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# Gendered and Sexual Violence

## 8 The Risks of Representation: Making Gender and Violence Visible in *The Ballad of Halo Jones*

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### **Introduction: Making Gender Violence Visible**

Violence, its relationship to patriarchy and its inflection of lived social experience as inscribed by gender has been a key theme in feminist activism and thought. Among the core aims of second-wave feminism was making visible the violence against women that was hidden from public view; gendered forms of violence that were ignored, denied or trivialised in political discourse, including domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, exploitation and violence against women by the state. Questions of violence, its connection to masculinity and the exercise of power within the family were also at the heart of the intense debates within the British women's liberation movement that saw it fracture in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>1</sup> A key area of contention was the relationship between violence and cultural representation; between coercion and compulsion, and ideology and imagery.

Themes of violence, gender, sexuality and their interconnection have recurred in Alan Moore's work. As a result, significant critical attention has been paid to the presentation of gender violence in comics he has scripted. On the one hand, comics Moore has written have been argued to expose the relationship between discrete acts of violence against women and larger patriarchal structures, insisting on gender violence as socially embedded. In a special issue of the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* on the subject, Lorna Piatti-Fanelli (2017) analyses the depiction of

sexual assault in *Watchmen* in relation to its wider examination of gender and nationalism. In the same issue, Michael J. Prince (2017) discusses how *From Hell* maps instances of violence against women onto systemic sexual violence as a manifestation of institutionalised misogyny. On the other hand, Moore's work has also been argued to reproduce sexist tropes common to the representation of gender violence in comics. The incapacitation and implied sexual assault of Barbara Gordon in *Batman: The Killing Joke* has been identified as an example of 'fridging,' in which acts of violence against women are used to expedite the development of male characters while eliding women's trauma (Curtis and Cardo 2017, 6–7). *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* series has faced criticism for both the trivialisation of sexual violence and its graphic portrayal, as has Moore's work with Jacen Burrows on the Lovecraft mythos.

Moore has responded to debate about the representation of gender violence in his work, arguing that while other forms of violence like murder are over-represented in comics, much more common crimes of rape and domestic violence are disregarded, amounting to the 'denial of a sexual holocaust' (Ó Méalóid 2014, no pagination). He can therefore be seen to share the second-wave feminist commitment to make gender violence politically visible. The divergent critical interpretations of his oeuvre raise questions about violence and its representation more broadly: as Bruce B. Laurence and Aisha Kim put it, 'how does one speak about violence without replicating or perpetuating it?' (2007, 10). This maps onto correlate debates about gender—how can the experience of women and girls be depicted in ways that testify to the lived reality of systemic subordination without reinforcing repressive constructions of sexual difference? What are the risks in making gender, violence and their intersection visible in popular media?

This chapter explores these questions by focussing on ‘The Ballad of Halo Jones’ by Moore, Ian Gibson and others, originally serialised in *2000AD* between 1984 and 1986. The strip aimed to redress the widespread invisibility of female characters in British comics, while challenging prevailing sexist modes of depiction. Like many *2000AD* series, it used science fiction to comment on the political reality of Thatcherist Britain through its critical estrangement. As a result, ‘Halo Jones’ can be read as an exploration of contemporary gender relations that highlighted various forms of violence against women conventionally unseen in both mainstream comics and politics. In doing so, it engaged with the strident debates of second wave feminism—in particular those focussed on questions of violence and representation—taking up critical positions within them that contested how both violence and gender are culturally articulated. As such, ‘Halo Jones’ negotiated the contradictions of making violence against women more visible—the tensions between exposing gender violence and reifying it as spectacle; between challenging standardised portrayals of women and reproducing harmful gender norms; between bearing witness to the reality of women’s lives permeated by violence, and naturalising that violence so as to disavow alternative ways of imagining and doing gender.

### **The Girl Who Got Out: Halo Jones and *2000AD***

‘The Ballad of Halo Jones’ related its 50th-century protagonist’s efforts to escape a series of restrictive situations, symbolised by repeated circles and webs. Halo is described as somebody ‘cramped by the confines of her life. . . somebody who had to get out’ (Moore et al. 1985a, 7). In the first arc or ‘book,’ she tries to escape the poverty of The Hoop, a huge floating estate and ghetto for America’s unemployed and migrant underclass. In the second she is trapped in the only available work as a hostess on a luxury space liner; in the third, she joins the army, caught up in colonial occupation and interstellar war.

