Second-degree Rewriting Strategies:

On Jack's Revisions and Transfictional Crossing from *Fables* to *Jack of Fables*

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Introduction

Bill Willingham, Mark Buckingham, et al.'s Vertigo series *Fables* (2002-2015), as its name suggests, revolves around the present-day lives of known fables, legends, and folk- and fairytale characters such as Snow White, Mowgli, Cinderella, and the Big Bad Wolf (Bigby) after they have been forced to leave their magical "native" fairytale homelands. As a result of their forced migration, these folk- and fairytale characters—who are referred to as Fables in the series—have found refuge in "our reality," in which they have established a New York stronghold. This refugee facility of sorts for fictional characters is known as Fabletown; it is magically protected and concealed from humans who are, consequently, unable to detect the presence of Fables in the "real world."

This process of re-narrativization[1] governing *Fables*, i.e. how known characters and their attendant storyworlds are re-configured in a new narrative, goes hand in hand with genre-meshing practices. *Fables*' characters are articulated in other "pulpy" genres and settings than those they are generally associated with, i.e. the fairytale and the marvelous. As comics critic and narratologist Karin Kukkonen explains at length in her examination of comics storytelling strategies (see Kukkonen, *Contemporary Comics Storytelling* 74-86), *Fables* meshes fairytale traditions and narratives with, for example, noir/detective fiction in the first story arc "Legends in Exile" (*Fables* #1-5), and with the political fable/thriller canvas of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in the series' eponymous story arc (*Fables* # 6-10). This is why the critic argues that *Fables* is "part and parcel of Vertigo's programme" (Kukkonen, *Storytelling Beyond Postmodernism* 24). Just like foundational proto-Vertigo comics such as Grant Morrison et al.'s *Animal Man* (1988-1990), Neil Gaiman et al.'s *Sandman* (1989-1996), Peter Milligan et al.'s *Shade the Changing Man* (1990-1996), and Alan Moore et al.'s *Swamp Thing* (1984-1987) have reconfigured characters and their attendant storyworlds beyond the mainstream settings and genres from which they originally emerged, *Fables* "presents [...] characters as personages

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[1] I use this term as a quasi-equivalent to "retextualization", which literary critic Christian Moraru uses to describe the process of postmodernism in his account of postmodern rewriting (Moraru xxii). I prefer the term re-narrativization because it allows for a more inclusive approach that goes beyond purely textual relations and revisions.

[who] have grown up and out of their original genre" (Kukkonen, *Storytelling Beyond Postmodernism* 24).

To add to Kukkonen's remarks, it should be specified that *Fables* mirrors *and* shapes Vertigo's own postmodern cultural identity in ways that go beyond genre-meshing practices and processes of re-narrativization. First, the series' focus on the fairytale and other "pulp-oriented" genres can be said to both reflect and nurture the imprint's development of a new canonical matrix in the American comics world throughout the 1990s and beyond, that is Vertigo's attempt to promote a new set of norms that moves beyond the mainstream and alternative spheres of the American comics field and their often privileged genres: the superhero and autobiography (Dony, "The Rewriting Ethos of the Vertigo Imprint"; Dony, "Reassessing the Mainstream vs. Alternative/Independent Dichotomy"). Secondly, *Fables'* characters move in and out of texts and diegetic realities. This has several implications. The gathering of Fables within a common fictional world, for example, erases the textual and narrative frontiers of what readers generally consider to be individual stories (i.e. *The Jungle Book*, *The Three Little Pigs*, *Cinderella*, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, etc.). This assembling of characters and their attendant diegetic realities into a unique storyworld thus challenges readers' expectations regarding the traditional narrative structure of the individual fairytale and the imagined fixed character of a particular literary canon, which postmodern culture at large has tried to deconstruct. Moreover, *Fables* also highlights the possibility for known characters to be re-invented beyond their traditional archetypal, mythic, or gender roles. For example, the characterization of Prince Charming and Bigby in *Fables* becomes increasingly complex as the events of the series unfold, notably because their identity is built upon various incarnations of their persona in different folk- and fairytales. Finally, the repatriation of characters within a new reality or locale cannot but echo what I call Vertigo's genesis narrative of remapping, that is how the launch of Vertigo in 1993 was marked by the migration of series that were first published under DC Comics, Vertigo's parent company.

