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# WORKING THE MARGINS: WOMEN IN THE COMIC BOOK INDUSTRY

by

WESLEY CHENAULT

Under the Direction of Marian Meyers

## ABSTRACT

Women have been involved in the writing, illustrating, and production of comic books at almost every step of the genre's development. The years between the late 1960s and the late 1990s were tumultuous for the comic book industry. At the societal level, these years were saturated with changes that challenged normative ideas of sex roles and gender.

The goal of this study is two-fold: it documents the specific contributions to the comic book industry made by the women interviewed, and it addresses research questions that focus on gender, change, and comic books.

This project asks: What was the role and status of women in the comic book industry between the early 1970s and late 1990s? By utilizing moderately scheduled, in-depth interviews with women working in the comic book industry during this period, this study explores their experiences and treatment while working in an insular, male-dominated field.

## INDEX WORDS:

Gender Roles, Women and Comic Books

WORKING THE MARGINS: WOMEN IN THE COMIC BOOK INDUSTRY

by

WESLEY CHENAULT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in the

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2007

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2007

WORKING THE MARGINS: WOMEN IN THE COMIC BOOK INDUSTRY

by

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To John J. Ryan for always believing...

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
Research Question.....	3
Significance of Research.....	4
2 WOMEN, WORK, AND FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW .....	7
Women and Work.....	7
Feminist Historiography.....	14
3 WOMEN AND THE COMIC BOOK INDUSTRY – PRE-CODE.....	18
Sketching the Industry from the Beginning to Virtual Collapse.....	18



	A Golden Age of Women in the Comic Book Industry.....	25
4	WOMEN AND THE COMIC BOOK INDUSTRY – POST-CODE.....	33
	Sketching the Industry from Virtual Collapse to Reformation.....	33
	Significant Events and Changes.....	37
	Women and the Mainstream.....	42
	Women Underground.....	46
5	WOMEN AND THE CONTEMPORARY INDUSTRY.....	49
	Sketching the Industry to 2000.....	49
	State of Women in the Industry from the 1980s to 2000.....	56
6	METHODOLOGY.....	61
	Sample Size.....	62
	Interviewing.....	63

Transcription.....	65
Coding and Analysis.....	65
7 FINDINGS	71
Red Sonja Tales.....	72
In Love with Words and Pictures.....	81
Major Changes: Content and Business.....	83
Treasured Fans and Dubious Others.....	86
Marriage: A Non-Issue.....	90
Drawing Like A “Girl”.....	91
Equal Pay: A Difference of Opinion and Position.....	93
The Women’s Movement and Degrees of Impact.....	95

Modest Gains: More Differences in Opinion and Position.....	99
Locating Women’s Impact on the Industry.....	101
8 CONCLUSIONS.....	104
WORKS CITED.....	110
APPENDIX.....	114

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

At certain historical moments, the comic book has been a lightning rod for debates about meaning, representation and effect. Underlying many of these heated exchanges are assumptions about the relationship between the public and media. One common assumption has been that comic books affect or influence their readers in some capacity. Numerous historical examples illustrate this point. Amy Nyberg's *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* depicts in great detail how societal concerns over the causes of juvenile delinquency during the 1950s found a target in comic books. The violence appearing in select horror comics, for example, was believed to increase the likelihood of criminal behavior in young people.

Throughout the late 1980s and mid-1990s, some feminist scholars turned their attention to representations of women in comic books. Specific examples of misogynistic images were analyzed and linked to sexism as it manifested more broadly in culture (Inness 78-79; Young 218).

Within recent years, comic books have received a different treatment than they typically have been given. Efforts have been made to legitimize this unique cultural and art form that has often been shrugged off as pap for pubescent boys. For example, Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* and *Graphic Storytelling*, and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* take as their subject matter the artistic and formalist elements of the medium. Comic book artwork today is clearly more complex than that of its four-color predecessors. The stories, too, are more complex. The 1990s

witnessed, for example, the death and re-birth of one of America's most recognizable heroes, Superman (Kipniss 51-90). Today, discussions of comic books appear almost everywhere. They have been the topic of features in mainstream magazines and newspapers (Brandt 90-92; Ingall 40-47; Mangels 55-60). Additionally, they have been the focus of scholarly panel discussions (Groth and Fiore 259-266) and articles (Baughman 27-30; Nyberg, "Women Readers" 205-224; Palumbo 61-64; Silvio 39-50).

While the medium has matured in several respects, the comic book is still viewed by many as little more than juvenilia. There are numerous stereotypes associated with this view. One is that "comic books equal superheroes." As is the case with many stereotypes, there is some kernel of truth. While the comic book of the 1950s ranged in subject matter from romance to war, the comic book of the 1970s and 1980s was mostly about the superhero (Rogers 119-168). Another stereotype is that comic books are adolescent male fantasies – heterosexual, to be specific. The overt masculinization of hero-figures and plots and the over-sexualization of female characters rightfully earn comic books such a stereotype. But as is the case with many stereotypes, a great deal is masked in terms of complexity and contradiction.

Often missing from these discussions and stereotypes is the historical context in which representations are created. This is certainly the case for women in the comic book industry. And this becomes important when claims are made about, for example, the sexism of the "pin-up" style comic art of the 1940s.

Since the 1920s, the comic book has undergone numerous transformations in form and content. The first comic book, a bound collection of reprinted comic strips, looks strikingly different than the comic book of today, a highly stylized serial with complex

characters and plots. During the 1950s, it was targeted by McCarthyism and censored. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the comic book regained some of its freedom of expression. At almost every step of its development, women have been involved in the writing, illustrating, and production of comic books, facts that are unfortunately little-known.

The role and status of women in the comic book industry has, at least in the academy, gone unnoticed. Outside of the academy, the few sources that approach these topics serve to counterbalance a burgeoning body of literature focused on select men in the industry. Though this information serves an important purpose, it does not address many questions pertaining to women's experiences in the industry.

### **Research Question**

This study examines the role and status of women in the comic book industry from 1970 to 2000. It asks whether women or the women's movement had an impact on the comic book industry during this time frame and how being a woman affected how they were treated in the industry or how others perceived their work. By utilizing moderately scheduled, in-depth interviews and the discursive analysis of transcripts from interviews with six women who worked in the comic book industry between 1970 and 2000, I answer these questions, as well as explore women's experiences and treatment working in an insular, male-dominated field.

Another goal of this work is to document the specific contributions of the women interviewed and connect it to what is known of women's contributions prior to this period. In general, works that focus on the history of comic books fail to address women's contributions. Works that focus on female comic book artists pay insufficient

attention to historical changes to the industry. This work, then, brings together through literature reviews and interviews, a broader, more integrated picture that places women's roles and contributions in the foreground.

### **Significance of Research**

This study will connect broadly with studies of gender and popular culture, as well as cultural studies. Within the past decade, feminist scholars and writers from the fields of cultural studies and popular culture have critiqued comic book images and representations. Several of these writings are threaded together by a methodological emphasis on textual analysis. Thus, for the most part, historical specificity is lacking. A small handful of writers have constructed historical accounts of women in comics, discussed genres popular with female readers, and traced the history of female superheroes. These works, however, are largely surveys that either fail to capture in detail the roles and status of the women artists at the times under consideration or they do not connect analyses of comic books to the larger cultural and historical context in which they were created. This study, then, brings to the literature on women and comic books in the fields of cultural studies and popular culture an account of the roles and status of women in the comic book industry from the early 1970s to the late 1990s, a period marked both by advances in the women's movement and by a conservative backlash.

This study is significant for other reasons as well. Since feminist scholarship encountered poststructuralism and postmodernism, greater attention has focused on analyses and examinations of the ways that gender is constructed via media representations, cultural practices, and language in the United States (Canning 368-404).

This study adds to this vast body of work, bringing in a historical perspective on women's roles and contributions in the comic book industry.

If the linguistic turn in the humanities has had an effect on the writing of history, it has been to interrogate who has the authority to write history. Feminist historical works have leveled other critiques, challenging many assumptions about notions of evidence, evaluation, and interpretation (Canning 368-404; Higginbotham 251-274; Shapiro 1-14). With more universities actively seeking material that has traditionally been left out of archives about people who have not always been seen as participants in "history," greater detail and texture becomes available for the collective stories yet to be told about culture and society in the United States. This project is an attempt to document women's presence in the industry, to add to the small but growing body of literature about women and comics. I leave a paper trail for others to build upon, challenge, or, more simply, to utilize to increase their awareness of women's roles in the comic book industry.

This study is also significant in the sense that it has produced historical documentation in the form of interviews and transcripts, material that could be put to use by future scholars. The past thirty years have witnessed broad social and cultural changes that have influenced not only who can write history, but also what counts as legitimate sources for historical writing. In the 1970s and 1980s, a few repositories in the United States made popular culture "ephemera," such as comic books, an area worthy of preservation and collection. The Special Collections and Archives of Virginia Commonwealth University, for example, holds a large collection of materials related to the study of comic arts, including nearly 10,000 comic books dating primarily from the



1970s to the 1990s. More impressively, the Comic Art Collection of Michigan State University holds over 150,000 items. Comic books comprise the bulk of the holdings, but they also include close to 1,000 books of collected newspaper comic strips, and several thousand books and periodicals about comics. The Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University actively collects women's and girl's zines and comics, a collection area anchored by the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection.<sup>1</sup> Interviews with women working to create comics and zines would greatly supplement the pool of resources for those interested in research.

The chapters that follow provide background information and detail to this study. Chapter 2 is two-fold. It first presents a brief overview of issues about women and work in the United States and provides a broad context to better situate questions around the roles and status of women in the comic book industry. Next, it addresses changes in feminist historiography and situates this project within the broader debates and concerns within the field. Chapters 3-5 review the literature on women and the comic book industry. These chapters cover some of the changes that would affect women's jobs within the work place and the technological and other innovations that changed the industry. Chapter 6 details the methodology of this project, and the next chapter reports the findings from the interviews. The project then concludes in Chapter 8.

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<sup>1</sup> Zines are small circulation publications of original and appropriated images and texts whose name derives from a contraction of the word magazine.

## CHAPTER 2

### WOMEN, WORK, AND FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

#### **Women and Work**

Regardless of whether or not they are paid for what they do, all women, with few exceptions, work in some capacity. Although “work” is utilized in this project to refer specifically to labor performed outside the home for pay, this usage cannot be separated from the larger context of changes in gender ideology and of the historical economic development of the United States. This context puts into relief a set of paradoxes in relation to women, family, and work. The main one that most studies touch upon, implicitly or explicitly, is that while this century witnessed the gradual increase in the size of the female labor force, it also saw the consolidation of the notion of female domesticity and motherhood.

These paradoxes are part of the reason why the study of women in the workplace, as most literature about this subject points out, is complicated. One scholar likens it to the parable of the twelve blind men describing different parts of the same elephant (Kelly 2). Each provides an important piece, but none presents a comprehensive picture of the animal. According to Kelly, most work about women and labor falls roughly into one of three camps: theories about systemic barriers, theories based on labor market and organizational discrimination, and theories of sex and gender differences (1-2). In the case of the later, theories that stress biological sex differences and roles, socialization

variations, and sex differences in education, training, and work wield the greatest explanatory power in terms of this study. Discrimination theories hold that barriers to the success of women in the workplace are explained by the presence of systemic biases held by those wielding the most power. The implication of these theories is that women will be hired, but in a fashion that leaves power relations unchanged resulting from a pre-existing gender hierarchy. Systemic barrier theories focus on structural patterns promoting discrimination. Clearly these viewpoints are valid, but not necessarily comprehensive.

Some scholars have used the phrase “subtle revolution” to address the far-reaching changes that have taken place in the work and family patterns of American women since World War II (Blau and Ehrenberg 1-19; Gerson 1-5). Blau and Ehrenberg state that in 1940, 86 percent of married women worked as homemakers, and that by 1994, 61 percent were in the paid labor force (1). While older, married women who had school-age or grown children, constituted a large portion of the women entering the labor force, over time, younger, married women began increasing their numbers in labor statistics.

This subtle revolution has been marked not only by an increase in women’s movement into the labor market but also increases in divorce rates and in nonmarital births, which have resulted in a large increase in single-parent families headed by women. The span of years between 1960 and 1990 witnessed changes in the work pattern of women that were, as one scholar described, “sudden and marked” (Snyder 2). According to Snyder, the female labor force increased 28.5 percent between 1950 and 1990 (2). Blau and Ferber attribute numerous factors to this increase, including changing

rates of fertility, marriage, divorce, and unemployment, as well as age, race, and level of education (108-109). Arnott and Matthaei emphasize that much of this growth was in the ranks of women with race and class privilege (135). According to Snyder, between 1960 and 1990 “the participation rate of white females aged 20 to 64 more than quadrupled while that of nonwhite women less than doubled” (3).

The picture presented by these numbers seems more than “subtle.” By widening the historical purview, it becomes more dramatic by comparison. Blackwelder provides a single statistical statement for what she refers to as a “quiet revolution” (3-9). In 1900, one in every five American women worked for pay, and by 1990, that number increased to three in five. Elaborating on this statement, she writes:

The number of women in the labor market rose from 5 million at the dawn of the century to more than 56 million in its last decade. In addition, as the century progressed, these wage-earning women spent more years on the job. These two facts, taken together, mean that women’s roles in the national labor force effort grew by a factor even greater than simple statistics suggest. A transformation so fundamental reflects shifts, gradual in pace but stark in consequence, in attitudes and structures within society. (3)

When viewed across a century’s span, the shifts and changes are easily identifiable. Women working outside the home for pay has changed from an “atypical” to an “anticipated” behavior (3). The expectation that the women who would spend years at work were poor and working class shifted to include middle-class women. Once the domain of single women, married women now dominate the labor force. The notion of the husband as “breadwinner” has given way to the reality that two-parent households rely upon the wages of wife and husband. A significant portion of households depends primarily on women’s earnings alone. Since 1900, the range of occupations available to women has vastly expanded.

Shifts in the U.S. economy and labor market clearly made the increase a possibility, if not a necessity (Blackwelder 3-9; Gerson 3-5; Goldin 3-9). At the turn of the century, the United States was a leading industrial power. In 1900, agriculture, fishing, and forestry combined contributed half as much as the industrial sector, which was composed of manufacturing, transportation and communication (Blackwelder 5). As industrial expansion increased in the first half of the century, a broad range of “white-collar” jobs developed. Manufacturing enlarged the service needs of the nation, with notable growths in medicine and education. While manufacturing increased into the 1960s, the industrial age was ending. By the 1970s the service sector began to surpass manufacturing, and by the end of the 1980s, services comprised 65 percent of the national income (Blackwelder 6). According to the work of Gerson, Goldin, and Blackwelder, shifts away from agriculture and manufacturing toward a service-based economy have, along the way, defined and redefined women’s work, both inside and outside the family.

Shifts in economics have not been the only factor in women’s increasing numbers in the labor market. Societal expectations and social institutions also have been forces of change. Blackwelder notes that popular attitudes and educational policies have, at times, lagged behind labor force restructuring (7-8). For example, Blackwelder states that instead of providing young girls with the skills needed to maximize employment opportunities, advice literature for women, school curricula, and girls’ clubs socialized them with white middle-class notions of feminine character and family order. As public education expanded in the first half of the twentieth century, boys and girls were often enrolled in secondary schools segregated by sex or following sex segregated curricula. During the 1950s, for example, millions of girls were prepared to enter domestic, office,

or industrial work via home economics, typing or other “women’s” courses. The expectation was that these girls would enter the labor force until they retired to the home after marriage (Blackwelder 248). School and girls’ club activities prepared girls for the roles of family and community caregivers and nurturers, roles in keeping not only for work as mothers, but also work as domestic servants, secretaries, teachers, nurses, and social workers. These broad generalizations are somewhat limited when differences amongst women are considered. Throughout this century educational and employment opportunities for immigrant women, poor and working-class women, and women of color have been fewer than those of white middle-class women. Racial and class based prejudices have shaped decades of educational policies and hiring practices (247-248).

Goldin argues that in addition to such issues as “wage discrimination,” “protective legislation,” and “sex segregation” – phenomena arising from the “peculiar” relationship between the workplace and society – “marriage bars” were also a factor affecting women’s ability to work for pay. Between 1900 and 1930, many school districts and firms initiated policies that prohibited the hiring of married women and that enforced the firing of single women upon marriage (7). Goldin states that dictates of social consensus reinforced those of the marketplace, keeping these practices in place throughout the Depression and into the 1950s. Only when the supply of single women sharply decreased in the 1950s were the majority of the marriage bars abandoned.

While the rates of women’s participation in the labor force have increased, they have not necessarily occurred evenly across occupations. Occupational segregation, regardless of the explanatory framework – human capital theory, socialization, sex-role norms – remains a significant feature of the female labor force (Snyder 4-5). According

to Blau and Ferber, the magnitude is quite substantial (129). Wages, too, are not equal, though they have generally increased (Arnott and Matthaei 137). “Social and economic institutions,” Snyder notes, “have been slow in recognizing the changing labor market status of women. Wages, hours, setting, and other working conditions still are set on the assumption that the typical worker is male with no family or household responsibilities” (3). This is also to say that women still play a greater role in unpaid labor in the home (Arnott and Matthaei 139). Most scholars note that change is occurring, albeit slowly, in terms of occupation segregation, equal pay, and family care responsibilities.

A point often lost in the narratives of women and work is their role in creating change. Women have not been simply the beneficiaries of labor shifts brought about by a changing economy. Throughout the century, women fought for rights that would increase their roles in politics and sought the means to lessen discrimination based on gender (Blackwelder 254-257). The suffrage movement led to women’s elections to public office and appointments to governmental offices. Women actively worked to create state and federal laws that protected their property rights, legislated women’s rights to U.S. citizenship regardless of marriage, and eased restrictions on divorce. They moved closer to equality in education and the workplace through civil rights law. In the mid-1990s, the United States joined the ranks of other industrialized nations with the passage of the Family and Medical Act Leave, which provided job protection for absences from employment associated with childbirth.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The United States, however, is not one of the 163 countries around the world that offers guaranteed paid leave to women in connection to childbirth, according to the report “The Work, Family and Equity Index: Where Does the United States Stand Globally?” The Project on Global Working Families. 27 Nov. 2006 <<http://www.globalworkingfamilies.org>>.

Changing notions about women's place at work and in the home are part of a complex process that involves women's political and social activism and shifts in the U.S. economy and gender ideology as well. Socialization has much to do with the career paths people choose. Historically, men and women have been – and continue to be – socialized differently. The work one chooses to do is part of the interaction of what that individual envisions as being possible and what society permits and encourages. Friedman's interviews with working women in *Work Matters*, Shelton's study of time usage differences between men and women in *Women, Men, and Time*, and Siltanen's interrogation of gender as an explanatory category to discuss work and social experience in *Locating Gender*, taken together, demonstrate the difficulties women have had integrating personal and economic life in a cultural milieu of conflicting messages about sex-roles and gender expectations. It is a conflict that, generally speaking, women working outside the home have had to deal with, but men have not.

The strength of viewing both quantitative and qualitative research focusing on women and work is that they provide a more textured image. They cannot, however, provide a total picture. No research can do that. But looking at anything from multiple angles and perspectives can provide a sense of the proverbial elephant. This is another reason why it is important to examine all the places where women have found or chosen work. What is most germane to this study is the historical significance of the period between 1970 and 2000 in terms of its changes in relation to women, paid work, and capitalist development. Just as important is having an understanding of what makes the comic book industry unique but not too unlike other markets where women have worked. A look at Friedman's research makes the point clearly. "When women were asked in



recent surveys what they considered the greatest obstacle to their success – lack of promotion? Pay equity? Family responsibilities? Isolation? – again and again the answer was the same, though it was none of the above. It was simply: Being a woman” (xix).

