

Giants, Bats, and Beetles: An Autoethnographic Look at Fandom Using Parasocial Theory

By Anthony Ramirez

Introduction

As a kid, and even as an adult, I have always been a fan of comic books and sports. The two have nothing to do with each other, but they are rooted in my identity, and in some ways they have impacted my life and guided me to become a scholar. How can Batman, Blue Beetle, and the New York Giants influence one to become a communication professor? Well, that is what I want to discuss within this autoethnographic reflection.

Autoethnography has been used in a plethora of communication studies, but it is underrepresented within popular culture and fandom studies (Asbury and Kratzer; Boylorn; Fox; Lauricella). Hernández and Munz state that autoethnography “functions as a reflexive pedagogical endeavor within which we assess our own modalities, identities, and pedagogical choices to ensure that we are crafting an identity-based curriculum” (p. 231). In other words, autoethnography is used as a method scholars can use to reflect on our educational approach, identity, and lived realities.

Theoretical Frameworks of Fandom

In 2015, I first began my journey studying fandom using parasocial theory for my master’s thesis. With that project, I had a chance to interview many participants about their love for their favorite comic book characters. Parasocial theory explores the interpersonal relationship that viewers or readers develop, bonding with performers or celebrities that they see on screen or with characters in their favorite book (Horton and Wohl; Lather and Moyer-Guse). Many refer to the relationship or attachment through parasocial theory as parasocial relationships (PSR) or parasocial interaction (PSI). This theory was inspired by research that examines the uses and gratification of audiences; for example, when audience members form interpersonal relationships with characters from television (Giles).

Uses and gratification theory is very similar to parasocial theory as both are used to measure the audience. According to Ruggiero and Cantril, the uses and gratifications theory was developed to study the gratifications that attract and hold audiences to their favorite kind of media and to content that satisfies their social and physiological needs. Parasocial relationships are known to develop over time as the viewer begins to believe that he/she understands his/her favorite character and the character’s personality, behavior, and values. Many of the viewers or audience members understand the difference between a real relationship and a parasocial relationship, although the attachment they have for the character or performer is similar to that of a friend or family member. Numerous studies have been conducted using parasocial theory, especially through mass media (Rubin & McHugh; Hataway; Lather & Moyer-Guse; Obregón; Young et al.). I use this framework for my own classes and guest lectures on fandom and popular culture.

Consequently, it was natural to use it in this project as an autoethnographic study on my own fandoms, and the role they have played in my journey from a kid on the frontera to the academic life of professor.

I am Vengeance, I am the Night, I am the Nerd

To explore the correlation between my passion for my fandoms and my journey as a scholar in Communication and Mass Media, I must go back to my childhood. In 1992, a series premiered called *Batman: The Animated Series* (TAS), created by Bruce Timm, Paul Dini, and Mitch Brian. It featured an amazing cast including Kevin Conroy as Batman and Mark Hamill as the Joker (yes, Luke Skywalker was the Joker). To this day, besides the comic books, this is my definitive take on Batman and the characters of those stories. My mom bought me so many figures, took me to every Batman movie, and most importantly, bought me comic books. These comic books are what led me into a love of reading. There were multiple years where I even dressed as the Caped Crusader for Halloween. While I was in third grade, I dressed up as and even had the chance to meet Batman. Little did I know that I did not meet the real Batman.

One Giant Leap for Fandom

While *Batman: TAS* premiered in 1992, two years later, a film called *Little Giants* was released and featured a group of peewee football players, who were nerdy and not very athletic. The premise of the film is about two brothers played by Rick Moranis and Ed O'Neill who end up coaching rival football teams. O'Neill coaches the "Pee-Wee Cowboys" who were athletic bullies and jocks, while Moranis' character ends up coaching the "Pee-Wee Giants." As a young kid, who was not very athletic and nerdy, I could relate to the Giants team. While they were not the most athletic group and were considered degenerates amongst their rivals, the Little Giants had heart and determination. These attributes along with their innovative approaches to playing football led them to triumph over the "Pee-Wee Cowboys." On top of that, their helmets were my favorite color, blue. Yes, this is the reason I became a New York Giants fan, because of this film and because the actual New York Giants uniforms were blue. This was my logic as a child. This film was also the reason I did not become a Dallas Cowboys fan, despite their uniforms also featuring blue. As I got older, I started to follow sports even more and learned about various players and coaches from the New York Giants. Perhaps ironically, then, my entry into sports fandom was inspired by a film whose heroes were decidedly unathletic, and my life-long love of the NY Giants is rooted in my association of them with a rag-tag group of under-dogs.

