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The body unbound: *Empowered*, heroism and body image

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Within most superhero comics, superheroes start as established heroes who save others and planets in the ultimate battle of good versus evil; although characters do evolve and become stronger over time, they still are treated as heroes by fellow superheroes and citizens. Offering an alternative reading, this article explores the transformative narrative arc of a female character who begins as disempowered and struggles to become empowered. Through Adam Warren's graphic novels *Empowered*, this article argues that through rhetorics of (dis)empowerment and challenging the duality of strength and femininity/sexuality, a new version of superhero emerges: a vulnerable, human superheroine.

Keywords: superhero genre; empowerment; heroism; body image; women in comics

For more than seventy years, superhero comic books provide readers fictional, fantastical stories about our world, other worlds and alternative dimensions. The typical narrative involves superheroes who start as established heroes, saving others and planets in the ultimate battle of good versus evil; although characters do get stronger over time, they still are treated as heroes by fellow superheroes and citizens. However, few stories highlight a lead character who starts as disempowered and overcomes difficulties to become empowered. Adam Warren's graphic novel[1] *Empowered* features the self-titled superhero Empowered (Emp for short) who transforms from a literally gagged and bound, unconfident, disempowered individual/lack-lustre superhero into a confident, empowered woman and superheroine.

These stories serve not just as entertainment (which they do offer), but also tell stories about ourselves (see, e.g., Dubose 2007, Emad 2006, Reynolds 1992, Taylor 2007, Wanzo 2009). As comics and their action heroes 'represent particular ideas about how the world functions' (Heinecken 2003, p. 35), they offer ways to understand how identities such as sex, gender, sexuality, masculinity, femininity and heroism are embodied, valued and devalued. Sherrie A. Inness (1999) makes a powerful argument to study comics: they 'should *not* be ignored, as they have been and continue to be such an influential twentieth-century art form . . . their changing content suggests a great deal about our cultural values' (p. 140; emphasis in original). Within their narrative art form, comics reflect their society's values, beliefs, attitudes and ideologies. Commenting on the power of images to evoke ideology, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001) argue 'explor[ing] the meaning of images . . . recognize[s] that they are produced within dynamics of social power and *ideology*' (p. 21;

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emphasis in original). Images do not exist simply as part of a naturalized world, but instead images circulate within logics of ideologies.

Indeed, comic-book characters' iconic status frequently results in appropriations of the characters themselves into other contexts, such as *Ms. Magazine* debuting its inaugural 1972 issue with Wonder Woman on the cover. Wonder Woman's cover appearance reflects her character's feminist ideologies and the direction of the magazine (see Robinson 2004). Therefore, works of fiction highlight important societal attitudes, and images of women and female superheroes deserve critical attention.

Using Warren's *Empowered*, this article explores rhetorics of (dis)empowerment and the duality of strength and femininity for a superheroine. Although Emp's sexualized look could potentially overpower any transgressive narrative, I argue scholars should look to Emp's complexities and dualities. Her negotiation of gender and her body not only makes for interesting reading, but also provides a model for female empowerment. Against all the odds within the world of the League of Superhomeys, she emerges as a superheroine. In many ways, Emp provides a unique character, even within the diversity of multiple comic books' universe(s). No other lead female character deals with body image and confidence, and uses prior items of her own bondage to save the day. Although lead characters such as Wonder Woman, Huntress or Manhunter do challenge gender norms, these characters begin as established heroes with self-confidence, whereas Emp does not. Ultimately, Warren's graphic novels argue for a different reading of superheroines from most mainstream comics: a vulnerable, human superheroine.

Notions of heroism

Superhero comics draw upon cultural narratives of what it means to be a hero and depict those ideals visually. Peter Coogan (2009, p. 77) categorizes the superhero genre by the following characteristics: 'mission, powers, and identity'. Their mission should be 'pro-social and selfless', rather than benefiting them personally. To accomplish such a mission, superheroes use costumes and codenames to establish their identity, and draw on their powers to help save the day (Coogan 2009, p. 78). All three elements work together to produce a superhero story that presents an ideal version of society, frequently evidenced by the triumph of good over evil (see O'Neil 2001).

