The Great Crossover: Readers and Authors in American Serial Comics

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(English)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2016

Date of final oral examination: 5/11/2016

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Table of Contents

Abstract

I argue that serial comics in the Western world form publics and counterpublics in social movements because they include what I call "correspondence zones," discursive spaces within the published text where authors and readers correspond with each other. While comics scholars have focused on the graphic novel, I suggest that ignoring comics' seriality makes us miss the power of comics to galvanize communities.

My chapters consider comics correspondence zones across decades, tracking how author and reader relationships shift over time. In Chapter 1, I consider how letter column correspondence zones of the 1960s *Justice League of America* series helped form the public of comics fandom. My analysis contextualizes the formation of comics fandom, shedding light on the connections between fandom and other social movements of the time. Chapter 2 tells a new oral history of the authors of *Wimmen's Comix*, tracking how the revise and resubmit system of the serial anthology formed a counterpublic of women cartoonists. Though the women's liberation movement has been criticized for its homogeneity, my analysis reveals an important dialogue between straight women and lesbians, reframing our understanding of diversity within the feminist movement.

In Chapter 3, I show how Neil Gaiman used the letter columns of the *Sandman* series to create a counterpublic of readers that recognized how questions about the definition of art were bound up with questions of queer representation. While discussions of the definition of art dominated conversations about Robert Mapplethorpe's *A Perfect Moment* exhibit, erasing his queerness, the presence of the correspondence zone in serial comics preserved the link between those two conversations and used those discussions to define the new comics counterpublic. Finally, drawing on discussions of the evolution of comics authorship and readership in previous

chapters, in Chapter 4, I analyze how the correspondence zones of webcomics reframe our understanding of authorship and economics on the Web of the early ‘00s. Rather than using authorship to compete in a capitalist marketplace, webcomics authors form relationships characterized by cooperative competition. Together, these chapters demonstrate the importance of viewing comics correspondence zones as tools for public and counterpublic formation.

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Acknowledgments

This project was made possible by the generosity of several different communities. The UW-Madison English Department provided support throughout. Timothy Yu, thank you for stepping in to provide project direction. Having to convince you has helped make this project stronger. I'd also like to thank Ramzi Fawaz for sharing his scans of the *JLA Mailroom* before he even moved to Wisconsin, and for helping me develop as a scholar of media and cultural studies. Thank you, Christa Olson, for stopping by every once in a while to check in. Research in the Michigan State University Archives for Chapter 1 was made possible by a summer fellowship from the department and a number of people, including Theresa Nguyen, Susan Bernstein, Robin Valenza, and Jon McKenzie, offered feedback on early drafts of that chapter. Thank you to Brad Hughes, who has been a model mentor, and Michael Bernard-Donals, who has been supportive from afar since my first day of grad school. I could not have made it through without some of my fellow graduate students, including Faina Polt, Rachel Herzl-Betz, and Ambar Meneses-Hall, who were great listeners and taskmasters as part of my dissertation writing group. Thank you also to my dear friend Mattie Burkert, who has supported me throughout by leading the way.

Being a part of the wider UW-Madison community has also enriched my research. The transdisciplinary conversations that were part of the A.W. Mellon Workshop on Comics helped provide new lenses through which to view my objects of study, and I am grateful to Adam Kern and Jim Danky for being such excellent co-leaders. Adam has been a model for how to build transdisciplinary spaces, and Jim's historical perspective has been invaluable. I met Carol Tilley through this workshop, and I am grateful that she turned my attention to comics readers and also

provided feedback early on in the process. Research for Chapter 3 was made possible by a Mellon-Wisconsin summer fellowship.

Membership in academic communities beyond the university has also been valuable. Being invited to participate in the HERMES Symposium on Authorship and New Media helped provide a necessary frame for the project, and the international community of scholars gathered in Prague offered valuable feedback and insight. To my fellow comics scholars, I welcome the chance to forge this new path in the excellent company of Nick Sousanis, Aaron Kashtan, Josh Kopin, Keegan Lannon, Keith McCleary, Frederik Byrn Kolert, Oswaldo Oyola, Jeremy Carnes, and Francesca Lyn. Maggie Galvan, you push me to be a better scholar. I look forward to being in dialogue with you for years to come. I am also grateful for the generosity of the women of *Wimmen's Comix* who sat for interviews and answered follow up questions for Chapter 2: Trina Robbins, Roberta Gregory, Terre Richards, Lee Marrs, Sharon Rudahl, and Joyce Farmer, thank you for talking to me about your lives and work.

And last but not least, the non-academic communities and individuals that make this possible. Thank you to my Madison Framily for being a never-ending source of love and support, to Club MX for reminding me that reading comics is fun, and to Kim and Peter Huff for providing a space in the late stages of this project. Thank you to my parents for supporting me no matter how wacky my dreams may seem. And most of all, thanks to Joseph. I may have done the writing, but this couldn't exist without you. I love that you challenge me and look forward to many years of conversations about comics and communities.

Introduction

Comics Forming Publics

An example from Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* captures how the serial form of comics builds relationships. The third issue of *Watchmen* opens at a newsstand where a newsvendor talks to an African American kid sitting against a fire hydrant and reading a comic series called *Tales of the Black Freighter* (Fig.1). At first, their relationship is one of customer and seller, but as the boy returns to read subsequent installments of the serial comic, they start to build a more human relationship based on the kid's continual presence. While the news vendor first claims that "In this world, you shouldn't rely on help from anybody," and scolds the kid for not buying the book, upon reading a distressing headline in a just-delivered newspaper, he changes his tune, saying that "We all gotta look out for each other, don't we?" before letting the kid have the book.[1] In the final scene between the two characters, the news vendor gets to know the boy, highlighting how "It's like you been coming here weeks, readin' that junk over an' over, an' yet we ain't exactly close."[2] He asks the boy's name and why he comes to the newsstand, tells him that he "took this job to meet people" after his wife died, because his friends stopped calling.[3] They happen to share the name Bernard, and while according to the kid, "That don't signify for nothin'," when a blast hits New York, killing half the population, Gibbons splits up the middle section of the page into six panels that depict the news vendor and the kid embracing each other as they fade to white (Fig. 2).[4] The page that reveals the monster responsible for the blast, depicts the man covering the boy with his body, protectively shielding his head, with the title banner "A Stronger Loving World" underneath.[5]

Figure 1: We meet the newsvendor and the comics reading kid in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons "Judge of All the Earth" ***Watchmen*** **3 (New York: DC Comics, 1986). The two build a relationship as the kid returns each week to read** ***Tales of the Black Freighter*****, a serial comic.**

Figure 2: When a bomb hits New York in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons "Look on My Works Ye Mighty" ***Watchmen*** **11 (New York: DC Comics, 1986), the newsvendor and the kid embrace as they fade to white.**

