Masculinization of the Great Machine: Reconstructing the Post-9/11 Superhero in Brian K. Vaughan's *Ex Machina*

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Brian K. Vaughan's graphic novel series *Ex Machina* (2004-2010) is a realistic alternate history in which a vigilante superhero is able to save one of the Twin Towers on 9/11. Instead of approaching apocalypse as in Moore's fictional world of *Watchmen*, Vaughan's neo-apocalyptic characters are trying to deal with the trauma inflicted personally and nationally from 9/11. Vaughan's post-9/11 New York City deals directly with issues of terrorism, vigilantism, masculinity, and heroism as the main character, Mitchell Hundred, moves from the superhero spotlight to the world of politics. Vaughan turns the traditional superhero narrative upside down; typically, the superhero is heroic and victorious. If a superhero should die, he is often reborn in the next issue or in an alternate universe. In the case of *Ex Machina*, Hundred is indeed victorious at the end of the series, but at what cost? Hundred himself is a comic book enthusiast because "those stories never get to become tragedies" (Book 5, Chapter 4). Ultimately, his story is a tragedy, and Hundred understands that the heroes he grew up trying to emulate don't represent the reality around him and, perhaps, the idea that there is no such thing as a "hero." *Ex Machina* interrogates what it means to be in a position of power in post-9/11 United States and to what extent we mythologize political figures in post-9/11 American culture.

Architecture and Masculinity

Architectural theorists describe vertical buildings as symbols of male domination, power, and political authority. In fact, the inventor of the skyscraper himself (Louis Sullivan) described his ambition to create "masculine forms"—strong, solid, tall, commanding respect. Henri Lefebvre argues that the phallic brutality of the buildings represents the brutality of political power. Arguably, the perceived phallus, a dominant symbol of ideology and oppression, theoretically invades what is considered to be a neutral space, thereby establishing superiority. Although I struggle with the concept of architectural supremacy, it's clear that buildings do carry with them a sense of

identity. However, this identity stems not from their physical domination of the sky, but from the imaginary foundations of social norms, which connote certain traits and behaviors as either masculine or feminine.

Mark Moss points out that technology carries with it an inherently masculine imprint, linking technological vision and innovation to the equivalent of biological reproduction. The architects and engineers of the world designate buildings in the public sphere as masculine because the buildings privilege function over ornamentation: "Both the architect and the building itself fuse together to become and to be defined as embodying the 'very essence of manhood'" (Moss 140); the very pride emanating therefrom is linked to strength, pride, and power. As Moss writes, building a skyscraper "is supposed to be about a manly form of construction that is genuine and stripped of feminine ornament" (140). Firstly, skyscrapers are part of the public, not the private domain, which is a place that is gendered female. Secondly, the construction of a skyscraper is about functionality, not ornamentation. However, it would be naïve to suggest that building design stems purely from a functional standpoint. Some of the most important buildings in the world are also the most beautiful. From a regional standpoint, the Cathedral of Learning stands out not only as an educational landmark in Pittsburgh, but the elements of gothic architecture, the surrounding landscape, and ornately decorated nationality rooms are clearly meant to inspire aesthetic reverence and awe in the students who attend classes at the University of Pittsburgh. The ornate design of the classrooms does not inhibit their function, but perhaps the aesthetics nurture the imagination, promoting academic excellence. Nonetheless, skyscrapers are considered to be masculine constructions: big, erect, and forceful, "the full balloon of the inflated masculine ego" (Weisman 1). The physical destruction of the Twin Towers was also the figurative destruction of our nation's sense of masculine strength and dominance. Attacking these patriarchal symbols dismantled America's perception of safety and security. The failure to protect our citizens and our symbols was considered to be a masculine failure, one that was immediately answered with a hypermasculine response in the media.

Gender and politics are social constructions based on nothing more than ideas and, therefore, there is no real reason why buildings should be gendered in a certain way. The foundations of skyscrapers are steel and cement, not testosterone and cowboy hats. The objects themselves are marvels of technological and engineering innovation, incapable of constructing ideology on their own volition. Yet, much has been said about the destruction of buildings on 9/11 as an attack on gender. Similarly, the perception of the World Trade Center itself changed in an instant. Poet David Lehman wrote a poem after the first WTC bombing in 1993, explaining his initial disdain for such "ugly monoliths" that lacked character. As a symbol, however, Lehman grew to love the buildings. Many Americans grew to love the buildings after 9/11, but it was more about their absence than their presence. Their absence represented an incomplete skyline, one whose previous dominance had been overcome by an act of terror. Although Hayles argues that dualities should become obsolete in a

shift away from presence and absence, clearly that is not the trajectory taken in our culture; the absence of the towers enhanced dualities and binary gender categories, often leading to outrageously gendered interpretations.