Moore and Gibson had six months for development, and the whole series was plotted in advance. This allowed for the creation of a richly detailed storyworld, complete with coherent intergalactic economy, futuristic slang and working alien languages. This fully realised future, with its high social inequality, racial tension and xenophobic militarism, was a clear extrapolation of Britain in the early 1980s—a period that saw waves of urban riots prompted by police racism, the jingoism of the Falklands War and the class confrontation of the Miner’s Strike. The satirical exploration of such topical issues through their dystopian defamiliarisation was characteristic of *2000AD*. However, ‘Halo Jones’ differed from the usual *2000AD* fare significantly. The creators declined to explain this complex future with thought balloons, captions or glossaries, meaning it had to be decoded through attentive, inferential reading. More unusual still was the female protagonist. ‘Halo Jones’ intended to confront the gender imbalances and stereotypes of mainstream comics, reflecting ongoing debate about sexism in the UK scene. Moore had intervened in this discussion with three-part article ‘Invisible Girls and Phantom Ladies’ published in Marvel UK monthly *The Daredevils* in 1983. It explored both the absence of comics for and about women, and the history of sexist imagery in the field, within the context of patriarchal culture.

### **Invisible Girls**

Moore was keenly aware that *2000AD* lacked major female characters, but with the rapid decline of girls’ comics, was becoming the only British title with a sizeable female audience. Its letters pages attested to a significant female readership, yet one which felt marginalised, particularly regarding the representation of women. One reader wrote, ‘I think your comic isn’t for girls. All the women in your stories get killed off’ (Watson 1983, 2).

Moore and Gibson aimed to redress this erasure with a strip in which the ‘central characters would all be female’ and men ‘would largely be relegated to the sort of walk-ons that women usually get’ (Bishop 2007, 101). This inversion enabled the portrayal of a diverse range of female characters and their social interaction. It can be seen as an acknowledgement of the frustrations of *2000AD*’s female readers by deliberately incorporating elements of the defunct girls’ comics tradition, with its focus on the dynamics of all-girl friendships.

### **Phantom Ladies**

The women characters that did appear in *2000AD*, readers argued, tended to be ‘drawn from imagination rather than reality’ (Chapman 2011, 165). Judge Anderson, for example, had been designed by Brian Bolland explicitly in terms of erotic appeal—‘a great opportunity to draw a sexy looking girl’ (Bishop 2007, 70). Alongside the general absence of female characters, it was this kind of restrictive stereotyping that motivated ‘Halo Jones.’ Halo was designed as a counterpoint to standard modes of portraying women at the time; she was to be neither ‘a pretty scatterbrain who fainted a lot and had trouble keeping her clothes on’ nor ‘another Tough Bitch With A Disintegrator’ (Moore 1986). The first part of ‘Invisible Girls and Phantom Ladies’ traced the historical emergence of diminutive superhero companions, who served little function other than comic relief founded on their feminised powers or romantic activities. Its second instalment noted the rise of assertive, hypersexualised superheroines who appropriated masculine traits of aggression and physical prowess, yet were marked by their ‘voluptuousness’ (see Taylor 2007, 352–353).

### **The Politics of the Personal: Violence and the Everyday**

In contrast, Moore and Gibson wanted to create a relatable, non-heroic female protagonist—to take ‘a totally unexceptional character’ and ‘show the sort of triumphs that ordinary people have’ (Hull 1986). This approach drew on girls’ comics, but also feminist comix, which developed alternatives to sexist imagery by candidly narrating the everyday experiences of unidealised, ‘ordinary’ women. Moore discussed the role of female underground cartoonists in challenging representational norms in the final section of ‘Invisible Girls and Phantom Ladies.’

The fact that ‘Halo Jones’ dealt with the unremarkable experiences of a young woman who ‘wasn’t that brave, or that clever or that strong’ (Moore et al. 1985a, 7) equally indicates its debt to the wider women’s movement. In feminist consciousness-raising participants described their everyday lives as a way to reconstitute gendered social relations as a totality, enabling them to see personal experience—including experiences of violence and trauma—as embedded in the larger social fabric and thus ‘reject explanations which stressed failures in their individual personalities’ (Rowbowtham 1990, 8). Exploring the day-to-day texture of women’s lives was a way to highlight structures of oppression and violence that were routine and thereby hidden.

