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## “More Liveable” Speculations: the Gender of SF in Margaret Atwood’s Short Story “Oursonette” and in the Comic Book / Graphic Novel *War Bears*

### Abstract

Taking into account the broadness of the SF genre, the article commences with examining the difference between speculative fiction and science fiction, as outlined specifically by Donna J. Haraway and Margaret Atwood. Drawing on Atwood’s understanding of speculative genre, the paper analyses two separate but intertwined artistic forms: a classic short story with embedded dialogue and a comic book / graphic novel based upon the extended version of the earlier narrative. The short story “Oursonette” was written by Atwood as a part of a national project of artists commemorating the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Canadian Confederation. It depicts Victory in Europe Day, 8 May 1945, from the perspective of Canada and its impact upon the publishing of “Canadian whites,” otherwise known as WECA comic books. Partially black-and white *War Bears* (2019), referring to the tradition of “Canadian whites” comics, is a modern graphic novel, co-authored with Ken Steacy, which essentially uses the plot of Atwood’s “Oursonette” as the foundation for drawing an expanded story that precedes and follows the original. The narrative is not simply elaborated, a new dimension of visual imagery and a significant layer of intersectionality have changed its meaning to a large extent. The article analyses those alterations in detail to come to a conclusion as to whether they are beneficial or redundant to the original form and content. Thematically, the paper probes the gendered dimension of Atwood’s (and partly Steacy’s) rendering of the superheroine subcategory, with regard to SF genre and its literary convention. The article compares how this issue is represented in both examined literary genres: a narrative by Atwood and a comic book / graphic novel by Atwood and Steacy.

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In her study *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* Donna J. Haraway outlines that SF can signify, among other things, “science fiction, speculative fabulation... speculative feminism, science fact, so far” (2016: 2).<sup>1</sup> According to her, “SF is storytelling and fact telling; it is the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come” (Haraway 2016: 31). If one wonders which direction this potentiality might go, the feasible path leads towards the narratives that Haraway defines as “more liveable.” She captures it as follows: “The Capitalocene must be relationally unmade in order to compose in material-semiotic SF patterns and stories something more liveable,” emphasis added (Haraway 2016: 50). As shown, Haraway’s understanding of SF genre encompasses the whole spectrum of speculative options, including science fiction narratives. Not all writers would, however, be responsive to such broad categorisation. Margaret Atwood, whose two works the article analyses, advocates a narrower construal of the speculative genre. In *In Other Worlds*, Atwood claims:

Some use *speculative fiction* as an umbrella covering science fiction and all its hyphenated forms — science-fiction fantasy and so forth — and others choose the reverse. SF novels of course can set themselves in parallel imagined realities, or long ago, and/or on planets far away. But all these locations have something in common: they don’t exist, and their non-existence is of a different order than the non-existence of the realistic novel’s Bobs and Carols and Teds and Alices. (2011: 61; emphasis original)

Due to insisting on the distinction between SF as science fiction and SF as speculative fabulation, Atwood has been referred to as a “genre traitor” (2011: 2). The writer ends to stress repeatedly that unlike in science fiction, her novels do not take place in outer space, and there are no extra-terrestrial life forms or accounts of the daily existence on “planets far away.” In line with that, Atwood’s fiction presents alternative, conceivable scenarios that “really could happen, but just hadn’t completely happened” when these books were created (2011: 6). With regard to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the novelist explains that she “would not

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<sup>1</sup> Haraway argues convincingly: “[s]cience fact and speculative fabulation need each other and they both need speculative feminism” (2016: 3).

put into this book anything that humankind had not already done, somewhere, sometime, or for which it did not already have the tools” (Atwood 2011: 88). In other words, the modifier “speculative” seems to mean to Atwood that although “‘the future’ became an established location” (2011: 72), this prospective location is not detached from the possibilities available to humans currently. For Atwood, to imagine alternative scenarios does not involve abandoning the (textual)reality based upon some potentially plausible grounds. While classifying her writing as “speculative,” Atwood neither undermines the capacities of new machineries and scientific know-how nor rejects re-defining humanity in relation to new technologies. What is more, the writer supports strongly broadening the human inventive and visionary potential “towards the outer reaches of imagination” (Atwood 2011: 63), with an emphasis put on future-oriented alternatives that can challenge oppressive structures and the political authoritarian power (terror) which, frequently, cannot be directly confronted (Atwood 2011: 62–63). However, as argued by Atwood in *In Other Worlds* with regard to her MaddAddam trilogy, her own SF scenarios seem to notwithstanding occur on planet earth — no matter how devastated, affected by the post-apocalyptic climate or genetic bodily modifications, and, as she assures her readers, it does not seem feasible that she may ever send her characters into some other spatial dimensions (Atwood 2011: 91–95).

