INKING OVER THE GLASS CEILING:
THE MARGINALIZATION OF FEMALE
CREATORS AND CONSUMERS IN COMICS

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of Kent State University School of Art in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts.

by
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AUTHOR’S NOTE

I am of the belief that gender is a spectrum and, in part, defined by social construct and that more identifications exist beyond the simple binary of “female” and “male.” This work focuses on the obstacles met by those people who identify with the “female” end of that spectrum. In using terms such as women, girls, and female, I am largely relating the experiences of those who identify and present as such. Discussing the feminist issues present in the comics industry requires an intersectional understanding; comics and their blockbuster films disservice women, of course, but also men and women of color, of orientation, of size, and of ability. The lack of diversity within comics and the seeming obsession of gatekeeping within “fandom” contribute to an atmosphere that feeds a self-perpetuating cycle. To discuss feminist issues in comics is to discuss issues of racism, homophobia, and all forms of Othering.
INTRODUCTION

Once ignored as trivial mass media, comic strips and comic books are now recognized as their own art form, one with a rich history and culture all its own. A fairly young art form, comics combine words and art into a continuous storyline, told over the course of multiple panels or pages. They were originally a feature in newspapers but then were written into books whose monthly or weekly installments compiled into one long-running story. A medium and not a single genre, comics’ purview extends over every form of storytelling for every audience. Japanese comic books, called manga, imported overseas have expanded the forms of storytelling available to United States audiences. With so much choice, the medium affords a large and diverse community of readers.

Studying the history of the art form means studying the surrounding groups that grew around comics, a subculture referred to as a “fandom” in popular parlance. Fandom, as a singular entity, is a space where likeminded enthusiasts can gather to share in the experience of what they enjoy. With the advent of comic conventions and social media, the line between the fan and the creator is one that has become permeable, allowing fans to interact with comics professionals on a personal level. This increasing democratization also allows fans the opportunity to become creators and distributors on their own, bypassing the traditional need for a publisher. Initially, this manifested in the underground comics scene in the 1970s. The internet age has now allowed independent artist and writers to directly interface with their readers by creating webcomics, published on their own schedules and containing whatever content they desire.

However, as subcultures reflect the attitudes of the culture at large, the comics fandom is found to have become an increasingly layered and intersectional one. The archetype of the friendless, teenage, male comic book nerd has found himself sharing space with a great variety
of ages, races, and genders. Increasingly, female-identified fans are becoming a vocal population within the subculture.

There is much that can be said of the maligned reputation of comics such as their refusal to be acknowledged as either art, literature, or even suitable for the over-sixteen set. Much can and has been said on such a topic but little has been said about comics’ female creators and consumers, who face both the reputational ceiling of comics and the all too familiar glass ceiling.

This is a study about comics, but primarily about the women who read and write them: about artists who established themselves in comics as soon as the medium was born; about writers accused of nepotism rather than talent; about fans who are often dismissed by gatekeeping men as “fake nerd girls,” if not outright subjected to sexual harassment and bullying in person.

Despite their presence, many fans and professionals alike seem to be determined to ignore the women who share their spaces. Women have been involved in the writing and drawing of comics since nearly their very first year, yet modern professionals within comics deny female interest in the medium. These professionals decry that female readers and viewers of comics-related content do not buy enough merchandise, while readers complain that any woman interested in comics must surely be faking interest in an attempt to seem sexually available to them. Even female professionals within the field are attacked and their contributions minimized.

In light of this thinking, this thesis aims to counteract such claims. The first and second chapters mean to take a holistic approach to the history of American comics. This combines the established, male-centric narrative of comic book history with women’s contributions reintegrated. This is not meant to be a “separate,” women’s history of comics but a complete one that tracks the medium’s full development into its “golden age” of the first half of the twentieth
century through to modern day comics fandom and its contemporary issues. The first chapter in particular also serves to discuss the greater ramifications of the publication of the book that sent so many American comic genres into decline, The Seduction of the Innocent. Not only did that book—along with the greater atmosphere of McCarthyism—reduce the American comics industry largely to inoffensive humor and superhero genres, it also sent many female contributors into other avenues and away from comics.

Continuing that history, the second chapter will look into the latter half of the twentieth century. While still following the path of mainstream comics, another voice must be examined: the underground comics movement. As a whole, this allowed for new voices and styles of writing to emerge, daring and edgy stories with no censorship. This independent movement also allowed voices to those disenfranchised by the mainstream. Feminist and woman-centric underground, small-press “zines” appeared. Using this new genre gave women a community and voice in the comics that had previously existed and then been lost.

These underground comics and genres would eventually be folded back into the world of comics as a whole, allowing for interplays of ideas and of criticism. Longform, literary-minded comics appeared, creating the idea of the “graphic novel.” The 1980s and 1990s saw the work of women like Alison Bechdel and Gail Simone who worked on graphic novels. Professionals in the world of comics but also proponents of feminism and queer rights, their names and ideas have become bywords for critiquing sexism in the media.

The third chapter studies the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the next entails looking at the massive upsweep in popularity of Japanese comic books (manga) and their influence on American comics and television. Though always available in limited quantities in the United States, they reached new popularity with the female market in the 1990s with the
introduction and translation of female-led action comics and series like *Sailor Moon* and *Card Captor Sakura*. These publications and others like them met with a voracious market, eager to read Japanese comics. Where manga and other traditionally published media ran out, the same kinds of thinkers who had created underground comics turned to the emerging platform of webcomics.

The remaining two chapters discuss fandom and fan culture. Using studies by Camille Bacon-Smith and Henry Jenkins, primarily conducted and compiled regarding *Star Trek* fandom, the fourth chapter will examine participatory culture and transformative works. Transformative fan works, such as fan made art and writing, can often be seen as more than merely celebratory. These works—known as fanart and fanfiction—are often critical and speculative of the source material, particularly when made by those fans whose interests are not served by comics’ established canon. They do, however, face critical censure from those who would maintain the status quo.

One type of participatory culture, cosplay, is studied in the fifth chapter. Referring to the practice of fans creating and wearing costumes of their favorite characters, cosplay is a typical fan activity. Some cosplayers, typically female, find themselves facing censure rather than acceptance. At times, this censure can come in the form of verbal, physical, and even sexual harassment. Although cosplayers are skilled and talented artists, they are often objectified by their viewers without the protection of being recognized in participants in an art form. This is compounded when cosplayers are women, who are often treated as interlopers who are using cosplay as a means of entrapment or falsehood.

The world at large is changing and popular culture is slowly changing to reflect it as well, allowing the examination the history of women in comics. This thesis largely studies the comics
produced by the United States’ “big two” publishers, DC and Marvel. Much attention is also paid to independent and self-published comics as well as Japanese companies and independent artists. Much of the criticism, however, of women’s treatment in comics is aimed at those two main companies. Widely consumed as pop culture, these companies have their ears closest to the ground and their publications reflect the world and problems of their audience. Comics fandom, too, often showcases gendered areas of division where one side believes that the state of comics needs no change and that the contributions and criticisms from the other side are damaging.
CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIGINS OF COMICS AND THE GOLDEN AGE

The Early History of Comic Strips

In the 1830s, Rodolphe Topffer is thought the first to lay out picture stories in a comics-like format, combining stories and paneled artwork into what he called “picture-novels.” ¹ Several tangential modes of visual storytelling have come together to create the modern comic book. Sequential and narrative images have, arguably, existed for as long as humanity has told stories and sought to match image to idea. Regardless of content, placement, or time, many works of historical fine art serve essentially the same purpose as a comic book: to aid the audience in understanding the story. It could be said that Egyptian walls, the Bayeux Tapestry, multi-scene Italian frescoes, and other historical art works are precursors to the comic as an art form. Satirical cartoons, likewise, have been present in early modern European newspapers, such as the scandalous *libelles* that were published in pre-Revolutionary France. Cartoons, however, were distinct from comics for their singularity, without ongoing story or continuity. Comics, though a fairly young art form, have a rich history that is often left incomplete, especially when historians ignore the contributions women have made.

In the United States, it is typically Richard Outcault’s comic *The Yellow Kid* that is credited with being the first real newspaper comic strip, first appearing in 1896. Typical histories of comics will credit Outcault as the founder of newspaper comics before gliding forward to 1905 for Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. Otherwise, they tend to gloss over nearly thirty years of a comics field that lived almost solely in the newspapers in favor of discussing the

beginnings of the comic books and the superheroes they would later house. Were comics aficionados to look closer at this beginning age of newspaper comic strips, they would notice that there is much more history and diversity to be found.

Not long after, many other newspapers contracted cartoonists. From the beginning, these artists were not, as modern readers might assume, all male. The immediate popularity of the Yellow Kid sent other publications scrambling to find art that was appealing, opening opportunities for artists of all stripes. A popular novelty in a competitive industry, a good comic strip could spell profits for a newspaper. Within a year of The Yellow Kid’s first appearance, Rose O’Neill was submitting single-panel comics to Truth magazine. In 1908, she would put pen to a concept that still lives in contemporary art, branding, and dolls: the Kewpies [fig. 1]. Kewpies were bright-eyed cherubs, said to be the children of Cupid, who were drawn with a light hand and with big, bright eyes to accentuate their childlike “cuteness.”

Though she was the first known, O’Neill was far from the only female illustrator submitting comics. By end of the 1910s, O’Neill was followed by such artists as Louise Quarlles, Grace Kasson, and Agnes Repplier on Sunday funny pages. Women in the early history of comics were no kind of rarity, but rather commonly found from the first days. Many of them loaned their artworks to popular brands and advertising.

One woman, Nell Brinkley, famously drew one style of woman—a young, vivacious flapper—so often that her “Brinkley Girls” were as well-known as Charles Dana Gibson’s own Gibson Girls [fig. 2]. Both drew beautiful women with precise ink lines but where a Gibson Girl was an agreeably demure Edwardian lady, a Brinkley Girl was a spirited and independent girl who sought her own life and pleasure. In short, a Gibson Girl was a man’s imposition of the

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ideal. Meanwhile a Brinkley Girl, inspired by onscreen stars like Clara Bow and Louise Brooks, was drawn by a woman as a liberated 1920s flapper fantasy. Her girls would become so iconic that they would be incorporated into advertising for the Ziegfield Follies theatrical revues, where fans could buy Brinkley Girl hairstyling papers meant to emulate the glamorous dancers and performers on the stage [fig. 3].

It is hardly difficult to find examples of skilled and well-published women in the formative years of comics. Indeed, the greater struggle comes from paring down which examples to include. Not only were many of these women active and talented artists, many were outspoken feminists in an age without women’s suffrage. Independent, outspoken, and talented, it is likely that many of them would, in fact, have been appalled to learn that women’s contributions to the comics field had largely been passed over by historians. While her art might have been considered “airy” and “feminine,” Rose O’Neill was an advocate for the woman’s vote. To make her stance explicitly clear, as well, Rose O’Neill allowed the Campbell Art Company to use the image of her Kewpies, depicting one baby cherub marching on a cloud holding up a sign that demanded “Votes for Women” and wearing a sash for “Women’s Suffrage.” [fig. 4]

Comic books emerged during the Depression. Originally a simple repackaging of collected newspaper strips, publishers were quick to see the potential of selling original material instead. Early comics included stories of the weird and wonderful, with high fantasy and science fiction, as well as detective stories to offer an escape from the realities of the Depression. Here, female writers and artists were also at work, with Cecilia “Pad” Paddock Munson spinning tales of Baroness Elsa Von Saxenberg as she dodged spies and adversaries. As the Great Depression set in, women continued making contributions to the newspapers and comic books, although
World War II and the Golden Age

In 1938, a pair of teenage boys from Cleveland, Ohio thought of a character who would change the face of comics forever. When Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster sought a publisher, they had a new kind of hero to offer, an alien sent to Earth from a dying planet and given powers by the sun—Superman. Initially, Siegel and Shuster fought rejection at every turn but when they found a publisher with *Action Comics*, Superman’s popularity took off faster than a speeding bullet. Superman’s immediate success paved the way for more superheroes and stories of adventure but also for the gender divide that would plague comics until the present. The so-called Golden Age of comic book sales and popularity began and the publishing companies that would become Marvel and DC got their starts. From this time forward, superheroes would occupy newspaper stands, radio broadcasts, movie theaters, and eventually televisions.

Yet another writer who operated under an ambiguous pseudonym, Dalia “Dale” Messick was also drawing adventure stories and, like Superman’s Siegel and Shuster, fighting rejection from publishers. Messick’s *Brenda Starr* was initially blocked from appearing in *The Daily News*. Even after publication, it seemed that editors and reviewers wanted to continue with disparaging remarks toward her work, criticizing her characters and artwork. This is due, Trina Robbins speculates, to the fact that Messick’s work was not the light and airy, daintily drawn “women’s work” that coexisted with the men’s noir, pulp, and action. *Brenda Starr* was a high-flying reporter, drawn in a clean, economical style while daily getting in and out of scrapes with

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3 Robbins, *Pretty in Ink*, 63
the same ingenuity that Clark Kent or Lois Lane might employ—but she and her creator had the misfortune of being a woman in what was perceived as a man’s arena.⁴

It is no wonder, then, that June Mills decided to replace her first name with Tarpe when she began to publish the story of costumed crime fighter Miss Fury in April 1941, saying “It would have been a major letdown to the kids if they found out that the author of such a virile and awesome character was a gal.”⁵ Socialite heiress by day, Maria Drake would lead her fiancé to assume that she was feckless and airheaded, deterring him from realizing that she was also the highly-capable spy, Miss Fury. While she lacked powers, there is no doubt that Miss Fury was the first costumed comic female superhero. Miss Fury notably did not shy away from violence, willing to fight off her enemies with fists and pistol before escaping on her grappling rope. Interestingly, she balanced her moneyed life with the pursuit of crime and wrongdoers not unlike her 1939 predecessor from Bob Kane and Bill Finger: Batman.

There were female heroes of all kinds available. Comic strip readers could also enjoy Neysa McMein’s Deathless Deer, an Egyptian princess reawakened and going on adventures to fight evil and find love. Where female characters were not provided, readers would make themselves known. Female fans of Nina Albright’s story The Cadet wrote letters demanding more girls in the supporting cast of adventurer Kit Carter. For those more interested in wartime exploits, readers could find plenty of Yankee Girls and Girl Commandos, the latter of which featured yet another masked heroine leading an-all girl team. As with their male counterparts, many women were doing their bit for their war. One such woman was Eva Mirabal, a fighter with the WACs and one of the earliest known Native American cartoonists of any gender.

⁴ Ibid, 63
⁵ Ibid, 66
Mirabal—of the Taos Pueblo nation—signed her comic, *G.I. Gertie* not only with her name, but with her rank, from Private First Class to Staff Sergeant.

**Wonder Woman and Her Creators**

Premiering later in 1941 was the greatest and most well-known female superhero of them all when Wonder Woman came to the page. The famous Amazonian princess was conceptualized when publishers noticed that comics marketed to boys were also bringing in the pocket money of young girls as well. Hoping to capitalize on this, Detective Comics brought on a self-styled “consulting” psychologist and developer of the lie detector test, Dr. William Moulton Marston to create the female superhero Wonder Woman.

Wonder Woman was an Amazonian princess under the protection of the Greek pantheon, a hot topic from Neoclassicism and ensuing suffragette fantasies. Princess Diana of Paradise Island had all the strength and powers of Superman, along with her lasso of truth and bulletproof bracelets. Her greatest comrades were sorority sisters Etta Candy and the Holliday Girls. Her weaknesses, however, were peculiar and seemingly unique from her male counterpart. Were a captor to bind Wonder Woman’s bracelets together, she would immediately lose her free will, creating a potent bondage fantasy to keep the male reader interested as well. Boys and girls alike loved Wonder Woman and voted her into the Justice Society of America, along with heroes like Superman. However, in the hands of *Justice Society’s* writer Gardner Fox, Wonder Woman was less a feminist hero and more a glorified secretary. While Batman and Superman went off to war, Wonder Woman stayed behind to answer fan mail.

Any history of Wonder Woman is incomplete without the footnote of Dr. Marston’s own personal life, in which he lived in a polyamorous triad with his own wife and a third woman who
was a former student. Beyond that, often very little is said and biographers rarely include that Marston’s wife was Dr. Elizabeth Holloway Marston, a working psychologist as well as a wife and mother who is likely to have advised and shaped William Marston’s creation when she suggested—in their son’s own words—“Come on, let’s have a Superwoman!”

The second woman, Olive Byrne, was the daughter and niece of suffragettes and birth control advocates, Ethel Byrne and Margaret Sanger. The latter of those two women would help found the organization Planned Parenthood. Olive Byrne was also highly educated, having completed a Master’s degree and completing part of her doctoral studies at Columbia. Even though she was a man’s creation, there is no denying that the women in Dr. Marston’s life gave Wonder Woman an extensive feminist pedigree.

Marston’s personal life should be more than just a punchline to the story of the creation of Wonder Woman. His creation was inspired by several women and by their shared ideas regarding feminism and progressive sexuality. Her pedigree included founding thoughts and ideas from the first wave of feminists and forward-thinking women. While Dr. Marston’s progressive thinking never went so far as to hire a female artist, the original artist Henry G. Peter had lived through the age of women’s suffrage and had drawn several cartoons on the theme. Wonder Woman’s fictional adventures also inspired a series called Wonder Women of History, focusing on such luminaries as Florence Nightingale to add extra educational content. Her core theme of loving equality of the sexes, however, was an idea that would fade from the comic after Dr. Marston passed away and he was replaced with Robert Kaniger.

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8 Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, loc. 2246
Despite the diversity clearly present in comics from the start, it is very telling then, that in his appearance as commentator on the documentary *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*, DC Comics’ president Paul Levitz said, “The first generation of comic book creators were incredibly hardworking men.”

This commentary—in a television documentary entirely without female panelists—fails to reflect the true history of the first forty years of comics. The ever-more popular comics were overwhelmingly filled with white, masculine heroes to be sure, but the race and gender makeup of the fictional characters never reflected the reality of their creators. In *Champions of the Oppressed*, Christopher Murray makes note of the irony of Superheroes created by artists who...

*did not conform to the dominant stereotype of the average ‘American’, because many were Jewish or non-White, and some were women... Perhaps in doing so they projected a myth that they knew was not a true reflection of the complexity and diversity of life in America, but one that they also knew would be accepted as authentic precisely because it was a distorted vision.*

This distorted vision still weighs upon the comics industry today, fueling the popular impression of what comics were, who wrote them, and for whom they were written.

**The Seduction of the Innocent**

Because comic books were a popular vehicle for propaganda and were sent to soldiers overseas, the superhero comic came to prominence during World War II, where they were sent overseas for the American military to read. Captain America, Superman, and Wonder Woman had all embraced their patriotic American duty to go fight Hitler overseas but the end of the war signaled a decline in the popularity of superheroes. Adrift without the war, the heroes were

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passed over in favor of pulp stories from publishers like Entertaining Comics (EC) that played up elements of gruesome horror and sexual menace against women. In these stories, women were far more likely to appear as corpses and severed heads than as heroes. One infamous EC horror cover featured a woman’s corpse in the background, her severed head held up by her hair in the foreground, eyes rolled vacantly back with saliva dripping from her mouth. Despite the gruesome image, the severed head still had perfect blonde curls and a perfectly painted red mouth, blending the macabre and the sexualized [fig. 5]. Female characters and their creators were pushed out of the way of male-oriented action comics as the G.I.’s came back from the war.

Other female characters fared better, but not in the superhero comic. Burgeoning patriotic hero Miss America had her own title and was, ostensibly, the headliner of the magazine that bore her name. Before long, however, the content shifted of Miss America, so that the heroine and her adventures became a side note in a magazine otherwise devoted to more “appropriate” pastimes for teen girls. Miss America found herself sharing space with Patsy Walker and Millie the Model and comics more devoted to romance and fashion. Miss America would continue into Timely Comics’ (later Marvel) superhero comics, making scarce appearances until she was written out almost completely before a new incarnation was introduced in 2011.

The beloved Archie comics appeared in 1941, featuring his potential girlfriends Betty and Veronica, but rarely with any female writers or artists in charge. Edged out, many female creators turned back to the newspapers or to female-centric magazines. There, Hilda Terry drew cartoons like Teena and Bobby Sox. Even so, Female creators experienced as much discrimination as their fictional counterparts. The comics market banned women from membership with the National Cartoonists Society when it was founded in 1951. When Hilda Terry’s husband nominated her for membership, she was immediately refused. It took a second
vote and the threat of division within the group for her to finally gain admittance. Though women who were admitted tried to include others, they were rarely successful. The male majority seemed so determined to disbelieve that women stood in their ranks that NCS mail addressed Marty Links as “Mr.,” even after she announced her first child’s birth.11

While the comics market for women stood on shaky ground, the entire industry was dealt a massive blow when Dr. Frederic Wertham published a book titled *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. Though he has since been vilified by history, Wertham was stubbornly liberal for his time and concerned with the “racism, the sexual exploitation of women, and the glorification of guns.”12 Released at the height of McCarthyism, *Seduction of the Innocent* claimed that the increasing violence and horror found in comics was directly linked to the increase of teen violence. Like committees today who argue that violent movies and video games cause real life teen violence, parents were quick to join in scapegoating the industry.

