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Truth, Justice, Boobs? Analyzing Female Empowerment and Objectification in the Graphic Novel Genre

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OBJECTIFICATION IN THE GRAPHIC NOVEL GENRE

by

Trisha L. Crawshaw

B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2011

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts

Department of Sociology
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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Approved by:

Dr. Rachel B. Whaley , Chair

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TITLE: TRUTH, JUSTICE, BOOBS? ANALYZING FEMALE EMPOWERMENT AND OBJECTIFICATION IN THE GRAPHIC NOVEL GENRE

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Rachel B. Whaley

Female representation is a problem within the graphic novel genre. Positioned to sell as profitable commodities, women in this genre are grossly misrepresented, sexualized, and objectified. While many scholars acknowledge a problem with these debasing marketing techniques, few have critically analyzed the ways in which we sell the female body in graphic form. My project addresses the issue of female representation with special attention to body commodification. Capitalizing on my time spent working at a local comic bookstore and a series of twenty in-depth interviews that I conducted with comic book readers; I draw from a series of personal field notes, ethnographic observation, and transcribed interviews. I argue that female misrepresentation and sexualization is a problem that alienates and objectifies the female fan base. Ultimately, this project seeks to expose the ways in which we consume, sell, and objectify women in the graphic novel community.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound! Fictional superheroes are the protectors of our social world. Since their rise in popularity, the comic book industry has seen a dramatic spike in profitable sales and narrative storytelling. Created by a culture that idolizes the powerful protector, the emergence of superheroes in popular culture is a sociological telltale. Peering into the world of “throwaway” comics and graphic novels, sociologists are able to gain important insight into a shifting cultural landscape. Social constructions of good, evil, justice, and power can be found within its pages.

In fact, many scholars have already focused on the mass media’s ability to influence social constructions of gender, race, sexuality, and power (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; Kilbourne 1999; Marcuse 1964; Smith 1987; Walter 2010). Specifically, there is a growing body of work on the importance of comic books and graphic novels (Barker 1989; Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2009; Hajdu 2008; Johnson 2012; Knowles 2007; Morris and Morris 2005; Morrison 2011; Pustz 2012; Williams and Lyons 2010). Although originally considered to be disposable mediums, comics are becoming increasingly useful narratives. They contain culture histories, commentaries, biases, and values. Scholars have specifically noted how race rhetoric (Brown 2000; Nama 2011; Singer 2002), gender expression (Danziger-Russell 2012; Greenberger 2010; Lepore 2014; Simonson 2012), and overt political messages (Costello 2009; Dipaolo 2011; Lepore 2014; York, York, and York 2012) are all present within this booming literary landscape.

Despite a growing body of work on the significance of graphic storytelling, gaps remain in the literature. None have asked how these images influence readers within the comic book community. Furthermore, how are bodies designed, used, and depicted in order to sell messages surrounding empowerment? For my research project, I sought to examine what makes a female

graphic novel character “powerful.” What does this power look like? Is it accessible to all types of women? Does this power invoke actual empowerment for the readers who consume these messages?

My research was guided by a series of questions that pertained to female empowerment in the graphic novel genre. My first question revolved around the notion of female representation in the comic book industry. How are these characters allowed to portray power? Do qualities they possess lead to empowerment? Other questions focused on the role of feminist theory in the development and marketing of these characters. Would I be able to find elements of feminism in these messages? What kind(s) of feminism? I was also motivated to discover the audience’s response to these depictions. Were images of female “power” in this genre inspirational or discouraging to the female fan-base who consumed these messages? To answer these questions, I draw from twenty in-depth interviews that I conducted with active comic book consumers. These interviews specifically allowed me insight into audience perceptions surrounding female representations, their access to power, and physical constructions of potential force and agency. Supplementing this research with ethnographic fieldwork, I also logged fifty hours as a paid employee at a local comic book store, Castle Perilous Books and Games. Here, I was able to engage first-hand with comic book culture. Furthermore, I used ethnographic observations to answer research questions concerning female participation within the comic book genre. Spending time in a male-dominated space, I was able to see how men and women interacted within this integrated community. Were women allowed a presence in these physical locations? Were emerging themes about separation in space also evident in the organization and layout of the store? Capitalizing from my personal experiences in this location, I was able to reinforce interview findings that suggested a female exclusion. These observations supplemented the in-

depth interviews and revealed a part of the larger picture. I used a feminist epistemology to position my research location. In an effort to extract authentic information from the population I wished to study, I designed my study to reflect the comic book community's take on female representation and involvement within the graphic novel genre. By examining the lived experiences of comic book consumers, this research advances a more nuanced understanding of how graphic narratives contribute to the social constructions of gender difference, sexual stereotypes, and body objectification. Furthermore, this work attempts to target and unpack the implicit manifestations of sexism within the comic book community. It was my objective to gain a better understanding of power constructions, gender relations, and body politics within this cultural canon.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cultural Apparatus

Understanding the critical cultural paradigm is essential in my analysis of comic book characters. Superheroes, confined within the pages of comic books and graphic novels, provide fascinating contributions to material culture. They serve as fictional actors that impart us with important social values and commentary. Comics also act as industrial sounding boards from which the culture apparatus can propagate messages of worth, importance, and value. Telling the consumers what and whom to value, the comic book industry creates societal ideals.

Manipulating ideology by means of material culture, comic writers design the characters that we champion, despise, or wish to emulate. In the following section, I outline the sociological thinkers that speak to the notion of the cultural apparatus. Drawing from their theories, I embed my research in a strong sociological tradition that connects mass media with manipulative hegemonic constructions of power, strength, worth, and value.

Smith: Culture “Manufactured.” Comic books, and the heroes therein, are not without cultural context. Crafted within contextual settings, these pop-cultural icons are the products of their society’s values, morals, and societal expectation. Smith (1987) is quick to outline the importance of these cultural and social influences. Speaking to the notion that cultures are created and carefully cultivated, Smith (1987) states that, “It is important to recognize that in this kind of society most people do not participate in the making of culture...Rather, they are the product of the work of specialists occupying influential positions in the ideological apparatus” (p. 19). This statement illustrates the shaping affect that comic book culture has on its audience. Placed in positions of power, “specialists,” according to Smith, are responsible for the design and message contained within comic book creations. Enlisted to produce empowering images of

strength, defense, and ability, superheroes—and their creators—are placed in influential seats of power. This power, according to Smith, is not accidental in nature. Concerned with the traditional modes of production, Smith (1987) warns that, “Our culture does not arise spontaneously; it is ‘manufactured’” (p. 19). This “manufactured” reality speaks to the complex notion of ideological intent. Given their power to shape cultural constructions of good and evil, strength and weakness, comic book creators are at the forefront of ideological manipulation. By spinning stories that champion the values of static complacency, pop-culture producers regulate, control, and frame important hegemonic structures of sameness, strength, and power. Smith (1987) highlights this power when she writes, “The ideological apparatuses are part of the larger relations of ruling the society, the relations that put it together, coordinate its work, manage its economic processes, generally keep it running, and regulate and control it” (p. 19). By upholding societal morals as important to protect, the ruling class is able to instill value to advanced political agendas.

Smith also asserts the power associated with creating societal standards. Ideological apparatus, as outlined by Smith, has the ability to influence the ways in which we view the world and ourselves. By infusing ideology with societal value, culture capitalists are at the helm of knowledge production. There is an incredible amount of power concentrated within these positions. Smith (1987) alludes to this power when she writes, “The making and dissemination of the forms of thought we make use of to think about ourselves and our society are part of the relations of ruling and hence originate in positions of power” (p. 19). Culture is disseminated through the efforts of the ruling class. Those in power determine the rules, laws, customs, and cultural standards. Left without autonomy or input, consumers of culture capital are left to the manipulative powers of elite domination.

Horkheimer and Adorno: Cultural Deception. Similar to Smith's observations, Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) also discuss the power of the culture industry. In their work, they outline the ways in which power is created and maintained by controlling culture production. Situating their fictional representations as "real," culture capitalists are able to suspend consumers' disbelief. Their fantasy world becomes an extension of what is believed to be reality. Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) disrobe this deception when they write, "The old experience of the movie-goer, who sees the world outside as an extension of the film he has just left...is now the producer's guideline. The more intensely and flawlessly his techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is today for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen" (p. 126). The consumer, or in this case, the comic reader, is duped by the producers of industry. Believing their fictional world to be a direct and truthful representation of his own society, the reader is impressed with the idea that the values expressed in the comic are the same morals to uphold in his social world. Adopting the same morals, values, and ideas of the cultural tycoons leaves the consumer in a vulnerable position. Unable to resist, think critically, or problem solve, he is left to mindless consumption and the hovering threat of mass deception and dominance.

