Reprints, reboots and retcons: standardizing comics cataloging with the *Best practices* guide from the GNCRT

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Response to a plethora of historical forces that devalue comics, including hostile cataloging standards, led to the creation of the *Best practices for cataloging comics and graphic novels using RDA and MARC21*. The guide supports comics cataloging using current standards, recognizing the great diversity in this sequential art medium, as well as needs particular to public, academic and special libraries. With this, and related current and future projects, the Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table (GNCRT) hopes to promote equity in comics cataloging, and improve patron access to comics.

The medium of comics (including comic books, comic strips, graphic novels and manga, among others) has been a staple in public and school libraries for decades, and has only grown in popularity. With the increased interest in comics for college coursework and targeted research collections, the demand for acquiring comics for academic libraries has also grown. The boom in acquisitions and circulation has been fueled in part by popular screen adaptations of superhero comics. But international comics have also become more popular; Scripps News notes that "the top-selling graphic novel from the beginning of 2021 was a volume of the Japanese superhero series *My hero academia*," and that manga in general "saw a [sales] growth of 171% in 2021 compared to 2020."[1] Comics have also begun winning traditional literary awards—like Nora Krug's *Belonging* (which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for autobiography in 2019), Jerry Craft's *New kid* (which won the 2020 John Newbery Medal) and Nick Drnaso's *Sabrina* (short-listed for the Man Booker Prize in 2018)—leading to a broader rethinking of comics' literary worth. Increasing numbers of the "most-anticipated"[2] comics titles showcase the diversity of comics content, including "LGBTQ+ characters, women, people of color, and emotionally deeper stories" and also "a greater diversity of voices behind the page."[3] NBC News notes that comics "with their powerful blend of images and words, have grown in popularity as a literary genre to explore the legacy of racism and the complexity of the immigrant experience."[4]

History of comics cataloging issues

However, the comics medium is arguably more complex than traditional literature, and poses challenges for library descriptive practices. Comics can include the glossy cover, 32-page saddle-stitched floppy, graphic novels, manga, syndicated comic strips, Disney flip books, 3D comics requiring anaglyph glasses, webcomics like Randall Munroe's *xkcd* and webtoons designed to be read on smartphones. They can be stand-alone stories or serialized with over a thousand issues, not infrequently with bizarre issue numbering and title variations. Some comics are written and illustrated by a single creator, others have multiple

1. Casey Mendoza, "Graphic novels, comic books are growing in popularity," *Scripps News*, February 21, 2022, https://scrippsnews.com/stories/graphic-novels-comic-books-are-growing-in-popularity/.

2. Mendoza, "Graphic novels, comic books are growing in popularity."

3. Ingrid Bohnenkamp, "Graphic novel circulation at North American libraries is on the rise!," *Drawn & Quarterly* (website), June 27, 2019, https://drawnandquarterly.com/press/graphic-novel-circulation-north-american-libraries-rise/

4. Claire Wang, "For many Asian Americans, graphic novels are way to explore history, fight racism," *NBC News* (website), November 29, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/many-asian-americans-graphic-novels-are-way-explore-history-fight-raci-rcna6072

hands involved and some are assembly-line studio creations pseudonymously attributed or not attributed at all. Different types of comics record their data in various places, from the title pages of graphic novels and European comic albums to the half-titles and colophons of manga, to the indicia of superhero collected editions.

This complexity poses challenges for librarians attempting to describe comics and facilitate patron retrieval. A comic title may be the product of several writers, artists, colorists, letterers and others. Are all of those contributors listed in the library catalog's record? How many should be listed, if not all? Variations in answering these questions lead to records that are inconsistent, with some being robust and others lackluster. Issues with consistency continue in other aspects of the record. Some lack summaries, which can be problematic for serialized comics with similar sounding titles, where the summary provides useful differentiating information. Other comics records are missing original publication information, which can cause confusion when comics content gets reprinted, rebooted or retconned. Limited institutional time and budgets also lead to minimalist comics descriptions; this impacts international and multilingual comics, which often need more time and examination to adequately convey their cultural and social complexities.