This example thematizes how serial comics, published in installments over time, bring people together. The newsvendor and the boy form their bond because the boy returns to the newsstand to read each new issue of the series, and they realize that connection is important in the apocalyptic era of the Doomsday clock. The newspaper stand becomes a place of intersection, as various newsvendors, a lesbian cabbie and her ex girlfriend, and other customers, along with Rorshach, his psychiatrist and the psychiatrist's wife, visit to buy their newspapers and have a bit of conversation with the newsvendor. Moore and Gibbons intercut these interactions with the language from the *Tales of the Black Freighter* series, continually framing this sense of community with the comic within the comic. Moore also highlights the seriality of the comic, not only by depicting the boy in every scene of the newspaper stand, but in his long discussion of the series found at the back of issue five, which discusses the development of the fictional series over time as the authors and artists changed and the series evolved.[6]

While this example highlights the role seriality can play in forming personal relationships, I am interested here in how seriality can form larger communities, namely publics of strangers who connect through the text. Early on in its history, comics reading was defined as an interactive practice, as published reader letters in letter columns blurred the line between readership and authorship. Comics, as cheap pop culture objects, spread across the country and the world, reaching many different kinds of people, including marginalized audiences, such as women, children, and minorities. These audiences became attached to the characters and stories, eager to predict what might happen in the next issue by writing letters to the editor or eager to try their hands at producing comics themselves, given that all they needed to create a comic was pencil and paper. When readers responded to one another in those published letters, agreeing and disagreeing with one another, or citing previous letters in their own interpretations of the

comic, they became a public that differs from a community in the sense that it forms between people, often geographically dispersed, who are otherwise strangers. As comics evolved to deal with more complex subject matter, including issues related to identity, these reading publics served as counterpublics, providing sites of resistance and solidarity around ideas that ran counter to those expressed in dominant culture.

The thematization of relationships forming around a series of comic books in *Watchmen* is in tension with the way most people encounter that story today. Because *Watchmen* was hailed as a turning point for comics and marketed as a "graphic novel" that collects the series in one book, most people's experience of the text today erases its seriality.[7] In his keynote speech for the 2014 meeting of the International Comic Arts Forum, Bart Beatty mapped the field of comics scholarship so far, and, unsurprisingly, most scholarly articles in the MLA database were on Art Spiegelman, Marjanne Satrapi, and Allison Bechdel, all of whom write graphic novels.[8] In efforts to legitimize the comics art form, scholars deny that serial history, separating the works they study, which are often published in one volume, from the "bad" history of comics associated with superhero comic books.[9] Jan Baetans and Hugo Frey connect seriality to genre literature in their definition of the graphic novel as composed of "single volume comics the qualities (content or artwork) of which distinguish them as exceptional when compared to regularly serialized titles or more generic material (superheroes, sci-fi, or fantasy)."[10] As Douglas Wolk claims, superhero stories are "the idiot cousin" of comics as art, "omnipresent" and "eternally the same," a statement that captures the common denigration of the superhero story.[11] As Romagnoli and Pagnucci point out, this denigration is matched with an erasure, as foundational texts, like Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics,* give superheroes short shrift or, like Martin Baker's *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics,* leave out superheroes entirely.[12]

This erasure of superheroes is consonant with an erasure of seriality, as the square book-bound trade paperbacks containing complete and mature stories (graphic novels) are dissociated from the stapled, floppy serial ongoing ones in comic books.[13] The ascendancy of the graphic novel, read in a single volume, causes scholars to miss the power of comics to galvanize communities of readers, which comes from their seriality.

I draw my methods from literary and media studies of authorship, readership, and participatory culture, with print culture studies of seriality providing an important lens through which to view these topics. Robert Darnton's separation of author and reader as depicted in "What is the History of Books?" highlights the disconnection of readers and authors in studies of both subjects. In this essay Darnton lays out a life cycle for texts that emphasizes the many agents responsible for shaping each text, and this overview of the field has been used to study book history and print culture since then (Fig. 3).[14] Depending on their particular interests, scholars zoom in or out on the diagram, sometimes focusing on one particular relationship in the cycle (e.g. how the relationship between the editor and publisher helped shape the text) and sometimes zooming out to discuss the entire life cycle of a certain book. A relationship in the diagram that is less often explored is the relationship between the author and the reader. In Darnton's original diagram, a dotted line rather than a solid one marks the relationship between the author and reader, indicating, as Darnton puts it, that "reading remains the most difficult stage [of this process] to study" because of a lack of documentation.[15]

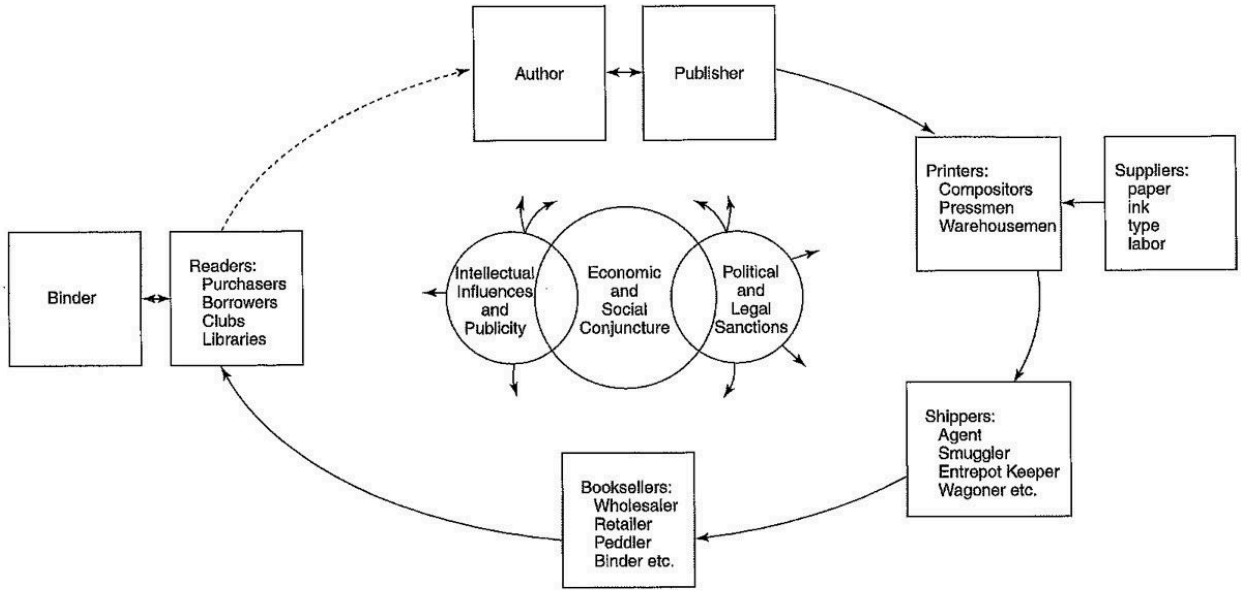

Figure 2.1 The communications circuit

Figure 3: Robert Darnton's communications circuit from "What is the History of Books?" that represents the many forces that affect the lives of texts, including a dotted line between authors and readers. This dotted line is characteristic of the disconnect between scholarship on authors and scholarship of readers.