The culture industry uses this material apparatus as a tool to subdue the masses. In fact, Horkheimer and Adorno explicitly state the important role that comic books serve in this suppressive system. According to the authors, "Cartoons were once exponents of fantasy as opposed to rationalism. They ensured that justice was done to the creature and objects they electrified, by giving the maimed specimens a second life. All they do today is to confirm the victory of technological reason over truth" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972, p. 138). Speaking to the static nature of cultural reproduction, they note the importance of comics in maintaining the

status quo. In fact, Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) continue with this idea when they write, “The standard of life enjoyed corresponds very closely to the degree to which classes and individuals are essentially bound up with the system—as he is in the comic pages or in real life” (p. 150). Comics directly contribute to the complacency with which consumers live their lives. Happiness can only be achieved through docile compliance. Instead of fighting a system that oppresses them, consumers are compliant in the process of cultural transmission. This transmission carries the consequence of internalized values, norms, and ideologies.

Marcuse: Culture through the One-Dimensional Lens. The final critical perspective that I apply to the power of the cultural apparatus is found in Marcuse’s (1964) landmark piece, *One-Dimensional Man*. In it, Marcuse expresses a strong distrust for the culture industry. According to Marcuse (1964), “The scope of society’s domination over the individual is immeasurably greater than ever before” (p. x). The culture industry’s power is immense and invasive. Growing in the silence of consumer compliance, hegemonic structures are created to support an elite ideology. This ideology, in turn, becomes a system of domination. Without regulation, the cultural apparatus controls all aspect of man’s social relations. Marcuse (1964) addresses this concern when he writes, “In this society, the productive apparatus tends to become totalitarian to the extent to which it determines not only the socially needed occupations, skills, and attitudes, but also individual needs and aspirations. It thus obliterates the opposition between the private and public existence, between individual and social needs” (p. xv). The culture industry, as demonstrated by Marcuse, has run amok. Permeating through the cracks of our everyday experience, mass production dominates, suppresses, and controls.

Comics as a Cultural Landscape

Comics, as previously mentioned, are important to our sociological understandings of a larger social context. In fact, a growing body of scholarly literature suggests that comic books and graphic novels are far more significant than we may have initially realized (Barker 1989; Hajdu 2008; Johnson 2012; Knowles 2007; Morris and Morris 2005; Morrison 2011). Pustz (2012) specifically reinforces this claim when he discusses the broader implications of comic narratives as a space for cultural expression. Based on his work involving comics and American culture, Pustz suggests that comic books create cultural history, artifacts, and also provide us with rich insight into our historical and contemporary identity. Not only do comic books shape the ways in which we see ourselves, but they also influence the ways in which we imagine the world around us. Social constructions of race, gender, power, and expectations are all evident within these texts (Brown 2000; Danziger-Russell 2012; Morris and Morris 2005; Singer 2002). By taking a closer look at this “disposable” pop culture medium, we are allowed critical insight into messages surrounding strength, ability, status, and purpose.

One of the ways in which we recreate social meaning is through the representation of race within the comic book canon. Exploring the purpose of race within graphic narratives is a growing topic of interest for many scholars (Brown 2000; Nama 2011; Singer 2002). In his groundbreaking work, Nama (2011) critically examined the role of the Black comic book character. According to Nama, Black characters typically speak to the complexity of racial relations within our everyday world. These fictional comic book renderings have wider implications for racial tensions at large. Black characters, according to Nama’s (2011) findings, are expected to navigate “white authority” while expressing stereotypical Blackness (p. 15). Furthermore, many Black characters are confined to the role of “sidekick.” Perpetuating their

real-life minority status, Black characters are reduced and marginalized within the comic book context. Scholars have also noted that comic books tend to reinscribe problematic race rhetoric (Brown 2000; Singer 2002). Challenging a white man's world is a dangerous endeavor for many characters of color. Suppressing explicit expressions of Black power, comics have historically worked to either downplay, or outright eliminate, strong Black characters. Nama (2011) gets to the heart of this dilemma when he writes that comics are, "Radical signifiers of the troubling intersection of racism, institutional authority, and broader themes associated with black political disfranchisement" (p. 56).

Not only are comics indicative of U.S. racial relations, but they also speak to constructions of gender roles and expectations. Superheroes are fictional personifications of desired gender traits and values. Creating the perfect man—or woman—gives a tremendous amount of power to the social constructions of desirability, empowerment, and influence. Modeling "appropriate" gender roles, comic book culture provides a template for idealized femininity and/or masculinity. Danziger-Russell (2012) points to mass media's influence when she finds that comics have historically "mirrored the sociopolitical climate of their times" (p. 30). Showing young girls and women the "correct" way to express their femininity, Danziger-Russell (2012) concludes that comics have an important role in the construction of gender expectations.

These findings suggest that comics serve a larger latent function within society. Introducing young girls—and boys—to their "appropriate" gender roles is an important social feature of the comic book industry. Working to indoctrinate gender expectations, the cultural apparatus propagates socially constructed ideas concerning what it means to be a "good" man or woman.

Good men and women, however, are painted in broad stereotypical strokes. Building on these stereotypes, comic books and graphic novels work to reinforce static character troupes. Lacking a deeper complexity, many of these characters are two-dimensional models of simple social cues. Failing to push past the boundaries of socially constructed ideas of “traditional” gender norms, comic books continue to reproduce popular—and problematic—images. Danziger-Russell (2012) discusses these oversimplifications when she writes, “There was an abundance of comics with pages filled with stereotypes: women who could not live without a man and women who would give up their careers, their ambition, their independence, to be by his side” (p. 19). Capitalizing on the assumed dependency of female characters, comic book writers helped to reinscribe the notion that women are helpless without men. This stereotype creates an unfair archetype that female characters have historically had to challenge. Even today, popular imaginings of the love interest, the nag, and the sexually promiscuous female are found in comic strips across the country.

It is easy to take these popular female characters for granted. It is important to realize, however, that female comic book characters did not exist until the creation of Wonder Woman in 1941 (Greenberger 2010). The first female in a titular role, Wonder Woman instantly became an icon for the ages. The dream child of the Harvard psychologist, William Moulton Marston, Wonder Woman was intended to be the ultimate representation of womanhood (Lepore 2014). In fact, according to pop culture historian, Lepore (2014), “Marston liked to say that Wonder Woman was meant to be ‘psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world’” (p. 191). Speaking to the notion of “psychological propaganda,” Marston asserts that Wonder Woman was designed to intentionally influence women and girls. In an article he wrote for *The American Scholar* in 1943, Marston lamented that:

Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power. Not wanting to be girls, they don't want to be tender, submissive, peace-loving as good women are. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman (Williams and Lyons 2010).

Believing women to be fundamentally different from men, Marston cites “tenderness, submissiveness, and peace-loving” as traits that are inherently feminine. In order to be a “good and beautiful woman,” Marston explicitly states that girls must embrace—and exhibit—the gender roles that are prescribed to them. Deviations from these gender roles could result in serious social reprimand. Marston's agenda also works to placate women in the social places they occupy. Supplementing submissively with conditional strength, Wonder Woman was Marston's ideal compromise for the next generation of women.

Not only was Wonder Woman poised as the perfect psychological propaganda, but she became a popular tool for political persuasion as well. Speaking to the power of comics within the political arena, Wonder Woman has been a historical template for “strong” womanhood. Lepore (2014) touches on this past when she writes that Wonder Woman was used to urge female readers to “Get Strong! Earn your own living—join the WAACs or WAVES and fight for your country” during the heyday of WWII recruitment (p. 227). Readers again see Wonder Woman as a political propagandist during the Second-Wave feminist movement. Comics from the 1970's depict a politically-engaged Wonder Woman fighting against male chauvinists, the gender wage gap, and pro-life terrorist groups. In fact, Gloria Steinem used an image of the comic book character, Wonder Woman, on the cover of the first *Ms. Magazine* (Lepore 2014).

