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Mazikeen's Faces —The Feminist Lives of Karen Berger

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When DC's Vertigo imprint was launched in 1993,[1] its ostensible purpose was to provide a space of radical creative freedom, wherein creators were free to pursue storylines with darker, edgier content than many mainstream comics. While this was an ideal rather than a reality, as a number of creators had content deemed "sexual" censored,[2] Vertigo has been widely regarded as an imprint with more latitude for creatives than many other labels. Rather than simply becoming the repository for graphic sex and violence that such an imprint could have devolved into, Vertigo became in fact the space of exploration it was founded to be. Of course, there is also sex and violence, to keep us all interested in the socially aware, politically nuanced storylines.

The name alone—"vertigo"—refers to a spinning sensation that is an apt diagnosis of transition between the 20th and 21st centuries. As an imprint, Vertigo sought to embody its name partly through the careful integration of historical realities, historical fiction, and mythology, to comment on both history and the present as spaces of disorientation. While the disorientation can be seen as problematic for characters, the Vertigo universe is a location of productive unsettlement. Authors and artists sought to create a place wherein hierarchical structures of power destabilize traditional roles in a manner reflective of contemporary social movements. Without editor Karen Berger at the helm, Vertigo's storylines could easily have been led by a cast of tokenized versions of traditional superheroes, in which the imposition of a different gender identity or ethnic category stood in for a more robust understanding of diversity. In fact, we see a contemporary movement regarding representational praxis in which superheroes traditionally created as white men are replaced by characters with marginalized identities, such as the current Spider-Man, whose alternate identity is Miles Morales, an Afro-Latino teenager, or the reintroduction of Ms. Marvel as a young Muslim woman. This representational work is important

[1] Vertigo was created partly as a method of evading the restrictions of the Comics Code Authority, an industry regulatory body created in 1954 in response to Fredric Wertham's famed *Seduction of the Innocent*, a popular book of psychiatry that posited that comics result in juvenile delinquency. Wertham argued that comics' depictions of sex and violence promoted the same behavior in children. The Comics Code Authority was the comics industry's response in terms of collaborative self-censorship, a compromise to avoid the likely more restrictive government censorship that had been proposed.

[2] For example, Frank Quitely notes in an interview with Isabelle Licari-Guillaume that "a suggestion of pubic hair" was edited out in the final printing without consultation (Licari-Guillaume, "Interview: Frank Quitely" np).

and has largely been produced with an awareness of how these characters would fundamentally differ if their origin stories derived from less privileged backgrounds. However, transposing a suit onto a person with less social capital can inadvertently simplify recalcitrant social ills.

Vertigo, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of trouble, and of violence, in social change. Julia Round contends that Vertigo "can be seen as an alternate, 'unofficial history' (Punter 1980) that runs alongside of the publication of mainstream superhero titles" (Round 48), effectively destabilizing the comics industry's preference for story arcs with relatively uncomplicated notions of good and evil. However, Vertigo writers also sought to capture the complexities of daily life, alongside of its more metaphysical meditations. Isabelle Licari-Guillaume notes during an interview with Berger: "One of the common points between many of the early series that you edited when you started Vertigo is that of social relevance: homelessness, racism, women's rights, transgender people etc., with a progressive outlook" (Licari-Guillaume, "We're Living in a Vertigo World" np). Berger herself saw the commonalities in Vertigo titles as being that "they all had some basis in reality" (Contino, qtd. in Round 47).

Growing out of my long-standing interest in Vertigo as an imprint and simultaneous disappointment at the paucity of women leads, I want to examine Vertigo in general, and *Lucifer* in particular, as a space of authentic negotiation of the "place" of women in comics through the means of historical fiction and mythology so as to accurately reflect how comics have been a literary form long staged with a white audience of mostly men in mind, and how Vertigo titles in particular show the difficulties in creating a more inclusive environment that reflects not only the humanity of women characters, but also the labor involved in social change. Put another way, Vertigo illustrates the obstacles women face in the world as they seek equal social standing with men in a form traditionally conceptualized as *for* men.

Vertigo in general, and *Lucifer* in particular, stage a range of ways women have historically been marginalized, particularly in terms of self-determination and identity. By exploring a variety of sites of contestation between men and women—and removing them from a particular historical moment and rendering them mythic—the author and artists of *Lucifer* seek to expose a variety of tactics and strategies women have used over time to gain and maintain power and to create an authentic sense of self even in the context of patriarchal oppression. Berger's role as editor is significant in part because of how she used the tensions in her gender identity in the context of her role in an industry dominated by men to guide storylines to better represent the realities of women.