This approach was echoed in ‘Halo Jones’ through the prevalence of first-person narration and subjective point-of-view, and the use of Halo’s diaries and letters in place of captions. Such epistolary storytelling was a common feature of the romance genre, which feminist cartoonists valued for its focus on female subjectivity, psychological realism and emotional depth, even while they satirised its narrow codes of gender and sexuality (Sutliff Sanders 2010, 158). As Kate Flynn argues, ‘Halo Jones’ consistently engaged with the ‘clichés of popular romance,’ particularly soap opera (2012, 52). However, this also harked back again to the conventions of British girls’ comics, and the success of *2000AD* has been attributed to the adoption of such “‘girls’ comic” thinking’ in terms of plotting, characterisation and emotion (Mills 2017, 21–22).

Like women's comix, the reader was also implicated in the experiences of female characters by subverting gendered conventions of visual storytelling. Women tended to appear far less frequently in close-up, and facially were near-identical. Marvel's style-guide suggested 'keep your female faces simple. Use no extra expression lines on the forehead, or around the mouth or nose' (Lee and Buscema 1986, 100). The received wisdom in British comics was similarly never to heavily shade a female face, 'as it made them look masculine' (Talbot 2003, 39). This reserved many of the visual means for asserting individuality, narrative centrality and emotional agency for male figures alone. By contrast, characters in 'Halo Jones' were often shown in tight close-up, with a range of facial expressions portrayed through heavy hatching (see [Figure 8.1](#)). Halo visibly aged as the series progressed, reflecting the commitment to creating credible female subjects rather than inert, idealised types.

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While its debt to girls' comics segued with aspects of *2000AD* more broadly, the divergence of this approach was noted by readers. The strip's early reception was lukewarm, with initial reader responses logging a distinct lack of 'action' (Parkin 2013, 157). The first arc's plot was comparatively low-key, revolving around the daily lives of Halo; her flatmates Rodice, Ludy and Brinna; and their robot dog, Toby. A large part dealt with Rodice and Halo's attempt to go shopping, taking over 24 hours as they evade hoop riots and navigate a baffling public transport system. This presentation of exaggerated yet quotidian events elaborated the boredom and hopelessness of life on The Hoop, probing the characters' different reactions to their constrictive situation.

As James Chapman asserts, girls' comics afforded 'greater prominence to character motivation' rather than relying on direct action to resolve all problems (2011, 110). It was this shift away

from conventional action, towards intersubjective relationships and a ‘discourse of feeling’ (Moeller 2011), that enabled exploration of the fantastically ordinary lives of these characters. However, readers complained that ‘very little happened.’ Crucially, Moore took this to mean ‘very little *violence* happened’ (Parkin 2013, 157). Yet the arc’s plot includes Halo being injured in hoop riot, a threatening confrontation with the aggressive ‘Different Drummers’ (addicts to ‘the beat’), and the murder of Brinna in their home. The crucial distinction is that it is the psychological and emotional impact of violence shown rather than violent action, which is implied or off-panel. This speaks to one way the comic negotiated making violence against women visible—in exploring women’s everyday lives, it presented violence which is routine rather than exceptional, stressing its protracted effects rather than its dramatic instantiation. Yet, having met resistance from readers, this approach didn’t sit well with editors either. The second book was only green-lit provided the strip became more typically ‘action-orientated,’ implying the depiction of spectacular violence. The creators therefore had to insert ‘the prescribed amount of violence into the narrative’ without turning Halo into an action character and negating her crucial ‘ordinariness’ (Moore 1986).

### **The Violence of Poverty: Gender and Class**

Halo’s presentation as an ordinary woman, subject to unremarkable, everyday violence, highlights the ways in which the comic refracted British feminism’s core debates. Halo was conceived explicitly as working class. Once more, this drew on trends within girls’ comics away from affluent characters towards working-class heroines (Gibson 2008, 2010).

