demonstrates a reader’s need for mundane knowledge -- the path that Gerhard’s body and spirit traces requires both an understanding of gravity, cause-and-effect, and a familiarity with the concept of the Judeo-Christian afterlife -- but also an expected familiarity with less intuitive systems of storytelling and linguistics. The culminating moment of Eisner’s story requires that the reader dispense with reading the action from left to right, as one might the words on a page in the western tradition; Eisner notes that this pattern of reading would be the norm for his reader despite the fact that very little written word comes into play during the entire page-long sequence. Though told largely through image Eisner acknowledges that the page is read as one might read text, though we might consider that the idea of reading as text is a reflection of our societal tendency to normalize text as a primary
means of print communication. It is perhaps more correct to say that Eisner recognizes that the reader’s processing of the page will following the process by which that reader would process text -- there is nothing inherently *textual* about the process of a left-to-right, top-to-bottom page read, as demonstrated by Eisner’s image-heavy story being told in the same structural tradition. What *is* inherent is the reader’s familiarity with this intentional story layout, a product of repetition and recognition of familiar symbols and concepts. These are the “superimposed” text and visuals that Eisner earlier mentions: it is not that text becomes pictorial or that picture becomes textual, though that can sometimes happen; it is that both share the same patterns of intentionality in structure and purpose.

Working from Eisner’s starting point of textual-visual superpositionality, comics theorist Scott McCloud famously provides a layperson’s definition of the Comics form in his seminal work *Understanding Comics*. McCloud acknowledges the groundwork that Eisner laid, beginning with the concept of Comics as *sequential art*: images, be they textual or pictorial, in a deliberate sequence in order to inspire some broad reaction -- McCloud defines this as “to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud 9). Despite borrowing Eisner’s coined terminology of *sequential art* in his description, it is on the concept of the *deliberate* that McCloud and Eisner’s concept share the most space. McCloud’s concept of a “deliberate sequence” echoes Eisner’s idea of intentionality and reliance on structural systems for meaning, his notion of Comics’s use of “repetitive images and recognizable symbols” (9) (Eisner 8).

With theorists like Eisner and McCloud having done the heavy lifting of defining Comics as an art form, the larger question of how best to critically respond to works within the medium remains. In *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*, critic Douglas
Wolk suggests that interacting with the Comics form begins by first understanding what they are not, despite appearances to the contrary:

Comics are not prose. Comics are not movies. They are not a text-driven medium with added pictures; they’re not the visual equivalent of prose narrative or the static version of a film. They are their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovators, its own cliches, its own genres and traps and liberties.

(14)

To understand how a work like *Hawkeye* achieves so much within a form and style that has received so little critical attention, one must understand how the form might be misrepresented. Wolk outlines how those misrepresentations manifest in a flawed perception of the work’s whole, and how those flaws are generally traced back to the mistake of treating the Comic book text as an offshoot or deviant of text-based literary works. Acknowledging that Comics as a rule “bear a strong resemblance to literature,” Wolk cautions that to lump Comics into the same critical conversations as text-based works is to ignore their unique quality (14).

McCloud’s perhaps overwrought definition of Comics - *juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer* - suggests that what is worthy of study in the Comics medium is never strictly its content, the sole aspect of the medium which detractors Wertham and Maher disparage. Such a view, Wolk claims, is myopic and ignores the crucial strength of cartooning: its ability to provide easily-accessible subjectivity to the viewer. Calling the art form “a metaphor for the subjectivity of perception”, Wolk attests that the strength of the Comics medium lies the way that its textual and visual composition allows for freer expression of the differing ways that a shared world can
be experienced (20). “What you’re seeing [in Comics],” Wolk claims, “is an interpretation or transformation of the world, with aspects that are exaggerated, adapted, or invented” (20).

If Wolk’s point is that equal parts of the narrative and the structurally stylistic are inherently interwoven into the fabric of the Comics form, then his claim is a natural extension of McCloud and Eisner’s insistence of the medium’s textual/pictorial balance. The modern reader’s tendency to write off the Comic form by emphasizing too much one the narrative component is regarded as a crutch of the form’s resemblance to text-based media: “It’s very easy to think of comics in terms of their plots and incident -- to slip from ‘what happens in this story’ to ‘what this comic is about’ to ‘what this comic is’” (24). While Wolk is correct to caution against the marginalization of Comics’s critical offerings, the reason that the Comics medium would be assumed to have less inherent analytical depth compared to text is never explicitly explored. The answer may be as simple as understanding the circumstances of the medium’s rise to prominence, and the free market’s role in the popular perception of the art form and its most prolific genres. Wolk attributes the narrative and structural balance of the Comics medium to the way that it was in his words “incubated in the marketplace,” created first and foremost as a means to generate quick and steady revenue during the form’s infancy in the 1930s-40s (22). This baptism-by-fire approach to the shaping of the Comics medium meant that a kind of instant gratification was required for a comic book story to be successful. Unfortunately, the rapid production-and-consumption model of Comics’s heyday generates in the popular conscience a perception of the medium as coarse and unthinking. By the merit of both their lack of boundary and potential for interesting stylistic liberties, superhero stories are ideally-suited for this kind of narrative/structural mix that Wolk identifies while similarly falling prey to the assumptions of shallowness that have plagued the medium and, more specifically, the genre.
In “The Hawkeye Supercut” Comics scholar Craig Fischer comments on the way that Fraction and Aja attend to both content and structure in equal balance to generate a narrative and stylistic reward for the attentive reader. The chronologically disjointed and visually complex structure of their *Hawkeye* stories, Fischer argues, focuses the attention away from the heroics and onto the personal struggles of the central character. To Fischer, the superheroics over the 20-issue run of *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* are “almost superfluous”, taking a back seat to the more important human elements of the story: “Fraction and Aja pare away typical superhero action to zero in on what Clint does ‘when he’s not being an Avenger,’ which allows the relationships between characters, and Clint’s own descent into isolation, to generate the real drama of the series” (Fischer). The departure from the typical superhero form noted by Fischer might be attributable to Fraction’s conscious decision to depart from a more comfortable form of storytelling in favor of the highly collaborative and experimental. He reflects in “How to Write *Hawkeye*” that the process of writing Clint Barton was a conscious departure from his previous experiences with Marvel properties, “completely different than anything [he’d] ever done before. [...] everything about *Hawkeye* kept getting weirder” (Fraction, “How to…” 51).

The “Marvel Style” of comic book development referred to is a process pioneered by the late Stan Lee as a means for a shoestring labor force to cope with heavy production demands, averaging an complete story “about 15 percent less full than a typical full script” according to Fraction (58). Writing a comic book script in Marvel Style is to emphasize collaboration and equal input across the entire artistic team:

> From my script, David produces thumbnails -- and they are the most laborious thumbnails you can imagine. [...] So I take the layouts and do a dialogue pass the best I can. Scenes can grow or change or transmute from what I’d written, or I
can give notes and add things or take away. It’s great -- as long as I can tell what’s happening, I mean. Which isn’t always. (60)

The lack of complete control over the finished product at first filled Fraction with trepidation, but the concession came in the form of his collaborator, artist David Aja: “my favorite pages from our time on Iron Fist, which was written full-script style, always came when [Aja]’d politely and respectfully diverge from what was scripted for him [...] So I’d start writing more and more vaguely for him, to give him more and more freedom, and he always crushed it” (53). At the core of the collaboration between Fraction and Aja and their mutual discovery of the benefit of the Marvel style is the material itself, which Fraction admits to have consciously approached in a way divergent from his previous writing outings for Marvel (The Invincible Iron Man, The Immortal Iron Fist, and Uncanny X-Men among others). Though he’d worked with David Aja before, it was with Hawkeye that the team first attempted something outside of the bounds of their tried and true method. Speaking of Fraction’s reflection on his writing process, Fischer and Fraction both indirectly acknowledge that this movement away from the storytelling status quo is fitting of the stories, though neither critic nor writer attests that this is the reason. Rather, the literary complexity of Hawkeye and its divergence from traditional superhero fare are treated as two unrelated novel characteristics of Fraction and Aja’s text:

In “How to Write Hawkeye,” Fraction explains that he compensates for the quotidian nature of his Hawkeye “with a complicated structure that would reward close-reads. So yeah, there might be an issue that’s about Clint trying to buy tape [#3], but it’s going to start with a car chase, cut back two days, then cut forward again, and on and on” [56].” (Fischer)
Both author and critic acknowledge the importance of narrative and structural style, affirming Wolk’s argument that a criticism of Comics media means that one “be attentive to both the narrative substance and their style,” and that “cartoonists’ visual style is manifested in every image they draw on every page of every comic book” (Wolk 24) (24).

For the creators’ part, attentiveness must be paid to the expectations of the reader picking up a glossy featuring a character as prominent as Marvel’s Hawkeye. It doesn’t do for the creative team to deviate too far from the expectation of the superhero genre, which even the medium’s most ardent defenders sometimes lapse into lambasting. Even as McCloud goes to great lengths to illustrate the “workshopping” of his definition of the Comics medium in *Understanding Comics*, he includes under his finished product an acknowledgement of what to which Comics is too often limited: “2. Superheroes in bright colorful costumes, fighting dastardly villains who want to conquer the world in violent sensational pulse-pounding action sequences!” (McCloud 9). The presence of this secondary definition is tongue-in-cheek, as McCloud acknowledges frequently the potential for all Comics to contribute to demonstrate analytical depth and adhere to his given primary definition for the medium. Yet the juxtaposition of this playacting definition of Comics alongside McCloud’s more sophisticated practical nomenclature - and the fact that the superhero genre is singled out specifically - reinforces a juvenile expectation for the genre even as McCloud sings the praises of its parent medium. The sophistication of the standing Comics definition is reinforced by the presence of a definition that the reader is expected to see as limited and childish; whether or not McCloud believes that the genre operates at a deficit of sophistication is irrelevant, as his use of the genre in contrast suggests a long-standing cultural presumption that it does.
That presumption of analytical shallowness might come in part from what Wolk identifies as the rise of a commodified superhero genre style, something of a trademark look that grew out of the rise of large comic book publishers wanting to brand their books visually with more than a logo or title. Wolk identifies the rise of what is termed “house style” as the development of a recognizable layout, storyline structure, and even anatomic character design that permeates most modern-day superhero comics, rendering them slick facsimiles of one another:

American art cartoonists generally try very hard to adopt a style that’s far away from the default style of superhero mainstream. But what is that default style, exactly? You know it when you see it, but it’s hard to pin down. Here’s a stab at it: it’s designed to read clearly and to provoke the strongest possible somatic response. You’re supposed to react with your body before you think about it. (50)

Wolk’s dispassionate criticism of the modern superhero comic paints it as appealing to emotional-imaginative response rather than requiring the reader’s intellect and reason to dissect and digest. The benefit to a style that is able to appeal to its viewer on a somatic level, especially for a medium born of mass consumption, is the immediate engagement of that audience with something that makes them feel with very little else required. As readers, Wolk argues, the enticing “quasi-realism” of the modern superhero comic is rooted in its promise of escapism. By ensnaring the senses and engaging the imaginative faculties, superhero comics “provide an escape route into a more thrilling world than our own” (50).

The downside of the superhero genre’s focus on the instant gratification of feeling over the slow-burn development of intellectual engagement is that the genre is prone to feeling emotionally stunted, even immature. Superhero comics, by the nature of their focus on the
fantastic and supernatural, are “something that people tend to discover as children”, and Wolk cites their proliferation in the public eye of the American presumption of what the medium has to offer as the “public and private shame of American comics” (100). Speaking of the socially deviant aspects of the genre, Wolk argues that to engage regularly with the somatic engagement offered by superhero comic books beyond childhood “suggests that you’re sublimating ‘adult’ impulses into something that’s not exactly maturely sexual,” owed to the thinly-veiled Freudian components of the traditional hero story, “the skintight outfit, the mask, the double life, the incident in which one’s true identity was formed, the way the first interaction with everyone of one’s kind if a physical tussle, the kid sidekick. Oh, God, the kid sidekick” (101).

Though Wolk later clarifies that the superhero genre could and does do a great deal to critically engage with the somatic aspects of its form in a deconstructive fashion in order to “grow up”, it is only through a great deal of analytical investment that the form takes on anything beyond its origins as the impulse-buy of the Comics medium. It is interesting to note, additionally, that all of the components that Wolk notes as needing to be addressed in order for superhero comics to escape their somatic roots - the costume and mask, the first impulse towards violence, the double identity, the origin story and the kid sidekick - are unpacked, questioned, and subverted by Fraction and Aja over the course of their run with Hawkeye. Wolk, Fraction, and Aja might has just as well been working out of the same guidebook towards the legitimization of the genre.

If form and content are to be viewed as a pair, it follows that structuralist analysis of the comics form is the perfect medicine for the ardent anti-Comics arguments that Wertham, Maher, et al. levy to discredit the medium. And if content alone is made to be the subject of controversy, then it stands to reason that an analytical approach that decentralizes content in favor of other
aspects of the work be the means to re-establish the legitimacy of the form. In his overview of structuralism in *Literary Theory: an Introduction*, literary critic Terry Eagleton says of the structuralist approach that “it does not matter that this story is hardly an example of great literature. [...] The method is quite indifferent to the cultural value of its object: anything from *War and Peace* to the War Cry will do” (Eagleton 83). Eagleton’s appraisal of the importance of the content to a structural view of the work observes that in addressing subject matter, Comics detractors make a critical error in their assessment of the medium by its genres. Such arguments mistake part for the whole, and in so doing craft an argument against Comics that is dismissible simply by choosing another means by which to measure the work’s literary merit. Eagleton continues on the topic of form versus content, using in his example the notion of a symbolic role within a text: “if we took a narrative structure in which what was required was the symbolic role of ‘mediator’ between two items, the mediator could be anything from a grasshopper to a waterfall” (83).