Many of the above observations resonate with what comics scholar Julia Round has described as a manifestation of the Gothic trope of absorption in comics, which, she argues, applies to countless Vertigo comics and narrative techniques (see Round, *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* 155-67). Round defines Gothic absorption as "an atemporal and bidirectional process that crosses boundaries of high and low fiction" and simultaneously "problematizes notions of a coherently bounded diegesis" (Round, *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* 155). Gothic absorption, she claims, can take intratextual, intertextual, or extratextual forms (Round, *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* 109), i.e. it functions as a process that can mix and/or reconfigure "events in or about" the diegesis, "fictional texts," or "events/people in the real world" (Round, *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* 109). Round is careful enough to specify

that Gothic absorption "is not limited to texts that are self-consciously gothic or horror" (Round, *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* 160), which is why her interpretative model can be applied to the previously described processes of re-narrativization entailed in *Fables* and, more generally, to her description of Vertigo's cultural identity as clearly marked by the phenomenon of Gothic absorption.

Round's model certainly is insightful to characterize much of Vertigo's production and poetics, but does it still make sense to speak of Gothic absorption when the concept somehow absorbs itself, that is when it occurs in the second degree? Round's concept suggests that the form of Gothic absorption she discusses in relation to Vertigo comics and the imprint itself is definitive and ultimate, and that it is therefore impossible to revise or write back to. And yet, this is precisely what happens when Jack crosses over from *Fables* (the "source" narrative) and enters his own spinoff series *Jack of Fables*. This article argues that this crossing over sets in motion a whole mode of rewriting in the second degree insofar as it creates new fictional and narrative spaces that build up and comment on Vertigo's own rewriting ethos and on *Fables* and *Jack of Fables*' distinct yet related processes of re-narrativization. More specifically, these spaces and their interaction provide room for meta-commentaries whose effects, I argue, entail a writing back to *Fables*' own rewriting strategies and the label's history of rewriting, particularly as it ties in to what I have previously described as Vertigo's genesis narrative of remapping and the so-called "British Invasion."

In order to further explore these various intertwined layers of rewriting and their second-degree ramifications, however, it is first necessary to explain how the spinoff is a transfictional form well suited for articulating dis/continuities of all kinds and complicating fictional-world as well as narrative relations.

Spinning off: Transfictionality, Fictional Worlds, and Rewriting

Literary critic Lubomir Doležel has been one of the first scholars to recognize the importance of fictional world relations as they coincide with intertextual and hypertextual ones (cf. Genette). In discussing possible worlds theory and fictionality, Doležel maintains that "[l]iterary works are linked not only on the level of texture but also, and no less importantly, on the level of fictional worlds" (Doležel 202). Doležel stresses the importance of fictional worlds because he is interested in a theoretical description of the relations that exist between these worlds and the narratives that they are based on, for which he coins the term "postmodern rewrite." He argues that the relations pertaining to the postmodern rewrite can take three forms: transposition, expansion, and displacement. Transposition, he writes, "preserves the design and the main story of the protoworld but locates it in a different temporal

or spatial setting" (Doležel 206). Expansion obviously "extends the scope of the protoworld, by filling its gaps, constructing a prehistory or post history, and so on" (Doležel 206). Finally, displacement evokes the "construct[ion] of an essentially different version of the protoworld" (Doležel 206). In short, postmodern rewrites always "*re*design, *re*locate, *re*evaluate the classic protoworld," particularly in ways that are "motivated by political factors, in the wide, postmodernistic sense of 'politics'" (Doležel 206 italics in the original).

Doležel's model is insightful insofar as it points to the forms and mechanisms that rewriting strategies can take and the narrative and fictional complexities that these forms can entail, but it is incomplete. First, the critic's "postmodern rewrite" does not account for the possibility of a fictional world constructed on the basis of a plurality of texts (and readers) since the examples that he uses are that of rewritings of "classic" literary works—roughly the same novels explored by other scholars interested in the connection between rewriting and postmodernism or postcolonial theory (see Moraru; Thieme; Widdowson). The second problematic aspect of Doležel's theory has to do with the value of the word postmodern. As Richard Saint-Gelais has argued in taking up and expanding on Doležel's model (Saint-Gelais), the operations underlying the critic's "postmodern rewrite" indeed apply to a large body of contemporary fictional networks: fan fiction, series, transmedia narratives, etc. Since many of these fictional ensembles respond to a market and economic logic that is keen on developing popular characters and their fictional worlds in various directions—often though not always across media—, Doležel's claim concerning the "political" and subversive potential of the operations of expansion, transposition, and displacement can be called into question.