### **Feminist Historiography**

As women moved into the academy in greater numbers after the late 1960s, feminist theory, within and across disciplines, has critically challenged many institutional paradigms in terms of scholarly content, methods, and epistemology. Although this project is not a “history” in a strict disciplinary sense, it is part of a larger set of feminist work that is interdisciplinary and that focuses attention on the lives of women and their experiences. An in-depth review of the changes in women’s historiography is outside of the scope of this work, as is a literature review of the broad field of feminist theory. However, a brief overview of select intersections of feminist theory and history will help provide context for this project.

Feminist historical work ranges in perspectives and practices. The ones most germane to this project are those impacted by poststructuralist theory, those having taken the linguistic turn (Canning 368-404; Hall 902-911; Shapiro 1-14). This turn has been problematic for it began at a time when many feminist scholars were exploring difference in regards to race, class, gender and sexuality (Hewitt 313-326). In terms of historical writings, one concern has been the way that a focus on language and representation overshadows challenges to “the real” in historical writing (Shapiro 13).

The work of historian Joan Wallach Scott provides a good example of the impact poststructuralism has had on feminist historical writing (1986; 1988; 1999). In a now classic essay, Scott presents a critique of gender as a category within the context of

political history, marking a theoretical shift from women's history to gender history (Scott, "Historical Analysis" 1053-1057). She later expounds upon her ideas in *Gender and the Politics of History*, thus setting the stage for a critical examination of other categories utilized in history such as experience, identity, and agency. Scholars have noted Scott's influence in shifting the terms of debate in feminist historical writings (Canning 368-404; Hall 902-911; Shapiro 1-14). These changes have not occurred without debate. Responses to Scott's work illuminate the tensions within the field. Scholars Jane Caplan, Claudia Koonz, and Linda Gordon are but a few to debate Scott on the use of a theoretical framework perceived to be disempowering and fragmenting to the female subject (Canning 372).

While the work of Scott and other scholars shifted the terms of feminist historiography to challenge earlier works that tacked a story of "women's" history onto "men's" history, feminists of color further problematized the field, challenging scholars to account for race and ethnicity. For example, in "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," Evelyn Higginbotham notes that feminist theorizing strengths reside in challenges to binary categories, questions of sexual difference and subjectivities, and the notion of social relations as relations of power; a notable weakness is the insufficient attention to race (251). Drawing from poststructuralism, she asserts that race, as a metalanguage, affects the representation and construction of other power and social relations such as gender, class, and sexuality (253). Race, Higginbotham argues, is neither stable in meaning, nor is it natural or transhistorical (252-253). Higginbotham, like Scott, challenges scholars to re-examine assumptions about the categories they use and to think about identity in more complex ways.

Historical writing and methods also have come under criticism, especially regarding interpretation, authority, historical sources, and meaning (Armitage and Gluck 1-11; Canning 368-404; Geiger 499-503; Gluck 1-2; Hewitt 313-326). The use of oral history in women's history illustrates some of these issues. As oral history became an increasingly important tool for social history, so too did it become a useful method for the developing field of women's history. It provided a means to recuperate or recover women's experiences, stories and lives, and add them to the historical record, an important link to this project. Large oral history projects were an outgrowth of grassroots projects, like the Feminist History Research Project, created between feminist scholars and community feminist researchers (Gluck 1).<sup>3</sup> Much of this early work was a simple, but important, celebration of women's lives and was marked by a sense of discovery.

Over the past twenty years, the field has developed to include works that focus on interview techniques, criticisms of the "Western feminist researcher," and the relationship between narrators and interviewers (Geiger 499-500). In the case of the latter, a critical focus on the interview interaction and positionality of participants has meant that scholars have had to negotiate their interpretations with the meanings that narrators give their lives (Armitage and Gluck 7). Increased sensitivity to difference in oral history has led to improvements in terms of representation and a healthy bit of caution in generalizations and conclusions (7). One challenge still facing practitioners of oral history is the construction of meaning (9). Questions still abound about who has interpretive authority.

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<sup>3</sup> According the article, Gluck co-founded the Feminist History Research Project in 1972 and began interviewing suffragists. In 1973, Gluck's work formed the basis for a grant-supported project, the Suffragists Oral History Project. The project, underwritten by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, was conceived by the Regional Oral History Office at the Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley. [Suffragist Oral History Project](http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/projects/suffragist/). 27 Nov. 2006  
<<http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/projects/suffragist/>>.

How much do the words of the narrators speak for themselves? How much contextualization or historicizing is necessary (5-11)?

Like Gluck, I believe the need to collect women's stories is as urgent as ever, not only because of the number of stories untold, but also because the recorded interviews are invaluable primary documents (8). Although Gluck writes about oral history, I apply her ideas more broadly to this study, which utilizes in-depth interviews and is not an oral history.

Although they are similar in method, in-depth interviews center on a particular phenomenon or experience, while oral histories focus more on a person's past. In general, oral histories span a wide range of topics and extensive portions of an individual's life (Reinharz 130-131). This project is about women's experiences in and contributions to the comic book industry, a very specific subject.

Differences aside, this project is part of a body of work deeply rooted in women's studies – the recovery project. By and large this work has made a significant scholarly contribution in uncovering the roles, experiences, and life stories of women. Interviews, used in this way, help obtain “information about *people* (author's emphasis) less likely to be engaged in creating written records and for creating historical accounts of *phenomena* (author's emphasis) less likely to have produced archival material” (131). Through literature review and interviews, this project places women's roles and contributions in the foreground.

## CHAPTER 3

### WOMEN AND THE COMIC BOOK INDUSTRY – PRE-CODE

#### **Sketching the Industry from the Beginning to Virtual Collapse**

The modern comic book of today owes its existence to the comic strips of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Between 1897 and 1932, over 500 books of comic strips were published (Benton, *Comic Book* 14). These books, which were collections of reprints from popular comic strips appearing in newspapers, varied in format, size, and commercial success. During the years of the Great Depression, the popularity of comic strips peaked. It was during this zenith that the comic book industry began.

The development of the comic book industry would be, however, a gradual process with numerous false starts. In 1929, Eastern Color Printing Company of Waterbury, Connecticut, printed a tabloid-sized “comic magazine,” titled *The Funnies*, for Dell Publishing. It did not meet with wide success and was cancelled after thirteen issues. Four years later, Harry Wildenberg and Max Gaines, both Eastern Color employees, would make possible the necessary changes that would spell success for the “comic book” and that would jumpstart an industry (14).

Wildenberg and Gaines believed that comic strips, immensely popular at the time, could be used to sell other products. The two planned to create a book of comic strips, which they then would sell to manufacturers who could use the product as a premium, or inducement, for their customers. During the planning stage, Wildenberg stumbled upon

the format which was to become the standard for comic books. Presses were geared to print standard size newspaper sheets, which, when folded in half, produced tabloids. Folding this tabloid once more produced a compact and convenient size comic “magazine.” Thus, color presses could be used to economically produce an eight-by-eleven-inch, full-color book of comics – the modern comic book (Benton, *Comic Book* 14). In 1933, Wildenberg made arrangements with a syndicate to reprint comic strips, such as “Mutt and Jeff” and “Joe Palooka,” at ten dollars a page. Gaines then convinced Proctor and Gamble to buy ten thousand copies of the new comic book, *Funnies on Parade*. It was made available to customers who sent in coupons for their Proctor and Gamble products (15).

In the spring of 1933, the entire print run of *Funnies on Parade* was exhausted (15). Recognizing the commercial potential in this product, Gaines approached other advertisers, including Canada Dry, Milk-O-Malt, and Wheatena, to sponsor another premium comic book. Later that same year, the thirty-six-page *Famous Funnies: A Carnival of Comics* was released. It had an initial print run of 100,000 copies. To meet the growing demand by clients for another premium comic book, Gaines and Eastern Color produced the one-hundred-page *Century of Comics*. For the remainder of the year, between 100,000 and 250,000 copies of *Famous Funnies* and *Century of Comics* were given away (Benton 16).

The next phase in development was to test the comic book’s marketability beyond that of a premium giveaway (17). Interested in tapping the profits made by Gaines, Eastern Color sought Dell Publishing to produce a new comic book. In February 1934, the result, *Famous Funnies: Series I*, was released. It contained thirty-eight pages and

retailed at ten cents. *Famous Funnies: Series I*, which sold through big chain department stores, set the standard size and price for all newsstand comic books over the next several years. Later that spring, Eastern Color approached the American News Company in New York with the idea of selling comic books to newsstands. After some deliberation, an order was placed by American News for 250,000 copies. The first newsstand comic book, *Famous Funnies: Series II*, hit the newsstands in May 1934 (Benton, *Comic Book* 17).

The year 1935 was fraught with industry growing pains (17-18). Publishers rushed into the burgeoning field, which created a demand for comic strip reprints. Syndicates were overwhelmed trying to provide materials. Despite the rush of publishers, comic book sales remained sluggish. Few distributors were willing to take on the new product. For the ones that did, visibility of the comic book became problematic and was complicated by the fact that newsstands, not knowing where to place these books, placed them among the pulp magazines and newspapers, or simply returned them as unsold. Nevertheless, by the end of the year, the burgeoning industry had grown (18).

By 1936, comic book publishing emerged as an established, albeit marginal, part of American publishing (Sabin, *Adult Comics* 144). Most of the companies that joined the developing comic book industry were already in the business of producing material that followed formulas and genres – pulp fiction magazines, movie magazines, paperbacks, and mass produced children's books. They were able to address the commercial considerations of producing a stripped-down, entertaining product on a tight budget. Many businesses were, thus, primed and ready for making quick money from this new craze (144).

Initially, the business of comic book publishing was relatively simple and involved minimal cost (Sabin, *Adult* 145). Artwork was obtained cheaply through newspaper syndicates, commercial comic book studios or freelance cartoonists. Publishers and editors packaged the artwork and send it to printers, who colored the art and printed the final product. Printers sent the comic books to various newsstand distributors, who put out new issues and returned old issues to publishers for credit. Printing could be done on credit, and distributors pushed the comic books onto newsstands for future payment.

For the remainder of the 1930s, important developments transpired that continued the transformation and growth of the industry. During this time, comic book studios, or shops, began emerging in the Manhattan area (Benton, *Comic Book* 23). These shops met the growing demand for original material that was becoming the staple subject matter of comic books. This material was produced via an assembly-line mode of comic art production, which specialized each step.

Comic book art production involves several distinct steps. Editors, art directors, and scripters are responsible for script writing, character design, and initial thumbnail sketches. The actual artwork begins with a penciller, the person who lays down the preliminary pencil tracings. The inker then inks over the tracings created by the penciller. After these two steps, color is added to the artwork by the colorist. Letterers are responsible for the look of the text bubbles, the dialogue, and words connoting sound effects. The final product is the combined effort of an editor, art director, scripter, cover penciller, cover inker, interior penciller, interior inker, background penciller, and



background inker, letterer, colorist, and “clean-up” person, with many workers performing more than one duty (Robbins, *Comics* 49).

While this mode of operation benefited the publisher, it meant low wage rates with little acknowledgement or royalties for the creators. The majority of comic book artists and writers of this time period were considered anonymous and interchangeable. Shops hid high personnel turnover by adopting “house names” for each feature (49). Artwork, for example, would be credited to fictitious creators such as “Ima Slob” or simply produced anonymously.

As time progressed and new material was added, publishers were able to detect popularity in specific subject-matter. With a flexible mode of production in place, along with easy distribution channels and low paper costs, publishers could keep in step with popular tastes. Comic book studios and shops could try out different kinds of comic books, and easily eliminate those that were not selling. In catering to the changing tastes, “genre titles” emerged. Though subject matter still was linked largely to newspaper strips, eventually more original material was added. And as it became evident that original material sold, even more publishers joined in the fray of comic book publication.

In June 1938, *Action Comics #1* hit the newsstands, featuring the newly created character Superman, and marked what would be referred to as the beginning of the Golden Age of Comic Books (Benton, *Comic Book* 23). Over the next two years, the numbers of comic books, titles, and publishers increased dramatically. The ranks of publishers, for example, increased to fifteen, and over fifty titles were produced. This type of exponential growth continued over the next fifteen years. By October of 1954, an all-time high of 650 titles had been published with 150 million issues published per

month (53). At a cost of ten cents per book, the comic book industry was reaping an annual revenue of \$90 million. The ranks of small and large comic book publishers rose to well over twenty-five. Some of the more significant publishers included DC Comics, Inc. (formerly National Allied Publications, National Comic Publications, National Periodical Publications); Marvel (Timely Comics, Atlas Comics); EC Comics; Charlton Comics; Archie Comic Publications, Inc. (MLJ Magazines); and Harvey Comics (53). During the Golden Age, publishers rode the waves of genre popularity among mixed-age and-gender readerships (Sabin, *Adult* 144). The comic book industry churned out superhero, teen, funny animal, romance, cowboy, crime, 3-D, war, and horror comic books – and varying hybrid combinations – as quickly as the genres moved in and out of vogue.

The year 1954 marks not only a pinnacle for the industry, but also the end of the Golden Age of Comic Books. Significant, if not deleterious, events occurred during this year that would forever change the comic book industry. These events occurred amid a backdrop of localized anti-comics campaigns and the reactionary governments of Truman and Eisenhower (Sabin, *Adult* 147). In 1943, the Children's Book Committee of the Children Study Association argued that comic books had a harmful effect on children (146). Anti-comics lobbies, oft-quoted as headed by Dr. Frederic Wertham, senior psychiatrist for the New York Department of Hospitals, evolved by the end of the 1940s into a full-fledged campaign (151). This comic book backlash included reported cases of comic burnings on school grounds and organized pressure campaigns by concerned parents against newsstand distributors.

Since 1945, the Senate Judiciary Committee on Juvenile Delinquency had been assembling information and data on comic book influence. Public hearings were held in 1954 on the ill effects of comic books on children (158-159). Central to these hearings was Dr. Wertham's commercially successful *Seduction of the Innocent*, a book which detailed the allegedly harmful effect on children of reading comic books with crime, sex and violence. This book was the impetus for the institution of the 1954 Comics Code. In October of that year, comic book publishers established the Comics Code Authority, a self-regulatory body which imposed a strict set of industry standards upon comic books. The devastating impact of these events upon the comic book industry would continue for the next two years.

There is no question that the Code was a commercial disaster for the comic book industry. Genres were virtually destroyed, particularly crime and horror, and companies were forced out of business, especially those relying on profits from crime and horror comic books. Male and female creators in the field left to find work elsewhere. Other issues factored into the collapse of the industry, albeit to a lesser extent. For example, the distribution system for comic books was disrupted by radical changes that impacted the numbers of distributors and newsstand agents (Benton, *Comic Book* 53). Exacerbating the industry's chances of recovery was the rising popularity of TV (Sabin, *Adult* 163). In 1952, some 60 million readers consumed comic books from the 650 titles being produced. By 1955, the Golden Age of the Comic Book had ended and a prospering industry had all but collapsed. The following year, readership plummeted to 35 million and the number of titles produced dropped to 250 (163).

### **A Golden Age of Women in the Comic Book Industry?**

Women were far better represented in the syndicated newspaper strip field than in comic book art by the end of the 1930s (Robbins, *Comics* 47). This would change, however, with the onset of World War II. In the early days of the industry, when companies published comic strip reprints or anonymously created work, women notably wrote and drew their stories. Corrine Boyd Dillon and Jean Hotchkiss worked on the short lived *Circus: the Comic Riot* in 1938. Claire S. Moe, who also used the male pseudonym “Vic Todd,” wrote and drew for Centaur Publishing. These women mostly produced stories starring young children, a popular subject matter at the time. Many other women worked in the comic book industry in the late thirties, including Ruth Plumley Thompson, Merna Gamble, and Ruth Leslie, who wrote and scripted stories. But most had left the field by the time it began to grow and prosper. Some women, like Connie Naar, left to become children’s books illustrators. An exception to this group of women was Ruth Thompson, who became editor of the David McKay Company, a comic book publisher, and maintained the position until 1945 (47).

During the 1940s, comic shops were the leading employers of women scripters and artists (Robbins, *Comics* 59). Due to the assembly-line mode of production, tracing women’s work in these shops is complicated. Fortunately, not all shops operated in the same way and work credited to women exists. Most of the women in the comic book shops of the 1940s worked for studios run by Jack Binder, Lloyd and Grace Jacket, Eisner-Iger (later Iger-Roche), and Harry Chesler (49). Chesler’s shop was one of the first to provide for the growing needs of the industry. Artists Ann Brewster and Georgette Sauterel worked briefly for Chesler before leaving to join other studios. It was

Chesler who acted as an agent for the work produced by Dillon, Hotchkiss, and Moe outside of the shop during the late 1930s.

Jack Binder's shop, a major source of material for Fawcett Publications and Street and Smith, best exemplifies the assembly-line production of the time. The work there was done collectively and anonymously (49). Women in the shop worked, without credit, as inkers on such popular lines as Fawcett's Marvel family titles. The majority of the women working there, including June Hill, Gloria Kamen, Betty Kathe, Pauline Loth, and Georgette Sauterel, left by the early 1940s (50). Ann Brewster and Marcia Snyder, who were pencillers as well as inkers, both stayed in the industry after Binder's shop closed in 1943.

Lloyd and Grace Jacquet's shop, Funnies Inc., was a comparatively better environment for artists in the field (Robbins, *Comics* 50). Artists were allowed to sign work and were encouraged to complete strips individually. The Jacquet shop also operated as an agent for freelancers seeking work within the comic book industry. At Funnies Inc., women filled many roles. Grace Jacquet and Edith Ross served as editors, while Nina Albright, Dolores Carroll, Lucy Feller, Tarpe Mills, Claire Moe, and Ramona Patenaude inked and pencilled comics. Patenaude and Albright were particularly prolific throughout the 1940s. Patenaude pencilled and inked numerous adventure features, including *Blue Beetle*, for publishers such as MLJ, Fox Features Syndicate, Holyoke Publishing Company, and Novelty Publications. The work of Albright, who also pencilled and inked adventure features, appeared in comic books published by Ace Magazines, Novelty and Worth. Mills, known for her adventure comic strip series *Miss Fury*, left the field by 1941 and garnered success in the newspaper syndicate strips.

Fiction House stands out more than any other in the number of women employed in the comic book industry (50-52). It epitomizes the impact that the war had on the industry via the exodus of male and influx of female employees. The early Fiction House comics were supplied by the Eisner-Iger shop. Women writing for Eisner-Iger not only wrote stories for the popular Fiction House titles, but also for Gilberton Publishing and Quality Comics Group. Jean Alipe, Audrey Blum Bossert (sometimes Tony or Toni Blum), Eleanor Brody, Georgianna Campbell, Evelyn Goodman, Jean M. Press, and Ruth Roche wrote many of the heroine titles, such as “Lady Luck,” “Sheena,” and “Senorita Rio” (Robbins, *Comics* 52). Ruth Roche, sometimes writing as “Rod Roche,” is notable for her talent as a scripter and editor and for her influence on the Fiction House style, which was known for its pin-up girl quality. After working as an assistant editor and co-editor, Roche eventually became business partners with Iger and remained with the company until it ceased operations in 1961 (52).