That basis in reality allowed writers and artists to explore the complexities of contemporary social issues, including those regarding women's roles, and violence against women.[3] The comics industry had been primarily oriented towards an audience of men, as well as being populated mostly by authors who are men. Gail Simone's 1999 list *Women in Refrigerators* was a landmark contribution to an ongoing conversation regarding the representation of women in comics, highlighting how often violence against women superheroes was used as a gratuitous plot device. While she had no major motives in compiling the list aside from satisfying her curiosity,[4] the site served as a flashpoint for conversations regarding how and why representation of women in comics matters. The list had more far-reaching consequences as well, as Simone speculated on the reason behind the disproportionate killings and maimings of women characters. She ventures:

> is it that the comics-buying public being mostly male that is the cause of this trend? [...] So, it's possible that less thought might be given to the impact the death of a female character might have on the readership. Or, it's possible that there's rarely a fan outcry when a female is killed. [...] Or maybe many of the male creators simply relate less to female characters. Or maybe it's a combination of these. [...] More often than not, though, there's a feeling of inconsequence, of afterthought, to these stories. (Simone, "Fan Gail Simone Responds")

One of the elements she addresses only obliquely is the extent to which this mirrors the lived experience of women. While her work was primarily focused on fictional women superheroes, it is worth noting that women suffer a disproportionate amount of intimate partner violence (Khazan).[5] While not explicitly exploring intimate partner violence, Simone's work perhaps inadvertently highlights some of the disparities between women's and men's experiences of violence.

Violence is not, of course, the only experience of women allegorized in some comics. Looking back at Simone's conjectures, it is not difficult to see how these questions can be posed regarding less

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[3] Please note my usage for this piece, which purposefully excludes "male" and "female," using instead "men" and "women." I used these terms instead to acknowledge that the former terms fail to capture trans and non-binary experiences, and while I'm explicitly writing about gender, I want to make sure I am not excluding trans women and non-binary people from the category of "women." I have *not* altered others' framing of male and female, however.

[4] Simone remarked that "When I realized that it was actually harder to list major female heroes who HADN'T been sliced up somehow, I felt that I might be on to something a bit ... well, creepy" ("Fan Gail Simone Responds").

[5] "The CDC analyzed the murders of women in 18 states from 2003 to 2014, finding a total of 10,018 deaths. Of those, 55 percent were intimate partner violence-related, meaning they occurred at the hands of a former or current partner or the partner's family or friends. In 93 percent of those cases, the culprit was a current or former romantic partner [...] Data from earlier reports suggest a far smaller percentage of men—around 5 to 7 percent—were killed by intimate partners" (Khazan).

explicit marginalization. If the preoccupation with violence is caused by an audience of mostly men, what are other consequences for comics aside from violence? Women are represented less often and are frequently represented as less nuanced characters. If there is rarely a fan outcry when women characters are killed, would it be any likelier that there would be any major objection when depictions of women are sexist? If men who are creators relate less to women characters, what are the consequences for how women characters are depicted? Suzanne Scott remarks that "[t]he issue is not simply that popular and academic literature generally renders female comic book readers invisible; it is also that the moments in which they are visible, they are too frequently compartmentalized and contained" (2.4): a statement which applies to women characters in comics as well and, furthermore, to the role of women in the comics industry, a triad of writer/artist-character-reader that forms the backbone of representation in the field. It is worth noting that many men in comics are working on these issues, but that greater representation of women in all areas of comics does not conform to a narrative of inevitable progress;[6] nor does greater representation of women characters necessarily mean that those renderings will be less sexist. In addition, experiences and interpretations vary, and it's important to continue conversations regarding these issues as there is no silver bullet to "fix" women in comics.

Berger herself indicates that she felt few pressures at DC as a woman, however. In an interview with Paul Levitz, he asked: "Did they not let you into their sandbox because you were a girl or because you were the new kid?" In response, Berger asserts "I never felt it was because I was a girl. I never felt that at DC, at all. It was a non-issue. If anything, being a woman editor gave me a great advantage working with freelancers, (mostly) men because a lot of them were afraid of me. Don't ask me why. [...W]ith a lot of men when working with other men there were a lot of ego issues. Outdoing each other. And I wasn't a threat to them" (Levitz). While she initially asserts that her status as a woman did not factor in, her elaboration is telling: that she simultaneously intimidated men she worked with *and* she wasn't perceived as a threat is a position that suggests a more complex role. In fact, I believe that this tension—between Berger's being dominant and being invisible—influenced many of the men who were authors and artists at Vertigo precisely in how they negotiated women characters.

[6] As Suzanne Scott and others recount, 2011 San Diego Comic Con saw a "noticeable shift in the demographics of DC's creative teams surrounding the new line [the New 52], with female creators dropping from approximately 12 percent to making up only 1 percent of DC's talent roster."

Lucifer

Among the dozens of iconic titles overseen by Karen Berger during her time as DC's editor of their Vertigo imprint is *Lucifer*. Employing a title authored and drawn by men (Mike Carey et al.), inspired by a series created by a man (Neil Gaiman) that followed a man (Morpheus), with a lead man (Lucifer) might seem an inauspicious start for a defense of Berger's role as a feminist influence on so-called "adult" comics, but her effect was more complex than a tokenizing impulse to have a woman lead who would be all but interchangeable with leads who are men. Furthermore, in spite of *Lucifer*'s ostensible focus on a leading man, most story arcs diverge from the actions of the title character, focusing instead on a range of women whose lives have been upended by Lucifer's desire to depart the universe of his Father, and how they deal with the consequences reverberating across creation. Lucifer himself becomes titular. While women characters are trapped within power structures created by men—Yahweh's creation, Lucifer's creation, and Elaine's eventual binding into the role of Godhead—they are able to adapt to and resist the corrosive aspects of that power in their own lives, eventually adapting it to an alternative future.