Saint-Gelais' elaboration on Doležel's theory of the postmodern rewrite in *Fictions Transfuges: La Transfictionnalité et ses Enjeux* (2011) is relevant for the conceptualization of rewriting I envisage for this article, that is as pertaining to serial narratives and fictional worlds, and how their (re)organization can provide meta-commentaries on, or revise culture- and medium-specific issues. Transfictionality, as Saint-Gelais defines it, is concerned with how characters, plot structures, and "texts share a 'narrative universe'" or "relate to a same fictional world" through phenomena of reprise or continuation (Saint-Gelais 7 my translation). According to the critic, seriality is a transfictional form *par excellence* because it is predicated on one of the most important features of transfictionality, namely the "migration" of various "diegetic elements" such as characters and settings from one text to another (Saint-Gelais 10-11 my translation). More specifically, seriality "entails a crossing over" from one space to another and thus implies zones of "rupture and contact" between various works, issues, and fictional worlds (Saint-Gelais 23-24 my translation).

Of course, all transfictional narratives can be said to fall under the concept of rewriting as understood in its widest sense. After all, the migration of diegetic elements almost invariably leads to fictional transformations, if only minor ones. But Saint-Gelais makes clear throughout *Fictions Transfuges* that some transfictional ensembles can engage in more radical forms of rewriting to the extent that they alter the *logic* and organization underlying particular fictional worlds. This is exactly what happens with Jack's transfictional migration when he moves from the "source narrative" *Fables* to enter his own spinoff series *Jack of Fables*. This crossing over is displayed and reflected on so as to highlight the disrupting potential of transfictional movements. Further, the crossing over not only relates to diegetic elements, but also to fictional worlds, generic markers, and Vertigo's own rewriting ethos. This is because *Jack of Fables* is not just a new installment in the *Fables* series; it is a sidequel in the second degree since it spins off from *Fables*, which itself already transforms characters by displacing them from their "original" genres and storyworlds, thereby prolonging and staying true to Vertigo's staple practice of postmodern rewriting.

"Hit the Road Jack": Establishing a Discontinuum between *Fables* and *Jack of Fables*

James Jean's cover for *Jack of Fables* #1[2] perfectly illustrates how a spinoff series and its leading protagonist can alter and comment on the logic and organization of the original series from which they grow out. In fact, Jean's cover is carefully designed so as to mirror the spatio-temporal gaps and many types of dis/continuities that a transfictional comics ensemble can entail. This can be seen in how Jean's cover establishes a formal and spatio-temporal dis/continuum between the two series and their attendant storyworlds through the use of particular layout, assemblage, and narrative techniques specific to comics.

Jean's cover is divided into two zones that are clearly separated by a thin double line that is reminiscent of "the gutter" (cf. McCloud), the unique intra-narrative space in comics whose generally elliptic nature simultaneously fragments and sutures the different and often narrative units of a larger "spatio-topical system" (Groensteen 24): the page, the book, or in this case the cover. Here, the gutter also functions as a frame that encloses the characters of *Fables* in a panel-like unit in the upper part of the cover. This suggests that these characters and *Fables* are part of a self-contained and isolated narrative and arguably generic space whose frame, as Groensteen would have it, "insures its integrity" (Groensteen 25). At the same time, however, Groensteen contends that a panel, although framed, also "takes part in [a] sequential *continuum*," notably with the other units or panels surrounding it (Groensteen 26

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2 Available on DC's website: https://www.dccomics.com/comics/jack-of-fables-2006/jack-of-fables-1.