When examining the roots of Atwood’s writing, it becomes noticeable that she has always paid attention to the “ability to see things from the point of view of another being” (2011: 21). Much as the writer stresses the importance of the factual research based upon historical or social realities (for instance, visiting the Iron Curtain countries, Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Poland before creating *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 2011: 86), she equally appreciates its speculative and imaginative capabilities. Likewise, Atwood argues:

If you can image — or imagine — yourself, you can image — or imagine — a being not-yourself; and you can also imagine how such a being may see the world, a world that includes you. (2011: 21)

To her audience, Atwood exists primarily as a novelist, a poet and a critic. It is not common knowledge that graphic novels and comic books have always been one of her favourite categories [Atwood admits “[o]ur generation of late forties kids was comics-oriented” (2019)], which eventually led to the publishing of *Angel Catbird* in 2016. Arguably, Atwood is one of few contemporary, reputable authors who has had the courage to admit her appreciation for the genre, which until recently, was dismissed by critics as popular, “second-rate” or lowbrow. What is more, in her writing, Atwood reminds one that comic strips and books have performed a crucial social and cultural role over the last decades, and especially during WWII. Cocca in her study *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation* (2016) highlights the scale and the meaning of comics’ wartime readership:

Comics’ distribution on newsstands, and for some, also in newspaper comic strips, required that their appeal be quite broad. A lot of people were reading these comics: during the war, about 90 percent of comics had superheroes in them, and sales may have been between 25 and 40 million per month (Wright 2001: 31; Hajdu 2008: 5). In the war years, an average of two to three comics per week were read by over 90 percent of six- to eleven-year-olds, 84 percent of twelve- to seventeen-year-olds, and 35 percent of those eighteen and older. In each group, the numbers of males and females reading comics were roughly equal (Gabilliet 2010: 198). (2016: 28–29)

As shown above, in the 1940s, comics' readers belonged mostly to the young generation. What is significant, Cocca argues that wartime girls and young women (i.e. Atwood) constituted a considerable part of such a cohort. As argued by Robbins in *From Girls to Grlzz: A History of Women's Comics from Teens to Zines*, referring to 1942–1957 in America "there was a time when more girls than boys read comics, a time when comics for girls sold in the millions, outnumbering every other kind of book" (1999: 7). Among the older generation of that time, the genre evoked mixed, prejudiced and frequently disapproving reactions. In *War Bears*, an imaginary senior citizen of 1943 refers to comic books as "trash [that] ... will ruin your mind... and contribute to delinquency and moral decay!" (Atwood and Steacy 2019). This preconception has been "scientifically" outlined in post-war study *Seduction of The Innocent* (1954) by psychiatrist Fredric Wertham. Regardless of the aforementioned biased attitudes, young people in the 1940s were enthusiastic about the comic strips. Atwood admits that her own motivation to teach herself to read resulted from the curiosity and passion for the so-called funnies printed in the newspaper. The author identifies the genre as one of the highlights in her self-contained childhood spent in the Northern part of the country (2011: 15–16).

From a broader perspective, full length comic books in Canada, especially during the 1940s and the World War II, had a national importance because they raised awareness about Canadian wartime contribution, which meant not only deploying troops but also providing allies with the much needed leather footwear, petrol and food supplies (Robbins, Kocmarek 2019). What is more, Ivan Kocmarek argues that WWII and immediate post-war years concurring with a peak in Canadian production of locally-based comic books reinforced the country's distinct national identity. He claims that:

There has been an unwarranted neglect (bordering on a cultural amnesia) of these first Canadian comics. Their small, but I think effective, role in contributing to the elusive 'Canadian identity' we were so desperately trying to condense by the time of the Centennial in 1967 is disregarded and dismissed. As the culture of comics has come to ascendancy among the masses and in academia during the last few decades, it perks up my sense of Canadian pride whenever we pull out and dig into that old trunk of forgotten comics in our nation's dusty attic. (Kocmarek 2019)

The importance of this genre was highlighted by Atwood in her short story "Oursonette," written in response to the appeal directed to Canadian authors to compose historically-based literary narratives commemorating the country's sesquicentennial anniversary. In "Oursonette," in the spirit of *Canada 150*, Atwood pays tribute to the Golden Age of Canadian comics (1941–1946) in general, and the wartime genre of "Canadian whites" in particular. They began to thrive due to 1940 War Exchange Conservation Act that forbade bringing in from the USA goods not considered as vital and indispensable. Bell explains that due to Canada's increasing negative transactional balance in export to America and cuts on gold transport from England, the economy-regulating Act was "designed to conserve American dollars by restricting the importation of non-essential goods from Canada's largest trading partner" (2006: 43). The embargo encompassed colourful and popular American comics. Due to this prohibition, black and white illustrated narratives with a colourful cover (as a result of the paper and paint deprivation) created and published in Canada<sup>2</sup> took over the national comic book market. Bell elucidates that before passing the Act, due to the financial and institutional

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<sup>2</sup> I.e. *Canada Jack, Nelvana of the Northern Lights*.

challenges connected with local printing, marketing and distribution, American publications were beyond competition (2006: 43). He sums it up ironically that by introducing the ban, Canadian “government inadvertently laid the groundwork for an indigenous comic industry” (Bell 2006: 43). According to Kocmarek, WECA (an acronym for the 1940 Act) comics, the term that he prefers to “Canadian whites,” represented much more than simply an imitative replacement to American comic book production. He maintains that WECA comics “better reflected a Canadian sociocultural core... they were purely a Canadian product, creating new Canadian comic books heroes” (Kocmarek 2017: 3–4).