Thus, the role of the superhero demonstrates a larger understanding of heroism within culture, whereby comics and societal norms mutually reinforce each other. M. Thomas Inge (1990, p. 142) argues heroes with superhuman abilities are prominent within Western culture and comics continue that tradition: 'Comic books have continued to maintain and develop these patterns, translate them into forms more suitable to a post-industrial society, and educate young readers in a significant part of their cultural heritage.' In this way, narratives serve an ideological function, drawing on tropes that reflect who we are or want to become: 'The stories that we tell about ourselves, and the way in which we organize, edit, and revise those stories, help to shape our identity – our sense of who we are as persons' (Jasinski 2001, p. 399). Not only do comics provide a set of entertainment for the readers, but they also set a standard for what constitutes heroism.

Superheroes and their heroics in comics began in the World War II era with of the most well-known superheroes, Superman (1938), Batman (1939), Captain America (1940) and Wonder Woman (1941). Owing to the popularity of Superman and artists such as Jack Kirby, superheroes dominated the comic scene: 'Comic books in the late thirties and through the forties became the province of superheroes' (Harvey 1996, p. 35). Partly as

a response to world events as well as the fact that 'comic books were the ideal medium for portraying the exploits of super beings' (Harvey 1996, p. 35), readers enjoyed the tales of superheroes such as Superman, Captain America, Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman. Jack Kirby, co-creator of Captain America, reflects on why there was a need for such a hero: 'We [the United States] weren't at war yet, but everybody knew it was coming . . . That's why Captain America was born. America needed a superpatriot' (Kirby 1991, cited in Harvey 1996, p. 31).[2] Thus, many of the superheroes served to portray images of masculinity (Bongco 2000) or ideology (Barker 1989). However, after World War II ended, the popularity of superheroes waned, which allowed other types of comics to develop, including Westerns, romance, crime and horror comics (Harvey 1996, p. 40). Even after the decline in superheroes, their popularity still exists as Superman, Captain America, Captain Marvel, Batman and Wonder Woman continue in publication today.

However, even though superheroes dominated the majority of comics, few of these characters included women, with Wonder Woman, Miss Fury, and Miss America (Marvel Comics) as notable exceptions. In the early days of comics, the dominant images of women in comics were not of heroes, but those in need of rescue or as sexual objects for men. More specifically, Inness (1999, p. 143) notes: 'Women were seldom presented as tough and independent. Instead, they were apt to require men to rescue them from all sorts of mishaps.' Thus, female characters frequently took the backseat to male characters, including being a supporting character (girlfriend or fellow superhero) or being rescued by the male superhero.

Within superhero comics, there are two types of heroic women and two categories of female characters: female superheroes and superheroines. Female superheroes are characters like a male character, but who simply happen to be women, serving more as a sidekick or supporting character to the lead, male, superhero (such as Supergirl). Superheroines, contrastingly, operate more independently, as their own title characters and whose femininity operates as central to who they are as a character as well as a hero (take Wonder Woman, for example). Although at times the boundaries between female superhero and superheroine can blur (particularly owing to longer-running characters having multiple writers), the distinction remains important. Superheroines, rather than seeing female identity as an add-on characteristic as female superheroes do, integrate femaleness into the character, story arcs and identity of the character. Scholars should look at how superheroines, through their very femininity, change and reshape a heroic identity.

Thus, analyzing superheroines proves especially important to understanding notions of heroism, toughness and femininity/masculinity. Reviewing much of the current scholarship on female superheroes and superheroines within comics, Lillian S. Robinson (2004, p. 6) argues much of it is descriptive rather than critical/analytical: 'This uniquely uncritical approach . . . is due to the preference for a heroic icon over an understanding of how the representation of such an icon derives from and serves – as well as challenges – the dominant social forces'. Thus, feminist scholars should take up issues of superheroines more critically; although understanding their place in the history of comics still exists as a laudable goal (such as Trina Robbins's (1999) work, *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of Feminist Comics from Teens to Zines*), scholarship concerning women in comics should also examine how female characters operate as rhetorical understandings of identity.

Gendered notions of heroism are displayed onto the physical body of the superhero or superheroine, often through how he or she is drawn. Using Wonder Woman as an example, Robinson demonstrates how even as a strong woman, the reader does not see her having muscle definition, but instead sees her slimming down throughout the years. She states:

> Wonder Woman could be strong and we might see her deploying that strength, but, in contrast to Superman's superb Kryptoninan chest or the pectoral, abdominal, and lateral results of Batman's hours of weight training, the audience was not permitted to see what *made* her strong. The conventions showed that she could be a fighter and still be ideally attractive, but she could not be ideally attractive and have anything remotely resembling a fighter's body. (Robinson 2004, p. 63; emphasis in original)

This lack of strength and muscle definition ties into Colette Dowling's (2000) theory of the frailty myth, whereby women should not cultivate their physical strength because they threaten masculinity.