italics in the original). In Jean's cover, the sequential continuum is established with the bottom part of the image featuring Jack. In this unframed space (excluding the book's physical edges), Jack is literally running away, and spinning off, as it were, from the panel-like unit enclosing the characters of *Fables*. These characters not only protest against Jack for reasons which will be explained later, but also seem to be aware of Jack's transfictional crossing, as well as their own participation in a newly created transfictional ensemble with *Jack of Fables*. Some Fables protesters throw tomatoes at Jack which manage to cross the gutter-like panel/storyworld border. One waves a banner reading "How Dare you Get Your Own Series." Fables' transgression of their own fictional world is limited, however, since the gutter/panel border still *contains* them in the upper part of the cover. Jean's cover thus sequentially connects the two previously described zones or panel-like units at the level of the page, or cover in this case. At the same time, however, this layout and assemblage lays bare serial and fictional discontinuities between the two series and their attendant fictional worlds. Thus, Jean's cover provides a meta-commentary on the mechanisms of transfictionality in that it literally displays and fills in the usually elliptic and unseen space that exists between the different installments or episodes of a transfictional narrative.

Worlds and Genres Apart: The "Doubly-Coded" Poetics of Transfictional Spinning-Off

The meta-dimension entailed in the cover's formal dis/continuum is further made manifest through the articulation of strong narrative and genre distinctions between *Fables* and its spinoff series, *Jack of Fables*. For example, just as Fables are aware of their own fictional status in the *Fables* universe, Jack is aware of the generic markers of both *Fables* and the conventions of his own adventures in the so-called tradition of "The Jack Tales," i.e. a heterogeneous group of folktales from Britain, Scotland, Ireland, and North America whose most famous stories include *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Jack the Giant Killer*, *Jack o' Lantern*, and *Jack Frost*.[3]

This can notably be deduced from the slogan that appears on Jack's tee-shirt in the cover: "Ensemble books are for losers." This slogan unequivocally critiques the multi-protagonist narrative frame of *Fables,* and indicates that Jack does not adhere to the underlying narrative conventions or codes of this genre anymore. In fact, his running away from *Fables* to star in his own individual series is at odds with the solidarity-in-face-of-adversity philosophy that

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[3] Folk- and fairytale historian Carl Lindahl has detailed the extensive history of the "Jack Tales." According to him, they include "Märchen"—i.e. the name given to the earliest written versions of oral tales featuring a character named Jack, "the later tales, printed in prose and priced for a popular audience" that "were known as chapbooks" (Lindahl xxiv), and finally—one might add—the countless more modern and even contemporary revisions, rewritings, and filmic adaptations of these Jack tales.

animates *Fables*' ensemble genre formula. Fables indeed unite to flee their "original" folk and fairytale homelands as a result of their invasion by the so-called "Adversary." Moreover, they organize themselves in their newly-shared world so as to conceal their magical nature and fairytale identity to the "Mundies," i.e. human beings. This is established as an important rule of the newly relocated Fables' community since the characters fear both discrimination and persecution. However, Jack transgresses that rule in producing a film trilogy that celebrates his own past adventures and fairytale nature, after setting up a studio called "Nimble Pictures"—a name that is reminiscent of a Jack-related nursery rhyme: "Jack Be Nimble."

Leaving aside the self-referential character of this episode, Jack's (re)production of his own past exploits carries a self-centered agenda that prefigures his solo-stance in *Jack of Fables* and distances him from one of the core narrative principles animating *Fables*. In *Fables*, the characters' survival and strength stem from and depend on their popularity in humans' collective memory and imagination, a condition of their being that all characters know about and which self-reflexively makes them aware of their existence as characters/stories both within and outside the fictional world of *Fables* (cf. Kukkonen, "Popular Cultural Memory"). In concealing their magical nature and fairytale identity from Mundies, Fables implicitly agree not to strengthen their persona and their underlying tales/legends. This is not a condition that Jack seems to take seriously; his film trilogy is meant precisely to reinforce his legendary status, even if it means jeopardizing the existence, magical nature, and "exile status" of the whole Fabletown community.