Most scholarship bears out this visual separation of the author and reader, as writers and readers remain separate, with edited collections devoted to one or the other. Authorship is associated with notions of individual Romantic genius. In "What is an Author?" Foucault connects authorship to "a system of ownership and strict copyright rules,"[16] and Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi remind us in their introduction to the edited collection *The Construction of Authorship* that these copyright rules were connected to the "possessive individualism" of early capitalism in England.[17] Authors needed to assert control over their texts in order to make money from them, making the function of authorship an economic one. Even more recent conversations about authorship are concerned with authors "getting credit" (to use

an economic metaphor) for their work, asserting moral or legal rights over their productions, whether they be films, television shows, or some other form of text broadly defined. John T. Caldwell and David Brisbin both deconstruct the film auteur by discussing the contributions of, respectively, below-the-line workers, such as those paid hourly rates for physical film production, and production designers.[18] Judd Ethan Ruggill and Ken S. Mcallister lay out the many authors involved in creating a video game, extending authorship privileges to non-human actors, such as software algorithms,[19] and Michele Hilmes lays out how the many authors in serial radio production gained authorship credit via unionization.[20] All of these discussions are interested in recovering the multiple authors in order to determine who owns the text.

Studies of readers, by contrast, turn away from the author, focusing on how readers put the text to their own uses. As Carl F. Kaestle says in "The History of Readers," "there is little evidence of detailed responses by readers in the past, especially among ordinary people."[21] Therefore, it makes sense that scholars often take ethnographic approaches to recover reading communities, as Janice Radway does in studying how women use romance novels for gender identity formation in *Reading the Romance*,[22] and as Elizabeth McHenry does in *Forgotten Readers,* where she examines how literary societies help nineteenth-century African Americans forge a new, distinctly American identity.[23] While both of these works situate reading as an active practice, they focus particularly on how readers might read works against the grain, often positioning readers in opposition to authors.

In taking seriously published reader input, this project breaks down this binary between readers and authors, focusing instead on how the two connect through the medium of the text. Rather than posing an ideal reader, as much early reader response criticism does, I consider actual reader contributions that reflect actual reader experience. In doing so, I consider readers

who, through recognition and publication, become authors. At the same time, I think through authors as readers, who interpret, critique, and otherwise respond to previously published installments of serialized texts. When this reading, whether it comes from authors or readers, is published, it connects the dotted lines in Darnton's diagram, helping us consider the connections and similarities between readers and authors, rather than focusing on an antagonistic relationship. In other words, I think about how reading can be authorship and how authors are readers.

In focusing on breaking down the binary between authors and readers, I draw on scholarship on seriality and scholarship on participatory culture. Scholarship on seriality discusses how serial texts provide glimpses into reader experience, often focusing on how reading is more of an active than a passive act. Understandably, much of the scholarship dealing with seriality is connected to Victorian studies because the first serial novel in the West was Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* first published in 1836 and serial fiction flourished during this time period. Scholarship focused on serial forms, as Hughes and Lund indicate in their much-cited book *The Victorian Serial*, comes from a desire to more accurately understand the historical reader experience, as reading a story in serial form over a period of months is fundamentally different from reading those serial stories collected into a novel.[24] There is also the sense that the serial novel, because it was published in the popular press and because authors had the flexibility to modify stories based on current events, had a more intimate relationship with readers than bound novels.[25] The consensus among scholars of seriality is that serials both shaped and were shaped by the social and political contexts of their readers. Scholars study these relationships in various ways, from examining reading in autobiographies, to looking at how readers compiled pieces of information together in commonplace books, to studies of library or literary society records, in addition to looking at critical responses to texts.[26]

However, even though this work provides valuable insight into the somewhat elusive reader experience that always comes across as an active one, it seldom fills in the dotted line in Darnton's diagram by discussing how readers and authors interacted throughout the subsequent publication of serial texts. Work that uses reader letters to authors of serial texts helps to fill in this gap, bringing to light the contributions readers were able to make to serial texts over the course of their run. Jennifer Hayward's *Consuming Pleasures* with its focus on "the effect of [audience] readings on producers of texts" comes the closest to examining how audiences and authors collaborate during serial production.[27] Hayward also applies the methodology used to study nineteenth-century fiction to look at Milton Caniff's newspaper comic strip *Terry and the Pirates* from 1934 to 1936 alongside Dickens's serial version of *Our Mutual Friend* and soap operas, which makes her one of the few to examine comics as serial texts. Hayward tracks the reader through letters that Caniff kept in correspondence files, and it emerges that, as with most serial fiction, comics reading was an active practice and that the opinions and advice established in those letters helped shape Caniff's decisions as the comics author. While Hayward's work emphasizes how reader reactions, as expressed in reader letters, helped shape Caniff's subsequent comic strips, the letters are addressed specifically to Caniff, tucked away in an archive, not printed alongside the comic strips.

As serial texts, comics are both long-running enough to become an integral part of readers' lives and agile enough to respond to current events. In the *Watchmen* example, the publication of installments over time results in Bernard incorporating reading time at the newsstand into a routine. The comic becomes a part of both the character's quotidian experience, as well as the reader's experience of *Watchmen*, as we encounter the character reading the comic over and over again. For some comics readers, this sustained presence in everyday life leads to community

formation, as readers become so invested in the future of a series that they are compelled to predict or write future storylines. Each issue of the series is both presentist and forward looking, serving as a fulcrum upon which reader interpretation turns as the reader recognizes current events and then predicts what comes after. That same current issue, because it is produced quickly and cheaply unlike a television show or a movie, has the flexibility to reflect, respond to, and even shape its cultural and historical context.

Moore and Gibbons highlight this quality of serial comics to reflect the everyday and shape the future when they juxtapose thematics in the comic Bernard is reading with the sense of impending doom as more and more of the world is drawn into war in the diegetic narrative. The depicted comics series, called *Tales of the Black Freighter,* follows a lone protagonist in a horror comic who begins the tale marooned on a deserted island. Fearing for his family's safety given the horror of the Black Freighter pirate ship he thinks is tormenting his town, he makes a raft out of the corpses of his shipmates and sails home only to discover, after he has brutally murdered several people, that he is the monster he feared all along. The reader experiences the events of the series as a comic within the comic, through text boxes and panels intercut with the diegetic narrative of the *Watchmen* series. Newspaper headlines depict the escalating global conflict in the diegetic narrative as Russia invades Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the world approaches World War III. The doomsday clock on the cover of each issue of the *Watchmen* series amplifies this sense of impending doom in the diegetic narrative. If we think of this sense of impending doom as current events, the two instances of the *Tales of the Black Freighter* series that frame the attempted assassination of Adrian Veidt, who the public knows as a former superhero and philanthropist, highlight why comics should be taken seriously. The instance before the assassination attempt demonstrates comics' ability to deal with complex subjects, such as

mortality, while the instance after the shooting shows comics' ability to reflect current events. Moore and Gibbons suggest that comics should not be easily dismissed when they show a panel from *Tales* overlaid with the newsvendor exclaiming "Apathy! Everybody escapin' into comic books an' T.V.! Makes me sick," followed by a panel where both the newsvendor and the protagonist of *Tales* have a "sudden confrontation with morality" that "induce[s] an odd clarity" for both characters. [28] These parallels highlight how comics, rather than being pure escapist trash as the newsvendor seems to say, can help us philosophize about complex subjects like mortality and morality. Right after the attempt on Veidt's life, the comic within the comic calls attention to the way comics reflect current events when Gibbons depicts a panel from the *Tales* series that shows the protagonist's "enemies' hideous banner flapping dismally in [his] dreams," overlaid with a speech bubble from the newsvendor that says "war, child murder, attempted assassination…this front page is a nightmare!"[29] By juxtaposing the symbol of impending doom from the comic within the comic with talk that lays out the horror of current events, Moore and Gibbons call attention to the fact that comics reflect current events, a quality I am claiming stems from their serial publication format, specifically their flexibility as texts published quickly and cheaply one after the other.