El Escarabajo Fronterizo de El Paso

As I grew older and continued my love for comic books, I found out there was a Mexican American character by the name of Jaime Reyes, who would become the third Blue Beetle. Jaime would fight alongside many of the iconic characters of the DC Comics Universe including Batman. Not only was Jaime Reyes a Mexican American, but within the comic books he is from my hometown of El Paso, Texas. I was blown away that a character within the comic book universe I loved dearly was a Mexican American kid from the frontera. In addition to being a Mexican American kid from the border town of El Paso, the close and loving relationship he had with his family struck a powerful chord with me. Unlike many other superheroes, including my beloved

Batman, who are marked by their solitude, Jaime's family is integral to his success. This is heavily showcased within the 2023 film, *Blue Beetle* where the role of familismo is highlighted, as Jaime's family were integral to the film's plot. They helped Jaime through his journey of becoming a hero and even helped save him towards the end of the film. While becoming an academic may be a different kind of super-power, this resonated with my own experience. I was raised by a single mother and my grandparents, who likewise helped me throughout my journey of becoming an academic; they were the biggest sources of guidance, hope, and inspiration for me to follow my dreams, including pursuing a Ph.D. In Jaime Reyes, I found a character whose experiences as a kid from the border, including his familial and cultural life, mirrored my own in powerful ways.

As I was applying to multiple Ph.D. programs, I was discussing various characters and ideas for future projects with my Masters thesis director, and I mentioned *Blue Beetle*. The inclusion of Jaime's character helped develop my research topic for my doctoral program of researching comic books and Latinx characters of the U.S.-Mexico border. I was able to combine multiple passions of mine into various projects where I would research Latinx and Border identity within comic books and graphic novels. As I continued my research, I realized that Latinx characters were severely underrepresented within mainstream comic books.

Perseverance is the Real Superpower

One of the common themes of these fandoms that made me have a parasocial relationship with each of them was that they all persevered through various battles. In 2008 and 2012, the New York Giants persevered through a difficult season and were considered underdogs in both Super Bowls against the powerhouse team of the New England Patriots featuring Tom Brady, whom many consider to be the greatest quarterback of all time. Specifically, in the 2007 NFL season, the New England Patriots team had won every one of their sixteen games, including their playoff appearances, leading them to the Super Bowl. The New York Giants were major underdogs, as the New England Patriots and Tom Brady were heavily favored in both Super Bowls. The score was close throughout the whole game, but it took one major throw from New York Giants quarterback Eli Manning to David Tyree to change the game, leading them to win 17-14. In 2012, Eli Manning also made a difficult throw to Mario Manningham leading to a game winning drive. In both instances, the New York Giants persevered and triumphed over the Patriots, the unlikely winners of two Super Bowls that most had thought to be pre-determined.

With the New York Giants, again I reference the nerdy, but intelligent kids from the *Little Giants* (1994) as they used their intelligence and perseverance to beat the Cowboys. In the final moments of the film, one of the characters creates a new play using his data analytics to outsmart the overly athletic Cowboys team. They also use various tactics to gain an advantage, all while using their intelligence. While I do not suggest that Eli Manning is nerdy or unathletic, it is hard to miss the similarity of the optics. Manning, the second son of a prominent football family, is a tall, gangly quarterback, and certainly played the nerdy counterpart to Brady, a superstar whose looks and marriage to a Brazilian super-model are also part of his mystique. Manning's performance in both Super Bowls was marked not only by his intelligence on the field, but also his discipline. Manning and the Giants' besting of the Patriots and Brady was certainly an underdog story, but when we remember that the co-owner of the Giants publicly questioned whether Manning could lead the team to a Super Bowl win, it makes the victory even more triumphant.