Indeed, most of the major Vertigo titles had white men as protagonists. Even Vertigo's *Y: The Last Man*, which ostensibly had only a single character who was a man,[7] still followed the story of Yorick and his monkey Ampersand, the only XY survivors of a plague that killed all of the XY mammals on Earth. However, as Mark C. Hill explores in his "Alternative Masculine Performances in American Comics: Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerra's *Y: The Last Man*," even Vertigo titles with a man as the focalizer of the action can have distinctly feminist implications, as "Yorick's maturation is marked not only by 'traditional' notions of adulthood (responsibility, assertiveness, and confidence)" (80), but also by feminine-coded traits like "empathy" (80), as well as when he "slowly begins to stop judging himself by the hypermasculine norm of his youth" (87). Even without men, Hill explains, characters are still caught in the power dynamics established by heteronormative patriarchal ideology, but the series clearly establishes movement away from these norms as not only admirable, but crucial to survival.

Similarly, works as divergent as *Transmetropolitan* and *Preacher* both establish white men whose character development is fundamentally rooted in their recognition of their own fallibility, their need for contributions of the women around them, and the strength lying dormant in their own feminine-coded character traits. *Transmetropolitan*'s Spider Jerusalem's "filthy assistants," both of whom are women, succeed him in his writing and in fact eclipse his personal success. *Preacher* takes a different track, in which the hypermasculine-yet-chivalrous lead Jesse Custer

[7] Spoiler alert: there were in fact more.

often discounts his girlfriend Tulip's contributions to his mission while simultaneously relying on the untrustworthy Cassidy, both characters frequently undermining her ostensibly to keep her from danger. However, Tulip manages Jesse's reactions to her ability to help, as well as her abuse at the hands of Cassidy and objects to ways in which he attempts to co-opt her perception of her own experiences. Ultimately, she leaves Jesse until he reaches to her in tears, a crack in the veneer of his masculine performance. It is worth noting that, while fantastic, both of these titles also play with history: *Transmetropolitan* is a fictional future version of Hunter S. Thompson, the famed gonzo journalist, and the main story arc involves the team's work to take down an exceptionally corrupt president, while *Preacher* employs Old West tropes to examine a variety of American social ills. The historical fiction element in Vertigo titles often lampoons the impotence of American (and British) cultural myths when those myths are used as a way to combat real-world issues.

In fact, Berger's support of historical fiction in itself can be seen as distinctly feminist. The historical fiction of the Vertigo universe allowed the careful reintegration of voices into the historical record that were otherwise, because of accidents of history and structural issues like sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism, and other marginalizing "isms," left out of the historical record. Many excellent historians are doing the important work of incorporating voices that have been ignored, but in the very construction of the historical archive, there are sometimes aporias that can only be filled by a combination of interference from evidence and imaginative creation. Linda Hutcheon's examination of historiographic metafiction, the genre that "incorporates [...] theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic *meta*fiction)" (5) influenced my own studies, and I defined the comics version of this genre as historio-metagraphics. Historio-metagraphics engage in many of the same topics as autographics and seek to represent some measure of historical reality but also do so from a fictional vantage point. This term is meant to capture—as Hutcheon's did—a range of strategies employed in order to both illustrate historical realities and to question the way in which they are represented, in the case of comics, both textually and visually. In my book *Ethics in the Gutter*, I argue that "[e]mphasizing facticity at the expense of emotional or ethical concerns within what is represented can potentially impoverish our experience of history, and facts alone do not always sufficiently engage with the persistent ethical questions surrounding histories of violence" (8). Significantly, because of our identities, or perhaps more importantly, because of the assumed identity of audience members, we are as likely to be prompted to empathize with perpetrators as victims, and uncomplicated representations of historical events that fail to tease Others from the margins only recapitulate existing narratives of men as the only people who played a role in

history. I see historical fiction as offering a space not unlike the metaphorical space represented by the gutter between panels, wherein we have representations to guide us, but we need to infer what takes place in that blank space. While there is significant debate on the role gutters play in the reading process, I am firmly in the school that the gutter—whether physical or implied—plays a fundamental role in the comics reading process and signifies a metaphorical space wherein readers develop a role within the narrative.

Furthermore, historical fiction in comics offers a means of metacommentary on the construction of the canon and on the power structures that function to sanction or delegitimize different types of knowledge. Part of the difficulty in retelling history in a more inclusive way is the extent to which many peoples' contributions were rendered disposable. The very construction of the category "literature" was created not only to include some voices, but also as a means of refining what could count as literary and therefore valuable representations. Excluded from this category were many of the kinds of writing more readily available to women, such as categories supposedly self-evidently "non-literary" as letters, which have subsequently been rethought as significant contributions to the literary record. On one hand, this troubles the categories whereby literature as a discipline sanctions what kinds of people were producing literary works, and on the other, this broadens what our discipline can look at as "literature." The consequences of these re-framings of the literary enterprise are twofold: one, they open a pathway for people with different origins and experiences to more robustly contribute to discussions of the human experience. Two, they illustrate how a variety of non-traditional literary forms can be treated as literary artifacts if the goal is consideration of a broader understanding of the human condition, rather than a narrow segment of it.