In many ways, the visual look of a character draws upon specific gendered notions of heroism. Typically, women are not tough action heroes in fictional tales; when they are action heroes, 'the emphasis has usually been on their voluptuous bodies rather than their heroic actions' (Heinecken 2003, p. 1). Thus, all the (normative) attributes of heroism, 'such as [being] tough, aggressive, and self-confident' (Polster 1992, p. 8), can all be read within notions of masculinity. Therefore, it makes sense that Wonder Woman and other superheroines do not have muscle definition because it would be read as aggressive rather than sexy; heroism is read through a gendered lens.

Additionally, female superheroes and superheroines are typically depicted sexually, drawing on a 'good girl' motif that incorporates images of pornography or sadomasochism into the story. These images include 'the signs of pornographic discourse (whips, chains, spiked heels, beautiful but blank faces) and integrates them into the context of non-pornographic story structures' (Reynolds 1992, p. 34). For example, these motifs of bondage and sadomasochism appeared within *Wonder Woman* (see Hajdu 2008), including the issues cover dated July and September 1973 (numbers 206, 207). These issues include images of Wonder Woman and her female adversary 'shackled to one another at wrist and ankle and dueling with swords . . . [as well as] Wonder Woman and her mother . . . foregrounded gagged and bound back to back' (Robinson 2004, p. 83). Therefore, even the arguably most powerful superheroine can be powerless if she is bound and gagged.

In addition to being bound and helpless, other representations include the overly sexualized woman. In this case, 'female sexuality is emphasized, often with lurid pictures of women with enormous breasts and well-developed bodies, drawn in poses that feature spread legs or other sexually provocative poses' (Inness 1999, p. 145). Part of the reasoning for such depictions is simply that sex sells. Within the cases of S&M bondage and provocatively available, the women exist as objects of sexual pleasure for men: either all too willing or not at all.

And even when superheroines do take control of their sexuality, such control can still read as mirroring male sexuality instead of an act of empowerment. For example, the She-Hulk (first appearance 1980) is the first major female superhero to be openly, and explicitly, sexual and engage in sex with men in comics. However, as Robinson (2004, p. 101) argues, what sexually arouses She-Hulk still operates within a male gaze: 'What turns the She-Hulk on is the mirror image of what turns on the boys who drool over her, having a beautiful chest and a great ass.' Even within a notion of empowerment – being openly sexual – gendered logic can still constrain the individual.

Thus, narratives do not exist within an all-or-nothing position, but instead frequently contain elements of affirming and redefining or rejecting the status quo. James Jasinski (2001, p. 398) argues for a continuum of discourse: 'In this middle ground, the constitutive or ideological-rhetorical force of narratives can simultaneously affirm some cultural values (e.g., individualism, hard work) while subverting other elements of the culture (e.g., racism, sexism).' Many narratives both enable and constrain individuals to create change, rather

than an all-or-nothing position.[3] *Empowered* demonstrates this tension, a tension between her sexually provocatively drawn body and her heroic actions.

Breaking the mould

Adam Warren's superheroine Empowered presents an interesting case concerning issues of the female body, heroism and empowerment. Empowered (or Emp for short) derives her powers from a skin-tight body suit that provides her super powers and thus membership into the League of Superhomeys. However, her suit is very fragile and easily rips, tears or shreds. Once that happens, she loses her superpowers and then ends up tied, bound and gagged in various fashions. However, as her story unfolds over five volumes, Emp renegotiates her identity.

Through the narrative arc, Warren's graphic novels argue for a different reading of superheroines than most mainstream comics: as vulnerable, human superheroes. Warren (2007a) highlights this difference on the back cover of the very first volume: '*Empowered*, a butt-kicking, bootylicious superhero lampoon that raises the bar for long-john lust and low-brow laughs. Remove all previous notions of superhero entertainment from your puny mind . . . and prepare to be *Empowered*!' Thus, the text begins to question the meaning of heroism and empowerment, and the narrative fits within Jasinski's (2001) continuum, in which multiple meanings of a text exist, rather than being solely empowering or disempowering.