Women artists working for the Eisner-Iger and Iger-Roche shop included Nina Albright, Ruth Atkinson, Ann Brewster, Lillian Chestney Zuckerberg, Frances Dietrick Hopper, Jean Levander, Lilly Renee Wilhelms Peters, Marcia Snyder, Serene Summerfield, and Priscilla Ward (52-56). Most pencilled or inked, or both, on adventure strips that often featured a female protagonist, for example “Jane Martin,” “Glory Forbes,” “Camilla,” “Mysta of the Moon,” and “Gale Allen and her All Girl Squadron” (55-56). Of these women, Atkinson, Brewster, Hopper, and Peters remained in the industry for a number of years. Brewster, who had worked for Chesler and Binder, inked and pencilled across genres from romance to crime and for a range of publishers during the 1940s and 1950s. Frances “France” Hopper worked solely for Fiction House until

1948, when she presumably left the field. Hopper pencilled and inked for war, jungle girl and science fiction features during her career. Lilly Peters also worked for Fiction House throughout the 1940s. She, too, was prolific, working on many of Fiction House's popular features, such as "Jane Martin," "Werewolf Hunter," "The Lost World," and "Senorita Rio." After 1951, no other work is credited to Atkinson or Harris (58).

Other women worked in the comic book industry outside of the comic shops throughout the 1940s. Interestingly, the two largest mainstream comic book publishers today, DC Comics, Inc. and Marvel Comics, had the worst record of female employment in comparison with their contemporaries during the 1940s and early 1950s (Robbins, *Comics* 59). Elizabeth Burnley Bentley is the only known female artist to have worked at National Periodicals (DC) during the entire decade of the 1940s. She assisted her two brothers, without credit, lettering and pencilling backgrounds for *Batman* and *Superman* from 1939-1943. Bentley's time with National Periodicals was brief by comparison with her brothers, Jack and Ray Burnley, who went on to have long careers with the company.

Women writers fared better than artists at National (60-62). Lynne Evans and Ann Blackman, for example, scripted a few features during the mid-1940s. More notable were the women who wrote for National Periodical's best known heroine, *Wonder Woman*. William Moulton Marston, creator of the Wonder Woman character, hired female assistants for most of the decade. Alice Marble acted as associate editor to the feature from 1941 to 1945. She additionally scripted a series titled "Wonder Women in History," which was an educational feature about great women in history, aimed at young girls. Joye Hummel Murchison, chief assistant to Marston, wrote *Wonder Woman* scripts from 1944 to 1947. Another woman, Dorothy Woolfolk, is said to have also scripted for

*Wonder Woman* during the 1940s; however, work credited to her has yet to be found (62).

Timely (Marvel Comics), like National, hired few women (Robbins, *Comics* 62). It is notable that once Timely stopped buying material from the Jacquet shop – one of the shops that did hire women – no other female-drawn characters appeared in their pages until the 1960s. Most of the women who worked for Timely lasted until the man-power shortage ended after the war. In 1942, Vivian Lipman Berg wrote for the company and was the last woman to script at Timely for many years. Dorothy “Dotty” Keller worked as an artist from 1942-1943 on Timely’s funny animal features. Violet “Valerie” Barclay was the exception. From 1942 to 1949, Barclay worked as an inker. During the early to mid-1950s, she pencilled and inked for Timely’s romance comics and freelanced for Ace Magazines and American Comics Group (62).

At other companies, women wrote and drew a variety of comics throughout the decade (59). Though largely considered a male-domain, women worked on adventure features, both costumed and “realistic,” for Quality Comics Group and Harvey Comics. Gwen Hanson, Helen Doig Schmid, and Mary Wallace all scripted for Quality titles (59). Hanson, who was also an editor, scripted such popular titles as *Doll Man* and *Plastic Man*. Schmid worked on similar features while Wallace is known for having scripted “Torchy.” During the early 1940s, Josephine Elgin drew the Quality adventure feature, “Kid Eternity.” At Harvey Comics, Jill Elgin and Barbara Hall illustrated such female lead adventure features as “Girl Commando” and “Blond Bombers” (62). In addition to these two titles, Elgin also drew “Black Cat,” another female lead adventure feature.



A number of women worked throughout the 1940s and 1950s at MLJ on their successful line of “Archie” inspired comic books (59). Janice Valleau, who also pencilled and inked high volumes of short funny features for Quality, worked on “Ginger,” “Archie,” and “Gloomy Gus.” Between 1942 and 1945, other women such as Mary D. Goss, Betty Hershey, Virginia Hubbell, and Vivian Lipman Berg worked on teen features. From the mid-1940s to the early 1960s, Cassie Bill and Hazel Martin worked as inker-assistants for the popular teen title, *Katy Keene* (Robbins, *Comics* 60).

Numerous small publishing companies that proliferated during the late 1930s and 1940s also hired women, albeit normally only one or two (63). Parents Magazine Institute, Novelty Publications, Lev Gleason Publications, and Holyoke Publishing Company employed women as editors, writers and artists. Though in the minority, women were also publishers, usually at small companies. Rae “Ray” Herman wrote for comic strip syndication, before becoming editor and publisher of the Toytown/Orbit line of children’s comics (66). Gail Herman published the Rural Home line of comics during the mid-1940s, before leaving for the motion picture industry. Helen Meyer, who wrote for Western during the late 1930s, worked her way from editor at Dell Publishing Company to president of the Dell line. Dell, like Toytown/Orbit, was known as a publisher of children’s reading material.

With the approach of the 1950s came a reduction in the number of women working in the field (66). It is estimated that by 1950 the number of women employed on a yearly basis as writers or artists had dropped to less than a third of the war-time peak. Women across industries were encouraged to vacate their jobs for the benefit of returning men after World War II. For those women who remained, gendered territorial lines were

drawn around certain topics or genres. For example, the action/adventure features and titles that women wrote and inked throughout the 1940s were (re)claimed by returning men. The opportunities for women's involvement in this type of comic book slowly disappeared (Robbins, *Century* 83). Not surprisingly, women found other opportunities during the 1950s, working on the highly popular teen and romance comic books (121).

As was noted earlier, the comic book industry depended on the ability to quickly respond to changing consumer tastes. The most popular genres from the beginning- to mid-1950s were romance, teen, war, crime and horror (Benton, *Comic Book* 47-50). Though the overall numbers of women working in the field continued to shrink, women continued to write and draw teen, romance, and humor features (Robbins, *Comics* 67). LaVerne Harding drew the comic book adventures of Woody Woodpecker and his two nephews for Western Publishing during the 1950s. She later moved on to do animation on such projects as the Pink Panther series during the 1970s. Terry Cloik (latter Terry Szenics) also worked on humor titles. Cloik inked the teen humor series *Patches* for Rae Herman's Orbit Comics. During the early 1950s, Janice Valteau and Violet Barclay worked on teen humor and romance features for various companies. Hazel Martin and Cassie Bill worked throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s on the long-running teen humor comic book, *Katy Keene* (75). When the series ended, both artists retired from the field.

As conservatism increased in the 1950s, a time when considerable attention was paid to sex-role stereotyping of waged and domestic labor, even fewer women entered the field (Robbins, *Comics* 66). In many instances, women who left the industry found opportunities in fields such as children's book illustration, a move which sometimes

served as a de facto ghetto for their artistic talents. If a Golden Age for women working in the industry ever existed, it had certainly ended by 1954.

## CHAPTER 4

### WOMEN AND THE COMIC BOOK INDUSTRY – POST-CODE

#### **Sketching the Industry from Virtual Collapse to Reformation**

The years immediately following the institution of the Code were turbulent for the comic book industry. By 1956, many companies chose to fold or were forced out of business in the face of Code restrictions, along with a general softness in the market (Benton, *Comic Book* 55). EC Comics and Lev Gleason Publications, whose comics could arguably be cited as impetuses for the Comics Code, were particularly wounded. EC ceased production of its comic book lines and became a one-publication company with *Mad* magazine, while Lev Gleason's company closed all operations. Quality Comics, a leading publisher throughout the 1940s, went out of business after they sold their romance and war titles to DC Comics. Other companies that joined the ranks of the dead and dying included Ace Magazines, Avon Publications, Premier Magazines, Superior Comics, and Premier Publishing. At the end of the 1950s, only nine out of some thirty publishers survived: American Comics Group, Archie Comics Publishing, Charlton Comics, Dell Publishing Company, DC Comics, Gilberton Publications, Harvey Comics, Marvel Comics, and Prize Publications (8-9, 55).

During the late 1950s, surviving publishers continued producing a variety of comics, albeit on a much smaller scale (Rogers 43-45). DC and Charlton represented the broadest range, churning out horror/mystery, romance, science fiction, superhero,

western, and war comic books. The largest publisher of the late 1950s, Dell, focused on licensed children's comic books, most notably ones featuring Disney characters. Harvey primarily relied on the production of children's comics, with titles featuring such Paramount characters as Casper the Friendly Ghost. Gilberton only published *Classics Illustrated*, and Archie was the main source of teen comics. Marvel scaled down production to science fiction and mystery comic books. The smaller publishers, American Comics Group and Prize, produced limited numbers of romance and mystery comic books.

Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, overall industry sales declined and the numbers of comic book publishers remained low (Rogers 43-45). Nevertheless, by 1963 the comic book industry stabilized into a configuration that would hold until the early 1980s: Archie and Harvey would become the main source of juvenile publishing, Marvel and DC would dominate the superhero market, and the other publishers would exist in the margins of the industry (43).

During this sluggish time, shifts in genre popularity continued. Superheroes, again, reached heights of popularity during a period commonly referred to as the Silver Age of the Comic Book (46). DC, because of the size, range, and strength of its distribution, was ideally positioned for this revival (46-48). Julius Schwartz, an editor at DC, revamped Golden Age superheroes and drew on the popularity of science fiction in film, television, and paperback books. Gradually, superheroes became DC's most important segment. With the creation of the *Justice League of America*, DC brought the concepts of continuity and coherence to comic books. For the first time it was

established for DC readers that DC heroes lived in the same fictional world. DC's ideas were well received by readers (46-48).

Following DC's success, Marvel publisher Martin Goodman directed Stan Lee, editor-in-chief, to develop a similar product. Marvel's *Fantastic Four* debuted in November of 1961 (Rogers 47-48). For the remainder of the decade, DC and Marvel created new titles and characters and, more importantly, made fundamental changes to the genre. In the context of comic books, Marvel heroes became known for their complexities and imperfections. To meet the growing demand for superhero comic books and to stay competitive, Marvel made changes in production that allowed for higher yields and greater artistic expressions. Throughout the 1960s, Marvel and DC established an older audience that would become increasingly important to the industry (48).

Both companies benefited from the superhero revival that peaked in the mid- to late-1960s. During this time, Marvel and DC established their superiority in the superhero realm, and thus in the industry as well. Companies that relied heavily on other genres, however, did not do so well. Romance, war and funny animal comic books all lost popularity in the early to mid-1960s. In 1962, monthly sales of Dell's flagship title *Walt Disney Comics and Stories*, had dropped to 500,000 from nearly 2 million in 1960 (54). Comic book publishers that focused primarily on non-superhero comics experienced declining sales from the early 1960s to the late 1970s.

By the end of the decade, only Marvel, DC, and Charlton were producing superhero comic books (48). Unfortunately for the three companies, readership tastes again changed and superheroes lost popularity. The Silver Age, a time when superheroes

saved the industry, approached its end. By the end of the 1960s, the overall industry was in decline. American Comics Group and Prize folded, with Gilberton and Dell soon to follow. And Marvel and DC, the industry's two largest publishers, were not exempt from low sales and declining numbers of readers. Further exacerbating the slump in the marketplace was a price hike from twelve to fifteen cents in 1969.

The 1970s were not the best years for the industry in terms of overall sales and distribution (Rogers 49). In the face of failing traditional genres, Marvel and DC explored new genres in an attempt to increase sales. Some success was met with the introduction of sword and sorcery, martial arts, mystery and sci-fi, and monster titles. Many of these comic books were designed to capitalize on trends in popular culture in order to increase the fan audience. As Marvel and DC attempted to expand in 1974, the overall number of publishers dwindled to six – the lowest since the comic book industry's beginnings (Lavin, "Comic Books" 34). Marvel and DC both felt the effects of this industry contraction as they continued to dominate, sharing 80 percent of the entire market (34).

The 1970s and early 1980s were, if nothing else, times of significant changes in the industry. By the beginning of 1970, many of the teams and individuals responsible for Marvel and DC superhero comics during the Golden and Silver Ages had left these companies (Evans 39). With the influx of new writers and artists came the challenge to make changes in comic book content. Both companies attempted to become more socially relevant, even at the risk of challenging the Comics Code. Marvel and DC actually began this move in the late 1960s by addressing issues of racism, world population growth and corporate greed (Rogers 58). Also, more African American and

female characters were introduced in attempts to better representation through visibility. It was the topic of drug abuse, however, that brought about a re-evaluation of the Comics Code. The 1954 Comics Code forbade the mention of drugs whatsoever, and, so, problems arose when the U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare approached Stan Lee to do an anti-drug story. In 1972, the Code was revised to keep current with social mores thus allowing anti-drug stories, and also allowing the depiction of ghouls, vampires and werewolves, as well as greater expression in the depiction of sex and crime (60). These attempts at social awareness reflected the industry's interest in capturing an older audience, a segment gaining greater influence and importance as the children's audience and the availability of comic book material for children declined (60). By the mid-1970s, Marvel sparked a third cycle of superhero popularity with the new *X-Men* (Lavin, "Comic Books" 137). This would turn out to be the most popular Marvel comic book series to date, and it would mark another return of the genre.

### **Significant Events and Changes**

The superhero revival of the Silver Age is central to understanding the comic book industry's evolution for several reasons (Rogers 54-55). First, it established the emerging dominance of Marvel and DC in the comic book industry. Even though the industry slowly declined as a whole throughout the 1960s and 1970s and the popularity of superheroes waned, both companies continued to control the market. Second, the revival of the superhero genre brought with it changes in the organization of the comic book industry as a mass medium. The comic book industry's growing recognition of a potential fan base marked a shift in its production. Mark Rogers calls this a shift from "a Fordist model of a mass medium, which attempted to sell comics to the widest possible



audience, to a post-Fordist model, which concentrated on efficiently delivering products to the consistent niche markets represented by core audiences of fans and adolescent boys” (Rogers 56). During the Silver Age, Marvel and DC not only kept their core audience of (male) adolescents, but also attracted an older (male) audience. This latter segment represented the beginning of an influential comic fan community. Indeed, it was this burgeoning fan community that supplied numerous talent to the future industry, including Jim Shooter, Marv Wolfman, and Roy Thomas, all of whom worked for Marvel.

Another event that would affect the future comic book industry was the birth of underground comics, or comix (61). Comix are best understood as a product of a counterculture that stood in opposition to dominant institutions and ideologies of the 1960s. Early underground comix took form as self-published, small-scale endeavors intended for small distribution, and individual strips found in such notable underground newspapers as the *Berkeley Barb*, *LA Free Press*, and *East Village Other*. As a medium produced outside of the commercial industry, they were called “comix” both in contradistinction to their mainstream counterpart and to denote their often “x-rated” content which featured explicit sex, violence, and drug use.

Drawing from Amy Nyberg’s *Seal of Approval*, Mark Rogers encapsulates the importance of the underground comix to the mainstream comic book industry (61-62). First, comix went for an entirely different audience than the mainstream publishers like Marvel and DC. They demonstrated the existence of and commercial potential of an adult market. Second, distribution and sales of comix were conducted on an entirely different basis than their mainstream counterparts. Instead of newsstand distribution,

retail networks consisting of alternative record shops, bookshops, and headshops – hippie shops that sold clothing, pipes, and drug paraphernalia -- were utilized. Publishers including Last Gasp, Kitchen Sink, and Rip-Off produced entire lines of comix at the national level, while at the grass-roots level, self-publishing became increasingly widespread. Much of this distribution system would be an important precursor to changes in the way mainstream comics were distributed in the 1980s. Third, some underground artists went on to gain celebrity within what would become the new adult mainstream comics of the 1980s. In essence, comix served as a model to the mainstream comic book industry, demonstrating that comics could be sold to an established audience through outlets other than newsstands and grocery stores (Rogers 62).

It would take nearly a decade before the direct sales market replaced the older system of newsstand distribution. In the mainstream industry, the change was inevitable as the older system became increasingly problematic for comic book publishers, carriers and consumers (63). The corner shops and local marts that had been major markets for comic books slowly began to disappear from American cities only to be replaced by larger supermarkets and stores that did not carry comics. Comic books, thus, became less accessible to the general public. News agents gave increasingly less space to the small profit margin items, preferring to carry higher priced magazines. Additionally, as a returnable item, comics sales were difficult to predict. Comic books were often overprinted anywhere from 50 to 400 percent (63). This mode of distribution was also problematic for the growing number of comic book shops (often the very stores that sold comix) that serviced fan communities. Distribution practices prevented the shops from

specifying titles and quantities and kept the fans from knowing when new comics would appear.

From 1974-1979, the direct sales market, which would explode in the 1980s, slowly emerged (Rogers 64-65). It began with Phil Seuling, an avid comics fan and comic convention organizer. Seuling's idea was to buy comics directly from companies and re-sell them to comic book shops. After striking a deal with DC, Seuling formed a distribution company known as Seagate. Through this system, distributors could specify comic book titles and quantities, thus allowing for quicker response times to fans' needs, while receiving a higher discount than newsstand agents. Under this system, non-refundable surplus was placed into back stock.

During the mid- to late-1970s, as Seuling's idea gained in popularity, smaller distributors proliferated, often acting as sub-distributors to larger companies like Seagate (65). They bought directly from publishers or larger distributors and serviced the comic book stores in their regions. This allowed for greater efficiency in comics production. It also allowed fans to get what they wanted on a more regular schedule than before. Though the direct sales market accounted for as little as 10 percent of the industry's gross in 1979, it nevertheless demonstrated the potential for increased revenue with the new system.

In the early 1980s, competition between distributors increased (66). Between 1980 and 1984, many of the smaller distributors went out of business, often selling off their assets to the larger distributors seeking to expand their territories. The shift to larger national distributors included such companies as Glenwood in Colorado, Pacific in Los Angeles/San Diego, and Diamond in Baltimore. Seagate, unable to compete with these

larger distributors, declared bankruptcy in 1985. As changes occurred with distributors, sales in the direct sales market mushroomed. By the mid-1980s, both Marvel and DC began selling titles solely via this distribution mode (Rogers 66).

The interdependence between fans, comic shops and direct sales marketing continued to intensify during this period (67). The direct sales market partially enabled a proliferation of comic shops, which, between 1979 and 1986, increased from nine to 2000. Comic shops grew to meet the demands of an increasingly organized and vocal fan community. In 1981, Marvel's *Dazzler 1* sold exclusively via comic book specialty stores. It sold an impressive 400,000 copies, a number exceeding the average sales of most of Marvel's titles. Following this success, new independent companies, including Eclipse (1978), Pacific (1982), and First (1983), surfaced and sold exclusively through direct sales. Successful independent comics, most notably Dave Sim's *Cerebus* and Wendy Pini's *Elfquest*, found their way into comic shops via direct sales.

During the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, these changes in the industry also affected changes in the relationships between the industry and creators and between the industry and fans (Sabin, *Adult* 67). In the past, creators in the comic book industry worked relatively anonymously and for per page fees, while the publishers retained royalties and copyright over original material. However, in the early 1980s, independents began to offer major incentives to attract talent and to remain competitive in the industry. Pacific was the first to initiate this change, offering both royalties and some copyright control. As independents gained shelf space in stores and hired creative workers, Marvel and DC soon followed suit by offering royalties and incentives. Over time, creators became more important to sales than the actual comic book contents. Creators gained

celebrity status, unachievable in the earlier days. Increasingly, the mainstream comic book industry featured top creators to devoted followers. With creators' celebrity came the bargaining power over content. Throughout the mid-1980s, comic books increasingly dealt with sophisticated subject matter and utilized more ambitious artistic techniques.