The first Canadian own superhero was a female character *Nelvana of the Northern Lights* created by Dingle (Bell 2006: 47). On the whole, the wartime comic books frequently depicted empowered, courageous and resilient female superheroines. The progressive tendency observed at that time resulted from women’s active role during WWII and the fact that they worked professionally, supported their families and, to some extent, the whole country. Cocca observes: “[f]emale superheroes in the 1940s were generally clever, strong, and independent-minded, no doubt encouraged by women’s contributions to the war effort” (2016: 7). Hence, the comics of the 1940s apart from the national importance had also a vital gendered prominence. Cocca maintains that it was the wartime loosening of the rigid and discriminatory arrangement with regard to gender-based social positions and functions that enabled challenging the stereotypes of femininity and masculinity in comic books in the 1940s (2016: 28). According to her, “[s]pace for such subversion was created in a unique cultural moment, through the wartime flux of gender roles” (Cocca 2016: 28). What is more, in the absence of men who were fighting at the front, women would have more decisive power about the artistic content, editing and the layout of comic book publications. Although women were still in the minority, Robbins admits that never before had the comic industry employed so many women as during WWII (2019, Hicks and Round 2016). Consequently, Bell enumerates Patricia Joudrey who wrote and Doris Slater who drew Canadian comic books (2006: 48). All these changes are reflected in Atwood’s short story commemorating Canada’s sesquicentennial anniversary.

The main protagonist of “Oursonette,” Gloria Topper, is a female publisher, the editor-in-chief and the owner of the publishing house Canoodle Features. The complementary outlook is provided by an aspiring young, graphic artist, Al (his full name Alain Zurakowsky, and a pen name Al Zura, appears only in *War Bears*), who seeks employment in Topper’s company where he subsequently creates his “Canadian white” comic book *Oursonette*. Atwood’s short story focuses on the effect that the war’s end had upon this genre and its, in particular, female creators. Trina Robbins, the iconic cartoonist and the author of, among others, *Great Women Cartoonists* (2001), *The Great Women Superheroes* (1997), *A Century of Women Cartoonists* (1993), and the co-author of *Women and the Comics*, relates how the wartime experience affected comic book companies and women working in them:

“As in every other industry, guys are gone, and the women take their place,” Robbins says. “Women did things they’d never done before, including... drawing action comics for comic books. Almost invariably, they drew these beautiful, confident, fabulous action heroines who could handle anything. They rescue the guy and remain beautiful at the same time...” When male cartoonists returned to their jobs, the women who were working by contract were simply not rehired. (Hix 2014)

Very much in this vein, in "Oursonette," Atwood's literary representation of the Nazis' unconditional surrender in Europe, celebrated in Canada, foreshadows the changing role of women in the post-war society. Robbins remarks bitterly: "In America and Canada, the returning GIs got their old jobs back, and the women were sent back to the kitchens, not to emerge for at least the next twenty years" (2019). "Oursonette" furthermore predicts the prospective decline of Canadian WECA comics' editions. Bell explains that after the end of WWII, local companies could not afford to publish comics designed solely for the Canadian audience, thus, they either ceased the production or rebranded as reprint companies; many wartime Canadian cartoon artists had to seek employment in the USA or change the genre or the medium of their creative expression (2006: 52–56).

"Oursonette" (2017) and its follow-up comic book and graphic novel *War Bears* (2019), co-authored with a "visual storyteller" (as he defines himself) Ken Steacy, can be classified as the SF superheroine genre, with the elements of "the speculative past," written, with attention to historical details, into the specificity of WWII events.<sup>3</sup> Although the foregrounded, supernatural element is manifestly conspicuous, it remains in compliance with the convention of the speculative genre. As always in Atwood's prose, there are no "far away planets" or extra-terrestrials but a fantastic narrative-within-the realistic textual framework in the plausible convention of the Chinese box structure. The superheroine storyline is embedded within the fictional wartime comics, entitled *Oursonette*, drawn by Al/Alain Zurakowsky. The supernatural subplot of Zurakowsky's comics revolves around a formidable and fierce Canadian superheroine Sophie (aka Oursonette) who gets transformed into a half-human and half-bear form to combat Nazis. In *War Bears*, shapeshifting is further parenthesised and distanced graphically. *Oursonette* sections are drawn like a proper wartime "Canadian white" in black-and-white in contrast to the colourful, partly contemporary graphic novel sequences. As a result, the supernatural is visually processed and qualified via the meta-fictional, interpolated textual and history-based material. In the Foreword to *War Bears*, Steacy stresses assuredly conducting comprehensive studies to render the authenticity of the period-related idiom and the contextual wartime background (2019).

Exploring the roots of the genre, Madrid in *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (2016) explains that first comic strips of as early as 1934, published in newspapers, instead of superheroes, related the adventures of private investigators, soldiers or rogues of different types (2016: 3). It was no sooner than with 1938's Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel's *Superman* that a brand new genre and a new type of the hero came into being (Madrid 2016: 3). However the male-centred superhero category differs considerable from those involving female vigilantes. As argued in *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*, general tendencies in depicting female superheroines can be summed up as "underrepresentation, domestication, sexualisation, and heteronormativity" (Cocca 2016: 7). Furthermore in the examined genre,

...there are far fewer women than men, the women are portrayed as interested in romance or as less-powerful adjuncts to male characters, the women are shown in skimpy clothing and in poses that accentuate their curves while the male characters are portrayed as athletic and action-oriented, and both women and men are almost always portrayed as very different from one another and interested only in opposite-sex romance and sex. (Cocca 2016: 7)

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<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, both short story and *War Bears* relate loosely to speculative feminism and Atwood's *utopia*.