While it is common for popular culture to reflect current events, comics' seriality lends them an aspirational element that seeks to shape the future, if only the public would be willing to take them seriously. In the case of *Tales of the Black Freighter*, if the world had just learned the moral lessons of the comic series, Moore and Gibbons seem to suggest, the global conflict might not have grown so out of control. The protagonist of the tale learns the dangers of preemptive action when he accidentally bludgeons his wife to death in the dark, only recognizing her after he has killed her in an attempt to keep her from raising an alarm and thwarting his revenge on the

pirates of the Black Freighter.[30] As the protagonist runs from an angry mob of normal citizens, not the pirates he thought were tormenting his home, Gibbons draws a panel from *Tales* overlaid with the claim from the newsvendor that "morally, we oughtta strike first."[31] The comic, filled with the same sense of impending doom as the diegetic narrative, comes to the conclusion that striking first will only make things worse. While Moore and Gibbons show a public that ignores the world-making aspects of serial comics at their peril, I suggest that publics are drawn to these aspirational qualities of comics. Serial comics are able to be both of the moment and for the future, and this quality attracts publics in general, and counterpublics in particular, eager to shape responses to current events. Throughout this dissertation, I show marginalized populations reframing conversations or events as presented in mainstream media, like television and newspapers. When an installment of a comic responds to these events, readers contribute their thoughts about that event, pointing out misrepresentation of particular individuals. As readers in subsequent issues respond to these responses in the public forum of the series, they develop a counterpublic, whose discussion is always in relation to that of the dominant public, but also critiquing that position. In addition to providing a forum for published reader discourse, two important qualities of comics facilitate this public formation. First, because individual issues of serial comics are created over time, rather than all at once, they nimbly respond to and reflect current events and conversations. Second, the publication of the series over time renews reader attention at intervals, helping increase their investment in the stories the series tells. As readers return to it again and again, the series becomes an integral part of their lives. These qualities help sustain the public that blossoms as part of serial publication.

Hayward's work on seriality and research done in the area of participatory culture, where scholars examine how fan communities participate in the authorship of mass media texts, provide

useful frameworks for thinking about these publics of readers as they connect to authors and each other. In his book, *Textual Poachers,* Henry Jenkins highlights how participatory culture "transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts" associated with "a new culture and a new community,"[32] and in their introduction to *The Participatory Cultures Handbook,* Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson connect the rise of the study of participatory cultures to the emergence of the Internet, positioning the scholarly field as intimately tied to digital advances.[33] Demonstrating the further importance of participatory culture to a networked economy, Jennifer Gillan catalogues how participatory culture went from being associated with fans to being an integral part of corporate strategy for television companies.[34] Though many of the essays in Delwiche and Henderson's volume analyze participatory cultures not associated with fans, most scholarship on the topic, following Jenkins's lead, has focused on fan communities. Fans borrow characters to write their own fiction and they participate in online communities where they write on discussion boards. They produce self-published zines and post videos on YouTube that use their favorite characters for their own ends.[35] Yet even descriptions of this kind of participatory culture highlight the marginality of these spaces; true, fan input may influence the next season of television (the current season is already filmed before airing, after all), but participatory cultures usually remain in fan spaces, cordoned off from the work of the "authors" of the franchise. Serial comics, as pop culture texts, encourage the same kind of participatory activities that mass media like television and film do, but with a key difference. Because comics are produced quickly and cheaply on a regular basis, fan input can be included in the main text of an issue—in letter columns, in the plots of stories or choices of characters, or as readers take over the pen and paper—or the stylus—to become authors themselves. Serial comics, then, become an ideal place to explore the ways that authors

and readers connect within the space of the text, drawing studies of authorship and readers together using the framework provided by studies of participatory culture in order to connect studies of authorship to studies of readership.

I capture these relationships between authors and readers by focusing on what I call "correspondence zones," or public spaces within the text where we see readers and authors interact with one another. The term "correspondence" captures the dialogic nature of the interaction, as well as the shared responsibility for textual production. The author writes, and the reader responds, and the author writes, and so on. The seriality of the medium, the fact that it is published, not all at once, but in installments, helps facilitate this call and response structure. The term correspondence also refers to the fact that, in print comics, these zones emerge via the tradition of letter columns, where commercial editors print letters readers have written. While correspondence captures the reciprocal, written nature of the exchange, the word "zone" marks that space as delimited, but changeable. A zone marks a particular area with a certain characteristic, but does not have to remain static, a quality captured by the fact that the word can also be used as a verb, as in "to zone a city for planning purposes." The power of the correspondence zone comes from its public nature, from the fact that the readers and authors chose to have their exchange in public, rather than in private. At the same time, the public nature of the exchange breaks the binary between the author and reader, as the author's reading is revealed and the reader becomes a contributing author. These correspondence zones, while not only found in comics, situate comics as powerful archives for studying political, economic, and cultural power relationships and for reframing readership and authorship within these broader contexts.

Focusing on these correspondence zones also helps us see how the serial comics often dismissed by comics studies can be powerful tools for public and counterpublic formation. Nancy Fraser allies counterpublics with marginalized groups, positioning the counterpublic as an open space for the marginalized to "formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."[36] In her reading of Fraser, Catherine Palczewski suggests that these spaces "enable marginal groups to overcome the discursive barriers to participation because, by definition, [counterpublics] expand discursive space and provide discursive systems counter to those that exist."[37] Robert Asen refines Fraser's definition to apply specifically to discursive instances, since, in the wake of post-structuralism, intersectional identity constantly shifts, becoming a poor ground for building solidarity. Asen's conception of counterpublics acknowledges them as "a dispersed ephemeral phenomenon" that "manifests in moments of social dialogue and discursive engagement among and across constructed boundaries of social, cultural, and political affiliation."[38] Together, Fraser and Asen suggest that the lens of the counterpublic can capture the conversations of those outside dominant discourse in all their multiplicity. Paying attention to correspondence zones in this dissertation, I capture these discursive interactions as "emergent collectives" of children, women, queer individuals, and geeks negotiate their identities and needs in a space outside of dominant discourse.[39]