If comics were not causing violence, they could be inspiring even worse, more deviant tendency in America’s impressionable youth Wertham suggested. Batman and his young, underage ward, Robin, were “the wish dream of two homosexuals” and Wertham had the same accusations toward Wonder Woman. The Amazonian hero had had a prominent retinue of supportive sorority girls, but Wertham saw something more insidious than platonic friendship, finding that she put forth “a morbid ideal…Their attitude about death and murder is a mixture of the callousness of crime comics with the coyness of sweet little girls.”13 Once hailed as a role model for young girls, Wonder Woman was now too violent, and possibly a lesbian to boot.

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11 Robbins, *Pretty in Ink*, 96
12 Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, loc. 4657
As a result, in 1954, the American Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency took up the crusade against comic books, bringing industry leaders to court. It made no difference that there were never any official statements that definitively linked comic books with juvenile delinquency. A respected and apparent authority had gone up against artists and writers of no national reputation and secured an apparent moral victory. Despite the industry only receiving suggestions to “tone down” violence and to have a greater mind towards including a stricter morality, the damage was done. Even without any formal indictment, they had still lost the moral battle. Some publishers would collapse and never emerge; EC Comics abandoned all their horror titles and focused solely on their satirical magazine, *Mad*. This would be the company’s only surviving title until it was subsumed by DC Comics in the 1960s.

In response to the hearings, American comics companies formed the self-regulatory Comics Code Authority, whose seal of approval had to be put on every comic before it hit the shelves. The result was decades of tepid storytelling and juvenile-oriented plotlines, cementing the idea that this was a medium only for young boys. Edgier content, with horror and sexuality, was driven out of the mainstream. Many girls’ comics, too, were either toned down or gone altogether. Some, like *Archie*, managed to survive but most comics disappeared. Loss of variety meant a similar loss of jobs and many writers and artists—especially women and minorities, last to be hired and first to be fired—went packing. Once rich with genres, only a few titles and publishers survived, with the companies that would become Marvel and DC limping out of the fifties on their superhero titles. Some artists went back to the newspaper strips; others would leave the industry for good.

Where women had been a large presence in the comics industry, they were now a rarity. Marie Severin had worked for EC Comics and their horror line until the fallout of the U.S.
Senate hearings saw the company downsized. She hoped to work for Disney Animation only to be told that they did not hire women, regardless of skill. She eventually found production work at Timely Comics, but would not be allowed any artistic leadership until 1966 when she drew five pages for an *Esquire* article that the male artists apparently could not be bothered to draw. Finally noticed, she became the lead penciler on several titles. One other exception was Ramon Fradon, who applied to DC comics in 1950 and was immediately hired. For ten years, she was lead penciler on the *Aquaman* title and leant her hand to the creation of some of their characters. However, she admitted to feeling out of place in the male-dominated field, tired of drawing “male power fantasies.”

**Jackie Ormes**

If it was difficult to be a woman in the comics industry, it was doubly so to be a woman of color. Very few African-American men had crossed the color lines in comics and no women, though this is not to be confused with the idea that there were none at all. Jackie Ormes is credited as the first African-American woman to have a syndicated comic strip and, erroneously, often said to be the only one in her field. In 1937, she debuted *Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem*, a story about the title character leaving the American South and riding a “Whites Only” car all the way to New York, where she becomes an entertainer and meets her estranged mother— whose disguised silhouette suggests she is Josephine Baker.

In 1940, Torchy’s story came to an end and Ormes spent the next decade writing single panel comics. Her first panel comic, *Candy*, told the story of a black maid and was unrelentingly patriotic, reflecting Ormes’ own beliefs as a lifelong campaigner for social justice. Candy’s unseen employer was made out to be a hoarder of needed wartime supplies, for which she was
scolded by the narrative. Where other black characters of the time were drawn as stereotypes that dated back to racist blackface acts, such as the childish pickaninny and maternal mammy, Candy and Torchy were drawn as both smart, courageous role models who were also beautiful and fashionable.

Ormes’ second effort during the 40s was Patty-Jo ‘n’ Ginger, the latter was a wisecracking young child and the former a silent adult character whose job was to react to Patty-Jo’s smart-aleck punchlines. Through Patty-Jo, Ormes made her point clear, particularly in a 1956 comic where Patty-Jo put together a care package to send to bus boycotters in Alabama. When Patty-Joon ‘n’ Ginger became popular, Ormes was able to merchandise her characters. In an era where black dolls—if they existed at all—were characterized often as maids and nanny characters and the now-famous Clark Doll Experiments were a relatively recent memory, Ormes saw an opportunity with Patty-Jo.14

The Terri Lee Company had a small line of ethnic dolls, but had difficulty selling their two black characters. Ormes contacted them, negotiating the creation of a plastic Patty-Jo doll with individually painted faces and hair that was advertised as washable and, by coincidence of material, had similar texture to a real African-American girl’s own hair. Ormes’ comics were so popular and influential in the African-American community that Langston Hughes said that if he were marooned on a desert island, one of the things he would miss was “Jackie Ormes’s cute

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14 The Clark Doll Experiments were performed by psychologists Kenneth and Maimie Clark, asking young black children to choose between white and black baby dolls. Overwhelmingly, the black children said that the white doll was prettier or better while the black doll was ugly. When asked which doll they resembled, some children were visibly and vocally upset when they realized they looked like the “bad” doll. The experiment has been subsequently recreated with almost the same results.
drawings."15 To have a doll the represented a positive, popular character such as Patty-Jo—
instead of an oppressive stereotype—would have been a powerful image in the black community.

While her papers were not as hard hit by the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*,
Jackie Ormes’ continuing political activism while living in Chicago brought her under scrutiny
of McCarthyist witch hunters, who kept a file on her from 1948 to 1958. Politically aware, some
of the last *Patty-Jo ‘n’ Ginger* strips were explicitly in support of the Alabama bus boycotts [fig.
6]. No doubt her FBI file only expanded when Ormes returned to her Torchy Brown character in
1950. Where the 1937 *Torchy Brown in From Dixie To Harlem* had centered on Torchy’s
exploits as she hunted for love and success, *Torchy Brown in Heartbeats* was still romance-
oriented but also explicitly denounced racism and sexism. By the time it ended, *Torchy Brown*
had recognized that pollution could make people ill and that minorities were of even greater
risk—all of which predated the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* by nine years. Her
comics would continue throughout the 1960s in syndication, widely read and undamaged by the
forces that had sent the mainstream running.

The Silver (1956-1970) and Bronze Ages (1970-1985) of Comics Sales

Ormes, Severin, and their compatriots and the stories they told were a rarity. After the
Comics Code, most female characters either found themselves to be flighty disgraces who
belonged in the kitchen or else irresponsible teeny-boppers, whose antics told readers that girls
themselves were flighty and insubstantial. Even the female superheroes that debuted at the time
reflected this message. DC’s Batwoman may have been a circus athlete and motorcycle stunt
rider, but her greatest ambition was to win the love of Batman by getting his attention. Hard-

University of Michigan Press.
hitting female reporter Lois Lane was turned into a desperate shrew by DC in *Superman’s Girlfriend Lois Lane* where her outlandish schemes to land into the arms of Superman were childish and more than once put her in real danger.

The mutant team of X-Men had begun as a team of young individuals whose genes gave them extraordinary powers. The original lineup was almost entirely male, aside from the young Jean Grey, who spent more time worrying about her love for a fellow team member than saving the world. Notable as well was her doting relationship with the titular Professor Xavier. Older and worldlier, the professor’s relationship with Jean often bordered on intellectual pederasty.

The mutant team was later relaunched as the *Uncanny X-Men*, featuring a multi-racial and gendered lineup that included the ever-popular Wolverine and an African woman named Storm. Created in an era of Blaxploitation films with sexualized black female characters such as Pam Grier’s “whole lot of woman,” Foxy Brown, Storm was a determined exception. Statuesque with long white hair and a black leather battle suit, Storm was sensual but also dignified, elegant, and composed, using her connection to the elements to remain in control. From her first appearance, Storm was her own woman. Storm’s powers over the weather saw her worshipped as a goddess before choosing to join her fellow mutants in fighting to save lives, even as mutants—in a clear metaphor that resonated with many social or racial outcasts—battled against public discrimination and hatred.

The Comics Code hung on for years, loosening in increments. *Spider-Man* told a cautionary tale about drug use. *The Incredible Hulk* turned the conflict into one of misunderstanding, with law enforcement and the army acting as antagonists, but not villains. The 1970s, however, kicked off when liberal archer Green Arrow teamed up with the lawful good Green Lantern and fired an arrow into the heart of the seventies debates of politics. In a famous
comic, a poor black man approaches Green Arrow and Green Lantern and says, “I been readin’ about you...how you work for the blue skins...and how on a planet someplace you helped out the orange skins...and you done considerable for the purple skins! Only there’s skins you never bothered with--! ...The black skins!”16 With this comic ringing in their ears, comics artists began thinking about the greater implications of their art.

While the 1960s and early 1970s had witnessed the so-called Silver Age of Comics in mainstream titles, progress was slow for the female creator and audience, sometimes taking two steps backward for every one forward. For Marvel, the mid-1970s Bronze Age opened with a character named the Valkyrie convincing female members of the Avengers to embrace women’s lib, only to be revealed as a manipulative villain and for the male heroes to say they hoped a lesson had been learned about “that women’s lib bull!”17 DC had Catwoman attempt to form an all-girl villain team only to be distracted by the prospect of a solo heist, turning feminism into something brittle and flighty. The characters’ outfits and hairstyles made have been updated to match the Discotheque fashions of the day, but the 1970s heroines remained largely aligned with patriarchal values.

Ironically, the super hero who should have flourished during women’s lib was the one least serviced by the period. Without Dr. Marston at the helm, Wonder Woman had languished, spending more time with her boyfriend than fighting crime. It worsened when Seduction of the Innocent called her “an undesirable ideal for girls, being the exact opposite of what girls are supposed to want to be.”18 The Amazon would be sanitized into a girlish character, lacking her wit and personality from early days. In the late 1960s, writers hoped to revitalize her by taking

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17 Madrid, *Supergirls*, 150
18 Madrid, *Supergirls*, 190
away her powers and making her a karate master in a mod pantsuit [fig. 7]. While she did regain her personality, the new Wonder Woman lacked her iconic strength. In the premier issue of *Ms.* Magazine, Wonder Woman was the cover girl but not in her new, “liberated” form but in classic tiara [fig. 8]. Gloria Steinem even wrote DC, pleading for the return of the most recognizable superheroine to regain her powers and become that “undesirable ideal” again.
CHAPTER TWO
UNDERGROUND COMICS TO MODERN DAY

Pop Art and Comix

With mainstream comics bound and gagged by their own regulatory comics code, what had once been vibrant content full of freewheeling superheroes or edgy horror for adults was muted into moralistic children’s content. The artist Roy Lichtenstein took note of the medium’s change. Returning to his art studies after World War II on the G.I. Bill, it is likely that Lichtenstein had been a reader of the Golden Age comics often mailed to soldiers in family-made care packages. As an artist in the 1960s, he returned to that comic book imagery, appropriating and reinterpreting panels in his art. While he drew specifically from published comics around him, Lichtenstein altered them and painted from his own adjusted drawings. His “recomposed” paintings sometimes minutely changed details and expressions while sometimes completely altering dialog to serve the painting.19

Simultaneous to the drudging march of progression in the 1960s for mainstream comics, another type of comic book was beginning to surface. These comics had neither the traditional narrative content nor the streamlined artistic polish of DC and Marvel—nor did they wish to. Called “underground comics” or, alternately, comix these titles sought to distinguish themselves from their straitlaced predecessors. Just as Roy Lichtenstein appropriated the visual vocabulary of comics in high art, the artists of comix hijacked mainstream comics’ format to deliver a stubbornly countercultural message.

Where superheroes had grown up in World War II, comix grew up in antiauthoritarian times and came of age in the Vietnam War. This, along with the advent of Pop Art, created the

perfect environment for the dissatisfied comics artist. Their “canvas” too, was ripe for the subverting. “[I]t was this format,” Hatfield explains in his preface to *Alternative Comics*, “so widely associated with faceless industrial entertainment, which underground cartoonists usurped and redefined in the late 1960s. Comix transformed the medium into a vehicle…in tune with the radical sensibilities of the Vietnam-era counterculture.”  

They did this through content that would never have gotten the Comics Code Authority’s stamp of approval. In fact, they openly mocked it: the first volume of R. Crumb’s *Zap Comix* [fig. 9] proudly displayed a false approval stamp reading, “Approved by the ghost writers in the sky.”

The narrative and artistic content of comix was deliberately iconoclastic, written for adults and not for the juvenile reading market. They departed, purposefully, from the tidy, streamlined art of big publishers such as DC and Marvel and made their artwork messy and unrefined, deliberately amateurish and unprofessional. Like their Pop Art contemporaries, underground comics artists took the familiar packaging of the commercial and injected it with sarcasm and subversion, creating an art form steeped in irony. The content was often ribald and vulgar, sold as a reading material for adults, sexually and verbally explicit. The medium took shameless jabs at the culture around it, eagerly mocking the stagnancy of mainstream comics in the same pages mocking the hippie love culture erupting into the 1960s. Where mainstream comics were carefully apolitical and forced to promote authority figures as uniformly good, comix frequently opened fire on the political world around them.

The art process of comix was similarly subversive. In the forties, the single artist producing all the story and art had become more exception than standard. Instead, each stage of

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21 Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 12
production had been farmed out to different departments: pencils, inking, color/toning, and lettering, creating a consistent and refined product where one issue was visually identical to the next. This is still the standard procedure today in the mainstream where Marvel’s 19th issue of *Hawkeye* credits Matt Fraction (writing), David Aja (pencils and ink), Matt Hollingsworth (color art), and Chris Eliopoulos and David Aja again (lettering).\(^{22}\) In contrast, *comix* were a determinedly individualistic movement, written and drawn and finished by a single person. While not the first person to create an underground comic, his completely solo effort on *Zap Comix* is why R. Crumb is considered to be one of the parents of comix.

Between the push for subversion of industry standards and the individualism of the process, the aesthetic of underground comics was similarly deviant from what was traditionally on offer in the average comic book. Instead of idealized realism, comix were inspired by the newspaper strips and the earlier days of comics. The art was deliberately cartoonish and exaggerated, meant to look amateurish in comparison to mainstream comics. They also interwove the styles of traditional comics with their own “ugly” styles to create dramatic juxtaposition of aesthetics. These comics flouted the sterility of the mainstream, preferring over the top sexual vulgarity that would never have gotten the Comics Code’s seal of approval.

Even purchasing an underground comic became an act of countercultural subversion. Before the advent of the comic shop or the arrival of comics to the chain bookstore, comics were usually purchased with papers and magazines at the newsstands. Comix, meanwhile, had to be purchased at local hubs and centers of the hippie community: the decidedly kid-unfriendly head shop.

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Feminist Anthologies

Underground comics’ aggression against the status quo fell perfectly in step with the vocal movement of second wave feminism. Ejected from the superhero genre, female comics artists were working largely in production or independently, submitting their artwork to publications like *The Village Voice*. Excited by the possibilities of underground comics, production assistant Lee Marrs was disappointed to learn that underground comic books still suffered from the same “boys club” mentality as the aboveground medium. Underground presses were largely friends printing friends, making it nearly impossible for new talent to break out among the established names.23

In response, women began producing their own comic books. Trina Robbins, comic creator and historian, joined the feminist newspaper *It Ain’t Me, Babe* and was then instrumental to putting out *It Ain’t Me, Babe Comics*, touted as “the first-ever North American feminist, all-woman comic book anthology.”24 Several contributions and independent projects followed, including the first long-running all female comic, *Wimmen’s Comics*, founded by a collective of ten women including Michelle Brand, Lee Marrs, Trina Robbins, and Aline Kominsky (later Kominsky-Crumb) in 1972. This groundbreaking anthology would enjoy a twenty-year run, finishing in 1992.

However, the underground feminist comics fell prey to the same critiques as much of mainstream feminism. It took two years for *Wimmen’s Comics* to feature a lesbian cartoonist. Seeking a space and a voice, more titles appeared to cater to the dearth of queer artists and writers, including Mary Wings’ *Come Out Comics* and *Dyke Shorts*. Produced simultaneously

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23 Robbins, *Pretty in Ink*, 125
24 Robbins, *Pretty in Ink*, 126
with *Wimmen’s Comics* was the queer, feminist comic *Tits & Clits*, inspired by the double fronts of queer exclusion and the same sexism Lee Marrs encountered.

**Alternative Comics and Graphic Novels**

Underground comics often blurred the lines between the fictional and autobiographical, all with their noses stubbornly thumbed at the mainstream. In doing so, they inspired yet another form of making comics. Taking a measured approach, so-called independent or alternative comics drew on the freedom of the underground comic while attempting the longer narrative structure of the mainstream comic. In Hatfield’s words, “alternative comics cultivated a more considered approach to the art form, less dependent on gouging taboos (though that continued too, of course) and more open to the possibility of extended and ambitious narratives.”  

This approach was what would lead to the creation of the longer form graphic novel, of which Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God* is considered to be the first.

The content of alternative comics were often autobiographical or else comfortably slice-of-life, allowing artists to ponder the workings of life in ways that combined word and text. Some of them, such as Aline Kominsky, began in the comix scene where she was a contributor to *Wimmen’s Comix*, writing autobiographical stories that discussed her own sexuality. She would later move that same artistic frankness into several independent comic books, such as *Love That Bunch: An Unromantic Nonadventure Story* [fig. 10], in which she explicitly discusses marital and date rape and uses the “ugliness” of the style to emphasize the harshness of the moments. Where other media are sometimes accused of framing rape as a titillating scene, Kominsky drew it as awkward, contorting the victims’ faces with displeasure and giving the

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25 Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, Introduction
perpetrators painfully gleeful expressions, preventing a viewer from taking any visual pleasure. She would later continue to explore that explicit work in her collaboration with her husband Robert Crumb in the *Dirty Laundry* project in which they drew self-portraits interacting. Some of these self-portraits include explicit sexual imagery but also explored their anxieties as parents and of balancing their careers with married life.\(^26\)

In all of her autobiographical comics, including *Dirty Laundry*, Kominsky-Crumb rarely drew herself as she actually looked, preferring instead to emphasize her nose and jawline with thick, heavy lines, typically set in a grimace. This stylized avatar of herself likely provided some level of mental distance, especially when discussing domestic and sexual abuse she had experienced. In that way, Kominsky-Crumb and other women creating comix who downplayed their own looks are not unlike the painter Frida Kahlo, who exaggerated her facial hair and jawline in self-portraits that examined her life and mental state after a debilitating accident that would affect her for the rest of her life. This psychic distance allowed them the space to be candid about their own experiences.

In 1978, Art Spiegelman began his Holocaust comic *Maus*, in which the Jews were mice and the Nazis cats. This comic, with its serious tone and subject matter, gained fame well beyond the independent comics scene throughout its publication in the eighties. This growing appreciation paved the way for artists, and an audience, who wanted to approach comics as a real medium. In 2000, Marjane Satrapi would publish the similarly autobiographical *Persepolis*, detailing the life and death and coming of age during Iran’s Islamic Revolution, later turning her

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\(^26\) Carolee Schneemann’s performance piece, *Fuses*, predates *Dirty Laundry* by about a decade. *Fuses* hinged on the premise of portraying the artist and her partner, Jim Tenney, in the act of coitus. Certain pages of *Dirty Laundry* are similar in content. Both artists were involved in feminist, underground art and it is not unlikely that *Fuses* may have influenced Kominsky-Crumb’s endeavors with Crumb.
work into an Oscar-nominated film. Use of this format to tell a literary-minded memoir advanced
the credibility of these books as a real art form.

As comics slowly climbed back out of the niche market, more alternate and graphic novel
works were appearing. In the 1980s, one such artist rising to attention was Alison Bechdel,
whose comics were appearing in various queer publications across the United States. Her comic,
*Dykes to Watch Out For*, had all the same slice-of-life and conscious aplomb of the comix and
alternate books that preceded and were happening around her. In her pages and strips, Bechdel
chronicled the lives and anxieties of a group of queer female friends in a nondescript city.

In discussing queer issues, she inevitably came to discuss women’s issues as a whole and,
in 1985, Bechdel wrote a strip called *The Rule* that would become a pop cultural litmus test. In
*The Rule*, the character Mo says that any movie she sees must pass certain criteria to satisfy her
feelings on gender bias. The rule requires that there must be at least two women in any film who
talk about something other than a man (later permutations added that these women must also
both have names). This strip later entered popular parlance as “the Bechdel Test” and was
applied over time to works besides movies and, eventually, looped back to application in comics.