One of the most consequential areas of inconsistency in comics cataloging is describing serialized or continuing comics titles, including (among others) American superhero titles, manga and children's comic series. Librarians using serial bibliographic records, particularly those following Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) rules, will include information about titles, serial frequency changes and publication; but will often omit creators, story arcs, volume titles, summaries, and all but the most blockbuster characters and imaginary organizations. Those using multi-volume monograph records have more latitude to add changing comics creators as needed, as well as volume titles and original publication information. However, subjects will still need to apply to the comic's run as a whole, so such cataloging can't capture story arcs. Also, the need to continually update a single record with new information about each issue can make for long and unwieldy records. Those cataloging all comics volumes individually have the greatest ability to tailor descriptions to include specific story arcs and characters, summaries and variations in volume titles. However, this approach creates the largest volume of records for patrons to scan, leading to challenging search results lists, particularly for long-running comics like *One piece*. Inconsistencies in the appearance of volume numbers and titles in the search results can easily jumble the reading order, and make finding specific volumes difficult for patrons. Finally, those mixing more than one of these approaches expose patrons to the limitations of multiple methods, leading to unpredictability.

Even leaving these considerations aside, external constraints have limited the ability of comics catalogers to adequately describe materials for patrons. Prior to 2022, the Library of Congress' Subject Heading Manual Instruction *H 1430*, which governs the cataloging of "Comics and Comic Characters," forbade the assignment of subject headings to fictional comics, with very few exceptions. This included banning the application of fictional character headings to comic catalog records, even if the comic was entirely devoted to a fictitious character or included historical figures in fictional scenarios. So, for instance, neither Superman nor the African American boxer Muhammad Ali could be assigned to DC's comic *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali.* The 2003 graphic novel *Truth: red, white and black,* which riffs on the Captain America mythos while exploring systemic American racism and medical experimentation on Black WWII soldiers, could describe none of that to patrons through subject headings. The ban on subject assignment made it difficult for patrons and scholars studying the medium to find comics of interest (e.g. works with "Asian superheroes," "Afrofuturist comics" and so on). And it made it impossible for patrons to connect comics topically across different authors or series, impeding the discovery of new comics to read.

H 1430's constraint on applying subject headings to fictional comics also meant that librarians couldn't propose new subjects or genres pertaining to those comics, to fill in gaps in the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) or Genre/Form Terms (LCGFT) vocabularies. The psychologist Fredric Wertham's 1954 *Seduction of the innocent* sensationalized the notion that many post-WWII comics constituted shortcuts to the proliferation of juvenile delinquency,

preventable by the simple expedient of banning them from newsstands. *H 1430*, together with the lingering "low art" prejudice against comics sowed by *Seduction of the innocent*, stifled the creation of headings capable of expressing the incredible diversity of characters and topics in comics. For instance, the only "Superheroes" subject heading before 2018 to hint that there might be gender, national, religious, racial, age cohort or disability diversity lurking in comics was "Women superheroes"—and that was only authorized in 2012. Similarly, subjects and genres reflecting comics community terminology and interests, comics criticism and the increasing complexity of the comics medium (like "Manga," "Queer comics" and so on) were also repeatedly rejected from the vocabularies.

In fine, public and academic libraries alike with sizable collections of comics have wrestled with limited cataloging resources and hostile cataloging standards to promote patron discovery for research and pleasure.

Solutions by the GNCRT

To address the various inconsistencies and problems detailed above, the American Library Association's Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table's Metadata and Cataloging Committee (GNCRT) created a document entitled *Best practices for cataloging comics and graphic novels using RDA and MARC21*.[5] It began innocuously enough with members sharing their own local practices, and grew into an 80-page comprehensive guide with instructions organized by MARC cataloging fields, and over 50 pages of appendices.

The *Best practices* balances the needs and capabilities of different types of libraries, to help triage what's necessary and to standardize descriptions, while acknowledging the realities of limited library resources. The document includes guidance on fields important to disparate library communities, such as: the intended audience note, important for school library book leveling; local notes, useful for promoting discovery of special collections supporting focused class-room instruction or research; and the special coded dates field used to record the original publication date(s) for a work, primarily employed by academic libraries able to customize their catalogs to index and facet this information (e.g. to show comics originally published in the American Golden Age or Bronze Age). For example, *Hell-Rider,* a 1971-1972 two-shot comic with the first female African American hero, can be made discoverable for Black studies researchers through a local note, "Butterfly is a Black comic book character." The *Best practices* also gives options within fields for levels of coverage depending on local needs, and notes which fields are required or optional.