Historical fiction in Vertigo is a confirmation of the potential for such developments. In the first case, Vertigo titles often emphasize marginalized experiences in the context of power dynamics that limit their options, while simultaneously working to find alternative roads around these restricting functions. In the second case, Vertigo titles stand as testament to the literariness of a form often omitted from discussions of high art. Vertigo is invested in more diverse representation, as well as questioning of enshrined historical narratives, as Hutcheon would frame it. Historio-metagraphics seek to expose the social and cultural systems surrounding events, examining stories that fail to fit into prevailing capital-H "histories."

While historical fiction in comics engages with real-world phenomena, comics are not bounded by fidelity to the possible. Many of the comics in Berger's Vertigo universe, while representing actual events, incorporate fantastic, dystopian, or science fiction elements alongside. This is not,

of course, strictly the province of comics, as it overlaps with one major subgenre of dystopia: alternate histories, in which the author changes some basic historical event and games out how it would have changed present circumstances.[8] Vertigo is significant because its universe[9] was both based on real world events and was untroubled by fidelity to the historical record, creating genre-bending sf/fantasy/mythic riffs off of both the past and current events. Furthermore, Vertigo in particular seemed intent on representing troubling periods in history without erasing the agency of victims, the culpability of perpetrators, or the emotional and situational complexities surrounding violence. For example, *Scalped* develops a complex narrative exploring the difficulties of both personal and cultural memory in contemporary Native American life, illustrating present-day circumstances as tied to the particular history of violence enacted on Native bodies while eschewing an uncomplicated and romanticized view of Native life.

Representing the labor involved in creating a more egalitarian culture can certainly be reflected in a variety of genres, but I believe Vertigo's frequent blending of historical fiction and mythology provides authors and artists with a way to reflect on how current power structures, far from being inevitable, derived from events (and people) that can (and should) be altered in the present. By developing a universe in which radical social change is possible, while integrating historical realities alongside of the merely possible and the purely fantastic, Vertigo as an imprint seeks to make legible not a future utopian vision free from the hardships of the past, but a present that demands continued thought and negotiation. The woman is illustrated as not simply opposing or undermining the man in Vertigo but moves outside of the patriarchal understanding staged in the real world. Writers and artists of the series, under the guidance of Berger, Shelly Bond, and others took care not to simply upend existing power structures, but depict women *as they currently exist* within those power structures, and to develop pathways whereby they could move beyond outmoded notions of human divisions.

Characterization in *Lucifer*: Mazikeen's Face as Metaphor

Mike Carey's *Lucifer*, mostly penciled, inked, and colored by Peter Gross, Ryan Kelly, and Dean Ormston, ran from 2001 to 2007, totaling 75 issues. While the title character stands as the primary mover of the series, Carey's upending of traditional conceptualizations of divinity is a means of developing a critique of a universe based primarily on the masculine principle. The plot follows

[8] Not all alternate histories are dystopian, but they are a significant component of dystopian fiction.
[9] Briefly, it is worth noting that the idea of a unified "Vertigo universe" is debatable, as story arcs and titles often occur in alternate dimensions/futures/etc. However, when I use this term, I am referring not to a particular "place" elaborated by Vertigo authors and artists, but to an ethos shared by Vertigo titles.

Lucifer's ultimately successful attempt to depart Yahweh's creation and move outside of the divine plan. While hewing to Judeo-Christian mythos as to the origin of the universe, Carey's work incorporates the Navajo, Nordic, Japanese, and other mythologies, integrating them as natural portions of the broader creation. Furthermore, Carey's work disputes the permanence of the Judeo-Christian ordering principle, following Lucifer and a number of other characters through efforts to create other alternative creations, to disrupt predestination, and to remake the original creation as something more inclusive. Lucifer fashions his own creation alongside of Yahweh's, but he is tricked into battle with his brother Michael by the wolf Fenris (who comes from Nordic mythology) and, as the two spill blood on the roots of the World Tree, Lucifer's creation becomes vulnerable. When Yahweh chooses to depart his creation, because he is the primary source of the ordering functions of that creation, and because of Lucifer's vulnerability due to his injuries, both creations suffer a slow fading as Yahweh's name is slowly erased from each atom of the world. Lucifer refuses to save the creations, as it would trap him in the role of God, and so another means of salvation must be sought.

Characters are numerous, and so here, I will primarily outline characters who serve a major function in the plot. Mazikeen, Lucifer's consort, daughter of Lilith, and eventually the war leader of the Lilim (Lilith's thousands of children), is primarily interested in protecting Lucifer, but evolves to become engaged with the plight of her half-kin, who dispute their ejection from the Garden of Eden, as they had no part in the first sin. Her mother Lilith had become pregnant by another angel, Sandalphon, in the early days of creation, and he was her only great love. When Mazikeen and her brother Briadach (the son of the angel) kill him as revenge for slighting Lilith, she abandons her thousands of children to help Fenris and others to figure out a way to end creation. Jill Presto is a cabaret performer who allows the Basanos, a tarot deck imbued with free will, to inhabit her. They force her to become pregnant with their offspring, and she spends much of the series seeking to abort the pregnancy. In the lead-up to a fight in Hell between Lucifer and Amenadiel, a damned soul named Christopher Rudd is chosen as the consort of a demoness, Lady Lys. He connives to wrest power from Lys's father so as to bring down the system of Hell, which barters souls and mines their pain to use as a stimulant. Elaine Belloc is a child who is killed in part because of helping Lucifer, though it is later revealed that she is the daughter of Michael the archangel. Her spirit is rescued from the Mansions of Silence, a place other than Heaven or Hell where souls arrive after death, and she becomes a guardian for Lucifer's creation.