Building on Fraser's and Asen's definitions, Michael Warner focuses on the counterpublic as a series of exchanges that take place in a context "mediated by print, theatre, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like."[40] For Warner, publics and counterpublics are driven by print culture, as he highlights in saying that "not texts themselves create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and when a responding discourse can be postulated, can a text address a public."[41] While Warner does not

directly reference seriality, the "concatenation of texts through time" suggests that serial texts are particularly suited to public formation, because they possess the call and response structure mentioned here. These calls and responses must circulate in order to create publics, so that "correspondence, memos, valentines, bills—are not expected to circulate…and that is why they are not oriented to a public."[42] Here, the correspondence Warner refers to is equated with private letters. The correspondence I am discussing, because it is public, made possible by the circulation of the serial form of comics, has the ability to construct publics and counterpublics. It does so by taking "the most private, inward, intimate act of reading" and converting it into "a form of stranger relationality."[43] By making reading practices public, correspondence zones mobilize the seriality of the comics form to facilitate public and counterpublic formation. Indeed, Warner's own focus on what I am calling the correspondence zones of the serial *Spectator,* with its emphasis on the printing of reader correspondence that helped shape readers' relationships to one another, informs my own reading of the comics correspondence zone. While the correspondence zones of the *Spectator* form a public, correspondence zones of comics form both publics and counterpublics. Commercial comics of the 1960s, for instance like the *Spectator,* form a public that becomes comics fandom. As underground comics of the 1970s and commercial comics of the 1990s then respond to this public, which is predominately straight, male and white, they form counterpublics. They can be classified as such because they "[maintain] at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of [their] subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which [they] mark [themselves] off is not just a general or a wider public but a dominant one."[44] In each case, the comics mark or represent the dominant public, only to interrogate it later, to poke holes in it or to critique it. In the 1970s, the women of *Wimmen's Comix* use the chauvinistic idiom of underground comics to create a counterpublic of women

cartoonists. In the 1990s, Neil Gaiman represents the exclusive nature of comics fandom in order to propose a counterpublic of new comics fans who celebrate comics' ability to represent queer identities. Through these critiques readers gain a sense of themselves as a public. Following on Warner's assertion that "[a] public can only act in the temporality of the circulation that gives it existence," my chapters consider comics correspondence zones in different decades. As the comics form evolves, we see the correspondence zone evolve alongside it, with author and reader relationships shifting based on developments in the comics industry.

Moreover, the examples I have chosen from each era illuminate how seriality cuts across different genres of comics and how each genre both responds to its historical moment and shapes its reading public. I draw on Amy J. Devitt's theory of genre as a way of thinking about genre as a rhetorical practice, where the situation signals language users to "take particular reader and writer roles."[45] As readers and writers use genres, the relationship between genre and situation becomes "reciprocal and dynamic," as "people construct genre through situation and situation through genre."[46] This relationship between genre and the reading public reflects both the presentness and forward-looking aspirational elements of these serial texts. My use of genre works in two ways. First, the serial comics I analyze fall into a specific genre of comics representative of its particular era of comics publishing. Second, based on Devitt's claim that "the existence of genres influences people's uses of genres," these genres result in specific genres of correspondence zones, as the space shifts based on the evolving situation of author and reader relationships.[47] The genre lens allows me to consider how several disparate forms of comics that are seldom discussed together in scholarship, are unified by their serial forms.

In Chapter 1, I set up the letter columns of commercial comics in the 1960s as the origin of comics correspondence zones that helped form the public of comics fandom.[48] In the letter

columns of DC Comics *Justice League of America* series, editor Julius Schwartz encouraged interactive reading practices by printing reader letters that critiqued the comic, pointing to plot holes and making plot suggestions. Through these letter column correspondence zones, comics fans envisioned themselves as a public, defined by their interactive reading practices, as exhibited both in the letter columns and in fanzines, fan publications that featured fan authored art, writing, and comics about their favorite characters. Formed at a time in the early 60s when young people valued both community and liberal individualism, comics fandom formed a community, a public that celebrated individual creativity. Though scholars have discussed fandom formation in the past, looking at the formation of the public through the correspondence zone sheds new light on why fandom may have evolved as it did and why it evolved in the 1960s as opposed to in some other era.

Chapter 2 explores what happens when the correspondence zone moves center stage in creator-owned underground comics of the 1970s. Based on a new oral history of the authors of *Wimmen's Comix*, a serial underground anthology devoted to publishing comics for and by women, I discuss how the women envisioned themselves in opposition to both commercial comics and the male-dominated underground comics tradition, employing the transgressive form of comics to transgressively depict women's experiences, such as rape, abortion, and violence against women. In this context, the authors used a revise and resubmit system to mentor a new generation of women cartoonists, with the aim of increasing the number of women working in the male-dominated field of comics. A case study focused on two depictions of lesbian coming out, one drawn by a straight artist and one drawn by a queer artist, demonstrates how the layered form of comics, with its combinations of text and image, allowed for the expression of diverse viewpoints within the counterpublic of the women's liberation movement.

We return to the letter columns of commercial comics in Chapter 3, where I examine how Neil Gaiman mobilizes comics' alliance with misfits to encourage the formation of a queer counterpublic. Unlike mainstream media conversations about Robert Mapplethorpe's art, which erased the artist's queerness in favor of arguments about free speech, the correspondence zones of the *Sandman* series allow for discussions that acknowledge how cultural conversations about queer identity are bound up in conversations about the definition of art. By publishing a censorious letter from a conservative organization in the letter columns after thematizing queer representation in comics, Gaiman encouraged conversations about comics relationship to queer readers at the same time that his comics were vying for art status through their allusions to literature and the formation of the Vertigo line. Because *Sandman* is usually studied in trade format rather than in its original serial form, these conversations about queerness and comics have been erased from scholarly studies of the series.

In Chapter 4 I examine what happens to the correspondence zone in the context of the web through my examination of webcomics. While the historical form that I discuss in my other chapters proliferates as counterpublics find their own niches, webcomics keep this function, but so do many other Internet forms, and it becomes less vital to study their social consequences. One of the defining characteristics of Web 2.0 is the figure of the "produser," a consumer who, in experiencing media, produces more media. While much previous attention to this figure has focused on readers as authors, I concentrate on how the comics correspondence zone of reciprocal guest comics—where webcomics authors post readings of one another's work on one another's sites—helps us see how authorship is a readerly practice in the early days of the Internet. Focused on a particular period of digital production in the early 00s, my examination of Jeph Jacques's *Questionable Content* and Sam Logan's *Sam and Fuzzy* reveals that this readerly

authorship serves an economic function governed by the early Google algorithm PageRank, which determined search order based on the number of links a site had. As a result, rather than using authorship to compete in a capitalist marketplace, webcomics authors form relationships characterized by cooperative competition that help them succeed. My analysis uses the correspondence zones of webcomics to reframe our understanding of authorship and economics on the Web. In my conclusion, I consider the theoretical implications of the correspondence zone, as well as future research this frame could provide.