Jack's solo-act in Hollywood and subsequent moving into his own spinoff series also reinstall particular and popular generic markers of Jack's own folktale tradition that further distinguish the two series in terms of genre apparatus and narrative frame. With Jack's filmic (re)production of his own exploits, some of the common traits of his traditional persona are visible in stories such as *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Jack the Giant Killer*, and *Jack o' Lantern*: Jack is first and foremost a character that looks after himself, and he usually is a wandering trickster figure seeking fortune. These common traits of Jack's persona are highlighted on the very first page of *Jack of Fables* #1, wherein the protagonist affirms: "Here I am, out on the road, with a briefcase full of money and nowhere in particular to go" ("The Long Hard Fall of Hollywood Jack," *Jack of Fables* #1, 1). In contrast, *Fables* employs multiple protagonists that more or less manage to grow out of their traditional persona and "individual" stories for the common good: they seek to adapt to a new reality and wish to protect themselves from a new common enemy by working together towards the building and maintaining of a new community. *Fables*' ensemble logic is thus key to its rewriting strategy, and its relying on themes of togetherness and collaboration to face a common enemy may be said to heavily borrow from superhero teams. However, the sense of collaboration and solidarity-in-face-of-

adversity philosophy that animates *Fables* is not shared and supported by Jack. Thus, Jack is cast out from the *Fables* series not only for his transgression of Fabletown's number one rule, but for reasons of generic and fictional "unbelonging" as well. That is, Jack does not *fit in* the new collective narrative and generic agenda that *Fables* articulates and, as a result, experiences yet another new departure or phase of separation from his previously already redefined role and persona in *Fables*.

Jack's new departure from an "original" fictional world can be read as an instance of rewriting in the second degree. His moving from *Fables* into *Jack of Fables* pushes the separation trope of the traditional fairytale one step further than *Fables* does. While characters in *Fables* have been separated from their homelands and proto-fictional worlds in moving to Fabletown, they still manage to overcome this separation in facing their new Adversary and adapting to their new conditions. As such, they follow the classic pattern of the fairytale, which adopts the structure of the monomyth as defined by Joseph Campbell: "separation or departure," "the trials and victories of initiation," and a form of "return and reintegration with society" (Campbell 28-29). In contrast, Jack seems to be at odds with this logic as it is applied in *Fables*, and therefore becomes subject to yet a new phase of departure.

Paradoxically enough and in typical postmodern fashion, this second-degree transfictional movement and rewriting strategy is somewhat "doubly-coded," as literary critic Linda Hutcheon would have it; that is, it "involves a paradoxical installing as well as subverting of conventions" (Hutcheon 13). On the one hand, Jack enters his own series to challenge *Fables*' own rewriting strategy of the ensemble cast and solidarity-in-face-of adversity agenda. On the other, his transfictional movement is rooted in a rather well-known logic of the fairytale genre, i.e. a phase of separation from one's world. Moreover, Jack's crossing over coincides with a reassertion of key traits of his "traditional" fairytale persona. His leaving *Fables* highlights his wandering character, much of his spinoff revolves around him seeking fortune or securing his riches, and his well-known trickster personality reaches epic proportions when he notably attempts to mislead readers by claiming to be the "real" character behind Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan* in the "Jack n' Apes" storyline (*Jack of Fables* #36). This doubly-coded rewriting in the second-degree underlying Jack's transfictional movement is further complicated and ironic in the spinoff when, in spite of the series' reinstalling of Jack's "traditional" common fairytale traits, Jack and readers alike learn that Jack might just be a mere copy of another character, Wicked John—the allegedly "original" Jack of the Tales (cf. *Jack of Fables* #14, "The Bad Prince, Part Three: The Legend of Wicked John").

Does Jack's Transfictional Migration Prolong Vertigo's Genesis Narrative?

Jack's transfictional migration from *Fables* to *Jack of Fables* is not without recalling what I have described as Vertigo's genesis narrative of remapping, that is, how the characters and titles that launched the Vertigo imprint (*Animal Man*, *Doom Patrol*, *Hellblazer*, *Sandman*, *Shade the Changing Man*, and *Swamp Thing*) migrated from one social and fictional world, that of the DC Universe, to a distinct yet related one, namely the Vertigo imprint. But can Jack's crossing over truly be said to prolong Vertigo's genesis narrative, and more generally, Vertigo's rewriting ethos and its attendant poetics of remapping? Here again, the whole apparatus of rewriting in the second degree that underlies Jack's transfictional migration is somewhat ambiguous and doubly-coded.