All of these characters share a major motivation: the existing hierarchy has damaged them in a fundamental way, and they seek to create an alternative to that system. For Lucifer, his initial

impulse is to make a creation established by his own will rather than that of Yahweh's but finds that this still does not allow him to step outside of the divine plan. For Mazikeen, the power imbalance in her relationship with Lucifer is part of what prompts her to lead her half-kin against the Silver City, but she becomes invested in the fact that her brethren have no true homeland. Lilith was so traumatized by her lover's death that she seeks to unmake the world. Jill allowed the Basanos to possess her in order to bypass the glass ceiling she had been encountering as a performer. Christopher Rudd is horrified to find that the pain he had endured in Hell was not a harrowing for the purification of his soul but merely a means of manufacturing drugs, and comes to the conclusion that creation needs an alternative means of dealing with difficult souls. Elaine sees that Lucifer's methods are simply a revision of the old ways, and seeks something beyond this.

Perhaps one of the most interesting and overlooked subplots of the series is when Mazikeen's face is taken away from her. In a bid to heal the wounded warrior after battle, Jill Presto employs the power of the Basanos to restore Mazikeen to full health. When Mazikeen's face appears—as it does earlier in the comic—as half beautiful, and half flayed, Jill objects, wanting Mazikeen's face to conform to conventional, symmetrical beauty standards. In her original conceptualization in *Sandman*, Neil Gaiman and Kelley Jones designed Mazikeen to expose the socially constructed nature of beauty, alluding to the feminine face as malleable and alterable.[10] "Healing" Mazikeen's face, that is, recreating it as an image of conventional beauty standards, is done without her consent. Below I will consider Mazikeen's role in the series, contending that *Lucifer* emphasizes the power inherent in the embodied woman. Elsewhere, I have analyzed a subplot in which Lucifer replicates the Garden of Eden. Rather than commanding the first man and woman to eschew the Tree of Knowledge, Lucifer instead demands that they bow down to no one. Ultimately, Adam falls prey to the draw of worship (Polak, "And They Call"). Similarly, I have examined the role of trauma and Elaine's apotheosis elsewhere, framing how:

> Elaine establishes this ethical relation in her choice to see the value of creation, even those not her own, and to sink inside so that she ceases to be a "prime mover," and instead becomes an observer. By providing another option for the deployment of power inherent in creation and rule, that is, a preservation of sentience and space, she makes good on the knowledge of the paths trod by YHWH and Lucifer. (Polak, "It accreted around me" 92-3)

Given that Elaine becomes the God, perhaps her role would seem more well-suited for a metaphorical examination of Berger's leadership as editor at Vertigo. But her simultaneous

[10] Neil Gaiman discusses this in Hy Bender's *The Sandman Companion* (72-74, 100).

visibility as the hand steering the imprint, coupled with her own remarks regarding her womanhood as a "non-issue," that she was "not seen as a threat," seem uniquely suited to consideration in relation to a character who is both highly visible as the romantic interest of the main character, but whose face is partly covered.

In early issues, depictions of Mazikeen highlighted her otherness through both image and speech. Rendered in a red-hooded cape that was explicitly out of place in a 21st century piano bar in downtown LA, the half-mask covering her face only underscored her difference, and her lack of desire to conform to established norms. While Lucifer himself is depicted in a tuxedo, he never comments on Mazikeen's willful disregard for rules of convention. Furthermore, her voice is initially rendered the way it is in *Sandman*, in a halting and muffled confusion of letters and syllables, effectively illustrating what her speech would be like if her face were deformed, and half of her mouth was obscured with a mask. While her speech is difficult to follow and needed to be altered for clarity's sake, it is telling that Carey chose to have a woman character alter the face of another woman character, as it suggests that women are as capable of collaborating in misogyny as men. Unlike most women, Mazikeen had initially been able to choose her face, a metaphorical illustration of an alternate power dynamic in her culture that underscored one's identity as being shaped, at least in part, from within, rather than by externally repressive forces. However, that Mazikeen shaped her face to be both pleasing and terrifying in equal measure emphasizes the dualistic feminine archetypes that render women either as objects of visual pleasure or as threatening subjects.