Additionally, *Empowered* serves as a unique case study to examine notions of femininity, sexuality and heroism. Emp does not fit within the traditional mould of masculine heroism by being tough, aggressive or muscled. Instead, she often is unsure of herself and her powers, but finds a way to be a hero to her boyfriend, friend, fellow citizens and Superhomeys. Warren's use of her role to redefine heroism as vulnerable and human provides an alternative reading of the superhero body, one that should be explored more fully to see how it operates and contributes to our social understandings.

Vulnerability: physical and psychological

Rather than opening with a story in which Emp demonstrates strength or prowess, Warren shows her as disempowered: Emp appears bound, gagged, in remnants of her supersuit and subsequently humiliated by her Superhomey teammates. Warren highlights Emp's vulnerability, both physically and psychologically, within the first 10 pages of the first volume. In the very first chapter, teammate Sistah Spooky derails the team from listening to Emp's tactical ideas by calling attention to Emp's visible panty lines underneath her suit. She mocks her, calling Emp 'Miss "Victoria's-not-very-secret"' (Warren 2007a, p. 8). Spooky continues the insult by highlighting the fact that Emp is new to the superheroine business, berating her: 'Even the dimmest of newbie superbimbos is supposed to know that she can't wear civilian panties under her cruelly revealing supersuit!' (Warren 2007a, p. 8). Emp then runs off crying while all the rest of the Superhomeys join Spooky's attack by laughing at her. The entire room fills with their laughter and Emp's tears, as the previous white space of the panel fills with the multiple copies of the word 'Ha' and tears.

This psychological vulnerability then immediately follows with an incident of physical vulnerability. Emp appears bound with metal chains, gagged with a fabric knot in her mouth and the rest of the fabric tied around her face, and feet placed within a cement block. Although in a precarious position, Emp uses her quick wits and humour to stall the minions until the Superhomeys come rescue her. In this scenario, the narrative exists, in some ways, like many more traditional superhero comics in which a female needs to be

protected and/or saved. Carol A. Stabile (2009, p. 87) describes this rescue scenario: 'The central premise of superhero lore is that someone out there needs to be protected . . . the someone in need of protection is invariably female or feminized.' Thus, in the beginning, Emp does not embody the standard superhero narrative. She is frequently the one being rescued, rather than the one doing the rescuing, although she herself is the title character. Opening with these two stories demonstrates the dual axis of Emp's vulnerability: both psychological and physical.

Emp continuously battles these twin dimensions that influence her self-esteem. Unsure of herself around the Superhomeys, she uses lots of 'um's, 'uh's and vocal pauses when talking to them as a group, as well as sweating profusely. As an associate member of the team, not full-fledged, she does not have the respect or status of the rest of her team. Indeed, the Superhomeys join with supervillians and civilians in making fun of her through hurtful nicknames. The nicknames her teammates call her include 'Bondage Girl', 'Supercaptive', 'Captain Kidnapped', 'Hostage Hottie', 'Abduction Lass', 'The Hogtied Heroine', 'Bettie Page Overdrive', (Warren 2007b, pp. 18–19), 'no-talent intern' (Warren 2007a, p. 34), and 'Miss Lamest Superhero in America' (Warren 2007b, p. 99). Again, most of these pejorative nicknames reference her physical vulnerability, her propensity to become bound and gagged, and draw on the 'good girl' motif that both Reynolds (1992) and Horn (1977) describe, as images of sadomachoism and rescue boil down into a quick two- or three-word nickname. Although some superheroines do contain elements of the 'good girl' motif, *Empowered* uses this theme as a structural narrative device; situations in which Emp gets herself into trouble and needs to be rescued emphasize her disempowerment that she must ultimately overcome in order to become a better superheroine.

Part of what Emp's character must overcome includes her physical and psychological insecurities. These insecurities influence how well her suit works, creating a link between her emotions and her supersuit. Understanding how a superhero's costume works is an important aspect within superhero narratives. Indeed, the very bodies of superheroes, as represented through their costumes, function as a critical aspect of identity: 'Costume is more than a disguise: it functions as a sign for inward process of character development' (Reynolds 1992, p. 29). Take the example of Iron Man and his costume, which demonstrate the dual function: 'The role of the costume as a narrative device (giving Iron Man the powers he needs to fight villains) and its role as a sign of identity (to wear the costume is to become Iron Man)' (Reynolds 1992, pp. 26–27). Costumes, then, represent a dual function: both as a narrative device as well as formulation of identity. Emp's costume serves the dual function of many other superheroes; it exists as a way to understand the story but also to understand her body, her identity and what it means to be a superheroine.