While the chapters proceed in chronological order, numerous links can be found between each of them. For example, both Chapters 2 and 4 discuss genres of creator-owned comics, and that ownership allows the correspondence zone to shift center stage to the comic itself. While this shift is part of an activist mission in *Wimmen's Comix*, it serves an economic function for Jacques and Logan, as they cooperate in order to compete. By contrast, Chapters 1 and 3 focus on the letter columns of commercial comics, which were clearly governed by editorial practice. In comics from the 1960s, the editor is not one of the authors, and so he has no problem positioning comics reading as a critique of the author. In *Sandman* of the 1990s, Gaiman looms large, extending his reach into the letter columns by using his power as guest editor to print a letter he knew would be controversial. Chapters 2 and 3 have thematic links, as I examine comics and queer counterpublic formation in each, though the different relationships between authors and readers—the first one of mentorship and the second one clearly demarcating the boundary between author and reader—show how queer counterpublics can form in different contexts. Throughout, I track the a development of conceptions of the author, starting with the view of author as laborer and progressing towards a view of the comics author as artist. The relationship between these authors and their readers is complex. Commercial comics necessarily

hold the reader at arms' length: while authors of the 1960s invite critique from this distance, drawing the reader closer, Gaiman is happy to keep the reader in a reader designated space, though he does recognize the power of that space for counterpublic formation. Creator-owned comics choose their relationships to readers, with underground comics authors mentoring them and webcomics authors positioning themselves as readers for economic purposes. Together, the chapters provide a picture of the development of the correspondence zone and examine how comics' serial structure has resulted in the development of public and counterpublics.

My work contributes to the fields of comics studies, literary studies, and participatory culture studies. My focus on the seriality of comics contributes to the field of comics studies by revealing how comics can form counterpublics. Serial comics possess an ability to form communities that deserves more consideration. Additionally, narrow focus on form has eclipsed the power comics can have, and my analysis demonstrates the need for an alternate methodology based in print culture that situates comics within their contexts. For literary studies, I highlight comics as important archives of otherwise invisible reader and author interactions, and offer the correspondence zone as a framework through which to analyze these interactions. As I mentioned earlier, correspondence zones are not unique to comics, and they help us reconfigure our understandings of authorship as separated from readership. I suggest that looking at these two forces together could have an impact on our understanding of how texts enter into and interact with the world. Finally, my work contributes to participatory culture studies by focusing on fan interactions that are integral to the main text, rather than cordoned off in fan-only spaces. This distinction has important implications when paired with other discussions of fan agency for women and other minorities, especially since the integration of fan input resists additional marginalizing via medium analyzed. So often, analysis of fan contributions of

women, for example, focuses on marginalized media like fan fiction or blogs. By continuing to associate marginalized audiences with marginalized media, we keep them out of the mainstream and the agency we can claim for them is limited. Looking at correspondence zones, integral to the text, however, resists this replication of marginalization. Together, these contributions demonstrate the importance of viewing comics correspondence zones as tools for the formation of publics and counterpublics.

Chapter 1

Building a Public: *Justice League of America* in the 1960s

"The 60s was a period of self-discovery, not only for the general population, but also for comics fans, theretofore mostly unknown to each other. *Alter Ego* was the major bridge that brought us together and my participation was a pure pleasure—a labor of love for the comics medium." (Ronn Foss, editor of *Alter Ego,* one of the first comic fanzines)

Organized comics fandom in America emerged in the 1960s. Of course, people had read, appreciated, and probably discussed examples of the medium long before then, but, as Foss highlights, it was not until the 1960s that those fans gained a sense of themselves as a community, as a public. One major contribution credited with creating comics fandom was DC editor Julius Schwartz's decision to begin printing reader addresses along with reader letters in the letter columns of DC series starting in 1961, allowing fans to connect with one another via the mail. Publication of fanzines like *Alter Ego* was central to the formation of this fan community, helping fans to get to know one another and, to the extent that this took place in the public venue of the comic book, defining what it meant to be a fan of comics. And reading comics meant critiquing them, parodying them, or creating your ideal version of the story. As Foss's quote also highlights through its reference to the 60s as "a period of self-discovery," during the same time period when comics fans were forming an identity, members of the young baby boomer generation were forging their own identities, often in opposition to the status quo. Organized into groups like the Students for a Democratic Society and the Free Speech Movement, young people, with more time and money at their disposal than previous generations, questioned the post-war conservatism of the 50s, critiquing the established order with utopian dreams of making the world a better place. While some scholarship has explored the formation of comics fandom in the 1960s, the fact that comics fans organized during a moment awash in

youth organizations has yet to be explored.[1] I argue that paying attention to the correspondence zone of letter columns, where reader letters become part of a public forum within the covers of the comic, helps us recapture the liberal cultural roots of comics fandom, defining membership in that fandom through interactive reading practices that democratized the idea of authorship.

This chapter begins by laying out the many methods that DC editor Julius Schwartz used to define comics reading as an interactive experience, mobilizing the seriality of the medium along with the correspondence zone of the letter columns to create a sense of what Michael Warner refers to as "stranger relationality," where people who do not otherwise know one another begin to consider their commonalities as members of the same public.[2] As the letter columns developed genres and readers responded to one another, the letter columns were defined as integral to the experience of reading the comic. This was especially the case in the *Justice League of America* series (*JLA*), where Schwartz encouraged readers to write in letters voting for new characters to be included in the superhero team, thereby allowing readers to influence subsequent narratives in the series. The *Justice League of America* (*JLA*) is a revival of *The Justice Society* from the 1950s, and was first published in *The Brave and Bold* in early 1960, becoming its own series later that year. The eponymous Justice League was a team of DC characters, many of whom also had single character series running at DC. The original team consisted of Wonder Woman, The Flash, Green Lantern, Aquaman, Superman, Batman, and J'on J'onzz (Martian Manhunter), with honorary non-super member Snapper Carr joining in the first issue. When the comic itself thematized reader input, it reinforced comics reading as an interactive practice, helping to define the rules of membership of this particular public, the public of comics fandom. As demonstrated through my reading of the history of the *Alter Ego* fanzine, which used the addresses Schwartz printed in the letter columns for distribution purposes

beginning in 1961, that fandom formed around those interactive reading practices. I suggest that these reading practices are consonant with how the growing youth audience experienced media and situate the formation of comics fandom within the cultural context of the liberal youth activism of the early 1960s.