Mazikeen's first attempt to reacquire her face is at the expense of an obviously abused prostitute whose pimp Mazikeen has just beaten. As the girl offers "You…uh…you wanna good time, lady? I can give you just what you need" ("A Dalliance with the Damned" 8), the girl's face is shown in detail, lines denoting either dirt or bruising marring her features. Mazikeen, by contrast, has been rendered as free of flaws in previous panels, but in this panel, the over-the-shoulder point of view contains only the back of her head. The following panel likewise emphasizes the lack of her proper face by rendering Mazikeen only in profile, showing only the half of her face that was always exposed. As the two go into a motel, both are obscured, until the girl asks Mazikeen "what way do you like it?" (9), Mazikeen responding that "I want you to be quiet. Or else I will hook out your eyeballs with my fingers" (9). In this panel, she is positioned behind the girl, holding her hand over the girl's mouth, the half of her face normally visible to the public obscured behind the girl's head. The hand covering the girl's mouth can be framed as both a figurative and literal silencing mechanism, by which Mazikeen is taking away the girl's voice. In Kate Manne's recent book,

Down Girl, she conducts an extended close reading of the prevalence of men strangling women in domestic violence incidents, illustrating that the popularity of this particular act of violence as deriving from the desire to silence women; but moreover, because many victims are too fearful to testify—and when they do, they are often not believed—, the act becomes a sort of double-silencing, in which "Part of male dominance, especially on the part of the most privileged and powerful, seems to be seizing control of the narrative—and with it, controlling her, forcing her concurrence" (11). It is significant that this portion of the storyline is taking place between two women, as it is not simply commenting on the violence that men do to women, but how through a social milieu steeped in misogyny, women can become agents of the very structure of power that subjugates them.

The alternation of which part of Mazikeen's face is exposed underscores this complication of personal agency as well: her face was chosen precisely because it both capitulated to and undermined conventional beauty standards, and it was taken away from her not by a man, but by a woman who was seeking to *heal* her. Jill Presto's misunderstanding of Mazikeen's face derives directly from how Susan Bordo frames "[t]he body, [which,] as anthropologist Mary Douglas has argued, is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body. The body may also operate as a metaphor for culture" (165). Jill's revision of Mazikeen's face cedes her appearance to a social order that demands she be less threatening, which is at odds with Mazikeen's personal mission and struggles. Mazikeen's rejection of a "disciplined" body should not be confused with a sheer rejection of the "ideal type," but rather, as Andrea Dworkin remarked, a rejection of the fact that "[i]n our culture, not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered. No feature or extremity is spared the art, or pain, of improvement" (Dworkin 113, qtd. in Bordo, *Twilight Zones* 197). Jill's violation of Mazikeen's choice of face echoes contemporary ways in which women undermine feminist causes, and very specifically in terms of how women question other women's womanhood, thus erasing their identities as women while doing nothing to alleviate the social sanctions placed on them.

Bordo contends that "[t]hrough the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity [...] female bodies become docile bodies" (*Unbearable Weight* 166). Here, the emphasis should be on the *homogenizing* function, in which the requirements of an ideal type seek to annihilate difference. The final panel on the page, a circle with a face rendered in spit ("A Dalliance with the Damned" 9), is the site of the magic by which Mazikeen seeks to restore her own identity, though it resembles not *her own face*, but *any* face. Scott McCloud's discussion of

the icon as a vehicle by which "you see yourself" (36) within the world of the comic is replicated here but, in an ironic twist, this is the means by which Mazikeen hopes to see herself. However, given that the face is presented to the reader without an over-the-shoulder or other perspective, it suggests that we are seeing, momentarily, through Mazikeen's eyes. So, the general face she has drawn, which is ostensibly a pathway for identification for anyone, is jarred from its normal relationship with the reader as it comes to emphasize the erasure of Mazikeen's individual identity through the normalizing function of femininity.

Indeed, as she attempts to cast the spell that will restore her face, a three-panel sequence shows the face of the girl being erased off her head. The first shows a detailed version of the girl's face as she pleads with Mazikeen, illustrating even a small bandage denoting some injury, likely at the hands of her pimp or a client. The second panel erases her eyes entirely, and the final panel shows her head with only her mouth open in a scream of terror. This transition is interesting in part because the erasure occurs from her forehead downwards, inverting the script of strangulation described by Manne, wherein the girl is left only with her open-mouthed cry, itself an inarticulate "Gaaaahh!" ("A Dalliance with the Damned" 10). The eyes are usually seen as a major aspect of one's identity, and their erasure is certainly uncanny, but leaving the mouth alone to denote the horror of having one's face erased seems to suggest something about the role of women's ability to speak as being a final, vital component of their humanity, more basic, but also more vulnerable, than the other aspects of the face.

The spell is ultimately unsuccessful, as Mazikeen's face will not switch with the girl's, and she leaves the girl traumatized on the hotel bed in order to seek help from her family. As she approaches the cloaked Lilim stronghold, her thoughts are rendered in free indirect speech: "To many, of course, the face she wears now would seem beautiful enough. To her it is a lying daub of flesh, splashed across her skull. It makes her brain squirm and itch" (11). The word choice here is significant, as "seeming" is insufficient to Mazikeen's conceptualization of the purpose of a face, which seems to be to honestly and carefully reveal: that the current face both lies and is characterized as a poorly executed work of art emphasizes the culturally situated nature of aesthetics, but also that identity can be rooted in the face without being a simple exercise in vanity. Connecting to a double bind in which women are required to care obsessively for their appearance but to never appear to care about their appearance, Mazikeen's interest in her own face subverts dominant expectations about who a face is in fact for.