Indifference to preconceived *elegance* of literary content speaks to the validity of any material, regardless of content, being worthy of a serious structuralist analysis. It becomes a simple thing to address the concern of content that Wertham and Maher use to diminish the role of Comics in academic literary study: by adopting a structuralist view of the work, the content ceases to matter whatsoever. A structuralist analysis of any work, as Eagleton outlines, depends not on its content but in the way that its compositional elements work to produce a meaning that is recognizable for its patterns of interaction. Fraction and Aja are free to address whatever genre tropes they choose; the work will not be judged by the story it tells, but rather how it is told.
This is a boon for a previously off-written media, yet it also makes significant new demands of the work. If a structuralist line of thinking is concerned with whether a pattern can be established to develop a concept of archetype and formal/stylistic unity, then the onus is now on the creators to develop their work with attention to the style and form of their medium and genre. Fraction and Aja begin in this task by re-establishing their character relative to his genre and intertextual identity in a way that simultaneously demonstrates the elevated structural style of their storytelling.
Chapter Two: Temporal Tricks and Other Storytelling Shenanigans

In *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* vol. 4, issue 2, “The Vagabond Code” and vol. 4, issue 6, “Six Nights in the Life Of…”, Fraction and Aja subvert the chronologically linear narrative expectation of the superhero comic book form to emphasize the development of traditionally “un-superheroic” qualities in main character Clint Barton. This chapter evaluates how specific structural choices, chiefly uses of time, sequence, and page layout its telling, are used as hermeneutic details over the course of both issues to introduce the psychological and moral conflict of Clint Barton’s heroic compromise.

The pages of *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* adhere to a layout of between five to nine panels on the average, with the action from one to the next intended to imply sequential passage of time, movement, or speech. Fraction and Aja play with time and sequence in their run on the Hawkeye from panel one, exploiting the split-second world of archery in order to create visually striking moments such as Clint’s target practice amid conversation with Kate *(right)*. These six panels interspersed within fourteen smaller portrait-size images creates a

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Fraction, Matt, and David Aja. “The Vagabond Code”. Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon (vol 4, issue 2), Marvel Comics, pp.3
simultaneous flow of three timeframes across the page: one, the distended chronology of the female face (that of the titular Hawkeye’s protégé, Kate Bishop) as she responds to news of his day with a flippant “Well, that’s cool” (Fraction 4). The fourteen panels of Bishop’s face as she utters these three simple words compel the reader to read each letter as it corresponds to Kate’s sounding of it, suggesting altogether a significantly slowed perception of the events. Cut between this moment is a second time frame, Hawkeye pulling taut the bowstring and taking aim on his practice target. While not as slow as Bishop’s dialogue, these five frames are likewise a moment apart from our standard perception of the passage of time. The presence of Clint’s inner monologue in each panel (“The wire tenses”/”Back muscles tighten and lock”/”Slow your breathing”/Exhale--”/”--relax your hand--“) alongside the alternation Hawkeye and his target, each time closer than the last, suggests a reading of this moment in time as five staccato beats compared to the fourteen that make up Kate Bishop’s dialogue (4). This brevity and alternating change in the Hawkeye-centric panels compared to the imperceptible facial differences and spacious layout of Bishop’s creates a forced recognition of the disparity in speed between the two sequences, an effect that the final panel on the page contrasts even further: a moment’s sudden movement in which Hawkeye releases his arrow. This final moment snaps the reader back to a passage of time that is more appropriate that which we normally experience, further cementing the two sequences that play before it as perceptively different.

The demonstration of the passage of time by means of sequential paneling is a mix of what structural theorist Randy Duncan calls “sensory diegetic” and “non-sensory diegetic” images (Duncan 44) (45). As Duncan defines sensory diegetic images as those which “show the physical reality of the world of the story,” or the diegesis, and “can include anything, such as sounds and smells, that constitute the sensory environment of the fictional world” (44). The
motion lines alongside Clint’s released bowstring, and Kate’s distended dialogue - “Well, that’s cool” - are each available to the character’s senses as input: through the touch and implicit *hum* of the bowstring and Kate’s spoken words, both Clint and Kate are a little more aware (as are we, their guests) of their surroundings. By contrast, non-sensory diegetic images “show the internal reality of the characters in the story. These images represent thoughts, emotions, and attitudes that are part of the diegesis, but not accessible to the senses” (45). Clint’s inner monologue as he readies his bow is not an accessible sensory input to any but us and Clint himself, intended as integral Fraction and Aja’s depiction of the firing of Clint’s arrow over several panels of his companion’s time-distended face is an experienced moment within the world of the comic. Hawkeye takes aim and fires his arrow while Kate says, “Well, that’s cool”: there is no narrative trickery here, nothing that Duncan would define as “not literal”, or not open to interaction with or notice by the characters. Fraction and Aja do come close to engaging a non-diegetic moment, however, in depicting the Clint’s loosing of the arrow - an action that the characters can experience - in a way that is not accessible to the senses of the characters. Due to the distending of time over the course of the page, Kate Bishop cannot from her perspective experience the panel-by-panel movement of the arrow for its speed and suddenness. She instead recognizes as an instant what the reader recognizes for much longer due to the disparity in the time it takes both sequences (her dialogue and the arrow’s loosing) to unfold. It is in this way that the panel serves as both a diegetic image, one that exists within the story, and a non-diegetic image, one that is within the story but inaccessible or unable to be articulated to the characters’ comprehension.

And then, after all of this build-up, Hawkeye misses his shot.
The arrow impacts impotently outside of the bulls-eye, an embarrassment for Clint, the self-styled bow-and-arrow hero -- and in front of his young protégé no less. Fraction and Aja use the distention of time to showcase what is first perceived to be their character’s superb ability and practiced skill, only to pull the rug from under the reader and reveal his very human shortcomings. In this Clint’s misfire takes on a tertiary meaning, not quite non-diegetic but not quite diegetic either: Kate and Clint both recognize the embarrassment of the latter having missed a shot of such relative ease, but neither can connect the painstakingly deliberate sequencing of the action and its eventual lack of payoff to a reflection of Clint Barton himself. This symbolic significance of the arrow’s errant path is not for the world of the characters, but for the reader, recognizable only for Fraction and Aja’s distention of the moment for our benefit.

As heroes go, Clint is an extension of his bow and arrow -- an outmoded tool whose careful planning and best efforts often result in something just short of the desired result (early in *Hawkeye’s* first issue, Clint none-too-gently describes himself as “an orphan raised by carnies fighting with a stick and a string from the Paleolithic era” [Fraction, “Lucky” 1]). Laying out Clint’s process and failure alongside the unconnected remarks of the younger Hawkeye reinforces the former’s questionable position as a mentor-hero even if neither character can acknowledge the moment from a diegetic perspective. To imagine this sequence laid out in real time, over the course of a single panel of action -- Clint failing his shot while Kate comments offhandedly on the substance of their broader conversation -- is to overlook the way that this otherwise small moment plays in the larger scheme of setting Clint Barton up as a man that tries, rather than a man that succeeds.

Fraction and Aja’s re-imagining of Hawkeye as a hard-boiled hero means that his skillset, as defined, must be found to be with fault; it would not be in the tradition of downtrodden
detectives and low-level heroes alike if their central character remained Clint Barton, archer extraordinaire. Fraction and Aja set this character direction for their Hawkeye early in his adventure, on the heels of a failed mission, as Clint muses on his shortcomings while falling out of a high-rise window:


If Hawkeye is a talented grunt in the same vein of Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, and Harry Dresden, then it stands to reason that what begins as any impressive display of skill must fail by half: such is the destiny of the put-upon struggling hero, whose powers are impressive enough to merit attention but seldom sufficient to get the job done. If the reader is additionally to assess Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon structurally and eschew an overindulgence in its content then that reading must be informed by the means by adherence to the recognizable and mundane (not only Clint’s bow-and-arrow motif but his peak-human capability with the weapon) with the new (his ultimately less-than-stellar performance). Fraction and Aja reinforce Clint’s lack of superhuman skill to demonstrate nuance of form, undercutting their hero’s abilities in a sequence of panels while training the reader’s eye on the complexity of that same sequence from a structural standpoint. This moment is the culmination of a complex sequence of panels as much as it is a character moment for Clint, Fraction and Aja having used form to inform content, and content to inform form. Simultaneously subverting (through structure) and playing true (through genre trope) to the expectations of their genre and form becomes a pattern of Fraction and Aja throughout Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon, each time introducing a new structural trick at the
expense of the confidence of their title character. At surface level this is humorous letdown within the story, to Kate’s amusement and Clint’s chagrin, but it’s the similarly-intended anticlimax from a structuralist standpoint that reinforces Fraction and Aja’s pushing the limits of the form to the benefit of their central character’s development. Fraction and Aja continue to use Clint Barton’s position as the ever-behind, struggling heroic figure to contrast and thereby keep the focus on the complexity of their storytelling structure, chronology included.

A similar use of chronological flexibility is used to establish Clint’s other aheroic traits in *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* #6, “Six Nights in the Life Of…”. The issue begins with an *in media res* cold open that sees Clint, as Hawkeye, handily thrashed by super-villainous thugs while his super-powered teammates save the day in an excellent follow-through of the earnest but ineffective heroism set up in “The Vagabond Code”. Sometime after the battle, a disenfranchised Clint Barton is given an ultimatum by the low-level thugs plaguing the tenement he calls home: leave, or his fellow tenets - his friends and neighbors - will be killed. So begins six days and nights of Clint wondering whether it might be best for everyone, including himself, that he becomes scarce. Ultimately Clint discovers his sterner stuff and sticks it out; Fraction and Aja are playing with the reader’s expectations of the superhero genre’s journey, not reinventing its conclusions. The aheroic component of Clint’s story is not in its conclusion, but in how both reader and character get there.

Of issue six in particular, Fischer in “The *Hawkeye* Supercut” argues that the symbolic overtones in Hawkeye’s recognition of his heroic responsibilities is the by-product of the issue’s play with chronology. Fischer points out that the structure of the issue, like so much of the Fraction-Aja run, is bent so as to gear the emphasis in favor of Clint’s struggle to maintain his humanity in a grim and unforgiving world. As his proof Fischer submits the symbolic
significance of Clint’s bow, which changes hands and positions several times over the course of
the issue, each time with a specific symbolic meaning. The bow is first seen in Clint’s hands as a
weapon in his identity as Hawkeye, then prominently on the wall of his apartment, a proud
acknowledgment of his alter-ego; following the ultimatum it’s sent to the care of his protégé,
which she takes as a sign of cowardice rather than the passing of the torch that Clint
halfheartedly intended it to be: “This running away thing?” Kate admonishes, “It’s everything
about you that sucks.” (Fraction, “Six Nights…” 17). The end of the story sees the bow again in
Clint’s hands as a weapon - but it’s Clint as Clint holding the weapon, not Clint as Hawkeye, a
crucial distinction. Clint will defend the people that are closest to him, and will do so quietly and
without calling in his far more competent and prepared super-colleagues, making his heroism
more intimate than the costumed gallivanting he does with the Avengers. Next the bow is quietly
restored to its position in Clint’s apartment, though it embodies a new promise given its owner’s
newfound selflessness. Fischer traces the movement of the bow simultaneously to Clint’s
discovery of his selflessness in the face of a no-wins scenario: “Kate immediately brings the bow
back to Clint, but he only regains his status as a hero when, on Sunday December 16, he picks up
the bow again to protect his building from the TrackSuits” (Fischer). The story is easily pieced
together thanks in part to Fraction and Aja’s use of narrative text to precede each temporal leap,
as the structural complexity of the issue is not intended to be an unsolvable puzzle but one that
encourages reflection. Of issue six, Fischer claims that Fraction “encourages us to pay attention
to those relationships by repeating scenes and embedding a human heart within his puzzle
structures,” suggesting that this play with chronology isn’t about confusing the audience but
presenting them with a hero story that emphasizes emotion over action (Fischer).
Yet this analysis of the story still places the two components -- Clint’s struggling hero mentality and the unique structure of his story’s a-chronological outline -- in a disconnect. Though Fischer acknowledges that the structure allows us to see the humanity at the heart of Fraction and Aja’s *Hawkeye* stories, he stops just short of acknowledging that it is because of this humanity, specifically Clint’s need to discover it in himself, that the story makes most sense told in this way. Though Clint’s decision to take a stand for himself and his neighbors seems foregone, this is only because a reading audience is accustomed to the superhero genre as developing to this kind of conclusion. When one allows for a chance of Clint’s shirking his responsibilities as a hero in favor of what he deems the greater good, the certainty of the end feels less so - and with it the rest of the story’s surety of delivery can likewise be manipulated.

The lack of chronology in “Six Nights in the Light Of…” isn’t merely an approach that Fraction and Aja use to highlight Clint’s humanity and heroism; the reader doesn’t see the development of the story in a linear fashion in order to emphasize Clint’s uncertainty and confusion. In his moral-obtuseness Clint does not see a certain path through his conflict until it is said and done, and so neither does the reader.

Clint’s moral indecisiveness and its link to his story’s structural complexity is even more pronounced when compared to the straightforwardness of superhero stories with more morally centered heroic leads. Looking for a Marvel superhero character with a strong moral center for comparison invariably leads to Captain America, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby’s 1941 anti-fascist archetype of all that the country has to offer. Over his seventy-nine year history Cap has time and time again shown unwavering moral certainty, so much so that it might be argued to be his great superpower. The character’s unwavering moral certainty is on display prominently in Marvel’s *Civil War*, a cross-issue story arc that spanned a number of Marvel Comics properties in 2006-7.
Civil War’s basic premise is that of superhero civil rights: whether super-powered vigilantes have autonomy to exist outside of the purview of government authority, or whether their extraordinary circumstances mean conscription into S.H.I.E.L.D. (Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division), an extra-militaristic branch of the Marvel universe’s hypothetical world government. As an icon of the superhero community, S.H.I.E.L.D. tasks Cap with convincing his fellow masked heroes to conform with the Superhero Registration Act, a newly-enacted law that strips heroes of their secret identities in exchange for lawful purview as government agents. The assignment is a miscalculation on S.H.I.E.L.D.’s part: Captain America, whose heroic career is built upon ensuring individual freedoms from overreaching government bodies, rebels against the call to service and becomes the movement’s highest-profile fugitive.

Compared to Hawkeye, Captain America has far more to lose as an individual for his strong moral stance. His position as not only figurehead of the Avengers but as a government agent (his known alter-ego of Steve Rogers having been an army volunteer, Captain America’s title of rank is no facsimile) guarantees that the fallout of his decision has ripple effects across the Marvel universe. The superhero world stands divided following Captain America’s decision to buck the SRA and S.H.I.E.L.D.’s behest: many see Cap’s refusal to comply as a statement of personal liberty, while others see it as treason. Much of Civil War’s collateral damage, including the deaths of many of Cap’s colleagues and friends, could have been avoided by his acquiescing to what his government asked. Yet Cap never hesitates in his decision, knowing the likely ramifications that his actions will bring about. His ardent refusal to play politic begins in Civil War #1, in which he escapes from S.H.I.E.L.D. custody after an argument with S.H.I.E.L.D. Director Maria Hill about the dangers of the SRA:
Steve Rogers: You’re asking me to arrest people who risk their lives for this country every day of the week.