When taking into account wartime superheroines, American Wonder Woman, “a woman who does it all, and does it all well... often referred to as an icon, representing female power, and by implication, female equality with males” (Cocca 2016: 25), seems to be the closest to Atwood’s Canadian Oursonette. Trina Robbins, the first female cartoonist to draw Wonder Woman, in an interview with Olivia Hicks and Julia Round, “WWWWD: What Would Wonder Woman Do?” strongly defends this superheroine, praising her iconic status and defending the original, classic costume (2016). Robbins claims that male illustrators who drew Wonder Woman frequently misinterpreted or even detested this character, and they tried to manipulate her, by making the superheroine look or behave more to their taste (Hicks and Round 2016). In an interview for *Comics Bulletin*, Robbins calls Wonder Woman “a slave” to the industry and cartoonists, being “at the mercy of whoever writes her and whoever draws her” (2012). According to Robbins, the changes in Wonder Woman’s more and more sexualised representation are a perfect illustration of such a subduing tendency. The critic and an artist asserts strongly: “I object to the hypersexualisation of all the superheroines” (Robbins 2012). It is significant that referring to the costume, Atwood compares Oursonette to Wonder Woman “though with a few more clothes on” (2019a).

Among other qualities of Wonder Woman, Cocca underlines strength, fearlessness, valour, determinedness, cleverness, dedication to righteousness and truth, and always being on the side of the most vulnerable and those in need (2016: 25). All these features apply to Atwood’s superheroine as well. Oursonette, like Wonder Woman, realises all these ideals “through a female body,” “approaching all situations with an open heart, an open mind and an open hand,” which makes her “a potentially threatening figure” (Cocca 2016: 25). Oursonette and Wonder Woman without a doubt seemed to have been a direct threat to the restraining categorisation of gender roles, legitimising women’s subjugated status in the 1940s and to men’s sense of unchallenged superiority. With reference to Wonder Woman, Cocca concludes:

In a world in which women have been treated unequally by law and by custom for far too long, she has demonstrated since the 1940s that intelligence and strength and leadership are not “male” traits. Rather, they are human traits that can be performed by anyone. (2016: 25)

However Wonder Woman was neither the first female character who fought injustice of the world in disguise nor the sole one: one can enumerate The Woman in Red, Fantomah, Madame Fatal, Red Tornado, Miss Fury, Lady Luck, Spider Widow, Black Angel or Phantom Lady, to name but a few (Madrid 2016: 4–31).

Based on Atwood’s feminist narrative, the comic book / graphic novel *War Bears*, co-authored with Steacy, concentrates on the adventures of the non-normative superheroine who defies gender stereotypes. Gloria Topper’s granddaughter, Alexis Vadeboncoer, the author of the fictitious graphic novel *Were-women*, praises Oursonette as “a brave young woman with agency, who acted selflessly, and let nothing stand in her way” (Atwood and Steacy 2019). In the colloquial idiom, expressing admiration, Alexis, *War Bears*’ representative of present-day millennials, defines Oursonette as “bad-ass, an awesome were-bear superheroine who took zero crap from Nazis or — anyone else!” (Atwood and Steacy 2019). It seems symptomatic that it is the uncompromised attitude of Oursonette that the new generation praises above all.

Indeed, the superheroine in *War Bears* seems to be immune to flattery, power abuse or vanity. She distances herself from admiration, frequently reproaching men of authority like unruly children. Being presented with a medal for saving Canadian Royal Navy soldiers when their ship was torpedoed and caught in the German gunfire, Oursonette replies defiantly: "I don't mean to be rude, Admiral Chance — but there's no time for formalities. We've still got a war to win" (Atwood and Steacy 2019). Elsewhere, she retorts in a similar bold manner: "But there's still plenty of work to be done before this war's won, so onward and upward, everyone!" (Atwood and Steacy 2019). Oursonette does not negotiate her stance, back down or make concessions. She follows her moral compass and sticks to her guns. *War Bears*' superheroine seems to be devoid of feebleness, weakness or indecisiveness. She trusts her own judgment and she relies on herself and her female polar bears sidekicks.

In *War Bears*, Oursonette rescues on the North Atlantic, Canadian soldiers who are afterwards served hot chocolate and covered in warm blankets. Applying Cocca's term, male soldiers appear to be "mansels in distress" (2016: 28) saved by a tougher female vigilante. One can clearly perceive the gender role reversal: men are depicted as helpless and dependent, and the action heroine is a fearless darer of few words. Like other superheroes, Oursonette, Ursula Minor and Major (her female polar bears helpers) can move quickly due to flying. Atwood admits that for her this ability is essential in recognising the superpowers:

It has to do with wings, either actual or implied, with rising above the earth, and with the ability to glide effortlessly from one place to another. It has to do with overcoming the restrictions of the body, that dead weight of ultimate mortality we lug around with us. (2011: 32)

Above all, Oursonette is an avenger who aims to restore justice and punish Nazis for their war crimes (she announces to them: "You'll be tried for your crimes and pay the price for these infamous actions!"). German soldiers in Atwood's and Steacy's *War Bears* are portrayed as unscrupulous (shooting the defenceless, shipwrecked soldiers), cunning (trying to hide their wrongdoing), cowardly (asking for mercy, terrified of Oursonette: "Now we are kaput!") and avoiding accountability ("I was only following orders!"). Rooted in the genre convention, the usage of incorrect forms: "was" instead of "was" and foreign intrusions of i.e. "kaput," appears to add some satirising streak to villainous perpetrators of genocide.