This sense of perseverance and determination is something that is consistent across my disparate fandoms. Batman, for example, does not have any superpowers and instead must use his

intelligence and skills to overcome his foes. Similarly, while Jaime's Blue Beetle costume is a powerful super-suit that can generate various weapons, and flight, his true power comes from within, as he fights to help his community and those he cares about. Much like Batman, I do not have superpowers, but like all of my fandoms, I do have tenacity and a strong sense of perseverance and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to help my community. During my graduate programs, I made various goals for myself. I told myself that I needed this drive and sense of perseverance to overcome every semester of my graduate programs, Masters thesis, and PhD dissertation-

Super(hero) Smarts

Aside from perseverance, my parasocial relationships with my fandoms also began because of intelligence. Each of these fandoms are rooted in intelligence. As a child I always gravitated towards smart characters and personalities within popular culture. Batman is generally considered one of the most intelligent detectives within the DC Comics Universe. He uses his mind and detective skills to solve crimes and outwit his illustrious rogues' gallery. Within a film, like *The Batman* (2022) we see a story of a character that must solve riddles and figure out pieces of a larger puzzle to save Gotham. Throughout the transmedial landscape of the Batman lore, the character uses his brain to save Gotham, Earth, and the universe on multiple occasions, all without superpowers. Yes, Batman is rich and privileged, which is important to his heroic attributes and helping him solve crime, but I have always thought his greatest superpower is Batman's use of his intelligence to solve crimes and create impressive technology to defeat his enemies. As a minority and person of color, I used my intelligence to defy the odds and earn my PhD. As a character, Batman is marked by a profound sense of duty to his community and city. Similarly, as a professor and Assistant Director of the Center for Latino Studies at my university my work is marked by a desire to help my students and university. I do my best to lead with selfless and empathetic values to help my students and the communities that I am a part of.

Conclusion: Inspiration, Gratitude, and Life Lessons

Earlier, I mentioned that I had met a Batman when I was a kid. I then learned he was not the real Batman. As I got older, I went to many comic book conventions and had the chance to meet fellow Batman fans, some of which would dress in costumes. During one of the conventions, I had the chance to finally meet Batman. Specifically, my favorite Batman, Kevin Conroy. I had the chance to tell him because of his iteration of the character I fell in love with comic books and it led me to pursue academic research and career in comic book and popular culture studies. I have yet to travel to see the New York Giants play, but they are still playing with plenty of heart, intelligence, and perseverance.

The next thing I ask myself is, how can an article like this help others? Is this just a way for myself to express my identity further and share it with the world? Sure it is, but I do want to use this as a teaching tool for others as well. I love popular culture, this is the reason I became interested in becoming a communication scholar to study and analyze mass media and popular culture with a specific emphasis on identity and representation within popular culture. Within my classes, I use various popular culture artifacts and examples to enhance my lessons. Often, as a child and even as an adult I felt my nerdiness would just be a hobby, but it led into a career for me. A mentor of mine told me "find something you are passionate about and use that to guide you. From there, geek out!" Trust me, I have been geeking out since I was young, but this adult version

of geeking out is more critical and analytical. This is where my parasocial relationships with my fandom comes into play even further as they all are used as ways to enrich my identity not only as a person but as a scholar. These fandoms are a part of who I am. These fandoms have gratified me in a variety of ways including entertainment, but also as life lessons and a profession.

Batman and Blue Beetle led me into a world of imagination, colorful characters, and powerful storytelling. These characters inspired me to go into the multiverse of comic books, which then led me to explore fandom and Latinx representation and identity. In reality, my love of Batman and comic books led me to Blue Beetle, which then led me to explore my own identity as a Mexican American from the border.

The New York Giants and the Little Giants taught me that dreams are possible through hard work and dedication. It also takes willpower, determination, and a lot of heart. These are lessons I instilled in myself from watching my sports team and a movie inspired by my favorite sports team, but lessons I also want to teach my students.

To many, these are just characters in a comic book or tv/film screen, and athletes on a field, but to me these media personalities resonate with me on a deeper level and are a part of the identity. While I did learn lessons from these popular culture figures through my parasocial relationships, the real credit goes to my mother and grandfather who introduced me to these wonderful figures. Additionally, my mother and grandfather also taught me other lessons including a love for education and helping my community. These values were rooted in me from the start, but my fandoms and parasocial relationships only nurtured these attributes even further.

You see, while I am talking deeply about my own parasocial relationships, I am also having a discussion about passion, and how this passion can lead to big things in life. I encourage all my students and all of you to find topics that you all are passionate about and to explore that passion even further. I also encourage them to reflect on your own identity and how your identity matters. We are all fans of something in life, whether we like to admit it or not. Why not use that fandom(s) for good and use it to help others and inspire others?

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