Despite the heavy-handed efforts to alleviate gender inequality, Wonder Woman's story is far from perfect. Wonder Woman, although used as a tool for "female empowerment," is always situated outside of the predominantly masculine domain. Even in her early days, Wonder Woman required special permission to be admitted into the Justice Society. Submitted as a one-page questionnaire in *All-Star Comics #11*, male readers were asked, "Should WONDER WOMAN be allowed, even though a woman, to become a member of the Justice Society?" (Lepore, 2014, p. 209)? The response, to the writers' surprise, was overwhelmingly positive. And thus, Wonder Woman was admitted entry into the Justice Society—as its secretary.

Creating difference in physical space between the sexes is a popular motif in much of the literature (Danziger-Russell 2012; Duncan, Smith, and Levitz 2009). Even though she is positioned as strong and capable, Wonder Woman never achieves equal status with her male counterparts. Female characters are excluded from andocentric action in the comic books. Not only is this absence evident in the comic book narratives, but it is also apparent in comic book culture. Creating naturalized difference in space and interest is a hegemonic tool that reinforces gender roles and expectations. Separated from the "boy's club," female readers are excluded from these male-dominated locations. Danziger-Russell (2012) notes this separation when she discusses female exclusion from comic book stores. According to her findings, these spaces still cater to male customers and remain predominately homogeneous. This exclusion manifests in the separation of male and female audience members. Kept out and isolated, women comic book readers have a difficult time finding relatable representation within these narratives. Female empowerment, as devised and delivered by a male-dominated industry, has specific objectives. In order to be strong, women must look, act, and perform in socially appropriate ways. Their

bodies, gender, and sexuality are constantly scrutinized by the very industry that purportedly supports feminist messages of ability and empowerment.

Bodies: Sites of Sexuality, Gender, and Power

Surveillance, policing, and power are crucial to the sociological understanding of comic book culture. When do the propagated models of “female empowerment” start to influence our own ideas surrounding personal strength and ability? Are these politically-charged cartoons influencing our personal identities? How are “strong” bodies constructed within this genre? How is sexuality conceptualized? As the comic book industry shapes bodies to suggest “power,” I began to notice the sexualized nature of the comic book heroine. Clad in revealing, skin-tight clothing, women with voluptuous breasts and a narrowing waist are the gold standard within this genre. Hyper-sexualization is the norm within this industry. To what purpose, however, are we selling messages associated with female empowerment and strength? Does a strong body necessarily need to be a sexy body? To what extent can “feminism” be bought and sold in a sexualized cat-suit?

In order to answer these questions, I turned to works that incorporate power with constructions of gender, sex, embodiment, and sexuality. In his groundbreaking text, Foucault (1976) suggests that personal identities are increasingly tied to their sexuality. Through a series of socialized power relations, people create meaning and identity through sexualized experiences. Foucault (1976) explicitly conveys this idea when he writes, “The deployment of sexuality has its reasons for being, not in reproducing itself, but in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and in controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way” (p. 107). As stated, controlling populations

is the desired outcome. By manipulating the images that surround sexual expression, Foucault suggests that the cultural apparatus is able to gain power and influence.

Applying this theory to the graphic novel genre, it is evident that comic characters' identities are oftentimes developed through a sexualized context. In order to sell comics, many writers and illustrators have taken to selling sex. Capitalizing from the commodification of female bodies, profiteers in this industry are concerned with "providing itself with a body and a sexuality—to ensure the strength, endurance, and secular proliferation of that body through the organization of a deployment of sexuality" (Foucault, 1976, p. 126). Working from within a power structure that establishes dominant ideas of sex appeal, legitimizing these bodies and their subsequent "powerful" identities works to strengthen the discourse on what makes women valuable. This value is not coincidental. In his final chapters, Foucault (1976) speculates that, "The emphasis on the body should undoubtedly be linked to the process of growth and establishment of bourgeois hegemony" (p. 125). The bourgeois uses sexuality as a hegemonic tool. By bestowing "worth" upon compliant female caricatures, the bourgeois is able to protect their systematic structure of oppression.

Not only is the body vulnerable to social inscription, but gender expressions are also subject to cultural manipulation. Using the body as a site of social power, gender theorist, Butler (1990), discusses the importance of gendering bodies in her work concerning feminism and the subversion of identity. According to Butler, society stylizes the body in order to express appropriate gender expectations. Butler (1990) is explicit in her statement:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will

deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. (p. 43-44)

Speaking to the regulatory nature of gender, Butler professes that people are policed into compulsive compliance. Images of “appropriate” gender expression are idolized, whereas deviants are punished as gender non-conformists. Butler recognizes that the body is an important site of power. By framing expected gender performances as “natural,” society is able to regulate normalcy. There is a specific template that one must model in order to be accepted. Gender is a non-negotiable bodily adornment. The body—as a site of social construction—is not necessarily “a ready surface awaiting signification, but as a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained” (Butler, 1990, p. 18). The bodies of comic book characters, albeit fictional, still provide material to be molded by societal expectation. They are drawn to embody popular constructions of masculinity, femininity, desire, worth, power, and strength. Their bodies bare the “stylized” inscriptions of power, sexuality, and gender. How do these messages, however, infer meaning to the lived experiences of the comic book consumer?

Despite a growing body of research on the importance of the cultural apparatus, comics in culture, and the body as a site of sexualized and gendered power, gaps still remain in the literature. Below, I highlight how topics surrounding the social construction of gender difference, sexual stereotypes, and body objectification have been under-theorized. I then describe how the case of consumers’ lived experiences offers insight into these gaps and—more broadly—to our understanding of power constructions, gender relations, and body politics within this cultural canon.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

To address my research questions I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at a local comic book store, Castle Perilous Books and Games. Castle Perilous was an ideal site for observing participants because it offered the distinctive vantage point of recording the experiences of male and female comic book readers. I gained valuable data about the type of environment that my participants frequented. I completed fifty hours of ethnographic research and incorporated much of that data into my preliminary findings. In exchange for site access, I was expected to clean and organize the space. I spent Wednesday afternoons at the site cleaning, dusting, re-organizing, and shelving. I strategically chose Wednesday afternoons because that is when new comic books are released. This schedule gave me the opportunity to actively engage with the population I was attempting to study—readers and consumers of the graphic novel genre.

The layout, and overall organization, of my field site was important to my research experience. Even though it was a small location, roughly 1,200 square feet, the space was constantly (and uncomfortably) full of commercial product. Displays were crammed with merchandise and shelves were packed with books. Various posters hung from the walls. Immortalized in frozen action poses, muscles bulged as superheroes stared down from the walls in which they were unevenly hung. My Little Pony t-shirts were suspended from the ceiling next to Dr. Who backpacks. No spot was empty. Every inch was covered with creatures, comics, and card games. Displays were set up based on the store owner's preference. There was loose organization based on genre, type of game, promotions, and themes. Other than that, it was all fair-game. Often overwhelmed, I felt a chaotic sense of dishevelment and mayhem within this space.

It is also important to note the high levels of audio visual surveillance that I encountered in the store. There were seventeen surveillance feeds, all capturing movement and activity within the location. Hidden security cameras were strategically positioned throughout the space. A camera was peeking out from behind the beverage case. Another one was set up next to the Warhammer-themed clock. There was a third positioned discreetly above the dice counter. This space was highly surveillanced. Monitoring patrons was considered mainstream—and necessary—within this local gaming store.

The store was sectioned off into five separate spaces: two smaller rooms at the front of the store, one for gaming and the other for toys; the larger showroom, which displayed most of the store's main merchandise; a smaller side room, dedicated to back-issue comic books; and a fairly large "backroom," which functioned as a space for gaming tournaments on the weekends. In comparison to the rest of the shop's space, the backroom was quite impressive. Long fold-out tables dominated most of the backroom's physical space. There was still room, however, for a sink, refrigerator, lines of shelves, and a public restroom.

Games, books, cards, dice, and magazines littered the mismatched displays that filled the store's interior. There was little to no uniformity. There were wooden shelves, wire racks, and Tupperware bins that displayed various kinds of merchandise. I constantly found myself caught off guard by the chaotic nature of this layout. *Who can function here?* I wondered. *Who does this space serve?*

The walls were papered with various artworks. Framed comic books, plaques, signed pictures, countless clocks, fan art and posters lined the walls throughout the entire enclosure. Everything was different. I never saw the same poster twice. There did, however, appear to be some central themes. After passing the third visible poster of Princess Leia in her infamous

“slave costume,” I came to the conclusion that sexualized female bodies were normalized within this space.