In Atwood's short story, Oursonette's own manner of speech: preferring deeds to words, seems to be stylistically similar to that from co-authored *War Bears*. When congratulated by her military superiors, Oursonette replies "No need, ... We're winning! That's thanks enough" (Atwood 2019b). She is a heroine who "does things" rather than talks about them: she parachutes, breaks free from captivity, arrests enemy agents, ties them and hands them over to soldiers, she defeats Nazis on the sea and the land, feeds starving civilians, organises the resistance movement etc. When applying Madrid's classification, Oursonette would belong to "The Victory Girls" category (along with The Shield, Wonder Woman, Black Cat, War Nurse, Black Angel) who fought in WWII, "part patriotic, part pinup." Unlike the wealthy upper class "Debutantes," they represented more ordinary girls with mundane jobs, and were more independent and self-reliant than men-helping "Partners" and less romance-oriented than "The Glamorous Girls" (Madrid 2016: 6–31).

Like other representatives of the genre, Atwood's heroine needs to have a double (secret) identity. The writer admits that "the doubleness of superheroes... has a very long ancestry...

In addition to his disguising ‘normal’ alter ego, the super-hero of the 1940s was required to have a powerful enemy or two” (Atwood 2011: 28–29). In the case of Oursonette, the enemy was not represented by an individual villain but collective Nazis. What is more, instead of the protagonist’s genre-related doubleness, *War Bears* has a triple-layered structure: “real” Gloria (the editor-in-chief and the owner of the publishing house) inspires the creation of two female comic book characters: Sophia (the corporal on the front) aka Oursonette (the she-bear). By introducing the striking physical likeness between the three female protagonists, it is implied that Topper, apart from her down-to-earth, corporate personality, might actually have the undisclosed alter ego who wishes to fight the evil of the world. As Gloria’s personifications, Sophia/Oursonette take part in WWII combat, save allied soldiers from Nazis, complete impossible missions, and fundamentally help to win the war. It seems noticeable that Sophia achieves all these heroic deeds as the woman-bear, which means, in a non-human form. As the human female corporal, Sophia is buried in the paper work, politely ignored and patronised by male soldiers and her superiors. As the invincible she-bear Oursonette, she incites awe and admiration. Madrid comments upon this duality of female action characters:

They had been forced into the roles of well-mannered daughters or girlfriend, and a secret life gave these women a chance to be themselves. Putting on a cape and mask liberated these women to live the kind of life that they dreamed of — one where they could help make their world a better place. (2016: 6)

Considering the above, Oursonette signifies female unleashed strength, the fierce animal instincts, bravery, aggressiveness and bold, unapologetic (victorious) confrontation with men on equal terms that women at that time were rarely allowed to pursue. Routinely, superheroines had female sidekicks, like Oursonette’s two polar bears, Ursula Minor and Ursula Major, “women helping other women to beat oppression through self-reliance and strength, [created] certainly a positive message for young girls who would be coming out of wartime to help build a new modern world” (Madrid 2016: 51). Since Oursonette’s “traditional” femininity could not be reconciled with her combative and dynamic profile, to be able to activate her resources, Atwood’s heroine had to become a post-human, half-animal, yet still gendered person. As shown, even invincible action heroine’s superpowers are compromised by gender rules. Referring to fighting Nazis, Oursonette “wasn’t allowed to actually kill them — that would have been too unfeminine,” she was permitted to restrain wrongdoers and provide them to justice but not to execute them (Atwood 2019b). Cocca supports this view by elucidating that wartime superheroines would “generally subdue these characters not by overt violence but rather, by tying them up, and work to redeem the female criminals and help women and children in general” (2016: 28).

What is more, within the convention of the comic book, Oursonette has to be perceived by the male reading audience as sexually attractive. Following the (marketing) line of thinking, Gloria objects to the choice of the shapeshifting animal, suggesting a lynx or a tiger instead: “a bear’s not sexy. Bears are more cuddly, like teddy bears” (Atwood 2019b). Half-animal or not, the female action heroine needs to appear desirable to her readers. At the same time, Oursonette has to remain an inaccessible vestal Joan of Arc ideal: “No man could get near her because she had to save her powers for fighting Nazi spies. She’d been so pure, so brave” (Atwood 2019b). Madrid stresses that double standards for female characters operated along the aforementioned virgin and whore dichotomy:

Superheroines are presented in a highly sexualized way, but we are told that their scandalous costumes don't represent their true natures. A female superhero may dress like a whore, but between those perfect breasts must beat the heart of a virgin. (2016: 250)

While the female protagonist's "real" identity ought to be modest and reserved, the secret one could be seductive and sensual. In the short story, Oursonette's apparel is related to as a "nifty fur-trimmed outfit with the short skirt that showed a lot of leg" (Atwood 2019b). Madrid argues that sex in young audience-directed books was a taboo fantasy that could be implied by clothes, bodily nudity or flirting but never realised (2016: 249–250).<sup>4</sup> Regardless of the reduced skirt, Gloria Topper encourages Al to disclose a bit more nudity in his drawings of Oursonette: "Show more leg... and her fur-topped boots."<sup>5</sup> As a businesswoman and the head of the company, Topper is aware that revealing more female/animal body would increase the sales of comics. Nonetheless, there remains a thin line about which Robbins warned, between sexy and hypersexualised. In *War Bears*, this line becomes dangerously blurred in one of the most (intentionally ironic?) controversial graphic representations, depicting the superheroine sitting on the giant, phallic torpedo. Most of the time, however, *War Bears* portrays Oursonette without oversexualisation, as a good-looking, energetic, smiling, sometimes frightening woman with zoomorphic features, such as the black tip of the nose, claws and paws etc. In contrast to her female helpers, polar bears, Ursula Minor and Ursula Major, the superheroine most of the time fights upright, like a human being. Robbins sums Oursonette up as "a pretty lass with a big, black nose, covered in fluffy white fur, who punches Nazis, what's not to love?" (2019).