The other changed relationship was between fans and the industry, with the importance of fans escalated (Sabin, *Adult* 67). During the early to mid-1980s, fandom's drive for collecting comics shifted from mere hobby to the business of investment. The older and more serious collectors, or speculators, considered comics to be an investment. "Double purchasing," the practice where one comic book is bought to read and another is bought to save, became common practice. To better meet the needs of this new fan capitalism, comic book price guides were produced with the latest price calculations according to rarity, and businesses specializing in comic book restoration appeared (67).

By some accounts, direct sales initiated a boom in the comic book industry unprecedented since the early 1950s (68). More accurately, direct sales helped reshape and redirect an industry that had been in decline since the late 1950s. It can be said that as more publishers used the direct sales market, a wider variety in comic books appeared by the mid-1980s. Additionally, all aspects of the retail market expanded – the number of shops increased and comic book conventions grew larger and more sophisticated. By the mid-1980s, the direct sales market accounted for over half of all industry sales, and fandom became the driving-force behind the industry (68).

### **Women in the Mainstream**

From the post-Code years until the late 1970s – years that brought major changes to the industry – the number of women working in the mainstream comic book industry

was notoriously low (Robbins, *Comics* 103-106). Few women worked as artists at Marvel or DC during this period. Ramona Fradon drew for DC from the 1950s until 1980, when she left to work on Dale Messick's syndicated strip *Brenda Starr*. While at DC, she co-created *Metamorpho* and worked on the popular adventures of Aquaman and the Teen Titans. Elizabeth Safian Berube, whose experience during the early 1960s included work as an assistant editor and colorist for Archie Comics, joined DC in 1968 as a colorist and occasional artist for the company's romance line. During this period, small numbers of women also worked as editors and/or writers for DC. Dorothy Woolfolk functioned as both on DC's vanishing romance line. Mary Skrenes produced romance and humor stories. When DC ended its romance line in 1974, Berube and Woolfolk both departed from the comic book industry (104).

Marvel's record on female employment after the Code was no better than DC's. Marie Severin worked as a colorist for both EC and Atlas (Marvel) in the late 1950s, but was let go when the companies pared their respective staffs (105). In the late 1960s, she returned to Marvel, where her first comic book assignment was illustrating the "Dr. Strange" series in *Strange Tales*. Her later work included notable features such as *Sub-Mariner*, *The Cat*, and *King Kull*. Only one other woman worked for Marvel during this time, Florence Steinberg (105). In 1963, she began work at Marvel as Stan Lee's secretary. Once she realized the limits of her opportunities, Steinberg left the company. In 1976, Steinberg produced and co-edited a one-shot underground comic book, *Big Apple Comix*.

During the 1970s, it became obvious that mainstream comics were suffering from a shortage of female readers *and* employees. Marvel, under the direction of Stan Lee,

attempted in the early 1970s to re-establish a line of “women’s comics.” In an interview with Trina Robbins, Roy Thomas, a writer at Marvel at the time, recalled:

...it seemed to me that if we were going to do women’s books, we should get women to write and draw them. We just didn’t have enough women in the business. There was some worry on our parts that boys might respond negatively to stories written by a woman and we even discussed having them just use their initials instead of full first names, but in the end we realized that was not necessary, so we went ahead and printed their full names. (Robbins, *Comics* 106)

In November and December of 1972, *Night Nurse*, *Shanna the She-Devil*, and *The Cat*, premiered, featuring writing by Jean Thomas, Carol Seuling, and Linda Fite, and artwork by Marie Severin and Paty Cockrum. By mid-1973, all three titles were cancelled.

Shortly after, Fite and Seuling left the industry. Thomas continued writing, but for the ever-dwindling numbers of children’s series (106).

From the mid- to late-1980s, the number of women working in the mainstream industry increased slowly (108-110). Some women, like Irene Vartanoff, contended that women’s overall prospects in the industry were “relatively bleak” (106). Most of the positions opened to women were in production, such as lettering and coloring. These were less esteemed and lower paying jobs than pencilling and inking. One industry worker has referred to coloring, in particular, as “an economic ghetto full of female artists” (108). The exceptions to standard hiring practices were those who did work in the creative positions of writing and drawing. The “Big Two,” Marvel and DC, made strides during this period to hire women, especially as writers and editors (Robbins, *Comics* 108-109). Dickie McKenzie, Mimi Gold, Sharman DiVono, and Carol Lay occasionally scripted at Marvel. Mary Wilshire pencilled a Red Sonja series for Marvel. In the early 1980s, several female editors became writers, and some moved to a new line

of Marvel comics published under the Epic imprint, a line of experimental, creator-owned titles. A former editor for Warren and Marvel, Louise Jones Simonson scripted on *Marvel Team-Up* and *Power Pack*, which was drawn by June Brigman. Ann Nocenti, whose editorial work included *Star Wars* and Marvel's best-selling *X-Men*, wrote for various comic book mini-series and *Dr. Strange*. Mary Jo Duffy, after writing *Star Wars*, which was pencilled by Cynthia Martin, and resurrecting *Power Man-Iron Fist*, moved on to become an editor for the less genre-bound Epic line. Another woman who joined the Epic fold was former DC editor Laurie Sutton. Christy Marx, whose earlier work included scripting for Marvel's sword and sorcery line, wrote the Epic series *Sisterhood of Steel*. Epic also featured artwork by successful artists Trina Robbins, Wendy Pini, and Lela Dowling (109).

DC comics also hired greater numbers of women as writers and editors, while under the direction of Jenette Kahn, who was president from 1981 to 2002, (110-112).<sup>4</sup> Karen Berger and Janice Race worked as editors, as did Laurie Sutton before she moved to Marvel's Epic line. Scripters included Dann Thomas (nee Dannette Couto) who also co-scripted issues of *Arak*, *Son of Thunder* and *Jonni Thunder*. Interestingly, she was the first woman to receive credit for scripting *Wonder Woman*. Tamsyn O'Flynn and Mindy Newell also wrote for DC. O'Flynn wrote the "Lois Lane" series until it was cancelled. Newell's work included writing for the *Tales of the Legion of Super-Heroes*. Carol Lay inked briefly on a funny-animal superhero series and left the industry after it was cancelled. Cartoonists at DC have included Jan Duursema, Cara Sherman-Tereno, and Judith Hunt. Duursema drew the series *Warlord* and co-created the sword-and-sorcery

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<sup>4</sup> "Jenette Kahn Retires: DC Comics Publisher for 26 Years." ComicSource Newsletter. Issue 21. 5 Feb. 2002. 27 Nov. 2006 <<http://www.thecomicsource.com/news/news21.html>>.



title *Arion, Lord of Atlantis*. She also became the first female artist to draw Wonder Woman in her own book. Sherman-Tereno took over the artwork for *Arion* when Duursema left. Hunt's work appeared in the series *Robo-Tech Defenders* (Robbins, *Comics* 111).

During this period, many women created uncredited work. Dann Thomas's collaborations on *Conan* with Roy Thomas, before they were married, went uncredited. Mary Skrenes, who sometimes wrote under a male pseudonym, was known to credit her work to associate Steve Skeates just to get her stories placed. Carla Conway, a playwright, was known to co-plot with, co-write with, and even write material for her husband Gerry – all without credit. When Mike Grell left his work on *Warlord*, Sharon Grell, his wife, filled in for two years working under his name. She reasoned DC would not hire an unknown to work on such a popular series (113).

### **Women Underground**

While the mainstream comic book industry underwent changes in the 1960s and 1970s, underground comix emerged. Many women who went on to join mainstream publishers and independent publishers in the 1980s started underground (79). As early as 1966, the artwork of Trina Robbins appeared in the *East Village Other's* comix tabloid, *Gothic Blimp Works*. At the same time on the West Coast, Kay Rudin's work was published in *Yellow Dog*. As more women approached the underground movement it soon became clear that, like the mainstream industry, the underground was, in the words of comic artist Lee Marrs, "...like a boy's club...a closed club..." (79). Many women learned that if they could not be included in the underground scene, they would have to produce their own comic books. Robbins, along with the staff of California's first

feminist newspaper, *It Ain't Me, Babe*, published the first all woman comic book, also named *It Ain't Me, Babe* (Robbins, *Comics* 79). Willy Mendes, who, like Robbins, was a regular contributor to *Gothic Blimp Works*, produced *Illuminations* and *All Girl Thrills*, a collaboration with Robbins. Lee Marrs created *Pudge, Girl Blimp*, but it did not see publication until 1974.

*It Ain't Me, Babe* sold well enough that by 1972 publisher Last Gasp decided to release another all-woman title (81-82). It was during this time that Robbins and others formed a collective of women artists known as the Wimmen's Comix Collective. Last Gasp's second release, *Wimmin's Comix*, was created by the Collective and would become a showcase for women cartoonists of San Francisco. At the same time in Southern California, Joyce Farmer and Lynn Chevely formed the publishing company Nannygoat Productions. Their more notorious comic books, *Tits 'n' Clits* and *Wet Satin*, concentrated on female sexuality. Lesbian cartoonists Roberta Gregory and Mary Wings brought another aspect of female sexuality to *Dynamite Damsels*, *Come Out Comics*, and *Dyke Shorts*. In 1992, *Wimmin's Comix*, formerly known as *Wimmen's Comix* and commonly referred to as the "feminist warhorse" of comic books, printed its last issue after a twenty-year run (82).

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the work of many women who had started in the underground appeared in emerging independent comics (114-115). WaRP Graphics, formed by wife and husband team Wendy and Richard Pini, was the home of the highly acclaimed and commercially successful *Elfquest*. Wendy Pini is credited with co-writing and drawing the comic book. Another popular WaRP title was *Distant Soil*, which was drawn by Colleen Doran. Until Pacific closed operations in 1984, April

Campbell worked as a writer/editor on the company's line of detective-thriller, fantasy, horror, and science fiction titles. Ruth Raymond and Lela Dowling also worked at Pacific as artists. Eclipse Comics, which was run by editor-in-chief Catherine Yronwode from 1983 until it went bankrupt in 1994, featured the work of many women. Included were artists Trina Robbins and Sue Cavey; writer-artists Lee Marrs and Shary Flenniken; and writers Eline Lee, Wendi Lee, Sandy Saidak, Christy Marx, and April Campbell. June Brigman and Cynthia Martin were featured by Americomics before both moved to Marvel. Judith Hunt's *Evangeline* was published briefly by Comico.

## CHAPTER 5

### WOMEN AND THE CONTEMPORARY INDUSTRY

#### **Sketching the Industry to 2000**

Contemporary comic books in the United States are produced and distributed through a complex system that connects publishers, distributors, and comic book specialty shops (Rogers 109-112). Direct sales marketing has been responsible for much of the increased efficiency and interdependency of the comic book industry and has allowed for an increase in artistic and genre variety by allowing smaller independent and self-publishers to enter the field. By the end of the 1980s, direct sales represented more than 80 percent of sales. Today only a small portion of comic books are distributed outside of this system. The perpetually struggling children's market, best represented by Archie and Harvey, is one of the only sectors of the comic book industry to derive sales from newsstands (69).

Despite the efficiencies brought by the new system of distribution, the comic book industry of the last fifteen years is best characterized as having experienced numerous expansions and contractions (89-90). Throughout these phases, the industry, in general, has remained dominated by a few publishers selling similar products. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, Marvel and DC maintained control over the dominant superhero market. During the late 1980s, many of the smaller independents – including

Capital, Eclipse, Pacific, First, and Comico – that attempted to compete with Marvel and DC in direct sales eventually folded.

Contractions in the comic book industry have translated into cash flow interruptions (Rogers 89-91). During these times, smaller operations with less capital suffered the most. This has been the case for publishers, distributors, and comic book specialty stores. For example, in 1984 Marvel sold toy tie-in products and expensive reprint books to the direct sales market (89). Comic book specialty stores buying these products did so at the cost of independents publishers by diverting money from the purchase of independent comic books to the purchase of high cost Marvel products. Another example that had devastating ramifications for smaller companies was the “black and white glut” of 1984 (91). Based on the runaway success of Mirage Studios *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, speculators over-hyped and dealers over-ordered black and white self-published and independent comic books. Independents with less surplus capital, such as First and Comico, were unable to absorb the cost of the saturated market and, thus, folded (91).

Fierce distribution competition from the increasingly popular mode of direct sales arose during the 1980s, a period referred to as “The Comic Book Store Wars” (67-68). Major distributors, mainly Capital, Glenwood, Diamond, Bud Plant, and Second Genesis, competed for regional territory, over who could deliver comic books earliest, and on discounts, service, and product range. To remain viable, main distributors initiated business practices that interrupted industry cash flow, such as air freighting comic books to stores, buying warehouse space, and over-ordering. When financial problems arose, many companies went into bankruptcy. Surviving competitors, who sought to expand,

bought the assets of the folded distributors. As the dust eventually settled, two companies, Diamond and Capital, emerged as the main distributors with national reach (Rogers 68).

By the early 1990s, Diamond and Capital controlled between 80-85 percent of the total distribution market, while smaller companies serving limited regional areas controlled the rest (105-106). During this period, Diamond controlled an estimated 40-50 percent of the market and Capital controlled 30-35 percent. The next largest distributors, Heroes World of New Jersey and Friendly Franks, shared the remainder of the market. Diamond and Capital competed nationally for clientele and developed large infrastructures by acquiring smaller distributors as they folded. In order to maximize discounts, comic book specialty stores tended to deal with only one distributor, which factored into the competitive relationship between Diamond and Capital. With the internal structure and client base covered, both were able to meet the demands made by specialty shops for rapid delivery during the early to mid-1990s (106).

In December of 1994, Marvel agitated the Diamond and Capital dyad of distribution. Marvel bought the distributor Heroes World and forced comic book shops to buy Marvel comics from their newly acquired subsidiary (Lavin, "Marvel" 49). The ramifications in the industry were considerable. More than a third of all other distributors were forced out of business (Rogers 108). To safeguard themselves, DC, Image and Dark Horse, along with other smaller companies, elected to sign exclusive deals with Diamond. This climate of exclusivity made it increasingly difficult for smaller distributors to compete. As had happened in the 1980s, many companies folded or sold their assets to Diamond or the then suffering Capital. By the end of 1995, Capital had

lost 80 percent of its business. In the later part of 1996, Capital folded and sold its assets to Diamond. Troubles also plagued Heroes World during this time to the extent that Marvel ceased its operations. At the end of the 1990s, Diamond was the largest and the exclusive distributor of DC Comics, Dark Horse Comics, Image Comics and Marvel Comics, as well as other smaller publishers, to the comic book specialty market (Lavin, “Marvel” 49).

Over the last fifteen years, cycles of expansion and contraction have also affected the main clients of distributors – comic book shops (Rogers 106-108). Throughout the early to mid-1980s, the number of stores increased steadily as the overall industry expanded. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the number of stores rose rapidly from 4,000 to 10,000 as speculators flooded the industry. Because comic book stores required little capital to open, a mass of business opportunists opened comic shops to cash in on the industry’s good fortune. In 1993 gross sales peaked at some \$900 million (Rogers 108).

In the wake of a market collapse in 1994, the number of stores fell to 6,000 (108). During the contraction, stores that relied heavily on collectibles and limited lines of independents were hardest hit. Record, book, and specialty shops that only bought limited lines of independents simply stopped carrying them. The exclusivity of distributors had particular ramifications for comic book shops during these years. As distribution power consolidated into the hands of Heroes World and Diamond, fewer discounts and incentives were offered to shops. Thus, shops incurred greater operation costs. By 1996, the number of stores were estimated to be as low as 4,000 as the industry continued to experience leaner times. The same year, sales plummeted to \$450 million.

Conservative numbers indicate that the number of comic book specialty shops has not changed significantly within the last few years (108).

By 1992, comic book publishing had settled in comparison to the mid-to-late 1980s and with other components of the industry (Rogers 90). For most of the early to the mid-1990s, six companies controlled 75-90 percent of the direct sales market. From 1992-1996, Dark Horse, DC, Image and Marvel ranked as the top four publishers in market shares with Valiant and Malibu (eventually absorbed by Marvel) vying for the fifth and sixth positions (90). In 1997, Marvel and DC controlled 52 percent of all sales, Image 14 percent, Dark Horse 4 percent, major independents (mainly Acclaim, Topps, Chaos, Awesome, Crusade, Caliber, and Viz) 14 percent and numerous smaller publishers 10-15 percent (Lavin, "Marvel" 34).

The comic book industry of the late 1990s was dominated by mainstream publishers like Marvel and DC, which focus mostly on color superhero comic books (Rogers 100). Some independent publishers still attempt to compete with the Big Two for mainstream market shares. Interestingly, DC and Marvel are increasingly less financially dependent on comic book sales. Both companies are owned by large media conglomerates – DC is a part of the Time Warner group and Marvel is with New World Entertainment – and are able to exploit character licenses through film, television series, and product tie-ins for high profit yields (90). As early as 1985, two-thirds of DC's revenues were derived from licensing. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, both publishers pushed to further exploit character licensing. A few illustrations of films based on DC and Marvel comic book characters include the commercially successful Superman and



Batman movies and *The Punisher*.<sup>5</sup> In television, animated cartoon series based on the Batman, Mask, Spider-man and X-Men appeared frequently during the mid- and late-1990s (Sabin, *Graphic Novels* 174).

Indeed, the high profit yield of character licensing partially explains why some publishers enter the industry (Rogers 103-104). Others are content with competing for the attention of the mainstream comic book reader or in filling other niches. For example, Image, a publishing collective comprised of six artists and their products, competes for market shares in the color superhero category. Others publishers produce a variety of materials. Dark Horse, for example, is known for publishing translated Japanese comics, licensed comics, such as *Aliens*, *Predator*, *Terminator*, and *Star Wars*, and numerous creator-owned titles under the Legend imprint (104).

During the mid- to late-1980s, it appeared that the comic book industry might expand its general readership as comics gained greater visibility in the larger culture. Indeed, as the horizons of the medium were broadened, new readers did emerge (111). Publishers added to their audience base an older sector of speculators whose interests were in the possible investment opportunities from comic book collecting. Speculators had greater buying power than the traditional fan base of adolescent males. As hype increased around the value and collectability of comic books, speculators bought multiple copies of “collectible” comics and a greater variety of comics. Evidence of the industry’s attention to this audience is found in the number of expensive comic book reprints and graphic novels produced, as well as the expansion of genre boundaries to accommodate adult interests (Sabin, *Adult* 96-104). Outside of the industry, mainstream bookshop chains, such as W. H. Smith and Dillions, made room for the new, mature comic products

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<sup>5</sup> Between 2000 and 2006, Marvel released three feature films based on the X-Men characters.

such as the graphic novel. By 1992, however, low sales from comic books forced a re-evaluation of their place in mainstream bookstores. The flood of speculators who rushed to the industry in the mid-1980s soon left as investment potentials dissipated and as it became clear that the industry would not break through into the mainstream. In the early 1990s, it was the speculators who brought gross sales to record numbers. By 1993 and 1994, the comic book industry experienced another decline and a majority of speculators bid farewell to comic books (Sabin, *Adult* 73). As a result, the industry returned its attention to the male comics fan. Unfortunately, during the industry's speculator courtship, much of the entry level audience was driven away (112).