The sexualized nature of the merchandise started to stick out too. Between board games and comic books, there were some challenging misogynistic messages. There was a card game called, “Wenches.” Scantily-clad women are traded in this go-fish style game. Tiny “Zombie Babe” figurines were sold in packages of one hundred. These tiny undead “babes” stood strong in their bikinis, boobs prominent, shaking the decapitated heads of their victims. On a rack of cosplay pamphlets, there was a fashion magazine instructing its reader on how to make a Japanese school girl costume. The model from this cover winked coyly as she raised the hem of her skirt. If sex sells, then it sold very well for the vendors at Castle Perilous Books and Games.

In the middle of the store was a small entertainment enclosure with a public couch and comfy chair. Positioned next to a large-screen television, customers could hang out, watch movies, or browse Netflix.

Including the store owner, there were six other employees at the site. All of the employees identified as male. Five of the employees were white and one employee was African-American. I was the only female worker during my employment period at Castle Perilous.

My position as a paid employee allowed me the distinct advantage to observe the “front stage” of the sales floor, while recording “back stage” occurrences in the backroom and gaming rooms (Goffman 1959). I was open with my participants and coworkers about my status as a graduate student, and that I was conducting research on female empowerment and objectification within the graphic novel genre. While working, I occasionally scribbled down field notes in a personal notebook. Once I got home, I transcribed and elaborated on the field notes I had taken

during my shift at Castle Perilous. I analyzed my field notes inductively by using analytic memos to organize prominent themes and narratives as they emerged.

In order to supplement my fieldwork, I also conducted twenty in-depth interviews with self-identified comic book consumers. All of my participants engaged in active consumption of this media and, at my request, spoke to ideas concerning power, image, and the representation of women in the graphic novel genre. In total, eleven of my respondents identified as women, eight identified as men, and one participant identified as a transgender male. Respondents' ages ranged from 20 – 41 years. The median age was 27 years. Eighteen of my respondents identified as white or Caucasian, one respondent identified as African-American, and one respondent identified as “White/Jewish.” The average interview lasted between 1-2 hours and covered central topics pertaining to their personal background in addition to the purpose, images, and power found within the comic book genre.

I used two separate question guides during the interviewing process. One question guide was geared toward male respondents and the other was intended for female respondents. All of the questions were the same: Are there female characters in the graphic novels that you read? If so, how are they depicted? What do female bodies look like in graphic novels? Do they look like people you may know? What are these characters typically wearing? Do you see different representations of women in graphic novels? What does strength look like in graphic novels? Can female characters be strong? What makes them strong? What might be the appeal for a female fan-base? What about a male fan-base? Do you think that men and women look at these characters in the same way?

There were only two minor deviations on the gendered interview guides. Since there were certain topics that I wanted to ask only men or women, I had two specific questions that differed

based on the participant's reported gender. For instance, while I asked all of the participants questions that sparked conversation concerning female empowerment in the graphic novel genre, I specifically asked female respondents if they "could identify with any of these characters?" The purpose of this question was to gain better insight into whether or not female fans could find realistic representation that reflected their personal identities. The second question that was different for male respondents had to do with the sexualized nature of female comic book characters. While interviewing the men, I would mention: "There has been a lot of discussion about the sexualized nature of women in comic books. What is your take on this? Do you think they are sexy? What does sexy look like?" Without alienating my male subjects, I wanted to discover what they qualified as "sexy" within the graphic novel genre. Does sexy, as constructed by the comic book industry, always look the same to them? By posing this question as a common topic of discussion already present within the comic book discourse, I was able to obtain earnest opinions from my male participants.

This was just a sample of the questions that I asked both male and female participants. The interview guides served as an instrument to elicit information based on my participants' perceptions of female empowerment within the graphic novel genre. I asked my participants pointed questions on specific topics. Their responses, however, became the emergent themes on which I based my research findings.

Due to the interconnected nature of the comic book community, I utilized a snowball sampling technique. Many participants were more than willing to suggest a few friends who would be able to assist in my research efforts. In fact, many of the participants were enthusiastic to speak with me. Exhibiting passion and lots of interest, many of them spoke to great length and detail about comic books and the characters therein. All participants signed consent sheets and

were informed of their right to discontinue their participation at any point in the study. All interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder and then later transcribed by a paid transcriptionist. All of the participants' names have been changed to reflect the confidential nature of my research.

The in-depth interviews were crucial to the collection of my data. Allowing me to collect spontaneous information, these interviews produced useful information that got at the core of my participants' perceptions concerning strong, "empowered" female characters. By exploring how this group makes sense of these seemingly mixed messages, I began to generate a broader understanding of the key themes that would answer my research questions. My participants' experiences provided the rich social context for the data that I collected, coded, and later analyzed.

The analytic process was meticulous and thorough. Once the interviews were transcribed, I uploaded the word documents into NVIVO programming. This qualitative software aided my analytic efforts considerably. Re-reading the transcripts, I identified many emerging themes that were threaded throughout many of my respondents' personal narratives. Their answers echoed common sentiments and similar response. Interestingly enough, female respondents were more likely to bring up issues of space exclusion. Male respondents tended to focus on common female stereotypes within graphic novel storylines. Sensitive to similar word choice and themes, I started to code the transcripts as they related to larger key concepts. Strong themes surrounding space segregation, biological sex, stereotypes, and perceptions of powerful women emerged from these preliminary codings. Building from these analytic observations, I started to unfold and critically examine the social meanings embedded within my respondents' messages.

Power and Inequality: Shaping my Social Location

As a participant in the everyday life at Castle Perilous, I frequently found myself immersed within the data I was collecting. Because I am drawing from my own personal experiences, it seems pertinent to describe my social location at the site.

There were several instances when my role as researcher conflicted with the data I was collecting. My initial goal was to be an unobtrusive observer in the comic book store. I would soon find, however, that this was hardly the case. Occupying a space in which I was an extreme minority, I oftentimes found myself an item of spectacle or intrigue. Male customers within the space would approach me, soliciting me for dates or for more information about my project. Wishing to uphold a feminist methodology, I was honest with all persons in the space. This honesty, however, would evoke awkward and unsettling interactions.

There were several occasions in which I experienced discomfort in my female body. For example, other workers continually referred to as “that girl.” Even though I spent roughly four months in the space, I was never referred to by name. My identity within the store was closely tied to my biological sex. Sexual advances, instigated by male patrons, also made me uncomfortable in the site. In particular, one customer constantly badgered me about my inconsistent hours. Wondering when I would be back at the store, he frequently asked me about my schedule. On other occasions, male customers would inquire about my personal interests, “what I was doing there,” and where I lived. While initially neutral towards the amount of attention my presence received, I soon realized that these daily harassments presented a challenging obstacle.

Men’s “insider” conversations about other women also accounted for uncomfortable social situations. When grouped together—without an apparent female audience—male

employees and customers discussed the role of female characters within the comic book universe. Referred to as “shop talk,” male employees bantered about the “sexy” female characters that surrounded them. I recorded one such conversation in my field notes:

Bruce, male employee: “I really like the new costume. It really sculpts out her body and gives some more definition. Plus, it doesn’t have the gray and yellow across the chest anymore. Batwoman has the best art. Read it, look at it.”

Clark, male employee: “I don’t know... I only liked it for Barbara Gordon. She was HOT.”

Male customer: “Batman should just go buy a mini-gun, clean up crime, check out, and be like, ‘I’m gonna go fuck some bitches.’” (Crawshaw, 2014, *Field Notes*)

These kinds of interactions were commonplace. Unable to join in on the conversation, I was often excluded. My presence, as an obvious “outsider,” was tolerated, but never quite accepted by this community.

Site entrée provided another instance of unsettling power relations. In my early attempts to gain access to the site, I approached Gordon, the store’s owner. Explaining the basis of my research interests, I asked if I could conduct weekly observations in the store’s main showroom. Eager to present myself as “useful” within the space, I offered to perform weekly cleaning tasks. Eight years of previous retail experience had acclimated me to service industry culture, and I advertised this skill set in an advantageous fashion. Recognizing the value of my offer, Gordon agreed to permit site access if I was diligent in my cleaning duties.