Gendered Trauma

On September 13, 2001, Psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint appeared on a television special hosted by Peter Jennings and argued that our nation was suffering from a gendered trauma following the attacks. Although only two days after the attacks, his argument about gendered trauma was an uncanny predication of the ways in which our culture attempted to reclaim its masculine status. However, his argument was ultimately blurred between two vastly different concepts. First, he compared the attacks to a rape and that we, as a culture of victims, were violated by the terrorist attacks. Because 91% of rape victims are women, Poussaint's argument suggests that the victims were gendered female (RAINN). It's not clear whether he means that the acts of terror were about disempowering the collective victim (the United States) or if the thousands of victims were a part of a larger cultural concern involving emasculation and weakness (to compare this idea to Faludi's concept of ornamental culture and the masculinity crisis of the 1990s). Second, he goes on to call the attacks an attempted symbolic castration. This part of his argument infers that the victims of the attack were masculine (or that the victims were to uphold masculine traits or behaviors). So, whether he means that the symbolic victims were weak men or strong men, in either case his argument centers around the ways in which the attacks affected men, rather than women (or just humans in general).

The fact that these attacks were unforeseen and shattered the nation's perception of invincibility seems the likely reasons for such absurdly gendered claims. The general feeling that our nation is not as protected and untouchable as previously believed may also play a role. Because protection—whether personal, local, or national—is gendered as a masculine responsibility, the kneejerk reaction was that our nation needed to come together and get tougher. But because gender norms are based on ideology and intangible politics, this castration hypothesis does not work. In *Ex Machina*, Vaughan comments on architectural gender symbolism by having Mitchell Hundred's alter ego, The Great Machine, save one of the towers. The one remaining tower in this alternate New York City represents the supposed importance of the image of heteronormative masculinity. Rather than two phallic symbols standing together, one remains as a symbol of straight masculinity, the very kind that Hundred is expected to convey in his own representation. Hundred's constant manipulations of his image, however, play a huge part in his ultimate demise, much like our culture's focus on rebuilding a masculine stereotype became damaging to both genders.

Part of the damage stemmed from the way the news media seemed to have a particularly gendered way of sharing the visual narrative of 9/11. The victims were generally represented as white-collar men, while male FDNY and NYPD members represented the heroes.

Women were disproportionately underrepresented in favor of stories about brotherhood and heroics, despite the fact that there were women who worked in the Towers and women who arrived on scene as first responders. A short documentary called *The Women of Ground Zero* was dedicated to representing the heroics of female firefighters and rescue workers. Although the thirteen-minute film had a very limited release, it ignited outrage throughout the country. *The Weekly Standard* said that the documentary was disgraceful, while other reactions resented the "agenda" that the film supposedly advocated. These intense reactions—from average Americans to syndicated news show hosts—made it clear that for women to be anything but invisible in the coverage of 9/11 was outrageous because quintessential to the successful heroic narrative was masculine ideology and imagery. Using this narrative, the media created a localized gender crisis, using the tragedy to reaffirm the gender binaries that supported a renewed social hierarchy that privileges masculinity.

The formerly strong, masculine skyscrapers no longer represented the essence of manhood; instead, their absence represented the ways in which our culture had become weakened in the first place. The men working in cubicles were no longer considered to be the epitome of masculine success, as constructed in American popular culture in the 1980s and 1990s; instead, the definition of masculinity reverted back to historical notions of physical prowess. The most coveted of bachelors in New York City were no longer the ones whose regal apartment lofts overlooked the city. No longer was financial success a way to secure a masculine identity. Instead, masculinity was measured by historical ideals and images like strength, ruggedness, and power. Cowboys, firefighters, and soldiers in particular were useful to reconstruct the ideology of masculinity.

To rebuild the American identity and the New York skyline after 9/11, first our culture needed to reconstruct masculinity. Peggy Noonan's opinion piece, appearing in the *Wall Street Journal* just about a month after 9/11, shows the immediacy with which we looked to revamp the masculine identity: "From the ashes of September 11, arise the manly virtues" (Noonan). The perception was that because of the women's movement, American men had "grown soft," leaving the US vulnerable to attack. In propping up their myth, the media settled on its archetypal manly man: the 9/11 New York firefighter "as *the* American hero." Ultimately, this trend of hyper-masculinity following the American "exposure" of feminized weakness damaged both genders, as well as our own perspectives of identity.

The post-9/11 representation of masculine ideals returned to the historical image of masculinity and confirmed once again the American ideology of justified military aggression and violence. The revitalized John Wayne hyper-masculinity reconstructed gender archetypes as a way to reinvent a strong American (i.e., masculine) culture. Ground Zero itself is key to this reinvention because "Ground Zero [is] an urgent All-American creation" that symbolizes the "reopening of the frontier" (Mead 57). It is impossible to ignore the political implications associated with "heroic masculinity." The media supplied the "Old West" rhetoric, forging a narrative that Bush was our culture's new John Wayne. He would stop at nothing to make 'em pay for their attacks on our freedom.