Halo’s particularity as a working-class woman, rather than a figure of political authority or economic privilege, reflected how, by the late 1970s, the universalising feminist notion of sisterhood had been criticised for its denial of the intersectional differences within women’s

oppression. The arrival of the first female Prime Minister in 1979, who enacted social and economic policies that adversely affected women, threw differences within the British movement into sharp relief. Socialist and radical feminists cautioned against liberal notions of equality that saw some women elevated to positions of power, while the institutionalised exploitation of capitalism and patriarchy remained unchallenged. Book 2 explicitly drew attention to class disparities of economic, social and cultural power between women in its juxtaposition of Halo's undervalued labour as a hostess with the glamorous lifestyle of the VIPs she serves.

A distinct socialist strand of UK feminism had coalesced in the 70s around issues of production and the reproduction of labour. Alongside workplace struggles over low pay and intensifying casualisation, socialist feminists were concerned with the gendered division of domestic labour and lack of welfare provision that created a double burden on working women, with shift work, long hours, housework and childcare taking a combined toll on women's health. This slow, grinding violence of poverty, linked to stress, addiction and disability, was closely related to the disciplining threat of unemployment, equally inflected by gender. Being more likely to work in informal conditions, working-class women's labour was more depreciated and insecure, which put them at greater risk of redundancy and unemployment. Tracing Halo's trajectory through a string of low-paid, precarious jobs, interspersed with periods of vagrancy, low-level criminality, unemployment and reliance on credit, the comic interrogated this feminisation of poverty as a form of economic violence.

As well as representing unspectacular economic violence, 'Halo Jones' also explored the ways in which class inequality increased women's exposure to physical violence. 'Poverty, marginalization, and lack of protective mechanisms make women easy targets for abuse' (True 2012, 31) and the accelerated gendered inequalities of economic crises are risk factors for

increased violence against women and girls (101). The Hoop is crime-ridden, with a perfunctory police force. It is so insecure the standard parting is 'safe day' or 'safe night,' and the threat of violence is so pervasive it pushes Halo's flatmate Ludy into addiction, joining the Different Drummers because she was 'sick of being scared all the time' (Moore et al. 1984, 10). In this tense, confined environment, women arm themselves before going out and dress in layered clothing to avoid sexual harassment. When Rodice bares her skin it is a deliberate exhibition of toughness and challenge to a patriarchal culture in which women's bodies, particularly working women's bodies in the contested public space of the street, are deemed sexually accessible by default.

In stark contrast to the concealing, cyberpunk costumes of the first book, in the second arc Halo and her fellow hostesses wear matching skimpy uniforms and blonde wigs. This visual disparity is self-reflexively noted when Halo communicates her discomfort to her new roommate Toy: 'showing my feet and everything! I mean, on the Hoop, if a woman did that. . . well, we just didn't' (Moore et al. 1985b, 4). This highlights how 'social expectations about women's sexuality constrain women's working lives' and how women sell their physical appearance alongside their labour (Rowbowtham 1990, 192). The expendability of both Halo's labour and her body in this workplace is emphasised in the arc's first 'violent action' when she is held hostage by terrorists and the captain shows far more concern for the ship's navigator. The hijackers demean her as an 'Earth-concubine of the rich,' and the contrast in costume between the two books equally draws attention to contradictory ways in which women are simultaneously expected to make their bodies visually available yet are blamed for inducing gender violence in rape myths surrounding dress.

### **Gender Violence and Symbolic Violence: Image, Body, Look**

'Halo Jones' thus highlighted connections between the cultural inscription of gender and the threat of physical violence in the experiences of working-class women, the relationship between direct coercion and the symbolic violence of gender norms imprinted through cultural representation (True 2012, 30). Yet, in so doing, it sat in an ambiguous relationship to the standardised visual presentation of the female body for erotic display. Moore criticised how women's bodies in comics were presented in passive, contorted poses to service an implicit male gaze: 'if a comic book woman were to change a fuse she would do so with her head thrown back, lips slightly parted and with one arm extended in a graceful delicate curve' (Moore 1983a, 18). Yet the second and third books often featured Halo and others in various states of undress, allowing for the voyeuristic perusal of their bodies, and women were more frequently shown in submissive poses, with one dropped hip or a head half-tilted. Moreover, despite challenging conventional presentations of gender expression and hierarchy, notably with Toy's height and soft butch image, the positioning of Halo as ordinary 'constructs "ordinariness" as compliance with narrowly defined bodily norms' (Flynn 2012, 57). Halo's 'ordinary' body complied with many of the restrictive standardisations Moore criticised in 'Invisible Girls and Phantom Ladies.'<sup>2</sup>

Such contradictions in the visual representation of female characters, whereby gender stereotypes were at once undermined and reinscribed, echoed broader feminist interventions in media.