Maria Hill: No, I’m asking you to obey the will of the American people, Captain.

Steve Rogers: Don’t play politics with me, Hill. Superheroes need to stay above that stuff or Washington starts telling us who the super-villains are.

Maria Hill: I thought super-villains were guys in masks who refused to obey the law.

(Marvel, “Civil” 1)

*Civil War* offers little nuance in the outline of its central conflict, the trope of diametrically opposed characters engaging in an argument of values used to outline the central conceit of the story in stark relief. From a structural standpoint, the direction of Captain America’s story in *Civil War* mirrors his unwavering views on freedom, personal liberty, and the importance of separating what is right from what is popular. Captain America’s story in the *Civil War* comic goes on to be unmarred by flashback or chronological disturbance, unfolding from Point A to Point B to Point C and presenting a narrative as straightforward as the beliefs held by its central character. In contrast to the tangle of both narrative structure and moral fiber in *Hawkeye*, Cap’s moral strength, his surety that what he is doing is right, is reflected by the clarity of the narrative in which his actions take shape.

It’s additionally worth noting that unlike Cap’s foray in *Civil War* and elsewhere, *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* includes very little outright moralizing from its title lead. His actions, to make no mention of his rationale for those actions, are obscured not only by the use of time and sequence but also by the character’s uncertainty and lack of confidence. Oftentimes Clint himself makes choices without fully explaining or thinking them through, leaving the
narrative jumbled until the reader can piece their meaning together. Understanding Clint Barton’s actions is a puzzle for the reader, and the narrative structure of the *Hawkeye* book is the clue. Conversely, Cap’s *Civil War* narrative does not make the reader struggle nearly as much for answers to Cap’s inner thoughts. J. Michael Straczynski’s *Civil War* crossover issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* offers the most tellingly explicit example of Cap’s moral certainty as the former guides an unsure Spider-Man on where his loyalties ought to lie:

Doesn’t matter what the press says. Doesn’t matter what the politicians or the mobs say. Doesn’t matter if the whole country decides that something *wrong* is something *right*. This nation was founded on one principle above all else: The requirement that we stand up for what we believe, no matter the odds or consequences.

When the mob and the press and the whole world tell you to move, your job is to plant yourself like a tree beside the river of truth, and tell the whole world --

“No, you move.”

(Straczynski 13)

Cap’s words are clear, his motives distinct. Likewise, the storytelling of *The Amazing Spider-Man* #537 progresses without any significant upheaval. The panels employ moment-to-moment closure techniques, making for little if any difficulty in following the action of the story. Cap’s interaction with Spider-Man (*next page, right*) employs a simple six-panel layout, though artist Ron Garney plays a degree with the negative space of the page to force the boundaries of
those panels. His use of the starry sky behind Cap’s head in panel six as a portion of the background of panel one ties the two moments together as a cause-and-effect pair, leading the reader to view these moments as bookends to the page. The four smaller panels that come between sit “above” panels one and six, placing them in a less significant position on the page and inviting the reader to see their content as secondary to where the conversation begins and ends. The page unfolds over the course of normal, chronologically-correct time, the emphasis put on panels one and six serving to highlight the narrative and artistic detail of panels two through five. McCloud notes in *Understand Comics* that time and space occupy the same conceptual space in the Comics medium, and that the western tradition of left-right, top-bottom reading of text has carried over to the less-literal “reading” of a comic book page (McCloud 100). This page from *Amazing Spider-Man* can be similarly read as a simple progression from top-left to bottom-right as the western eye is trained to traverse a page, or it can be read diagonally, top-left to bottom right, and then back to the panels that fall between (left). Either
way, the sense of chronological progression of time -- that is, one panel’s “moment” following the next -- is the effect. McCloud notes that the question of duration is to a degree left to interpretation, noting that “as readers, we’re left with only a vague sense that as our eyes are moving through space, they’re also moving through time” but conceding that the question is easily answered by context clues given by the page: “in most cases it’s not hard to make an educated guess as to the duration of a given sequence, so long as the elements of that sequence are familiar to us” (100). In the case of Cap and Spider-Man, the clues are plentiful: the sameness of the environment from panel to panel, as well as the static nature of the character’s positions allow for an easy interpretation that this conversation occurs over the span of a few minutes, owed to the apparent lack of significant movement.

Returning to the moment of Clint’s target practice in My Life as a Weapon #1 one recalls that no amount of contextual framing allows the page’s twenty panels to unfold as a chronologically-ordered expression of moments, nor do the static nature of the environments provide the same degree of durational certainty that it does in the case of The Amazing Spider-Man. The difference lies in Fraction and Aja’s intentional use of the page’s layout to confound time through a simultaneous expression of multiple moments as previously identified. Rather than a case of artistic panache, author and artist use this lack of linear chronology to reflect the similarly complex position of their main character. What can initially be read as a means to highlight Clint’s lack of heroic stature -- a character renowned for his archery prowess cannot hit a bull’s eye under the most controlled circumstances imaginable? -- can likewise be read as a reflection of his inner turmoil more so than anything outward. For the simultaneous presence is not any distraction but Kate Bishop, his protege and a young woman for whom Clint repeatedly admits to having feelings that transcend that of mentor-to-mentee (“She’s pretty great” is Clint’s
regular refrain, the frequency of which quickly becomes problematic and uncomfortable for both reader and, eventually, Bishop herself). The embarrassment of Clint misfiring his arrow functions both as a means to demonstrate his heroic impotence and as a reflection of his ability to behave in a properly moral fashion where his protege is concerned. Despite his best efforts Clint is conflicted, ironically demonstrating the presence of a moral awareness while simultaneously admitting to being able to act upon it.

On the topic of time and development of narrative in Comics, critic Marc Singer notes that many artistic teams eschew a more standardized depiction of time because such a thing is not the priority of their storytelling (Singer 57). Germaine to the *Hawkeye* conversation is Singer’s assertion that the story is “part of the discourse, not its origin”: applied to *Hawkeye*, the sequence of Clint’s misfired arrow and its more mundane circumstances, including its relationship to time, do not themselves constitute the entirety of the conversation at work (57). Singer borrows the concept of the narrative aspects of the story as part, not whole, of the story’s full impact from Gerard Genette’s concept of the narrative’s depiction of time as “quasi-time”, or a conceptual representation of time that is at best a facsimile of the real thing (Genette 35). The depiction of time, which McCloud likewise recognizes as a mutable, representative element on the Comics page (95-8) becomes then another means to develop the larger picture of the story’s meaning: it is not the chief conveyor of the story but rather another one of the tools used to tell it. Singer and Genette’s perspective gives credence to the claim that Cap in *The Amazing Spider-Man* and Clint in *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* are being developed as a means of the discursive elements of time as much as any other narrative element. Cap never wavers in his resolve, so much so that the narrative elements of his story -- including the way in which they are depicted as unfolding in time -- are likewise straightforward and resolute. By contrast, Clint is a
complicated man with a great degree of uncertainty in his choices, his skills, and his partnerships. Fraction and Aja use a more complicated implementation of time in their narrative to reflect a likewise complicated individual.
Chapter Three: Language as Character

Clint’s inner turmoil and Fraction/Aja’s use of time to depict it comes into further focus in the grander scheme Hawkeye’s premiere story arc, centering around the machinations of a burly group of vaguely Russian mobsters to empty Clint’s Bed-Stuy apartment building for purposes of an ill-defined money laundering and real estate scheme. True to form, Clint falls into this plot not through the nuance and fastidiousness of his crime solving panache but through sheer dumb luck, a pattern mirrored by his dog, Lucky, in the eleventh issue of the series, “Pizza is My Business” and again by Clint in the series’ nineteenth issue, “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke”. Fraction and Aja use Clint’s and Lucky’s difficulties in triumphing over the machinations of those poised to do them harm to illustrate the complexity of their title lead not through a manipulation of time and sequence, but by a meta-textual subversion of two other essential elements of the Comics page: language and visual layout. In this chapter I employ an application of semiotic theory to posit that the use of surrogates for textual language over the course of “Lucky”, “Pizza is My Business”, and “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke” are used to heighten the stories’ linguistic subjectivity in order to reflect the uncertainty, confusion, and ultimate incapabilities of the characters experiencing them.

Following a disastrous and unresolved bit of heroism that culminates with a fall from a city high-rise and prolonged hospitalization, Clint happens upon what he presumes to be the forced eviction of one of his neighbors -- though he is initially unsure, and remains partially in the dark for the duration of his well-intentioned intercession, as Clint does not speak whatever language he hears. Given that the reader experiences the story from Clint’s limited perspective, the resulting speech bubble is only partially 'translated' (next page, right). The presence of the speech bubbles suggest that Hawkeye does register the presence of a conversation, but in
moments like these it is the words he does not comprehend that tell us what we are meant to
know as readers. The insertion of words that are not a translation of what is being said, nor a
phonetic approximation of the sounds being uttered, frames the sensory input it in a way that is
not accessible to those experiencing it, keeping us as in-the-dark as the characters with whom we
are intended to sympathize. Any language that Clint does not understand is presented to the
reader as a presumptive maybe-language: captions such as “(Some Spanish-sounding stuff?)” and
“(Russian, maybe?)”

reinforce the idea that
Clint is not a worldly jack-
of-all-trades but a talented
grunt (Fraction, “Lucky”
5).

Sequences like the
above remind the reader of
the world they are
exploring and the limits of the guy with whom they’re exploring it. Fraction and Aja use
moments such as these as a gentle nudge towards the expectations of the genre even as they
challenge the assumptions of the medium’s ability to engage meaningful structural constructs.
Language in particular is a major conceit in the structuralist analysis of any work, being itself the
key system involved in conventional storytelling. Ferdinand de Saussure outlines in his “Course
in General Linguistics” that language is an exchange of values, neither defining nor clarifying
but always shifting the burden of explanation to the next element in the chain of meaning (858).
Saussure defines “the linguistic unit,” as “a double entity, one formed by the association of two
terms”: the first, the “sound-image […] the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression it makes on our senses” and the second, “the concept, which is generally more abstract” (852)(853). The connection between the idea conveyed by the language and the language itself, here represented as both textual to the reader and implicitly auditory to Clint intra-textually, is strained by a humorous treatment of Clint’s inability to understand the language being spoken. The creative team nonetheless convey the meaning that they intend, but the reader finds that it has little to do with the words themselves. In his brief overview on post-structuralism in Literary Theory: an Introduction, Terry Eagleton critiques the structuralist approach to the language binary (sound-image to concept) as inherently limiting, suggesting that any push towards an all-encompassing truth to be discovered through the purveyor of the linguistic system is inherently flawed:

   Just as Western philosophy has been ‘phonocentric’, centered on the ‘living voice’ and deeply suspicious of script, so also it has been in a broader sense ‘logocentric’, committed to a brief in some ultimate ‘word’, presence, truth, or reality which will act as the foundation of all our thought, language, and experience. (114)

   Eagleton further suggests that Western approach to language has been to attempt to establishing what Saussure alludes to in “General Linguistics” as impossible: a means to end the constant shift of semiotic explication, what Eagleton describes as “the lynchpin or fulcrum of a whole thought-system, the sign around which all others revolve and which all others obediently reflect” (114). Eagleton finds this venture to be fruitless due to the inherent impossibility of seeking out a purveyor of the thought-system, given that any such explanation of the system would only be possible from within the system’s confines: were the entity responsible for the
thought-system truly its master, Eagleton argues, surely it would exist beyond the system and be wholly unreachable to us within it. If language is a constant string of signifiers, as is the structuralist claim, then it stands to reason that the entirety of human communication is based around them - to try to capture an concept outside that system would be for anyone within the system inconceivable. This is in miniature what Fraction and Aja orchestrate for Clint: by neglecting to provide a translation or even a phonetic approximation of the language he hears, Clint is kept outside of the conversation, it becoming a linguistic system to which he has no access. Clint is rendered impotent: in response to this unknown, the hero can only muster “Uh oh”, and stand by as a befuddled spectator (Fraction, “Lucky” 5). It isn’t until he forces his own system onto the proceedings (by speaking English and thereby entreating his neighbors to respond in kind) that he can affect any kind of change, establishing the necessity of working within an established system of linguistic transference in order to parse any semblance of meaning whatsoever. The linguistic system is necessary for meaning - attempting to articulate anything outside its confines is, as in Clint’s case, not possible.

Yet Clint does recognize the sounds he hears as a language -- is he truly outside of the system? Clint is not as hapless as he first seems for his ability to discern an approximate language derivative for what he hears is a reasonable counterpoint, yet some uncertainty remains. Clint successfully narrows down the language he hears to “Spanish-sounding”: presumably he infers patterns of articulation reminiscent of the no less than ten recognized dialects of the Spanish language itself, though he may likewise be referring to any number of the Latin-influenced languages that share a common root with Spanish. Clint’s ability to understand some resemble to Spanish in what he hears is, all things considered, none too impressive - nor does it speak to his expertise nor savviness as a detective-errant. What it does do, however, is bring into
consideration the idea of the “Transcendental Signified”, or the concept of a universal meaning that supersedes all means of communication and is therefore understandable on a grand level (Derrida 49). Jacques Derrida’s discussion of the “TS” is tied to what the theorist-philosopher deems the logocentrism evident in some schools of structuralist thought, the search for a means to return to a purer form of communication of meaning: that of speech (Powell 23). Here Derrida and Eagleton overlap: logocentrism thought views speech as the purer form of communicating the relationship between signifier and signified, with writing being an offshoot of said relationship. It follows that an ideal work would see the return to a focus on speech as a means of communicating meaning for its alleged closer semblance to the concept, or signified. Fraction and Aja bring this relationship into question in Hawkeye by suggesting that, for Clint, the presence of spoken word is anything but clearer. Hawkeye hears speech, the alleged purist signifier of thought, and is no closer to an understanding of the concepts that the language signifies than he was moments before -- he cannot even recognize for certain which of the numerous signifying systems he is hearing. Moreover, for the reader, an approximation of sound on the page -- Clint’s “Spanish-sounding stuff!” -- is far less clear than what occurs when Clint engages his neighbor in conversation: a return to the text of the story means a return to understanding. Through the ineptitude of Clint Barton, the presence of a Transcendental Signifier is subjected to heavy scrutiny.

Fraction and Aja engage in an ironic game of subversion by positioning their character as a man who observes but does not understand. A meditation on the purity of audial linguistic systems comes about as a result of Clint’s incomprehension of one of the most prolific non-English languages on the planet: arguably a weakness on his behalf, and as in the case of his failure to impress with his weapon of choice later in the issue, one that works to establish him as
a hero found lacking. His inability to understand the goings-on of his own story accentuates his hopelessness even as the character’s position as an Everyman, a ‘hero of the people’, fits nicely at odds with the complexities of the storytelling structure that his creators have built around him.