Regardless of being the all-powerful vigilante, Oursonette in Atwood's short story plays with male soldiers in a flirtatious, little-girl like manner: "Got a little present for you, boys," she'd said. She was charmingly offhand about her own heroic exploits" (2019b). Her chatting up might result from the fact that Al in the original text seems to be more romantically smitten with Oursonette than with officious Gloria. In Atwood's narrative, it is more a Pygmalion story of the creator who falls for his Creation. Al recalls "his Oursonette. She wasn't a real woman, a real bear-woman, true, but he would miss her a lot... Together they'd renounced their so-called normal life to dedicate themselves to the cause" (2019b). In the graphic novel, Oursonette impersonates Al's fantasy about a desirable yet inaccessible femme fatale boss and bossy femme fatale.

In *War Bears*, when Alain Zurakowsky comes into the publishing house looking for a job, he mistakes Gloria Topper for a receptionist. When the young illustrator addresses Ms Topper "madam," she rebukes him and insists on being called the boss; eventually she sends him away with dismissive words "Now beat it, I got a shop to run" (Atwood and Steacy 2019). As her surname implies, Gloria likes to stress her position of authority and being in control. In "Oursonette," there is no mention of this first meeting, Atwood, nonetheless, renders

<sup>4</sup> Atwood traces back the derivation of the female vigilante costume ("the skin-tight clothing with the bathing suit over the abdominal parts, the wide, fancy belt, and the calf-high boots") to the previous century circus costumes or wrestling outfits (2016: 24).

<sup>5</sup> The stereotypical representation of "a sexy nymph in a revealing costume" (Madrid 2016: 4), not leaving much space for imagination, and the proverbial tight swimsuit have not always been the convention in comic books. As stressed in *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines*, the first costumes of superheroines were long robes with capes (Madrid 2016: 4).

Gloria ironically as a sensuous and alluring woman who “blew out smoke from under her wavy blonde Veronica Lake sideflop, extruding her lips into a red O” (2019b). Hence both in the short story and graphic novel, Gloria seems to represent a cold-blond femme fatale: *War Bears*’ drawings of this scene portray her from the back, highlighting her tight violet dress, high heels, zooming in on stockings with a seam, on which her hand with long, painted red nails rests. The other hand is holding a cigarette, an intrinsic phallic attribute of vamp-like, manipulative women. Perceptibly, Gloria represents a parody of Hitchcock’s platinum blonds and female protagonists from the *film noir* convention. Nevertheless in Atwood’s short story, Topper does not try to manipulate or seduce Al, as observed as well by Kocmarek (2019). On the whole, “Oursonette” does not imply much erotic tension between Gloria and Al: the female boss treats a young man in a condescending way, more like a child than a potential lover [“You’re very sweet, Al,” Gloria said. “You need a girl friend” (Atwood 2019b)]. In *War Bears*, regardless of being overtly attracted to Zurakowsky, Gloria resists the temptation, and she resolves not to get involved in the love affair with a younger employee infatuated with her. In conclusion, “Oursonette” seems to be a more universal narrative about the impossible love based on the projected male fantasy and failed hopes and disappointment arising from it, whereas *War Bears* offers a more conventional, broken-heart tale of a novice besotted with his eye-catching and powerful female superior.

When comparing the two genres, Gloria seems to be a character whose role in the narrative differs most considerably with regard to the ending of Atwood’s short story and that of the graphic novel. As a “superheroine,” Topper in “Oursonette” is a shrewd businesswoman who manages her publishing company in an uncompromised manner and who can foresee the forthcoming changing marketing trends. Like in the case of Oursonette, Atwood portrays Gloria via the verbs of action:

...Gloria was the brains behind Canoodle Features. She picked the artists, she okayed the ideas, she supervised the printing, the distribution, the ads. She kept the books. She’d inherited the business, which had printed signs, posters, and streetcar ads before the war, so she’d already known the basics. (2019b)

Judging by the forthcoming end of the trade ban with America, Topper can predict the decline of Canadian whites: “I give it six months, a year maximum. All-colour Americans — they’ll be back. Captain Marvel, Batman, Wonder Woman” (Atwood 2019b). Furthermore, she can deduce that that post-war women will no longer be allowed to identify with action heroines but their role models will become housewives who fight on the home front of dishwashers and washing machines. She asks Al: “Can you draw washing machines?... Cute housewives in aprons hanging out the sheets, pitching woo to their laundry?” (Atwood 2019b). Gloria in “Oursonette” is a visionary, she is well aware before others that her business will have to adapt to the changing times and provide what the market demands: advertising household goods and appliances. She is confident and fearless, when she assures Al “trust me: it’s gonna be big!” (Atwood 2019b).