Agreeing to clean the space I was in, it was a weekly expectation that I would mop, dust, vacuum, shelve, and re-organize the store. I found, however, that these tasks were highly gendered in nature and somewhat demeaning. I would oftentimes be approached while completing these tasks. I was left to wonder what impression I evoked on these male consumers who viewed women as objects and not subjects in their own fantasy worlds. Was I contributing

to these impressions? Was I socially responsible for creating some sort of resistance to their culture? These were all questions that I struggled with throughout the course of my project.

My own assumptions shaped my role as researcher and, sometimes, subject.

In a world where power, strength, and worth are defined by physical attractiveness, I found a slew of social and gendered inequality at work.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Below, I present my findings on how women are represented within the graphic novel genre. I argue that female misrepresentation and sexualization are problems that alienate and objectify the female fan base. After describing how my respondents created naturalized difference in space, sex, and stereotype, I present my findings on (1) how powerful women are depicted as attractive bodies, and (2) how the superhero narrative enforces a social status quo.

Creating Difference: Space, Biological Sex, and Stereotype

Space. Many of the female participants that I interviewed speculated about a separation of “space” within the graphic novel genre. This space was oftentimes physical and reflected a lack of female participation within the comic book community. Not only were women silenced servants within the pages of comic book culture, but female fans also expressed that they are alienated from the genre they sustain. In addressing my research question pertaining to the audience’s response to these sexualized depictions, I found that many of these images had become discouraging, disgusting, or alienating to females within this fan-base. Selina, an avid comic book reader and former Castle Perilous employee, spoke to this idea when she said:

Spaces that are male-dominated, you kind of have to fight for your right to be there, and to be there as more than just a pretty face. I don’t know. It’s frustrating to see girls being treated like it’s weird that they’re there. Like, when someone acts like it’s weird that you’re there you don’t want to be there anymore. I don’t know. I really like working there, and I really like my hobby obviously, or I wouldn’t be dropping money like that on it. It’s interesting that a culture that’s suppose to be about acceptance when you can’t find acceptance is alienating people who are looking for the same thing.

Talking back to this male-dominated space, Selina acknowledged the existence of a community that celebrates female exclusion. Silenced within the medium and also within the culture at large, the emphasis on an in-group/out-group dynamic that suppresses female involvement became an interesting phenomenon. Jennifer also mentioned the idea of female exclusion when she said that:

Not that I'm being specifically excluded. More just that I'm not uh, that I'm not being targeted. I'm not the target audience. Like, not that there's like a big sign that's like, "Keep out!" But, more that there's a sign that's like, "Hey there's boobs in here," whatever.

Jennifer's experience captured the idea that women are not the targeted interest group for this media consumption. Instead, females, and their hyper-sexualized bodies, are the instruments used to entice male interest. Without the male gaze, and the bodies that illicit that interest, this industry is at a loss. Focused on serving these bodies to an andocentric consumer-driven market, women characters are commodified at the expense of female viewership. While this emergent theme was widely discussed among all eleven female respondents, it was never mentioned by any of the male participants. Women were more likely than men to mention their systematic exclusion from this genre. Drawing from their own personal experiences, this topic was important to female fans. All of them were critically reflective of the amount of space they were allowed to occupy within the larger comic book community.

Ethnographic observations also supported these findings. Female customers did not frequent this male-dominated space. In fact, if a female customer did come into the store, she was typically partnered with a male consumer. I captured one such experience in my field notes:

The door opens, and the first female customer in two hours enters the store. My eyes fixate on her as she enters the site. She is with a male companion, and he wanders aimlessly around the store, from display to display. She follows him quietly, hands in pockets. Her large frame fills the sweatshirt she is wearing, and her blonde mousy hair hides the acne scars on her face. She is quiet. I never hear her speak to him, or to anyone in the store. She gets excited at one fixture, the small open bin of plush viruses and bacteria. "Come look at this!" She exclaims in a muted tone. Compared to the booming male voices encouraging Batman to get his "fuck" on, I have to strain to hear her enthusiasm. Her partner comes up beside her, nods absently, and continues to wander about the store. Her excitement, and expression, is short lived as she abandons the display. As she roams other areas of the store, she keeps to herself, quiet about the remaining merchandise that surrounds her. (Crawshaw, 2014, *Field Notes*)

Discouraged from active participation, the female customer's experience was limited by this interaction. Her demeanor suggests that she was uncomfortable in this space. Yet again, difference in sex translates to difference in spatial access. Unable to comfortably occupy this male-dominated location, this woman is silenced and socially excluded from the larger comic book community. This theme became indicative of a larger absence within the genre—that of adequate female representation.

Biological Sex. Another area in which I observed manifestations of “difference” occurred in sexual distinction. Many of the male respondents pointed to difference in biological sex in order to explain variation in comic book depictions. Echoing tenets of biological essentialism, many male respondents cited innate “natural” distinctions that made male characters different, stronger, or better than their female counterparts. Anthony spoke to the idea of innate physical capabilities when he said:

I see it as like, guys are like hardwired to deal with pain, and we need to deal with it when bad stuff happens. But, there is a greater degree of emotional sensitivity that I think women have, and can access more easily, and that makes it absolutely horrendous when something that is done to them. And, I think even on like a subconscious or a spiritual level it registers with us that it's like, “You have done something horrible...” It creates a much more visceral reaction in that context.

Speaking to strengths that he saw as inherently masculine or feminine, Anthony created biological difference in perceived ability. By believing that men are “hardwired to deal with pain” and that women are more “emotionally sensitive,” Anthony reinscribes biological assumptions about men and women. Furthermore, Anthony believes that violence against female characters is used to elicit stronger reactions from comic readers. Assuming the audience to be male, Anthony speculates that these readers will be more upset if violence is enacted against female characters. Women, perceived as naturally weak and vulnerable, not only need the protection of the male protagonist, but also the outrage of their male fan-base. This protection, as

a “subconscious” male reaction, reinforces socially constructed ideas about weakness, ability, and female victimhood.

Another instance where participants created biological difference came from conversations concerning characters’ talents and superhuman abilities. Many of the male respondents stated that a woman’s strength or ability fit within her “natural” alignment. If a woman in the graphic novel genre was depicted as strong, then it needed to “make sense” within the context of her character’s feminine identity. Drawing from this difference, Steven was quick to note:

I would just say that males and females have different talents and different abilities. Like, the physiology of both of us are made to be highlighted in different areas. Like, the storylines are more or less devoted towards what a male could be involved with...But, when you have a female in the story... Here’s a weird thing I’ve noticed is that when you’re talking about old women, the old women I can think of all have this wisdom. I feel like older females they try to give off this intellect that they have.

Again, elements of biological essentialism were rampant within many of these conversations. Believing men and women to be “made” in different ways, Steven expressed a central theme in my research findings—it is easy to create and maintain difference when that difference is seen as natural. Furthermore, while discussing what a male character could be “involved with,” Steven encroached on the topic of character capability. Men, according to Steven, are able to be strong while women are expected to be wise. This separation is reinforced by sexist stereotypes. Separating characters by their “natural” abilities makes it easier to enforce sexual segregation. This segregation, static and uncompromising, persists in creating systems of inequality, stereotype, and difference.

Similar to the way in which female exclusion was only broached by female respondents; male participants were the only subjects talking about biological essentialism. Ideas of innate sexual difference were found in five interviews conducted with cisgender males. According to

male respondents, female characters might not be as “strong” as their male counterparts, but that was because they are naturally weaker. None of the female respondents cited biological sex as an inhibitor to female strength. Sex specific themes presented a reoccurring trend in much of my research findings.

Stereotypes: Love Interests, Nags, and Sluts.

The love interest. Both male and female respondents revealed that stereotypes are rampant within the comic book narratives. Women within the graphic novel genre are almost always constrained within the confining roles of wife, girlfriend, or mother. Unable to escape this archetype, many of these characters work to reproduce ideas of a maternal, or romantic, caregiver. Staying at home while their significant superhero other is saving the day, these female characters are stock images that reinscribe messages of “natural” domesticity. Throughout the course of my in-depth interviews, many respondents noted these depictions as typical. Mark, a 35-year-old service worker, spoke to this idea when he claimed:

I'd say the most prevalent female character in graphic novels is almost always the love interest. That's just part of the... To most any comic book superhero. You've got Peter Parker, and you've got Mary Jane. You've got Clark Kent, and you've got Lois Lane. Most, and even if it's not the girl who's always there there's usually someone.