In *Hawkeye #11*, “Pizza is My Business”, Fraction and Aja’s continue to build their character’s complexity through language play and structure. The issue introduces a menagerie of symbol, onomatopoeia, and occasional text language - a combination of diegetic and non-diegetic images - to form the story of a murder conspiracy as seen from an unexpected perspective: with his owner oblivious and a murderer afoot, it falls to Hawkeye’s adopted dog, Lucky, to follow a winding series of clues around his owner’s apartment building in a desperate bid to find whodunnit. In lieu of narrative boxes more traditional for the Comics form, the reader is instead shown a mix of symbols laid out in a kind of flowchart pattern (right) representative of Lucky’s way of sorting out his senses.

Lucky’s sense of smell is chief among those tools, even as the mystery of what that sensory input means comes to be just as big a puzzle to solve as the murder that is the impetus of the story. These panels demonstrate to a reader what cannot be articulated by Lucky for lack of an adequate language set, a series of non-diegetic images intended to stand-in for Lucky’s inarticulate senses.
A second language puzzle occurs when Lucky is in the presence of people holding a conversation. Being a dog, Lucky does not have the capacity to understand speech save for the handful of words to which he has been conditioned to respond. In these scenes (left), the reader only gets snippets of the larger dialogue exchange – only the words that Lucky would recognize, such as his name and a few commands. These panels serve as a game of contextualization for the reader: Fraction and Aja give us more than enough information, even in the scattered sentence fragments Lucky “knows”, to follow the larger conversation to their logical end. Whereas with Lucky’s sensory flowcharts the author and artist test our ability to work outside of our comfortable sender-receiver communication array, these partial-word puzzles force us to test just how well we can work within it. It becomes a game of piecing diegetic and non-diegetic sensory images together in order to receive the whole picture.
The reader is also presented with spreads in which both diegetic and non-diegetic images occur at once through multiple modes of communication (*below, right*). Lucky is processing what little spoken language he recognizes at the same time that he is associating his people with his own form of symbolic narrative (...and ultimately he leaves, likely because the whole thing is too damned complicated).

An element common to all of Lucky’s spreads (likewise present but downplayed by the action in Clint’s arrow-loosing sequence) is what comic writer and historian Will Eisner referred to as the “reader track.” As described in *Comics and Sequential Art*, the reader track is the means by which the writer-illustrator of a comic dictates the order in which the reader takes in the textual and image-based elements of the storytelling (41). Eisner notes that the presence of Comics as a visual medium, which the reading population may be inclined to view spatially rather than sequentially due to its similarity with visual art, has in the past required deliberate sequencing through textual and/or visual cues in order to assist the reader in the ordering of the story’s narrative. Eisner’s study of reader direction through page layout is echoed in “The Arrow and the Grid,” in which comics historian John Witek observes the carryover of cultural reading...
practices to Comics that grew out of the page sequencing Eisner observed. Absent of contradictory textual or visual cues, Witek notes that examples of the Comics medium are by default read in the style of a culture’s prosaic works: in the West, this means a left-to-right, top-to-bottom read of the comic book page (Witek 152). Subverting the prosaic reading pattern in the case of Comics, such as through alphanumeric panel ordering or other visual indicators, reveals the comic book panel as possessing a duality of function: “panels on the page always create narrative meaning both as sequences and as spatial arrangements: this double-text is implicit in all comics forms, but it comes to the fore most fully on comic books” (153). Witek’s purpose is to explore the evolution of the comic book page to include more advanced means of training the reader’s sequential intake of the action beyond artifacts such as arrows and numbering, which both Witek and Eisner recognize as effective, if archaic, forms of controlling the reader’s absorption of the story (155). Eisner’s reader track is evident in Clint’s arrow- loosing sequence in “The Vagabond Code” as a diegetic moment within the story: the progression of the action of drawing and loosing the bowstring and the articulation of Kate’s dialogue both impress upon the reader the ‘correct’ sequence of reading these panels through the use of cause-effect action and recognizable speech as markers to ‘correct’ ordering.

Lucky’s understanding of his owners’ argument and his dawning conflict concerning his feelings about each of them are far less sequentially specific, asking the reader to focus on the duality of purpose instead of a proper sequence for the concepts. The conversation about sequence and ambiguous ordering of input means more structural complexity for the pages themselves - the reader is given no real idea of meaning or takeaway, or even of a place to begin in most circumstances of Lucky’s flowchart thoughts. As with their use of time in “The Vagabond Code” and language in “Lucky”, Fraction and Aja’s employment of non-specific
sequence of order in “Pizza is My Business” stems from a deliberate callback to genre, allowing once again for the expectations of their storytelling tropes to inform the nuance of its structure.

For the sake of argument, consider a traditionally western read of the page: the reader track compels the reader first to understand the verbal argument that Hawkeye and Kate are having by merit of its being by barest margin the topmost piece of input on the page. The reader takes in what little language is available to Lucky from left to right in Kate’s speech bubble. The left-to-right, top-to-bottom structure that the Comics medium borrows from western prose likewise suggests a pattern of input for Lucky’s non-diegetic sensory input chart, starting at the top of each chart as we might in a dialogue bubble, the alternatively-colored sections of the full-page spread having sectioned this single moment in time into thirds (Lucky’s “Hawkeye” chart; the Kate-and-Hawkeye argument; Lucky’s “Kate” chart) and thus compelling us to read the leftmost chart first. Lucky parses what he knows of Hawkeye, beginning first with his association with the bow and arrow. Next comes a simplified visual representation of Hawkeye himself, followed by the ideas that Lucky most associates with him. Lucky concludes his analysis of Clint Barton with the inverted arrowhead that serves as the latter’s superhero icon: a diegetic image that conveys Hawkeye’s identity in a nonverbal way and conveys to the reader the information that Lucky cannot articulate in words. To Lucky, Clint Barton is Hawkeye, the archer, the hero; his analysis begins and ends thus.

Hawkeye is on the defensive in his argument with Kate, given his more prone body language and Kate’s accusatory stance; also of note is Kate’s pointing both bow and finger, person and heroic identity, at Barton — this is an accusation on a personal as well as professional level. Lucky’s cocked ear and the presence of three non-diegetic inquisitional lines above his head tell us where Lucky’s attention is focused: on Kate, whose flow-chart begins in a similar
fashion as Clint’s but ends quite differently. Lucky sees Kate Bishop as an archer as well, understandable given her place as the Hawkeye protégé, but his assessment of this second human companion deviates soon thereafter. Whereas his assessment of Barton is tied to the utilitarian and professional (coffee pots, coffee cups, dog food, the Hawkeye icon) Lucky’s assessment of Kate is tied to softer, human aspects. With Kate Lucky associates flowers, wine, and lipstick – whether these are traces of scents that he picks up or memories of times past is unclear (are those lips the waxy aroma of Kate’s makeup or the memory of kisses bestowed by her?); what is relevant is that the end of his summation of Kate Bishop is not professional, but personal. Lucky’s assessment of his friendlier human companion ends with a heart, perhaps the most common non-diegetic image in the medium. In Clint Barton, Lucky sees a hero, a professional, his partner; in Kate Bishop, Lucky sees a friend, someone who cares.

Significant to both flowcharts is the central image, a simplified version of each character’s face. Here Clint Barton and Kate Bishop appear as cartoonish versions of themselves, with even less photorealism than in Aja’s already simple character designs. Taken structurally, we can refer to Scott McCloud’s work in *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art* to understand the significance of making a comic image less photo-real. McCloud focuses on the tendency in some forms of Comics to switch from panel to panel between the photorealistic and what McCloud calls the “iconic,” or representational (McCloud 46). McCloud explains this stylistic choice as one pertaining also to narrative development, a means of emphasizing the objects:

for example, while *most* characters were designed simply, to assist in *reader-identification* – *other* characters were drawn more realistically in order to *objectify* them, emphasizing their “*otherness*” from the reader. (44)
Adapting McCloud’s explanation of the objectification and iconography of the Japanese Comics form to the *iconification* of Clint and Kate’s faces during Lucky’s flowchart-thoughts provides an explanation for the otherwise abrupt-seeming re-definition of either character’s looks. In this moment Lucky is seeing both of his human companions not as the people he knows them as but as the ideas with which he associates them: Kate and Clint’s *iconified* faces do not represent themselves (their diegetic forms) but rather the canine-signifier that Lucky associates with them.

Viewing Lucky’s flowcharts from top to bottom as Witek suggests is the western default of the Comics form presents a linear narrative - perhaps where one does not exist. It is just as easy to begin Lucky’s flowcharts from the central point of the iconified Clint-and-Kate faces, building outward in Lucky’s perspective of both in a kind of free-association of sense-memory. There is after all little, if anything, in the layout of any of Lucky’s flowcharts to point us toward any concrete meaning save for that for that which we take from prosaic reading practice. The conclusion that Lucky comes to about either of his human companions - Clint as Hawkeye, Kate as love or friend - might just as easily be the beginning of his association if we consider the flowcharts from the perspective of their ‘thinker’ and begin from the bottom of the page rather than the top. A top-to-bottom prosaic read of Lucky’s charts is further questioned by Fraction and Aja’s aforementioned use of color to divide the spread into three vertical panels, invoking the left-to-right reading practice. Does the reader read top-to-bottom, and see an implicit comparison of Clint and Kate? Do they read bottom-to-top, from Lucky’s perspective, and experience the flowcharts as a series of associate traits that both end at the common image of an archer, suggesting Lucky’s conflict in seeing both his companions as the same? Do they read left to right, perhaps beginning at the central icon of Clint Barton before encountering his argument with Kate, and only then find out about her? Or do they read the page as one moment,
recognizing as Witek did the meaning derived from the use of space? What could be read as a confusing structure is in fact a deliberate ploy on the part of the creative team to bring the reader further into the world of a dog, whose patterns of logic would conceivably function in a less linear fashion than that of a human’s. It serves Lucky to be concerned not with an a-to-b chain of events but to be aware of strings of information as they occur to him in the way that a dog might: he is a sensory input machine, unconcerned with logical sense as it has little bearing on his day-to-day. As with the development of Clint’s *impressive mediocrity* in the arrow-loosing sequence and his inability to function outside of a familiar language binary, Lucky’s psuedo-linguistic flowcharts serve to characterize him through their complex structure. Yet again Fraction and Aja use form to beget character, and visa-versa.

The repetition of compositional elements of form and style allows us to view two works, even those with disparate subject matter, as similar, and determine the essential qualities of the genre, medium, or storytelling niche that they share. In the case of Fraction and Aja’s *Hawkeye*, they also allow us to form thematic comparisons between two otherwise disparate moments in the narrative. Clint’s position as the under-informed detective through diegetic and non-diegetic means is developed similarly in “Pizza is My Business,” wherein Lucky faces the same lack of speech-language comprehension: speech bubbles represent his lack of comprehension, their words scratched out and blurred to signify that he cannot even place a possibly country of origin for his canine lack of understanding. He recognizes sound, but nothing else – save for the words that he, as a dog, would know through training. The same logic is applied to his attempt at rationalizing what he senses of his surroundings through flowchart. This time, his incomprehension is represented through the development of sequences without discernible meaning or order. Lucky’s ideas flow freely, connected but without direction or conclusion. In
these moments he, too, is the hamstrung detective, unable to parse meaning and thus without a full picture of the situation. His confusion is highlighted by the complexity of the sequences in which he is central, which direct the reader’s attention to their complexity for the sake of shoring up Lucky’s perspective. Fraction and Aja adopt the same storytelling technique – the same structure – to the characterization of Lucky, who views Clint as a business partner and therefore after whom he models his detecting practice. This attention to an established trope within the style of the genre of this comic allows for the structuralist analysis of the work to develop characterization for Lucky and Clint Barton based not on traditional, text-based literary analysis but on an understanding of how the form and genre of the *Hawkeye* comic functions. More importantly, though, is the return to an emphasis on a structural storytelling uncommon to the genre brought about by the characters’ comic incomprehension of its significance.

Despite a rudimentary understanding of Clint and Kate’s circumstances and his place amid them, Lucky is unequipped to arbitrate their spat and remains at best an invested observer. Lucky is likewise unsuccessful in his attempts to solve the murder of one of his and Clint’s close friends, despite having ample evidence and a literal nose for clues. Lucky is simply outmatched by human intellect and motive; put simply -- he is *just a dog*. Just as Hawkeye’s ineptitude relative to his super-powered Avengers teammates is a given, so too is Lucky’s incapability to solve an intricately-woven murder mystery. Lucky’s failure as a sleuth mirrors most closely Clint’s language shortcomings in “Lucky”, but it likewise finds a parallel in the failed target practice of “The Vagabond Code”: a character to whom one specific skill is a given (Clint and his arrows, Lucky and his canine sense of smell and tracking) leaving his audience wanting.

In much the same way that dogs are said to resemble their owners, Lucky in his haplessness comes to resemble Clint Barton: both are hellbent on doing what they perceive to be
the right thing, even if neither seems well-endowed to be successful. Fraction and Aja cement this point with an issues-apart splash page testimony to dog and owner in *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* #11 and *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* #19 (side by side, below). Both Clint and Lucky adopt a protective stance over their common home, though in both spreads the building is positioned as larger than either man or beast could hope to defend. The apartment building, not the character, demands the bulk of the page and reader’s eye; it is monolithic, expanding beyond the page’s limits, and the character is a relative spec by comparison.

Noteworthy also is the insignificant presence of both characters’ modes of defense. Clint, armed with his bow, parallels Lucky armed with the flowcharts that have come to represent his acute sensory capabilities. The reader is reminded of the shared ineffectiveness of the characters’ skill sets in surmounting the challenge at hand, that their standing sentry are not acts of upstanding courage and inner strength by assured heroes but instead defiant jabs from two plucky underdogs. Both Clint and Lucky have a personal stake in their fight, arguably more so than they would if they were fighting for a faceless ideal in the vein of Captain America’s heroisms. Clint and Lucky’s vestment in their conflicts appear self-serving if viewed from a more traditionally heroic perspective, but when taken together with that precedes them -- their ineptitude and resulting failings coupled with their struggle to do right against odds that are not only
unfavorable but provably superior -- underscores the challenge of genre expectation through the presentation of their title leads’ subversive characteristics.