The success of *Dykes to Watch Out For* allowed Bechdel’s other works to join the ranks
of the graphic novel. In 2006, she published the critically acclaimed memoir *Fun Home: A
Family Tragicomic* about her childhood in the Midwest and her relationship with her closeted
father, influencing yet more autobiographical comics the way that *Maus* had influenced her. In
2014, she would be awarded the MacArthur Prize for her work on *Fun Home* and a musical
based on her book would win several Tony awards in 2015. Like her predecessors in
underground comix, Bechdel drew herself and the people in her life in sparse in lines, minimally
shaded with green ink washes in most of the comic. In scenes recreating old photographs or
showing literature formative to Bechdel’s life, she shifted to a more realistic style, using heavy black cross-hatching that made those scenes darker. These juxtaposed with Bechdel’s stylized memories, made light with minimal cross-hatching and the light green washes.

Where the 1970s’ emergence of more progressive superhero stories came to be called the Bronze Age, the rise of the graphic novel was hailed as the beginning of a Modern Age for comics. This approach allowed for the publication and success of the revisionist superhero comic, *Watchmen*, named for the philosopher Juvenal’s “*Quis custodiet ipos custodes?*” often translated as “Who watches the watchmen?” In this graphic novel, writer Alan Moore examined the idea of superheroes who were not wholly good but deeply flawed and often morally questionable, suggesting that superheroes are not inherently trustworthy. Notably, this comic created the violent arbiter of good and evil, Rorschach, who wore an ever-changing liquid mask. Both an example and a deconstruction of this kind of violent hero, Rorschach inspired the fatalistic, violent antiheroes of the 1980s and 1990s.

Following the lead of the dark and cynical tone of *Watchmen*, mainstream comics cast off the Comics Code for good, embracing grim and gritty ultraviolence and sexuality. Where superheroes had previously been explicitly on the side of good, characters like The Punisher were driven by revenge instead of goodness. Artists like Rob Liefeld created ultra-masculine men, bulky with muscles and machine guns, and physically impossible women to fall into their arms. Under Rob Liefeld, male characters carried an excess of musculature, beyond the dreams of any body builder, with oversized guns to match. His women were impossibly thin and often so distorted in the pursuit of “sexy” poses that, in real life, their bones might have broken to maintain such positions [fig. 11]. The women of these grim and gritty comics were just as strong,
just as willing to kill, but seemed to be doing it in far more ripped spandex and spiked heels than their male counterparts.

Women in Refrigerators

It was in this dark and gritty time that Alan Moore wrote 1988’s *Batman: The Killing Joke* that would forever alter the storyline of Barbara Gordon, the original Batgirl. *The Killing Joke* attempts to explain the background of Batman’s most infamous nemesis, the Joker. The character’s history is intercut with present scenes of Joker attempting to mentally torment the police commissioner Jim Gordon. In order to hurt Gordon the most, the Joker kidnaps Barbara, shooting her in the spine and then stripping her nude to take photos of her suffering. These photographs are then mailed to Commissioner Gordon. All of the physical and sexual assault the Joker inflicts on Barbara is meant to act as a means of hurting a man in her life, using her pain as a narrative device in the squaring off of two male foes.

Eventually, in later comics, Barbara Gordon would recover. Wheelchair bound, she would pass the title of Batgirl on to other characters. Formerly a librarian, she used her computer skills to set up a crime-fighting network and took on an advisory, leadership role under the new code name of Oracle. As Oracle, she led an all-female team called the Birds of Prey, whose original members included Dinah Lance (Black Canary) and Helena Bertinelli (Huntress).

Barbara Gordon triumphed over the injuries done to her at the hands of the Joker and would become one of the most famous and recognizable disabled characters, proving that in the world of comics, a hero was just as effective with a ready mind as a batarang. This does not change the fact, however, that her character was maimed in a story that did not really revolve around her. *The Killing Joke* was meant to be, first, an examination of the Joker and, second, an
examination of Jim Gordon. Barbara was not injured, in this story, to further her own narrative. Instead, she was assaulted to create more pain for Jim Gordon as the Joker struck out against his loved ones.

This trope of sacrificing female characters as a means of creating male pain would eventually lead then-comics fan Gail Simone to coin the term “Women in Refrigerators,” sometimes shortened to the verb form of “fridging,” in 1999. The term was inspired by a scene in a *Green Lantern* comic, where the hero’s girlfriend Alex is murdered by a villain, who then mutilates her corpse and stuffs her into the Lantern’s fridge for him to come home and discover what has been done [fig. 12]. Again, as with the maiming of Barbara Gordon, this had nothing to do with Alex’s narrative. On both a textual and metatextual level, her death was used as a means of causing pain to the main, male character. The narrative, as with Barbara Gordon, used it as a means of highlighting the extent of a character’s villainy.

Simone and her friends realized that this trope appeared at an alarmingly high rate, causing her to begin the website Women in Refrigerators. The list they compiled highlighted the various ways female characters had been abused and tortured, often as a means of furthering the pain and narratives of male characters. One infamous example was the death of Gwen Stacy in a 1973 arc of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, in which Spider-Man’s nemesis the Green Goblin kidnaps Gwen Stacy, Spider-Man’s girlfriend, and throws her from the Brooklyn Bridge. As Gwen Stacy falls, Spider-Man attempts to catch her by the ankles with his artificial webbing, only for Gwen to die. Given the *snap* sound effect by her neck, it is left ambiguous if her death comes from the Green Goblin’s violence or the sudden stop brought by Spider-Man’s web. The depiction of her moment of death was alarmingly sensual, with Gwen’s blond hair flowing down her back and her legs taut like a dancer’s [fig. 13]. Gwen Stacy died as prettily as a Pre-Raphaelite Ophelia.
floating gracefully to her death rather than struggling against drowning. As Spider-Man held the
death Gwen in his arms, evoking a pieta, her death became a tool to provide Spider-Man with
angst.

To that end, many female characters were either directly the victims of outright sexual
violence or were killed in ways that became alarmingly evocative of sex, such as the 2004 death
of the character Stephanie Brown. At the time, Stephanie Brown was a character in the Batman
comics who had already dealt with an abusive family and a teen pregnancy, transcending those
struggles to become the first female character to take on the title of Batman’s (normally male)
sidekick, Robin. However, a villain name Black Mask took the teenaged Stephanie, tying her up
and torturing her “over several issues” of comics before ultimately killing her with a phallic
power drill. Jeffrey Brown observed, to add insult to injury, “Stephanie’s gruesome death had
only a small impact on the story line, and almost no impact on Batman.” The gratuitous
violence of her death was barely a glancing blow on the story.

Death was cheap in comic books, killing and reviving characters with all the vivre of the
most complex daytime soap opera. Yet, Simone noted, the ones resurrected the most were the
heterosexual, white, male characters. Queer characters found themselves with a similar rate of
elimination, as did characters of color. These latter categories of characters were less lucky, both
in their manner of death and rate of return. It was these male characters who “die heroically and
are often commemorated and/or magically brought back from the dead on a regular basis.”
Stephanie Brown did return from the dead, in 2011, but to little fanfare.

28 Brown, Dangerous Curves, 175
“No Girls Allowed” in Comic Books

While the 1990s and early 2000s saw comics flourish again into popular and even respected forms of media, it also brought its share of troubles. This revived popularity created new demands and added value to the comics of the past. Made rare by wartime paper rationing and the passage of time, old Golden Age comics were selling now for upwards of thousands of dollars. The first appearance of Superman in *Action Comics*, in good condition, could even net the seller upwards of one million dollars. Convinced that all comic books would eventually become equally valuable, the early 1990s witnessed a speculators’ market on which Marvel and DC were all too happy to capitalize. The Big Two flooded the market with highly publicized, “not to be missed” storylines and gimmick collectable covers decked out in foil and holographic images. By doing so, however, they simply flooded the market with a glut of the same comics, meaning these comics were neither rare nor remotely valuable.

As all bubbles do, the speculators’ market burst disastrously in the late 1990s. The financial collapse saw several comic book stores close. The fallout was so severe that Marvel comics was forced to file for bankruptcy in 1996, saving themselves by merging with toy companies and selling several of their movie rights. The height of the speculators’ market also turned comics producers towards only one kind of consumer.

While proprietors of early anime conventions saw that the white, male geek was losing his dominance over that world, DC and Marvel acted as if those were the only consumers left. As such, superheroes got bulkier, with badder attitudes and bigger guns, trading on a male power fantasy. Meanwhile, female characters—always objectified—got ever sexier, a fact commented upon in 2005 when busty heroine Power Girl said, “Green Lantern used to ask me why I never

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29 See Chapter Three
wore a mask. It's because most of the time...they ain't lookin' at my face.” Power Girl was a heroine from the same planet and with the same powers as Superman. Where the Man of Steel wore his famous S-logo on his chest, Kara Zor-L had a circular cut out that showed off what was apparently her most prominent super power. Faced with media so clearly designed for someone else, alienated readers went elsewhere.

Such attitudes resulted in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Comic store proprietors and publishers saw no reason to welcome “outsiders” into their worlds, preferring to guard their customer base to a certain membership. This led Jeffrey A. Brown to comment in his 2001 book, “There are female fans, but they are much less in number and usually much less about their passion for comics,” later adding that “A few of these women actually read comic books themselves but most are wives or girlfriends who don’t seem to share any real enthusiasm.” Where male fans guarded “their” stores with the force of Batman and his Batcave, their female counterparts might have looked at the same building with all the trepidation of a criminal regarding the same comic’s Arkham Asylum.30

From the beginning, comic book superheroes lived on the airwaves as well as on paper, expanding their audience through other avenues. Television shows contributed to the hero’s mythology but in a way that was more self-contained than decades of back story for new readers. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, DC had put out several animated series, including *Batman: The Animated Series, Batman Beyond, Justice League,* and more. Many of these series and feature films received critical acclaim and even awards, the Emmy among them. Originally working with studios like Warner Brothers and its subsidiaries, DC eventually contracted almost

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30 Interestingly, Brown revisits the idea in his 2011 book, *Dangerous Curves*—also cited in this thesis—discussing female heroines and the marginalization of female fandom, examining the reasons why so few women were in that comic book store in 2001.
exclusively with Cartoon Network. It was a relationship that proved stymying for creative teams and disappointing for fans hoping for diversity.

In the early and mid-2000s, DC capitalized on its teams of former sidekicks with the shows *Teen Titans* and *Young Justice*, starring the younger companions of established heroes such as Batman’s Robin and Superboy. The anime-inspired *Teen Titans*—with many female regular and guest-starring characters—enjoyed a respectable five seasons and was later revived in the kid-friendly spinoff *Teen Titans! Go*! Unfortunately *Young Justice* did not fare so well. Despite critical praise and a 2011 Emmy for Outstanding Individual in Animation, the series was cancelled after its second season with no warning.

Fans and even professionals like filmmaker Kevin Smith were stunned when it came to light why exactly the show had been canceled in a 2013 interview. Paul Dini, the writer and producer of *Young Justice*, explained why Cartoon Network executives had chosen to end the show: the viewership had been largely female. Dini continued, saying that executives believed girls simply would not buy licensed merchandise and were therefor simply not worth considering in the market:

> We need boys, but we need girls right there, right one step behind the boys”—this is the network talking—“one step behind the boys, not as smart as the boys, not as interesting as the boys, but right there.”... we had families and girls watching, and girls really became a big part of our audience...Cartoon Network was saying, “Fuck no, we want the boys’ action, it's boys' action, this goofy boy humor we've gotta get that in there. And we can't--” And I'd say, but look at the numbers, we've got parents watching, with the families, and then when you break it down—“Yeah, but the—so many—we've got too many girls. We need more boys.31

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It was as if executives simply could not fathom the idea of a valuable female readership. Rather than learn to create storylines and superheroes for another half of the population, Cartoon Network simply chose not to bother.

Feminist Writers and Heroines

Given the general attitude of the comic shop and little interest in marketing otherwise, it is unsurprising how few women wanted to visit such businesses. It further fueled the idea that women were not reading comics. In a personal interview, Kelly Sue DeConnick re-asserted, “Women have always made comics. Women have always read comics. The percentage of female readership went down in the country when superhero comics became...aggressively unfriendly to women.” She insisted as well—a claim backed by the sales numbers of such female superhero titles as *Sailor Moon* and *Card Captor Sakura* from Japan—that it had nothing to do with the content:

> [T]here is nothing inherently masculine about telling stories with pictures and words. There is nothing—and even if you break it down into the superhero genre, which is the dominant genre in this country—there’s nothing inherently masculine about that! It can be done in a way that is aggressively unfriendly to women...But it can also be wonderfully inviting. There is nothing inherently masculine about the idea of heroism. There is nothing inherently masculine about power fantasies and I would put forth that, as a five foot tall woman who is largely impotent in a larger society, I think I can teach any man in any room about power fantasies.\(^{32}\)

With a long career of adapting Japanese comics for an English audience before writing for DC, Marvel, and Image Comics, DeConnick is well versed in the many ways comics can offer readers of any stripe the chance of escape.

Currently, DeConnick is head writer for *Captain Marvel*. Under DeConnick, Carol Danvers’ storylines aim to push her away from her infamous history that Gail Simone summed
up thusly on the character list of *Women in Refrigerators*: “[M]ind-controlled, impregnated by rape, powers and memories stolen, cosmic-powered then depowered, alcoholic - SHEESH!”

Carol Danvers’ story centers on her acts of heroism and female empowerment. To drive home Carol’s status in-world and to readers, one of the first pages reminds us that Carol is actually a military woman and—as a full bird colonel—one who actually holds a higher rank than Captain America.

The creator of *Women in Refrigerators*, Gail Simone, started out as a popular and critical fan but would eventually become the longest running female writer of DC’s Wonder Woman. Her outspoken feminism saw her on a panel about diversity in media at the White House. Despite her admitted initial habit of biting the proverbial hand by criticizing big publishers in comics, Gail Simone became a writer for some of DC’s most popular titles. Her Wonder Woman was both Amazon princess and deadly warrior, determinedly self-assured and forward about the equal treatment she and other women deserved.

Arguably, the character that has been most transformed under Simone’s leadership is Dynamite Comics’ *Red Sonja*. First appearing in the 1970s, Red Sonja, the She-Devil with a Sword, lived for the male gaze. Sonja’s origin story for decades is that after bandits killed her family, she is raped and left for dead. Rather than die, she is visited by a goddess of vengeance who assists Sonja with prodigious strength on the condition that she sleep with no man who has not bested her in combat. In her chainmail bikini, the original Red Sonja was the untouchable Amazon of Greek myth in a pulp world.

In 2012, Simone became head writer for Red Sonja and started her anew. While her family is still killed by bandits, this iteration of Sonja is neither raped nor bound by laws of chastity. She becomes a warrior honed by years of gladiatorial combat and wears her chainmail
bikini for her own freedom of movement, mixed in with other practical outfits. What was once a cheesecake comic about a female victim became an empowered story of a woman who was fierce and funny. Sonja often complained of being hungry, smelly, “randy,” or some combination of the three. Furthermore, Simone noticed that the publisher itself was changing. In her blog, she admitted, “I once thought of them as a cheesecake company only, yet soon, they will have more female creators writing regular books than companies ten times their size…” and went on to commend the quality of writing and art they were producing.

On the Marvel side, perhaps one of the most subversively telling scenes in comics that hint to change can be found in *Black Widow: In the Name of the Rose*, written by Marjorie M. Liu. In this scene, the titular Black Widow has been captured and is being held by her male captors in a meat locker [fig. 14]. She is stripped naked and tied to a chair while they gloat that they will torture her and then leave what remains for her boyfriend to find. In essence, they plan to literally fridge her. Not only does Black Widow break out of their hold, she incapacitates them, gathers information, and dresses before her allies can come to her aid [fig. 15].

In these scenes, Natasha’s nudity is very carefully handled. While she is naked and vulnerable, artist Daniel Acuña draws on cinematic technique, framing the scene with selection of wide shots and heavy shadow to obscure and desexualize her nudity and suffering. Panels drawn close to her face showed Natasha with pallid skin, blue from the cold, and dark circles under her eyes. Once freed, however, Natasha strips her opponent of his clothes and appropriates his shirt and jacket, wearing them buttoned up only above her navel, freely using her allure now that she is freed. In those scenes, Natasha is drawn with a confident posture, her skin returned to

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its normal tone, allowing Natasha to be beautiful in her liberation not her captivity. Marjorie Liu explained that this imagery came from a crossroad of specific choices and happy accident:

*I was very deliberate in specifying that there should be nothing erotic in those scenes when Natasha is captured — specifically because captured women are so often eroticized, and even though Natasha is naked, restrained, she’s the one still in power. She never for a moment stops being in power. And not through her sexuality, but through her wits and will. That was very important to convey.*

*As for the next scene, that was an artistic choice that Daniel made. All I said in the script was that she walks out wearing her captor’s clothes. But clothes themselves — what they conceal and reveal — are often more erotic than simple nudity, and at that point she’s free, she’s come out on top — her sexiness can now be part of her aura in ways that wouldn’t have been appropriate in the previous scene.*

In this way, the Black Widow remains one of Marvel’s most famous femme fatales, exuding confident sexuality without eroticizing her victimhood.

This scene is bears strong resemblance to one of the most definitive and heavily-advertised scenes in the 2012 *Avengers* film, where we are introduced to Black Widow in a seemingly dangerous position. Here, she is in a cocktail dress, but still tied to a chair while men threaten her [fig. 16]. The tables are turned when Black Widow’s handler calls them on the phone and Black Widow protests, “I’m working. These morons are giving me everything.” In that line, she reveals that not only has she not been at their mercy, she has been playing on their expectations of feminine weakness to exploit them for her own gain. While it is unknown if the *Avengers*’ scriptwriters read *The Name of the Rose*, the similarity between scenes makes it clear that neither version of Natasha is a damsel in distress.

The character of Miss America had slowly waned out of her own title in the 1950s and 60s but returned in 2011. Appearing in their book *Vengeance*, this new iteration was America Chavez [fig. 17], a Hispanic heroine created by Joe Casey and Nick Dragotta. In her creators’ hands, the fifteen-year-old member of the Teen Brigade was drawn with the body and outfit of
an adult woman in low-riding pants and bustier with her hair drawn loosely, better suited to walking the runway than fighting crime. This already revealing costume was often shredded with cleavage on prominent display. Almost gleeful in his sexualization of a Hispanic teen girl, Joe Casey went on record as saying that America did not wear underwear in battle.36

Later, America would join the second lineup of a team called the Young Avengers. Written and illustrated by the Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie—both men—retooled her into a no-nonsense young adult who wore comfortable boots and hot pants with a star-spangled t-shirt and denim jacket. McKelvie—who also illustrated *The Name of the Rose’s* prologue—often showed America emerging from a fight bruised and bloody, but never in sexualized way [fig. 18]. Gillen also wrote America as a lesbian, a facet of her personality that was not sexualized for the male gaze in *Young Avengers*. This was in a book that featured several other queer characters, one of whom was the Jewish and gay Billy Kaplan, who is also currently the most powerful entity in the entire Marvel Universe.

The greatest proof of the desire for new and diverse heroes, by far, is of the most recent incarnation of Ms. Marvel. Carol Danvers had given up the title and become *Captain Marvel*, taking over for a now-deceased male character. The new Ms. Marvel was announced in November 2013 and her first issue went into publication in February of the following year. This new Ms. Marvel was to be Kamala Khan, a Pakistani-American, Muslimah from Jersey City. Wearing a homemade costume fashioned with fabric paint and a modest “burkini” swimsuit to accommodate her shape shifting powers, Kamala is teenaged, female, and a religious and ethnic

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36 “One thing we've decided about the new character, Miss America Chavez, is that she doesn't wear underwear. Believe it or not, that was an important creative decision. I think it says something about her personality that she deliberately goes out into the field sans underwear.” Casey, Joe. "When Worlds Collide: Joe Casey's Vengeance Part 1." Interview by Tim Callahan. Comic Book Resources. May 23, 2011. Accessed February 16, 2015. http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=32457.
minority. In this way, Kamala embodies the underdog, marginalized superhero that a white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied superhero no longer fulfills.

Kamala Khan’s selling power is at unexpected heights. Although comic books have reached new popularity and sales with the increase of popular superhero movies, the books themselves typically do not reach similar numbers. This is why it is particularly remarkable that Kamala Khan’s first issue has gone into a sixth printing. Most printings run and sell around 3,000 copies. Going into a sixth sets Kamala’s numbers into approximately 50,000. Those sales numbers put *Ms. Marvel* on the same tier as Wolverine and Batman.37

**Bitch Planet**

At times, however, creators find themselves facing unwarranted censure as much as their own characters. Despite her career of over a decade, there are readers and reporters who would undermine her by suggesting Kelly Sue DeConnick has only reached this level of success because of her marriage. DeConnick’s husband is Matt Fraction, current author for the Marvel comic *Hawkeye*, which has received critical praise and Eisner Award nominations. These accusations are constant and DeConnick has responded, vocally. In her own words, she explains that she was in fact “blind-submitted for my first gig at Marvel.”38 DeConnick also reminded her accusers that if anyone might have benefitted from nepotism, it would actually be Fraction, who had been her guest to several Marvel events.