In *War Bears*, from her trip to the US (ironically, regardless of the wartime ban), Gloria imports an American business partner and her future husband. This decision allows her to rebrand the dwindling publishing company into a thriving advertising enterprise and become an ad agency executive. When Topper in *War Bears* takes a walk down the aisle with Troy Bradford from New York’s advertising branch, she breaks young Zurakowsky’s heart. On the

whole, Gloria does not seem to marry Troy (solely) due to post-war economic recession, she even jokes self-ironically "about finally snagging a husband" (Atwood and Steacy 2019). However, the business and romantic merge depicted in *War Bears* appears to be a somewhat disappointing and conformist solution to Topper's financial problems. Like Elizabeth Bennet in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Gloria simply "happens" to fall in love with a wealthy American businessman who "happens" to help her to keep her company afloat. Gloria in Atwood's original narrative does not even consider giving up her business or personal autonomy. In the short story "Oursonette," Topper appears to be equally determined to enter the advertising field but she does not count on the assistance of foreign investors (especially not American ones) or romantic male helpers. Ironically, Atwood's original wartime literary character seems to be more self-reliant and resourceful than her graphic novel counterpart.

Generally speaking, a different genre requires different stylistic devices. In the co-authored *War Bears*, visual representations provided by Steacy (who is also acknowledged as the co-writer of the text) introduce an additional, significant layer to Atwood's original narrative. In the words of Kocmarek, the graphic designer "extrapolated this story both backward, as a short prequel, and forward, with a near-to-present-day-coda" (2019). As a matter of fact, Steacy's graphics superimposed extra political and cultural commentaries upon the initial text — their overall effect, however, remains disputable and uneven. The majority of illustrations in *War Bears* operate upon the thin line of pastiche, nonetheless, due to their somewhat pushy ostentatiousness; the blade of irony now and then strikes back the attacker.

In point of fact, the succinct short story "Oursonette" seems more nuanced than elaborated *War Bears*, published originally in three parts. Relying heavily on understatement, Atwood's condense narrative leaves space for the imagination, whereas the message in a co-authored graphic novel is delivered as if in the manner of, in one's face. On the other hand, *War Bears* incorporates the extra, intersectional dimension into the original narrative, providing at the same time the detailed background stories to main characters, each of whom suffers from a different kind of social discrimination: either based upon gender, sexuality, religion or descent. Due to such a strategy, *War Bears* functions at the intersection of gender studies, queer studies, ethnic minorities and immigration discourse, not to mention the Francophone Quebecois identity motif. Nevertheless, this (over)saturated fusion may appear a little enforced upon the stretched-enough plot. What is more, it does not always seem to be supported by feasible textual rationales other than the well-motivated intention to squeeze as many forms of social injustice into one book as possible. That is why at times the effect may seem to be contrary to the expected: it produces surplus and excess, and, in consequence, exaggeration rather than social inclusiveness. There is one more disturbing aspect in this palimpsest narrative: it cannot function both as the parody that advocates systemic changes and the literal embodiment of its vices. Then if misogynistic illustrations such as the one with a missile upon which Oursonette sits are to be perceived as subversively mocking, what about the textual authority of the book's intersectional and anti-discriminatory dimension?

Regrettably, many intersectional extrapolations introduced in the comic novel rather than signify progressiveness seem to turn Atwood's original story into a cliché narrative. For instance, Al's father is a Polish emigrant from Cracow who epitomises numerous ethnic stereotypes: seemingly a working class bully yet with a golden heart, represented graphically most of the time with a bottle of alcoholic drink in hand, bragging about his menial job of a scrap metal dealer that supports the whole family and proud of his tough emigrant beginnings,

wanting to raise his son to be “a real man.” Fearing his son might be gay, homophobic Zurakowsky is elated when Al gets in a fight over the girl. In *War Bears*, Al is not drafted because of his poor sight and asthma, yet his father makes him feel guilty about it, calling him “shirker.” Unlike his dad who looks down on “stupid cartoons,” Al believes that “drawing comics will help the war effort, help with morale” (Atwood and Steacy 2019). With regard to the war contribution, Mr Zurakowsky holds a different opinion. According to his immigrant code of honour, in exchange for the improved life opportunities, Al ought to pay Canada back with his military service. In *War Bears*, this assumption is tragically tested when Zurakowsky’s other son gets killed while fighting for the allies. Structurally, the loss of a son in combat is supposed to make the domestic loudmouth more “humanised” and sympathetic to readers. So should his marital union. Mr Zurakowsky appears to be truly fond of his Francophone wife but even she is not immune to her husband’s coarseness. Al’s mother is an emotional woman from Montreal, with faulty English pronunciation (“bradders” instead of “bothers,” for instance) who tries to appease her rowdy husband and protect her children against his unmannerly behaviour.

Clad in his proverbial working class sleeveless vest and condescending attitude towards women and men not masculine enough (“a bit of pansy”), Mr Zurakowsky constitutes an old chestnut hybrid somewhere between Stanley Kowalski from *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams and Onslow from the classic BBC television series (*Keeping Up Appearances*). One can detect a note of humour in Zurakowsky character, who has a cat named Pierogi (dumplings) after the traditional Polish dish. Yet it appears a bit too far-fetched that his surname, as admitted by Steacy, is supposed to be a tribute to the Polish pilot who fought in the Battle of Britain. If Steacy truly had done his research, as he claimed, he would have avoided Google-mistranslated blunders, such as an exclamation: “God damn them all to hell!!!” rendered as “Bóg skrytykować je wszystkie do piekła!!!” (meaning: “God to criticise them all to hell”) (Atwood and Steacy 2019). Mr Zurakowsky exclaims those words in outrage and agitation when he finds out about his son’s death. However word-for-word automatic(?) translation errors spoil the pathos of the scene. In this case, one can hardly interpret those inaccuracies as some intentional parodic end product. On the other hand, Mr Zurakowsky’s unswerving loyalty to Canada and his personal loss of the son in combat make readers aware of immigrants’ contribution to winning WWII.