The necessity to insert this character is commonplace in most comic book cultures. The opportunities for protagonist roles are decreasing for female characters in the genre (Danziger-Russell 2012). Women in the graphic novel genre are depicted as supplementary plot devices instead of agents of their own action. Speaking to this notion, Veronica, a 25-year-old female graduate assistant said:

They're kind of more accessories, I guess. You know, it's not that there aren't any. I would say that there are less generally female characters that are driving stories than there are male characters.

Unable to drive the plot that they are in, female characters are objects, rather than subjects within their depictions. This trend, however, is not unique within the pages of this graphic fiction.

Female consumers are pigeon-holed within these stereotypical roles. Representations of female subservience and care-giving can also be found within real-life comic communities. In an in-depth interview I conducted with one of the workers at Castle Perilous, Nathaniel, a working college student, mentioned that women are rarely seen as agents in their own lived experience.

He captured this notion when he said:

Usually, when you see a girl walk in you either assume that she's a mom or some kind of teen from SIU, because stereotypically they don't know what they're looking for. I'm not trying to bash on females in anyway. But, stereotypically when a female walks into a place you are going to ask, "Do you need help?" Because, they don't come into the store regularly, and I don't normally see females here... Usually I see them in board games. Things like that. Or, they're doing something for their family, or their boyfriend, or someone's birthday. "Hey, it's my kid's birthday and he needs Pokemon cards. Can you help me?" It's usually a female catering for someone else normally if it's not for themselves.

Nathaniel's observation spoke to the idea that women who financially support the graphic novel industry also reproduce one of their most popular tenets: women serve as helpers, mothers, and love interests within their gendered relationships. As they reinstate the notion that women are incapable of serving in active roles, many of the females who consume comic book culture fall into these categorized character troupes. Designated as kin-keepers, women were expected to enact specific roles within these communities. Operating within the larger social context of gender roles and stereotypes, women were framed as caretakers, givers, and passive participants within this all-boys' club.

The nag. Women characters, as many male respondents suggested, also fell into the caricatured role of the "nag." The depiction of a badgering female character is a stereotypical staple within the comic book canon. Bossy, annoying, or useless, the nag is seen as an

impediment to the protagonist's main mission. Graphic depictions of these female characters show them in menial roles harassing male characters (Danziger-Russell 2012). This incessant pestering is a source of irritation and annoyance for the main character. This aggravation, however, is not contained within the comic book genre. Throughout the course of my research, male participants' frustration with the "nag" character became relatable to their own lived experience. Seeing the women in their own lives as "nags," male respondents would sympathize with the main characters in comic book series. Dante, a 27-year-old retail worker, vented some of his own frustration when he disclosed:

You know, the wife is gonna be always nagging. "Why-why aren't you...going after a better job?" "Why aren't you cleaning the kitchen?" "Why aren't you doing this? And why aren't you doing that?" And...in comic books you get the same thing, like, "Whoa, why didn't you shoot him with your laser eyes?" You know?

According to Dante, the nag is representative of the female relations within his own life. Dante, subscribing to the comic industry's stereotype, believes that women are always going to be nagging the men in their lives. This depiction paints female characters as annoying antagonists.

The nag, as an annoying antagonist, was also mentioned in Mark's interview. While discussing the old Superman comics he used to read as a child, Mark reminisced that one of the most persistent antagonists in the series was none other than Lois Lane—Superman's comic book girlfriend. According to Mark:

Like, Lois Lane is written terribly—as a terrible person—in the early Superman comics. I mean in the very earliest, she was just sort of a heroine in distress, right? Er, not heroine, a, uh, damsel in distress. But, uh, as it started developing, she became, like, a--supposed--it-it was supposed to be humorous, but, like, it--another--um, almost another villain for Superman to defeat. In that, for a while there, it was all about Lois Lane trying to get Superman to marry her. And that's all she was interested in. And, like, he would always have to come up with these, uh, comical--but inventive ways to get out of it, or, uh, or-or to get out of her questioning him about marriage. Um, and him never wanting to be tied down. And, like, that was all the character was about. (chuckle) Which, is super demeaning.

Resisting their demands, male characters—and readers—are positioned to disregard the female voice. Since they are framed as unimportant, female concerns are typically ushered out of the conversation. Not only does the nag troupe silence female characters, it served as an excuse to inflict personal violence. Again, Dante provided evidence when he claimed:

I kind of feel like, “Oh, she thinks she's a strong woman, let's put her in her place.” You know? Man is the real powerful creature. And I-I feel like that's-that's the way a lot of...media goes now. You know? Like, you can't...you can't have a strong female character without her being perceived as annoying.

Dante's statement echoed the sentiment that violence is permissible against female nags in order to keep them in their “place.” Female characters who supply counterarguments are excusably hurt within comic book discourse. Violence against them is seen as understandable, if not entirely necessary. Becoming the voice of opposition—especially when that voice is a woman's—is dangerous for dissenting characters. These actions position assertive women as the targets for violence in the comic book genre.

Dante made another important observation when he said that female strength is associated with annoyance. In a genre that supposedly champions strength and power, the woman's voice, when offering strong counter opinions, is silenced. Female power is annoying to certain readers. Violence is used as a way to punish a character for her strength, ability, or resistance. This position, as enforced against the “nag,” demonstrated that women antagonists are designated strict, limited roles within the comic book landscape. To push against these roles is to incite aggravation, irritation, powerlessness, and violence.

This finding was also supported by my ethnographic observations at Castle Perilous. I often overheard conversations suggesting that unpopular female characters in comics deserved violent ends. I captured one such conversation in my field notes. According to my data:

Steven, male employee: “Personally, I think M[ary]J[ane] can die. Their terrible relationship just reflects on how much he [Spiderman] loved Gwen Stacey. He just can’t get over her, ya know? He snapped Gwen Stacey’s neck with his bare hands.”

Nathaniel, male employee: “It didn’t really matter. She’s not special.” (Crawshaw, 2014, *Field Notes*)

Justifying Gwen Stacey’s violent death, Nathaniel assumes that her life did not matter because she was not “special” enough in the comic book series. Female characters as disposable objects are a chilling trend in comic book literature (Simone 1999). Once they are depicted as the cumbersome nag persona, female characters are subject to male violence and censor. This reoccurring theme provided yet another stereotype that unfairly defines female characters within the graphic novel genre.

The slut. The final stereotype that rounded out my research was a growing concern for the future of comic books and the female role models that they generate. While discussing the tension between the plot points and the character depictions, many of the respondents—both male and female—were critical of the images that were being sold to young female consumers. Selina spoke to this idea specifically when she said:

Umm... well, see, it’s kind of backwards cause the message that they are trying, I think, to give us is that they are trying to build stronger female characters and ones who can be plot-driven, and I don’t know. They definitely stepped up their game with their writing. But because they look, I don’t know, they look like bimbos, no one’s going to take it seriously. Ummm... I don’t know, there’s a lot that could be taught to younger girls growing up if they do read comics, uhhhh... there’s a lot, I don’t know, be taught to everyone if we moved past that and got to what was actually going on in that storyline and how that character actually is able to deal with it, and I don’t know, give them more of a voice, instead of just an appearance.

Speaking in a language that resonates with slut shaming, Selina expressed a concern that female representations portrayed within the graphic novel genre are not suitable role models for young girls today. This echoed a similar complaint lodged by Anthony. During his interview, Anthony stated that:

Again, we don't need token female superheroes, but we've got to have someone. We've got to have someone out there who can be represented. Which is also why it frustrated me that the characters are drawn the way they are. Because, some of the superheroes you see looks like Miley Cyrus got some of her costume from them. I see feminism as necessary in that regard. As far as where it fits in storytelling. Yeah, write strong characters. Write strong female characters who girls can look at and say, "Oh, I don't have to be the slut to get popular?" You know? "I can be this person. I can be strong. I can be who I am." Which, for some people requires strength.