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Perhaps with those prejudices in mind, DeConnick wrote *Bitch Planet* for Image Comics. *Bitch Planet* is a dystopian story set in the future in which women who do not conform to standards of beauty or behavior—or whose husbands simply want to trade in for a younger model—are branded NC (non-compliant) and imprisoned off earth, the titular Bitch Planet.³⁹

Drawing on literary predecessors in dystopian science fiction such as *1984* and *Brave New World*, whose premises similarly hinge on a population’s compliance, *Bitch Planet* follows a similar storyline. All three issues are illustrated in a restrained style with flat, lower saturation color, rather than the bright, slick coloring typically favored in modern comics. The individual covers of each issue, as well, draw directly on old pulp science fiction covers and movie posters. *Bitch Planet* #1’s cover features a limited color palette with textures to emulate the colored “ben day” dots of old style printing [fig. 19]. The text on the cover is also evocative, featuring large type that reads, “ARE YOU WOMAN ENOUGH TO SURVIVE” and “GIRL GANGS…CAGED AND ENRAGED.”

The characters of *Bitch Planet* are drawn diversely from the story’s protagonist, Kamau Kogo, is a black woman with a wiry athletic build, scarred from fighting onto the compact, undersized Meiko. These diverse foreground characters are often drawn in panels where the background is rife with in-story advertisements for plastic surgery, cosmetics, and diets, including “The parasitic worm diet that is all the rage with today’s tween celebs.” One such NC is Penny Rolle, a self-confident overweight woman happy in her own appearance, described as “Habitual offender…insubordination assault, assault, assault, repeated citations for aesthetic offenses, capillary disfigurement and…wanton obesity” [fig. 20]. Penny’s refusal to comply with the idea that she must be thin to be beautiful is seen as criminally deviant.

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In *Bitch Planet*, the heroes are the disenfranchised women who do not always find themselves represented elsewhere. *Bitch Planet*’s story about the difficulties of living in a male-dominated society has resonated with readers. Some ardent fans have embraced their “non-compliance” and gotten the “NC” brand as a real tattoo, not dissimilar to people who get Captain America or Superman tattoos to express their esteem for their heroes. However, unlike other fan tattoos, branding oneself as non-compliant is often a statement of personal philosophy as well as admiration for their fictional heroes.
CHAPTER THREE
MANGA IN AMERICA AND WEBCOMICS

A Brief History of Manga

Simultaneous to the rise of American comics in the twentieth century, Japanese comics (manga) and their animated counterparts (anime) were taking shape. While not true of every Japanese show or comic, in the West, manga and anime are known for an exaggerated style that utilizes large, stylized eyes and fanciful characters with brightly colored hair and elaborate outfits. Related but entirely different from American comics, publishers licensed and imported manga for the U.S. When the medium’s popularity effected a change on the perception of comics’ audiences, American companies tried to adapt their styles and content to match.

Much like American cartoons and comic strips, Japanese comics have a long-reaching history. Associated with the preparatory stages of the woodblock printing process and the isolationist Tokugawa Period (1603-1868), the word originally referred to initial sketches or more informal prints in the same way that ‘cartoon’ once meant a renaissance artist’s preparatory work. The word dates back to Japanese printmaker Hokusai, whose “manga” were a series informal, sketchy images. In one such manga, the viewer can see the roots of the stylistic facial distortions so common to modern manga as well [fig. 21]. The American Commodore Perry eventually forced Japan to open to total European trade, starting the Meiji Era (1868-1912), a cultural exchange began.

While French impressionists were enjoying and taking inspiration from the new japonisme, Japanese artists were encountering western art. Writing for other westerners in Japan, Charles Wirgman began The Japan Punch [fig. 22], a magazine based on the British Punch. In The Japan Punch, Wirgman published satirical cartoons that blended Japanese aesthetics and
European copper-plate printing. These satirical drawings were adapted by Japanese artists into a style called *ponchi-e* (Punch drawings), which also poked fun at government figures. Eventually the term fell out of use and was folded into the repurposed umbrella term of manga.\(^{40}\)

As with American comics, the medium of manga continued to grow and transform although it was largely put on hold during World War II whereas American comics flourished. Japanese artists were either at the front lines or else restricted from making art. Those artists who did continue to produce were limited to harmless children’s cartoons or else outright propaganda. It was in the aftermath following the war that censorship began to relax.

One of the first manga to reappear in Japan was 1946’s *Sazae-San*, written by a woman named Machiko Hasegawa and whose protagonist is a young housewife named Sazae. *Sazae-San* initially ran in newspapers and utilized a simplistic black and white style that a Western eye might typically associate with western newspaper strips rather than the current impression of anime [fig. 23]. Notably, Sazae did not conform to the perfect idea of a traditional Japanese family at the time, living with her own parents rather than her husband’s and living for herself as much as her husband and family. The combination of an assertive and lively woman with a domestic fairytale of happiness proved to be a potent ideal that would keep *Sazae-San* running for almost thirty years, concluding its run in 1974.\(^{41}\)

Although not the first creator of manga to return after the war, Osamu Tezuka was, however, undoubtedly influential in both his native Japan and throughout the world. It was Osamu Tezuka’s work that largely popularized the large eyes and small noses and mouths thought to be typical of manga. Ironically his own style was inspired by the stylized protagonists seen in Walt Disney’s animated movies and Max Fleischer’s *Betty Boop*—known herself for

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\(^{41}\) Danziger-Russell, *Girls and their Comics*, 138-9
large, stylized eyes—cartoons from the West. His prolific career has earned him worldwide respect. Tezuka drew and wrote six hundred different titles, created some sixty animations, and was also an active doctor of medicine. Long before the popularity or availability of most manga, Tezuka’s work was among the first Japanese cartoons to be released in America where the animated adaptation of his *Tetsuwan Atom* was released as *Astro Boy*.

Tezuka also created female-oriented (“shojo,” Japanese for “girl”) manga, thought to be influenced by his family’s attending shows put on by the all-female Takarazuka Troupe. The Troupe’s use of blurred genders is thought to have influenced Tezuka’s manga *Ribon no Kishi* (*Knight of Ribbons*, translated as *Princess Knight*). Where other early women’s manga were romances or traditionally gendered stories, *Ribon no Kishi*’s Princess Sapphire was raised as a boy and went on daring adventures. Despite her “masculine” adventures, Princess Sapphire had large eyes that filled half her face, a petite nose, and short but curly hair that framed her face to emphasize that, while tomboyish, she was still a female character and feminine hero [fig. 24].

*Ribon no Kishi* ran from 1953 to 1956, precisely the same years that American comics were taking blows from *Seduction of the Innocent* and Senate hearings of 1954. Where the sprawling genres of American comics were curtailed by the restrictions following *Seduction of the Innocent*, Japanese and European comics faced no such penalty. Japan never had a Comics Code Authority and manga developed as a medium not synonymous with any one genre or age group. This continuing respect and profitability allowed female creators and consumers to thrive in their own market.

After World War II and the Senate hearings, American comics were forced into the genres of superheroes or light humor, while Japanese comics grew into reading material for all

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42 Gravett, *Manga* 26
ages and interests. Manga was not only actively marketed to female readers, but to different age groups, no different from the way they were marketed to a male audience. Teenage girls had thick magazines full of shojo offerings while adult women were marketed with the category of josei. These terms were eventually adapted by American publishers in the early 2000s when publisher Viz offered two circulating magazines with chapters of manga to read. Filled with shonen (boys’) comics, *Shonen Jump* enjoyed such a healthy readership that Viz would also publish a girls’ comic counterpart *Shojo Beat*.

Meanwhile, the 1960s and 70s were “the golden years of shojo manga.” As Japanese society hit a high stride, a loose collective of female artists called the 24 Nengumi—named for the 24th year of the Showa era in the Japanese calendar—formed. These women breathed new life into what was previously called “the lowest form of manga.” Their work expanded the kinds of storytelling seen in girl-oriented manga from romance to science fiction and fantasy to comedy.

**Magical Girls**

Shojo manga would also see the creation of the “magical girl” subgenre with 1962’s *Himitsu no Akko-Chan*, about an elementary school student given transformative powers by the spirit of a magic mirror, allowing her to become anyone she wishes. Typically, magical girls were given transformative powers, allowing them to create secret identities. Some magical girls used these powers, not to become superheroes, but to become pop idols. Others embraced the idea of becoming heroes, but in a distinctly feminine way. Where Marvel’s Dr. Donald Blake would lift the hammer Mjolnir to become the Norse god Thor, the titular protagonist of *Card*
Captor Sakura used a winged magic wand that transformed into a necklace shaped like a pink and gold, winged key.

It was in the early 1990s that an iconic and enduring magical girl appeared. Inspired by the concept of the superhero team, Naoko Takeuchi combined the idea with the magical girl to create the superhero Sailor Moon. The titular character’s alter ego, Usagi Tsukino, was an underachieving middle school student whose interests lay, in her own words, in napping and video games far more than they did in her grades. However, when approached by the talking cat Luna, Usagi acquired a brooch that allowed her to transform into a “Sailor Suited Guardian of Love and Justice.” The manga was so popular that it continued until 1997 for twelve books, as well as a two hundred episode animated series with three feature films.45 Its legacy was so enduring that a new anime, Sailor Moon Crystal, was released in 2014.

Subsequent chapters would introduce Sailor guardians for the whole solar system. Not only was this an all-female team, each character was fleshed out and fully realized. Drawn in battle suits that resembled a figure skater’s uniform with a short skirt and a sailor collar, Takeuchi’s characters had the long, graceful proportions of fashion designs. While the heroines were unafraid of violence—routinely killing their enemies outright, rather than healing or redeeming them—they were also distinctly feminine in different ways. Each girl’s character design, reflected her individual personality: Sailor Mercury was shy and smart, shown in her calm expressions and demure, closed poses, and typically associated with shades of blue and water. Sailor Jupiter’s more confrontational personality was shown in her character’s extreme

45 However, at times, the gender of the person handling a piece of media does affect the content. The first Sailor Moon anime shared directorial credits among three men. While the characters of the manga retained most of their core traits, the main female characters’ more noble qualities were downplayed in favor of sitcom-style infighting. The animated Sailor Guardians were far more likely to redeem their enemies rather than confront them directly.
height, often drawn in battle ready poses with hands in fists, while also highlighting the character’s femininity in her pink and green battle outfit and rose earrings [fig. 25].

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the label of “shonen” or “shojo” has an impact on the story’s content. While some sweeping generalizations might be made to shonen’s emphasis over action compared to shojo’s perceived attention to emotional interaction or to shojo’s tendency for more delicate artwork compared to shonen’s bold, black lines, there are as many exceptions to the rule as there are adherents. The titular female characters of Magic Knights Rayearth often emerged from battles as bloody [fig. 26] as those seen by the deadly Soul Reapers of the shonen series Bleach [fig. 27]. The eponymous character in Naruto cared as much about his fellow ninja and their emotional wellbeing with the same devotion Sailor Moon had for her fellow Guardians. Female artist Hiromu Arakawa’s most famous manga, Fullmetal Alchemist, ran in a monthly shonen magazine and favored a bold black and white style with heavy line work more typically associated with bold, “masculine” storytelling. Like Sailor Moon and Magic Knight Rayearth, the content of Fullmetal Alchemist never shied away from scenes of death and violence, just because of the creator’s gender.

Just as authors and audiences of any gender in the west are fascinated by retellings of the stories of chivalrous King Arthur, similar can be said about the legendary samurai troop of the Shinsengumi. Their stories have been approached and reinterpreted in film, television, and shojo and shonen manga. Kaze Hikaru is a shojo series about a young girl who disguises herself as a boy to join the legendary troop while Peacemaker Kurogane is a shonen series whose male protagonist has the same aspiration. Neither series shied away from the action and swordplay of the samurai genre, though Peacemaker Kurogane favored bloody violence while Kaze Hikaru focused on the emotional interplay between the characters, eventually ending as a love story.
Shonen and shojo, seinen and josei, are umbrella terms encompassing a near endless selection of subgenres. While it is inaccurate to say there is no discerning between the two, it is also inaccurate to say that whether a manga is aimed for boys or girls is determined by content. Both categories have romance, action, fantasy, science fiction, or any number of other genres, whether or not a series is shojo or shonen seems to have more to do with the author’s stated, intended audience than their storytelling.

Anime and Manga in America

*Sailor Moon*'s popularity was at its height in Japan when American companies were seeking to capitalize on what had been a lucrative formula. In the 1990s, afternoon children’s television was rife with shows made in America or imported from abroad, featuring teams of superheroes. Typically, these teams wore matching, color-coded outfits, just like the Sailor Guardians. However, most of these teams such as the various incarnations of the *Power Rangers*, *The Mystic Knights of Tir na Nog*, *Ninja Turtles*, or the *Big Bad Beetle Borgs* were typically male, with female characters as a minority.

The defining show of the genre was *Mighty Morphin’ Power Rangers*. This show—beloved by American children—was actually a Japanese series called *Koryu Sentai Zyuranger*. American producer Saban had purchased the rights and footage and created the new show by filming new, English scenes of the Rangers’ civilian life and then dubbing in new sound for the battle scenes. As the Rangers wore immobile, full-face helmets there was little need to worry about synching with mouth movements.

This popular formula led other companies to try and mimic the success of *Power Rangers*, either by creating their own series or by importing and adapting more Japanese shows.
Canadian company DiC secured the rights to *Sailor Moon*. For English-speaking audiences, *Sailor Moon* was re-dubbed in English with an especial effort to remove the idea that the show had originally been foreign. Lines were changed and censored while some episodes were cut entirely. As with *Astro Boy* and *Speed Racer* before it, the characters’ names were also altered so that Usagi Tsukino became Serena and Ami Mizuno became Amy Anderson. Some characters, who were overtly homosexual, had their genders or relationships altered to become more suitable to the American palate. What had been a show marketed to older teenagers in Japan was edited into an afterschool staple for younger children to fit into the mode of other superhero shows.

While adult fans of *Sailor Moon* now generally regard the English dub as inferior, the show performed as intended. Young girls were tuning in and then going to toy stores to buy dolls, stickers, sneakers, and even a Sailor Moon bicycle. With the demand growing, fledgling publisher Mixx (later TokyoPop) imported the *Sailor Moon* manga as well. The manga initially received similar treatment to the anime, in which names and lines were altered. Mixx also initially “flipped” the manga so that it could be read from left to right by American readers, rather than the original Japanese language’s right to left.

Female fans were given the opportunity to see a variety of young women as heroes in *Sailor Moon*, able to identify with one or more of their favorites in an ensemble where other media ensembles had only one female character. These fans were happily spending allowances to buy merchandise and comics. At under two hundred pages, shrunk down from the original print, and poorly bound with weak glue, the books cost between eight to ten American dollars and readers were willing to pay. As with the success of *Power Rangers*, publishers saw a lucrative opportunity and began licensing yet more Japanese manga and anime.
The early 2000s saw the manga section of chain book stores explode from a half a shelf of the graphic novels aisle into brightly marketed and multi-shelf sections of its own. Translating companies marketed themselves solely on manga, such as TokyoPop and Viz. Where neophytes may have found the comic store esoteric and intimidating, stores like Borders and Barnes & Noble provided a welcome alternative. Surprising to some executives as well, was the amount of female readership these comics received. With a greater awareness of manga came fan demand for a more “authentic” experience, leading companies to publish “un-flipped” manga with warnings in the back that these were not to be read in the traditional left to right format [fig. 28]. Rather than hindering readers, manga devotees learned how to read ambidextrously.

Now a freelance writer for Marvel and other comics companies, during this time writer Kelly Sue DeConnick was adapting translated manga for American sales and observed the phenomenon firsthand:

[T]here was this received wisdom there, for a while, that girls wouldn’t read comics…And then the manga-dome happened, and not only were girls and women coming out in droves to read comics but they were spending hundreds of dollars on them every month! Reading them at ten dollars a pop and sometimes keeping mall bookstores open [by themselves]…We make it so hard for new readers to come in that it was actually easier for girls and women to learn to read backwards than it was to enter American comics.

Where Marvel and DC had decades of interrelated back story and determinedly curatorial fans, manga was seen as a wide open playing field with the options of self-contained series that completed in less than ten books or over one hundred.
Manga-Influenced Fan Spaces and Creations

Where there was no space for female fans, they chose to make spaces of their own. Eschewing the comic store, they turned to bookstores, libraries, and the internet. Concurrent with the rise of the internet as a whole, female fans found community and creativity by taking advantage of free, easy to manage websites. Rather than struggling with page building or learning code, these fan pages flourished. Individual users created online “shrines” to their favorite characters, which hosted fan art and fan fiction. They created quizzes and sharable code, embedding guest books that allowed visitors to sign in, leaving messages and words of encouragement. These fan sites were never meant to act as virtual islands unto themselves; instead they enabled fans to find likeminded friends who they might not otherwise have found in an analog space.

 Eventually, this fan community did, however, seek to connect in physical spaces. While science fiction fan conventions and their derivatives had been present since the 1930s, anime and manga specific conventions only appeared in the late 1980s and 90s. At these conventions, attendees could browse through an “artist alley” to buy independent artwork, shop in a “dealer’s room,” meet with friends, or attend informational panels on a range of anime-related subjects—still the standard format of conventions today. As the popularity of anime grew, more conventions popped up in different states, leading to the present schedule of several dozen yearly conventions in North America alone. A new demographic revealed itself at these growing anime conventions. As Gregson quoted, regarding the population of Otakon—whose 2014 attendance was quoted as 33,929 unique memberships—that “the stereotypical white, male, socially inept

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46 Often abbreviated simply to “anime conventions”
fan is dead."\(^{48}\) With its ready mix of genres and character options compared to American comics and science fiction, anime drew a wide audience with ready spending money and a vocal demand for subject matter that the traditional comics market failed to provide.

Another difference from American comics was that manga was typically attributed to one creator who did a large part of the writing and artwork. Some writers may have collaborated with artists and some artists, subsequently, often turned to a small group of studio assistants, but the resulting product was largely the efforts of only one or two main artists. Artists who did collaborate often did so on a semi-permanent and still smaller basis, such as the all-female collective who used the pseudonym of CLAMP. CLAMP—a collective title rather than an acronym—originated as an amateur group creating fan comics, known as doujinshi, to sell at local markets before creating original content. Their collaborative operation allowed for a larger catalogue of titles, though still smaller and more accessible than Marvel or DC.

This idea that a single person could be enough to run a comic inspired many fans. Like the self-produced comix and zines that came before them, artists began to eschew the formal studio process in favor of independent publishing. Manga publishers like TokyoPop took advantage of this, running a contest/anthology called *The Rising Stars of Manga* for several years and often picking up and publishing “OEL” (Original English Language) manga. Although the company would eventually close American production in the late 2000s, other companies took inspiration and went on to do the same.

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Webcomics

For those artists who wished to retain full creative control of their product, the internet provided a solution. Like their ink and paper counterparts, the webcomic began in the early days of the internet merely as an archival tool, making newspaper comics available online while a few programmers and students published original content. It was in the late 1990s that webcomics began to take off, concurrent with the rise of the alternative and indie comic.

Initially, original webcomics were formatted similarly to newspaper and book pages with the typical gag-a-day format before gaining an increased continuity. These included *College Roomies from Hell!* by Maritza Campos and Dorothy Gambrell’s *Cat and Girl*. Eventually they reflected a sense of humor and narrative that related to the young adult readers who were beginning to flock to the internet, such as the video-game centric comic *Penny Arcade*, whose popularity eventually earned the creators independent income. Some creators, being fans of anime and manga chose to pursue a similar storytelling and visual format, like Fred Gallagher’s *Megatokyo*, whose artist Fred Gallagher uses a soft, pencil and cross-hatching approach inspired by shojo manga and romance-oriented video games (called visual novels) [fig. 29].

For every “household name” webcomic, there were dozens of others that existed as labors of love or artistic experiments, hosted on websites that marketed themselves as being exclusively for webcomic creators and readers, such as Keenspace and its derivative of Keenspot. The former distinguished itself as being for consistent, established webcomics and paid users while the latter was available for any creator. Artists of any age, experience, or taste, could take advantage of Keenspot’s free hosting and tell any story they liked.

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Though this granted access to any artist in ways that previously curated comics and zines had not. Despite the rich availability of reading options and the emerging scholarly recognition of comics as a whole, webcomics find themselves understudied and under-researched. Were there to be some real academic attention to the medium, investigation would turn up a huge body of work with a wide expression of ideas and artists.

To this end, even artists who had become established in traditional comics publishing chose to pursue side ventures with webcomics, such as the erotic comic *Teahouse* [fig. 30] whose artists—collectively known as Emirain for professional anonymity—have worked doing color and line for Marvel. Using the skills honed while working for Marvel, the two artists created complex character designs and fully-rendered backgrounds, aiming to create a product that looked as finished as a book made with the resources of a large publisher.

In this way, again, webcomics held the appeal of the underground comics of the sixties and seventies. This is perhaps why many webcomics began to reflect the same freewheeling artistic spirit of genre-bending and deliberately unpolished art. 2006’s *XKCD* [fig. 31], for instance, was and is drawn almost completely with stick figures. A former NASA employee, artist Randall Munroe juxtaposes the simplicity of his art with sophisticated comics that can refer to mathematics, linguistics, and advanced sciences.