Ex Machina

As *Ex Machina* explores the issues embedded with reconstructing the masculine identity and the New York skyline following 9/11, Vaughan interrogates the concept of heroism, arguing that in the world of politics, perhaps the mask of a hero is not so far from the mask of villainy. By mythologizing politicians whose self-interests might inhibit their judgment, Vaughan believes that we are setting ourselves up for failure. Our politicians are not movie stars and superheroes; giving them unrealistic accolades and expectations will not help our culture to heal, nor will it help us to progress.

Ex Machina opens with Mitchell Hundred admitting to us that his comic book story is a tragedy. In pages scattered throughout the series, Hundred speaks to us in a darkened room, almost a confessional. He is sick of seeing his own image, the idealized superhero image that opens the series. It's a brightly colored photo of the Great Machine, his superhero alter ego, intercepting an airplane on a beautiful September morning and saving one of the Twin Towers. It's one of the few bright, primary colored images in the entire series. The rest of the coloring is dark, brooding, ugly—closely matching the reality underlying the character's motivations as a superhero and as a politician. Not only is he sick of seeing the image, but he knows that we, the readers, are too. In this fictional confession, he is speaking to those in an alternate New York City, but we the readers, certainly understand the tiresome feeling associated with seeing the same glorified, rhetoric-laced images over and over again. For Hundred, the biggest act of The Great Machine's career was his 'deus ex machina' role on 9/11, which propelled him into the political spotlight. But the great tragedy for Hundred occurred after his act of heroism, upon the realization that the hyper-real society in which we live is an artificial landscape, a simulacrum of ideology and identity stemming from a socially constructed reality and that he, despite his heroics, actually has no power to control his own identity, let alone make a difference in the political realm.

The postmodern identity is shaped by our surroundings and not necessarily by choice. Everything we do, think, or buy is part of the discourse associated with our position in society: "These elements—sounds, words, notes, gestures, expressions, clothes—are part of our natural and material world; but their importance for language is not what they *are* but what they *do*, their function. They construct meaning and transmit it.…They don't have any meaning *in themselves*" (Hall 5). In other words, meaning is signified through a visual representation of our identity as a system of signs. Consumers unknowingly buy into these signs as a way to construct an outward identity as well as a way to behave according to one's place in a hierarchy. One such construct of identity is gender, which can be used to formulate personal and national identities: "In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, dominant representations of the US self-as-nation were constructed through particular discourses in ways that resonated with the prior masculinization of US identity" (Shepherd 21). For post-9/11 America, the resurgence of a masculine identity gave the illusion of solidarity and protection; however, in reality, the careful

construction of masculine heroism masked the underlying political intentions of the Bush White House and irreparably divided the concepts of masculine and feminine in order to legitimize acts of war and to globalize gender politics.

In the case of *Ex Machina*, Hundred attempts to rise through the hierarchy with an appearance and behavior that give him strength. By adopting a strong alter ego name, wearing a costume with the appearance of armor, and attempting to reduce crime and save civilians in the city of New York, he constructs the same kind of masculine hero identity that appeared in the news media following 9/11. Like Bush, Hundred's appearance and expressions were specifically designed to create a certain kind of man, one whose historically strong behavior gives the illusion of safety. Ultimately, the image of the brawny cowboy or brave superhero served as nothing more than a distraction from the real issues stemming immediately from the events of 9/11, right up through our misguided entry into Iraq.

The symbolic hierarchy of gender is not a natural construction; it is politically based in order to reinforce the dominant ideals of social reality:

> At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees that dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (Connell 77)

After 9/11, the rugged, brawny, vengeance-seeker became the idealized form of masculinity. The supposed manly men could solve not only our problem of weakness at home, but their blood-thirsty, win-at-all-costs desire for revenge seemed to help our society to cope with the tragedy of 9/11. The image of renewed masculinity stemmed from gendered media representations. The media helped to reestablish a national identity based on fear and gender politics.

Donna Haraway argues that "social reality in lived social relations, our most important political construction, [is] a world-changing fiction" (Haraway 315). These oppressive social realities articulate the dangers of being comfortable in the face of absolute power disguised as illusory freedom. Hundred's superpowers represent the dangers that come with absolute power. Like many superhero origin stories, a mysterious accident while on the job gives Hundred superhuman powers to communicate with machines, powers that I consider to be post-human and post-masculine. Hayles suggests that "the prospect of becoming posthuman both evokes terror and excites pleasure" (283). For Hundred, the moment he becomes transformed into the posthuman is a terrifying and painful one. But his feelings of terror do not last long once he realizes the pleasure he derives from controlling machines, ultimately relishing his newfound power. But as we've learned from the traditional superhero universe, with great power comes great responsibility, and Hundred's recklessness and narcissism makes him one of the most irresponsible superheroes in comics.