The ultimate exercise in exploiting and subverting genre expectation in the service of character development -- and vice versa -- comes in Fraction and Aja’s *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* #19. Aptly titled “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke,” the issue depicts the effects of a disastrous bout of well-intentioned heroism that leaves Clint temporarily deafened even as the threats to his apartment building and those around him reach a dangerous climax. Fraction and Aja continue their use of the speech bubble as both a diegetic and non-diegetic story element to capture Clint’s struggle with the loss of an decidedly human (rather than super-human) capability. For a hero whose skill set is already comparably limited as comic book superheroes are concerned, the removal of Clint’s hearing sets him behind even his equally non-superpowered villains in the Fraction/Aja run, the Tracksuit Mafia that threatens to overtake his building. On a metatextual level, Fraction and Aja again play with language as is depicted in the Comics medium, asking the reader through Clint’s difficulties how the comic book page can aptly convey the silence of hearing loss to the previously hearing-capable.
Fraction and Aja again tie a character complexity to the structural uniqueness of their storytelling to demonstrate the inextricable nature of their leading man and his story. The storytellers further complicate their use of diegetic and non-diegetic imagery introduced “Lucky” and “The Vagabond Code” by adding a third image-word option, the *hermeneutic image*, into the fray. Whereas diegetic images (be they the image representation of physical objects or the written/drawn representation of speech) are intended to exist in an interactable sense within the reality of the story and non-diegetic images are understood to be intangible but still within the scope of the story (for instance, representation of a character’s thoughts), the hermeneutic image is outside the reach of any character or story component. In *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods* Randy Duncan defines the hermeneutic image as those which “do not represent either the physical or mental reality of the fictional world: they are not meant to be a part of the diegesis,” the story’s reality, calling them instead “the author’s commentary” on the story’s unfolding (Duncan 45). While the concept of authorial commentary apart from the act of storytelling does invite some confusion -- barring divine intervention, what part of the storytelling process *isn’t* arguably author commentary? -- the reader can take Duncan to mean that the chief difference between the hermeneutic image and those of the diegesis is character access: the hermeneutic image is reserved only for the reader, whereas the diegetic and non-diegetic are in some way accessed by reader and storytelling component (character, narrator, etc.). Lucky’s sensory-input flowcharts in “Pizza is My Business” thus retain their position as non-diegetic images: they are not tangible nor are they able to be interacted with, but they are what Duncan calls a part of the “mental reality” of the story by being Lucky’s visualized thoughts and sense experiences. Similarly, the distention of time in “The Vagabond Code” and Clint’s language-barrier interactions in “Lucky” are likewise instances of non-diegetic imagery:
both moments exist for characters within the story even if they cannot be directly controlled or manipulated.

When the reader compares the above-given examples with the images used to tell the story of “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke,” it is apparent that a new degree of image-consciousness is in play. Before any discussion of the semiotic significance of the visual language modifiers in this issue can be had, however, it is important to address briefly the means by which the circumstance of Clint’s deafness is explored. Fraction and Aja’s approach the topic evokes the social model of disability and impairment theorized by Sara Goering in “Rethinking Disability: the Social Model of Disability and Chronic Disease”. The specifics of the differences between Clint’s physical impairment (his hearing loss) and his growing sense of disability stemming from the social and psychological ramifications of his circumstances will be addressed further in Chapter Four as a further symptom of his deviating from the heroic norm; the discussion of his hearing impairment in this chapter is instead focused on the visual representation of its symptoms and how Fraction and Aja use them to further characterize Clint’s psychology and deviant character.

Fraction and Aja present Clint’s deafness not with characters in speaking-pantomime as a reader might expect, but with empty speech bubbles (right). The use of speech bubbles outside of their intended use (as non-diegetic representations of the intangible storytelling element of speech) challenges the perspective of the reader to understand what is being depicted: if speech bubbles are the visual-textual diegesis’s way of conveying that which is heard, what sound does
**an empty speech bubble represent?** Moreover, how does the inclusion of “soundless” sound work to develop the character’s plight or the mounting action of the story?

Charles Hatfield acknowledges in *An Art of Tensions* the effects that pictographics, diagrams, and other non-textual representations of spoken language can have on the way that a reader perceives a Comics story. Hatfield’s assessment is that the inclusion of iconography, pictographics, or other text substitutes to convey the same signified concept usually carried by text forces the reader into a conversation that becomes less about text-and-visuals and more about symbols-to-symbols. Hatfield, as McCloud did before him, argues that the presence of dialogue is but another symbolic facsimile of that which the Comics medium must rely on representative objects to communicate:

> Such visual/verbal tension results from the juxtaposition of symbols that function diegetically and symbols that function non-diegetically -- that is, the mingling of symbols that “show” and symbols that “tell”. More precisely, we may say that *symbols that show* are symbols that purport to depict, in a literal way, figures and objects in the imagined world of the comic, while *symbols that tell* are those that offer a kind of diacritical commentary on the images, or (to use another rough metaphor), a “soundtrack” for the images. (Hatfield 134)
Applying Hatfield’s example to “Pizza is My Business,” for example, the reader might ascribe the title of *symbols that show* to the diegetic pieces of the story: Lucky himself, the apartment building, Clint, Kate, the corpse on the roof. By contrast, the dialogue Clint overhears but does not understand in “Lucky”, the “*spanish-sounding stuff!*,” offers a soundtrack to the images depicted in a similar fashion to Lucky’s sensory-dialogue boxes. In each case, that which appears within the speech bubbles (or, in Lucky’s case, as close to a speech bubble as a non-anthropomorphized dog can display) translates elements from the scene in which they appear to the reader -- elements that exist within the diegesis but are inaccessible by restraint of the Comic form. Hatfield’s idea of the tension arising between the visual and the textual is here resolved by the reader’s understanding of the functionality of the speech bubble and its canine counterpart: a relationship between what is shown (Clint over hearing an argument, Lucky taking in his surroundings) and what is told (the language overheard, the smells and sounds observed). The complexity of the *Hawkeye* comic comes from what is further *shown* by each of these “symbols that ‘show’”: as discussed earlier, Clint’s inability to adequately resolve the overheard argument reveals a degree of ineptitude that is mirrored by Lucky’s inability to draw satisfactory conclusions from of the sensory inputs he receives. Thus the “symbols that ‘tell’” interact with those that “tell” on two levels: first by underscoring the action of the scene through their presence as non-diegetic storytelling elements, and again by serving as hermeneutic imagery intended to convey a depth of character beyond the grasp of anything or anyone within the diegesis itself. “At its broadest level,” Hatfield says of this interaction, “what we call visual/verbal tension may be characterized as the clash and collaboration of different codes of significance, whether or not written words are used” (134).
The question of what sound an empty speech bubble makes, as seen in “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke,” might come down to whether the reader considers the lack of sound to carry storytelling significance. The speech bubbles attributed to Clint’s brother Barney and the attending physician provide Hatfield’s “soundtrack” to the images in that they convey to the reader a sense of what the visual cannot afford: they add a sense of the audial to the diegesis of the story, even if, as in this case, the audial is silence. There is a degree of “telling” in the symbology of the empty speech bubble, and together with the symbols that “show” (Clint’s bandaged head, the word “DEAF” prominently displayed on a computer monitor) the symbol sets function to establish diegesis. Fraction and Aja challenge the reader’s understanding of non-diegetic and diegetic images, however, when they play with the shape of the empty speech bubbles to convey emotion (next page, left). Practiced readers of the Comics form will recognize the spiked style of Barney’s speech bubble as one that suggests aggression or anger, but given Clint’s deafness the image is paradoxical. If the reader is following this story from Clint’s perspective (suggested by the non-diegetic lack of text within the speech bubbles to account for Clint’s loss of hearing in the diegesis), there should be no means by which Clint -- and by extension the reader -- can understand Barney to be upset. Any visual cues that would otherwise convey the emotion of unheard words are also lost: Clint is keeping deliberately aloof, not even looking at his brother, so much so that Barney resorts to physically grabbing for Clint in the following panel to gather his attention. This visual cue of Barney’s aggressive speech cannot therefore be intended for Clint, as it is impossible for him to perceive. It is arguably accessible to Barney, who has at this moment in the story retained his hearing, though the conclusion of its being intended for him in a sender-receiver relationship is unsatisfactory: Barney would have no reason to need to access his own audial input, having been the one to provide it, and his
character’s ability to communicate in a hearing-normative fashion is tangential to the conflict at hand. Hermeneutically, the image is intended for the reader, as a means by which to draw the reader into Clint’s circumstances by maintaining a lack of textual (and therefore audial) input but allowing us to understand the emotional cues of his absent voice in much the same way that we might take context cues from an unheard person’s body language and facial expression. The presence of the altered speech bubble confirms Barney’s state of mind not for Clint, but for those reading his story. In this Fraction and Aja seamlessly transition the tool of a blank speech bubble from a non-diegetic storytelling element to a hermeneutic one within the span of a couple of story pages, using it both to develop the conceit of their fictional world and offer metatextual thematic development of the growing divide between Barney and Clint.

It’s the divide between the two Barton brothers that forms the “b” plot of "The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke", and arguably the action of the main plot as well. Clint and Barney are brought together through circumstance to deal with the fallout of the Tracksuit Mafia’s newest hitmen, and in so doing are forced to grapple with the unpleasantness of their upbringing -- which, apparently, included difficulties with hearing for a young Clint. In the flashback that precedes and mirrors the present-day Bartons’ activity, we learn that Clint was deafened in childhood as a result of an undisclosed accident. Barney served the same function in childhood as he does in the present: he is a grounding element for Clint, who it is shown might have otherwise lost his drive and scrap. Fraction and Aja develop the Clint-and-Barney

*Fraction, Matt (writ.) and David Aja (illus.). “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke”. Hawkeye, vol 4, issue 19, Marvel Comics, 2014, pp.11*
childhood subplot simultaneously with the development of the adult brothers’ plan to rally the apartment building’s residents towards a defense of their home against the Tracksuits, throughout demonstrating that it is from Barney that Clint receives his tendencies to resist backing down -- as well as his indelicacies in doing so. For while Barney demonstrates a brotherly concern for Clint, his approach is not dissimilar from Clint’s towards the now-departed Kate Bishop: Barney antagonizes Clint towards self-preservation, matches his anger with contempt, and refuses his self pity by needling him towards action. The Barton sibling relationship is a complex, love-hate antagonism the roughness of which fits the characters themselves, a complexity Fraction and Aja develop through the symbolic uniqueness afforded by the story’s conceit.

Similar to the language barrier erected in “Lucky” is the use and lack of language in "The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke". In the present Clint’s deafness is addressed by panels of blank speech bubbles (such as Barney’s previously-mentioned), but past-Clint’s deafness is shown through speech bubbles that contain scratchings of could-be dialogue (previous page, right). These examples offer the nuance of comparison to the two Clints’ scenarios: the presence of dialogue, even obscured dialogue, allows the speech bubble to retain some degree of diegetic access for the character. Clint’s being able to register word sounds -- even if he can’t comprehend their
meaning -- suggests an impermanence to his current situation, and in fact gives the reader a wholly different interpretation of their meaning: rather than an absence of sound, the reader interprets an obscured text in a speech bubble as Clint interprets his neighbor’s “Spanish-sounding” dialogue in the premiere issue: as sound without meaning, but sound nonetheless. The etchings, then, become signifiers without a signified, vibrations audible, if only just, but devoid of meaning due to the injury young Clint sustained in the past. A nearly identical scene is shown of the present Clint’s diagnosis, only here the speech bubbles are empty. Structurally the similarities in the two scenes suggest characterization for the main players. In both past and present Clint is seated apart from the doctor and adult influences, implying that even as an adult he in some way still feels like the child in the room; Barney’s placement and posture in the present begs a comparison to Clint’s father in the past, apt given his paternalistic attitude towards his younger brother. The scene of the doctor’s office has changed, even Barney has grown up and assumed a more responsible role, yet Clint remains the same -- ever a man-child, wallowing in his inability to effect meaningful change and constantly finding himself at a disadvantage against forces more capable and prepared than he.

The bubbles lose even a hint of their dialogue because they reflect the attitude of the man from whose perspective the reader would otherwise understand them. Fraction and Aja use an eight panel vertical spread of Clint’s eyes -- first in the past, then in the present -- to connect the two time periods (right), drawing a link between the two and reinforcing how little has changed for Clint. Clint has trod this particular path before, and has been treading it his whole life, and “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke” finds him at his limit. Upon needling from Barney, Clint finally relents and explodes, raging that the Tracksuits have “[taken] everything” from him: his protege, his home, his friends, even his ability to hear (Aja, “Spoke” 10). The lack of even a
facsimile of dialogue in the speech bubbles of Clint’s present represent to the reader a man that has given up: in the past, Clint was able to process his circumstances and develop a means to cope until his hearing returned (albeit with the assistance of some tough love from Barney); there he had the advantage of youth, and the presence of a support structure from the beginning of his crisis. When Barney catches up to Clint in the present it is after Kate’s departure, the murder of one of his friends, his abject failure to adequately protect the building, and shortly before the repeat loss of his hearing.

What Barney does not explicitly know is that it is through Clint’s actions - be it his heroic ineptitude, his interpersonal awkwardness, his inability to tread softly and play the diplomat - that Clint has lost what he has. The Tracksuits are the endgame, but Clint’s deteriorating ability to adequately function in society are the facilitator to his troubles. Barney’s presence in Clint’s both past and present is to remind the younger Barton to always stand in the face of adversity, to “make everything something to HIT WITH. AND HIT THEM UNTIL THEY STOP” (Fraction, “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke” 11) (next page, right). In Clint’s present, Barney’s message of resistance is needed more than ever. Apart from demonstrating the similarity of the past and present circumstances, Fraction and Aja use the empty speech bubbles as a visual representation of that which wouldn’t be available in a tangible sense: Clint’s diminished pride and sense of meaning. As a result of his shattered personal and professional lives Clint has lost hope, and the dialogue bubbles serving as a heuristic representation of his empty hopes for success. The empty
dialogue balloons serve the same purpose in the past, appearing only as the younger Clint abandon’s hope to wallow in self-pity.

Fraction and Aja continue to play with language in alternatively heuristic/diegetic roles to emphasize the growing divide, and eventual reconciliation, of the Barton brothers in the face of the impending Tracksuit siege of Bedford-Stuy. During the course of the argument that is the turning point of Clint’s development as hero and leader, Barney and Clint come to blows in a mirror of the scrap that saw Barney knock sense into his brother in the past. After unsuccessfully getting his brother to see reason, Barney resorts to needling him into physical confrontation in order to break his facade of nonchalance. This altercation begins in the present with Barney’s frustration at Clint’s resignation and unfolds similarly to the heuristic use of the aggressively-styled dialogue balloon from earlier in the story, though this time Fraction and Aja adopt a wholly heuristic visual signifier: the use of drawn American Sign Language fingerspelling.