Andrew Hussie’s various *MS Paint Adventures* [fig. 32] are always intentionally crudely drawn, even as he incorporates highly sophisticated elements in his stories. Named for the minimal image software Microsoft Paint, *MS Paint Adventures* tends toward a simplistic digital style, evocative of early video game technology. Using his skills in the computer sciences, Hussie’s current comic, *Homestuck*, features interactive video game elements, music, animated panels, and even stop-motion animation that was filmed and then embedded into the website.
This simplistic style showcased not a lack of ability but an artistic choice, used to create a fun and humorous story.

These freedoms also allow for a diversity in creators and content that is only slowly emerging in mainstream comics. Although no reliable study has been conducted, it is notably easy to find creators of all genders, races, and creeds to suit a reader’s taste. There is also similar freedom in discussing and sharing these stories. Like Dykes to Watch Out for’s Allison Bechdel before him, webcomics allow transgender artist Tab Kimpton to write about the experiences of gay and transgender young adults in his completed work Khaos [fig. 33], and exploring the difficulties of coming out, the gender spectrum, and asexuality in Shades of A. In examining Kimpton’s comics—spanning from 2006 to the present—both Khaos and Shades of A display manga-influenced digital art. Kimpton typically works in black and white with minimal touches of flat color and shading while alternating between a more subdued “realistic” style and anime-influenced exaggerated expressions in humorous moments. This use of a familiar style of media allows Kimpton to frankly and accessibly tackle stories of transgender violence and misogyny, sexual assault, and interpersonal growth.

Eschewing the traditional comics format as XKCD’s Randal Munroe and MS Paint Adventures’ Andrew Hussie, Allie Brosh similarly uses crude artwork. Using the inherent absurdity of such a style allows her to inject humor as she discusses the impact of depression on her life in the comic-blog Hyperbole and a Half: Unfortunate Situations, Flawed Coping Mechanisms, Mayhem, and Other Things That Happened [fig. 34]. In her comic-entries Depression and Depression, part 2, Brosh draws herself as a vaguely humanoid figure with stick limbs and a dorsal fin of blonde hair, even when various panels show a clear understanding of artistic principles of perspective, value, or composition. In distorting herself, Brosh’s self-
caricature can exaggerate movement or force the appearance of emotion to inject humor and absurdity into a bleak topic. Amidst the black humor, her comics use bright primary colors even as she discusses the gray and indifferent listlessness brought on by depression. Her autobiographical self-deprecation fits in well with her comic predecessors such as Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Alison Bechdel. Also like Aline Kominsky-Crumb, in downplaying her own features in favor of a deliberately distorted avatar of herself, Brosh likely gains the same mental distance from her own tribulations to discuss them for her readers.50

This is not to say that the appeal of webcomics is based inherently on crude art. Only that it allows for any kind of style and storytelling the opportunity to flourish. On the opposite end of the spectrum are artists such as the aforementioned Emirain. In her slice of life love story *The Less Than Epic Adventures of TJ and Amal* [fig. 35], E.K. Weaver painstakingly plotted the route of the titular characters’ road trip from California to Rhode Island, mapping out true to life locations of places and businesses visited. She also took pains to realistically illustrate architecture, nature, and human anatomy in pencil and ink. In doing so, Weaver emphasized the story’s down-to-earth qualities by grounding it in a realistic style.

Faith Erin Hicks, as well, has long balanced print comics and her own webcomics, mapping out the topography of a New England town in her semi-autobiographical work *Friends with Boys* [fig. 36], as well as her comic adaptation of the video game *The Last of Us* for Dark Horse comics. In *Friends with Boys*, Hicks works in a bold black and white style, combining loose pen and ink brushstrokes with sparse digital gray tones, using it to effectively create her horror and supernaturally-inspired environments. The loose brush strokes infuse energy into her characters of Maggie—a young girl haunted by a nineteenth century ghost—and her three older

50 Connections could also be made, via Brosh’s deliberately childish art, to the work of Jean Dubuffet who took inspiration from children and the mentally ill to create his Art Brut raw style.
brothers where she uses a more controlled style. In flashbacks to the nineteenth century and in the dark scenery of the comic’s local cemetery, Hicks uses heavier black cross-hatching to create tension and a sense of foreboding. This stylized technique plays well with Hicks’ narrative use of magical realism or outright fantasy set in an otherwise mundane New England town, giving a moody darkness to the pensive story.

Because of the democratic nature of the internet, webcomics are never in any real competition with other titles. Rather, they find niches and readers all their own. The growing popularity of manga and webcomics have forced big publishers to reconsider their models. At times, Marvel has tried to translate their content into a manga-like style, to mixed results. Both Marvel and DC have experimented with visual storytelling and stylization in their animated offerings and comics as they also look to the future while trying to hang on to the models of the past. When publishers fail to satisfy, fans may take matters into their own hands by creating artworks of their own, sometimes appropriating established characters to tell their own stories.
CHAPTER FOUR
TRANSFORMATIVE WORKS, FANDOM, AND DETRACTORS

Rosie, Diana, and Carol

During World War II, when comic book superheroes came of age, another heroic character emerged that would capture popular imagination. Conflated from paintings by Norman Rockwell and J. Howard Miller, Rosie the Riveter became an enduring symbol of WWII-era women who took up factory work to produce weapons and equipment while the men went overseas. The name Rosie the Riveter was inspired by a 1942 song of the same name and became the title for Rockwell’s 1943 cover for the *Saturday Evening Post*. His *Rosie the Riveter* featured a confident female factory worker eating her lunch while holding her rivet gun in her lap and stomping on Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* [fig. 37]. In the same year, J. Howard Miller painted a female factory worker wearing a jaunty polka-dot bandana and red lipstick while flexing the muscles of her arms and captioned “We Can Do It!” 51 [fig. 38]

Endlessly imitated and re-interpreted, the pose of “We Can Do It” has been used several times in connection with female superheroines. In 2013, DC and Ant Lucia released a line of posters and statues in their DC Bombshells line, an homage to the cheesecake pinup girls famously connected with WWII. One such image featured an alternate Wonder Woman, her tiara transformed into a bandana and her leotard redrawn as a pair of riveted shorts and a low-cut polo shirt bearing her logo. Though her costume was made casual, Wonder Woman still wore her glowing lasso of truth and bulletproof bracelets while she smiled at the viewer and snapped apart chains in her bare hands [fig. 39]. Superimposed above her logo was the caption “She Can Do

It!” creating a playful homage that celebrated Wonder Woman’s beauty without diminishing her superhuman strength.

Issue #2 of Kelly Sue DeConnick’s Captain Marvel drew even more directly on the Miller painting. An alternative cover for that comic featured Captain Marvel in her form-fitting, full-body flight suit, tugging on one of her gloves as she flexed a bicep. Her expression was less exuberant than the Bombshell Wonder Woman, closer to Miller’s original painting with a close-lipped but playful smile [fig. 40]. This homage was fitting with a series that focuses on Captain Marvel’s comparative seriousness and military rank as an army colonel. This 2014 interpretation by Ed McGuinness stood under text that declared Captain Marvel was “Earth’s Mightiest Hero.”

Comics like this use reference as a means of reinterpreting and affirming connections for their characters to past comic events and to famous pieces within the art world. These images are by no means the first or only pieces to interpret a preexisting artwork, a practice done by various artists for various reasons. Some artists copy other artworks as a means of learning techniques, while some (such as “appropriation artists”) do so in a way that is critical or deconstructive to the source material. Comics artists are no different.

There are also some artists who reinterpret works and characters for no reason other than their own enjoyment, with neither thought to reward nor the official sanction of the characters’ original creators. Instead, they adopt the characters and mythos of their favorite comics and create something new. Academically, they are often referred to as members of “participatory culture” and their creations as “transformative works,” but someone within these cultures would likely think of it, simply, as being a member of “fandom.”

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52 DeConnick, Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight
53 Delwiche, Aaron, and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson, eds. The Participatory Cultures Handbook. New York:
What fandom is and what it does and what it means are often subjective to individual members but at its broadest definition fandom refers to the community of enthusiasts that surround a piece of media. Fandom can be both positive and negative, often with innumerable points on a spectrum in between and who show their appreciation through creative output such as fan-drawn art (fanart) and fan-written stories (fanfiction). While there are certainly professionals within the comics industry who are enthusiastic fans of their colleagues’ work, the term typically is reserved for fans who are non-professionals. The defining line between homage or appropriation art, as seen with Captain Marvel and Bombshell Wonder Woman, and transformative work is the lack of official sanction. Though transformative and referential to Rosie the Riveter, these images have been licensed by DC and Marvel. These members of fandom are often amateurs in the truest sense of the word, whose creative contributions are done out of love for the source material with no other end reward but their own creations.

For those who try to define it, a growing concern is who does and does not belong and whether those who are in the community are participating “correctly.” Some believe that a fan community should be isolated and curated while others believe the community should be a creative sphere that takes inspiration from the media they enjoy. Often that divide falls along gender lines and female fans find themselves shunned from the fandom at large and, so, turn to smaller sub-communities and create art and writing, altering and reinterpreting what is and is not canon, redefining the comics experience for themselves.

Routledge, 2013.
History of Transformative Works

Because comics in their published form were so typically a male-dominated sphere, there was often little to interest female fans in the published comics canon and available social spheres, such as the comic shop. Female fans took it upon themselves to fill in the gaps by finding their own spaces dominated by creative output in the forms of fan literature and art. Academic study on fandom and fan creativity is, largely, attributed to Camille Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women* and then to Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers*. Initially, Bacon-Smith and Jenkins’ work focused on science fiction fandoms, especially the television series *Star Trek*. Due to the permeable nature of fandom groups, however, many of the terms codified in *Star Trek* fandom have come to apply universally to exchanges and output in any fandom. To discuss the creative works put forth by comics fans is to use terms codified by *Star Trek* fandom.

In the modern sense, fanfiction has appeared since the 1930s but *Star Trek* fandom is popularly thought of as the one that originated terms still in fandom parlance today. Prior to the advent of the internet, fandom society centered around club-like meetings, conventions, and the circulation of fanzines. These zines largely contained fanart and fanfiction, appropriating the characters and settings of *Star Trek* to tell their own stories. Typically, these stories were curated by groups of friends. For a small amount of money, these would be mimeographed (later photocopied), collated, and mailed to subscribers. These fanzines could also be purchased at dedicated fandom conventions. From these 1960s fanzines, we still retain certain fandom slang terms, such as the Mary Sue and slash (homoerotic fanfiction, from pairing titles like Kirk/Spock), that are used almost universally by fans of any media.

The emergence and popularity of the internet forever altered the way fandom interacted and distributed fanwork. What had formerly been the product of group effort over time became
individualized and instantaneous. The same fans creating the character shrines seen in the previous chapter were often using their sites to host fanfiction. Those who did not possess the coding knowledge themselves could correspond with webmasters and mistresses via e-mail or, starting in 1998, upload their fanfiction directly onto the dedicated archive fanfiction.net. Ten years later, the academically minded Organization for Transformative Works would open a similar site, Archive of Our Own (AO3). AO3 functioned in the same way but also allowed for content banned by fanfiction.net, such as stories with erotic content. The sites grew to host millions of fanfictions and to refine their user interface. A user in 2015 on fanfiction.net or AO3 can simply choose to browse the Manga section’s subheading for *Sailor Moon* or refine their search terms to a selection of characters, genre tags (alternate universe, romance, humor, etc.), or movie-like ratings from “all ages” to “mature.”

Technology has also improved the distribution of art as well as writing. Home scanners, and then smart phones with cameras, allowed for the immediate digitization of art to post to fan websites online. Digital art programs and the use of art tablets made the process even more seamless, creating art that lives entirely through technology. Any fan with the means to acquire a digital tablet can sit down, draw, finish, and post an artwork in an entirely independent, artist-controlled process. For those who lack the skills to draw their own art, technology and the internet offer other ways to transform or distill preexisting imagery. Use of an image search and digital compiling allows for edited photomontages and collages, offering imagined castings for a superhero movie or compiling favorite scenes of a character from across several books.

This is not to say that the internet has made fandom into an isolated experience. Just as anyone can upload and read fanwork, all sites present options for readers to directly interact with the writers. Both fanfiction.net and AO3 allow users to leave comments on stories, whether to
say words of congratulation or to offer critique, and for creators to reply. Other blogging platforms also allow for the posting of art and for audiences to respond similarly. In this sense, there is an immediacy of interaction between creators and their audiences, fed from the same immediacy of production to publication.

Transformative Works as Critique and Commentary

Because they are dealing with copyrighted characters and concepts, fanfiction writers very rarely find ways to parlay their hobbies into a paid venture. While some say that praise from their peers is the only reward fanfiction offers, Susanna Coleman has a different theory: creating fanfiction and fanart are ways of reshaping canon that give the fan control and agency. Rather than being totally devoted to a canon, “The key quality of [her] participation is the re-writing, re-imagining: she participates in her fandoms by interrupting them in order to shape them into what she wants them to be.”\(^{54}\) The fan reinterprets and asserts control of their fantasy world.

This, combined with Kelly Sue DeConnick’s earlier assertion about the power of comics as wish-fulfillment explains the popularity of transformative works, especially the much-denigrated category of Mary Sue fanwork [fig. 41] Originating with the Star Trek fandom, a Mary Sue is an invented character who typically acts as a creator’s avatar, as a wish-fulfillment fantasy. The Mary Sue is derided for being unnecessarily beautiful, intelligent, and romantically involved with the author’s character of choice, essentially for being too perfect. While a male counterpart, the Gary Stu, exists, censure is typically only leveled at female characters by female creators. However if a character who is too attractive, too smart, and too adored by their peers

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quantifies a Mary Sue, by that rubric the male power fantasy of the super-smart, dashingly handsome, and much beloved Batman should also be denigrated a “Gary Stu.”

Although fanwork can often be used as a form of wish fulfillment, it should be noted that transformative works are rarely sycophantic to their source material. Fans are often just as likely to use their art and writing as a means of examining, correcting, and even critiquing the canon. This interruption and re-examination of canon has much in common with contemporary literature; author Lev Grossman noted that transformative works are “[P]art of a larger tradition that also includes things like Wide Sargasso Sea…books that engage with and borrow from other texts in an explicit way.”55 Using transformative works, a critical fan can examine or point out the failings of a canon, which Grossman points out with an example in Star Trek fanfiction:

Some of it is straight-up homage, but a lot of [transformative works] are really aggressive towards the source text. One tends to think of it as...a kind of worshipful act, but a lot of times you'll read these stories and it'll be like 'What if Star Trek had an openly gay character on the bridge?' And of course the point is that they don't...There's a powerful critique, almost punk-like anger, being expressed there.

This exploration becomes important especially when considering the characters that are not already there and, subsequently, the people who do not see themselves in the media.

In the same mode of thought, Grossman could easily compare fans’ transformative works to the way that Pablo Picasso examined his relationship with artistic forbearer Velazquez in Las Meninas [fig. 42] when he created 58 permutations of the famous work in his own style [fig. 43]. His friend Jaime Sabartés described Picasso’s process as one of near-obsession in which he compared the painter to a scientist, dissecting Velazquez’ painting in an attempt to understand it and to understand his own relationship with the piece. Like a member of participatory culture,

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however, “He dissects, not to destroy, but to learn, to get to the bottom of things, to look for the how and the why. It must be some secret part of ourselves we are looking for, that we are hoping to discover.”\textsuperscript{56} Although his paintings were stylistic abstractions of \textit{Las Meninas}, Picasso was neither fully subservient to the piece nor was he destructive. It became a dialogue between what was known and established and what Picasso sought to bring to his art.

\textit{Las Meninas}, too, would not be the last time that Picasso created “transformative works.” In the same decade, he created a print based on a Lucas Cranach painting, \textit{Portrait of a Woman After Lucas Cranach the Younger},\textsuperscript{57} and a work after Eugène Delacroix’s, \textit{Woman of Algiers (Version O)}. The latter work recently made records when it sold for $179 million in 2015\textsuperscript{58}, proving that just because a work derives from established source material, that does not decrease its inherent worth or desirability to the audience.

Finding a Mirror

While giving a speech Bergen Community College, Pulitzer-winning author Junot Diaz discussed some of his own reasons for becoming a writer and for writing diverse characters.

\textit{There's this idea that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. And what I've always thought isn't that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. It's that if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves. And growing up, I felt like a monster in some ways. I didn't see myself reflected at all. I was like, "Yo, is something wrong with me? That the whole society seems to think that people like me don't exist?\textsuperscript{59}}

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If Diaz’s own experiences reflect that of other consumers of media, then this explains why so many fans of comics use transformative works as forms of critique. Comic books, as a source of power fantasy, still do not adequately provide opportunities for readers who are not the presumed default.

In the last decade, the rise of easy and accessible blogging platforms has made fandom interactions more instantaneous than ever, creating a collective intelligence that disseminates, analyzes, and alters media almost as quickly as it is produced. It has brought together celebratory fans, but also the same curious, critical fans that Grossman discussed. These are fans who seek to find greater diversity and relatability than the comics canon provides on its own, using fanwork as a place to transform their favorite characters via art or use of imagined movie casts. In doing so, many of these images transform a character’s gender or ethnicity, fan practices that are known as genderswapping or gender-bending and racebending, respectively.

One application of these transformations is a fan-created fantasy movie cast that suggested the Korean-American Daniel Henney in the role of Superman and the African-American Nicole Beharie as the Green Lantern [fig. 44]. Just as in Grossman’s example about having an openly gay character on the bridge of the Enterprise, altering characters in this way highlights their canonical absence. A female Iron Man points out the fact that there are no female characters of that fame and caliber already provided by the canon. No mirrors have been provided, therefore fans must alter the canon to find reflection and affirmation for themselves.

This deliberate interruption is something that Henry Jenkins has mused on in several of his works since 1992. “Fandom is a vehicle for marginalized subgroups (women, the young,

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gays, and so on) to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations,”
he writes. It is what brings out the transformative in “transformative works.” For devoted fans,
canon is not an untouchable monolith, but “something that can and must be rewritten to make it
more responsive to their needs.” Fandom sees and realizes potential that the canon does not
always produce, creating wish-fulfillment in their own images. In short, as Jenkins said in 1997,
fanwork is “a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary
myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk.” If the almighty canon cannot
provide, fans will undermine it until it does.

Although these transformations are largely driven by fans outside of the professional
comics sphere, creators like Kelly Sue DeConnick and Gail Simone have also taken note of that
lack, as have their other colleagues. To that end, some creators are not only not discouraging
fanart but are challenging their colleagues as well. In 2015, DC writer Ming Doyle challenged
her colleagues to draw genderswapped versions of established characters, creating more female
interpretations of heroes and villains than currently exist in the established canon. Marvel and
DC artists rose to the challenge, including illustrator Joe Quinones, who posted a genderswapped
version of Batman villain Two-Face to his blog, using actress Rachel Weisz as reference [fig. 45]. In doing this, Quinones created an alternate interpretation of a DC character that did what
no other fanart could. Because of his employment as a comics artist, Quinones’ Two-Weisz
carries the idea of an official sanction that recognizes readers’ demands in a small way. As a
professional, he is capable of providing a semi-official mirror that did not previously exist.

62 Jenkins, Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers
The Creative versus the Curatorial

Despite the fact that fandom’s creative side is typically attributed as a female sphere, female fans are often still marginalized within the sphere of fandom as a whole. When entering shared spaces, such as comic book stores or conventions, they are still regarded as invaders and this attitude is still the norm, rather than the exception. Female fans who do not participate in a fandom “correctly” are either demonized or dismissed.

From the earliest recorded discussions of fandom, the perception was one of a predominantly male sphere. An observation quoted by Smith-Bacon from Harry Warner noted “Around 1940… virtually all the females in fandom had a fannish boy friend[sic], brother, husband, or some other masculine link.”65 The attitude pervaded, well into the 1960s and later in Star Trek fandom, where “a woman was considered fair game, sexually, unless she could prove her superior intelligence in which case she could receive an uneasy acceptance as a ‘guy.’”66 It remains an attitude familiar to women in fandom today, who still find themselves rigorously quizzed to prove they are true fans.

Today, social media is rich with mythology alluding to the elusive “fake geek girl.” A “fake geek girl,” proponents claim, is a female who only feigns interest in such topics as comic books and video games. They do so as a means of entrapping nerdy boys like some kind of romantic prey. Never do these elusive females pursue nerd culture out of their own curiosity or love of comics. Curiously, the person credited with the origin of the term is a woman, Tara “Tiger” Brown in an online 2012 opinion piece for Forbes, who said, “Girls who genuinely like their hobby or interest…not garner attention, are true geeks. The ones who think about how to

66 Bacon-Smith, Enterprising Women, 17.
get attention and then work on a project in order to maximize their klout [sic], are
exhibitionists.”67 Despite the fact that female fans are the majority of the creators of fanworks, they are disregarded.