After fighting one of her brothers, Mazikeen is named war leader of the Lilim in exile. What prompts her to adopt this role is not simply her victory, but her other brother, Briadach, who as

she vacillates about her potential role, asks her, “Have you never fantasized about facing him as an equal?” (25), the “him” being Lucifer. She looks back over her shoulder at Briadach, once again showing only the side of her face usually available, while the part that would normally be underneath the mask is once again obscured. This suggests in part that she is only willing to expose what she was always willing to expose to the public, and choosing to conceal that which is no longer her face is a subtle commentary on Briadach’s treachery as well as her own desires for a more egalitarian relationship.

Near the end of the series, Mazikeen does indeed have her original face restored to her, although her own will, desire, and work towards that end has nothing to do with it. In “Evensong,” Lucifer embraces her in a flash of white, and she crumples to the ground. The first panel on the page including her face shows it half obscured by her hair as she asks, “Lucifer, what—what have you done to me? My face—”, to which he responds, “Your face is not the gift. I only wanted to see you again—as beautiful as you were when you first came to me” (71). The flayed portion of her face is turned towards viewers, but while it would normally prompt a desire to recoil, in fact, it momentarily seems sweet, and a restoration of something she had sought for so long. In addition to the return of her face, he also gave her “My name. My nature. The light that my father lit in me when the worlds were first made” (72), recreating her as the Lightbringer. These gifts—of her face, of his identity—trouble some of Lucifer’s own philosophies, particularly those regarding power and will and one’s orientation towards heritage and the world. Indeed, Mazikeen’s immediate response is to demand, “You think that walking away from your life makes you free, my lord? That you can be born again so easily?” (72). This question points towards Lucifer’s major desire to have no origin, to not have derived from Yahwehor the divine plan at all. When Mazikeen lashes out with her sword, she is depicted in profile so that the viewer sees only the flayed half of her face, and she leaves a bright red cut across the center of Lucifer’s. We see from her perspective momentarily as he looks up without understanding, switching to an external point of view of Mazikeen declaiming, “You’re wrong. You will remember my love. Erase that mark if you like, but you prove yourself a coward if you do” (73). Her marking of him stands in for the effects circumstances necessarily have on an individual’s identity. Ultimately, Mazikeen is rejecting the myth of the self-made man who exists outside of influence and assistance. “The past made us, Lucifer,” she tells him as she walks away from him, instead of waiting for his final departure of creation. “It continues to make us. Travelling light doesn’t change your origin. Or your destination” (74). Lucifer desperately wants to escape the influence of others, but Mazikeen is able to see that a personality cannot exist outside of its context, that is, the people and culture in which one conforms to or resists the roles they have been assigned. Her face is, in one sense, an

acknowledgement of this tension: a capitulation to beauty standards paired with its precise opposite. Or perhaps, alternatively, the raw half of her face is an allegory for what beauty standards do to identity: flay the skin down to the bone. Another alternative: that the corrosive elements of circumstance can coexist alongside a will to live authentically as oneself.

His failure to recognize the truth Mazikeen imparts to him stands as testament to the development of a new order that will better serve the inhabitants of Creation. This is underscored in his final conversation with God, when YHWH proposes that they give one another their thoughts, experiences, and memories in order to "become two new beings, each possessing both your memories and mine" (158). Lucifer responds, "I don't need to consider. What you're describing sounds like death to me" (159). While Lucifer has been the ostensible hero of the series, seeking both to save Creation and to become wholly himself, he is ultimately unwilling to do *with* God what he has just done *to* Mazikeen: to share himself in a way that would allow him to grow and change. Because of the divine plan and the universe's reliance on His name, YHWH's creation stagnated and eventually fell. Because of his desire for "things that cannot be" (156), Lucifer has stagnated as well and, as he retreats into the void, the lesson is not that he has freed himself from others' influence, but rather that he is too stubborn and short-sighted to see the extent to which all of his experience, and therefore his own identity, can be shaped only at the intersection between himself and others.

Mazikeen's parting comments regarding how we are shaped by the past echo Berger's own interest in the intersection of real-world elements in fantasy, horror, and other genres represented in Vertigo titles. The alteration of those wielding power in *Lucifer* is a necessary change, in part because those with power were failing to use it to preserve life, and in part because their values no longer reflected those of the world they ostensibly controlled. When Elaine becomes the new God of Creation, Mazikeen the Lightbringer, and Izanami the Adversary, it is not simply an inversion of the previously existing order: just because the women have power previously held by men doesn't mean they don't carry their experiences from the previous "administration" with them. The implication is not a prescription for the matriarchy-as-palliative, but rather lifts the characters most willing to work on behalf of others, as well as those for whom power is denaturalized. Part of Carey's message isn't merely that power should go to those least interested in wielding it, but in particular that it should go to those unaccustomed to wielding it—the characters' status as women is part of this, as their past subjugation and abuse is framed as

potentially ensuring a more egalitarian present.[11] However, this is not a simple formula, either, as Mazikeen's insistence on the importance of how the past shaped us accentuates memory as formative of identity, and therefore, of future action.

Myth and History

While *Lucifer* is not commonly read as explicitly historical fiction because it is based on Christian mythemes, these stories have shaped so much of our contemporary reality that they are arguably "histories" in the sense that they are the stories a civilization tells about itself. One of the reasons I have found *Lucifer* so evocative is its troubling of the distinction between historical events and the mythic, illustrating the extent to which lore influences our lived realities and vice versa. Additionally, *Lucifer* combines the mythic with the practical realities faced by women in a variety of contemporary social contexts, teasing out the patterns of repression and threat and illustrating how women negotiate the minefield of misogyny and sexism in the contemporary landscape.