Fraction and Aja use visual representation of ASL intermittently throughout the run of Clint and Barney’s story, though it is typically...
shown in scenarios in which what is said makes contextual sense as the spelled “dialogue” of a present character -- such as a grudging conversation about Clint and Barney’s shared ability to sign *(previous page, left)*. In other cases the presence of finger-spelled words makes no contextual sense as spoken dialogue, and instead showcases the tension of a scene: Barney and Clint coming to blows is preceding by the elder brother none-too-gently grabbing at the younger, and Clint’s indignation is demonstrated through both an aggressive (empty) word balloon and a floating finger-spelled “W-T-F”: colloquially representing the indignant expletive phrase, “What the fuck” *(below, right)*. The mixture of signifiers in this series of panels demonstrate diegetic, non-diegetic, and heuristic intent: the presence of the dialogue bubble represents the presence of sound, available to the hearing characters in the diegesis; the emptiness of the bubble, as well as its aggressive, “spiky” style, serve as indicators of the raised emotions of that which is spoken without themselves being available visually to characters as they are to the reader; finally, the floating fingerspelled “W-T-F” not only might represent an utterance of surprise on Clint’s behalf, but heuristically comments on suddenly-heightened stakes of the moment, serving as a commentary on the events unfolding and removed from the characters’ perception.
Ultimately Barney brings Clint around on giving his heroism one final try, and Fraction and Aja’s complex character study of the questionably heroic, socially inept, and altogether nuanced and flawed Hawkeye reaches its conclusion. Little of the action of the Barton brother’s conflict with the Tracksuits bears out on the pages of “The Stuff That Don’t Get Spoke”: the lion’s share of the issue is instead devoted to Barney and Clint’s interpersonal development and the atypical use of language in its telling. As elsewhere in the Hawkeye run, Fraction and Aja de-emphasize the heroics of their main character not only because he doesn’t sport a particularly stellar success rate with them but also because they are not what makes him complex: his complexity lies in his personality, his paradoxical reluctance to be the hero that he is apparently incapable of turning away from. Clint’s confrontation with Barney, both in the past and the present, shows that Clint is willing to go to extreme lengths of self-sabotage to prevent himself from rising to his potential: whether for fear of failure or fear of success and the responsibility such a thing would entail, the acts of heroism themselves are of little consequence.

Of final note regarding the dialogue in “The Stuff That Don’t Get Spoke” is the utter lack of any reading guide, translation, or assistance of any kind with the fingerspelling and conventional ASL signs used through the issue. The reader is left entirely on their own in determining what Barney, Clint, and the rest of the characters in the issue are discussing, a scenario not unlike Clint’s initial interaction on the street in “Lucky”. In the event that the reader does not know how to read ASL, the reader is left uncertain of what they are reading, able only to piece together bits of information in the same vein as Clint himself (or, on one rare occasion, Lucky the Pizza Dog). This deliberate obfuscation of meaning might be the largest heuristic
signifier used by the creative team, one that spans the entire issue without doing so explicitly. The lack of any certainty to the reading of “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke” functions as both a way to reinforce the helplessness of their main character and also to speak to the realities of many outside of the world devised by the creative team. Speaking about the development of the story, artist David Aja addressed this stylistic choice: “If while reading Hawkeye #19 you feel you don’t get it all, if you find obstacles, congrats, you’re starting to learn what being disabled is” (@davaja). It is not the narrative, nor any diegetic or non-diegetic element therein, but rather the deliberate potential for misconstruction that Fraction and Aja use to reinforce the characteristics of the man whose story they are telling while highlighting the very real struggles of those who share one of his most unremarkable characteristics.
Chapter Four: The Subversion of the (Super)Hero Archetype

“This running away thing? It’s everything about you that sucks.” In the scope of heroism, seldom is the outright disgust of one’s protege seen as the hallmark of a job well done, and the same is true for Clint Barton. In this chapter I employ a comparison of the development of Clint’s story to the hero journey outline popularized by Joseph Campbell and employed in many (if not most) heroic comic book narratives as a means of tracing the character’s stagnant development. I also employ a comparison of Hawkeye’s depiction of women and disability alongside other examples of the genre in order to further accentuate Clint Barton’s deviant status as a character. This chapter serves to reinforce Clint Barton’s story as a subversion of the traditional hero story, this time through a subversion of narrative expectation as expressed through previously-explored instances of simultaneous aberrations of expected visual structural form.

As discussed previously, the sixth issue of Fraction and Aja’s Hawkeye run, “Six Nights in the Life of…” plays with the linear narrative structure of the typical superhero comic book in order to place subtle emphasis on Clint’s indecision. Caught in the middle of foes he isn’t sure he can handle and uncertain of the collateral damage that will result, the elder Hawkeye considers permanently giving up the mantle and walking away, ostensibly to save people from the fallout that would undoubtedly occur in the event of a showdown between him and the Tracksuit Mafia. But it is a move tinged with cowardice from a hero figure that isn’t always quite heroic. The central thread of Clint Barton’s Hawkeye journey is that his heroism is of the eleventh-hour variety, usually nipping at the heels of whatever carnage he’s invited by satiating his baser desire to hurt bad guys. About the only thing Clint Barton has in common with the true superheroes of his
world is his acknowledgement that he isn’t one of them, having made that distinction himself in his initial outing against the Tracksuits in *Hawkeye* #1:

“*You asked about the Avengers. Y’wanna know the best part about being an Avenger? Having Captain America around you all the time. He just -- the guy just brings out the best in people. You... want to be good when he’s around. You really do. Ivan, look around real quick. Because, right now? Captain America ain’t here.*” (Fraction, “Lucky” 16)

The action surrounding this conversation is key to understanding who Clint is, and why Kate Bishop is so keen to call him out for it. Upon recognizing that the Tracksuits have a legitimate legal claim to the building, Clint is at first noncommittal to his ability to do much about it (right). With some cajoling from his neighbors, and sensing that something larger is afoot, Clint eventually attempts to coerce lead Tracksuit, Ivan, to part with the building by buying it himself; when this does not pan out, all legal claims to the building are forgotten in the drag-out brawl that Clint instigates to dig himself out of the mafiosos’ den into which he had earlier strongarmed his way. This pattern of thoughtlessness directly brings about the action of the entire story arch but exacerbates circumstances to involve the crippling of his brother, the assassination of his neighbor and friend Grills, and the near death of Arrow/Lucky, the “Pizza Dog” narrator of issue eleven. It is actions like these which also ultimately drive the younger Hawkeye, Kate Bishop, away.

Kate, for her being around him most, recognizes Clint’s behavior not as the standard lone wolf machinations of the antihero, but as the failing of a man-child that is constantly at odds with his desires and his needs. It’s not just that Clint is running away that “sucks”; Kate is very careful in her admonition. She sees that the running away is “everything about him” that is to be
detested. “Running away” is the culminating step in a practiced process of impulsivity, shirking responsibility, crippling doubt, and last-minute goodhearted motivation that consistently proves to do more harm than good overall.

Easy money has Kate Bishop as Clint’s conscience from the start. She is introduced to the reader as a moral equal of sorts, sharing in Clint’s ideals as much as his hero alias and skillset, even as her role as his protege implies needed tutelage. Yet she demonstrates more good sense than her mentor on a regular basis and initially appears to ground Clint in the reality of his situation and the limits of his power. In this way Kate is not unlike any number of “spunky” superhero sidekicks, her femininity, relative youth, and inexperienced vulnerability making a comparison to Carrie Kelley’s turn as Robin in *The Dark Knight Returns* most apt. Both Kate Bishop and Carrie Kelley serve battle-scarred vigilantes that take it upon themselves to wage a war against injustice that nobody asked them to fight; though whereas Frank Miller’s grizzled, battle-scarred Batman finds his humanity through a need to protect and set an example for his young charge, Clint’s inability to do the same is the catalyst for her eventual departure.

The parallel position of both Kelley and Bishop as supporting heroines tangential to their male heroic mentors invites a feminist critique of the comic book (super)hero archetype. In “Second Wave Feminism in the Pages of *Lois Lane*,” Jennifer Stuller asserts that any meaningful feminist critique of the narrative form must first focus on the female characters’ proximity to narrative significance: “In the narrative, is a woman the protagonist, if not, how is she positioned in relation to the main character?” (Stuller 238). Stuller further cautions against the mistake of presuming the importance of a female character due to proximal status alone, noting that even significant female characters often become motivations for the central male to grow and change, thereby serving their most significant purpose off-panel (238). In the superhero genre, stirring
change in the male protagonist oftentimes requires the death or disfigurement of the female character, further delegitimizing the presence of the female character.

Precisely this occurs on the pages of Frank Miller and Klaus Janson’s The Dark Knight Returns through Carrie Kelley’s turn as Robin, the young protege to an aged and brutalized Batman. Kelley’s origin story is promising, seeing her rise out of her drug-addled parent’s neglect and join the Batman’s war on crime not on the grace of superhuman gifts but on pure drive and determination (Hawkeye would be proud). Rather than continuing to exist on her own terms, however, Carrie becomes a surrogate for the past -- male -- Robin figures upon the official bestowing of the mantle. The first of Carrie Kelley’s first post-scare debriefs in the Batcave sees her sitting silently as Batman and Alfred discuss her future without her input, despite her having proved herself a valuable asset in battle (above, right). Alfred, Batman’s surrogate father figure and long-standing steward, refers to Carrie, in her presence, as merely “the girl”, robbing her further -- Carrie is not only without agency, she is now without a sense of identity beyond her sex (Miller 84). Though Batman is quick to point out that she has a name, both men nonetheless come to a conclusion about her future in their crime-fighting endeavors for her, rather than inviting her insight or wishes (84). Batman’s musings that Carrie is the presence that he needs to turn the tide of Gotham’s crimewave come alongside imagery of his being suited
up for combat, patched and reinforced against the ravages of time and experience, suggesting that Kelley is another piece of equipment for him, a piece of his arsenal rather than an individual in her own right. By scene’s end Batman is again a man of action, reinvigorated by the much-needed zeal demonstrated by Kelley’s youth and bravery.

In an analysis of DC’s *Lois Lane* comic run Stuller employs the Bechdel Test, “a commonly referred to litmus test for the representation of women in movies and television” that also has its uses in Comis media (it in fact first appeared in Alison Bechdel’s *Dykes to Watch Out For*) (Stuller 238). The test’s three parameters revolve around whether or not a male presence -- literal or tangential -- is necessary to motivate the presence of a story’s female characters, summarized in Stuller’s implementation as “[requiring] that the story has: two or more women; that these women talk to each other; and that they talk to each other about something other than men” (238). Superhero comics are habitual failures of the Bechdel Test due to their being marketed overwhelmingly to male readers as a form of escapism and power fantasy. These elements of the genre’s target audience account for Stuller’s observation of female presence in the genre being narrowed to several male-serving roles: “love interest, damsel in distress, caretaker, family member, or femme fatale” (238). Though Kelley does not initially fit any of these roles, her observational status in the Batman-Alfred conversation about her future might be considered an inversion of the Bechdel test. Not only is she the only major female character in the story’s run, but her first major point of conversation between two men focuses not on her wishes, but on how each man perceives her, either as a child (Alfred) or a soldier (Batman). Neither view positions as capable of making her own choices: she would be relegated to supervision in Alfred’s eyes and expected to follow orders in Batman’s. The exchange ends with Batman and Alfred reflecting on the fate of the previous Robin -- Jason Todd, who met his
end at a savage beating from arch-nemesis the Joker -- and it is Batman’s assertion of Todd’s
worth as a soldier that settles the matter. Kelley’s position at Batman’s side is cemented only
after the memory of the last person to stand in her place, the last in a long line of male Robins, is
invoked.

Despite not initially fulfilling one of the traditionally feminine roles Stuller outlines,
Carrie Kelley eventually serves as both a damsel in distress and caretaker of sorts for a Batman.
It is implied throughout *The Dark Knight Returns* that Batman has forgotten his humanity after
years of warfare in Gotham, and the coarseness of the Dark Knight referring to Jason Todd and,
implicitly Carrie, as “soldiers” when they are themselves still children is used to demonstrate
Batman’s desensitization and lack of connection to those around him. It is through Kelley’s
presence that Batman begins to again care for the people of Gotham on a personal level,
culminating in Batman’s nurturing affirmation that Kelley, too, is a “good soldier” following a
particular harrowing night of crime-fighting (*below*). Notable is the repetition of Batman’s
assertion in this moment, however. It is easy to imagine the hero’s cadence in the repetition of
the phrase (helped by a hard end-stop at the end of each invocation and Batman’s protective,
paternal grasp on Kelly) as that of a parent consoling a child, framing this exchange into one that infantilizes Kelley while demonstrating Batman’s reawakened sensitivity. Kelley does not explicitly set out to coddle and nurse the Dark Knight, but it is a role she fulfills nonetheless - by no other metric than her being a woman. The “good soldier” affirmation further distinguishes Kelley from her late predecessor in not only cadence but context. Jason Todd is called a soldier for his conduct on the field of battle, with Batman implying that his death “honored [him]” and made him worthy of memory; Carrie is given the accolade in a moment of vulnerability, providing Batman with a moment to rediscover his humanity. Kelley is not a soldier in her moment so much as she is a tool of Batman’s character development. Where Batman sees in Jason Todd a worthy equal in battle, he sees in Kelley someone in need of nurturing, of saving, and whose saving ultimately saves (and serves) him. Despite both Todd and Kelley carrying the mantle of Robin, they fulfill the role differently -- according to the role prescribed to them by the society that views men as gloried by battle and women as delicate things to be treasured and protected by men.

The treatment of female supporting heroes is the first and most prominent place that Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon subverts the expectations of the hero genre, and not in an altogether progressive fashion. It is through Clint’s similarly dismissive treatment of Kate as a hero in her own right and his ardent refusal to see in her any means to improve himself -- somehow performing worse on the Bechdel test than even Alfred or Batman -- that the narrative again defies the expectations of how a hero, super or otherwise, ought to behave.

Whereas Carrie Kelley’s Robin is established as a guerilla tactician, Kate Bishop’s Hawkeye is an experienced direct combatant at par or exceeding her mentor in skill and temperament. Clint himself makes the observation that Bishop, though very much his junior in
terms of age and experience, is “without a doubt the finest and most gifted bowman [he’s] ever met” (left), yet it is in this same breath that Barton makes the same mistake as Batman and Alfred do their new Robin.