For Emp, emotions influence the suit's performance, whether negatively or positively. While telling both her captors (and the reader) how her powers work in the first volume, she explains that her suit can stop a bullet or zap things. However, her powers do not work 'if my suit's really torn up like this [her suit is tattered and torn, looking more like a skimpy bikini than body-covering wetsuit]. Or if I'm too distracted or scared. Or if I didn't get enough sleep the night before' (Warren 2007a, p. 65). Revealing how her suit works not only gives her enemies knowledge of how to disable her but, more importantly, it provides insight into her psyche. When she becomes overwhelmed by negative emotions, such as distraction, fear or sleep deprivation, then she cannot function well and the suit responds accordingly.

As her story continues and develops, Emp comes to the realization that, indeed, her powers and emotions tie themselves together. Processing the unreliability of her suit, she tells her boyfriend Thugboy that self-doubt paralyzes her:

> There's no way that the stupid thing should be as ridiculously damage-prone as it is! Unless . . . Unless the hyper-membrane is physically fragile because I'm psychologically fragile. The suit's always in tatters 'cause my self-esteem's always in tatters, see? It's mirroring my own degree of emotional vulnerability, right? You'll notice that, on rare occasions that I'm not paralyzed by self-consciousness or whatever — like that time I rescued you [Thugboy] – the suit and I can kick some ass. (Warren 2008a, pp. 147–148)

Here Emp acknowledges that body and mind link themselves together; her feelings of inadequacy manifest themselves into the vulnerabilities she faces physically.

However, as she notes, when someone she loves is in danger, she overcomes her self-doubts to save them. Two particular instances concern Thugboy and Emp's best friend Ninjette. When Thugboy's former fellow thugs capture and threaten to kill him, Emp kicks the door down with a big 'BAMM'. She then uses her zapping powers to knock out the bad guys to get Thugboy and save him (Warren 2007a, pp. 91–92). When three maniac killers try to chop Ninjette's arms and legs off in an attempt to take her back to her abusive ninja clan, Emp catapults from a tree, crashing into the battle. Using her zapping power along with newly sprouted angel-like wings, she defeats the trio and saves Ninjette (Warren 2008a, pp. 189–197). Ninjette thanks Emp, stating: 'I knew you'd save me, you know that . . . ? [. . .] 'Cause you're a hero Emp' (Warren 2008a, p. 195). Emp uses love and friendship to overcome feelings of inferiority to become a hero in the truest sense of the word.

In addition, Warren posits a particular idea of true heroism, by demonstrating the lack of heroism within the Superhomeys through their mistreatment of Emp. Instead of being invulnerable, Warren argues heroes require a sense of vulnerability to be able to save others. Thugboy provides this salient observation as he makes the distinction between an invulnerable and vulnerable hero. Calling Emp his personal hero, he tells her to value herself:

> You're as vulnerable as a superhero could possibly be . . . ! You know that you could lose your powers at any time . . . [. . .] But, scared or not. . . . . you keep on plugging away. You keep on putting your vulnerable self in harm's way. That's brave. [. . .] And that's why you're my favorite superhero. (Warren 2007a, pp. 80–81)

Most of the Superhomeys in this comic universe think of themselves as invulnerable; their powers do not fluctuate based on their confidence level. However, Emp's courage and heroism come from facing the unknown, time and time again, in order to help save others. By putting herself in harm's way, she offers her own body as a shield for others, instead of being limited by a fragile suit.

In many ways, Emp's struggles with her body demonstrate Heinecken's conclusion that female-centred heroic tales focus on the self rather than others: 'While traditional heroic texts foreground the establishment of control over others (the ultimate goal of bodily control), female-centered texts primarily articulate concerns/tensions with autonomy, issues over gaining and maintaining control over the self' (Heinecken 2003, p. 152). Understanding the internal dynamics of heroism and those struggles could potentially redefine the meaning of heroism for men and women. Although a fictional character, Emp goes through what many of us go through: self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy or not fitting in, wanting to be loved and loving fiercely. These characteristics do not detract from her heroism but simply shift the focus from previous understandings of heroism both in literature and comics.