As one of New York City's civil engineers, Hundred was called to investigate something strange under the Brooklyn Bridge. A glowing green box explodes in Hundred's face. The explosion damages his body but the more painful outcome of the explosion is that in an instant, Hundred is able to hear every machine in New York City in his head—every cell phone, every computer, every man-made piece of technology. Screaming at the overwhelmingly torturous noises in his head to shut up shuts off the power to the entire city. Immediately we see the danger involved in one man's ability to control the world's technology. Interestingly enough, Hundred's job as a civil engineer similarly places him in a position of control over our environment. Through the physical manipulation of our world, Hundred understands the physical infrastructure that keeps our society safe, whether it be maintaining naturally occurring landscapes or by physically altering a landscape with manmade constructions. In the wrong hands, this knowledge could be used for destruction and we learn, over time, that Hundred isn't exactly the kind of person who should have infinite power. But if a former superhero turned politician can't be trusted with this kind of power, who can?

With Hundred's identity and skills being linked so heavily with technology, we can return to Moss's argument that technology, architecture, and engineering are inherently masculine pursuits. During a time in which our culture was clinging so desperately to a specific type of masculinity, it is very fitting that Hundred embodies so much of what was celebrated in our culture in 2001. Not only is Hundred a strong, handsome engineer—one whose strength and intelligence designs and constructs buildings—but he's also a superhero that saved hundreds of lives on 9/11.

In this alternate world, "The Great Machine" was the world's only superhero, although comic book history as we know it is very much a part of this world. He is Batman-esque, a realistic caped crusader who builds his own contraptions and gadgets with the help of his father-figure mentor, Kremlin, and his brawny-protector and closest friend, Bradbury. The series contains a number of flashbacks between past and present that show Hundred's naiveté as both a superhero and a politician. Often, his decisions cause more harm than good, and he is perceived as a villain.

Hundred admits that his first adventure as a costumed hero feels "stupid on so many levels" as he attempts to stop two teenagers who are surfing on top of a subway car (Book 1, Chapter 1). The two teens are delighted by their god-like speed and enjoying their dangerous rebellion. When The Great Machine appears next to them in his jetpack, one of the startled teens falls off the train and must be rescued; Hundred ends up breaking the teen's arm and sitting him down on the tracks. With a looming train just seconds away from killing both of them, Hundred yells "Full stop!" In the next panel, Hundred stands above his crying rescuee with a very satisfied, arrogant expression peering through his mask. Authoritatively, he says "Listen to me. When people ask who saved you… tell them it was *The Great Machine*" (Book 1, Chapter 1):

Fig. 2: *Ex Machina: Book One* ™ and © Brian K. Vaughan & Tony Harris. Courtesy of DC Comics.

He flies away from his victim, breaking through the lines of the panel as he redefines the purpose of caped-crusading; for Hundred, feeling like he has done something good, even if there are costs, brings him a giant ego boost. The next panel is the front page of *The Daily Wire* with the headline "Crazed Wingman Shuts Down Subway for Eleven Hours!" As a superhero, Hundred was not particularly effective, often creating more issues than were originally present. However, all of his inadequate adventuring was forgotten when he actually used his abilities for something useful: saving one of the Twin Towers by landing one of the hijacked airplanes by using his voice to control the plane's machinery.

Hundred actually saves the tower after he willingly retires his 'ridiculous' costume to become a member of the political machine. He sees his costume as childish and unmanly, saying that he was "playing dress up." Upon meeting with his potential campaign manager, Dave Wylie, Mitchell creates the perfect image of a New York politician. He very purposefully chooses his wardrobe to project an image of masculine strength. He pairs a button up shirt and a dark jacket with a Yankees baseball cap. Readers of this comic will instantly associate this character with Rudy Giuliani, who frequently wore outfits uncannily similar to this one. This image and connection is meant to give Hundred instant credibility, despite the fact that in the timeline of the comic, 9/11 has not yet occurred. Vaughan is able to very carefully manipulate moments of this series by referencing specific imagery from 9/11. It was, after all, the most visually documented event in history.

Believing that he can do more good in a day as a mayor than his superhero alter ego could do in a month, Hundred publically reveals his secret identity and announces that he is running for mayor of NYC. At his press conference, Hundred is disappointed that there aren't more reporters there to document a moment that he no doubt

sees as an important one. He was particularly dismayed when an *Entertainment Weekly* reporter asked him what movie or TV show Hundred was promoting. This moment shows him that his time spent as the world's only superhero might have been more insignificant than he initially realized. Only two people oppose Hundred's coming out: Kremlin, his mentor, and superfan Monica, who became obsessed with The Great Machine after being rescued by him. She throws hot coffee at his face and calls him a sellout.