Just as Jack seems unable to properly fit in *Fables*' ensemble narrative formula and its shared fictional universe, so the characters of the previously mentioned proto-Vertigo titles clearly struggled to navigate the overarching narrative and social space of DC Comics, especially its dominant superheroics. Proto-Vertigo series distanced themselves from the dominant narrative and generic principles underlying DC's mainstream superheroics, doing so in varying degrees and using different strategies. One strategy is nevertheless common to all these series: they feature characters who struggle to keep control of their own destiny, persona, or even fictional world. This struggle with and lack of control is mirrored in how *Animal Man*, *Doom Patrol*, *Hellblazer*, *Sandman*, *Shade the Changing Man*, and *Swamp Thing* use dense intertextual networks that heighten their protagonists' anxiety, hesitation, and feelings of unbelonging in their respective storyworlds and, *a fortiori*, in the macro-DC universe from which they originated. In fact, these series' storyworlds were most likely too intertextually complex and dense to be fully and coherently integrated in the DC mythos of the time. It is precisely this hesitation, uncertainty, and dense intertextuality that set these titles and their attendant characters and storyworlds apart from the DC Universe of the time which, exceptions notwithstanding, was very much about seeking control or (re)installing order—at both micro and macro levels.[4] This is a view shared by Karen Berger—who created and shepherded the label for over 20 years. In the 1992 "Vertigo Preview" column that formally introduced readers to the then upcoming Vertigo imprint, Berger writes: "We've always been in our *strange little corner*, shaking things up *from the edges of the DC Universe*" (Berger emphasis added). The spatial vocabulary that Berger employs highlights her awareness of the

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[4] This claim also includes the oft-quoted catastrophic crossover series *Crisis on Infinite Earths* by Marv Wolfman and George Pérez, which DC published between 1985-1986. At the (micro) level, that is that of the series' fictional world, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is very much apocalyptic and therefore about lack of control. But at the macro level of the DC multiverse, the narrative was a sanitation act. As Andrew J. Friedenthal puts it in his exploration of this universe-spanning crossover, the largest "plot/continuity outcome" of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* "was the death of the [DC] multiverse, and its rebirth as a single [more coherent] universe" (Fridenthal, para.12).

alternative and uncanny character of proto-Vertigo series' spatial politics, including how each of them can be said to create a particular heterocosm whose often chaotic form and nature, intertextually speaking, made them "unfit" for the DC Universe of the time.

This poetics of remapping in part applies to Jack's transfictional migration and arguably follows a tradition that Vertigo has established since its inception, that is, the adoption of ambiguity in relation to spatial politics, narratively or otherwise (see Dony, "The Rewriting Ethos of the Vertigo Imprint"; Dony, "Reassessing the Mainstream vs. Alternative/Independent Dichotomy"). Just like the protagonists of the titles that launched the imprint, Jack leaves the source series for a new fictional world because he does not quite fit in it, both in terms of genre and narrative frames. In contrast to these proto-Vertigo series' characters, Jack does not enter a new social and publishing space on a macro level; that is, he does not move from one publishing space to a distinct yet related one since *Jack of Fables*, just like *Fables*, remains a Vertigo series. Moreover, whereas proto-Vertigo titles migrated because they distanced themselves from "traditional" superhero tropes and themes of the time (control, order, domination), Jack does not leave *Fables* to chart new generic territory. Rather, his transfictional migration reasserts a traditional form of fairytale that focuses on a single protagonist and highlights his most known traits as a folktale hero (a wandering trickster figure seeking fortune).

Jack's transfictional migration and the reasons behind it thus provide a meta-commentary on Vertigo's genesis narrative and on the label's championing of ambiguous spatial politics. This meta-commentary does not fully embrace the uncanny spatial poetics underlying the titles that launched the imprint. Nevertheless, the meta-rewriting philosophy that arises from Jack's crossing over establishes some continuity with the rewriting ethos entailed in the label's editorial and publishing project.

This oscillation between maintaining and challenging traditions through micro and macro levels of rewriting, including how they tie in with the early history of the imprint and its genesis narrative, can be further examined in Jack's Americanization in *Jack of Fables*.

Jack's Americanization

Jack's crossing over from *Fables* to *Jack of Fables* not only coincides with a shift in narrative frame and genre apparatus, but with the protagonist's Americanization. This Americanization of the character entails various layers of rewriting (in the second degree) that further shape issues of narrative and fictional continuities with *Fables*, the fairytale genre, and the imprint's early history as ties in with the British Invasion, thus again intertwining micro and macro

levels of rewriting. Before further exploring these issues, however, it is first necessary to account for Jack's Americanization.