Moving away from bound and gagged

However, Emp's struggles are not just limited to being a good superheroine, but also concern her body image. When her supersuit rips and tears, it frequently only conceals just enough so she is not totally naked. She often appears more in a super-bikini than the original suit's full head-to-toe supermembrane. This tattered, bikini-type suit largely derives from her origin story of coming from a damsel-in-distress storyline.

The character of Empowered started when people commissioned Adam Warren to draw damsels in distress or bound and gagged women. *Empowered* features metatextual narratives in which Emp breaks the fourth wall to talk directly to the reader. Metatextual talk in superhero comics began in the 1940s with Captain Marvel and in the 1960s with the Fantastic Four and has since been used by characters such as She-Hulk. The metatextual talk breaks convention and 'address[es] the audience directly' (Robinson 2004, p. 107). Robinson argues that metatextual aspects and breaking the fourth wall represent 'another stage in the process of comic book self-awareness and self-commentary', including 'simultaneous presence – indeed, the deliberate juxtaposition – of multiple points of view and multiple sources of narrative and visual authority, along with the constant commentary on the process of the work of art as it is being made' (Robinson 2004, p. 109). Emp's breaking the fourth wall does offer a different perspective on herself.

Although not every fourth wall breakage includes a redefinition of her character (some are used just for humour or as a chapter break), Emp does break through assumptions about her character conception and development through direct address. This character redefinition begins as she divulges her origin story over three chapter title pages in the first volume. First, she dishes that her creator did start part of his career by drawing 'a bunch of commissioned sketches for some guys with, ah, specialized interests. Wink, wink. Specialized as in, they requested sketches of, shall we say, "damsels in distress"' (Warren 2007a, p. 109). On the next chapter title page, she reveals that those sketches then turned into her own character: 'He started drawing really short (ahem) "stories" about an oft-distressed and bondage-prone superheroine. That superheroine would, apparently, be me. Degrading much? And you thought that the story of your conception was totally embarrassing, huh?' (Warren 2007a, p. 117). After working up a sweat talking about her bound and gagged creative conception, she sticks out her tongue to show her resistance to her origin as well as the tongue-in-cheek element of her humour, a rebuff to the 'good girl' motif. On the third chapter title page, she concludes:

> But in the course of these throwaway 'stories' . . . . . he says I developed a, quote, 'personality' . . . . . and a woe-is-me backstory . . . . . and a boyfriend . . . . . and a nice set of body-image issues, thank you very much . . . . . and, well, voilà . . . . . this goofy mess somehow wound up morphing into a, quote, 'real comic.' A 'real comic' in which, you'll notice, I still seem to get tied up a lot. (Warren 2007a, p. 120)

Using sarcasm and humour about her situation, Emp not only reveals but confronts her origins and the way Warren draws her.

She continues to use the chapter title breaks as a way to address the reader directly and break through assumptions concerning her bondage-prone self. In every chapter title, she appears in her supersuit. Appearing in costume allows her to advance her feelings about herself as a superheroine and critique more traditional superhero lore. At first, the fourth wall/chapter titles or recaps are much more straightforward, showing Emp introducing herself. The very first line of the first chapter title page reads, 'Uh . . . hello, there! Welcome to my story, okay?' (Warren 2007a, p. 5). Here, starting with 'uh' and using the qualifying word 'okay' demonstrate that she seems unsure of herself. However, as the volumes

progress, Emp gains a more confident attitude and will tell the reader what to do, make fun of the creator and have fun with the whole concept of breaking the fourth wall. At times, she is still unsure of herself, but her overall image projects more self-confidence. Two particularly resistive pages stand out, centring on the themes of the way she is drawn and readers' sexual pleasure and arousal.

First, Emp becomes creeped out by the thought that some people may be turned on or masturbate to her bound and gagged images (again, another critique of the 'good girl' motif). After musing aloud to herself, and the audience, she has an epiphany, represented by a large, bold exclamation mark, and nervously shouts to the reader, 'Y-you're not like that, right? R-right-?! Tell me you're not – p-please! You seem r-really nice, okay?' (Warren 2007a, p. 125). Here she calls on the reader to reject a particular conception of her image and attempts to use a compliment, that the reader is 'really nice', to persuade the audience against reading into what she sees as negative images of being bound and gagged.