Gender and Politics

Although his campaign begins before 9/11, the reader can assume that Hundred's victory happened because he was able to save one of the Twin Towers on 9/11. Though, he had retired his superhero identity and celebrity alter ego to appeal to voters. The uncanny, unreal full-page image of an unrecognizable Ground Zero, where one untouched tower stands next to the memorial light of its lost twin signifies the potential power that a lawless superhero has to protect us in ways that we can't protect ourselves, yet immediately preceding this page, Hundred laments that he is not a real hero. Saving only one of the towers results in a visual representation of the partial emasculation of the man-made skyline but also the emasculation of a superhero who could not save everyone in the wake of violent destruction. Like Spiderman, Hundred is blamed for not doing more. Not saving both towers, not saving the Pentagon, and not saving specific individuals weakens his presence as a masculine hero. Hundred sees his superhero identity as ineffective when compared to his role as an elected public servant. This reflects the ways in which our post-9/11 culture mythologized political leaders. In effect, voters seemed the most interested in electing leaders who were also heroes, whether they were fictional heroes (Arnold Schwarzenegger), real heroes (John McCain), or both (Jesse Ventura). The image of heroism, whether it be John Kerry defending his military record or George W. Bush wearing a flight suit, is privileged over leadership ability. Vaughan recognized the growing mythos of political leaders and critiques this trend in his superhero turned politician character Mitchell Hundred.

In *Ex Machina,* we see immediately how jaded Hundred becomes by his own experiences as a superhero *and* as a politician in the second panel of the series. He says,

> People blame me for Bush in his flight suit and Arnold getting elected governor, but the truth is…those things would have happened with or without me. Everyone was scared back then, and when folks are scared, they want to be surrounded by heroes. But real heroes are just a fiction we create. They don't exist outside of comic books. (*Book 1*, Chapter 1)

Not only do comic books make the actions of superheroes look easy and fun as they are celebrated by the society around them, but they don't represent the complicated nature of politics embedded in the foundations of our culture. Firstly, Hundred is surprised both before

and after his retirement that people are unhappy about his superhero activities, almost as if he is expecting to be worshipped by the people he's trying to help. Secondly, he is surprised throughout his political career at the cost of making changes within a governmental system. Saying that all of these events would have happened whether or not he was involved shows how difficult it is to enact any kind of social change that deviates from the perceived norms of our culture. Alienated from his failed perception of optimism, Hundred falls victim to bureaucracy as he realizes that there really isn't anything else he can do to make any changes. The series ends with Hundred betraying his own morals and ethics to advance his political career, which continues to improve.

Though the series tackles a number of real-world issues, the construction of masculine identity in a fragmented, post-9/11 world is most significant to this essay. Hundred willfully denies himself full knowledge of his identity throughout the series. He is never very interested in learning the origins of his strange powers that allow him to communicate with machines and, perhaps most importantly, his sexual identity is continually dismissed. As mayor, Hundred is called to officiate a number of weddings, a task that normally frustrates him. When he learns that his deputy mayor's brother, a firefighter, wants Hundred to officiate, he is happy to oblige, having promised the rescue workers of New York City that he would do anything he could for them. When his deputy mayor tells him that this is a wedding he can't officiate because his brother is gay, four panels on one page zoom closer onto Hundred's face as he contemplates, before a full page image of a confident Hundred answers, "So?" His intern is the first to suggest that leading this charge will be controversial in a number of ways, including the potential to jeopardize a re-election campaign. She also suggests that his sexual orientation will be called into question, saying, "It's just, you're a perpetually single guy, snappy dresser, used to wear a costume….[I]t might not hurt for you to clarify you…" But Hundred immediately interrupts by saying, "There are two things I don't discuss… my powers and my private life. Neither is relevant to this job" (Book 1, Chapter 3). While he understands that there will be backlash for seeming to take a stance on a divisive political issue, he uses 9/11 as the excuse to do what's right which, in this case, was promising to do everything he possibly could for the firefighters of New York. Officiating the wedding of a firefighter allows him to avoid taking an official stance on gay marriage. Hundred's evasiveness is his great strength. He never confirms nor denies specific positions on key issues, and he was elected as an independent. While deconstructing binaries is a departure from divisive political ideologies, we will see later that Hundred's self-interest is what his supposed neutrality hides.

After agreeing to marry Todd and Bill, Hundred asks a reporter named Suzanne out to dinner. When she realizes the convenient timing of his invite, she asks Hundred if he is gay. Hundred enters her apartment and shuts the door; the conversation that takes place is one that we never witness. There isn't a definitive answer regarding Hundred's sexual orientation; Vaughan leaves the interpretation up to the reader. But, part of what Vaughan does here is show us how

desperately we, as a culture built on a certain set of norms, need to know the answer regarding sexuality in order to feel like we can better understand a character's or politician's motivation and why he/she must constantly feel pressure to perform. Although his sexuality might not influence his duties as mayor, the general public demands to know every little detail about politicians so that in the event that something goes wrong, there is a way to pinpoint a character flaw.