And the document pays particular attention to the three methods of cataloging continuing and serialized comics described above. Instead of prescriptively favoring one option above the others, it highlights the strengths and challenges of each approach. The *Best practices* offers considerations for choosing the approach to best fit a local library's needs and notes which fields are most important for each method. To help standardize comics description and provide more consistent search results, examples throughout the document showcase comics from around the world cataloged using the various descriptive methods, from graphic novels to children's comics series, translated editions to superhero comics.

The emphasis that the *Best practices* document places on globalization is part of a deliberate effort to internationalize discussions of comics cataloging and move beyond focusing almost exclusively on superhero comics put out by the "Big Two" American publishers (Marvel and DC), particularly given the increasing presence of manga and other international comics in library collections. This internationalization is folded into all aspects of the *Best practices*. Examples include guidance on where to look within different comics for publication metadata, since manga, bandes dessinées, webtoons, etc. tend to use different locations for necessary information; and these also differ from the indicia used in American comics. The document also notes metadata that varies in different comics cultures; manga and bandes dessinées, for instance, tend to have much smaller (and more easily recorded) creative teams than either American Marvel Comics or Nigeria's Comic Republic. International and multilingual comics examples also appear throughout the document and appendices, from non-Roman scripts, like Korean, Hindi, and Indigenous languages, to dates in alternate calendars (the Hebrew calendar, Hijri/Islamic calendar and Juche

5. GNCRT Metadata and Cataloging Committee, *Best Practices for Cataloging Comics and Graphic Novels Using RDA and MARC21* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2022), https://alair.ala.org/handle/11213/18623.

Fig. 1. Cover for *Hell-Rider*, vol. 1, Skywald Publications, August 1971. In the public domain.

calendar from North Korea). Several appendices in the *Best practices* include educational materials about international comics, including a brief history of Franco-Belgian bandes dessinées and Japanese manga. The *Best practices* also defines selected comics terms such as "tankōbon" and "mangaka" used in other countries in the glossary (Appendix F). Sources to consult when cataloging international comics, like BDGest for bandes dessinées, in Appendix C, are provided to help diminish the additional time needed for international comics description mentioned previously.