Second, she asserts herself against bondage fans by expressing her pleasure at the decreasing amount of time spent bound and gagged as the series continues. She yells and curses at the reader, in a ragged, jagged word balloon:

> You can just go to hell, bondage fans! You think I like being hogtied and humiliated for your hentai *convenience*?! Didn't volume three's bondagepalooza tide you ____ers over for little bit? Well, screw you! I like the new, positive direction this volume is taking! (Warren 2009, p. 146)[4]

Here Emp clearly takes a stand against the hyper-sexualized nature of being bound and gagged as well as asserting her own positive self-identity. Each of the examples demonstrates an aspect of self-humour that not only makes her personable and human, but also serves as a way to reflect on other superheroes' body image.

Additionally, Warren uses situations and characters as a way directly to break through Emp's negative self-body image. Two major examples include using means of her own physical bondage to save the day, and her boyfriend Thugboy's love and positive verbal and sexual affirmation. Both examples begin with Emp as bound and gagged, but then evolve into a positive affirmation of her body image. Each is analyzed in turn to demonstrate how Emp progresses in her concept of self.

First, Emp faces Imperial Pimpotron Alpha, a representative of an alien emperor. Imperial Pimpotron Alpha first entraps Emp within power-draining bondage gear and then evaluates her body and its attributes for the emperor's harem. The body scan reveals 'an excessive callypygious volumoisty' (Warren 2007a, p. 42); thus, she will not be forcibly enslaved for sexual purposes. In essence, she did not meet the emperor's butt standards. Emp becomes mortified, and the alien leaves her, still bound in the power-draining gear, and again her teammates rescue her from her bound position. However, she keeps the gear and later uses it in battle to trap and contain the Demonwolf (Warren 2007b, pp. 103–105). The now Caged Demonwolf reminds Emp of this fact when she attacks herself as being worthless. In his unusual syntax, he argues: 'If you had not endured such degradation [with the slaver], then you would never have acquired the means to stop the world-snuffer's rampage. Thus, if you'd never been humiliated, foolish wench . . . your very WORLD would be FORFEIT!!!' (Warren 2007b, p. 107). Here, a defeated enemy argues for Emp to see herself as a true hero, as only she saved the world from his horrible rampage. Thus, she used the previous bonds of her captivity, and mortification, to save the world when none of the other Superhomeys stood a chance (the comic depicts them here as beaten down and Emp as the last line of superhero defence).

Second, Emp's relationship with Thugboy helps to drastically alter her sense of body image and overall self into a positive light. From their first meeting, Thugboy showers her with compliments. Emp attempts to rescue a woman from a group of minions and thugs, but ends up becoming captive herself. As one of the minions, Thugboy takes the opportunity to tie her up so he can talk to her. He encourages her to keep fighting because lots of people look up to her: 'I know that you're having trouble with the superheroing, but you gotta keep at it, okay? 'Cause you've got more fans than you know, among those of us who can appreciate a superhuman who's human as well as super . . . !' (Warren 2007a, p. 67). Here, again, the theme of vulnerability and humanity demonstrates what defines a true hero – using one's humanity to save others with respect. Also, Thugboy also compliments her by calling her a total 'badass', 'the most promising [Superhomey he's] ever seen', and 'the cutest' (Warren 2007a, p. 67). After this encounter, they eventually start dating and move in together. Thugboy continues to shower Emp with compliments, such as calling her 'brave and courageous' (Warren 2007a, p. 132) and a 'bootylicious superchica' (Warren 2007a, p. 151). When she puts herself down, Thugboy refuses to let her, stating 'I'm not gonna let anyone talk trash about my favorite superhero. Not even my favorite superhero herself' (Warren 2007a, p. 78).

Additionally, Thugboy provides another important boost to her body image and self-esteem: sexually. After helping Emp take down thugs and criminals, Thugboy quips, 'Well, this stuff makes you happy, dunnit? What else am I gonna do?' (Warren 2007a, p. 87). However, he does such actions not only for her happiness, but also as part of a sexual motivation. Immediately after this proclamation to Emp, his thought balloon – which the reader can see but Emp cannot – reads, 'Not to mention that you always get completely sexed-up and outta control after every successful superhero outing . . .' (Warren 2007a, p. 87). The next scene flashes to his memory of Emp and Thugboy having sex; she is on top of him in the remnants of her suit. Vertical lines between their bodies make it appear as though they are rapidly having intercourse. With an expression of sexual delight on her face, she yells in passion 'WHAT'S . . . MY . . . NAAAME?!' and tells him she wants to look into his eyes while she's '____ing [his] . . . brains out . . . !' (Warren 2007a, p. 87).[5] During sexual intercourse, Thugboy uses his own body to provide love and support for Emp and her self-esteem. Although the use of sex and/or a man to improve a woman's self-image could be read as questionable, Emp grows as both an individual and a hero after her experiences with Thugboy. One test would be if she could live without him and still be a strong woman and superheroine. However, as they still live together at present as boyfriend and girlfriend, Emp has not faced such a test of inner strength. Even so, all individuals form themselves in relationship to others, and she is no different.