Jack's leaving of *Fables* to enter his own series undoubtedly highlights his rugged individualism and his self-made man attitude. These traits are common to many an archetypal (folk) American hero, whose traditional incarnations tie in with (early) American Puritan culture and anti-aristocratic sentiments amongst other socio-cultural factors. In *Form and Fable in American Fiction*, literary critic and folklorist Daniel Hoffman describes the American folk hero as embodying qualities such as "self-assertive independence" and "self-reliance no matter what the stakes or the odds" (Hoffman 56). Undoubtedly, Willingham and Sturges' re-articulation of Jack in *Jack of Fables* as a character that leaves a rather conservative and somewhat aristocratic society (Fabletown) to engage in a solo-act (*Jack of Fables*), which he self-reflexively comments on find resonance with the American myth of the self-made man. Moreover, the artists' representation of Jack as a character traveling through the US in *Jack of Fables*, looking after his own interests, and whose primary goal is to increase his wealth cannot but remind us of the American frontier myth.[5] Finally, *Jack of Fables* and its protagonist's rejection of some of *Fables*' generic codes and themes is also reminiscent of the sense of regeneration and (spiritual) rebirth that pervaded the Puritan settlers' cultural imagination. As Sacvan Bercovitch has extensively argued in his discussion of the American Jeremiad, New England's colonists' progressive sense of renewal was firmly rooted in the "discard[ing] of the Old-World ideal of stasis for a New-World vision of the future" (Bercovitch 23). Quite unequivocally, when Jack is forced to leave *Fables*, he does so quite happily to renew himself in his spinoff. It is therefore possible to argue that Jack's crossing over to *Jack of Fables* embodies the metaphor of exodus and its attendant idea of self-realization that characterized many forms of the American myth of the self-made man.

The Old- versus New-World ideas underlying Jack's Americanization not only coalesce with the discontinuities existing (in-)between *Fables* and *Jack of Fables*, they also articulate another second-degree meaning when put into relief with the very history of the Jack Tales tradition. Willingham and Sturges' Americanization of Jack in *Jack of Fables* indeed rearticulates American folklorist Richard Chase's own presentation of Jack as a distinctive

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[5] As cultural historian Richard Slotkin has extensively argued in his trilogy on the mythology of the American West (Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*; Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*; Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*), the frontier has functioned as a deeply-ingrained theme in America's collective imaginary and its cultural and literary traditions. The critic traces the origins of this frontier myth in the idea of Manifest Destiny, that is, how various generations of Puritan immigrants who, because they believed to be God's chosen people, thought they were destined to settle in new and allegedly unexplored territories. Drawing on popular literature of 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, Slotkin has shown that writers and artists have metaphorically absorbed this particular imagination of settlers by producing works that foreground themes such as expansion and self-realization through a taming or controlling of the wilderness and its dangers.

American hero in his 1943 collection entitled *The Jack Tales* (Chase). Chase claimed that the protagonist of his collection was different from its former Irish, British, and Scottish versions. He writes: "[o]ur Appalachian giant-killer has acquired the easy-going, unpretentious rural American manners that make him so different from his English cousin, the cocksure, dashing young hero of the 'fairy tale'" (Chase ix, quoted in Lindahl xxiii). Thus, Chase's *The Jack Tales* aims to celebrate Jack's Americanness and to denigrate the characters' previous "Old-world" incarnations. Likewise, Willingham and Sturges' Americanization of Jack in *Jack of Fables* can be read as a strategy used to celebrate the new Jack of the spinoff series while calling into question his position, role, and the traditions of the "Old-World's version" in which he had previously appeared (i.e. *Fables*). This denigration of the old and celebration of the new that is the result of Jack's Americanization is also clearly mirrored in the color palette employed in the cover for *Jack of Fables* #1: the cover employs colors of the American flag only (white, as well as shades of red and blue), using shades of blue for Fables characters that appear to be "pale," perhaps even "old-fashioned" when contrasted to the vivid shades of red used to color Jack and his new setting in *Jack of Fables*.