As mentioned above, one of the biggest problems in comics cataloging was the constraint on application of subject and genre headings, exacerbated by cataloging instructions like *H 1430*. To combat this, the subjects guidance section of the *Best practices* includes information about subject vocabularies useful for international comics cataloging. It also describes alternate vocabularies helpful for cataloging comics featuring characters from underrepresented and diverse backgrounds if commonly-used vocabularies like the LCSH lack adequate descriptors. Among the vocabularies appearing throughout the sections on cataloging guidance and examples are the Homosaurus (created by and for queer communities); the First Nations House of Learning Subject Headings (developed
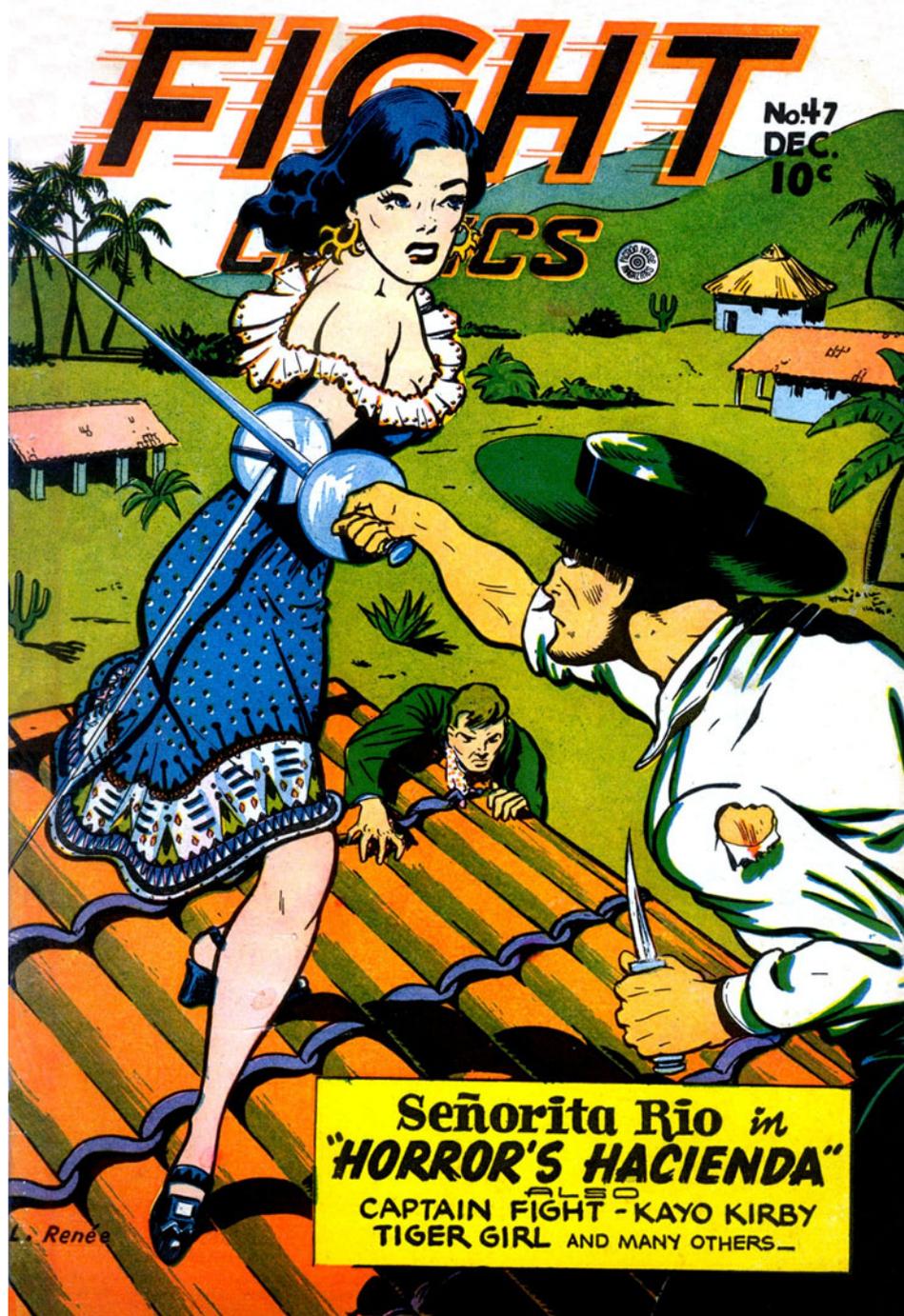
Fig. 2. Cover for *Fight comics*, no. 47, December 1946. Assumed to be in the public domain.

by the University of British Columbia's X̱wi7x̱wa Library); the Gender, Sex, and Sexual Orientation Ontology (conceived to facilitate communication between LGBTQIA+ persons and health professionals); and the Māori Subject Headings List (developed by the Māori Subject Headings Project, and jointly sponsored by LIANZA, Te Rōpū Whakahau and the National Library of New Zealand).

While developing the *Best practices*, the GNCRT recommended changes to *H 1430*, in an effort to redress the various inequities the prior form of the Instruction created for subject access within comics cataloging. The edits, accepted by the Library of Congress in May 2022,[6] create cataloging parity between fictional comics and other fictional formats, as well as between fiction and nonfiction comics. As mentioned above, prior to the revision, fictional comics generally did

6. "H 1430 Comics and Comics Characters," in *Library of Congress Subject Headings Manual* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2022), https://www.loc.gov/aba/publications/FreeSHM/H1430-clean.pdf.

not receive subject headings, so characters, plots, locations, etc. were only discoverable via summary statements. While many catalogers (including the members of the GNCRT) chose to ignore the restrictive provisions of *H 1430*, the revisions officially allow the wider cataloging community to liberally apply both subject and genre headings, and also to label the fictional characters appearing in comics.