Clint’s oft-repeated assertion -- that Kate is “pretty great” -- takes on a romantic, if not overtly sexual implication as the series progresses, and for a recurring subplot of the series sees Clint struggling with what he recognizes as inappropriate feelings to have for his much younger, less seasoned protege. Clint never acknowledges Kate as a hero in her own right, as someone worthy of circumstances of her own (even the playful banter between Clint and Kate, in which they refer to one another good-naturedly by their shared moniker of “Hawkeye”, belies a codependency that ultimately proves to be the crutch of the senior hero, not his protege). The way that Hawkeye the series deals with the tension between its two titular characters is to deviate from the established pattern of the will-they, won’t-they relationship of mentor and mentee by making these feelings exclusively one-sided on the part of the elder Hawkeye, thereby also subverting the expectation of the comic book superhero as one who can reliably expect women to fulfill the role of romantic device or a convenient means of emotional development. Kate is nothing if not repulsed by her mentor’s inability to manage the expectations put upon him by those that rely on him (the Avengers, his neighbors, and Bishop herself), culminating with the female hero doing what Carrie Kelley never could. Seeing Clint in a self-destructive rut of indecision and recognizing that his behavior is
none of her responsibility, Kate takes Lucky and leaves. There is no happy ending for the Hawkeye duo: Clint does not receive a reciprocation of his feelings, having never really untangled them himself, and Kate does not serve to awaken in him some larger sense of heroic duty. Though Clint later claims in “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke” that it is the Tracksuit mafia that have “take[n] everything,” it is instead through his inaction -- and his decidedly unheroic treatment of his capable, eager mentee -- that Clint continues to lose his grab on traditional comic book heroism. It isn’t until the arrival of his brother (a male influence -- another thing he and Batman have in common) that Clint comes around to the heroic path, still with the same last-minute haphazardness and disregard for others that pushed Kate Bishop away.

It is difficult to say whether Clint’s lack of adherence to the traditional trope expectation that would otherwise have him “get the girl” is more or less progressive. On the one hand Kate is allowed to exercise free will and determination denied characters like Carrie Kelley; on the other hand, she does so by exiting the story altogether, maintaining a decidedly male perspective in the story. For both his inability to interact with his female partner in a way expected (and tacitly encouraged) by the superhero comic book form, Clint Barton subverts reader expectation and gives credence to the notion that *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* is not operating by the conventional rules of its genre. Whether Clint’s particular subversion of sexist power fantasies inherent to the superhero comic book genre ultimately strengthens the character’s ethos is another question altogether.

The prominence of Barney Barton and the loss of Clint’s hearing in “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke” serves as a neat bookend to one aspect of Clint’s decidedly unheroic subversion of form whilst introducing another: the concept of ableism as it applies to the superhero genre. Historically, deafness and hearing loss are nothing new to the Hawkeye
character. Clint Barton has been either hard of hearing or outright deaf in many of his comic incarnations, and so Fraction and Aja’s use of the trope is less an unforeseeable twist and more a nostalgic throwback to other authorships of the character. Like his treatment of Kate Bishop, the subversion of form occurs not in the introduction of the familiar circumstance but in the way that the character deals -- or refuses to deal -- with the challenges it invites.

Clint Barton’s non-normative hearing is not uncommon among cape comics, a genre that often obfuscates conversations about disability through allegory, metaphor, and superficial generalization. Martin Lund notes in “Beware the Fanatic!” that heroes with powers presenting as non-normative, such as the X-Men’s mutant cadre, have been alternatively read as racial, religious, and disability metaphors (Lund, “Fanatic” 142). Lund suggests in “The Mutant Problem” that the conflicting interpretations of heroes outside of the sociocultural norm can be attributed “confirmation bias”, specifically a sense that the interpretive meaning of the characters is static because the cultures and groups represented are as well -- both concepts which Lund vehemently disagrees (“Problem” 45). If there is any confusion over the significance or representational qualities of heroes with non-normative gifts and abilities, Lund points to the reader rather than the author as the source. As evidence Lund points to the work of Comics scholar Peter Sanderson, whose work identifying the staying power of the X-Men in the X-Men Companion II points to the ambivalence of the term mutant.

Whether due to a difference of religion, race, sexuality, ability, or any other definition, Sanderson identifies that the term can easily appeal to anyone who feels out of place or otherwise removed from the world that they inhabit, inviting a great many different sympathies (Sanderson 10). Hawkeye, of course, is not a mutant -- he is barely even a hero -- but he does exist outside of the norm when his writer decides to play to his deaf or hard-of-hearing past. Yet his hearing loss
cannot serve as an alienation factor in “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke”, as by the time
Fraction and Aja employ it Clint has already alienated himself. Kate is gone, and with her Lucky;
his neighbors and friends stand likely to lose their homes, if not their lives; and Clint himself has
spiraled into a depression fueled by his refusal to commit to changing his pattern of self-
destruction. Though Lund and Sanderson’s analysis of the superheroic disability as a stand-in for
social alienation, such a use in Hawkeye would ring hollow amid circumstances which have
themselves already erected a significant social stigma around the character.

Fraction and Aja are likewise saved from the alienation trap by the nature of Hawkeye’s
disability: his hearing loss is not considered socially grotesque or cumbersome in the way that
the X-Men’s unique traits sometimes are, occupying a space in our social consciousness that is
non-normative but not unaccepted. There is no guarantee that individuals meeting Barton in his
deafened state will have an adverse reaction to his circumstances, and in fact few do. Instead,
Clint’s difficulties come in the form of his inability to interact with the larger society in which he
lives, and the now-unwieldy expectations that he feels it levies on him. This contrast between
two states of the same disability is alluded to in Sara Goering’s “Rethinking Disability: the
Social Model of Disability and Chronic Disease” as the two simultaneous experiences of the
differently abled: impairment and disability. Goering describes a scenario like Clint’s first as an
impairment: “impairment is understood as a state of the body that is non-standard...As such,
impairment may or may not be met with a negative evaluation by its possessor” (Goering).
Goering goes on to describe Clint's circumstances -- his impairment -- as a purely physical
manifestation, which does not guarantee social stigma or alienation itself. Impairment is merely a
means of describing the limitations of one’s body, a kind of dispassionate description that views
the characteristics of the disability as a “neutral” setting rather than one that is positive or
negative (Goering). The difference between disability and impairment is the difference between what Goering and others term the medical model of disability and the “social model” of disability, which focuses less on the physical manifestation of the non-normative body type and more on the sociocultural implications of such things for the individual:

The point of making and emphasizing this distinction is to show how much and sometimes all of what is disabling for individuals who have impaired bodies has to do with physical and/or social arrangements and institutional norms that are themselves alterable (e.g., stairs vs. ramps; presentation of data using only auditory means vs. universal design for communication, restrictive definitions of job requirements vs. expansive accommodations for different modes of performing work, etc.). (Goering)

Goering’s analysis implies that it is disability, rather than impairment, that is the source of Clint’s difficulties with his deafness.

The world of the superhero suggests two outcomes for the hero given to non-normative bodily circumstances: alienation, as in the case of the X-Men and others, or the attainment of super-social capabilities due to the enhancement intended to “balance the scales” for the disabled character. Heroic characters like Daredevil, Professor X, and even villains such as DC Comic’s Orca and perennial Spider-Man foe The Lizard find themselves in possession of heightened capabilities to make up for absent normative traits: Daredevil’s blindness is answered by his heightened hearing, balance, taste, and touch; Professor X’s paralysis is offset by his telepathy; the physically disabled Orca and The Lizard possess superhuman levels of strength, constitution, and agility. This portrayal of disability as a trait to be overcome is both an ableist trope and a key example of the social disability model in action. Rather than treat the disability as a neutral trait
as is suggested by the impairment state, characters like Daredevil and The Lizard are shown to use their superhuman capabilities to rise above their disabled circumstances. Matt Murdock is Daredevil in spite of his loss of eyesight; Dr. Kurt Connors becomes The Lizard to regain his lost arm. The disability becomes just another villain to beat, a means to character development rather than a development itself.

Here again Hawkeye subverts the tropes and expectations of the superhero comic, though as with his treatment of Kate Bishop the means of subversion are of questionable heroic quality. Hawkeye’s relationship with disability is unique among heroes in that he does possess any additional skills or abilities to allow him an “edge”. In losing his hearing Clint is in even greater turmoil than before, compounded by his stubborn refusal to sign or acknowledge the lipreading he learned after his temporary childhood hearing loss. Stubbornness aside, however, Clint Barton is fully capable of interacting with his civilian world as a hearing-impaired individual; Hawkeye, however, is not so lucky. The natural disadvantage of Clint’s heroic identity, an average joe among gods and monsters, is compounded when he loses an element of what makes him average. In his heroic guise Clint is not only impaired, but also disabled: his body is non-normative and his world is ill-suited to allow him to continue existing in it unimpeded.

It is not uncommon for superheroes to find themselves both impaired and disabled over the course of their stories. Such temporary changes (and they almost are are temporary -- see Stan Lee’s “illusion of change”) to the status quo make for good eye-catches and offer drama and tension to drive the development of the hero’s larger story. Spider-Man losing his powers, Captain America super soldier serum wearing off, Wolverine having the adamantium stripped from his skeleton: all of these circumstances result in the character rising above the challenge and showing themselves to be heroes without their super/peak-human gifts. In a continuation of
the “impairment as villain” trope, “rising above” one’s disability is a likewise ableist take that positions the loss of ability not as a neutrality or new normal but as a circumstance that must be overcome. When Captain America, Wolverine, or Spider-Man lose their powers, there is no impression that their new circumstances are just as feasible as their old. Instead, they are driven to find some hitherto-untapped strength from within that will allow them to overcome what is perceived as a setback. The option to accept their new status as impaired or disabled is never on the table -- reinforced by the marketing decisions that make the “loss of powers” story arcs a temporary concern. Hawkeye goes through the bulk of “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke” in the same vein as his fellow heroes, but ultimately Clint comes around by focusing on something a little more his speed: the promise of not only regaining what he lost but of hurting those that took it from him.

When his appeals to Clint’s humanity and strength go unheeded, Barney appeals to an ableist view by assuring his brother that “[he] can get it ALL back” (Fraction, “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke” 14). It is Clint’s decision about what recovering from his loss entails that sets him apart from a similar vein of temporarily-impaired hero. Clint’s idea of regaining what he’s lost is not limited to his hearing, but extends to all that he perceives the Tracksuit Mafia has robbed of him: his friends, his lifestyle, and his home. Whereas the promise of recovering from an impairment might in other heroes mean a way to adapt, adjust, or otherwise restore the loss of heroic capabilities, it takes little time for Clint’s journey of recovery to blossom into a plan for vengeance -- which, most startlingly, involves those in his life that have already paid for his past transgressions. Clint gathers the remaining tenants of his apartment building at the climax of “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke” and delivers an impassioned sign-language speech translated by his brother. When pressed for details on how he, in his impaired state, has any hope of
defeating the group that made him so, Clint offers a spoken reply: “We” (18). The rallying cry has its intended effect, galvanizing those present and convincing them that this fight, Hawkeye’s fight, is theirs as well. The tenants become something akin to Clint’s personal army, and the character once again subverts the hero genre in a way that is not altogether good nor bad.

Ben Ghan notes in *The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke: Hawkeye and Disability Done Well* that Clint’s ultimate decision to accept his impairment rather than focus on a way to rise above it is perfectly suited to a character that has made a brand for being a downtrodden hero of the people:

Too often is a story about a character in a wheelchair is about them wishing they could walk again...But Clint’s character journey isn’t about conquering his disability, or fighting it. Hawkeye embraces his hearing loss, accepting that it is a part of his life and that he doesn’t need to hide it or be ashamed of it. He accepts that a disability does not mean he is disabled. (Ghan)

Ghan observation comes from the moments before Clint delivers his stirring call-to-arms atop the roof of his apartment building (*below, left*). It’s the first time that Clint has shown signs of openly accepting his circumstances, and he does so in a way that is largely unseen in the superhero genre: by accepting not *his limitations*, but the *reality of his circumstances*.

“I’m deaf. They deafened me,” Clint begins, explaining that his impairment came at the hands of those that have laid claim to...
the building. “So I’m gonna sign what I have to say. I need the practice and I’m not gonna hide anymore” (Fraction, “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke” 16). Clint’s choice of words is what sets his relationship with his impairment apart from the rest of the superhero crowd. “I’m deaf,” he says, accepting the characteristic instead implying anything transitory about his condition, his assertion that he needs to brush up on his signing reinforcing a sense of permanence. This moment is what Ghan sees as the success of Hawkeye’s struggle with deafness, and what sets his story apart from similar others in the genre: “I’m not gonna hide anymore,” Clint says, showing that in the end it’s not a struggle at all.

With the good, however, comes the bad: the struggle comes shortly thereafter, and doesn’t revolve around Clint’s interaction with disability but instead with the people around him. For though *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* might subvert the stigma surrounding non-normative bodily function in a positive way, Clint’s relationship with the act of heroism subverts expectation in a wholly different direction. The crux of the first issue of *Hawkeye* surrounds Clint’s moral compunctions with the Tracksuits, a group that he is made aware have a legal claim to his building and may do with it as they please. Ultimately Clint’s desire to stand up for his friends and neighbors wins out, and in a fit of questionable legality Hawkeye forces a buyout, promising trouble to any that might come around in their stead. The problems that develop thereafter -- Grill’s death, Hawkeye’s growing uncertainty about his heroic stature, his estrangement from Kate -- all stem from this initial conflict, making them problems of the hero’s own making. These problems come to a head in “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke” with Clint’s deafening and a return to his David-versus-Goliath posture. As before, Clint finds no issue with placing his desire to see an abstract ideal of *right* win the day over the bodies of those he has promised to protect.
Clint, a seasoned combatant and hero, has been deafened, possibly permanently; his brother has been paralyzed; his protege has been driven away; and at least one tenant of the building has been killed as a direct result of his actions against the Tracksuits. Despite all of this, Clint’s plan is to draw more people into the line of fire by marshaling them to the final stand in a conflict of his creation. With this perspective in mind, Clint’s acceptance of his hearing impairment may be read not as strength but more of the same nonchalance and borderline malfeasance that has colored his heroics since “Lucky” and that saw him through the upheaval of “Pizza is My Business”. This Hawkeye isn’t a beacon of strength and hope so much as he is a character well-suited to rolling with the punches wherever they land, be that on him or those around him. As with his hearing, Clint has decided that the important thing is not to give up, despite the knowledge of the potential fallout from such a fight (Barney, for instance, has spent some time growing close to a neighboring family of Clint’s -- including two children). The more heroic choice might be to consider retreat, a route that Clint has considered before out of selfishness. In a moment where those around him would be better served by this course, Clint again defers to ego: “They took everything from me!” Clint laments to Barney following his accident. “You can get it ALL back,” Barney responds (14). Fraction and Aja simultaneously craft a story that re-imagines the superheroic perception of disability and impairment while continuing to question the heroism of their title character. The result is a grey character that, while unique in the depth and humanity of his struggles, for those same reasons cannot always be called a “hero”.

