

The Popular Culture Studies Journal Interview CAROLYN COCCA

ABOUT CAROLYN

Carolyn Cocca is Professor of Politics, Economics, and Law at the State University of New York, College at Old Westbury.

She is a SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching recipient and earned her Ph.D. from New York University. Her latest book *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation* is Winner of the 2017 Eisner Award in the Best Academic/Scholarly Work category and Honorable Mention of the 2017 Prose Awards in the Media & Cultural Studies category. She is also the author of *Jailbait: The Politics of Statutory Rape Laws in the United States* and the editor of *Adolescent Sexuality*.

What attracted you to the areas of politics and law in combination with gender?

In my house growing up, we read the newspaper every day, watched the news every night, went to the library to get books every week, and talked a lot about historical and current events.

That household consisted of just my mother and me. My reality inside that house—two hardworking, capable, independent females—did not match what I was reading and hearing in the paper, on TV, and in books about single-mother households, which were then and still are blamed for a variety of social ills.

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 5, No. 1&2
Copyright © 2017

And so, I began to wonder, how have we come to this very political, very gendered, seemingly very simple “explanation” for problems in the U.S.? Who benefits and who loses out when a finger is pointed at women who are raising children by themselves (especially impoverished women, women of color, and women with disabilities), rather than at the people, structures, laws, and norms that have fostered and buttressed a multitude of inequalities in this country?

I don’t think political science—or any single discipline—has all the answers to these kinds of questions. I created my own undergraduate major with courses from different departments, and in graduate school I took a number of classes outside the Politics department: in History, in Social and Cultural Analysis, at the Institute for Law and Society, and at the School of Law.

This is how I came to use insights from feminist and queer theories, socio-legal studies, cultural studies, critical race theory, disability studies, and political economy together with political science to explore why we have so many inequalities in the U.S. today, and what we can and should do to push for real equality for all of us.

Recently, the State of New York passed “Enough is Enough” legislation to protect New York’s college students. Are you seeing any impacts of this on your teaching or scholarship?

This sort of work, at the nexus of gender, politics, and law, is something I’ve been engaged in for a long time, particularly when I was Director of the Women’s Center on my campus and administering a \$200,000 grant from the Department of Justice/Office of Violence Against Women. The grant had four requirements: 1) Create a coordinated community response, across campus divisions, to develop formal policies and protocols for responding to

violent crimes against women. 2) Train campus police as well as other campus units to respond effectively in dating violence, domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking cases. 3) Establish prevention and education programs about violence against women. 4) Establish or strengthen programs to train members of campus disciplinary boards to respond effectively to charges of violence against women, including reviewing and revising the Student Code of Conduct.

By doing all of these things, we basically implemented “Enough is Enough” at my college well before New York State mandated that we do so. It was not easy to get multiple campus units on the same page, many of whom had been doing things the same way for a very long time, and many of whom were not used to communicating with each other. It was also not easy to get students to reconsider their own ideas about gender and sexuality, many of which were based on stereotypes and were victim-blaming.

We reached several thousand students, faculty, and staff over the course of my three years as Director. We had workshops and outreach events daily in the months of October, March, and April, and at least weekly in other months; we went into classes in all the different departments to talk to students; and we made the Women’s Center a safe space, a resource center, and a site of crisis referrals. I created a course called Politics of Gender and Sexuality as another way of institutionalizing these efforts. And my scholarship has always been squarely about these same issues.

We accomplished a lot. But there is more to do. Changing laws and policies is one way to make change. Changing norms, changing hearts and minds, is another. Fostering a culture in which interpersonal violence is seen as unacceptable, in which gender-based discrimination is seen as unacceptable, in which we interact with others under the assumption that we are all of equal worth, is crucial work and we have to keep doing that work until we get to that point.

Why popular culture, specifically, why the study of heroines or female superheroes? How does it relate to your interest areas of politics, law, and gender?

My writing and my teaching and my work at the Women's Center are closely related, in the same way that my latest book (about female superheroes) is very similar to my first book (about statutory rape laws). All of it uses an interdisciplinary approach to investigate pervasive gendered inequalities and stereotypes, how they came to be, how they affect our daily lives, and how we can change them.