Specifically using the term, "slut," Anthony reinscribed the hard dichotomy that there are only two kinds of female characters, the virgin or the whore. This characterization, as prompted by the interview process, spoke to the notion that many consumers in this fan-base operate within the saint/sinner binary. Using sexuality to create an identity, audience members are formulating impressions on the female form based on their internalizations of societal power and knowledge. This directly ties back to Foucault's idea of sexuality as a source of power. In an effort to control popular ideas of female empowerment and strength, "Sexuality is tied to recent devices of power...it has been linked from the outset with an intensification of the body—with its exploitation as an object of knowledge and an element in relations of power" (Foucault, 1978, p. 107). Not only does the "slut" create an unfair stereotype that polices women's bodies and sexuality, but it also serves as caricature to an unrealistic representation of women everywhere.

Concern over the "slut" stereotype was widely represented in both male and female respondents' interviews. Six of the male respondents expressed some sort of discomfort with the sexualized nature of female characters. Nine female respondents also made mention of "slut" persona. Citing this representation as "unrealistic" many of the women that I interviewed were annoyed or agitated by the persistent presence of the hypersexualized female character. This was a theme that both male and female fans could identify as problematic within the genre.

Graphic Representation: Attractive Bodies as Powerful Women. Another emergent finding was the idea that women are only deemed powerful within this genre if they are given

attractive bodies. Wrapped in provocative packaging, strong women are only seen if they are sexualized. Female characters must be attractive—by heteronormative beauty standards—in order to be visible. Confronted with the idea of using a woman’s body to sell an image of strength or power, respondents became concerned that there was a concentrated focus on a superheroine’s body, and not her voice or potential agency. During an in-depth interview, Carl, a 30-year-old male reader, admitted that:

Sex sells. It’s something to put more eye balls on your product. It’s cheap and easier to do it that way, than to have a compelling storyline. Because, just based on the visual style of comics you look down and you have to read the words, but if there’s a busty woman in a leather bustier your eyes automatically go to that. You’re not even going to know if she’s saying anything... I’m trying to read what's being said. If it doesn’t silence, it certainly cheapens.

Distracted from the voice of the character, Carl readily admitted that emphasis on a sexualized body “silences” a female character’s actual message. Encouraged to look at these women in sexualized, essentialist ways, readers are trained to place merit on the way a female body looks and not what she has to say. Silenced by the “super” bodies they possess, female characters are reduced and muted in the wake of their sexualization.

This concern led to another emerging theme: who has the power to be seen within the pages of these graphic narratives? Furthermore, are these portrayals indicative of larger societal implications? During an interview, Bailey, a 30-year-old woman who works as a freelance artist, acknowledged the idea that feminine beauty and attractiveness in the graphic novel genre may be a response to society’s structure as a whole. Discussing the ways in which artists can bypass reality, Bailey tied her own personal experience with graphic novels into reoccurring trends she had noticed within a wider social context. According to Bailey:

There’s more of an element of fantasy in them because you’re not as restricted to a real body like in a movie or something like that, but, I mean, you see all the time, like, photo shopped women on magazine covers, and, you know, like, the before and after, and

they've moved their arm somewhere weird. So, I mean, today's technology gives us more realm for fantasy than it did in the past, but, uhm, it's still freer when you can just draw whatever position you want. You know, make sure to get the ass and the tits in the scene. That kind of thing. But, I would say that the idea is the same. That there is a standard of what is expected of a woman that will be viewed by everyone, and that just kind of that idea, I think, is universal. And, it just has different styles depending on where you are.

This “standard” became crucial in understanding what kinds of women have access to representation within comics and the mass media at large. Manipulating body type and image, comic book industries are able to warp the messages that shape norms about ideal beauty standards. Tying her observations back into the graphic novel genre, Bailey continued to state that:

And, the comic books. I don't know how much, but it does definitely sustain this idea of, you know, there is a type and we all have to conform to that or we're not to be viewed I guess. Or, put in the newswoman. The newswoman has to be pretty. You know, like, that kind of stuff. Anyone that is put before everyone to deliver any sort of information, or to perform, or to talk, you know, just anyone that is in the position to be viewed by the masses has to have that thing and its... One more thing. One more drop in the bucket.

Bailey's experience highlighted a growing concern among many female consumers. Who, by virtue of representation and portrayal, is allowed the power of expression? In a world where the voices of power, information, and knowledge can only come from a sexualized image, who gets represented and who becomes devalued within this cultural landscape? According to the cultural apparatus that reproduces these images; only attractive female bodies have the power of expression, knowledge, and visibility. Aimee, a 24-year-old female graduate assistant, captured this idea in perfect summation when she said, “I don't know that their power is derived from their appearance other than the fact that it gives them the opportunity to be there as characters.” Representational opportunity is an important and growing need for all women—and yet, only the attractive ones are being served.

Another female participant, Cassie, spoke to the idea of the attractive woman as

powerful. A 26-year-old optometrist, Cassie has been reading comics since the age of 10.

According to her, a strong female character has to embody numerous traits in order to be “empowered.” Out of all of these traits, however, only one really matters. Cassie spoke to the characteristics that qualify female characters as strong when she said:

She has to be all about this woman empowerment, but still maintaining femininity and being strong and independent. Otherwise, you have a Hillary Clinton character who is also strong, intelligent, independent—yes, but...nobody's gonna read a comic book about Hillary Clinton.

Even though, according to Cassie, Hilary Clinton might make a good role model, she makes a lousy comic book character. Policing the body of a political female figure, Cassie reinforced the notion that comic book fans only want to engage with feminine, attractive characters. Utilizing gender performance as a persuasive tool, comic book companies are able to promote and normalize notions of desired womanhood. Comic book characters must be models of gender conformity. Complying with Butler’s notions of gender performance, these spandex crusaders are pawns in a hyper-political arena. Women’s bodies are purposefully gendered and “stylized” with political intention. It is not enough to be strong and independent—a woman must also be physically feminine and desirable in order to be consumed by the public.

CHAPTER 5: FURTHER DISCUSSIONS: FEMINISM IN THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

GENRE

Defamed Defenders: Saving a Status Quo

Even though I asked participants pointed questions about specific topics, I had not anticipated the most frequent theme. Throughout the course of my research inquiries, I began to pick up on messages pertaining to definitions of feminism and feminist identities. Stumbling upon one participant's reluctant definition, I was intrigued to learn how others identified messages of feminism within this graphic art form. In a discussion concerning his favorite female comic book characters, Steven was quick to say,

Yeah, she is a really powerful character! I really respect her. I mean...I'm not a feminist or anything. I'm just normal. I respect everybody's viewpoint.

His automatic desire to disassociate from the feminist identity became an interesting topic of critical analysis. Not only did he assert that he was "normal," but he said that he "respected everybody's viewpoint." This statement assumes that he views feminists as disrespectful and abnormal within the context of his lived experience. This viewpoint was not unique. Anthony also spoke to the unflattering nature of perceived feminism when he said:

Yeah. I think that the tendency as far as what feminism looks like in a lot of cases, or at least the way that I see it in the way that I see that I'm not pleased with is when it's sort of this radicalized feminism that is sort of a victory at any cost sort of a thing. Where it's sort of gone into areas that it didn't need to go into and is trying to take on challenges that it's like, "Is this really what feminism really needs to be about?"

Distrust of feminism, or what it would potentially look like in the graphic novel genre, became an interesting launching point for further research. In order to answer the research question concerning the presence of feminism within the graphic novel industry, I decided I needed a better idea of what feminism looked like to my respondents.

Midway through the study, I became more intentional about my feminist inquiries. I purposefully asked fifteen participants (9 females, 5 males, and 1 transgender male) to 1) define feminism, and 2) tell me if they saw feminist messages in graphic novels and/or comic books. I asked these questions at the end of the interviewing session. Weary of potential alienation or polarization, I wanted to first and foremost understand my respondents' relationship with comic books and female representation within the genre. At the end of the interview process, I asked participants—both male and female—to define the following concept: feminism. The results were fascinating. This question, although purposefully placed at the end of the interview, was met with hesitation, reassurance, silence, distrust, and/or defense.

According to Mark's reluctant answer, feminism is, "Simply about equality. It's not necessarily about--i-it's about everyone, you know. Treating everyone, uh--respecting everyone for who they are. You know? So, it's just about--I dunno. I guess it is, uh, about fairness, but more about equality."