Jacks' Americanization in *Jack of Fables* may also entail ideologically-oriented commentaries regarding Vertigo's strong ties with the British Invasion. To better understand this, which I consider to be yet another instance of rewriting in the second degree, it is first useful to turn to the historical context of Chase's *The Jack Tales*. When Chase published his collection in 1943, his argument that the Jack of *The Jack Tales* was a true American hero who clearly differed from his former Old-World variations was not disputed. Therefore, Chase's collection of tales "was adopted by Americans as a national tradition" (Lindahl xvii). In reality, however, Lindahl explains that the rise of Chase's Jack as a truly American folk hero was the result of the specific political, economic, and socio-cultural context of the US in the 1930s and 1940s. In that period, Lindahl maintains that:

> [t]he United States began a process of intense national introspection as historians and literary critics sought to discover the defining properties of American culture. The Great Depression, the Second World War, America's postwar dominance of world economy and politics—each of these massive realities spurred the impulse to identify and understand the inner workings of a 'national mind' (Lindahl xxii).

Just as Chase's Americanization of Jack was influenced by societal, cultural, and historical factors, so too—it can be argued—was Willingham and Sturges's Americanization of Jack in *Jack of Fables*. When the series was published, Vertigo was still primarily very much known and celebrated for its publication of "innovative" and "sophisticated" works by British artists. Despite the fact that the imprint has considerably enriched and diversified its catalogue since the so-called British Invasion phenomenon, critics have often struggled to engage with Vertigo's influence in the American comics landscape *beyond* its early history and the works

of 'British Invaders" such as Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, and Grant Morrison (see Carpenter; Licari-Guillaume; Murray; Round, "'Is This a Book?'"; Weiner). Considering Bill Willingham's success with *Fables*, the second longest Vertigo series after *Hellblazer* (1988-2013), Jack's Americanization after crossing over from *Fables* to *Jack of Fables* is arguably meant to draw attention to the creators' ability to engage with and comment on the history of imprint and how critics have mainly perceived it. After all, despite their very diverse and innovative rewriting strategies, *Animal Man*, *Doom Patrol*, *Hellblazer*, *Sandman*, *Shade the Changing Man*, and *Swamp Thing* never articulated transfictional relations with other narratives to put into relief their own alleged Britishness or British sensibility in a way similar to Jack's Americanization after his migration from *Fables* to *Jack of Fables*.

Conclusion

Jack's crossing over form *Fables* to *Jack of Fables* coincides with a whole register of meta-rewriting or rewriting in the second degree that goes beyond Vertigo's processes of re-narrativization and mechanisms of Gothic absorption as they are articulated in, for example, all of the series that launched the imprint but also countless other Vertigo comics that re-work historical figures, characters, narratives or genres, including Steve Darnal et al.'s *Uncle Sam*, Garth Ennis et al.'s *Preacher* (1995-2000), Mike Carey et al.'s *The Unwritten* (2009-2013). Jack's migration to his own series, his denigration of *Fables*' genre formulas, and his subsequent Americanization in his own series constitute strategies of rewriting in the second degree that self-reflexively comment on Vertigo's own rewriting ethos and the imprint's historical ties to the British Invasion.

Future scholarship may investigate whether or not other possible instances of such strategies of rewriting in the second degree exist in other Vertigo comics, and analyze the extent to which they might help scholars to reconsider Vertigo's poetics beyond the trope of the British Invasion and the phenomenon of Gothic absorption. One example worth exploring in this respect would probably be another comic installment of the Fables universe: *The Great Fables Comics Crossover* (2009). As a crossover comics series which straddles the narrative and fictional worlds of *Fables*, *Jack of Fables*, and a mini-series called *The Literals*,[6] *The Great Fables Comics Crossover* further expands on and is likely to complicate *Fables*' transfictional ensemble, its logic, and its organization. Whether or not the potential dis/continuities arising

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[6] More specifically, The Great Fables Crossover functions as a mini-series within the Fables universe; it is a nine-issue narrative that combines various issues of the three series mentioned above, namely *Fables* #83-85, *Jack of Fables* #33-35 and *The Literals* #1-3. The Literals, as its title suggests, revolves around the fate of so-called Literals, i.e. characters who are anthropomorphic personifications of abstract literary concepts. A non-exhaustive list of 'Literals' characters includes Mr. Revise, Gary—the Pathetic Fallacy, Kevin Thorn—the personification of Storytelling, and Bookburner.

from this expanded transfictional ensemble continue to write back to Vertigo's history and poetics in ways that *Jack of Fables* does remains to be seen.

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