Regardless of the origin, it is a term that has gone viral, best captured in the macro images of the Idiot Nerd Girl. The memetic distribution of the image features a multicolored background surrounding a young woman with the word “nerd” written on her hand. Internet users have taken this photograph and imposed text on it to suggest that the subject’s interest in these fandoms is superficial with captions such as “My favorite superhero? Probably X-Man. Hugh Jackman is soooo [sic] hot.”68 The combination of image and text reveals what the creators believe about female fans. It posits that female fans who are not fully “educated” in a subculture for the “correct” reasons are not real fans. Enjoying a superhero film for the actors featured while not amassing the full catalogue of related knowledge is also “incorrect.” Defensive subversions exist, altering the text to rebuttals such as “Hasn’t read all 900 issues of Batman. Neither have you.”69

Jenkins suggests that the way genders approach the canon of fan material is inherently different and in conflict. Male fans tend to approach fandom in a curatorial way, typically concerned with following—rather than deviating—from what is established by the author. They are the ones who collect and memorize facts, who fueled the 1990s speculator bubble. Their concerns are largely related to maintaining a strict canon, quantifying facts and values. To

deviate from canon, via transformative art or writing, is to violate it and the author’s intent. Men, Flynn suggests in *Gender and Reading*, are “cautious about ‘accuracy’ and they thus inhibit themselves from saying things that may not be literally documented.”70

Female fans, however, approach fandom differently. This side of fandom expresses its love for the source material by drawing fan art and writing fan fiction, or else creating costumes to wear (cosplay). They are interested in absorbing canon and then extrapolating, reading between the lines, and using canon as basis for speculation, rather than a closed loop. The inherent application of imagination and analysis may be especially focused when female fans are converging around a canon not intended for them, reinforced from a young age with the “school girl required to read a boy’s book…may find ways to remake these narratives…rather than simply accepting those offered.”71 In the example of the school girl, this becomes a necessity; for female fans of a male-oriented art form, this becomes a pleasure.

Transformative work disrupts canon in a way that male gatekeepers cannot always reconcile. Male comic book fans, typically, already see themselves in comics and rarely have to force themselves with a different character, to do so is to have to identify with a “lesser” character. This is consistent with Kelly Sue DeConnick’s own observations with comics fans: “[Female fans] learn how to cross-identify very easily. [Male fans] never have to and if they have the opportunity, it would be identifying down, status-wise, and no one wants to do that.”72 Already served by canon, they typically do not understand the urge to alter it.

This also explains the negative reaction to alternate interpretations and transformative works. Referring to the earlier example of a female Iron Man, a male fan’s intimate knowledge

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72 Personal interview
of Tony Stark’s canonical history is only currency for status if the canon remains unaltered. Fanart that transforms the white, male Tony Stark into, for example, a Vietnamese-American Toni Stark affords a female fan the space to identify with her hero and examine the way that Iron Man’s Vietnam War-era origins might be impacted. This change, however, renders that canonical knowledge useless. Transformative fanart allows a marginalized reader to find a mirror in which she is reflected but takes that mirror away from someone who perceives himself as its rightful owner.

Men seem to be curatorial while women fill in the gaps with creativity. For this reason, it is still common for male fans to grill perceived outsiders by questioning them on facts and minutiae that show an attentive devotion of the established canon. They are the organizers and arbiters of published and established fact. Since the canon, without alteration, already serves his needs, the male fan tends to see transformative works such as fanfiction or gender and raceswapping as an attack on his fantasy. Transformative works render his curation of fact moot or chip away at “his” domain. When female fans use transformative works to critique canon they become more than wish fulfillment. Instead, they are an act of protest, hijacking the media they love as a means of culture-jamming.
CHAPTER FIVE
COSPLAY AND COSPLAY CULTURE

Play and Performance

In 1938, the Dutch cultural historian Johann Huizinga published *Homo Ludens*, a study on the behaviors related to play in humans. In writing *Homo Ludens*, he suggested that aspects of play and performative behavior were present in all facets of life. He identified *play* and *fun* as “a function of culture proper” for adult life, beyond that of children or animals. Adults, Huizinga explained, engage in play behaviors in all aspects of adult culture, including mythology, art, and theater—important aspects of fandom as well. “The fact that play and culture are actually interwoven with one another was neither observed nor expressed, whereas for us the whole point is to show that genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilization,” Huizinga wrote.

Given Huizinga’s interest in the lack of separation between recreational play and the play inherent in day to day life, it is unsurprising that his writings were influential on performance artists like Allan Kaprow. In his *Essays On The Blurring of Art and Life*, Kaprow quotes Huizinga directly and expands on his writings, suggesting art “be done with gusto, wit, fun; it’s to be play.” This fed into his artistic Happenings in which several performances occurred concurrently, creating a multi-sensory art experience. He also discusses representational play and imitation, used in taking on roles and personas. These ideas about play are broadly applicable, from fine art to the world of fandom.

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74 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 5
One wonders, also, if Huizinga was aware of the first World Science Fiction Convention taking place in New York City in 1939.\textsuperscript{76} Now known simply as WorldCon, this convention was the forerunner of other comic and anime conventions nationwide and featured attendees in costume. It was at this first WorldCon that attendees and guests arrived in costume. In 1983, a loanword appeared from Japanese culture that would have delighted Huizinga: Cosplay. Attributed to Takashi Nobuyuki in \textit{My Anime} magazine, cosplay is an abbreviation of “costumed roleplay.”\textsuperscript{77} Cosplay describes the now-common practice at conventions of recreating the outfits of favorite characters, dressing up and embodying them. The tradition goes back even earlier than the first WorldCon, at least to the early 1900s. A 1912 Tacoma, Washington newspaper clipping shows the first prize-winning August Olson in a homemade costume of Skygack, a science fiction newspaper strip character.\textsuperscript{78}

While he may not have had cosplayers in mind, Huizinga accurately sums up one of the most important and enjoyable aspects of the activity when he specifically discusses “dressing up.” In dressing up at conventions, attendees both mark themselves as part of the group and enter a whole new sphere that “proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space…It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.”\textsuperscript{79} Allison DeBlasio and Joey Marsocci explain that, “For some, days of dressing up vanished with their childhoods. Others grew up to have mild-mannered jobs by day, but by night they enter a secret

\textsuperscript{76} Han, Yaya, Allison DeBlasio, and Joey Marsocci. \textit{1000 Incredible Costume & Cosplay Ideas: A Showcase of Creative Characters from Anime, Manga, Video Games, Movies, Comics and More!} Beverly, MA: Quarry Books, 2013.


\textsuperscript{79} Huizinga, \textit{Homo Ludens}, 13
world where lycra, leather, and vivid fabrics combine.”80 In this way, cosplay is one of the most visible and creative facets of fandom, wherein fans willingly mark themselves as part of the subculture.

In the world of art, costume often plays an essential role in performance art and in artists’ personas. Actor turned Dadaist Hugo Ball famously wore a ‘cubist costume’ while performing his Dada poetry at the Cabaret Voltaire. Joseph Beuys’ ritualistic performances often incorporated fat and felt as props or as clothing, wrapped around his body. Matthew Barney’s video and performances pieces, notably in his Cremaster 4, used costume and prosthetic makeup to fully alter his body into the character of “a hybrid satyr-cum-dandy.”81 His character wore a crisp white suit and pinned cravat as well as prosthetics to extend his ears and flatten and elongate his nose to give him caprine features, alongside orange hair curled to intimate horns [fig. 46]. In each instance, these costumes allowed the artist to enhance the moment of performance, creating distance between themselves and their audiences via dress but never creating a full barrier.

This same semi-permeable membrane between artwork and audience is often present in cosplay. In creating cosplay, the costumers are playing dress up and creating personas as well. When they go to conventions and wear these costumes, the cosplayers become performers and art pieces who also walk freely through their audience, a situation that can be either convivial or dangerous.

80 Han, 1000 Incredible Costume and Cosplay Ideas, 6
Craftsmanship

The act of bringing a character to life through cosplay requires numerous skills. As many cosplayers make their own costumes, it can require proficiency in sewing and in altering or completely drafting sewing patterns. For those characters who have definitive props along with their outfit, the cosplayer may wear multiple hats as sculptor or welder. For instance, Niki Boyert, in her cosplay of *Guardians of the Galaxy*’s Star-Lord, hand-sculpted a replica of the character’s helmet [fig. 47] in addition to sewing and modifying the character’s clothes [fig. 48]. It is also increasingly common as well to find cosplayers who take advantage of technology by using 3D printers to ensure they are bringing the character to life accurately.

In addition to work in fabricating outfits and props, the ability to style wigs and apply makeup is often considered essential to complete a cosplay. Again, the cosplayer needs multiple skills to perfect a ready-made wig. Tutorials can be found, not only for styling wigs, but for adding lace fronts to better simulate a character’s hairline or for dyeing or sewing in new wefts for characters with multiple hair colors and complex styles. These are techniques that Caitlin Gollini has used for several wigs, using lace fronting and additional wefts for *Kill La Kill*’s Ira Gamagori [fig. 49] and Ryuko Matoi [fig. 50]. Where clothing and wigs are not enough, some cosplayers are also skilled in transforming themselves with makeup. This includes not only theatrical makeup to enhance or conceal features, but the use of body paint or prosthetics. In this way, they can completely transform their skin color to cosplay unearthly aliens. Others might use prosthetics and scar wax to imitate a character who is scarred, disfigured, or inhuman.

To create the alien empress Her Imperious Condescension of *MS Paint Adventures: Homestuck*, Emilia Blaser used several of the aforementioned techniques. Using a dress form, she drafted her own pattern for the outfit and then 3D-printed and formed the character’s trident.
She also took plaster molds of her own ears and sculpted the character’s gills, creating a template that allowed her to reproduce them in silicone [fig. 51]. Using a headband rig designed to rest under her wig, she created a stable anchor for the character’s two-foot-long horns, which she crafted from insulation foam, paper clay, and paint. To imitate the character’s gray skin, she used waterproof stage paint on all exposed skin, including her face and hands [fig. 52].

In essence, most cosplayers are multidisciplinary artists who have acquired these extensive skills in the name of fun, the sort of play Huizinga described. While some cosplayers have garnered media attention\(^8^2\) or focused on convention competitions with monetary prizes, very few undertake cosplay as a means toward fame or fortune. Often, cosplay is a hobby undertaken in addition to professional lives, investing free time and money into projects with little thought to any concrete reward beyond the pleasure of performance. The interviewed cosplayers Niki Boyert, Caitlin Gollini, and Emilia Blaser are, respectively, a medical laboratory technologist, graphic designer, and dentist. Cosplayers, typically, are neither rare nor socially deviant, merely pursuing the skills out of love in addition to their “day jobs.” As with the transformative works created by artistic and literary fans of media, cosplayers are almost always amateurs in the truest sense of the word.

Performing

Once the physical aspects of the costume are complete, there is a final element: performance. While some cosplayers are satisfied in looking the part, others will often take the final step of embodying the character by acting, moving into the realm of performance art. For the most dedicated, this can require skills found in drama, physical acting, and even drag since

\(^8^2\) There are a minority of cosplayers who have managed to parlay their costuming hobbies into professions, such as Yaya Han on the television show *Heroes of Cosplay*, but this is extremely atypical.
crossplay—a portmanteau of “cross-dress” and “cosplay”—is quite common. Taking it further, some cosplayers will act in front of an audience or for the camera, creating “cosplay music videos” and short films. Some do so by putting on skits for conventions’ competitive masquerades.

When a cosplayer attends a convention, they enter a liminal space in which they are both an artwork to be witnessed and an active participant, surrounded by separate and specific social codes. Costumed and non-costumed attendees are also the audience, once again creating the same semi-permeable barrier between artwork and viewer that performance artists know well. Even performance itself is fluid, as cosplayers step in and out of character, improvising and performing as their chosen characters at any given moment. In this way the attendance of a convention is like that of attending a Happening or similar piece in that it is a fully immersive experience where even observing becomes its own participation.

As with other aspects of participatory culture, the ability to embody and engage in the fantasy of becoming a character is another form of self-empowering wish-fulfillment. For the three or four day space of a convention, a cosplayer can act the role of superhero, villain, sorcerer, child, or any of a number of characters, as it is not uncommon to bring a different cosplay for each day of the convention or even to change outfits several times a day. By participation, a cosplayer gets to set aside a mild-mannered alter-ego in favor of being seen and witnessed.

The embodiment of a character for personal empowerment is also applicable to the fine arts. It was once common for the patron to be depicted in paintings as a deity or other mythological figure. Even Roman Emperor Commodus who had himself sculpted as the Greek
Hercules created a “cosplay” of sorts [fig. 53]. These patrons used the artistic depictions as ways of emphasizing wealth and power, engaging in fantasy.

In contemporary art, it is now the artist and not the patron who typically chooses to undergo such a transformation as a statement of power in art. In the late 1990s, artist Renee Cox created her series *Rajé*, in which the artist dressed in a red, green, black, and gold leotard with black leather platform boots to create her heroic alter-ego Rajé. In that alter-ego, she edited photographs of herself to show herself flying, accomplishing great feats of strength, and brandishing long claws like Marvel’s own Wolverine [fig. 54]. Although the character of Rajé was an original creation and Cox’s end products were photographs and not interactive performance, her creation and embodiment of a hero was both in line with Huizinga’s ideas of dressing up for play as well as cosplayers’ motivations.

One of the most interesting aspects of cosplay is the blurring of the gender barriers in crossplay. Typically, crossplayers are female-bodied and constructing a male persona. In doing so, they will go to such lengths to convincingly portray a male character as using corsetry and binding to imitate a male physique and using theatrical makeup and fake beards to create a more masculine appearance. Male-bodied crossplayers are not uncommon and equally skilled in disguising gender, but often do so in a more humorous, drag-influenced way in which gender norms are flouted but the crossplayer’s gender is not disguised.

The reason for the apparent commonality of female-to-male crossplay is likely related to the reading preferences and impositions discussed in the previous chapter. Because of the commonly-held belief that males will not engage with a female protagonist, it is left for women

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83 There are also transgender and other gender nonconforming cosplayers who toy with gender via cosplay.
to cross-identify with the larger availability of male protagonists. Therefore, if a female cosplayer wants to engage in the role of the hero via cosplay, she faces far more male options. While male cosplayers may be stigmatized for embodying a female character, for a female cosplayer, identifying with a male character is common, encouraged, and necessary.

Suspicion of Deceptive Performance and Harassment

This growing ubiquity of cosplay and fandom activities among all walks of life ensures that what was once a fringe hobby for fans is now becoming more common and popular. Whether or not this is a positive aspect, however, is dependent on the individual fans. Despite the oft-repeated reminder that fans keep judgments in perspective, cosplayers can still find themselves being interrogated by “real” fans. Female cosplayers, particularly, find this opposition from the same gatekeeping fans that hassle or quiz them to prove their “worthiness.”

A few months after Tara Brown’s original article about the “fake geek girl,” Joe Peacock wrote a blog post for CNN in the same vein, specifically about cosplayers. He complained that women “put on a "hot" costume, parade around a group of boys notorious for being outcasts that don't get attention from girls, and feel like a celebrity.”85 In particular, Peacock discussed San Diego Comic Con, one of the largest and most expensive conventions to attend. The cost of four day attendance alone can average around two hundred U.S dollars.86 This is not including the cost of transportation and accommodations for the many fans who do fly in from out of the area and even out of the country. It is not unheard of to spend hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars to attend for four days. This is on top of the cost of the costumes that Peacock alleges are simply for

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the purpose of ensnaring men. Even for smaller conventions, attendance is not a cheap endeavor and certainly not one that many women would undertake only to prey on men.

The debate about the barrier between an artwork’s willing participant and their audience is one that has been considered and tested by performance artists such as Marina Abramović, particularly in her definitive piece *Rhythm 0*. In this performance, she sat at a table arrayed with seventy-two items that could cause pleasure or pain and sat pliant for the audience to do with the objects and her body as they wished [fig. 55]. Throughout the piece, Abramović’s audience put a gun to her head or cut away her clothing. Her apparent passivity to the audience made it acceptable and easy to objectify her, making her a pliant figure rather than an active person. The intensity of the audience’s depersonalization became clear at the climax of the piece when Abramović stood up: “I started walking to the public and everybody ran away and never actually confronted with me.”87 A human-shaped but apparently passive figure posed no threat but an active one caused them to flee.

Like any other performance art, there are certain expectations of acceptable boundaries. It is a commonly quoted, but unwritten, rule that cosplayers should be asked for permission before taking photographs or initiating physical interaction. Many cosplayers will attest to the difference between being asked for a hug as opposed to being embraced by a stranger without any indication or permission. While not necessarily specified in programming guidelines, these unspoken modes of appropriate behavior are typically expected at all conventions. These behaviors are accepted and relied upon as the unspoken requirement not to touch an artwork or to interrupt an artist’s performance without prior permission. When these rules are violated, it is an act against the bodily integrity and work of an artist.

Far from being a malicious and invasive force on nerd culture, many female fans of comics have testified to receiving harassment of all kinds when attending conventions in cosplay, rarely sounding like the fabled anglerfish preying on vulnerable men. At my request, a random sampling of cosplayers on tumblr relayed instances of sexual harassment from other conventions. While all in their twenties, many of them said that these happened while the girls themselves were underage. Chelsea Connel, 23, said of 2014’s Comic-Con: “The leering was so bad it caused anxiety attacks…Catching guys staring at my chest and giving them a dirty look, only for them to smile at me. As if to say, “Sorry you're uncomfortable, but thanks for your tits.” At age 15, 22-year-old Caitlin Postal was approached by a man over eighteen, attempting to kiss and touch her at a convention.

The harassment is rarely only verbal and can, at times, follow the individuals outside of the convention. 24-year-old Lexi Attiani attests to encountering such attitudes with male attendees who often failed to distinguish between her as a human being and as the character whom she cosplayed: “I have been groped, fondled, had my ass slapped, and even once had my visor licked all because apparently romancing a character in a game means anyone who cosplays as her is suddenly your property.” Speaking up for herself resulted only in a dismissal of her knowledge of the character. Five years previous, Haley Oatway was 19 and attending PAX (Penny Arcade Expo). Despite not wearing a costume, she was approached for a photo, only to realize the photographer had zoomed in on her chest and then posted the photo on social media to rank the attractiveness of convention attendees.

88 Connel, Chelsea. E-mail message to author. September 12, 2014.
89 Attiani, Lexi. E-mail message to author. September 11, 2014.
90 Oatway, Haley. E-mail message to author. September 14, 2014.
In *Enterprising Women*, Camille Bacon-Smith recounted an incident in which she, as a female attendee, was made to feel very unwelcome in the largely male-occupied game room of a convention:

> One of the gamers...pinned me to the wall by my throat and drove a glancing blow at my side with his wooden sword. Although the violence of the attack was strictly in “play,” the gamer clearly intended to intimidate me. I was frankly terrified but, but I laughed as though I were enjoying the play.\(^9\)

Once again, whether Camille Bacon-Smith was aware of Huizinga’s discussions of play, she had experienced its transgressions and the way that the performative nature of conventions could be used as a way of pushing away perceived interlopers.

Cosplayers, while embodying the idea of performance, still lack the protection of being seen as an art form or as professionals. Instead, they occupy a place where character and reality blur. This is compounded by the utilization of “booth babes,” paid models who are dressed up as characters to attract business. Where a cosplayer, dressing for their own pleasure, serves no agenda but their own, booth babes are “instructed to be as mute and compliant as possible—as interchangeable approximations of a fantasy figure.”\(^9\) Female cosplayers are then often treated as an extension of the paid booth babes. Rather than recognizing cosplayers as craftspeople, others feel more comfortable with breaking typical social boundaries. In disregarding the bodily autonomy of cosplayers, those who harass them are objectifying cosplayers in a way that, like *Rhythm 0*, goes too far.

However, whereas the premise of *Rhythm 0* hinged on Abramović voluntarily relinquishing control as part of the piece, cosplayers have not given such consent. Their interaction with others and exhibition of their craft runs the risk both of an unintentional

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91 Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 18
forgetting of boundaries through over-enthusiasm as well deliberate and intentional harassment. While many cosplayers might agree with Allan Kaprow’s suggestion that “the line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps as indistinct, as possible,” it is quite likely that many would advocate it with the caveat of a policy of safety and respect.

“Cosplay is Not Consent”

In response to this harassment, three fans formed the group Geeks for CONsent. The women, identified by their first names only on their site, met while working for the Hollaback! organization that works to prevent street harassment. Learning that they were also part of comic fandom, founders Rochelle, Erin, and Anna (surnames not given) decided to concentrate their efforts towards the specific issues of the fandom community. While many conventions have stated policies regarding general harassment, there is little by way of policy that specifically addresses sexual harassment. Hoping to create change in a way that provides all attendees with appropriate recourse, Geeks for CONsent has petitioned convention runners across the United States. They also work to highlight conventions whose policies are especially clear, such as Washington, D.C.’s Awesome-Con, who maintain a “‘zero-tolerance policy against harassment, groping, stalking and inappropriate photography. Gender-based harassment doesn’t have to happen in the workplace to be unacceptable.’” This is part of a larger, multi-paragraph statement handed out to all convention attendees in their programing guides.