'Attempting to turn around the presentation of women' risked 'demonstrating what you actually opposed' (Rowbowtham 1990, 249). As Flynn argues, this futuristic estrangement of a social reality in which women are predominantly 'for men to look at' is supported by invitations for the reader to look at female bodies in ways that reproduce patriarchal gender dynamics (2012, 57).

This risk was self-consciously acknowledged in Halo's final *2000AD* appearance in 'Tharg's

Head Revisited,' December 1986. In their contribution (see [Figure 8.2](#)), Moore appears, asking Gibson if he holds the artwork to the unrealised Book 4, to which he replies, 'No! This is Page Three,' referring to topless glamour photographs in British tabloid *The Sun*.

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A campaign against Page 3 launched that same year in many ways emerged from preceding feminist activism focussed on the media's role in socialising women to subordinate gender roles and appropriating the female body as a site for the projection of male sexual fantasy. The group Women in Media interrogated the prevalence of sexist representations of women across broadcasting, comics, novels, pop music and the press (King and Stott 1977), and feminist campaigns against sexist advertising ranged from defacing misogynist imagery with spray paint, to lobbying regulatory bodies to ban objectifying images (Klorman-Eraqi 2017, 236–237, 231). Moore drew on such work in 'Invisible Girls and Phantom Ladies' by relating the representation of women in comics to the broader sexism of film, television and stand-up comedy, and 'Halo Jones' metafictionally highlighted the disjuncture between the melodramatic 'holosoaps' the characters consume and the dismally prosaic violence they endure. Moving on in his article to condemn Good Girl Art (GGA) for intimating rape fantasies, Moore also refracted radical feminist interventions in this 'images of women' debate. He criticised the 'startling regularity' of sexualised torture, and related such sadomasochistic imagery to the reinforcement of rape myths in the Sword and Sorcery genre: 'the message . . . is that women enjoy rape and that they say "No" when they mean "yes" [sic]' (1983b, 19).

Radical feminists increasingly linked gender violence to its promotion through visual representations that reinforced structural disparities of power, with a specific focus on pornography. This strand of feminism had a particular significance in Yorkshire, where between

1976 and 1981 Peter Sutcliffe beat, raped and murdered 13 women. Feminists were outraged, not only by the state's failure to protect women from such brutal violence, but by police advice not to venture into the street at night, and the media's treatment of the case as lurid spectacle, where gender violence went typically unreported (Coote and Campbell 1987, 223). In Leeds, the revolutionary feminist group Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) was established, organising 'Reclaim the Night' marches across different cities in which strip clubs and porn shop windows were vandalised. Angry Women, an offshoot of WAVAW, went further, setting fire to several sex shops in West Yorkshire.

Drawing on thinkers like Andrea Dworkin, Susan Brownmiller and Catherine MacKinnon who argued coercion was integral to male sexuality, such groups theorised a direct link between pornographic images as a form of symbolic abuse and control, and acts of sexual violence.

Pornography was positioned as a central facet of male violence 'operative within the same system of dominance and control' as sexual assault and rape (Coote and Campbell 1987, 223).

'Halo Jones' similarly explored violence against women as a continuum by linking sexual violence to routine harassment, throwing open questions of how rape can be culturally visualised without subverting it as spectacle and thereby reinforcing myths that facilitate it.

On-board the Clara Pandey, Halo is attacked by Toby after she discovers his sexual obsession with her, in an assault that extended over three weekly episodes. Toby aims to possess Halo sexually through violence, brutally killing Brinna, so Halo can inherit him. When she discovers his plan, listening to his audio-memory tapes of the murder, he attempts to kill her too. She is pursued through the ship in a protracted violent chase with a strong sexual subtext—dressed in a nightgown, she tries to hide, but Toby engages infrared vision, and the panel perspective shifts to shots of Halo's naked legs with his eye-screen as frame, presenting his enhanced view.