The chief factor in the subversion of the superhero comic book that occurs in *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* stems from the subversion of the hero archetype itself. Fraction and Aja’s Clint Barton defies the expectation of heroic behavior, both in his proactive actions and reactive
postures, the subversion of the superhero comic book form being used to frame these instances of
trope deviation. In subverting the heroic archetype, Clint Barton’s story deviates from what the
reader has been taught to expect out of the superhero genre; this uncertain territory lends itself to
the exploration of form and style that Fraction and Aja likewise undertake.

The archetypal Westernized hero famously outlined in Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with
a Thousand Faces* is an ideal place to identify how Fraction and Aja defy expectations in order
to open their story to an exploration of both form and concept. The first area of significant
departure comes not from an outright deviation from the Hero Journey but from a perversion of
course correction intended by an interaction Campbell terms the “refusal of the call” (Campbell
49). Campbell identifies that the traditional hero story begins with a seemingly insignificant
moment leading to a much broader and yet-to-be-understood world: “A blunder -- apparently the
merest chance -- reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship
with forces that are not rightly understood” (42). Campbell outlines the beginning of the hero’s
journey not necessarily as a momentous and widely-recognized appeal from on high but as the
barest hint of things to come. In his identification of the hero archetype, Campbell recognizes the
importance of the seeming everyman as a heroic figure; though some heroes come from the
ranks of kings and figure of myth and legend, the hero can likewise be generated from those for
whom the first hint of a larger journey “may amount to an opening of destiny” rather than the
conclusion of some planned for and prophesied epic (42). Important to consider here is that the
hero’s journey starts not always with the known greatness of the heroic figure but by the
machinations of fate and circumstance, a joining of forces that puts the hero precisely where they
need to be to begin their cycle of growth and discovery. An intercession of fate is what comes to
pass in the first issue of *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* even before Clint’s initial run-in with
the Tracksuit Mafia. The opening pages of “Lucky” show Clint at the end of a previous job, a botched getaway and resulting hospital stay giving the reader a first look at his contrarian nature (below, left).

The combination of New York City traffic and his being cooped up in a bed for six weeks results in Clint abandoning his taxi in favor of walking home (below, right) whereupon he has his first run-in with the Tracksuits. These two circumstances -- Clint’s failed getaway and the restlessness born of his convalescence -- that result in his entrance into a world that he does not completely comprehend. The world of the eastern European mafia that the Tracksuits implicitly represent is that unknown world, and Clint’s heroic call is initially answered with the action he takes in protecting his neighbors from their designs. The action that Clint takes...
against the Tracksuits, while explicitly illegal, is framed as a moral victory: Clint’s neighbors are prevented from being abused by the power players in the mob, and working-class-hero Clint Barton is even able to save Lucky from abuse at the hands of his owners, the same villains that are after the building. Campbell recognizes that oftentimes the journey of the hero begins with something as innocuous as a series of seemingly insignificant actions; he in fact precisely describes Clint’s entrance into the heroic sphere in “Lucky” when he notes that the hero “may be only casually strolling, when some passing phenomenon catches the wandering eye and lures one way from the frequented paths of man” (48).

Thus far Clint’s entrance in the heroic sphere matches the expected outline of the hero and it is notable that the storyline of “Lucky” plays out largely as a traditional hero story might be expected to: action, the notion of good’s triumph over evil, and even a sense of happily-ever-after that is absent from the Clint’s overarching story with the Tracksuits. His deviation from the heroic norm begins in the subsequent issue, “The Vagabond Code”, and it is likewise in this issue that Fraction and Aja’s playfulness with the Comics form begins to also take root. Rather than embarking on the storied journey of the hero defined in Campbell’s outline, the second issue of Hawkeye sees Clint settled back into the status quo of his living in Bed-Stuy and overseeing the safety of his neighbors.

While he recognizes that the instances of coded signs in his neighborhood are likely a portent of dangers to come, he is not motivated to action as he ought to have been by the presence of

Fraction, Matt (writ.) and David Aja (illus.), “The Vagabond Code”, Hawkeye, vol 4, issue 2, Marvel Comics, 2014, pp.3
the Tracksuits in the previous issue (previous page, left). While he concedes that these new developments mean that he has a “new gig, new responsibilities”, it isn’t something that he has begun to face head-on (Fraction, “Vagabond” 3). The questions posed by Kate concerning the heightened circumstances are only grudgingly answered when it becomes apparent that the younger Hawkeye has the means and access that Clint lacks. Though Clint is working his case to the best of his ability, his ability is yet again not up to par. Beyond identifying that the codes around his neighborhood warn of some kind of imminent threat to those on the wrong side of the law, it is not until Kate’s intercession (right) that he makes any kind of headway into the specific circumstances breeding them. Is this a case of Clint abdicating his destiny and thus ignoring what Campbell terms the “call” of the heroic journey?

Campbell defines the refusal of the call not as ending the hero’s story, but as transforming the hero in relation to the larger conflict, claiming that “the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and...
becomes a victim to be saved” (Campbell 49). Clint relies on the timely intervention of Kate Bishop in over the course of “The Vagabond Code” to both allow him to progress in his own story: it is through Kate’s family contacts that Clint is able to trace the errant ciphers to a group of traveling robber-performers, and it is Kate rather than Clint that serves to save the day in her Hawkeye persona. In his discussion of the refusal of the heroic call, Campbell notes that it is often born of a subconscious desire on the part of the hero to face down an even greater challenge, “a deliberate, terrific refusal to respond to anything but the deepest, highest, richest answer to the as-yet unknown demand of some waiting void within” (53). It might be argued that Clint’s refusal of the call and Kate’s subsequent recusing of him is a reflection of his subconscious desire to face down the true enemy, the Tracksuits that motivated him to action in the run’s premiere issue. Clint appears to have reached this revelation by the end of “The Vagabond Code”, affirming his desire to see this mystery through to its conclusion (above, left).
This argument falls apart with Clint’s attempt to leave the journey behind in “Six Nights in the Life Of…” and again in “Pizza is My Business”. These actions solidify Clint not as a hero refusing the call to adventure in order to fight a higher power, but an aberrant hero whose ability to respond to his circumstances is repeatedly hindered by his self-destructive tendencies. It is in these two issues that Fraction and Aja’s playing with time, sequence, and the semiotics of the comic book page are meaningfully developed (as discussed in previous chapters), their deviation from form simultaneous with Clint’s deviation from the heroic cycle. Following the refusal of the heroic call and the subsequent heightened of stakes that such a move invites, Campbell’s archetypal hero experiences a “providential revelation of some unsuspected principle of release”, leading the conflict to new heights where it is ultimately resolved (Campbell 54). Quite the opposite occurs in Clint’s circumstances. His conflict surrounding the Tracksuit Mafia has certainly reached new heights, but far from spurring some grand resolution the heightened circumstances provide Clint the excuse to shutter and withdraw in a pattern similar to that in “The Vagabond Code”. Clint is caught in a cycle of selfish refusal followed by brief moments of atonement, each time requiring the intervention of Kate Bishop and forcing the consideration of which of them is more deserving of the hero moniker. He exhibits none of the lasting, deeper understanding that Campbell’s hero is to receive following his misguided refusal; Clint instead remains stubbornly removed from all consequences of his choices until they again impact him specifically.

Clint’s stagnation in the hero cycle again reaches an apex in “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke”. Alongside Fraction and Aja’s most playful deviations from the execution of the superhero comic book’s form comes Clint’s third refusal of the heroic call, this time requiring intervention not from his protege but his sometimes-estranged brother. Dealing with his deafness
and the blow to his self confidence that it represents brings Clint into a conflict with both Barney and the man he knows he should be. This dual conflict is a reflection of a step in the hero cycle that Campbell defines as the “atonement with the father”, a figment of the hero perceived to be a villainous influence but is instead proved to be “a reflex of the victim’s own ego” (107). Barney Barton’s appearance in his life presents Clint with an image of the man he might have been: reasonably well-adjusted, though not without a roughness; capable of taking care of himself; and, perhaps most importantly, able to identify and work through the emotional baggage put upon him by their father. Clint’s flashback to his childhood hearing impairment “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke” shows Barney in the present in a position reflecting that of their father, demonstrating the sameness in both their shared identity and Clint’s stagnation (as previously discussed in chapter three). While Clint eventually makes peace with his brother and comes to understand that he cannot run away from this fight, there is no accompanying rise to a new understanding of his heroic stature, the “apotheosis” or “ultimate boon” that Campbell describes as the next stage of the hero’s journey. Clint grudgingly accepts the help of his brother, but his attitude remains largely unchanged from his momentary lapses into heroism in issues past. There is no grand sense of change in Clint, and in fact his plan to involve innocents in the coming final showdown with the Tracksuits suggests that he hasn’t learned any lasting lessons whatsoever.

Collateral damage is a recurring motif in all of Clint’s stories: Lucky, Kate, Grills, Barney, and the apartment building itself all suffer the cost of his indecision and stubbornness. Rather than experiencing growth and returning to the world he left as a changed and wizened master, as Campbell’s hero cycle suggests is the destiny of the heroic archetype, Clint is stuck in a cycle of refusal, admonition, and grudging action. The portions of Clint’s story that show to varying degrees this deviation from the heroic expectation -- “Lucky” “The Vagabond Code”, “Six
Nights in the Life Of…”, “Pizza is My Business”, and “The Stuff What Don’t Get Spoke” -- are also the stage for Fraction and Aja’s most creative deviations from the expectations of the superhero comic book’s form.
In Summation: Subversion in *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon*

Fraction and Aja’s *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* is by no means the only example of
the subverted superhero comic, though it is a fine example of what each entry into the niche
subgenre that it represents set out to accomplish. As established by naysayers like Wertham,
Maher, and even by the well-intentioned proponents like contributor to *The Atlantic* David
Cutler³, the superhero comic book for better or for worse is expected to follow a predictable
pattern of development in both characterization, narrative direction, and formal presentation.
Works such as *Hawkeye* (and subsequent genre deconstructions such as Jeff Lemire’s *Moon
Knight*, Christopher Priest and M.D. Bright’s *Quantum and Woody*) allow for a re-imagination of
those expectations by way of using visual cues to open a dialogue into how else the genre might
surprise and divert expectation.

While there is a place for the expectation of certain rules and narrative patterns in any art
form for the establishment of the form’s definition itself, there must likewise a place for the
deviation from the norm. Deviation is the means by which art is allowed to flourish, grow, and
expand past what it was in order to determine what it can be. In *Comics: A Tool of Subversion?*
Comics scholar Jeff Williams repositions the question of subversion in the Comics form as a
means to question the hegemonic practices of culture and society:

Hegemony, therefore, implies that all aspects of society and culture are tools of
the current dominant order, either on a conscious or subconscious/subliminal
level. Hegemony, like counter-hegemony, is an organic process. And as an

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³ Cutler’s 2014 article “The New Teachers’ Aides: Superman and Iron Man” makes a case for Comics in the
classroom while mistaking genre for form in much the same way that Wertham and Maher do. The conversation
about Comics’ space on classroom shelves aside, painting the art form with the narrow brushstrokes indicative of a
single aspect of its larger form arguably does more harm than good in establishing the validity of what that art form
has to contribute to academic discourse.
organic process there are occasional shifts. These shifts allow an opportunity for change and involve consciousness, action, history and especially language. (3)

When the detractors of the comic book -- be they a besmirched social psychologist, a laconic and embittered talk show host, or even those within the industry who are looking to deter perceived outsiders -- speak out against the form for what it is perceived to do or not do, those invested in the form have the responsibility to respond to these criticisms. This response comes best not in the direct acknowledgment of the argument at hand but through explicit example of the fault therein: Matt Fraction and David Aja’s work with Clint Barton is a study in the means of talking back to the condescension against the form for its ability to both tell an engaging story while subverting and most every turn the way that the traditional comic book story is told. Most engaging about this discourse is what it reveals about the connection between subversion of form and subversion of character trope -- namely, that the subversion of one requires the subversion of the other to make any kind of lasting hegemonic change. To challenge the dominant expectation of either form or the hero archetype, Fraction and Aja needed to change both form and function in their story. To challenge only the archetype of the character without challenging the story form that the character inhabits merely results in a failed or ineffectual hero; to merely change the form without challenging reader expectations of the character creates a work that is novel but forgettable. Challenging the hegemony of the dominant superhero comic book expectations requires both a conceptual and cosmetic shift -- both the narrative and its presentation need to be changed or the work resists fully breaking free of the expectations of its established norms.

In challenging both form and function of their story, *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* is able to call into question the expectations of its form -- but the questions raised may themselves defy expectation. *Is Clint Barton a hero?* isn’t the largest question of which Fraction and Aja’s
story invites consideration. Their run on *Hawkeye* is in an even better position to ask, *what is a hero?* or *what is a superhero comic book?* What do they do, how do they work, and how frequently can they not do those things they are expected to do before they stop being the thing that they are (or are not)? By calling into question those constants that are ascribed both by form and character trope, *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* questions both the character of the hero and the hegemonic truths under which such a definition can flourish.

It is grandstanding to suggest that by questioning Clint Barton’s heroism Fraction and Aja inspire some great revolution of thought in the superhero genre; what they do, however, is give pause to the idea of what both heroism and the superhero comic can be. To pick up a copy of *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* at a comic book store today, one would need to shop in the section for superhero comics. Likewise, Marvel’s upcoming *Hawkeye* television series on the Disney+ platform -- which borrows explicitly from the Fraction/Aja run in its depiction of its central character and promised appearance of Kate Bishop -- is billed as a superhero series. Both enduring definitions suggest that there is room in the greater lexicon for the kind of deviation that Fraction and Aja engender in their storytelling. Moreover, as Williams suggests, such deviation from the norm might even be necessary to the continued health and proliferation of both genre (hero) and form (Comics). Thus the subversion of form and character at work in *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* is not so much a singularity as it is a recurring pattern of growth to disrupt not only our expectations but the dangerous stagnation of the medium.
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