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93 Quoted in Richards, Marina Abramović, 93
In June 2014, Geeks for CONsent petitioned San Diego Comic Con to improve their harassment policy. The current policy constitutes one paragraph in a programming book that averages two hundred pages that instruct attendees to behave with “respect [to] common sense rules for public behavior, personal interaction, common courtesy, and respect for private property” and that they report any misbehavior as soon as possible. Given the size of San Diego Comic Con, this policy is not only vague but almost impossible to enforce in a timely and effective manner. Geeks for CONsent petitioned San Diego Comic Con to create a more reliable way to report harassment, clear signage regarding the policy, information for attendees, and more training for convention volunteers and staff.

In response, San Diego Comic Con’s director of marketing and public relations, David Glanzer, explained that he felt creating a more stringent harassment policy would actually be detrimental for the convention’s safety and reputation. In an interview with *Comic Book Resource*, Glanzer said, first, that the policy was deliberately broad so as not to be exclusionary. However, he also felt that a tighter harassment policy would suggest to press and outsiders that the convention has an inordinately large harassment problem and damage the convention’s reputation unduly. In Glanzer’s own words, “I think the news media, might look at this as, ‘Why would you, if this wasn't such a bad issue, why do you feel the need to single out this one issue and put signs up about it?’” This reluctance speaks of an inability to acknowledge what attendees have made clear: there is a harassment problem and it must be dealt with.

New York Comic Con, however, has also taken steps to improve their harassment policy. Attendees during their October 9, 2014 weekend encountered a very clear anti-harassment policy.

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in programming guides and on their website that proved Glanzer’s statement about the dangers of an overly specific policy false. In clear terms, New York Comic Con explained that “New York Comic Con has a ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY for harassment of any kind, including but not limited to: stalking, offensive verbal comments, harassing or non-consensual photography or recording”\(^97\) and other items, explaining that these terms were applied, but not limited to topics of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, size, or disability. Furthermore, attendees encountered banners that said “Cosplay is not Consent” in large letters [fig. 56].

Cosplay Performance as the “Wrong” Artform

Many professionals in comics are known to embrace cosplay. Some, such as Matt Fraction or Gail Simone, even post their own convention photos online. Others, however, have been vocal about their dislike of the activity. While not the first to make such comments, Denise Dorman—the wife of comics illustrator Dave Dorman—made waves in a blog post about a recent convention. Dorman explained that several conventions were no longer becoming profitable to attend for sellers and artists like her husband. She posited that the goal of convention attendance had shifted away from buying artwork and memorabilia, favoring cosplayers instead: “[I]n this selfie-obsessed, Instagram Era, COSPLAY is the new focus of these conventions–seeing and being seen…Conventions are no longer shows about commerce, product launches, and celebrating the people who created this genre in the first place.”\(^98\) Dorman went on to express admiration for the talent of cosplayers, but explained that conventions were


an expensive undertaking for sellers as well. She felt it was becoming less feasible for traditional artists to appear at conventions if they were “reduced to being the background wallpaper against which the cosplayers pose in their selfies.”

In a later blog post, titled “Denise Dorman Does Not Blame Cosplay for Low Convention Sales,” Dorman clarified her point. Rather than the cosplayers themselves, she said, she had difficulty with “The new breed of attendees who are there because someone said it’s cool to be there; they are the ones completely unfamiliar with the comics industry.” These “new” attendees were there in self-interest, taking attendee memberships away from more “dedicated” fans. They were not the correct kind of fans, she wrote: “They are the people I take issue with. NOT the Cosplayers. Those are the people who care only about their selfies on their Instagram profiles.” Her criticism now implied that it was not the performers and cosplayers but their audience, who were enjoying the “wrong” artwork in the “wrong” way.

While neither the first nor the last industry professional to make such a comment, Dorman’s post was folded in with other discussions of the changing shape of fandom. Dorman took pains to say that while she had been accused of being anti-feminist, it had not been her intention. Other professionals, however, were much more eager to make it clear that they had no interest in the young, female side of fandom. Two years before Dorman’s 2014 post, social aggregator BuzzFeed directly screen-captured a post by comics artist Tony Harris on his personal, but publicly visible, Facebook page [fig. 57]. He denigrated female cosplayers both for

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99 Dorman, “The Hidden TRUTH”
101 Dornam, DENISE DORMAN DOES NOT BLAME COSPLAY
what he believed was false enthusiasm and for being “unattractive.” Harris concluded by echoing the sentiment that women were taking money away from industry professionals:

YOU DONT KNOW SHIT ABOUT COMICS, BEYOND WHATEVER GOOGLE IMAGE SEARCH YOU DID…And also, if ANY of these guys that you hang on tried to talk to you out of that Con? You wouldnt give them the fucking time of day… Your just the thing that all the Comic Book, AND mainstream press flock to at Cons. And the real reason for the Con, and the damned costumes yer parading around in? That would be Comic Book Artists, and Comic Book Writers who make all that shit up. [Emphasis and misspellings his]

The rant, in its entirety, was full of undisguised hostility. Like Joe Peacock, he made it clear that he believed these women were not cosplaying for themselves—or even familiar with the source material—but for the confidence boost that came from befuddling men.

In December 2014, another veteran comics artist came forward with his thoughts on cosplayers. Active in the 1970s and 80s, Pat Broderick rejoined the industry in the 2000s and did not like what he saw. On a similarly public Facebook post [fig. 58], Broderick wrote: “If you're a Cosplay personality…If you're a convention promoter and you're building your show around cosplay…you bring nothing of value to the shows, and if you're a promoter pushing cosplay as your main attraction you're not helping the industry or comics market.”

In short Broderick felt that emphasis on the performances of amateurs over the commodities put forth by professionals was the incorrect way of managing a convention.

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102 Reproduced in Dickens, “Tony Harris Hates Women”
The Creative versus the Curatorial in Cosplay

When posts like the above discuss cosplayers, if gender is mentioned, it is usually
to denigrate young, female cosplayers—the same fans who “interrupt” canon with
interpretive and transformative fanworks—despite the fact that attendees of any gender
are seen to enjoy cosplay. In this mode of thinking, it could be suggested that the hostility
towards cosplayers folds in several factors. The old guard of artists and attendees expect
conventions, as a social and financial sphere, to remain unchanged. Certain artworks—
the artists’ “official” prints and memorabilia—should remain at a higher social and
monetary value.

The popularization and focus shift to cosplay, to performance, is therefor
“wrong.” It distracts from the established “value” of the objects for sale, dealing in
performance and experience that cannot be commodified. This comes in combination
with the previously discussed split in modes of thinking that tends to fall on either side of
the gender divide. Cosplay is a creative, interpretive art that is typically seen as a
feminine undertaking, one that cannot be curated or sold by the old (typically male)
guard. Because it involves the participation of the “wrong” kind of fan in the “wrong”
way by the “wrong” gender, it is seen as disruptive and inferior.
CONCLUSION

In 2012, artist Christianne Benedict posted a one-page narrative titled “A Day at the Comics Shop.” In this comic, she detailed the people she saw in the store on a Wednesday, when the latest comics are traditionally delivered. First there was Benedict herself, a transgender woman, and three other women, all of whom were people of color. Behind the counter, Benedict noticed that the current staff-members were a woman and a gay man. Another woman in the store was a local reporter, writing about queer characters in comics [fig. 59]. In the bottom, Benedict writes, “Notice who’s not present? This was on a Wednesday afternoon, new comics day. They say that comics have a diversity problem and that’s true. But comics readers don’t have a diversity problem. Hopefully the industry will wise up eventually.” The missing customer in question was the heterosexual, white male to whom so many comics market. What Benedict noticed was one of the first signs of the paradigm shift comics are still undergoing. Some comic book shops remain jealously guarded fortresses, trying to serve a dying breed, while others have welcomed new fans with open arms, creating a space for the new generation of comic book fans.

History shows us that female interest in comics is not new at all. For as long as there have been comic strips and books, there have been girls and women who read and make them as well. Since the days of Richard Outcault’s Yellow Kid, artists like Rose O’Neill and Nell Brinkley were creating their iconic Kewpies and Brinkley girls. When Superman premiered, the Man of Steel was quickly joined by other costumed crime fighters including Tarpe Mills’ Miss Fury. This was an age where publishers saw the potential of female fans, leading to Dr. William

105 Benedict, “A Day at the Comics Shop”
Moulton Marston’s creation of Wonder Woman. The World War II years saw widening opportunity for artists and writers, including Indigenous American WAC Eva Mirabal and politically outspoken black artist Jackie Ormes.

It was only in the 1950s—when Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* and the subsequent Senate hearings decimated comics’ reputation—that comics became a boys’ club. Even then, female fans did not entirely disappear. Instead, they could be found reading and making underground comix or making friends among distribution circles for the latest round of *Star Trek* fanfiction. As technology improved, so did fandom’s capacity to cross distances. If comic book shops proved unwelcoming for female fans, they could find outlets on online message boards and distribute and read fanfiction and webcomics. As the twentieth century closed, imported manga were gaining unprecedented popularity, attracting female fans and their spending money. The growing numbers of women and girls at anime conventions proved that female readers of comics not only existed, they existed in huge numbers.

Movies and merchandise based on comic book characters are making the books pop culturally relevant and attracting more new readers than ever. However, these new fans do not always find themselves welcomed with open arms. The “old guard” of fans remain protective of a social and cultural sphere that they see as theirs. Because of this, neophytes are often rigorously quizzed to prove that they have absorbed enough information about a comic’s canon to be considered a true fan.

Much of the harassment falls on young women, pushed by territorial fans who use proof of knowledge or lack thereof as social currency. Writing for *The Atlantic*, Noah Berlatsky

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suggests that for this curatorial group, fandom is based in “how much you've consumed; on what you've consumed; and on how long before everyone else you were able to consume it. That knowledge is—deliberately, essentially, intentionally—used, and meant to be used, as an identity, and, therefore, as power.”\textsuperscript{107} When the (typically) female half of fandom renders that knowledge inert and invalid by transforming and departing from canon, the people who value the knowledge become territorial and seek to undermine the creative side of fandom.

This becomes abundantly true when these fans mingle in person at convention. Cosplayers are skilled artists and craftspeople, using craft and performance as a means of living out the fantasy of being their favorite characters. However, they are often scorned as a destructive aspect of fandom—if they are even acknowledged as being genuinely part of the group at all—and treated either as villainous seductresses or as characters to be objectified rather than people.

In the afterword of \textit{Bitch Planet #1}, Danielle Henderson, reminds us that women everywhere are still under the scrutiny of their male peers: “The striking thing about \textit{Bitch Planet} is that we’re already on it. We don’t have to get thrown on a shuttle to be non-compliant—be a little overweight, talk too loud, have an opinion on the internet—be a woman of color.”\textsuperscript{108} While Henderson does not say as much explicitly, another way to be “non-compliant” is to love comics the “wrong way.” Those fans, so often female, who prefer to show their appreciation for a canon “incorrectly” by the creation of transformative fanart, fiction, and cosplay often face scorn. Transformative works interrupt the efforts of the curatorial, typically male, side of fandom and


so such contributions are often cast as derivative and immature rather than creative. At times, these fans even face censure from industry professionals, who often explicitly conflate cosplayers and female fans as the source of economic or social downfall at conventions.

Despite their detractors, the female side of fandom is determined to find its place and to be acknowledged. Those same fanartists and writers have used their creative skills to create new interpretations that reflect and serve those members of fandom who want to see themselves as every inch the hero as Captain America. Using their creative skills, they reinterpret Iron Man as Iron Woman and cast Japanese actress Rinko Kikuchi in the role of the Wasp. If the media does not serve them and territorial fans reject them, they will creatively reroute the comics they love in hopes of finding a better reflection of themselves in popular media.

Slowly, comics executives and creative forces are responding. The last few years have seen diversity grow in many comics’ rosters, from the Latina lesbian Miss America and Muslim Ms. Marvel. Former supporting character and love interest Jane Foster has been judged worthy to lift the hammer Mjolnir and become Thor rather than be rescued by him. Jane Foster’s Thor will be in good company with the new all-female *Avengers* title.109 On the flesh and blood side of comics, DC’s latest lineup features more women and people of color on their creative staff.110 More than ever, comics are providing their readers with compelling, diverse characters and the fans are responding with enthusiasm. Since the beginning, neither comics creators nor fandom have been homogenously white, male, and heterosexual; it is time for the same to be said of the characters on our screens and pages. Change is coming, but this is only a start.

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APPENDIX A

Interview with Kelly Sue DeConnick

MC: The first thing I have to do is from my telemarketing days is say this call is being recorded.
KS: Kay!
MC: I think I’m supposed to say that.
KS: Can you hear me well enough? I’m on my cell phone.
MC: Yeah, I can hear you.
KS: Okay great.
MC: So I guess I’m just going to dive in and start with the questions, because I’ve got a lot of them. First of all, I just want to say thank you for taking the time to do this. I’m really excited.
So I guess the big first question that has to be asked is this: Do you think there is a problem with sexism in the comics industry, toward artists and writers as well as to consumers?
KS: Sure. I mean I don’t think there’s...I think there’s a sexism problem in everything. I don’t think we’re particularly unique for that. I think there’s a sexism problem in the news. I think there’s a sexism problem in the government. Yeah, I’m full on tin hat!
MC: In a large part, my thesis topic was inspired by that post you made on your blog, about how people said you were only in comics because of Matt Fraction. Is that attitude still prevalent, in your experience?
KS: Towards me in particular?
MC: Towards you and, I guess, towards others in a similar situation.
KS: Yeah...Yeah. I think so.
MC: Do you experience that kind of attitude from people in the industry or from readers?
KS: Well both.
MC: So I guess it’s kind of...I guess it’s kind of accusations of nepotism and stuff?
KS: Yeah, Yeah. I mean it’s...it’s this...I. Hm. It’s usually an assumption that...That my working
or continuing to work is because of my husband’s position. When in fact, I think it’s actually
been more detrimental to me than helpful.
MC: Really? Yeah…
KS: Ultimately it’s one of the things that it’s really...Part of me just doesn’t care what people
think.
MC: Which is pretty reasonable!
KS: But…But in, you know when it comes from trolls, I super don’t care. But it stings when it
comes from people who think they’re good guys and will defend it with, “Well you know. It’s a
natural assumption.”
MC: The whole “fedora” mentality.
KS: It’s not a natural assumption! It’s an ingrained sexist...It’s culturally ingrained sexism.
There’s nothing natural about it.
MC: Yeah. And that actually leads really well to my next question which is...A lot of my
research–with this thesis and with other topics that I’ve looked at–relates to erasure from history,
the idea that a diverse group of people beyond just white men have been involved in all parts of
history but have since been excised from that history. Women have been involved in drawing
and writing comics pretty much since their inception in the newspapers. I think the earliest
example I found was in the 1890s so it’s nothing new.
KS: No! Not at all! And it’s a thing...I get this question a lot about how, like, there’s this
revolution going on right now where women are suddenly discovering comics! That’s like...NO!
No that is not the case! Women have always made comics. Women have always read comics.
The percentage of female readership went down in the country when superhero comics became...aggressively unfriendly to women. Which is shocking, I know!

MC: I know, right?

KS: But...the thing is, there is nothing inherently masculine about telling stories with pictures and words. There is nothing—and even if you break it down into the superhero genre, which is the dominant genre in this country—there’s nothing inherently masculine about that! It can be done in a way that is aggressively unfriendly to women. And has been done in a way that is aggressively unfriendly to women! And, shockingly, women did not flock to read those books!

But it can also be...It can be wonderfully inviting. There is nothing inherently masculine about the idea of heroism. There is nothing inherently masculine about power fantasies and I would put forth that, as a five foot tall woman who is largely impotent in a larger society, I think I can teach any man in any room about power fantasies.

MC: And yeah, I was reading this thing on tumblr, which is where I got a lot of ideas that I hold about sexism and how people experience it, and there was this thing that the first known novel, The Tale of Genji, written by a woman. Mary Shelley, wrote Frankenstein and is credited with inventing science fiction and The Scarlet Pimpernel—you know, a costumed hero saving people—is written by a woman. And now we’re being pushed out of that same genre that we had helped create.

KS: Yeah, but you know, interestingly. The films have brought a lot of women back, which I think is fantastic.

MC: Do you think this is specific to the Marvel films or to superhero films in general, with comics?
KS: Well, we don’t know, because nobody’s done any reliable research. Because I work...I can give you, you know, stories of what I’ve experienced on the Marvel side, but I don’t know how representative that is.

MC: Yeah, I mean, anything you’re willing to tell me. It’s worth knowing, I think.

KS: No, I mean. I...The Iron Man and Avengers movies brought a lot of new readers into the Marvel Universe.

MC: Yeah and I know personally, I was a big X-Men reader and viewer, but prior to Iron Man coming to theaters all I knew was that he was an alcoholic with a heart problem. And now he’s–

KS: Most people thought Iron Man was a robot before the movie!

MC: Yeah, most of what I knew about him was...most of what I knew about Robert Downey Jr. as well. But...and I think, it was Ed Brubaker who made that tweet about how Guardians of the Galaxy was relatively unknown but brought in a big audience and that there’s this big audience that wants this kind of stuff. And, I guess the original question I had talking about the history, do you think this historical involvement of women in the comics has been well-known or ignored in the current industry?

KS: I think there’s...The women who have labored so hard in our industry have largely been ignored and those who have been successful are viewed as, you know, the trope of the “exceptional woman.”

MC: When, again, that’s totally a fallacy. Such again, the erasure–

KS: Or, you know, we’re never mentioned without...some comments made about our romantic lives.

MC: Yeah. I think that’s true of any woman who’s prominent in any industry like this, but it’s something that I’ve noticed is especially prominent within the comics fandom, and...most of
what I’m writing about is the effect of this barrier on real people, on writers and consumers who are women. But you can’t ignore that writers have created some characters—I know that Gail Simone’s Women In Refrigerators site has a lot of commentary about the trauma that other writers have forced on your character, Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel through, including rape, pregnancy, memory loss, and alcoholism. Is that something you consider while writing Captain Marvel? Do you feel like that’s a history that needs to be “confronted” or “corrected” in any way?

KS: Well, I mean. It was already addressed, you know, I mean...a lot is made about Avengers #200, but not a lot is made about how Claremont wrote Carol confronting the Avengers about it. Like, she...it’s not. I hate that that’s the thing that people know the most about her, you know?

MC: Yeah, I mean. Personally, what I knew about her for the longest time was her involvement with the character Rogue and that was about it.

KS: Yeah.

MC: Until I started following your blog, actually.

KS: Avengers #200, I get asked about, frequently and I feel like it’s been answered. Claremont took care of it years ago. But, you know, everyone loves that Carol Strickland essay—which is an important essay, I’m not being dismissive of it—saying that questions have been asked and answered. But because it kept coming up, um, one of the things that I did in the first run. Like, I was sort of revisiting Carol’s history and kind of trying to replay some of these events in ways that were less—that were more active. So that she was less a victim and had more agency.

MC: I was going to ask about that!

KS: So, you know, she loses her memory again. But she makes the choice. It is a heroic gesture. And then the way that I used that was to have her relearn her identity from this eight-year-old
girl, who she hung with, so basically I retconned her without retconning. So everything that happened to Carol still happens, but she doesn’t know it. So it doesn’t matter.

MC: So it’s not so much that you’re confronting it. You’re just kind of...retreading that ground, I guess…?

KS: What I was trying to do was. Well I was trying to tell an interesting story first but while doing that I wanted to kind of put a lid on things. Can we...can we stop talking about this?

MC: Yeah. ‘Cause yeah, it does suck that the thing we know about these characters is their trauma and obviously I’m guilty of that. That that’s what I knew about Carol Danvers before starting to read your books.

KS: And it doesn’t reinforce—as we’re trying to move forward with the character—to continue to shake our fists at something that happened twenty-some years ago. It doesn’t help. If we’re never going to be able to move on from that, then we need to kill Carol and get someone new. You know? Like seriously! But I don’t want to do that.

MC: Yeah it’s a history that’s hard to divorce from, but you don’t want to wallow in it. Is that kind of what’s going on?

KS: Yeah. It’s done. It’s asked and answered. If we find it absolutely impossible to perceive her in any way but as the victim, then she is no longer the tool that we need. And we need a new tool. I believe that she is a good tool and, you know, the fact that there’s a couple dings in it doesn’t mean it doesn’t still work. But...it’ll...The fandom will make that decision. If we can’t move on from it, then she’s gotta go.

MC: And I’ve got to say, I really do love your writing for Carol. I just wanted to say that.

KS: Thank you!
MC: In general, as a woman writing comics in the current climate of growing (and vocal!) awareness regarding diversity and representation, do you feel like you need to make a conscious effort to answer to those readers? Do you worry first about the story? Or are they one and the same? I know you kind of started to mention first telling an interesting story.

KS: Yeah, I mean. My first responsibility is to the story but I have made a conscious effort to...get out of my comfort zone. I grew up, white lower middle class. I’m sort of firmly middle class now. And so I’m toting around a hefty backpack full of privilege, you know? And...and I think it makes for better stories...I think the “write what you know” can be misinterpreted to like...to the point where people only write the stories of their own lives. Sort of, you know? And I think as writers we have a responsibility to get out of the comfortable places. And especially when you’re telling stories about heroes. I want to see all kinds of heroes.