In figuring the aggressor's perspective, in Toby's othering as an extraordinary machine-animal and in dramatising the assault as one way to get the editorially mandated action into the strip, this could be seen to reinforce rape myths about survivors and perpetrators, and sensationalise gender violence (see Garland et al. 2016). Yet the fact that Halo is assaulted by a pet she shows affection to and the only male figure within her nontraditional family structures of female kinship challenged the myth of 'stranger-danger,' highlighting the prevalence of acquaintance rape and rape within the home. This reflected radical feminist critiques of the family and connection of women's subordination within it to their exposure to violence. Toby's role within these female collectives was as protection against male aggression. His calculated use of brutal force to ensure sexual access to Halo and to punish her non-compliance demonstrates how patriarchal protective paternalism is underwritten by violence.

The dramatic action of Halo's assault is intercut by scenes of run-of-the-mill social interaction in ways that connect gender violence to commonplace sexual harassment, emphasising its systemic nature. Halo's ordeal is interwoven with Toy's rejection of the belittling, sleazy advances of a date, who warns, 'Don't play hard to get.' Toy's aggravation at such routine sexist maltreatment, 'Men! What do you have to do before they get the message?' is counterposed with Halo's terror (Moore et al. 1985d, 7). This draws an emphatic link between shocking gender violence and ubiquitous harassment, highlighting the pervasive use of the threat of rape to regulate gender behaviour. The strip therefore represented not only a challenge to the invisibility of sexual violence against women in comics but the way that the media focussed only on unusual cases, eliding the 'ordinary sexual violence endemic in everyday life' (Kitzinger 2004, 28).

Although there are instances where the reader 'must adopt Toby's perspective of looking' (Flynn 2012, 57), the attack is not exclusively presented from his viewpoint. Opening with a focus on

Halo's rapidly changing expressions as she listens to Brinna's murder, the reader continues to witness the terror and pain etched on her face during the assault. Several pages involve a switch of perspective whereby Toby advances menacingly towards the viewer. Others are composed from Halo's subjective viewpoint, including one where she sees herself reflected in a tight close-up of Toby's eyes (see [Figure 8.3](#)). The consistent focus on the characters' eyes and looks, and movement between perspectives, emphasises the visual positioning of the viewer in relation to the scene, raising uncomfortable questions about the representation of violence and the act of witnessing it. This destabilises comics' usually transparent gendered conventions of looking and being looked at. Both addressing and dislocating the male gaze, it can be read as a reflexive criticism of the ways in which male heterosexuality was commonly encoded in spectacular violence against hypersexualised female comics characters (Sutliff Sanders 2010, 154–155), challenging readers' genre expectations of 'violent action.'

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However, while 'Halo Jones' navigated the connection between the cultural objectification of the female body and gender violence, it also diverged from revolutionary feminism significantly. The argument that violence was implicit to masculinity and heterosexual relations faced criticism from other feminists for its 'profoundly conservative pessimism' (Rowbowtham 1990, 253), tending towards an ahistorical essentialism that naturalised oppressive gender relations. In line with the casting of pornographic images as objectively exploitative and causally linked to violence, this was seen to also deny women's sexual agency and disavow the possibilities of figuring female desire outside abusive frameworks of shame, fear and domination. 'Halo Jones' can be seen to reflect the stance of opposing 'sex-positive' feminists, in its exploration of sexualities traditionally invisible in boy's comics. Halo is presented as a sexually

autonomous and active subject in contrast to both the general erasure of female desire in British comics, and the sublimation of sexuality in ultra-violence or the fetishising imagery of GGA.

While framing Halo's love life through romance genre clichés, the strip situates the reader within a circulation of female desiring looks that 'queers *2000AD*'s male gaze' (Flynn 2012, 58). This includes not only Halo's heterosexual desires, but Toy's sexual attraction to her in face of a culture of compulsory heterosexuality. This echoed radical feminist concerns with liberating female sexuality through the intersubjective discussion of female fantasy, sensuality and pleasure.