Conclusions: an empowered self

Being able to draw on positive experiences and combat a negative self-esteem and body image allows Emp to grow as a character and superheroine in terms of her self-esteem, self-confidence and powers. As all five volumes' covers show Emp in a powerful position, such as arms curled towards her head and flexing her muscles (Warren 2007a), Warren highlights her character as empowered, rather than disempowered. Each graphic novel, at more than 200 pages, enables Warren to flesh out more fully Emp's character to demonstrate her larger character arc and transformation into an empowered self. Her character is first introduced to the reader as a disempowered self: bound, gagged and somewhat helpless. However, as the series progresses, Emp redefines herself and gains confidence and

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powers. At the beginning, her suit can stop bullets and do some zapping, but it drains her suit's powers, leaving her vulnerable, gagged and/or bound (Warren 2007a). Next, she progresses to using part of the suit as a weapon, and calls on her love for Thugboy and Ninjette to save them (Warren 2007b). Additionally, the suit contains invisibility powers, but only the suit turns invisible, leaving her naked and embarrassed in front of Thugboy, Ninjette and the reader in volume one. However, by the fourth volume, she turns her invisible suit power into an asset, and saves all the Superhomeys (Warren 2008b). After saving the Superhomeys, she can now cling to surfaces like Spider-Man as well as breathe in outer space without space gear (Warren 2009). Emp's vulnerability, both psychological and physical, showcases a much more human side to being a superhero. Rising from her bondage inception and vulnerability, Emp finds empowerment through herself and her sexuality.

However, her move from disempowerment to empowerment still draws upon the tropes of 'good girl' comics, such as sadomasochism and sexuality, highlighting the question of what constitutes 'empowerment'. Brown (2004, p. 52) argues that tough female action heroes transgress gendered boundaries; she 'is a transgressive character not because she operates outside of gender restrictions but because she straddles both sides of the psychoanalytic gender divide. She is both subject and object, looker and looked at, ass-kicker and sex object'. Emp negotiates both these identities: she acts as an object whereby the reader views her bound, gagged, nearly naked but also as a subject who directly addresses the reader and tells them to view her differently than a mere object.

Perhaps what Emp best demonstrates is how norms of gender and ideology operate both to empower and to disempower. In certain instances, she operates as empowered, such as when she breaks the fourth wall to talk directly to the reader and challenge her visual depiction. In other instances, she remains disempowered by her self-doubts, name calling and visual appearance. Using the means of her disempowerment (bondage and bondage tools), Emp redeploys them as part of the way she discovers herself as a superheroine. In this way, *Empowered* functions as a way to highlight rhetorics of (dis)empowerment. Ultimately, Empowered functions not as a perfect character, but instead shows readers that a superhero does not have to be an invulnerable, inflexible individual; rather, she can still be strong in her own way – a *human* superhero.

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Notes

1. I use the term 'graphic novel' to describe *Empowered*, as Warren identifies his work as graphic novels rather than comics. More specifically, *Empowered* constitutes a series of graphic novels, as each volume can stand alone, written as a complete unified work of fiction, rather than being a compilation of monthly issues (drawing on O'Neil's 2001 distinction here). When I use the term 'comic' or 'comic book', this functions as an overall umbrella term for comics more generally, including comic strips, monthly issues, miniseries, trade paperbacks and graphic novels.
2. See also Simon and Simon (1990) for more on development of Captain America as a character.
3. For more on these tensions, see Stuller (2010).

4. Warren uses black boxes to play with the concept of redacting or censoring certain words, such as profanity. In order to keep in the style of the graphic novel, I have decided to keep the word 'fuck' censored.
5. See previous comment concerning censorship and Warren's visual style.

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