MC: Absolutely and, um, I’m actually half-Asian and I remember really clearly when Mulan came out, being so excited because she was Asian. So I’ve experienced it firsthand.

KS: Yeah! It’s huge! It’s absolutely huge, you know? I mean I...even...I liked Snow White better than any of the other princesses when I was a kid–and half of them didn’t even exist when I was a kid–because she had dark hair and so did I! You know there’s a certain...I’m not nearly as eloquent about this as Junot Diaz, who has an amazing quote, about–

MC: The mirrors and monsters quote?

KS: Yes, about vampires not being able to see themselves in mirrors and how you can drive people crazy by denying them cultural representation. ...you know and it’s scary, because when you’re writing things that aren’t your experience, it’s...Well. I’m going to contradict myself here. You’re going to get stuff wrong but you’re also going to get stuff wrong if you write your own experience because you don’t please everyone all the time and you shouldn’t be writing to try
and do that anyway. But...But it’s a different uncomfortable and a different kind of dangerous. I think it’s on us to have courage.

MC: Yeah, that’s a big thing, absolutely. Do you think more writers in modern media should be made aware of—or are already aware of—this responsibility?

KS: I don’t know. I mean I can’t...I can’t tell other people what their responsibilities are. But I will say that we’re fifty percent of the population, I think it’s super pathetic that we’re fifteen percent of the protagonists last year in major motion pictures in this country. I think girls can’t imagine themselves as leads in their own stories if they never see it? And then, there’s also a weird advantage that comes from it that we learn how to cross-identify very easily. But men and boys don’t learn how to identify with female protagonists because who wants to identify down?

MC: They never have to.

KS: Yeah. They never have to and if they have the opportunity, it would be identifying down, status-wise, and no one wants to do that. So I think that it...It hurts us culturally. It makes us ill. You know, it’s not good for us. It denies the contributions of half of our society. I think it’s in our best interest to cut that shit out but at the same time, I do flinch at saying to some other writer what their responsibility is. I can speak for what I think I need to do.

MC: And I keep reflecting on my own experience because that’s all I have, obviously, but for a long time I thought that all the Batman, Superman cartoons that are so beloved today. I thought that as a kid I couldn’t watch those ‘cause that was boy stuff. And until I saw—and it’s shameful to say this—but in the Batman & Robin movie, that was my first introduction to the idea of Batgirl and that was my first idea that girls could be part of that world. So I guess that movie did one thing right, but yeah again it’s that whole mirrors thing, you need to see...you need to see it to be it, I guess.
KS: Yeah, I had a guy I went to high school with. I sent some books for his twin girls and he wrote me back—a lovely letter—about how one of his girls had been so flabbergasted to know that women could work in comics. Because she...it had never occurred to her as a possibility. And he was mortified that it didn’t occur to him that they wouldn’t believe that they could do anything that they wanted to do.

MC: Yeah that’s a big thing. And...so I got a little off track with my questions, so I’m going to go a little bit out of order. You reblogged an essay about how the female characters of Pretty Deadly act as embodiments and subversions of the Maiden/Temptress, Mother, Crone triumvirate. Was that intentional on your part? You know, it’s always that question of did the writer mean to have this symbolism or is it just--

KS: Yeah no. No that was utterly unintentional. That’s somebody else’s analysis that I thought was fascinating but no, I absolutely did not approach it with that in mind.

MC: That’s like my new favorite comic is Pretty Deadly so--

KS: Oh thank you!

MC: Yeah...it reminds me of Sandman and Fables in the best way but with a lot of new ideas that I haven’t really been reading and I love it so...thank you.

KS: Well thank you very much.

MC: And with Pretty Deadly, you’re currently writing for Marvel, for Dark Horse, and for Image. Do you experience sexism in any of these arenas? One more than the other? In mainstream or in independent comics.

KS: Yeah this is the sort of question that like...you’re going to have to talk to me in about fifteen or twenty years when I can speak freely on it.

MC: So that can’t be published at the moment.
KS: Yeah, sorry. You’ll have to just take my word for it.

MC: Yeah, I don’t want to have my thesis undo your career by any means so...Yeah I would like to not do that.

KS: Yeah, I appreciate it.

MC: There’s a lot of “shouting” and online campaigns for many things, like a Black Widow movie or–recently–I’ve seen a lot of things about how they’re apparently killing off of Janet van Dyne (The Wasp) off-camera in the upcoming Ant-Man movie.

KS: Is that true!? I feel like there’s a lot of speculation about that but I don’t...Maybe it is but I haven’t figured out where that’s coming from. Then again I haven’t really gone looking for it either.

MC: Yeah there was a quote from Michael Douglas talking about how his wife gets killed off to create personal tragedy. Which is like...Class A fridging. But yeah, I’ve seen a lot of anger about it. Do you think the decision makers that kind of pilot these movies–are they aware of these demands? Do you think they believe they have any weight or that they come to ignore them?

KS: Oh I don’t even...I...I mean, I…

MC: Or is that a whole different department?

KS: I think things like tumblr are echo chambers, where people think that things are a bigger deal than they are. Even the internet is an echo chamber. I mean I’ve heard a story told about a...there’s a very prominent retailer who, online, appeared to speak for a number of retailers as [indistinct] the online authority and someone at one of the bigger houses went looking to see, “Oh all right!” to see what this guy’s store does and it wasn’t even one of the top 300 stores in the country and so it’s like…Well, they’re a business. Money talks. And I...I don’t think anybody ever cared about anything that dude said again. There’s a...I think. I think eventually a female led
superhero movie will happen that is successful. I mean it’s happened already, Elektra was made! It was terrible.

MC: It made money though, didn’t it? It made some amount of money.

KS: I have no idea but making money isn’t enough. It has to make a ton of money and it has to sell a lot of merchandise. And that is a thing that is interesting to me about how Carol [Danvers] has become so prominent in recent...in our echo chamber, but comparatively in our Marvel universe, Carol’s become...has become a very prominent figure in the last couple years and we’re starting to see her show up in more things and I have nothing to base this on but I have sort of been thinking about the fact that the sales of the book are not extraordinary. We do well, we make money, but we don’t make *enough* money. Most books would be cancelled at the numbers that we do and we’ve not only been *not* canceled but we’ve been relaunched. And my theory is that Carol is selling stuff.

MC: Yeah I know on the Hot Topic website they had a t-shirt sale and the Carol t-shirt was actually, at the time was sold out in my size and I was going “Aww.”

KS: I think people are starting to...First and foremost these are businesses and...one of the big arguments about women in animation is that these characters don’t sell toys because the female action figures just don’t do very well. And so they don’t make very many of them. They, once in a while, will make one and you know it’s bad and it doesn’t do very well and it becomes this cyclical thing. Like, for instance, when they did the… “We don’t get superhero toys for girls!” and then, like, finally, Marvel does um...Not Marvel, McDonald’s does Happy Meal toys for Spider-Man that are for girls but they’re like...one of them is stationary? Which FYI, is not a toy, so no one wanted it because it was *stationary*. I have a four-year-old, what the hell does she want with *stationary*? You know? But anyway so we try to sell, we do it stupid, and then “well oh it
didn’t work!” so but anyway...I think Carol sells stuff. I think people want to wear and, you know, Carol sells so much stuff that licensed retailers are not making enough of her merchandise so people are buying un-licensed merchandise. You know I’ve seen rip-offs…

MC: Yeah, on Etsy and stuff…

KS: Yeah! I’ve seen rip-off t-shirts and jewelry constantly! And I think that’s interesting and I suspect and, you now, I am not privy these conversations. I am not...I should be very clear, I am not a Marvel employee. No one in the creative end of Marvel...not in the...We’re all freelancers. Only the editors are employees. So...my theory is that somebody has noticed that Carol sells stuff and they’re going to keep that book going as long as she’s selling t-shirts. Which is fine! So, you know, buy t-shirts!

MC: If they would restock my size, I would! ‘Cause I’ve been seeing all the Carol Corps stuff you reblog as well, so obviously there’s...people are interested in it. And...kind of the last couple of questions I have...What do you think will happen for professionals and fans who retain the gentleman’s club mentality of “geekdom,” the ones who complain about stories not needing to be “PC” by being diverse and believe in the idea of the “fake geek girl” and stuff like that?

KS: I don’t know. I mean, I’m unfortunately not a soothsayer. Maybe they’ll win. I hope not.

MC: Yeah, me neither.

KS: I mean, I believe. What is it? The arc of the universe is long but eventually towards justice? I mean we’ll get there eventually. I don’t know how long but we’ll see. I tend to be...fairly pessimistic about these things and that serves me well. So, I would love to be wrong. So. We’ll see.

MC: Yeah and hopefully, this thesis will at least reach a couple people in the academic community who will...you know, hopefully make some ripples. But I guess that does cancel out
my last question, which is, what do you think the future holds for comics? For creators and female readers and things like that? But that kind of canceled out that question.

KS: Yeah, I mean, there are interesting things happening right now. The most interesting thing that is happening right now is the phoenix-like rebirth of Image Comics. Well there’s two stories. The two biggest stories are Image Comics and digital. And that is going to change the shape of our industry. Digital is going to change distribution. I think a lot of stores are going to close but a lot of stores are going to do better than ever. It’s going to be kind of like what happens with book stores. If you cannot make your store a community hub or a very cheap warehouse, you’re not going to be able to compete. So if your store is not a pleasant...if your store is the equivalent of a stinky garage sale. I don’t think those places are going to last and I’m not really shedding any tears about it. And there’s some excellent retailers who are very savvy about how they can expand their consumer base by making their stores community hubs. And they can...turn them into very successful organizations, I think, and I think they will and I think they’re going to figure out how to use digital to their benefit.

MC: I know Marvel has, like, a Netflix-like series that you pay so much a year and you have access to their entire digital database.

KS: Yeah, no, that is fascinating. There’s also...how long...We have a single distributor. Diamond has a de facto monopoly on our industry. If something were to happen and Diamond were to close tomorrow, do you know how many businesses would fold? That is fascinating to me. How long that will continue to exist is interesting to me. I don’t...I don’t think that Diamond’s threatened in any way.

MC: But it’s something to think about.

KS: Yeah. Is there a Plan B? I mean what would they do if Diamond folded?
MC: I know, that for me, as a college or graduate student, I don’t buy as many paper comics because I’m going to be changing apartments every two or three years. I’ve started buying a lot more digital because it’s a lot more affordable and I can zoom in and zoom out and page this and that.

KS: I’m old and I can’t figure out how to flip through a digital comic.

MC: The one app that I have, it’s very picky where you have to put your fingers.

KS: Yeah, my problem is that I tend to…I tend to use things for reference and I need to remember, “Oh it’s, you know, about three quarters of the way through the book on the left-hand side.” And I can’t do that with digital comics.

MC: It has its advantages and disadvantages for sure.

KS: But a lot of people love it and I...I like that everyone who has a smart phone has a comic book store in their pocket.

MC: In a way, it’s become much more accessible just by having that new platform. And I guess there was one other question that I kind of had but I wasn’t sure that, necessarily, how relevant it was so I kind of saved it to the end but you also did a lot of adaptation work for manga, right?

KS: Yes.

MC: And in adapting those, a lot of them I read were shojo, girls’ comics. They were for teenage girls or young women. Do you think the attitude in that writing is different? Are there different social constraints?

KS: Oh yeah, I mean. Japanese gender relations are fucked up! Yeah, I mean–

MC: Yeah, one of the ones that I read you had translated [adapted] was Sensual Phrase. And I was...I was sixteen and I was, “Whoa!” I was sort of blown away by it.
KS: There’s a...there was another one and I think I did two issues of it before they decided not to put it out in the American market and it was by the same author. It was just straight-up rape fantasy. Which...you get into whole other areas of feminism and try to figure that out, you know?
MC: Yeah, for this thesis I’m trying to stick to the Western, North American, side of things. Because if I were to try and tackle every single topic that has to do with sexism in comics...I would not finish my thesis in a semester!
KS: But here’s what’s interesting to me about manga versus American comics. In terms of sexism. Not the content, but rather that there was this received wisdom there, for a while, that girls wouldn’t read comics. Girls and women would not read comics and one of the stupidest reasons was the notion that, “Well, women are not that visual.” Which is so completely dumb that I...it boggles my mind. If women were not visual, we would not have fashion magazines. Or eyes! But anyway, so there was this received wisdom that girls and women would not read comics. And then the manga-dome happened, and not only were girls and women coming out in droves to read comics but they were spending hundreds of dollars on them every month! Reading them at ten dollars a pop and sometimes keeping mall bookstores open solely.
MC: Yeah, I was one of those teenage girls.
KS: And that kind of put it to rest but it also was interesting, with our shared universe comics. We make it so hard for new readers to come in that it was actually easier for girls and women to learn to read backwards than it was to enter American comics.
MC: Yeah, I would agree with that, like, most of my comics right now are the shorter runs like The Young Avengers—which I got interested in because of America Chavez actually—so it’s...a lot of those access points, I would definitely agree with that.
KS: You need someone to hold your hand, you know?
MC: And especially, I think, for newcomers of any gender. There’s so much gatekeeping that it’s not always easy...And yeah, that’s all the questions I have written down. This has been amazing.

KS: All right! Well thank you very much!

MC: And thank you so much for doing this.

KS: You’re welcome and good luck to you.

MC: Thank you

KS: Bye bye!
My name is Lexi Attiani and I am 24 years old. I have been cosplaying since I was only eleven. In that time I have met many wonderful, amazing people and had many fun experiences, however I have also dealt with the worst of harassment and male entitlement. When I was younger I dressed mostly as male characters but I developed early and had never heard of binding until much later so frequently I was mistaken for other characters and even worse, for an older girl and so at eleven I already had men almost twice my age approach and proposition me. I'd rather not get into that time period as it was highly scarring, but recently the entitlement has only gotten worse. I cosplay as a very popular love interest from one of Bioware's most popular games and I will often be approached by non-cosplayers who will feel the need to tell me that because they romanced my character they are entitled to touch me any way they want or say anything they want to me because that character was their girlfriend in game. I have been groped, fondled, had my ass slapped, and even once had my visor licked all because apparently romancing a character in a game means anyone who cosplays as her is suddenly your property. And then to make matters worse, if I stand up for myself or disagree with them on a matter, I am told I either didn't play the game or only played it for the romances. I am literally pop quizzed on the finer details of the game's setting and details. I think the worst of it, however, was once a guy was trying to I guess show me how much more he knew than me and if you do things wrong in this game, the character I cosplay as can possibly commit suicide. I have suffered with self-harm and suicide attempts all my life as a result of past trauma and that's a very highly uncomfortable
sore spot for me. Luckily most people adore this character and take great lengths to keep her safe and happy and alive, but this guy felt the need to say to me 'It must be so awkward to cosplay as a character who commits suicide' and then went on to tell me with great delight how in his playthrough he made sure she did. Sure the sexual harassment is awful, but I think that was my worst experience with harassment in cosplay. It was the most hurtful attempt to 'put me in my place' that I ever experienced and even though I was able to come back at him that she only dies if you mess up, the damage was done.

I hope that this is helpful with your paper, thanks for your time.
Hello! My legal name is Chelsea Connell, and I'm 23.

For almost a decade, I've been attending anime and comic conventions, and the experience has changed quite a bit over the years. I remember when it was still considered unfashionable to be a "geek", and the cons were usually a lot more fun during that time. Not because people weren't rude, but because it was a community of support and love that embraced newcomers. Recently, the scope of public interest has changed, and people have become more defensive and resistant to change.

Most recently, I attended Comic-Con 2014. It was my second year, so I was far more prepared, but it's still rather overwhelming. I learned from my first year that wearing anything that revealed even an inch of skin would attract attention. If I wasn't with my boyfriend at all times, the leering was so bad it caused anxiety attacks. I learned from my second year that it didn't matter what I was wearing, I would receive unwanted attention. Catching guys staring at my chest and giving them a dirty look, only for them to smile at me. As if to say, "Sorry you're uncomfortable, but thanks for your tits."

At most anime conventions, there are dances (more commonly known as raves) and those are breeding grounds for inappropriate behavior. I have been grabbed and pulled into a dance without even a "Hey" more times than I can count. Telling a guy who asks that I have a boyfriend doesn't exactly solve the problem either (because I learned a while ago it's easier than just saying no).

"He doesn't have to know!"
"Is he here now?"
"Ugh, that sucks!"
I haven't bothered going to a rave in several years because it's just a headache waiting to happen, particularly because I don't consider getting a guilt trip about not wanting to dance, having a good time.

Please let me know if you'd like any more specific stories, or anything! I'm happy to help.
Marjorie Liu

Hi Maria,

I was very deliberate in specifying that there should be nothing erotic in those scenes when Natasha is captured — specifically because captured women are so often eroticized, and even though Natasha is naked, restrained, she’s the one still in power. She never for a moment stops being in power. And not through her sexuality, but through her wits and will. That was very important to convey.

As for the next scene, that was an artistic choice that Daniel made. All I said in the script was that she walks out wearing her captor’s clothes. But clothes themselves — what they conceal and reveal — are often more erotic than simple nudity, and at that point she’s free, she’s come out on top — her sexiness can now be part of her aura in ways that wouldn’t have been appropriate in the previous scene.

I hope that helps!

Marjorie
Haley Oatway

I've got a convention story for ya [sic]. At PAX [Penny Arcade Expo] in 2009, I was wearing a Red vs. Blue t-shirt and had a guy approach me asking to take a picture. I was confused since I wasn't in costume but naively agreed.

He zoomed right in on my chest, took the shot and ran. I found photos of my chest on a Facebook page a few days later. The page was for ranking the hotness of girls at the event... it was eventually taken down, thankfully.

No problem! My name is Haley Oatway and in 24. Although at the time that my story took place, I was 19. Best of luck with your thesis! :)
Hey there,

My name is Caitlin Postal and I've been going to conventions since age 13 in 2005. I am now 22 and recently began attending conventions after an extended break during my college years. I have a few stories that come to mind, but I'll highlight two: one from before I was 18 and one from earlier this year.

Before I was 18, I had multiple people hitting on me and saying that they thought I was so much older. At one convention when I was 15, I was spending time with a friend who decided to get drunk for his 18th birthday. Despite him having a girlfriend (who was not at the convention), he continually tried to kiss me, touch me, and otherwise be inappropriate. Luckily I was both sober and not okay with the situation, so I told him to stop trying anything because it wasn't going to happen. I made him sit on the other side of the room so we could just talk until his sister came back from being out.

In April 2014, I went to Sakura-Con in Washington and, despite my better judgment, decided to wear a costume from a fandom that is known for being pretty shitty. The only plus side is that the character is pretty rude so it gave me the ability to shut down creeps. The costume requires a wig, a hood, sleeves that cover my hands, and a full face of theatrical makeup.

Anyway, I was volunteering for the con and needed to check in for my next shift when another fan shouted at me while I was on the escalator: "I love you, [character name]. Marry me!" Normally, I would have just brushed it off, but later that day I attended a cosplay meetup for the fandom and saw the same person. They came up and started to put their arms around me (as if to hug me) without even saying hello first. I literally pushed their chest away and said
"Whoa, you need to ask permission before you touch me." To which they responded with a wink and a very suggestive voice, "See you at the honeymoon." Later at the same gathering, another cosplayer put their arms around me and my friend without permission, resulting in a photo of some very disgruntled faces (my friend's and mine, that is).

While I know this particular instance isn't the worst thing that could have happened, it's a symptom of the larger issue. There are so many people that see cosplayers as objects of their fantasies rather than fans who are interested in this geeky subculture. There also seems to be this issue where fans (frequently male) think that other fans (frequently female) are only invested in cosplay, conventions, etc. to try to get a significant other, which results in the first fans harassing the second, because they feel entitled to something. Cosplayers don't owe anything to anyone and frequently cosplayers just want to make their costumes and have a safe space to showcase them. But what should be a safe space for everyone is, instead, a place where so many female-identified people have to travel in groups or in pairs to maintain a level of safety. After the events at Sakura-Con, I decided that I would never cosplay from the fandom unless I had at least two additional people with me (I did have two people at Sakura but, due to my volunteer hours, I was unable to be with them at all times) and it didn't stop that person from doing what they did).

I know that my story(-ies) are minuscule in comparison to others, but they are significant in the long run because they're symptomatic of a larger problem. And, if occasions like mine go unchecked, they can grow exponentially into very dangerous situations.

I'm not a well-known or popular cosplayer. I don't go to events all the time and, despite knowing so many well-known cosplayers, I don't seek out the limelight. I just want to make stuff and wear it, preferably around people who appreciate the same things I do. And quite frankly,
there are costumes I would love to make that I know I won't because I'm legitimately concerned about what kind of attention they would draw.

Good luck with your thesis. I hope this helps! If you need anything else, just email me.

Caitlin [blog URL redacted]
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Fig. 5

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Fig. 12

Fig. 14
Fig. 15

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Fig. 20
Fig. 21

Fig. 22
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Fig. 24
Fig. 25

Fig. 26
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Fig. 27

Fig. 28
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Fig. 50
Gollini, Caitlin. Progress of Wefting Ryuko Wig. 2014. Reproduced with permission.

Fig. 51
Fig. 52
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Fig. 54

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