On a more constructive note, apart from the stereotypical ethnic context, the graphic novel creditably aims to contest heteronormativity, which was rarely challenged in the genre of the examined period. Unlike other, not so successful intersectional interpolations, this subplot seems to be well-developed and substantial. Al’s colleague in Topper’s company and co-graphic designer, Mike MacKenzie, is hauntingly worried about Kevin, his gay partner’s fate on the war front in the navy. What is more, when his partner is leaving for the front, Mike cannot demonstrate his affection for Kevin in public: “I couldn’t leave him at Union Station with anything more than a lousy handshake” (Atwood and Steacy 2019). Drowning his sorrows in bars, MacKenzie is alienated because he misses Kevin and he has to keep his sexual identity secret. The rivalry between him and Al with regard to Gloria’s interest turns out to be Mike’s cover to distract attention from being gay. When MacKenzie comes out to Al, he says: “it’s still me; Mike! But what I do behind closed doors is really none of your beeswax” (Atwood and Steacy 2019). Apart from individual discrimination, Mike’s subplot acknowledges the collective part that homosexual soldiers and their partners played during

the war. As earlier, it reminds the audience that many gay soldiers, such as Mike's partner, fought in World War II and put their lives at risk. In MacKenzie's speech, he compares his own vulnerability with that of Alain's:

And lemme tell ya, if you think it's rough being a Catholic-Polish-Francophone-Artiste here in Protestant-Scottish-Anglophone-Blue-Collar Toronto, just try'n imagine being a fairy in this town, okay? (Atwood and Steacy 2019)

This single sentence captures well the saturation of intersectional subplots in *War Bears*. When after many years, Al is invited to Toronto Summer 2009 the Joe Shuster Awards and join the hall of fame, Alexis, Gloria's granddaughter, refers to him as "a staunch Canuck who channelled his Francophone culture and Polish pride into this great character" (Atwood and Steacy 2019).<sup>6</sup> Alexis's statement proves that contemporarily one's heterogeneous identity and diversity have become not a source of shame but pride.

As shown above, intersectionality remains a vital enhancement of graphic plots in *War Bears*. Iconic female vigilantes such as Wonder Woman were classified as being "white, of royal birth, nearly nude, attractive, heterosexual, and able-bodied" (Cocca 2016: 25). Therefore, besides gender, they usually did not represent any other kinds of exclusion. Oursonette apart from assuming a human/non-human form, embraces Francophone cultural difference. In addition to virtue and courage designed by Atwood, the lengthy speech bubble in *War Bears*, equipped superheroine with her Quebecois ancestry. Oursonette was attacked by the were-bear in Northern Quebec, and, as a result, she could shapeshift into "a fearsome creature who strikes terror into the dark hearts of the evil axis" and could consolidate supporters to fight for the freedom of her country (Atwood and Steacy 2019). One can detain a note of irony (pointed at America) in Steacy's drawings (compare the evil axis to contemporary American anti-terrorist rhetoric). As demonstrated, *War Bears* gave Oursonette the personal past and the alliterated "feisty Francophone" identity (Atwood and Steacy 2019). The short story implies this fact in-between-the-lines. Atwood writes: "Au revoir' was the only French thing Oursonette ever said, but you got the idea" (2019b).

Furthermore, Oursonette the character functions at the intersections of changing political affiliations. When Al first drew Oursonette, the bear form was supposed to recognise the Russians' role in the WWII. Nonetheless, with the course of time, the short story and the comic book indicate the evolution of wartime attitudes towards Russians, accompanied by the growing awareness of Stalin's totalitarian and anti-democratic outlook. In *War Bears*, Gloria rightly predicts:

Y'know that Russian Bear — I don't see that being so popular, coming up. How're they going to divide things up? The Yanks the Russkies — it's not gonna be so lovey-dovey soon. Believe you me! (Atwood and Steacy 2019)

When the fight for power and influence led to the polarisation of world politics, Oursonette stands against her former wartime allies and opts for the values of the Western world: freedom and democracy. In her role as the military liaison heading Canadian superheroes,

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<sup>6</sup> The term "Canuck" signifies an informal expression of Canadian identity.

Oursonette summons the goddess Athena and the indigenous spirit Orenda to help her to prevent the Russian nuclear explosion and the atomic destruction of the world. Eventually, she foils Russians' nuclear plans of global annihilation, turning against the "Gremlins from Kremlin." Referring to the times when it was becoming clear that former allies in combat would not remain collaborators in peace, Atwood's short story hints at the problems with marking power zones between Americans and Russians. Oursonette is aware that the times of the post-war reality will differ considerably: "soon we must win the peace and start rebuilding our world," she instructs soldiers (Atwood and Steacy 2019).

In conclusion, with her contemporary SF tribute not only to Canadian comic books and graphic literature, Atwood has once again generated "more liveable speculations" of the reality where women's roles are to a considerable extent less gender-bound. In the speculative genre, female characters can perform heroic deeds, actively engage and participate in all (not only domestic) forms of life, save themselves and others, combat evil and injustice. They are professionally, politically and culturally active members of the society. To realise it fully, as observed by Atwood, one needs to "speculate further" (2011: 41).

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