By 1999, comic book sales were at their lowest in fifty years (Robbins, *Girls* 140). During the zenith of the Golden Age of Comic Books, 90 percent of the nation read from a variety of mixed-age and gender marketed titles and genres. By the end of the 1990s, that readership number was less than 1 percent (140). Part of the problem lies in the evolution of the industry post-1954. The system of direct sales, publishing, and dependency on fan communities made for a small and insular industry.<sup>6</sup> Another factor, however, contributed to this decline in readership. Cartoonist and writer Trina Robbins offers a poignant perspective on the state of the comic book industry at the end of the 1990s, and the importance of gender to it, in a *Ms.* article:

Revolutions don't happen until things get so bad there's nothing to lose. But now the comics industry is in big trouble. Comic book stores are closing, distribution is terrible, and there are only so many 12-year-old boys. Publishers are going to have to diversify to stay alive, and find things that

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<sup>6</sup> According to an article in the *Dallas Morning News*, June 28, 2003, comic book sales dropped consistently between 1994 and 2001. However, this trend abruptly changed when feature films based on Marvel (X-Men, Spiderman, Hulk) and DC (Superman, Catwoman) characters began being released in 2000. Comic books sales jumped 31 percent between 2001 and 2003. [The New York City Comic Book Museum](http://www.nyccomicbookmuseum.org/Dallas_6_28_03.htm). 26 Nov. 2006 <[http://www.nyccomicbookmuseum.org/Dallas\\_6\\_28\\_03.htm](http://www.nyccomicbookmuseum.org/Dallas_6_28_03.htm)>.

women and girls will read, and find new ways to sell them. And they will, but they'll have to get desperate first. (Ingall 47)

### **State of Women in the Industry from the 1980s to 2000**

Women's participation in the comic book industry has remained consistent in some respects. Few women have worked in the more lucrative mainstream for publishers like DC or Marvel; most women have worked primarily with smaller, independent publishers (Robbins, *Century* 154). The later part of the 1980s appeared to hold greater promise for women as the industry enjoyed increased visibility in the larger culture (Sabin, *Adult* 230-235). As a greater number of adult-oriented comic books moved into the mainstream, it was believed that new markets would become available for bookshops and news agents. In the hype of the comic book's growth and maturation, the "woman question" became fashionable in the comic book industry (230). Fandom, fanzines and panel discussions at conventions focused on the issue of women in and to the industry. Publishers promised changes, including increased variety aimed at female readership and policy changes relating to the employment of female creators. Promises were kept, but only superficially, as greater numbers of positive images of women appeared, mainly in independent publishing (231). Likewise, women creators appeared in greater numbers through independent and self-publishing. Some publishers even reported rising numbers of female readerships. Mainstream press covered much of this emergent visibility as "revolutionary" for the industry (233). All the attention, however, amounted to little more than hype. The numbers of women working in the industry and of female readerships changed only minimally (233).

By the 1990s, it became clear that the best space for women working in the comic book industry was with the more alternative publishers – progressive independents, small presses, and the avant-garde. Generally, women have been better represented by select independent and small press publishers such as WaRP Graphics, Eclipse Comics, and Renegade Press, of which the latter two are now defunct. During the late 1980s and 1990s, independent publishers have featured the work of women in action titles, as well as in other genres (Robbins, *Superheroes* 180-186). *Heartbreakers*, a comic book which featured two female leads, was written by Anina Bennett. Sarah Dyer's *Action Girl* started in 1994 as an outgrowth of her 1991 *Action Girl Newsletter*. Dyer's comic book is actually an anthology of work by various women writer-artists, including Elizabeth Watasin. More recently, women have been represented as writers and artists in self-publishing enterprises: Colleen Doran's *Distant Soil* (Aria Press), Tara Jenkins's *Galaxion* (Helikon Press), Teri Wood's *Wandering Star* (Pen and Ink Comics), and Rachel Hartman's *Amy Unbounded* (Pughouse Press) (Lavin, "Women" 99). The work of both Doran and Woods has been picked-up more recently by larger publishers, including Image and Sirius (99). Carol Bennett, a publisher of British female-centered comics, remarked "it is a sad comment on the state of things that for women to stand a chance of being published they still have to get together and do it themselves" (Sabin, *Adult* 234). In her comments, there is an echo of the position of women in the underground comix of the 1970s.

In the mid- to late-1980s, women writers and artists found room inside and outside the mainstream on projects that attempted to revive the young girls' market (Robbins, *Girls* 105-107). In 1985, Barb Rausch co-produced a contemporary version of

*Katy Keene* named *Vicki Valentine* for independent publisher Deni Loubert's Renegade Press. The following year, Trina Robbins convinced Marvel to publish her six-part teen series *Meet Misty*. Marvel also irregularly printed Barbara Slate's *Sweet XVI*. Another of Robbins's teen series, the eight-part *California Girls*, was published by Eclipse. That same year, 1986, DC published Slate's girl comic *Angel Love* – and it was DC's last attempt at the young girls' market. Robbins and Loubert attempted to produce contemporary versions of romance comics with *Renegade Romance* in 1987. Unfortunately, most of these efforts lasted no more than a year (107).

In the 1990s, more successful efforts were made, albeit outside the mainstream, by Lea Hernandez in her graphic novel *Cathedral Child* and Janet Hetherington's comic book *Eternal Romance* (136). From 1990-1994, Marvel produced one comic book aimed at girls, *Barbie*. Artist Mary Wilshire and writers Barbara Slate, Trina Robbins, and Lisa Trusiani are but a few of the women who lent their talents to the comic book (Robbins, *Century* 170).

In the world of mainstream action comic books, Mindy Newell took over the writing of *Wonder Woman* in 1988 (Robbins, *Superhero* 156). The following year, DC produced a special *Wonder Woman* annual, which featured the artwork of ten women cartoonists. After that issue, Jill Thompson assumed the drawing for the next two years (156). In 1993, Thompson drew the artwork for DC's *Black Orchid*, which was later drawn by Rebecca Guay (161). Artist Lee Marrs, editor Kim Yale and artist Sarah Byam worked on revisions of early DC superheroines, such as the magician Zantanna and the crime fighter Black Canary, during the early 1990s (166-167). The character Tank Girl

was co-created in England by Jamie Hewlett. In the United States, these stories were reprinted by Dark Horse Comics and later turned into a movie and a graphic novel.

As the proceeding chapters have shown, women have, since the beginning, been involved in the comic book industry. As with many other industries during World War II, the ranks of women working rose tremendously. After World War II, those numbers fell considerably. The 1950s and 1960s marked particularly low points in the ranks of women employed by the comic book industry because of sex-role norms as well as a sluggish, shrinking industry. This would change for both parties, albeit slowly, in the 1970s and 1980s. Many of the women involved in the underground comix scene went on to work in mainstream, alternative, and independent publishing. These women have proven their abilities as artists and writers, and publishers.

It is also clear that the comic book industry has experienced numerous changes in terms of successes and failures, growths and contractions. The comic book has gone from a mass produced item, diverse in terms of content and readership to a niche product, relatively homogenous in content and readership. The modes of production and distribution in place during the 1940s looked nothing like those at the end of the 1990s. The reception of comic books in society has been met with both enthusiasm and scorn. They join the ranks of other cultural forms to be publicly scrutinized and censored. The strongest survivors of the 1954 Comics Code went on to shape and mold the industry of today. The underground comix scene also affected today's comic book industry by providing a blueprint for infrastructure and networks, as well as proof that audience loyalty existed beyond adolescent boys.

What is not so evident from these histories is just what it was like for women working in the comic book industry. Their stories of working in a dynamic, changing industry during unique, historical moments marked by shifts and changes for women at the societal level are missing. This study attempts to fill these gaps by interviewing women who worked in the comic book industry from 1970 to 2000. This work will complement the histories through an exploration of the roles and status of women during that time period, as well as through an examination of their experiences.

## CHAPTER 6

### METHODOLOGY

This study has a two-fold goal. First, it asks: What was the role and status of women in the comic book industry from 1970 to 2000? Did women or the women's movement have an impact on the comic book industry from the 1970s to the end of the 1990s? Has being a woman affected how they were treated in the industry or how others perceived their work? By utilizing moderately scheduled, in-depth interviews with women working in the comic book industry during this period, this study also explores women's experiences and treatment while working in an insular, male-dominated field.

Documenting the specific contributions made by women in the comic book industry is a second goal of this project. It is a history largely unwritten. Without this information, it is difficult to ask questions regarding status. It is important to know not only which creative positions are paid more or are valued but also who has them. The same goes for positions of control over content or money, ones that usually carry more power.

There is other research value in documenting the details of women's roles and contributions. By taking stock of women's work in the field, one can more readily examine a body of work by an artist or analyze works created during a specific historical period. If a particular artist's style influences the work of other artists, having a catalog of the work makes the information more accessible for examination. One can more



readily compare and contrast how, for example, women in the comic book industry have represented gender and other aspects of identity. It provides a foundation upon which future research can be conducted.

Another reason why it is important to detail this work is the ephemeral nature of the medium. By and large, comic books are constructed of material that is highly acidic in composition, thus prone to rapid degradation. Unlike books, which are printed on a more stable form of paper for longevity, comic books are not constructed to weather the effects of environment and time. Furthermore, with increases in the amount of publishing online, these paper works are becoming increasingly obsolete.

This study will borrow from Potter and Wetherell's useful discussion of discourse analysis. Because their research focuses on social psychology and discourse analysis, I will turn to scholars from communications and sociology who utilize interviews and discourse analysis. The following methodological steps identified by Potter and Wetherell are of relevance to this study: sample selection, interviews, transcription, coding, and analysis.

### **Sample Selection**

Sample size is less emphasized in discourse analysis than in more traditional methods, such as surveys and content analysis. Stated simply, the emphasis is on quality rather than quantity. For this study, six women were interviewed. The sampling considerations "characteristic of quantitative studies are not usually applied to qualitative interviews" (Priest 107). According to Potter and Wetherell, decisions on sample size in discourse analysis tend to be guided by the research question, the labor-intensive nature of the approach (i.e., transcription, coding, bodies of documents), availability, and the

nature of the subject-matter (161-162). According to Priest, “sometimes, it’s necessary or important to only interview a few people,” if, for example, one is studying a small, individual media organization or the research goal is to understand the world from another’s vantage point (107).

### **Interviewing**

Interviewing is an established method of qualitative research. According to Seidman, it “is a basic mode of inquiry. Recounting narratives of experience has been a major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experience” (2). Borrowing a phrase from Bingham and Moore, Lindlof states that an interview is a “conversation with a purpose” (164). Elaborating on this notion, he remarks that “a qualitative interview creates an event in which one person (the interviewer) encourages another person to articulate interests or experiences freely” (Lindlof 163).

But an interview is not quite a conversation. More than conversation, “the distinctiveness of the interview as a performance is informed by its purposes, and to some degree by its structure” (Lindlof 164). The researcher or interviewer conceives the purpose. As for structure, it differs from conversation in that it “emphasizes turns of questions and answers, with the interviewer moving the discussion in a desired direction by asking most of the questions” (164). Noting the differences between interviews and oral histories, Reinharz states that “interviews focus typically on a particular experience or phenomenon, while oral histories deal more broadly with a person’s past” (130). As noted earlier, this study is based on interviews, not oral histories.

Seidman believes interviewing is the best avenue of inquiry to get to a “subjective understanding” (4). Echoing this belief, Lindlof states: “Interviews are especially well

suited to helping the researcher *understand a social actor's own perspective* [author's emphasis]" (167). In utilizing this method, the researcher "tries to gain a critical vantage point in the sense making in communicative performances and practices" (165). In this context, "sense making" does not imply some objectivist stance. To the contrary, "interview talk is rhetoric of socially situated speakers, not objective report of thoughts, feelings, or things out in the world" (165).

The terms "unstructured," "intensive," "in-depth," and "open-ended" sometimes are used interchangeably in regards to interviewing (Reinharz 281), and they refer to a qualitative data-gathering technique that emphasizes the researcher's flexibility to explore "interesting things" as they arise (Priest 107). More specifically, this approach gives the researcher the opportunity to "collect a great deal of information," "ask follow-up questions," "pursue topics," and adapt to new situations (Berger 59). Van Zoonen states that in feminist media studies and cultural studies, "in-depth interviewing is the most popular method" (136). Essential to in-depth interviewing "is an interest in understanding the experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman 3). According to Berger, this form of interview is like "a probe" in the sense that it seeks to reach deep enough into the interviewee to tap feelings, beliefs, and attitudes (59).

"The interview schedule," according to Lindlof, "is used when a project requires uniformity of question wording, order, use of probes, and the contexts in which interviews are conducted" (185). Many researchers turn to moderately-scheduled interviews, notes van Zoonen, "in which not only the topics to be discussed are decided on beforehand, but also the preferable sequence and the formulation of the initial, 'grand-

tour' questions that allow participants to tell their story in their own terms" (137).

Researchers not only ask individuals the same basic questions while receiving "open-ended responses in the participants' own language," but also encourage participants "to clarify ambiguous, opaque, or mistaken responses" (185).

The types of questions asked in this study focus on gender, change, and the comic book industry. Follow-up questions encouraged participants to expand upon their responses. All of the questions and the interview schedule are contained in the Appendix.

### **Transcription**

Transcription is an important and difficult task. Priest defines transcription as "word-for-word typescript recording from interviews, focus groups, or other verbal communications" (254). She continues, stating that it "is one way to create a qualitative data set that is conveniently available for systemic analysis" (254). Potter and Wetherell state: "A good transcript is essential for a form of analysis which involves repeated readings of serious sections of data, and the process of transcription itself can be helpful in forcing the transcriber to closely read a body of discourse" (165). Questions regarding the level of detail needed in a transcription, for example pauses, and the amount of time required to transcribe and analyze are answered by the information that is required from the transcript and the level of analysis.

### **Coding and Analysis**

Potter and Wetherell identify coding and analysis as two separate steps for clarity, but often in discourse analysis the two overlap (168). Cautioning that the process of analysis is difficult to abstract, Potter and Wetherell, continue "it is not a case of stating, first you do this and then you do that. The skills required are developed as one tries to

make sense of transcript and identify the organizational features of documents” (168). Discourse analysis, notes van Zoonen, is a “key constituent” in the examination of interview material (140). Analyzing interviews “consists of analyzing texts and language” (van Zoonen 140). Priest defines discourse analysis as a “method for looking at argumentation and dialogue in a systematic way” (242). Drawing parallels between works by Strauss and Corbin and van Dijk, van Zoonen notes that analysis “moves from the smallest units present in texts (words, concepts, propositions) to the examination of relations between these concepts and the overall meaning they can thought to be part of” (142). Discourse analysis also attends to the “style” of talk, the choice of words and their combinations which signal, as van Dijk notes, participant opinions which carry social and ideological implications (142). The importance here is that discourse analysis looks not only for what is expressed by language, but also what is achieved by language. Lindlof offers a similar view: “We make sense of an interview text by examining either the commonalities and differences in orientation to speech topics (themes) or what a sample of speech is trying to accomplish as a social act” (234). But, the “commonalities and differences” the researcher encounters requires a means of handling the data.

The constant comparative method, developed by Glaser and Strauss in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, will provide just such a means for this study. According to Priest, it is “reasoning from the specific to the general; the development of theory based on observation rather than through testing hypotheses” (244); it uses an inductive approach to analyzing data (Reinharz 18). Lindlof identifies two crucial features of the constant comparative method: “It specifies the means by which theory grounded in the relationships among data emerges through the

management of coding, and it shows explicitly how to code and conceptualize as field data keep flowing in” (223). Clarifying his use of coding, Lindlof states that it “is a process in which the researcher creatively scans and samples data-texts, looks for commonalities and differences, and begins to formulate categories of interest” (224). According to Priest, in the constant comparative method the researcher begins “by assigning the initial data...to a few tentative categories” (191). As new data are added, category fit is (re)evaluated. “The goal is to use consistent categories but to allow them to emerge from the data rather than imposing your preconceived ideas that may misrepresent what is really going on” (Priest 191).

The goal of coding, according to Potter and Wetherell, is to “not to find results but to squeeze an unwieldy body of discourse into manageable chunks” (167). Depending on the type of project, the categories used in coding can be straightforward or may come from a cyclical process moving between analysis and coding (167). In discourse analysis, the technique of coding is used differently than, for example, content analysis. According to Potter and Wetherell, the former has the goal of collecting together instances for examination” which “should be done as *inclusively* [authors’ emphasis] as possible,” while the latter collects data onto categories and looks for the frequency of occurrence, which in this case is the equivalent to analysis (167). Transcript pages relevant to the coding categories can be photocopied and placed into their own files. Following this logic of inclusivity, one page of the transcript may appear in more than one file. It is important, however, to keep in mind, as van Zoonen writes: “No matter how refined and systematic the analytic procedure used to extract information from qualitative data, making sense of language is an interpretative activity” (143).

Following the steps provided by Potter and Wetherell, six in-depth, moderately scheduled telephone interviews were conducted with women who worked in the comic book industry between 1970 and 2000. The interviews were audio-taped, with permission of the interviewees, and transcribed for analysis. Anonymity was offered all participants; however, they declined this offer and wanted to be identified by their names. After transcription, the interviews were coded, or read for categories, and the data filed accordingly. Once the transcriptions were categorized in some meaningful way, the categories were analyzed and the findings reported.

Participants were asked their positions and tasks, as well as perspectives on the industry as it changed. Participants were also asked about their experiences working in a male-dominated industry. These questions addressed how the participants felt they were treated in the industry and how they were perceived.

The comic book industry is particular and unique. In general, it is an insular world in terms of the product and publishing. The ratio of women to men is comparatively low. The relatively small sample size of this study has as much to do with these particularities as it does the availability of the interviewees. But other factors also affected the sample size.

A main criterion for participant selection was that each woman had to have experience working in the comic book industry going back to the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> All of the six participants worked in the industry at various times from the 1970s through the 1990s. Most of the participants worked extensively in the 1970s either in women's underground comix or for independent publishers. Throughout the 1980s, the participants remained

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<sup>7</sup> The interviewees were born between 1938 and 1958.

active either inside or outside of the mainstream comic book industry. All of the interviewees have experience working in the mainstream comic book industry.

With this criterion in place, an initial sample of women was created utilizing secondary sources comprising the literature review. Next, the sample was cross referenced and narrowed using information provided at the official webpage of Friends of LuLu, a nationwide, nonprofit organization which encourages the involvement of women writers and artists in the comic book industry and which also promotes comic book readership among women and girls. The result was a list of fifteen women.

Beginning January 2000, the women comprising the list were contacted by telephone and e-mail. Over the course of six months, four never responded, three refused to be interviewed, two had constant scheduling conflicts, and six agreed to participate. This study, then, includes in-depth interviews, conducted June, July and September of 2000, with the six women who replied and agreed to be interviewed.<sup>8</sup>

All of the participants are established members of a rather insular community. Biographical and professional information about them is available, mostly via on-line sources. For example, many of interviewees have webpages, and all of the participants are listed as working professionals by the official webpage of Friends of LuLu.

The time under consideration is an important factor in this study. In terms of the comic book industry, the span of years between 1970 and 2000 is marked by change and development forming the contemporary industry in terms of its comic book producers, subject matter, audience, and modes of distribution. In terms of the roles and status of women at the societal level, these years mark significant change. Women's liberation movements, attempts to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, legal issues around abortion

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<sup>8</sup> This small sample size emphasizes depth rather than breadth in interviews.



and reproductive rights, and the passage of Title IX are but a few of the events witnessed during these years. Thus, the period under consideration involved events that reflect both industry changes *and* societal changes. Questioning what the roles and status of women working in the comic book industry during years of such change is important to understanding their experiences within a focused historical context.