Applying this kind of analysis to representations of superheroes sort of puts a button on my life thus far. As far back as I can remember, I was reading and watching and playing superheroes...and noticing that the female ones were much less numerous, much less covered by clothing, and much less nuanced in their characterizations. In many ways, little has changed since then, when I was the girl who played "the girl," while my boy friends got to choose from a bunch of interesting male characters who would each contribute to saving the day. But I stayed with superhero media as I got older: I read against the grain, made up my own backstories for underwritten and underdressed female characters, cross-identified with male characters, and latched onto the stories that resonated and dismissed those that didn't.

After forty years of this, I now find myself having to explain to my own daughter why she rarely sees herself represented as a hero, and why girls of color and queer girls and girls with disabilities see themselves even less. If I was frustrated and angry about this before, I'm even more so now on her behalf. And I figured that there had to be a lot of other people who felt the same way—who held superheroes close to their hearts for the ways in which they embody our hopes for justice and inspire us to be our best selves, but who rarely saw themselves represented as heroes. There had to be a lot of other people who also rarely saw themselves represented in positions of

power in various institutions in our world. The two things are intimately connected, and that's how I approach and write about them.

What were some challenges/benefits you saw in incorporating popular culture into your scholarship?

I am tenured in an interdisciplinary and supportive academic department, in a college whose mission is grounded in diversity and social justice, so I could pursue this research simply because I wanted to. I did face questions, inside and outside academe, about the worth of this kind of project from people who assume that analyzing pop culture is frivolous and has little to say about our world. But these were not people who had any professional power over me, and some of them did come around when I explained the importance of this kind of work. For untenured people, or for those in departments who are strict about disciplinary boundaries, or for those surrounded by old biases about high versus low culture, writing about pop culture is almost certainly more difficult. Hopefully this is changing.

My major challenge was about accessing sources and being as comprehensive as I could: every issue for dozens of titles across decades of comics, every episode of multiple TV shows, and every superhero film; interviews with writers, artists, editors, publishers, and producers; creators' websites, Tumblrs, Instagrams, blogs, and tweets; fan letters, websites, Tumblrs, Instagrams, blogs, tweets, and podcasts; sales figures, TV ratings, and box office sales; and scholarly sources from multiple fields. But all academic work has to confront some version of this problem.

There were so many more benefits than challenges. I made many new professional connections in academic areas I just hadn't been a part of before. I also made a lot of new connections with people in non-ivory-tower spaces, and that pushed me to rewrite and rewrite the book so that it would be scholarly in its methods and framework, but also accessible and

hopefully even enjoyable for superhero creators and fans to read. I've guested on multiple podcasts, I've been interviewed live for radio programs and on camera for documentaries, and I've written some shorter pieces for different websites—none of which I had done before, all of which challenged me in different ways, and I'm glad I pushed myself to do them.

Last but not least, I've had a lot of fun over the last few years while doing this work. I hadn't realized quite how unfun my work had become until I threw myself into this project. I got to spend an enormous amount of time reading and watching and writing about superhero media. And I got to talk about all of it with a lot of people I'd never met before, inside and outside of academe, many of whom have become really close friends.

Your recent book, *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation* is the honorable mention in the 2017 Prose Awards in Media & Cultural Studies and the winner of the 2017 Eisner Award in the Best Academic/Scholarly Work category. What was the inspiration/start of this book? In other words, why did you write it?

The book really started from a conversation with a fellow political scientist who was about to co-edit a symposium on the politics of superheroes for a political science journal and encouraged me to submit something for it. As much as politics and superheroes had always been part of my life, as much as whenever I looked at superhero comics or TV shows or movies I couldn't help but see them through my various academic lenses, it just wasn't something I had really thought about before in terms of scholarship. So, I wrote an article about Wonder Woman, and the symposium co-editors, Kent Worcester and Matt Costello, gave me really encouraging feedback. But I had more to say than would fit in that article. I presented a paper about

Wonder Woman and Buffy the Vampire Slayer at a conference where I met Chris Gavaler and Jeffrey Brown and Trina Robbins, and then that paper became a chapter in a book edited by Norma Jones. It's important that I name all six of these people, because they have been greatly supportive of my work in this area.