There are numerous accusatory remarks made to Hundred and the Great Machine regarding sexual orientation. The words "faggot" and "queer" are constantly used against Hundred, often in situations where he is the one in control. In one particular scene, the Great Machine rescues a man from a burning building. On the sidewalk, an overweight male onlooker seems incredibly annoyed at this display of heroism. He mumbles contradictory complaints under his breath, first that jetpacks are "gay" and then that the Great Machine is "probably flying home to some skinny-ass model" (Book 1, Chapter 2). Because this witness was helpless to rescue the man himself, he felt emasculated by Hundred's presence as a superhero.

First, the witness accuses the jetpack—an extremely coveted, awe-inspiring piece of equipment—of being gay. Although it seems that the majority of people in American culture use this term as an inconsequential synonym for "stupid" or "lame," it's clear that using that word as an insult stems from homophobic feelings and is used to demean people and objects as being weak and unnatural. Realistically, the man in this scene is clearly jealous of the superhero performing in front of him. Moss discusses the ways in which men utilize props to "define and prove" their manhood (5). Although Moss's discussion is centered around masculine consumption and symbolic compensation, superheroes are an elite group whose masculinity is not available for purchase. In this case, Hundred has a physical object that gives him power and enhances his masculinity; because the object isn't for sale and isn't something an average man can build, the witness attempts to emasculate Hundred, who is only momentarily surprised to not receive a burst of appreciation from the man.

Second, the witness believes that the Great Machine embodies the ideal form of masculinity and is, therefore, capable of achieving the sexual conquest of what our society deems as the ideal form of woman: slender, attractive, and famous. In this case, it's clear that this witness is jealous of the Great Machine, someone who visually represents everything a man should be: a strong heroic man who goes above and beyond to save people. In trying to create his own masculine superhero persona, Hundred diminishes the masculinity of those around him. From the onlooker who was powerless to help another person in need, to the teenager who was made to cower in fear, it's clear that Hundred's idealized superhero representation often went over the line as Hundred boosted his own ego and his own masculinity. Despite his own personal gains, his narcissistic caped crusading did help people from time to time, although certainly his attempts at heroism (up until September 11th) caused more harm than good. But another way in which this comic series challenges superhero mythology is that most New Yorkers have no idea

who the Great Machine is or they dislike him. These citizens are too concerned with their own egos or too distrusting to appreciate that someone is trying to help them.

Hundred appreciates the ego boost when it comes to emasculating the men around him and uses it to build up his own power. Whether it's by threatening to shut off the pacemaker of someone who is blackmailing him, or by manipulating his closest friends, it's clear that Hundred thrives on subjugating men. In moments where he needs to be the so-called tough guy, he himself relies on homophobic rhetoric like the word "faggot" in order to maintain his idealized masculine image. When necessary, Hundred is able to use authoritative force to save people as the Great Machine or to make policy changes in his role as mayor. However, there are a few villains in this story who don't fit neatly into gender categories because of their posthuman status. Against these characters, it doesn't appear that Hundred is as capable of projecting a strong image. Perhaps his intimidation stems from his own insecurities.

Hundred's masculinity is called into question several times throughout the series, but perhaps one of the most significant situations comes from his own friend Bradbury shortly after Hundred begins his career as the Great Machine. Bradbury is a retired Marine who helps to protect Hundred as a superhero and becomes his bodyguard when Hundred is mayor. In a flashback to 2000, we can see that Hundred is more concerned with his superhero one-liners and daunting appearance, ultimately forcing Bradbury to save the day. After rescuing Hundred, Bradbury tells Hundred that "it's a good thing you got those superpowers, Mitch. 'Cause you punch like a faggot'" (Book 3, Chapter 3). The panel with a close up of Hundred's face may be one of the most important in the series. His face is still covered by his mask, but a look of sad anger and confusion is clearly seen in his expression. Unlike the rest of the male characters, Hundred's appearance could be considered feminine; in this specific panel, we can see Hundred's long eyelashes and kempt brows as he internalizes the word "faggot," perhaps using it as fuel to "cowboy up" his image or ideology.

Later in the story, Bradbury all but gives his life to protect Hundred's career and reputation. As the story climaxes, Hundred must take down his former friend (and possible "beard") Suzanne Padilla, whose consciousness has been breached by a much more sinister version of the mysterious object that gave Hundred his abilities to communicate with technology. Interestingly, many of the main villains of the series are female characters, as if to comment on the prevailing media theory in post-9/11 culture that powerful women must be stopped by powerful men in order to preserve the natural (albeit fabricated) order of society.