Why talk about DC instead of Marvel when discussing comics fandom? After all, everybody likes an underdog and Marvel Comics, when it emerged in the 1960s, was the underdog against the DC Comics juggernaut. And it's true that Marvel published more realistic superheroes who lived in New York and had human problems, while DC heroes, often compared to Greek gods, stood as emblems of perfection. Yet, often in order to craft the underdog narrative for Marvel as the comics of the counterculture, most scholars overstate the conservative nature of DC. Laurence Maslon characterizes the difference as "*Mad Men* culture vs. the beatnik culture," emphasizing DC as a large industrial corporation whose workers "were expected to show up for work in suits and skinny black ties," whereas Marvel was a "renegade company" with a handful of employees.[3] Historian Jeffrey K. Johnson casts DC as allied with the old conservative culture, "producing nice guy company man heroes that smiled while upholding American values and seemingly having few problems that could not be solved in the span of one comic book story," and Marvel as the company allied with the with baby boomers who "were beginning to struggle for social and cultural control of American society."[4] Johnson also uses DC's dominance throughout the decade to highlight that even though "new cultural ideas were gaining traction…most people still favored the status quo."[5] In short, DC stands in for the slick status quo, representative of formulaic comics stories from a bygone age, while Marvel is the young, scrappy upstart bringing innovation to the comics form. However, this reading of DC stems from solely paying attention to character representation and perhaps corporation structure. The

valorization of Marvel, where Stan Lee edited and wrote almost everything the company published, also threatens to fall into the literary studies trap of privileging the writer over any of the other creators, such as the artist, inker, or letterer.[6] I suggest that a print culture perspective that takes into account the letter columns and other paratexts of the DC series reveals a much more nuanced picture of DC as a company that reframed comics reading as interactive and helped form the public of comics fandom.

Comics Authorship and Readership in the 1960s

Let me begin by laying out the status of authorship and readership in commercial comics of the 1960s. Authorship, as we understand it to mean belonging to one author responsible for the labor of producing the text, was nonexistent, divorced from ownership because the comics and characters belonged to the publishing house. While this discussion of authorship is less relevant to this chapter, the discussion sets up the arc of this longer project where I explore the changing roles authorship and readership play throughout the history of serial comics. In future chapters, we will see other authors respond to this divorcing of the individual laborer from the product of their labor. The discussion of readership is important to both the argument of this chapter and the longer arc of this project. In the 1960s, readership was defined as an interactive practice through the development of the letter column correspondence zone. As readers and the comics creators situated these letter columns as integral to the experience of reading a comic, correspondence zones helped form the public of comics fandom.

Based on practices established in the Golden Age of comics (1940-1954) when comics were so popular that companies wanted to turn them out as fast as they could, production practices in

comics of the 1950s and 60s attached authorship to corporations. During this time, the comics characters and the worlds they lived in, known as comics "properties," belonged to giant publishing houses rather than single authors, and those publishing houses paid creators an hourly wage for their work. For example, the comics house National Periodical Publications, which would later become DC, owned the rights to the property Superman, instead of Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster owning the character they created, because Siegel and Schuster were paid an hourly wage to produce work for the publishing house. As a result, authors worked in teams to produce the comic. Each issue could have a writer, an artist, an inker, a letterer, and an editor, not to mention a separate artist and colorist for the cover of an issue, but none of these people received credit for their work, because they weren't thought of as artists, but as laborers trying to make a living wage. As you might guess, the notion of the property was certainly problematic when it came to adequate compensation for labor and resulted in many unsuccessful lawsuits (Siegel and Schuster never reclaimed the rights to Superman, though DC was ordered to compensate the heirs back in 2008), but the notion of the property meant that no issue was attached to a single creator.[7] Instead, the properties belonged to the parent company, in the case of Superman, to DC. I refer to this production structure as *atelier production*, after the French word for "workshop," in order to indicate the lack of attachment to a single creator at DC, and to distinguish this form of production from that of "auteur" publications, which has become the way to refer to (mostly non-serial) comics written and drawn by the same person. Those working as part of the atelier made different contributions to the final product, contributions others working on the same comic lacked the skill to do well. In the realm of commercial serial comics, writers seldom worked as artists and vise versa, and coloring often served as a stepping stone to becoming an artist. The atelier structure, then, always provided room for multiple authors. Moreover, these

authors would frequently shift from issue to issue. In its original run from 1960-1987, the *Justice League of America* (*JLA*) series saw five different writers, three different artists, and three different inkers, not to mention numerous letterers and cover designers. If we think of authorship as usually tied to an individual, authorship, in the sense that literary scholars normally discuss it, was nonexistent because the atelier members did not own the text.

The *JLA* series critiqued this nonexistent authorship by calling attention to the multiple creative contributions to the text. Because the series combined numerous characters that already had their own series into a team, creation of the text was even blurrier than that of single character series. The members of the DC atelier that created issues of *JLA* were already not the original creators of the characters that appear in the series. Gardener Fox was writing stories for characters normally written by John Broome among others, while Mike Sekowsky was drawing characters that Carmine Infantino among others drew. As *JLA* was being produced, many of the characters on the team, such as Green Lantern and The Flash, also had stories running in their own individual character series. The art styles and stories of these single character series influenced the plot of *JLA,* not to mention reader expectations. Individual character series determined core aspects of the character, such as Green Lantern's weakness to the color yellow or Aquaman's inability to leave water for more than an hour, and the *JLA* was obliged to create plots that incorporated those character traits. Thus, the *JLA* series provides an exemplary version of the atelier production structure because not only were many people working together to produce a single issue, but the characters those people were writing about or drawing were simultaneously being written about by other people in house at DC.

Amongst this setting of corporate ownership of atelier labor, letter columns became standard practice, providing a correspondence zone where readers could express their opinions and make

suggestions about the series. Comics readers, like most fans, had been writing letters for a long time, but the letter columns made that writing public. Letter columns in comics, taking cues from pulp science fiction magazines, first appeared during the Golden Age in the 1940s and 50s, but became a regular feature of comics in the 1960s, when DC editor Julius Schwartz began printing addresses along with reader letters. In the letter columns, editors published reader responses to previous work two issues after it appeared, so that, for example, letters written about issue #3 would appear in the letter columns of issue #5. Often, these letters would point out flaws in the stories, discuss why a certain character or storyline was a favorite, or make suggestions for future stories. The public nature of these letters, the fact that they were printed, made them correspondence zones vital to situating comics reading as an active pursuit. The layout emphasizes the letter columns' status as a correspondence zone, a public space of reader and author interaction (Fig. 4). Letters would appear in a typescript font with the reader's name (and later address) printed afterwards. In DC series, Schwartz's name did not appear anywhere on the page. Instead, he took the more general alias of "Editor," a moniker that highlights the anonymity of the members of the in house atelier that Schwartz was a part of. His comments appear directly under the name in a modified font, most often in parentheses and italics. This back and forth between the readers and the Editor, with each participant's role marked by font changes, makes the letter columns look like a dialogue between the Editor as head of the DC atelier and the readers. Thus, even before looking at the content of letters pages, we can see how they offer a space for readers to correspond with the atelier.