## CHAPTER 7

FINDINGS<sup>9</sup>

In terms of roles, responsibilities, and occupations, the participants have done everything from lettering to editing, from self-publishing to mainstream publishing. Their work falls on a continuum in relation to where they have worked and the positions that they have held: from a high profile editing position in a mainstream publishing house to the creator, writer, and illustrator of a highly successful self-published comic book. Most of the participants fall somewhere between these two poles, freelancing for both independent and mainstream comic book publishers. If the 1970s marks a time when the participants were getting a “foot in the door,” so to speak, then the 1990s is a time when some of the participants explored other mediums for creative expression, while others continued honing their craft in the comic book industry.<sup>10</sup> Although only a few of the women are currently involved completely in the industry today, each continues to feel a true passion and appreciation for the artform that combines words and pictures.

Another commonality, or theme, arising from the interviews is descriptive of the character of the participants: they are determined, resolute, and strong women. To succeed as they have in the comic book industry, they could be nothing less. One

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<sup>9</sup> The following is taken from transcripts made from telephone interviews conducted with the six participants. Additional biographical information is available on participant webpages: Carol Lay, <<http://www.waylay.com>>; Christy Marx, <<http://www.christymarx.com>>; Wendy Pini, <<http://www.elfquest.com>>; Trina Robbins, <<http://www.trinarobbins.com>>; and Barbara Slate, <<http://www.barbaraslate.com>>.

<sup>10</sup> The majority of women interviewed were in their late teens and early twenties during the 1970s.

particular interviewee produced an appropriate characterization, that of Red Sonja, the fiery, sword-wielding warrior. In a discussion about gender and socialization, Pini notes that her success with *Elfquest* has required some anger, some selfishness, and some stubbornness, all qualities our culture generally does not encourage in young girls and women. Pini comments:

I was raised by a mother who believed that selfishness was the ultimate evil, that you were supposed to live for others. And I was a big disappointment to her because that's not the way I thought, and that was certainly not the way I behaved. You have to be stubborn. You have to be willful. You have to be rude and you have to be selfish. But if you pay that back by telling stories and providing artwork that means something to people, then there's a balance.

Ironically, Pini had her beginnings playing Red Sonja at comic book conventions.

“Sonja,” states Pini, “was a socially acceptable way for me to vent a tremendous amount of rage...And it was so much fun, you know, what do women do with their anger even? Part of the energy of creativity often comes from anger.” Pini did not become aware of the irony until the end of the interview and wanted this comparison to be made in the project. In many ways, all of the participants embody Red Sonja's fiery, feisty, and willful spirit. The remainder of this section provides a synopsis of the different ways in which each participant has been involved in the comic book industry over the past three decades.

### **Red Sonja Tales**

During the 1970s, Carol Lay spent most of her time “learning the craft while working in the business.” She explains:

I lettered comics for DC and Marvel and Hannah Barbera. And through Hannah Barbera...I did some layout work in the animation end, but I also did a lot of comics work that was sent overseas. There I learned how to ink, pencil, and write stories for publications.

They weren't very good, but I was learning at the time. I also was doing underground comics on the side--everything from, you know, writing the story to the finished art.

Lay provides a good description of the steps that go into “the craft” by way of comic book publishing practices via large companies such as DC. When working in these larger environments, the comic book goes through an “assembly line” where skilled individuals provide one task in getting the comic book produced. “A writer,” Lay states, “will write a script. An artist will pencil it out on a drawing board. Then, the letterer gets it and takes the writer’s script and finishes that off. And then the inker gets it. And then the colorist gets it.”

In terms of roles and occupations, Lay says she did “anything for a buck” during the late 1970s and 1980s. Her early experiences with underground work for Last Gasp and Rip Off Press and for mainstream publishers helped her as a freelance cartoonist. Illustrating this point, Lay states: “I’d be doing advertising art at the same time as I was inking comics for Western, doing a lot of Disney comics or things like that. I also worked for Mattel. I did comic and package art for them. I worked for the movies doing storyboards for live action films.” In the mid- to late-1980s, in addition to doing commercials and props for live action movies, Lay wrote and drew five issues of *Good Girls* published by Fantagraphics. She also drew Barbie and Mad Scientist comics for Mattel. Lay “loved doing comics” but found it difficult to make a living at it.

“Things fell into place,” Lay recalls, during the 1990s. She got a break in 1991 from the *L.A. Weekly* with her comic strip, “The Thing Under the Futon.” This led to a weekly serial strip titled “Now, Endsville.” During the mid- to late-1990s, Kitchen Sink Press published three collections of Lay’s “Story Minutes”: *Now, Endsville, Joy Ride*

and *Strip Joint*. Currently, weekly installments of “Story Minute” appear in the online magazine *Salon* and in several papers across the country, including *The San Francisco Examiner*, *The Hartford Courant*, the *Dallas Observer*, and the *Seattle Weekly*. Other works by Lay can be found in magazines such as *Entertainment Weekly*, *Worth*, and *Newsweek*.

Although she no longer freelances for comic books, work she describes as “soulless,” Lay is still driven to work in a medium driven by words and pictures. At this point in her life, Lay feels that she has come into her own as a cartoonist. Adding to this, she states, “I think I’m getting better at doing the job. As far as craft and wisdom goes, I think that comes with time.” Lay enjoys the whole process of producing something from “start to finish.”<sup>11</sup>

While Lay was “learning the craft,” Karen Berger was getting a foot in the door to the comic book industry. In the late 1970s, after graduating from college, Berger began looking for a job. A good friend, J. M. DeMatteis, who wrote *Moonshadow*, the first fully painted comic-book series published in the United States, suggested that she contact Paul Levitz at DC comics. At the time, Levitz wanted an assistant from outside of the industry. Berger states that the extent of her comic book knowledge included “some *Archie* comics, a few romances read at sleep-away camp, and many of [her] brothers’ *Mad* magazines.” Berger applied and got the job. She started as an assistant editor/assistant editorial coordinator. *The House of Mystery*, adds Berger, “was my first project.”

A year-and a-half later, in the early 1980s, she was promoted to editorial coordinator, a position responsible for the “scheduling and deadlines for the entire

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<sup>11</sup> As of November 2006, Lay’s work appears in print and online, most notably at [Salon.com](http://Salon.com).

editorial department.” Berger also did other editing on the side in addition to *The House of Mystery*, including titles such as *Amethyst*, *Princess of Gemworld*. Soon after, Berger was given *Legion of Superheroes*, which she edited for seven years. When editing and editorial coordinating became too much work, she was given the choice by Levitz and Dick Giordano to take either the business route, as a managing editor, or the creative route, as a fulltime editor. Berger chose the creative route and soon began editing *Swamp Thing* and various other books. As an editor, Berger tried new approaches to these titles, fueled by a desire to push mainstream comic books into new territory.

In the mid-to late-1980s, Berger found a more fitting means to explore that territory when she started working with new British talent like Neil Gaiman, Grant Morrison, Jamie Delano, and Peter Milligan. With this pool of talent, Berger was placed in charge of DC’s Vertigo line. And she made it her mission. She acquired several new books, *The Changing Man*, *Animal Man*, *Sandman*, *Doom Patrol*, all launched during the late 1980s. Through these titles, Berger developed a niche market, for “mature readers.” Internally and externally, the Vertigo line-up garnered accolades and acclaim.

In response, DC decided to make Vertigo a separate imprint to further develop and expand the niche. Berger created a publishing plan, and in 1993, Vertigo the imprint was launched. When she was promoted to vice president - executive editor of Vertigo in January of 1992, Berger attributed the company’s success to “having a good game plan.” They were working at full scale a year before the official launch. And they have been “going strong for close to ten years now.”<sup>12</sup>

By the time Berger entered the comic book industry, Trina Robbins had already done a great deal in terms of roles and occupations, gaining much experience in the

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<sup>12</sup> As of 2006, Karen Berger served as vice president – executive director at Vertigo.

underground comix scene. During the 1970s, Robbins worked primarily as a writer, editor, and cartoonist. She states: “I wrote my own stuff, and, obviously, illustrated it. I also was an editor...I put together the first, the very first, all woman’s comic in 1970.” It was titled *It Ain’t Me, Babe*. In 1972, Robbins helped found the Wimmen's Comix Collective. She states that the collective put together a continuing all-women title, *Wimmen’s Comix*, that was being published into the 1990s, albeit sporadically.

In the 1980s, Robbins continued her involvement in *Wimmen’s Comix*, and also worked for independent and mainstream comic book publishers. Much of her work focused on the now all-but-obsolete teen-girl market. She did the cover art for *California Girls*, an independent comic book published by Eclipse and *Meet Misty*, a mainstream comic book published by Marvel. In 1986, she illustrated the four mini-series *Wonder Woman* for DC Comics.

During the nineties, Robbins began writing more than drawing, moving between independent and mainstream publishers. Between 1990 and 1993, she wrote and inked numerous issues of Marvel’s *Barbie* series. She was a regular writer for *The Little Mermaid* published by Disney and Marvel comics from 1994 to 1995. (In 1995, the Walt Disney Company granted the rights to the Disney comics franchise to Marvel Comics.) And in the late 1990s, she wrote *Wonder Woman: The Once and Future Story* for DC Comics. In addition to her work on comic books, Robbins adds that she authored numerous books about women and comics, wrote for several California-based periodicals and helped found the organization Friends of LuLu.<sup>13</sup>

Like Robbins, Wendy Pini entered the comic book industry in the early 1970s. Pini, and husband Richard, were both comic book fans. They attended conferences at

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<sup>13</sup> Robbins’s current activities are listed on her webpage.

which Pini began selling her artwork. Recalling those early days, Pini states: “[I] was starting to make a name for myself as a fan artist. And then, very quickly, I started doing book covers for science fiction anthologies like *Worlds of If* and *Galaxy*. So I became a professional rather quickly and left fandom behind.” At one particular conference, Pini met Frank Thorne, who had been working on Marvel’s *Red Sonja* series. Thorne encouraged Pini to enter a Red Sonja look-alike contest. She did, won and became the “official unofficial” Red Sonja. Along with her husband, Pini toured conventions with Frank Thorne doing a stage show called “The Sonja and the Wizard Show.” Eventually Thorne suggested that she do some script work. “The Singing Tower,” Pini’s first story, was published in *Red Sonja: She-Devil with a Sword*, volume one, issue six, May 1977.

That same year, she chose the comic book form to tell a tale that she had been conceptualizing. When Pini approached Marvel and DC with the idea, it was declined. She recalls:

[Marvel and DC] turned it down because they thought it was too weird, and there was nothing else like it out there. And they didn't think it would do well. So, then, we found sort of a shady publisher somewhere in the Midwest. And he got one issue out for us, and then promptly tried to steal the rest of the artwork, so we had a little hassle getting all of that back. And then we decided to bring *Elfquest* out again in 1978--re-released issue 1 ourselves.

Wendy and Richard published *Elfquest* under WaRP (Wendy and Richard Pini) Graphics, in 1978. *Elfquest* went on to become the first full color graphic novel to be published in the United States. For nearly twenty-five years, Pini has worked almost exclusively writing and illustrating *Elfquest*, and developing it into prose novels and music. Much of her energy in the 1990s has been spent developing *Elfquest* into a screenplay and working with sculptors for a line of action figures.



In addition to *Elfquest*, Pini has done other work. In the 1980s, Pini also wrote and illustrated graphic novels based on the television series *Beauty and the Beast* for First Comics. She also did work for DC, Marvel, and Comico comics, albeit in a very limited fashion.

Overall, Pini's position is unique both in terms of her success and her relationship as a woman working in comic books. She does not think of *Elfquest* as "just a comic book property." This is part of the reason Pini describes her relationship with mainstream publishers as "peripheral at best." She also states: "I have never, and do not now, regard myself as a woman in the comics industry because I actually haven't been in the same trenches as some of the other women." Several distinctions make *Elfquest* a unique property. As a comic book, it has a strong, loyal fan base with a large female readership. Another distinction that separates Pini from other professionals working on comics is her mode of distribution. Rather than publishing monthly comics, the Pinis' decided to produce graphic novels to be sold through large chain bookstores.<sup>14</sup>

Christy Marx, like Pini, entered into the comic book industry through the sci-fi and fantasy genre. In 1971 Marx moved to Los Angeles thinking that she "was going to be an artist." During that time, she met people working in comics and animation. On one occasion, she was told about a small gathering where Roy Thomas, editor-in-chief at Marvel Comics from 1972-1974, was going to speak. After the session, she introduced herself and asked if he would read a story idea. Thomas liked Marx's script, which turned into "Child of Sorcery," for *The Savage Sword of Conan the Barbarian*, published in 1978. In the early 1980s, she wrote stories for *Red Sonja: She-Devil with a Sword*, another Marvel comic book in the sci-fi and fantasy genre.

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<sup>14</sup> Wendy Pini's current projects are included on her webpage.

Eventually, Marx moved to New York and met Mike Friedrich, who in the mid-1970s had started Star\*Reach, an independent comic book publisher. Friedrich became Marx's agent, a rare working relationship in the comic book industry. She describes the working relationship: "Working through Mike, I went out and managed to actually sell some of my own series ideas. I sold *Sisterhood of Steel*, that Epic Comics published, and I did some stuff for Eclipse."

During the mid- to late-1980s, Marx wrote other stories, most notably *Carlos McLlyr the Californio*, a three-part historical adventure fantasy and *Sisterhood of Steel*, a graphic novel about a society of warrior women, which were both published by the now-defunct Eclipse Comics. *Sisterhood of Steel* had previously been an eight-part series published by Epic comics, a creator-owned line of books from Marvel Comics. Unfortunately, a situation over censorship with the late Archie Goodwin, who was then editor-in-chief of Epic, soured Marx's feelings regarding working with comic books. Compounding this event was the death of her husband, Peter Ledger, an artist with whom she collaborated. She recalls:

After Peter was killed in a car accident in '94, I no longer had an artist partner. And it's very tough trying to sell anything when you're just a writer. It gets very difficult. I didn't see anything out there that I was all that interested in in terms of just the regular books that I really wanted to go after--I mean, comics don't pay that well; and when I'm writing for television, I'm making far, far better money. So it just made more sense to just keep doing all the television work and not really worry about comics too much.

Stepping away from the comic book industry, Marx spent the 1990s delving into new creative mediums. She has written numerous scripts for action-adventure, sci-fi and fantasy animation for television. Her time away from the industry, however, was somewhat short-lived. Marx returned to write for Wendy Pini's *Elfquest*. The result was

the twelve chapter mini-series, collected together in *Elfquest Reader Collection #9A: Wolfrider*.<sup>15</sup>

For Barbara Slate, it would be a character she created for greeting cards that would take her in the comic book industry. She states:

Well, I kind of went in the back door. I was doing greeting cards. I had a character called Ms. Liz...and she was a feminist. I sold something like two million greeting cards. I licensed her on t-shirts and mugs, and animated on the Today show, and she was a spokesperson for DuPont. She was fairly successful, actually. And after about nine years of that, I took the character to DC Comics. It was one of those incredible times where I was just sitting around thinking, "Where do we go from here?" And, somebody called and said, "You should see Jenette Kahn at DC Comics." So I made the phone call, and she was very receptive because at that time she wanted to do something for girls. So I had a meeting with her, and she couldn't use Ms. Liz for some reason. I think it was that they needed to own the copyright at that time. So, anyway, she asked me to develop something else.

For various reasons, DC could not use "Ms. Liz," but the meeting was the "foot in the door" for Slate. Khan asked her to develop something, and the result was *Angel Love*, a comic book geared towards female teenagers. It was published as a nine part series from 1987-1988. *Angel Love* led to a string of work with other comic book publishers. From 1989 to 1992, Slate created, wrote, and drew *Yuppies From Hell*, *Son of Yuppies From Hell*, *Sex, Lies and Mutual Funds of Yuppies From Hell*, and *Sweet XVI*, a seven part mini-series, for Marvel Comics. From 1990 to 1991, she was the writer of *New Kids on the Block* for Harvey Comics. She wrote Barbie stories for Western Publishing Company in 1994. And the following year, she wrote monthly comics for Marvel such as *Barbie*, *Barbie Fashion* and Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*.

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<sup>15</sup> For a listing of Marx's current work, refer to her webpage.

In the late 1990s, Slate wrote comic strips for numerous magazines, wrote for Archie Comics, was the artist and writer of Furby® cartoons for Tiger Electronics/Hi-C® fruit containers, and continued to create new characters and scripts. Because she freelances, Slate remains busy writing, drawing characters, and licensing her creations when possible. In addition, Slate speaks to girls in high schools about careers, is working on a screenplay and enjoys painting and writing.<sup>16</sup>

### **In Love with Words and Pictures**

For a near majority of the participants, exposure to comic books and strips and a true love for the combination of words and pictures influenced the career paths that they took. Lay recalls an early childhood memory of drawing a “lady in high heels” and hearing her mother respond in amazement at her “skill.” She remembers being influenced by the comic art of Al Capp. As she grew older, Lay’s love of comics fueled her desire to become an artist. During her college years, friends introduced Lay to Frank Zappa and Robert Crumb’s *Zap Comix*. Lay also became familiar with the work of prominent comic book artists at the time: Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, Harvey Kurtzman, Basil Wolverton and Bernie Wrightson. Increasingly, she emerged herself into the comics “culture”: attending conferences, dating a guy with interests in comic art, and picking up the lettering jobs.

Pini wrote and illustrated for her entertainment as a child. Pini recalls: “Words and pictures just went together for me from a very early age. I didn’t really discover comics until I was around sixteen years old. It was Marvel Comics, the *Fantastic Four* [and] the early *Inhumans*. And I just loved them. I just totally related to those

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<sup>16</sup> See Barbara Slate’s webpage for current projects.

characters; and that is what got me interested in comics. I was pretty much a Marvel baby.” She says turning into a fan of comics in her mid-teens was the outgrowth of being a storyteller. The writing of Michael Moorcock, especially his sci-fi and fantasy Elric series, also influenced her. As Pini crafted her style, she drew upon that of Jack Kirby, who had helped create a Marvel “house style” during the 1960s. Pini comments: “I don’t want my drawings to be all airy-fairy. I want them to have weight and substance as well. So there’s always been a little bit of a chunky quality to my work as a result of [Kirby’s] influence.”

Slate states that she was always good at drawing and writing. “The combination of the two,” she recalls, “really made me know that I wanted to be a cartoonist.” And, she knew at an early age. “I would always have my mother get babysitters who could draw,” states Slate, “and my art teacher in high school pretty much directed me.” Reflecting on his influence, she continues: “His famous words were ‘Draw what you see, not what you think you see.’ Those were powerful [words], and so I started drawing from life, rather than copying the already printed cartoons.” Other influences, according to Slate, included Dan DeCarlo and Stan Goldberg. She greatly admired the drawing ability of DeCarlo, *Archie* artist and creator of *Josie and the Pussycats*, and of Goldberg, an *Archie* and *Millie the Model* artist. Additionally, Slate attributes her style to the Pop Art movement artists, especially that of Andy Warhol.

Regarding early influences, Robbins states: “I was drawing before I could even read and write.” Not surprisingly, her foray into the world of comic books began early. “I grew up reading comics. At the time, I didn’t know that girls weren’t supposed to read comics because when I was reading them, girls did read comics.” She was especially

attracted to strong female characters like Mary Marvel, Wonder Woman, and Sheena, Queen of the Jungle. Regarding influences, Robbins was drawn to the clean, accessible and open style found in the teen line of Timely Comics that she read as a youth. Her career path has been shaped by a true love of the medium. This love is reflected in her belief that “the ultimate way to communicate is with words and pictures.”