Veronica was defiant when she defined feminism as, "Equality for everyone. It's not equality for one gender. It's not 'I hate men.' It's equality for everyone. It's equality for all races. Everyone who is being discriminated against—it-it's encompassing humanity."

Raising an eyebrow, Cassie complained that, "That's a heavy question...especially since I'm speaking to a feminist!"

One respondent, however, provided illuminating insight into my quest for a feminist message.

Bryan, a 27-year-old graduate student, is a self-identified comic book "geek." Interested in comics since the age of 12, he spends upwards to 15 hours a week reading his favorite comic

serials. When asked to define, “feminism,” a concept he was familiar with through multiple college courses, he responded:

Feminism is not only having women be equal to men. It is challenging and changing the system that exists as is does now that *is* keeping women disadvantaged to men... so how can we change society so it's more equal for both parties.

Intrigued by his response, I asked him to elaborate. For instance, did he ever find feminist messages in comic books or graphic novels? After a deep breath, he replied with the following observation:

That's a great question. I find women can do it...Like, women--more power to 'em. But, of course there's no major changes of, like, social changes that comic books deal with, um, as far as, like, changing the broader stance of society.

Struck by his observation, I realized the static nature of the comic book universe. When antagonists—or supervillains—are introduced within the superhero universe, they are posed as a catastrophic threat to society's current way of life. Fearful of the changes that could potentially occur; the superhero is set to attack. After all, what could be more dangerous than a threat to our modern society? Celebrated as a model of success, the society in which we live is deemed worthy of a superhero's protection. Yet, what if it is not? What if this society is flawed or wrong? What if it is in need of change, repair, revolution, or equality? Unfortunately, and without coincident, we do not have the cultural blueprint for that narrative.

We, as an audience, are supposed to cheer the superhero as a savior; but perhaps our potential resistance is his ultimate foe. The superhero is a theoretical representation that impedes social change, progress, and mobility. Situated as the good guy, we champion his strength, power, and desire to serve justice. This justice, however, is a reflection of the hegemonic forces keeping inequality afloat.

Superheroes are framed as the ultimate defenders; however, this begs the question: what are they defending? Saving the world from supervillains and antagonistic foes, the superhero is positioned as the protector of our social universe. They uphold the “good” and “just” ways of our modern society. They defend us from the unsavory prospect of change, upheaval, and potential revolution. Pawns in a game of cultural manipulation, we see superheroes as the ultimate defenders—of the status quo. Anti-revolution by manufactured nature, the construction of superheroes provides fascinating insight into a world where the cultural apparatus has complete control over the production of good, evil, strength, justice, and power. Looking through the lens of a critical paradigm, we can analyze the manipulative nature of the comic book industry.

In order to protect the status quo, the culture industry, as illustrated through the propagation of comic books and superheroes, is anti-revolution in nature. Social disturbance is unacceptable. Contained in a bubble of the unquestioned continuum, the culture industry actively works to dismantle revolutionary actions. Villainized across the splash pages and media screens, the arch-nemesis is painted as the figure who threatens traditional society’s “way of life.” Operating from the assumption that society is already at its best, this message silences dissent. Change, revolution, and disruption are not tolerable. Or, at least, are not welcome within the confines of a complacent social order. Protection must defend against outside intrusion. This intrusion, as imagined by the culture industry, comes in the form of revolutionary uprising. To thwart this prospective, the culture industry must adopt—and enforce—an anti-revolutionary stance.

This limitation is seen through the lack of representation within the graphic novel genre. Superheroes are expected to reinforce the special interests and concerns of the ruling class. Keeping society in order, the way it has always been, comic book characters parole the potential

for upheaval, resistance, or revolution. After all, in the comic universe, only the bad guys want to change the society in which they live. The good guys, or superheroes, are dedicated to the preservation of the power elite. By keeping their ideology in place, the superhero serves as a hegemonic tool of domination and complacency.

While these findings are preliminary, there is substantial material for further research. Focusing on how comic book consumers craft their feminist understandings (to protect their social world?) presents a potential question to explore in the future.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This article examined how female characters are represented within the graphic novel genre. More specifically, it examined how my respondents created naturalized difference in space, biological sex, and stereotype, answering (1) how powerful women are depicted as attractive bodies, and (2) how the superhero narrative enforces a social status quo. I argued that female misrepresentation and sexualization is a problem that alienates and objectifies the female fan base.

My research suggests that there is a strong divide within the comic book community. Alienated by androcentric spaces, female fans are silenced and separated within this community. While women are more likely to consider separation in physical social space, male respondents reflected upon biological differences. Expressing beliefs that align with biological essentialism, male respondents represented an emerging trend that female characters are seen as naturally and physically inferior to their male counterparts. Female characters were also more likely to fall into stereotypical caricatures. Male respondents discussed the comic book woman's role as the love interest, the nag, and the slut. Female respondents were also concerned by the hypersexualization of the "slut" stereotype. Another key finding pertained to the construction of the female physique. According to both male and female respondents, only "sexy" attractive women are presented as powerful women within the graphic novel genre. Since this industry lacks adequate representation of female diversity, only one body type—that of the heteronormative female ideal—is depicted as powerful within this medium. Final discussions speculate on the need for further research about perceptions of feminism within the comic book canon.

My results resonate with the larger literature. As previous scholars suggest, graphic representation within the comic book genre is indicative of larger sociopolitical realities (Barker

1989; Danziger-Russell 2012; Hajdu 2008; Johnson 2012; Knowles 2007; Morris and Morris 2005; Morrison 2011; Pustz 2012). Projecting from a sociological platform, it is evident that comic books provide an illuminating landscape for critical social thought and analysis. Female exclusion from male-dominated spaces, as suggested by Danziger-Russell's (2012) previous research, was also supported by my findings.

While certain aspects of my research did align with previous study initiatives, there were gaps in the literature that my investigation sought to address. Throughout the course of my project, I highlighted the intersecting topics surrounding the social construction of gender difference, sexual stereotypes, and body objectification within the graphic novel genre. I also worked to describe how consumers' experiences offered insight into these gaps and—more broadly—to our understanding of power constructions, gender relations, and body politics within this cultural canon.

In a critical reflection of my research design, I acknowledge that there are certain limitations to my study. While snowball sampling provided easy access—and trust—among my research participants, much of my sample was homogeneous in nature. Similarity in response may be a result of similarity in sample respondents. Future research should cultivate more diversity in the sample's social location. This diversity should reflect variation in race, age, and socioeconomic background. Another compelling avenue for continued research would include an exploration of the participants' intersecting identities. While my research was illuminating in regards to sexual difference and gender expressions, little was mentioned about my participants' racial, sexual, and classed identities.

These limitations, while influential, were in part balanced by methodological strengths. Coming from a feminist epistemology, it was my hope to empower my research respondents. I

was continuously open and transparent with all of my research participants. While this did, at times, allow for uncomfortable and even personally vulnerable situations, I would continue to advocate this level of openness in future research. Because I positioned myself at the front lines of comic book culture, I was allowed unique insight into this shifting cultural landscape. Drawing from my skills as a qualitative observer, I endeavored to present an accurate representation of this subgroup's fascinating social perspective.

Continuing with this research, it is my desire to interview respondents concerning perceptions of female empowerment in the graphic novel genre. Drawing from their own experiences, I wish to answer research questions that make sense of a hyper-sexualized female presence in a male-dominated space. By focusing on these emerging themes: silencing women, visibility, representation, alienation, and the reproduction of role models, I hope to focus my concentrations in a direction that will yield fruitful topics of comic book discourse.

Furthermore, I hope that my research project will contribute to the existing literature by broadening the social understanding of constructions of female power within popular culture. By emphasizing the complex relationship of corporate approved power and female constructions of agency, I want to highlight the Catch-22 that is inherent within this industry. The qualitative aspect of this study also adds to the literature by providing real voices and human experience to the topic of sexual objectification within the graphic novel genre.

In conclusion, I found that constructions of female power in the graphic novel genre are dependent on participants' assumptions regarding biological sex, acceptance of common female stereotypes, and compliant alignment to heteronormative male attractions. This gained knowledge contributes to the current literature. By situating our understanding within the

participants' frame of meaning-making, we are positioned to critically deconstruct problematic messages that degrade, alienate, and needlessly sexualize "strong, empowered women."

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