I thought about the arc of my life, from playing superheroes and *Star Wars* with the boys in my neighborhood all the way through to talking to my daughter about the still-small number of female superheroes and the still-small number of women in the newest *Star Wars* movies. I thought about my work with the Women's Center, and about the various types of discrimination and ways of making social change that I teach my students, and about my research and writing about gender and politics and law. I thought about the demonization of single mothers and other "others" in pop culture, news media, cultural narratives, policies, and laws. And I thought about how all of these things were connected.

So, I decided to write this book, approaching fiction not as separate from or lesser in importance than the "real world," but as an institution that's part of the real world, that impacts people's lives and their perceptions of themselves and their communities, and that is subject to change by people who are aware, concerned, and organized. I see economic, political, social, and cultural inequalities as all interconnected and reinforcing one another.

Women are underrepresented in all kinds of positions of power in our world, and are still often evaluated in discriminatory ways at home, at school, at work, and on the street. In media, they are regularly portrayed as not even present when important things happen, and if they are present, they're usually shown to be emotional and interested in their own appearance and in hetero-romance; they're almost never portrayed as leaders or professionals or mentors; they're often objectified and their looks commented upon. These types of cultural narratives and media representations of women have been repeated so much and for so long that

they contribute to making it seem as if our real-world inequalities and stereotypes and sexualization are natural and normal. But they're not.

So, while I do hope that readers learn something about individual superhero characters, and how representations of superheroes have changed over time and why, I really want readers to come away from the book with four broader points: 1) That representation matters. 2) That representations of superwomen are one of the many spaces in which we can see inequalities of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, religion, and class. 3) That representations are changeable and changing them is one way of fostering societal change—not one that I would advocate be used in isolation, but one that can be used alongside other types of collective, direct, political actions for broad-based change. 4) And that inequalities are changeable, and we need to use our power to push for more equity, justice, and equality in every area of our lives.

What are some ways in which scholars can better utilize popular culture and their works?

As I said, I approach popular culture the same way I would approach studying other institutions in our world. In some disciplines, and my own discipline of political science is generally one of them, scholars tend to push aside popular culture as not mattering because it's not "real." But it is real. Pop culture producers and consumers are real people who have knowledge and passionate feelings about cultural moments and events and artifacts that reveal their dreams and their disappointments and their politics. Every piece of popular culture is a product of multiple choices by particular people at a given moment in time. Scholars can and should incorporate pop culture artifacts and their creators' intent (and sometimes corporate strictures) behind them, as well as consumer readings and rewritings of them, into their works as sources.

Popular culture isn't divorced from politics, from history, from psychology, from economics, from law, etc. Cultural narratives circulate around and through various institutions in our world, taking different forms in each place, but quite often reinforcing each other and telling us quite a bit about ourselves in the process. It can be messy, because it's not easy to understand the effects of pop culture works on various groups of people, or various groups of people's exact impact on popular culture, or how popular culture interacts with political and social institutions. But it's necessary work.

What is next for you?

I've been invited to speak at Women's History Month events at two U.S. universities, and to keynote the Gesellschaft für Comicforschung (the German Society for Comic Studies) Annual Conference. I'm also giving three talks on superwomen at my college: one for visual art majors, one for honors students from various departments, and a third that will be open to the public. And I will continue to guest on the *Talking Comics* podcast, as I have for the last few years.

I am currently writing a book chapter, about Supergirl in comics and on TV, for an edited volume. And I plan not only to update my work on the characters already in my book, but also to expand the analysis to other characters who have become more prominently "transmedia" since I wrote the book, such as Jessica Jones and Misty Knight and Colleen Wing. I'm not sure yet whether those analyses will be individual pieces or become parts of a new book.

And I'll keep teaching both undergraduate and graduate students.

In short, I'm going to keep talking about all of these issues and I'm going to keep working for change.