The art form also grabbed Marx at an early age. Recalling her childhood, Marx elaborates:

I think I would probably have to go all the way back to my earliest childhood because I can recall when I was--probably even before I knew how to write--I was drawing sequential little stories, using little stick figures, cute little stick figures telling the story, you know, in three or four panels. So, obviously, whatever it was about this particular art form, it grabbed me at the very, very, very earliest ages...I was really into reading newspaper comics as well, just from the earliest ages; I was completely fascinated by comics.

As a youth in the 1950s, Marx would go “absolutely crazy out-of-my-way to go and buy and find and collect comic books.” She continues, “I was just completely addicted, had to have my comic books!” As a teenager, Marx spent a great deal of time creating her own characters, writing and drawing. She claims to have created approximately one hundred female action figures by the time she had reached fifteen. Marx’s aspirations to become an artist were clearly shaped by her love of the combination of words and pictures.

### **Major Changes: Content and Business**

When asked what they thought had been the most significant changes to the industry during the past thirty years, the participants produced a range of answers, most of which pertained to changes in the content of comic books or some change in the business aspect of the comic book industry. Interestingly, the range of responses in many

ways reflects the different positions occupied by these women in relation to the comic book industry at different historical moments. Lay, Marx, and Pini, all very much a part of comic book culture during the 1970s, referenced significant change stemming back to the emergence of underground comix. Lay states: “Underground comix certainly opened the doors to a lot more possibilities of what you can do with comics...Justin Green and Robert Crumb doing autobiographical comics certainly started a trend.” Comix allowed for a difference in content outside of what the Comics Code allowed and what mainstream publishers felt was profitable. Inadvertently, the popularity of these non-mainstream works had the effect of making the Comics Code more obsolete since they were never beholden to it.

Continuing with the theme of changes in content, most participants expressed the belief that the rise in the late 1970s and 1980s of independent and self-published works created more space for artists to explore ideas and styles outside of the mainstream. Although Marx herself came up against issues of censorship, she thought the 1980s marked a time of increasing relaxation in terms of content. Berger continues with this theme, but brings in the perspective from working inside a mainstream publisher. Changes that were occurring to content in the 1980s, according to Berger, allowed for a “maturation of comic books” and the “creation of new genres.” Specifically, she references the Epic material of the early 1980s done by Archie Goodwin, who found and edited Marvel’s groundbreaking anthology magazine *Epic Illustrated*, which begat the Epic imprint. The 1980s, according to Berger, was a germinal time in modern, mainstream comics for branching outside of the superhero genre. Numerous participants

gave specific examples of comic books that have veered away successfully – *Watchmen*, *Sandman*, *Love and Rockets* and *Cerebus*.

Other significant changes identified that are intimately intertwined with both content and business are an aging baby-boomer market; a work force of baby-boomers who grew-up reading comics and eventually assumed positions of power both inside and outside the mainstream industry; and industry changes brought about by both the market and numerous individuals. Pini, for example, credits the rise in “creator’s rights” as an outgrowth of the independent comics movement of the 1970s. The success in the mid-1980’s of Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird’s *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* is a prime example of the success of one independent comics success and the changes it made to the industry at large, especially with the glut of black and white comics.

In terms of changes in business, Pini points to the defection of big names, like Todd McFarlane, creator of *Spawn*, to begin companies also in the mid- to late-1980s. Marx echoes much of Pini’s assessment and adds that changes in distribution during the 1980s and 1990s have had a significant impact on the industry, mostly affecting the types of material carried by comic book stores. Adding to this, Robbins believes that direct sales comic book stores that began in the 1980s have been a significant change, especially in nurturing a “for boys only” climate. Robbins states: “I think the most significant changes have been negative, and that has been the lack of available material for women – and, in fact, the lack of available material for children also. So that at this point, the comics industry seems to be confining itself to doing comics for 14 to, say, 20 year-old-males.” Marx felt that where the industry was formerly “run by people who wanted to do comics, who liked comics, loved comics, and understood comics, who



wrote and drew comics,” it was now just another “business entity that gets sold, bartered, changed, leveraged, merchandized. And it’s no longer about comics.”

Several participants also made references to rapid changes in computer technology. The participants who freelance had much to say about computer technology is changing the way that they work. Lay said computers allow her to create specialized fonts, save postage by e-mailing, and quickly sketch and scan. Slate states the computer has been a great tool for her freelance work. Offering a different spin on changes brought about by computer technology, Robbins and Marx feel that visual mediums, such as computers and television, have replaced the comic book for many young people so that fewer kids read comic books. Berger, however, thinks it is too soon to say how significant computer technology is for the industry. “We are just seeing the beginnings of what the computer can do.”

### **Treasured Fans and Dubious Others**

When asked how they felt they had been treated in their line of work and if they thought it was related to being a woman, participants made distinctions between fans and publishers. Overwhelmingly, the participants felt the readers and fans treated them wonderfully. Lay, Pini, Marx, Slate, Robbins, and Berger all felt that readers and fans had been, by and large, a source of affirmation, inspiration and support.

Marx comments:

I treasure my fans. They’ve been great. I still have lots and lots of people that remember *The Sisterhood*, and they are still big fans. I've always tried to have good communication with my fans like the newsletter I mentioned back when I was publishing *The Sisterhood*. And I would do that newsletter just out of my own pocket just to stay in touch with people and to publish my thoughts and publish their letters. I think it’s very important because they are the people that really support you and support your work. To me it's always

been a matter of I like to hear what people think. And I like to be in touch with the people who are reading my work.

Lay states that “the readers are great.” With tongue in cheek, she continues: “I’ve only gotten about five or six pieces of hate mail in the nine years I’ve been doing the strip.” Slate also felt that she had been treated well by the fans. She comments: “I’ve got wonderful, wonderful, wonderful letters. I’ve got so much mail, especially with *Angel Love*. The fans have been great.”

When asked how she felt that she had been treated by fans, Pini began, “Generally, superbly.” She continues:

Richard--because he is involved with our website and has taken it upon his shoulders to interact with the fans and answer their questions-- sometimes gets the brunt of their worst behavior. So he certainly sees the best and the worst of them. But I guess I’m lucky in that I don’t involve myself with relating to the fans directly. I stay away from chat rooms and that sort of thing because it’s very draining to your creative energy.

But when it comes to conventions or public appearances and that sort of thing, I am very, very open to whatever comes. And, usually, what comes is something very beautiful. The fans will come up and say: “I have been reading your books since I was a kid.” Or a young mother with a child will come up and say, “I grew up on your books, and now I’m reading them to my daughter.” And, they name their children after our characters. A lot of them have tattoos of our characters on them. They are very intense, very loyal.

By and large, it’s a wonderful experience. Sometimes, you can get sort of pinned to a wall by the type of fan that won’t let you go. They don’t know when to be quiet. They don’t know when a conversation is over. But you learn how to handle that sort of thing so that you are not hurting peoples’ feelings or anything like that.

Overall, none of the participants seemed to feel that being a woman factored negatively into how fans or readers treated them. Their assessment of publishers and

editors, however, differed in comparison to fans. Lay referred to publishers as a “problem.” Elaborating she states:

Publishers – they are all annoying because they all want every right in the world for nothing. Ever since the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, the underground publishers are still paying their chintzy little fees, but they want ancillary rights and electronic rights and merchandizing and all this stuff. And if somebody picks it up and turns it into a Saturday morning TV show, then they can make a [windfall] without having to put out anything.

Regarding editors, she thought that there existed “good people and bad” in the industry. “You are going to get some editors,” Lay continues, “who are going to give a helping hand to some women, just because they want a female voice. And there [are] the other ones who don’t give a damn. I got a rejection letter from one paper that said: ‘Thanks, but we already have a female cartoonist.’”

Lay feels that it is difficult to say if how she was treated was because she is a woman. Her experiences with publishers and editors could have more to do, she states wittily, with her “poor social skills.” She goes on to note, however, that she has gotten jobs because she is woman: “[*Mad Magazine* and *The Wall Street Journal*] both hired me to do these really shitty stories written by women. I mean they were really bad, about dating.” In reference to problems with the *Mad Magazine* job, she adds: “The place is run by old men. They are trying to get women in, but they don’t know how. They do it by their conception of what women do. And they’re old men. What do they know?”

Countering Lay’s experiences are those of Marx and Slate. Marx, who had an agent, stated that she has had good experiences with publishers – the Epic experience notwithstanding. She recalls: “The people at Eclipse were certainly nice enough people...and Wendy [Pini] has been just a dream to deal with, so generally, I guess I’ve

had pretty good experiences. And dealing with Roy [Thomas] – he’s a really good guy and a good friend. So, I always felt that I had good treatment.” Slate, too, feels she has had good experiences with not only publishers, but also editors. Slate states:

Basically, I think I’ve been treated well. I don’t think I’ve been discriminated against because I’m a woman. If anything it’s been beneficial to me because there are so few women in the field. It just seemed like I got a lot of really great projects because I met my deadlines. And I think I’m really good at what I do, but I think being a woman was just fine. You always have your idiots. You always have your pigs. But, you know, nothing unusual, I don’t think.

Berger, too, expressed a belief that being a woman worked at times to her benefit. Elaborating on this point, she states that “there are many men who find it hard to say no to a woman.” Noting differences in communication styles, Berger adds that she finds men to be more competitive with other men, and not with women.

Robbins gives a very different perspective on gender and how she feels that she has been treated:

The guys in the industry will all be very friendly to me at conventions and say, “Hello” and “Gee, how are you doing?” But they don’t--and never have--networked with me. I know they network with each other. But no one has ever networked with me. The women in the industry--some of them have been very nice and very helpful. I’m talking about editors. Some of them, I feel, seem to feel that since they’ve clawed their way up in this male-dominated industry that they can’t really afford to be one of the girls or to be helpful to another woman. Some of them, I feel, might even feel that because their position as a woman in the industry is so shaky that if they make a wrong decision, they might lose it all; and so they are afraid to hire a woman or to hire someone who is doing something woman-friendly. I think there’s more fear with some of these women than there would be with male editors.

I’ve met lots and lots of women in the industry who are exactly like me and who feel exactly the way I do. There are also women who really are in enormous denial and just want to insist that they’ve never, never encountered sexism, and they are totally treated as “one

of the boys.” Sometimes they will say this in public; but then in private, when talking to me, I’ll find out just how angry they are at the situation. But they’ll never say it in public. Never.

### **Marriage: A Non-Issue**

None of the respondents thought that marital status had affected their careers. Marx, who answered the question with a resolute “No,” often collaborated with her late husband Peter Ledger, who was an artist. Berger felt having children, more than marriage, has affected her career in terms of how she views things. In jest she comments, “A number of people on my staff have told me I calmed down after having my second kid.” Pini and Slate, however, went on to qualify their answers. Neither thought marital status was an issue, but in the case of marriage, or relationships more generally, whether the partner was or was not supportive was important. Both felt having emotionally supportive and understanding spouses has been beneficial. Slate comments: “Just for me, psychologically, if I’m with a man who’s supportive, it really, really helps – you know, supportive of who I am in my career. When I’m with somebody who is not supportive, then it really is all about who I’m with.” Pini fleshes the point out in more detail. She remarks:

When you have a helper, when you have someone there to support you, to believe in you, who’s there as your lifemate, it cannot help but grease the way for you. You know, even if you are out there plugging away and dealing with the companies on your own, to have someone to go home to and bitch to and to have them encourage you—absolutely. I think that women are not raised the way guys are. I think that women are not raised to be team players the way guys are, and I think that women are not raised to take the amount of shit that guys do from each other.

I would say a woman out there alone, especially in the depressed state that the comics industry is in would have to be extremely strong, have an extremely strong vision of her own – and they’re out there, they are definitely out there – and would have to be able to

take not only the shit that naturally comes with being part of a bullpen; but she would also have to take the fact that the industry is depressed. It is very hard to make a living out of it right now.

### **Drawing Like a “Girl”**

When asked if being a woman affected other people’s perception of their work, the participants were, for the most part, in agreement: they felt that it had. Lay offers examples of how perceptions are affected by gender. When making stylistic comparisons, Lay has observed that people differentiate between male and female artists. She remarks:

They are always comparing me to other female cartoonists. I used to get this a lot: “Oh, I really like Linda Barry’s work.” I’ve heard of another woman cartoonist who told me the same thing happened to her. She was at a party and said she was a cartoonist, and they said, “Oh, I really like Carol Lay’s work.” But nobody says: “Oh, I really like Matt Groening’s work.” It’s like they always think of another woman to compare you to. And we’re always being segregated as when somebody is being interviewed in *The Comics Journal* about their favorite cartoonist. Then, they’ll say, “Well, what are the female cartoonists that you like.” We just have this weird handicap.

Slate gives fans as an example. She said she believes it is important to female readers to see that a woman created, wrote and drew *Angel Love* and *Yuppies from Hell*. This visibility, she adds, positively influences female readers.

Marx agrees that people’s perception of her work is affected by her being a woman. She provides good examples of the relevance of gender in the sense of its cultural and political relevance and its embodiment. In creating *The Sisterhood of Steel*, a series that attempted to look at a society of warrior women, Marx ran into problems with men and some women over how she represented strong women and such “women’s issues” as menstruation. She comments:

When I was trying to sell it [*The Sisterhood of Steel*] again as a series, I'd get these weird reactions from men who just did not understand the look and who thought I was just writing men with boobs. And here I am, I'm a woman. Excuse me! This is a woman's take. And they just wouldn't get it.

*The Sisterhood* generated some very, very interesting response because I remember that this was my attempt to do what I felt revealed a real look at a society of warrior women--the whole sociology of that. How would that work? In the very first issue, I just had a little throwaway line – it was just a minor thing. It wasn't a big deal about whether a couple of girls were lovers or not; and, then, and the thing was, no – they are not. And I got all this mail from lesbians who were just thrilled that I had just simply touched upon this as a casual and normal part of their lives.

So it generated just a really, really interesting following of both male and female [readers]. So I think the fact that I brought that women's perspective to something in that way generated all kinds of different responses, you know? Men that couldn't understand it; men that were goddess worshipers and loved it; lesbians were thrilled with it; feminists attacked me. I just had like a whole range, a whole range of responses to that in particular.

Robbins and Pini pointed to stylistic differences and perception between women and men. Both state their work embodies a “feminine” style or sensibility. According to Robbins, men and women have different styles. She comments:

“I write like a woman and I draw like a woman. It used to be a real insult, and I think with a lot of guys it still is to say, “Oh, she draws like a girl.” But it's a fact. I truly do believe that men and women draw differently. There are women's styles and men's styles. Men don't really understand women's styles. And they criticize them. They say, “Oh, she can't draw.” They don't understand. It's a completely different style.”

Elaborating on what constitutes these different styles, she continues:

The ultimate example of a man's style would be Jack Kirby. Everybody's very blocky. You've got all this machinery, just tons of machinery. The ultimate example of a woman's style would probably be a typical love comic panel with a big close-up of the heroine with a tear in her eye. That's because, number one, women like to draw women. And they are better at drawing women.

Number two, women are much more concerned with relationships, thus the tear, much more concerned with relationships than with action. Men are more concerned with action. Women are concerned with people, thus the close-up. Men are more concerned with machines and fighting, thus the Jack Kirby jillions of blocky figures battling each other with machines.

Even the coloring... I think that women tend towards bright colors and men seem to – in the comics, at least, seem to tend towards browns and grays, which I just--I look at some of those vertical comics pages, and I turn my eyes away. It bothers my eyes to look at all that darkness, all that brown and gray. It makes my eyes unhappy.

Although Pini does not feel her being a woman has affected her audience's perception of her work, she does think that the "female sensibility" in *Elfquest* partially explains why it has one of the highest female readerships of any comic in the United States. Elaborating on what she means by "female sensibility," Pini compares her style to European comics. She remarks:

[*Elfquest*] is regarded as a European style comic in the sense that the drawing style is very organic. It focuses on facial expression, body language -- certain sensitivities that you don't find in superhero art or the film noir type stuff of Frank Miller. *Elfquest* is designed purely to engage your emotions; there's no other reason for it. The story is there purely to engage your emotions, purely to get you to feel and to think at the same time. I think that does come from a feminine sensibility; and I think that's why women are drawn to my work.

### **Equal Pay: A Difference of Opinion and Position**

The participants expressed differing opinions in regard to whether they felt that they had been treated the same as men in terms of salary, pay and benefits. Although gender plays a role in how the participants responded, so too does their positioning in relation to the comic book industry. While self-publishing and independent work allows for greater artistic and creative freedom, it also carries with it the difficulties of making a



living in an environment dominated by large publishers and limited modes of distribution. Likewise, while working for large publishers offers security in terms of pay and benefits, they are more restrictive in terms of content and control.

Pini thought her unique position with *Elfquest*, a highly successful self-published comic book, left her without grounds for comparison. Marx, also in a unique position by having an agent, said she could not say with certainty whether she has been treated the same. However, Marx felt pretty certain that having an agent ensured her if not the standard rate, then at least a bit more. Berger responded that she has been “compensated very well.” It was after a second maternity leave that Berger was chosen to launch Vertigo as a separate DC imprint.

Contrasting these views are those of Lay and Robbins. Both participants have worked without agents, mostly freelancing for independent and mainstream publishers. Lay and Robbins felt that they had been treated differently, and not for the better, than men in the industry. Robbins states that in general she has “always been paid less.” “That doesn’t even bother me,” she continues, “I mean, I accept it. There are so many other things to fight for, you know? What’s the point about fighting for salary until we get some kind of equality.” Lay provides a recent example of pay inequity from the late nineties while working for *Salon*. The four cartoonists employed, Lay found out, were paid differently for the same work: the two white males made thirty percent more than she or her African-American male counterpart. She remarks: “I felt really insulted by that. The last raise had just been across the board. This time, I expected the same kind of treatment, that we all get treated the same. Here it was the two white guys are getting

thirty percent more than the black and the woman.” “But,” she continues, “we are all doing the same work. We’re getting the same exposure. We should get the same rates.”

Slate offers a different view on how gender is at work in terms of pay. In comic book publishing, royalties, money based on the amount of books sold, vary between those working on high volume superhero comics and those working, for example, on comics aimed at young girls. Slate states she received far less in royalties for her work on *Barbie* than counterparts working on superhero material. Interestingly, Robbins made the same point.

### **The Women’s Movement and Degrees of Impact**

All the participants thought that the women’s movement had an impact on their line of work. The degree or extent of the impact, however, provided a point of departure in opinion. Most of the participants expressed a view of the 1970s as a moment when the women’s movement certainly had an impact, one that rippled, albeit tentatively, into the 1980s and 1990s. They expressed the belief that the ever-increasing number of women interested in comics corresponds to women’s changing roles in society, thanks to the women’s movement. Lay, however, was tentative, in general, about her assessment of the impact of the movement. She remarks:

That’s hard to say. I’m a feminist, and a personal feminist goal is just to get more female voice out there to be heard. Growing up, all we had was *Nancy Drew*, *The Bobbsey Twins* and *Little Women*. There was all this male material out there. There were romance comics in the fifties and sixties, but those disappeared. [Then] it was all that macho-breast-monkey crap with capes on where all the women are just weak sisters or have these tremendous boobs.