Anti-pornography feminism was criticised for threatening sexual freedoms and foreclosing alternative configurations of sexuality. Lynne Segal argued that censorship would likely be used by the state against feminists, lesbians and gay men, as seen in the 1982 'Clean Up Soho' campaign, used by police to attack gay venues. Many feminists were uncomfortable with aligning themselves with right-wing 'moral decency' campaigns, which had been directed against the underground and gay press, as well as comics like IPC's *Action*. Envisaging female and queer sexual desire within a boys' adventure comic thus had an important resonance in relation to struggles around gender, sexuality and censorship. Moreover, 'Halo Jones' undermined the essentialism trailing revolutionary feminist constructions of male violence. The demotion of male characters in some ways mirrored separatist aspirations which extended in the late 1970s to the advocacy of political lesbianism. However, the comic challenged essentialist conceptions of gender difference and their own symbolic violence through the trans character the Glyph, Halo's other cabin mate on-board the Clara Pandy.

The Glyph, not identifying with the sex ascribed to hir at birth, undergoes a series of total body remoulds but fails to find gender congruence within a reductive polarity of gender expression. As

a result of hir failure to conform to culturally inscribed norms, ze has become invisible, ignored by everyone including Halo, who ze sacrifices hir life to save from Toby. The Glyph's genderqueer body is culturally unintelligible, a cipher—doctors cannot categorise hir according to regulatory taxonomies of dimorphic sex and a correlate gender binary. In a series of flashbacks of heteronormative families conforming to binary gender presentation, the Glyph is shown to become progressively erased from social perception. Halo and Toy similarly ignore and elide hir, questioning idealised constructions of female homosociality.

However, the reader sees the Glyph, sharing hir viewpoint and bearing witness to hir death. This facilitates a critical awareness of the contingency of other characters' interactions on performing binary gender. The Glyph's self-identification emphasises that, in fact, ze is a pictograph, as are the other characters so easily categorised male or female. Conceptually, glyphs are only readable, and therefore meaningful, within an agreed set—sitting outside of culturally intelligible categories of sex and gender, the Glyph not only highlights their constructedness but stands as a metafictional commentary on their visual inscription and the difficulties of escaping a restrictively gendered semiotics. This denaturalises the correlation of sex and gender within hetero- and cis-normative structures, undermining revolutionary feminist notions of innate male violence, and challenging the wider prevalence of essentialist views, later dubbed cultural feminism. 'Halo Jones' thus represented the inconspicuous symbolic violence enacted against trans people, as well as the connection between the everyday cultural effacement precluding their access to liveable lives and their disproportionate exposure to physical violence.

In its efforts to make violence against trans people visible, however, 'Halo Jones' reinscribed cissexist tropes, while it worked to subvert them. That the Glyph's most significant act is one that leads to hir death reproduces the trope of the tragic queer character (Kidder 2012, 183),

echoing the similar fate of Toy. Nevertheless, the attempt to explore the violence of hetero- and cis-normative constructions of sex and gender was significant in the context of the widespread preclusion of queer and trans issues from second wave feminist debate and the outright transphobia of feminists like Janice Raymond, who linked transsexuality to male violence.

### **A Woman's Life in the Modern Army: Violence, Colonialism and War**

This challenge to gender essentialism was extended in the third book which further explored gender and violence within the context of future war. Cultural feminist views that women were 'by nature' more empathetic and peaceable became central to discourse surrounding the peace camp initiated in 1981 at Greenham Common. Although there was great feminist support for the camp, many rejected its 'elevation of the "feminine" . . . into a "natural" force for peace' (Liddington 1989, 259–260).

Matching its aim to challenge sexist comics norms, 'Halo Jones' also intended to subvert standard depictions of war. Again facing prolonged unemployment, Halo enlists in the army, which promises good pay, new skills and adventure. She becomes entangled in an imperialist war waged by Earth to revive its failing economy and is party to systematic abuse of civilians and the killing of child resistance fighters, and ultimately accessory to genocidal war crimes. Showing a conflict in which both the killers and the killed are mostly female was intended to overcome desensitisation to violence: Moore imagined readers used to seeing men cut down 'might perhaps be more affected by the prospect of frightened women being crushed into viscous red puddles because of its comparative rarity' (Bishop 2007, 110). This relates to the strip's depiction of sexual violence—reflexively critiquing comics' conventional spectacularisation of violence and militarisation of masculinity.

The strip was distinguished by its focus on the day-to-day experiences of ordinary privates. As such, the depiction of the effects of warfare on the female combatants was striking. The reader follows Halo from initial training, first combat experience, withdrawal and re-enlistment to her ultimate escape, witnessing her increasing brutalisation. Visualising violence perpetrated by and upon female fighters refuted ideas of women being essentially more peaceable, but equally challenged the militarisation of ultraviolent superheroines.