Based on the revisions, the fictional *About Betty's boob* can have the same subject tracing for breast cancer that the autobiographical *The story of my tits* has; whilst the *Trial of Captain America* can have a heading for brainwashing, along with headings for Captain America (Steve Rogers) and Bucky Barnes. Catalogers can add a heading for Lucy Van Pelt to a collection of *Peanuts* strips, or note which Spider-Man appears in the Spider-Verse crossover event, such as Miles Morales or Peter Parker. This new ability to name fictional characters is especially important, since name headings existed previously primarily for male superheroes, but not for iconic heroines such as Usagi Tsukino (Sailor Moon), Señorita Rio or Stephanie Brown (Batgirl and Spoiler). With the ban on assignment of fictional character headings lifted, these can now be created.

New subject and genre headings can also be proposed to fill in gaps in those vocabularies and the GNCRT has been active in expanding available headings. Concurrently with the development of the *Best practices*, the GNCRT proposed new subject and genre terms to better describe the diversity of comics content. Nearly all of the diverse superhero subject headings were authorized in 2019 or later, including "Indigenous superheroes," "Transgender superheroes," "Teenage superheroes," "Jewish superheroes" and "Superheroes with disabilities." The GNCRT also successfully lobbied the Library of Congress for new subjects for comics scholarship. As of March 2022, subjects that would have previously been assigned "in literature" or "in art" headings (or a combination thereof) could now have "in comics" headings. So a book about comics depictions of World War II such as *Comics, the Holocaust and Hiroshima* could be assigned the new subject heading "World War, 1939-1945–Comics and the war," along with "Atomic bomb in comics" and "Holocaust, Jewish 1939-1945, in comics." Examples of these new headings, and guidance on when it's appropriate (and not appropriate) to use them, appear in *Best practices* Appendix B. The list has grown significantly since first published and now includes such headings as "Social justice in comics," "Race relations in comics" and "Gender identity in comics."

The GNCRT also sought to increase the universe of comics-related genre terms, including headings to better reflect the terminology used by comics communities, as in the change from "Medical comics" to "Graphic medicine (Comics)." It also includes proposing genres to better describe comics produced by and for underrepresented and traditionally marginalized communities such as "Intersex comics," "Queer comics" and "Indigenous futurisms comics." One of the most significant genre victories for the GNCRT is "Manga," a term previously rejected multiple times by the Library of Congress, in 2012, 2014, 2019 and 2020. The GNCRT drafted a report[7] to counter the Library of Congress' assertions that "manga is merely the Japanese-language word for comic book, and is therefore a synonym for Comic books, strips, etc., not a separate concept,"[8] and to demonstrate how manga is a valid, definable genre understood by American audiences. "Manga" was officially approved as a genre (and a subject) in November 2022. The *Best practices* encourages the liberal use of these and other genres, to promote useful search result groupings and increase comics discovery.

Conclusion

With the *Best practices* and related successful projects completed, the GNCRT is looking to the future. Some members are currently working on reports advocating for the inclusion of manga subgenres (shōjo, shōnen, boys love and yuri) and anime in the LCGFT vocabulary. Others pioneered the creation of a Comics and Fiction Funnel, which operates within the PCC to propose new name, subject and genre terms related to comics and fiction. The Funnel is hoping to develop a best practices document for the creation of fictional character name authority records; propose additional terms related to comics and fiction scholarship; and propose new and changed headings related to comics and fiction.

7. GNCRT Metadata and Cataloging Committee, *Report of the GNCRT Metadata and Cataloging Committee on the Inclusion of Manga in the LCGFT Vocabulary* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2022), https://alair.ala.org/handle/11213/18621.

8. "Summary of Decisions, Editorial Meeting Number 1912," Library of Congress, SACO: Program for Cooperative Cataloging, December 16, 2019, https://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/saco/cpsoed/psd-191216.html.

This Funnel will help promote equity, diversity and inclusion in comics cataloging, and further the GNCRT's mission to improve access to comics and fiction more generally.

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