It’s really hard to say because there just aren’t that many women doing this job. I think that there are more and more women who want to do it. I see a lot of women who don’t quite have the skills who have something to say, but they can’t draw well or can’t write

well. And they get published anyway because they're women. I think that's a little unfortunate because I want to see more women with real skills doing this job. But it pays so lousy, and it's so hard to work it that only a real odd duck is going to end up here. Women with the kind of talent you need for this work – if they are smart enough – will get into something that pays better. But it is something that, I think, attracts people who just love it – who just love doing it

Berger qualified her comments that although the women's movement had a significant impact, it did not have a far-reaching one. She notes that there are pockets where change is evident, for example, self-publishing, but “nothing over-arching.” An increasing number of strong female characters at DC is another example Berger provides. She notes that when she worked on *Wonder Woman* with George Perez, they took a more “feminist” or “woman-centered” viewpoint in the story and artwork. Berger also points to the work of Robbins and Slate, women who have created material aimed at young female readers, as still more examples.

Marx felt, as did other participants, that the movement of the 1970s opened spaces, thus allowing for a growing number of women to enter in the 1980s and 1990s.

She remarks:

It had some [impact] in that girls that grew up to be women like me were more able to participate. I mean there are certainly more women participating in creating comics now than there ever were when I was a kid. Otherwise, I don't know if it had any real direct effect on comics because I haven't seen any major budging of attitudes in the male writers in terms of female characters. There may be some, perhaps, but I think where it shows up the most is just that there are more women working in comics – and considered it. That's a general societal change. Women are working in areas that they weren't working in before.

Pini felt that the women's movement of the 1970s gave women working in the comic book industry a "certain kind of language" to address their experiences, difficulties, and barriers. In fleshing-out her response, she continues:

The women's movement certainly gave us a certain kind of language with which to speak; although if I am a feminist, that is not the language I speak. I regard myself more as a humanist. You know, everybody matters as far as I'm concerned. But I do think that when women are motivated to create, to be heard, to put themselves out there – and it is not as easy for a woman to do it as it is for a guy – she has far less support. She has far fewer cronies to turn to. I think a motivated, strong woman who has a story to tell – it is usually her story. *Elfquest* is a much-disguised autobiography, and I think that is true of many of the women who are telling their tales and have been telling them for many years. The most universal things are the most personal. And I do think that women are better at focusing on the personal and bringing them out, bringing them into the light, and turning them into very interesting and fascinating stories.

In addition to the impact that it had on women, Robbins notes that there was "a bit" of an impact on mainstream publishers in the 1970s in that they were trying to "be with it." Marvel came out with lines of comics with superheroines like the *Cat*, *Shanna the She-Devil*, and *Spiderwoman*. Robbins comments:

The women's movement was my work at the time. It had a bit of an impact on the mainstream in that they were trying, in the '70s, to be with it, as it were. The few love comics that were coming out, for instance, could try to have more contemporary themes. Also, throughout the '70s, Marvel came out with this new group of comics, "women's comics" really, superheroines that had their own book. Even Stan Lee did *Night Nurse* and the group of superheroine comics: *Shanna the She-Devil*, *Track of the Cat*, *She-Hulk*, [and] *Spiderwoman*. They all started in the '70s.

Following this impact onto the 1980s and 1990s, Robbins continues:

Well, you got the Reagan Administration and an entire country that was suddenly much more rightwing. You got post-feminists in the way of women, [and] the whole anti-feminist push to get women back into the old roles, even by 1990, real threats to our abortion

rights. And that showed itself, not just in the rest of the country, but in the comics industry also. Comics changed, I would say, from the late '80s on – certainly by the middle '80s. There were very few superheroines that had their own titles. The teen comics had folded. The last sort of love comics had folded. There was nothing out there for girls to read anymore at all. And very slowly, very slowly, subtly, the rendition of women in comics started getting more and more sexist as their breasts started getting bigger and their outfits got smaller.

Slate and Robbins suggest that any lasting impact by the movement in the 1970s was tempered by dramatic changes to the industry in terms of direct sales, the decreasing amount of available material aimed at girls, and by larger socio-political changes brought about by the Reagan administration and a backlash against feminism.

Compared to earlier times, many participants felt that the climate towards women has improved to some extent. Lay makes the point that women working in comics no longer have to “disguise” their sex with pseudonyms: in reference to the current *Brenda Starr* cartoonist, she remarks, “June Brigman can be June Brigman now.” But Lay quickly follows with remaining barriers, such as tokenism. She recalls being turned down for one particular job where the rejection letter stated: “Thanks, but we already have a female cartoonist.”

The participants agreed that there is a need for further change, mostly in increasing the numbers of young female readership and the numbers of women working in the industry. “We’ve made a lot of progress,” states Lay, “and there’s still some progress to go.” Several participants noted that women’s numbers in small presses have increased more than the number of women doing mainstream material, since there is greater room for self-expression and creativity. Robbins observes, however, “for every small change like that, I think you have a lot of men reacting to it very negatively in their

comics.” Berger, Slate and Robbins are quick to offer the reminder that these few efforts exist amidst masses of comics depicting women as sex objects. In fact, Marx states that she has not “seen any major budging of attitudes in the male writers” in terms of how female characters are depicted. More than one participant noted that, in general, comic books are a medium produced by men, predominately for men. That said, most of the participants expressed the belief that an increase in the number of women producing comics would result in changes to the medium, most noticeably in the representation of women.

### **Modest Gains: More Differences in Opinion and Position**

When asked if women’s roles and status in the industry have changed since the 1970s, the participants produced an array of responses, some echoing the previous section. Pini felt that her experience removed her from any position granting a broader view of the field, but offers her thoughts:

I think that women of vision have come in and have had the experiences that they have had. Some have persisted, and some have gone on to other things. I think that you see an awful lot of women in the--how can I put it--in the editorial area of comics. You see an awful lot of women in production. Well, it’s almost like animation. Good ole Walt Disney always used to hire women to paint his cells back when that was how animated films were made because women have much more of a sense of detail and a kind of refined perception than guys do. So Walt would always hire women to paint the cells because they could stay within the lines better than the guys did. I think that this refined perception, this ability to dot “i’s” and cross “t’s” is, in a sense, part of the feminine nature. I think you will find lots of women in production because they can catch glitches that guys wouldn’t. They can catch more misspellings. They can catch more layout problems. They just have an eye for it. So I think that’s one reason you see a lot of women in production. And, also, there simply aren’t a lot of women who are out there who are creators, who are encouraged, or who have raised themselves up to be writers and artists. There just aren’t a lot of them.

In terms of status, Marx gives the most optimistic response:

Yes. I think it's certainly better. I think it's certainly improved – just the fact that there are women working in comics. Now you do have women doing it, who are known for doing it, and can get somewhere doing [it] – which was pretty much unknown before. Unfortunately, I'm probably just a couple of steps outside the industry to be a real good judge of this. I think it has evened out more. I don't think it's even 50/50 or anything like that. But, certainly, there's some really stunning coloring work being done. And it seems to me that there are quite a few women editors.

Slate points to a moment of hope in the 1980s when large publishers made efforts to create more material for girls. She, along with Robbins, further comment that it was, however, a fleeting moment of hope as titles were cancelled and industry giants turned to ways to capitalize on existing markets (fanboys) and products (franchising).

In terms of roles, the participants again gave conflicting views. Marx and Slate indicated that there appears to be a greater number of women, for example, in editing and production, than in the creator roles – a point Pini also makes. Marx also notes a greater presence of women in coloring. In contrast, Robbins expressed the opinion that the number of women in colorist and letterer positions has been about the same since the 1970s. Pini attributed the higher number of women in editing and production to a notion that women have a better eye for “detail and refinement.” As to why there are fewer women in the role of creator, she notes a general lack of support for women artists and writers.

Regarding self-publishing, Robbins states: “There are many more women who are being published by the indies or who are self-publishing.” The number of women in the mainstream, according to Robbins, “has not changed at all. If anything, maybe there are less women; I don't know. But there certainly are very few.” She elaborates:

Our inroads have really all been in the independents, as I said, the indies and self-publishing--the fact that, thank goodness, we can self-publish. And, of course, I think that a major--a major good inroad has been Friends of Lulu; the organization called Friends of Lulu. At least it's a place where women can come, you know?

Berger's perspective is that there are more women, at least women editors, in the mainstream industry than twenty-five years ago. Slate adds to this, stating:

I know there are women out there. But in the creative roles of writer or drawer, I don't think there [are] any. I guess there are some people who are drawing, but I think they are drawing superheroes. I don't think there is anything really going on that's not superheroes. I think there are more women editors now.

### **Locating Women's Impact on the Industry**

Most of the participants expressed ambivalence over whether women have had any impact on the comic book industry. It seems that impact is best located outside of the mainstream or in certain positions, such as colorist. Most of the participants pointed to examples from the 1980s and 1990s of individual women in self-publishing or independent comics. These examples include acclaimed comics by Donna Barr (*Desert Peach*), Colleen Durand (*A Distant Soil*) and Wendy Pini (*Elfquest*). Most felt these works stand out for their artistry in both illustration and writing. Marx and Robbins both cite the organization Friends of Lulu as evidence that women have had some impact on the comic books industry.

In reference to the organization and women's impact, Marx notes:

Oh, I think so, definitely. I've been supporting that group since they formed. I just think the very fact that a group like that can exist says a lot -- that women can, certainly should, and I think will, especially if they keep fighting at it, have an impact.

I'd like to see a lot more books out there like *A Distant Soil* [Colleen Doran] and *Strangers in Paradise* [Terry Moore], and things like



that. One of my favorite books of all time was *Love and Rockets*. And God knows--those guys [Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez] tend to be a little hardcore sometimes, verging on porn. But they still did just a wonderful job of creating characters, absolutely wonderful stuff. I think that women could help push it, women and the unusual men like the guy that does *Strangers in Paradise*. Those [are the] kind of people that understand that you can do books other than overbuilt superheroes having to save the universe all the time. And I think women are going to probably tend more in that direction.

Robbins says of Friends of Lulu:

Just recently, this woman [e-mailed], "I want to do this comic about, you know, a heroine, and I showed it to a guy, and he said 'Well, you have to give her a guy love interest, you know.' Well, why do I have to do that?" Women want to join Friends of Lulu just to know that they are not alone, just to talk with other women.

Based on the interviews, impact seems to be a matter of degree and informed by the positions of the participant. Slate remarks:

Because we are freelance, there's not that whole group thing. I would like to say, "Oh, yes, we all," but it wasn't like that even when I was working more than full time. You'd just go in and have a meeting and give your work and then leave. If you happened to see somebody in the hall and say, "Hi" and could actually go out for a cup of coffee, that would be nice. But, usually, that didn't happen. It was pretty isolating.

And Lay states with much humor:

The place [Mad Magazine] is run by old men. They are trying to get more women in, but they don't know how. They do it by their conception of what women do, and they're old men. What do they know? But as younger people get into those jobs, when these old farts retire, then, I think there will be a genuine change there; but at least women got their foot in the door.

The narrators identify many of the reasons for their ambivalence to this question. On the one hand, free lance and contract work has kept some participants from gaining a broader view of changes regarding women's impact on the mainstream comic book industry. This position, however, is one that allows them greater artistic and creative

space. For those who are still trying to work within the mainstream industry, it remains a male-dominated industry.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONCLUSIONS

If the participants made one thing clear, it was their passion for comic art – panels of words and illustrations. For most of them, this love for comics began in childhood. It was a time when titles aimed at children and young girls were easily found at newsstands and grocery stores. As youth, they read comic books at summer camp, borrowed copies from siblings, had parents buy them or they bought them. Influenced by the combination of words and pictures, they created their own characters and wrote their own stories. For several of the participants, having an interest in comic art shaped decisions that they made in regard to occupation, whether it was as an artist, illustrator, writer, scripter, and/or cartoonist.

When asked how they felt being a woman affected how they were treated or how people perceived their work, they offered a variety of responses. Most of the participants expressed the belief that being a woman in the industry did shape, on some level, other's perceptions of their work and how they were treated. Whether it was actually "being a woman" or creating work with a feminine "sensibility" or "style," gender was relevant. Fans, according to the narrators, were a great source of inspiration and validation. Relationships with publishers and editors, however, provided a variety of responses ranging from experiences of overt discrimination in terms of pay to getting jobs based on their gender. All participants expressed the belief that women's visibility does make a positive difference in a predominately all-male environment.

Regarding the impact of the women's movement on the comic book industry, the participants expressed a belief that it did have an impact. Examples provided by the narrators depict gains in self-publishing and independents, an area allowing greater artistic creativity and control that has gained greater status since the 1980s. The women's movement, according to several participants, opened the door for women to participate in the mainstream industry and gave them a common language to articulate their experiences and concerns. Slate and Robbins believed changes within the industry (distribution, niche marketing, and reduced diversity in genres) and a larger socio-political conservative backlash against feminism have tempered the impact of the women's movement. Overall, the participants thought the impact of the movement has created positive change, but they also expressed the need for greater change, not only in increasing the numbers of female readership and women working in field, but also in improving how women are represented.

When asked about the impact of women's participation in the industry, the participants expressed ambivalence. Participants involved in self-publishing or working for independents, such as Pini, expressed a distance to the mainstream comic book industry that made evaluating the impact difficult. Marx and others felt that the presence of highly acclaimed women in self-publishing and independents, Donna Barr for example, was an indication of the impact of the women on the industry through quality artistry and storytelling. For others, the presence of an advocacy organization of and for women, FOL, was, according to Marx and Robbins, evidence that women have made some impact. Lay and Slate provide reminders that as a whole, women still confront a great deal of bias in the male-dominated industry.

The narrators presented a range of thoughts regarding changes in women's roles and status, all of which reflect a sense of modest gains for women. Much like their predecessors, these six women performed a variety of tasks, assuming myriad occupational roles - editing, scripting, writing, illustrating, coloring, lettering. For those creating their own works, they performed all of these tasks. For others, freelance work for mainstream and independent comics meant performing one role – for example, writing the story or doing the artwork.

According to the interviews, most of the women worked throughout the 1980s in the comic book industry. Several, however, found it increasingly difficult to make a living doing comics, and they expanded their talents into other areas – television, comic strips, movie scripts, and books. Some participants, Lay and Marx for example, left comics, finding they could be creative and make a living working through these other mediums.

In terms of women's status, most participants expressed a similar belief. Compared to other periods, the fact that more women, albeit in small numbers, are working in comics and getting acclaim and making lucrative careers demonstrates that overall there has been an increase in status. In terms of roles, the participants gave conflicting responses. Regarding the mainstream industry, Marx and Slate indicated that there appears to be a greater number of women, for example, in editing and production, than in the creative roles, like writing and drawing. Pini, too, made this a point and attributes the smaller number of women in creative roles to a general lack of support for women artists and writers.

Self-publishing and independent comics, according to all of the participants, have been where women are seen in greater numbers. Their comments on this topic attribute this to reasons that focus on changes within the industry and larger social forces. For example, it was during the 1970s that underground comics gained notoriety and a nascent movement for independent comic book publishers started. Numerous women, including Robbins, working during this period were part of that environment. Pini noted that the movement of big name talents out of the mainstream industry opened the door for a greater numbers of artists wanting to self-publish or work for an independent publisher. According to the participants, women found better opportunities for artistic expression and development in self-publishing and in independent publishers.

Furthermore, as the mainstream publishers focused efforts to foster a culture of fans to include not only adolescent, but also older males, they slowly abandoned creating works that were created for a female readership. As Robbins and Slate noted, these were the areas in mainstream publishing where women were writing and drawing.

As the participants expressed, the decision to work inside or outside the mainstream comic has tradeoffs, in terms of salary, pay and benefits. While self-publishing and independent work allows for greater artistic and creative freedom, it is also more challenging to make a living when competing with large publishers and limited modes of distribution. Large publishers may be able to provide security in terms of pay and benefits, but they are more restrictive in terms of content and control.

When asked how they believe being a woman has affected their salary, pay, or benefits, participants responses reflected their positioning within the industry. Pini's highly successful self-published comic book left her with no point of comparison. Marx

believed having an agent ensured she was paid competitively. Berger, who has worked for DC, felt well compensated. However, Lay and Robbins felt that they had been treated differently as female freelancers, and not for the better, than men in the industry.

Future research will require taking note of the some of the limits of this project. The phrase “comic book industry” for some participants seemed problematic. One opinion was that it assumed coherence where none existed. Those who had freelanced for mainstream or independent publishers did not feel that they were necessarily working in an “industry.” In fact, many participants expressed disregard for mainstream publishers and did not see their work as having anything to do with the others.

Large publishers use the assembly-line method of creating comics, while those working in self-publishing and for independents often assume many roles. Marvel and DC exist primarily as producers of superhero comics while independents and self-publishers have greater freedom to explore other genres and stories. Whether working for mainstream or independents, the majority of the participants worked in genres other than superheroes – teen, romance, sci-fi/fantasy, and funny animals.

Although it makes for a useful framing device, the phrase “comic book industry” could be either reworded, or opened for discussion in interviews. In the case of the latter, it might invite interesting thoughts and opinions in regard to the relationship between mainstream and independent comic book publishers and self-publishers.

There were other limits to the project. The sample size made generalizing difficult. Future research could include a much larger sample. While each of the six participants’ stories is important in and of itself, smaller samples allow for qualitative rather than quantitative data collection. The data generated from a larger pool of

interviews could present broad themes from which one could generalize more easily about women's roles and status in the comic book industry. Future studies might also consider bringing men into the sample to tease out in greater detail how gender is at work, include queer issues or characters, or works that are created by people of color. The six participants were a homogenous group in terms of gender and race, which shaped to a certain extent their experiences.

In closing, when taken together, the interviews clarify the fact that the participants have striven individually to make differences for future generations of women in an industry that is largely male-dominated. In terms of content and style, the participants have worked and re-worked the boundaries of popular notions of comic books being adolescent heterosexual, male fantasies. They have sought to open up a medium that was once read across a larger demographic. And, in terms of their positions within a male-dominated field, they have expanded women's place in the comic book industry. Although much remains the same, these six women have pushed the boundaries and redefined the margins inside and outside of the comic book industry.



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## APPENDIX

Name:

Permission to tape:

Occupation:

Date:

Time:

1. In terms of occupations, roles, and responsibilities, how were you involved in the comic book industry during the 1970s or later in the 1980s and the 1990s?
2. What factors do you feel most contributed to your career choice(s)? (Probe for role-models.)
3. Do you think the women's movement had an impact in your line of work during the 1970s or later in the 1980s and 1990s?
4. What do you think have been the most significant changes to the industry during the past 30 years? (Probe the times.)
5. How do you feel you have been treated in your line of work by publishers, by other women in the industry, by men in the industry, or by fans? (Probe for changes in treatment.)
6. Do you think any of this was related to your being a woman? (If yes, ask to explain and give examples. If no, ask to elaborate.)

7. Do you think your marital status – either married or single – affected your career? (If yes, ask how so. If no, ask to elaborate.)
8. Do you think being a woman affected other people's perception of your work? If so, how? (Probe their views on co-workers, readership, and fans.)
9. In terms of salary, pay, benefits, etc., do you feel you have been treated the same as men in the industry?
10. Do you think women's roles and status in the industry have changed since the 1970s? If so, in what ways? (Probe for the kinds of change, the obstacles, the struggles, the in-roads, the gains, and the times.)
11. Do you think women impacted the comic book industry in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s? If so, how? (Probe for changes in genre, content, work environment.)
12. Is there anything you would like to add about yourself and your work?
13. Is there anything you would like to add about the roles and status of women as a group in the comic book industry during the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s?