Once more the comic not only represented shocking acts of violence but connected them to institutionalised cruelty, culturally inscribed—emphasising the continuities of war and ‘non-war,’ particularly for women (Jacobs et al. 2000, 11). Drawing on post-Vietnam science fiction ‘Halo Jones’ related military conflict to systemic colonial violence. Guerrilla attacks on Halo’s unit on an occupied planet are precipitated by invasive house searches, ‘search and burn missions’ and ‘kappa bomb’ attacks that have devastated the environment. The occupation itself is justified by a racist ideology that dehumanises the ‘natives’ as ‘degenerate sub-human she-devils’ who ‘only understand force’ (Moore et al. 1986a, 9).

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The visual representation of violent action is again framed to interrogate the act of viewing itself, particularly in episodes on the planet Moab. In the stronger gravity of its battlefield, if anti-gravity suits fail, combatants are squashed into pools of blood, and at a distance objects appear to be at a stand-still. The reader’s perception of the violence, as a sequence of static frames where moments of death are frozen (see [Figure 8.4](#)), is thus aligned with that of the fighters themselves (Di Liddo 2009, 71–72). Temporal distortions mean minutes of fighting actually amount to days on base. Correspondingly, episodes read in five pages represent years of conflict, yet seconds of fighting stretch across several pages. This slows down violence in an appalling manner that again

reflexively questions the appetite for dramatic action, presenting violence's protracted effects alongside its instantiation—not only the bloody mess of combat but the 'mess in people's head, in people's lives: all that loss and pain' (Moore et al. 1986d, 4).

## **Conclusion**

'Halo Jones' can be read as a critical estrangement of social relations of gender and their ideological construction, which aimed to make the systemic violence hidden behind them visible, in alignment with the British women's liberation movement. Navigating many of its key debates, particularly over gender violence and cultural representation, it took up critical positions within them: centring the intersection of gender and class, affirming a liberated female sexuality and challenging essentialist correlations of binary sex and gender.

To that end, the strip contested how both gender and violence were articulated in comics and culture more broadly: using defamiliarisation to emphasise the unremarkable ubiquity of violence against women as a structural process, to reflexively trouble the conventions of showing and viewing it, and to highlight its differential allocation—how 'certain human lives are more vulnerable than others' (Butler 2006, 29). However, the strip remains contradictory—in making women visible in comics it both subverts and reproduces restrictive gender norms. In representing the habitual violence they face, across symbolic, psychological and physical manifestations, it both exposes that violence to political scrutiny and risks its sublation and naturalisation. Comics 'have the potential to be powerful precisely because they intervene against a culture of invisibility by taking the risk of representation' (Chute and DeKoven 2006, 772). 'The Ballad of Halo Jones' takes the risks of representation at the heart of feminist debates about violence and visualisation—the question of how to show the dystopian reality of what *is*, while sketching utopian possibilities of what could *be*.

**Figure 8.1.** Alan Moore, Ian Gibson and Steve Potter. 1984. 'The Ballad of Halo Jones' Book 1 Part 8: 'When the Music's Over.' *2000AD* Prog 385 (15 September): p. 11.

**Figure 8.2.** Alan Moore, Ian Gibson and Q. Twerk. 1986. 'Tharg's Head Revisited.' *2000AD* Prog 500 (13 December): p. 32.

**Figure 8.3.** Alan Moore, Ian Gibson and Steve Potter. 1985. 'The Ballad of Halo Jones' Book 2, Part 7: 'Puppy Love.' *2000AD* Prog 412 (6 April): p. 5.

**Figure 8.4.** Alan Moore, Ian Gibson and Richard Starkings. 1986. 'The Ballad of Halo Jones' Book 3, Part 11: 'Slow Death.' *2000AD* Prog 463 (22 March): p. 4.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1978 Women’s Liberation Conference divided acrimoniously over the issue of male violence, one of several fault lines emerging within the movement between and within radical, socialist and liberal strands.

<sup>2</sup> Flynn’s more substantive point regards the way this ordinariness is racially marked as white, although the strip featured a higher number of non-white characters than many contemporaneous mainstream comics.