The focus in *Lucifer*, and my own focus in this article, could seem at first to underscore the objectification of women, focusing as it does on Mazikeen's face as one of the major components of identity. Her quest to restore her face, some might argue, is narcissistic, or is a reinscription of modes of thinking about women's bodies as something to be molded into an "ideal." Bordo discusses how "we are constantly told that we can 'choose our own bodies'" (*Unbearable Weight* 247) which derives from "an industry and ideology fueled by fantasies of rearranging, transforming, and correcting" (245) that "do not merely transform but *normalize* the subject" (254). Mazikeen, of course, is not seeking plastic surgery to conform, but rather a return of a choice. In addition, a reading that fails to account for the role of objectification in Western culture disregards the extent to which women *are* judged on their appearance, and so, navigating the historical fact of this becomes itself an evocative way to comment on social realities while positing a path forward.

Carey, in an interview with Olly MacNamee, asserts that "[w]e think we live in a real world, we don't. We live in stories about ourselves in the story of the real world" (Dane). The historiographic-metafiction of *Lucifer* highlights the extent to which our cultural stories, and therefore our cultural *scripts* shape and delimit our possibilities, and highlights the extent to which fables, lore, and myth script the "real world." The role of free will in *Lucifer* is always set at tension with the

[11] While Izanami is depicted as having power from the start, her power derives—according to the mythos—from being rejected by Izanagi.

social realities faced by characters.[12] In an interview with Tom Waters, Carey discusses a fundamental tension in this story, recounting "when Lucifer and Mazikeen go to hell in *Dalliance Of [sic] The Damned* (*Lucifer* Vol. 3), Peter has her wearing the [Normal Consciousness Will Be Resumed] t-shirt. It was his idea that basically, Lucifer would play the game and turn up in 18th century regalia so that he would fit in. Mazikeen would simply, stubbornly, gracelessly, cheerlessly be herself" (Waters). Lucifer is the character in the series most obsessed with being himself, with his will being the only thing worth living for and enacting. He departs Creation itself in an attempt to free himself from a past wherein others' influence played a role in creating who he is. But, at many points in various story arcs, Lucifer more readily conforms to the social expectations of the moment than does Mazikeen, or many of the other women characters for that matter, which echoes Berger's ambiguous role at Vertigo.

To return to her remarks regarding her role as a woman at DC, her characterization of herself as "not a threat" and her womanhood being a "non-issue" both seem to underscore the invisibility of women in the comics industry. And yet, her very public profile and the use of the term "Berger books" to refer to the Vertigo universe come together to suggest a navigation of the social realities facing women while also offering a potential path forward, in which invisibility can undermine some of the pressures to conform that require that invisibility. Berger's role can also be read in the same way as Mazikeen's, as a locus of power which, because of social circumstances, must play a sort of peek-a-boo game regarding that power, largely concealing it until necessary. Berger can be read as a referent standing just out of view in much of the Vertigo universe: a woman with an "intimidating" amount of power who is simultaneously, because of her gender, rendered unthreatening. In a sense, Berger's work is emblematic of historical attitudes towards "women's work," in which societies largely ignored, discounted, and undervalued both the work that women were expected to do in the social contract *and* the work women did in "men's work." *Lucifer* taken as a whole stands less as an example of a retelling of a particular historical moment, but rather as a historiographic metafictional allegory of women's long-standing struggle to maintain a sense of self in the context of a society designed for men.

Conclusion

One of my personal fantasies/thought experiments is to game out what my life would have been if I lived in a society free of sexism and misogyny, and each time I reach for that frustratingly

[12] See https://i.gr-assets.com/images/S/compressed.photo.goodreads.com/hostedimages/1542142239i/26592602.jpg

elusive imaginary, I am to some extent trying to reach beyond a past that shaped me. However, that is the first step towards an alternate future: one that acknowledges the influence of the past without letting the past become the future. In "Exodus," volume 7 of *Lucifer*, Elaine and Mazikeen are working together to clear the immortals from Lucifer's creation. Mazikeen has just killed one immortal, and another was saved, and made mortal, only because of Elaine's intercession. It is a rare moment, as the reader is offered a window inside of Mazikeen's thoughts, who observes Elaine: "She is angry. It shows in her face, first—Then in her body—and finally in her world" (144). Mazikeen's observation accompanies Elaine changing from the protective spirit she is back into the little girl she once was, her power finally reflecting as a sudden snowstorm surrounding them. Unlike most women's, Elaine's world can reflect her emotions and her will, is in fact reshaped by them. For Mazikeen, who at this point in the series is still forced to wear the conventional face Jill Presto clothed her in, her face and her voice are the only option for expressing her internal state. She cautions Elaine, saying that "I think there may be other things that have provoked this anger, Elaine Belloc. And if you don't control it, the land will suffer" (145). Mazikeen does not dismiss her anger or tell her not to feel it, but rather to manage it and direct it in a way that would be useful. She cannot control the context in which she lives, but she can be herself, whatever face she is wearing.

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