Posthumanism and Post-masculinity

Hundred gained his superpowers from the explosion of an extradimensional device. Towards the end of the series, we learn that there are multiple dimensions occurring at the same time and that Hundred has constructed a white box that can open portals to the other

dimensions. When Padilla discovers the white box, she falls under complete control and becomes able to manipulate the people around her to do whatever she asks. Her powers are also stronger than Hundred's in that she acquires super strength and the ability to fly. In her final showdown with Hundred, she blames his failures as a superhero on his inability to get laid. She goes on to link suicide bombers and engineers as men who don't know how to "score." As humans more concerned with construction (engineers) or deconstruction (suicide bombers), Suzanne essentially makes the claim that men's obsession with controlling physical objects is ultimately harmful to the culture at large, linking engineers and terrorists as groups of people who are equally dangerous because they don't focus their lives on what society deems to be most important. However, neither constructing nor deconstructing buildings is free of ideological influences. As I discussed earlier, the design of a skyscraper is gendered masculine; the attack on a skyscraper, too, is deemed masculine. While Suzanne might consider post-humanism as moving away from humanity, post-humanism actually allows us to reimagine what being "human" means, rather than what it doesn't. What I mean is that the concept of human exceptionalism leads to power structures and dualities that shape our beliefs in ways that are invented to maintain a certain social hierarchy that elevates men and suppresses women, ultimately hurting everyone.

Post-humanism seems to suggest that gender binaries no longer exist (or shouldn't exist), so theoretically as a technologically enhanced human, Hundred is in an elevated position that frees him from the constrictions of social norms and expectations. Yet, despite the fact that Hundred is not bound by the expectations of gender hierarchies, he still attempts to conform to gender norms in terms of dress, behavior, and beliefs.

As Hundred has continued to brush aside his sexuality in favor of robotic asexuality, we are able to conclude that as a cyborg, he is meant to be neither masculine nor feminine. Cyborg theory can "suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (Haraway 149). However, Hundred is never able to achieve post-human transcendence because he clings so desperately to the image of masculinity that is expected of him so that he is supported by his political constituents and so he can further his career. Instead of reaching post-human, non-gendered potential, he is victimized by identity politics that push him to fit into a gender normative category. This pressure stems from his own obsession with superheroes and from the gender ideology present in post-9/11 culture.

Hundred admires comic books because the stories told within the brightly colored pages never become tragedies. Before going on his own superhero adventures, he viewed the superheroes as reliable, unchangeable, and trustworthy—the very things we hope for our politicians. Superheroes represent the strong masculine ideals embedded in their surrounding culture. Additionally, the origin stories of superheroes often stem from scientific or technological mutations, resulting in post-human bodies. As a result of his own technological mutation, Hundred was able to create his own identity. But, because

his identity was based on fictional definitions of masculinity, even he cannot live up to his own expectations.

The Consequences of Mythology

When Hundred was a child, he was devastated to learn that it was possible for Superman to die. He was similarly upset to learn that multiple universes existed in the world of comic books and that storylines and characters could change so drastically from one issue to the next. His stubbornness to accept change reflects his conservative tendencies; this is likely the reason why it's so important to Hundred that he uphold his masculine image. Despite the fact that he initially refuses to choose a political affiliation, he still attempts to create a strong, heteronormative image for himself. Upholding his image becomes more important to him than actually making a difference, which—in theory—is why he wanted to become a politician in the first place.

We must move beyond the need to categorize gender identities, particularly in post-apocalyptic culture. Hundred is the perfect example of the damage caused when society mythologizes politicians whose masculine principles are nothing more than an illusion created to maintain the status quo.

Now, we can return to Bradbury saving Hundred's career. In order to defeat Suzanne, Hundred is forced to become the Great Machine once more. He put on his costume, won the battle, and once the police arrived to arrest him for his vigilante activities, he flew away. When the police finally capture the Great Machine, the mask is removed only to reveal that at some point Hundred and Bradbury have switched places. Bradbury is willing to be arrested in order to preserve Hundred's career and his image. This act of selflessness is truly heroic, but in this case, the hero is sent to jail for criminal vigilante activity, and the villain is free to advance his political career.

A year passes since Bradbury's arrest. By the time Bradbury comes to visit Hundred, Hundred's career has taken a drastic new turn. Hundred is the United States ambassador to the United Nations and is about to embark on something even bigger and better. Meanwhile, Bradbury's life is clearly in shambles. Bradbury is drunk and disheveled as he explains how his life has fallen apart since he was released. Hundred is trying to brush Bradbury away so that his own reputation isn't somehow tarnished by this encounter. But, before Hundred can make him leave, Bradbury admits that he loves Hundred and always has. The conversation takes place in four page length panels that highlight the facial reactions of both characters. Bradbury moves closer to Hundred as he admits his feelings. It's clear that Hundred is carefully taking this information in and is pained by his thoughts. It is possible that this pained expression stems from the fact that he knows that he can't share those feelings, if he has them, because of his career. Or, maybe it's because he doesn't want to hurt his friend's feelings. But in this moment, he must react quickly. He neither confirms nor denies the feelings and simply replies, "[Y]ou're drunk. Go" (Book 5, Chapter 4). In disbelief, Bradbury punches Hun-

dred and calls him a faggot. Before leaving, Bradbury attempts to reclaim what he lost in that vulnerable position. Bradbury left everything on the table, and Hundred couldn't be bothered to offer anything authentic, whether it was reciprocation or rejection.

Several months later, Hundred is contacted by Kremlin, who has learned that Hundred used his power to communicate with machines to fix the election that he won. Having always been opposed to Hundred's political career, Kremlin plans to blackmail Hundred into becoming the Great Machine once more. To clearly establish his threat, he points a gun at Hundred. But once he realizes that Hundred will never be a superhero again, Kremlin turns the gun on himself and says, "I cannot watch you become something you are not. If the Great Machine is really dead… then I may as well join him" (Book 5, Chapter 4). Hundred asks if Kremlin has shared his information with anyone else. When Kremlin claims that he hasn't, Hundred says, "BANG," which causes the gun to fire.

In the span of a few short months, Hundred has irreparably severed ties to those who loved him, all to preserve his image. While it seemed that Hundred was upset by Kremlin's death, he made sure to collect the incriminating file about the election before he left. As a post-human, Hundred truly had the potential to deviate from hegemony and oppression. According to Hayles, the ideal "version of the posthuman … embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality" (5). Hundred's superhero journey began innocently enough, but ultimately, Hundred became enamored with the image of power and was willing to do anything to get more, even hiding parts of his identity.

Having never identified himself as Democrat or Republican, gay or straight, Hundred's character deconstructs binary oppositions embedded in our society. By not articulating and defending a divisive viewpoint, the qualities of this character match the united and unbiased outlook of an American no longer separated by political divisions. But we know that it wasn't long before dividing lines were reconstructed in the world of politics. For gender, it was almost the opposite effect.

As men "returned to being men" in our post-9/11 society, the rugged cowboy identity became the masculine ideal. *Ex Machina* communicates the issues that stem from imposing gender normative requirements in our culture. But the series also shows the reciprocal relationship in which we distrust the great machine of politics, but also the great machine's distrust for us. Hundred says, "Give this country a hero and they can't wait to tear him down" (Book 5, Chapter 1). Here, Hundred establishes, firstly, that heroes are male, and secondly, that heroics are dangerous. Becoming a part of the great machine of politics forces Hundred to manipulate his own identity for his own gain and, ultimately, we learn that Hundred has been the villain all along. The tragedy of the story is not Hundred's, but the tragedy that befalls those around him as his moral corruption leads to his role as Vice President in the John McCain White House. The re-writing of 9/11, then, serves to show that despite our efforts,

the fractured identity of society is susceptible to manipulation, even by those who appear to save us.

Rebuilding the New York skyline has become nearly as complex and damaging as reconstructing masculinity. In *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2002), Baudrillard states, "The spectacle of terrorism forces the terrorism of spectacle upon us" (30). In reconstructing a set of masculine ideals, both genders are damaged as one group is privileged over another. In attempting to repair a broken skyline, one traumatized by deconstruction, Baudrillard questions whether or not it's normal to build and construct, as architects do:

> The towers, for their part, have disappeared. But they have left us the symbol of their disappearance, their disappearance as a symbol. They, which were a symbol of omnipotence, have become, by their absence, the symbol of the possible disappearance of that omnipotence—which is perhaps an even more potent symbol. (47)

As a symbolic image, the towers will always exist. But, commemorating 9/11 has been controversial. Even now, with the museum in place and with Ground Zero beautifully memorializing the victims, there is dissention about the best ways in which to encapsulate such a devastatingly complex and large-scale tragedy. In *Ex Machina*, Hundred wavered back and forth on the memorial plan before ultimately making a decision to rebuild the lost tower exactly as it was, preserving the skyline of New York and representing the resiliency of its people. But because his plan comes so late in the series—after he begins to learn that Hundred is the villain of the story—we are able to question his decision to rebuild. It becomes a metaphor for the dangers associated with a culture's inability to move forward. Building an exact replica places too much weight on the past. In the case of our post-9/11 culture, it means reverting back to historically oppressive notions of masculinity.

New York City artist in residence Banksy recently criticized One World Trade Center, calling it a "shy skyscraper" that proclaims that "the terrorists have won." Banksy submitted the editorial to the *New York Times*, who declined to publish it. Spokesperson for the *Times* Eileen Murphy said, "We couldn't agree on either the piece or the art, so it was rejected." A brief look at the comments section on CNN reveals a disparate group of voices, mostly in disbelief and anger that Banksy would dare say something negative about One World Trade Center, a supposed symbol of our American values. But again, a building is a just a building. Claiming that a skyscraper encompasses all of our American values is simply untrue. As an artist who dares to push us outside our comfort zones, he makes the point that one should be able to criticize a building or political policy without fear. Acts of terror are meant to inspire fear; acts of art are meant to inspire critical thinking. By condemning Banksy's position as offensive or insulting, we miss the point entirely. Defending the beliefs embedded by a physical structure sets ourselves up for dissention. By believing that a building can only be one thing, that a gender can only behave a certain way, we are preventing our culture from moving forward. Banksy is not diminishing the lives of those lost on 9/11; he simply

asks us not to return to our old ways of thinking. That is how those lives are diminished.

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