Though letter columns originated as part of a general marketing strategy touting the fact that the series was fulfilling reader wishes, they exceeded this capitalist function by creating a sense of reader community. During this time, in addition to including letter columns, DC ran ads with

copy like “You asked for it!” or “At your request,” both of which highlight the fact that appearing to value reader input was part of a more general marketing strategy that happened to

The JLA MAIL ROOM

Dear Editor: My name is *Green Arrow*. You most certainly have heard of me and read my adventures in *World's Finest Comics*. The *Justice League of America* is my second favorite comic book. My prime favorite is, of course, *World's Finest*. I am pleading with such heroes as *Flash, Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Aquaman, Green Lantern*, and *J'onn J'onzz*—who are members of the *Justice League*—to make me a full-fledged member of their organization. Why oh why am I left out? You say I have no super-powers. I counter with the question—does *Batman* have super-powers? No! So I repeat—why am I left out?

I do have one small power—I am a fairly good archer. My arrows and I could have done more in at least one of the JLA adventures than did *Aquaman, Batman*—yes, even *Superman!* I also fight to rid the world of all crime and injustice. There is nothing unusual about me that you should shun me. I fight on earth in the present day. I am as regular as all the other members. I am sure you could make room for me—positive of it! There are many ways to accomplish this—and I'm confident you are brilliant enough to think of them. As a suggestion, I might become a member and take care of things on earth while the other members go off to another world to fight a menace. Or perhaps Snapper might go into the Army and have me take his place. I'm certain I have reader support for the cause of my membership. In all modesty I assert I would be a great help in the JLA. Please PLEASE give me membership!

Green Arrow-Oliver Queen,
Capitol City

(For our reaction to this overwhelmingly persuasive appeal, we refer you to the "Doom of the Star Diamond" story in this issue!—Editor)

* * *

Dear Editor: How come in the January issue of *JLA*, when the members used candles in their headquarters that *J'onn J'onzz* wasn't weakened by the flame?

Robert Rudzinski, Hammond, Ind.

(Several readers caught this apparent goof! What they all overlooked was that the flame-sequence occurred during the time the *JLA* was in *magic-land*—where normal earth-science conditions did not exist! –Editor)

* * *

Dear Editor: Keep up the good work. The *Justice League of America* is a great comic. It gives us a chance to see all our favorite heroes together, and the adventures they get into are terrific!

We like the way *Snapper Carr* talks, and he's the type of character you hardly ever see in any other comic book. We think he's great and should be shown more, perhaps even be brought more actively into some of the *JLA* adventures!

We have only one complaint to make—when *Aquaman* gets teleported to another world with the rest of the *JLA* members, or goes there by himself, he always seems to have water. For example in *JLA* issue No. 1, *Green Lantern* and *Aquaman* are teleported to the water-world of *Thanakor*. In issue No. 2, *Batman, Superman* and *Aquaman* are on the continent of *Oceana* in *Magic Land*—and there's water! It would be interesting to find *Aquaman* by himself, in a position where there is no water. A desert world would do nicely. We would like to see how he'd get out of this difficult situation.

Congratulations to your artist and writer. You have a wonderful magazine going, so keep it up at all costs! Sandra and Ian, Richmond, Can.

(Sooner or later we expect *Aquaman* will find himself trapped someplace where there is no water to sustain him. We further expect *Aquaman* will find an ingenious way out of his predicament! —Editor)

* * *

Dear Editor: In your January issue, page 14, panel 1 of the story "Secret of the Sinister Sorcerers" showed *Wonder Woman* racing along with *Flash*. Yet she is wearing high-heels and no woman can possibly run fast in high-heels. Later, on page 16, panel 3, you show *Wonder Woman* crossing a rope in those same high-heeled shoes without falling!

Thomas Yarborough,
Long Beach Island, N. J.

,You're implying a woman would have to be a *wonder* to run so fast while wearing high-heels!

Figure 4: The letter column of *Justice League of America* Issue 4 "Doom of the Star Diamond" (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1961) that shows how the correspondence zone looks like a dialogue between readers and the Editor.

include the letter columns.[8] In reality, Schwartz only printed a small number of letter excerpts, selecting based on his own ideas of what made for a good letter. Indeed, it is also entirely possible that some of the letters were written in house, as in the first issue of the *JLA* to include Green Arrow, where a letter purports to be written by "Green Arrow," a fictional DC character.[9] Coupled with confessions from editors about having fabricated letters, scholars and comics fans alike often dismiss letter columns as fake and commercial. But this stance fails to take into account why these editors found it necessary to fabricate these letters. I contend that they did so because they were beginning to recognize the power of the letter columns as a public forum that created a sense of community for readers that was based on multi-authoritarian narrative practices that included contributions from readers. Editors were fabricating letters because they saw the value in the letter column as a public forum and knew that readers valued the content printed there. When they fabricated letters, they were aiming to elicit specific responses.

We gain a sense of letter columns as being integral to DC series through both the fact that readers evaluated a series based partially on the quality of the letter columns, and by the fact that they used the letter column to correspond not just with the authors, but also with one another. For instance, the comics club the Comics Hounds cite *Green Lantern*'s letter column in enumerating everything they like about the series, and Ken Gentry writes a letter praising the letter columns and citing two specific letter writers (Rick Wood and Billy Clapper) later on.[10] Readers' choices to highlight the letter columns specifically when praising the overall quality of the series demonstrates that readers were reading the letter columns and judging their quality, indicating that readers saw the letter columns as part of the text. Gentry's citation of two specific letter writers also demonstrates that readers viewed letter writers as authors who contributed to the text, not just as readers who happened to voice their opinions. For example, in the letter

columns of *The Flash*, John Pierce writes a letter specifically agreeing with a suggestion made by reader Roy Thomas regarding changing Kid Flash's uniform, and Ricky Mass writes a letter disagreeing with "old-time *Flash* fans" who requested in an earlier printed letter that the silly characters Winky, Blinky, and Noddy be included in the Silver Age Flash.[11] The agreeing and disagreeing shows that not only did readers read the letter columns, but they considered them a forum for interaction with other readers whose input they valued as much as that of the DC authors. This discussion amongst readers shows the formation of the public of comics fandom, as readers connect to one another and form relationships via the print form of the correspondence zone.

The controversy over the idea of rotating membership in *JLA,* which appeared in numerous letter columns and eventually in the "Missing in Action—5 Justice Leaguers" storyline, illustrates how the letter columns became a public forum integrated into the experience of reading the series. When the Atom joined the JLA in issue #14, the DC atelier found that it was difficult to include all the members in each issue, and, as a result, many issues would pass without all members present. In the letter columns, readers weighed in on the choices the DC atelier made regarding which heroes participated in each issue, with some defending the atelier's choice to limit the number of heroes and others complaining about the exclusion or inclusion of particular characters. The debate began when reader John DeVries claimed that the DC atelier "made the gross error of trying to use every single JLA member in the same story. By using too many members in one story, it foul[ed] up the artwork and [didn't] allow each character the space he or she [needed] to make a favorable performance."[12] DeVries believes that having too many characters in one story negatively impacts both the artwork and the plot, and others took up his reasoning in future letters. The atelier eventually solved the overcrowding problem by

using what readers called a "rotating membership," including only Green Lantern, Wonder Woman, the Flash, J'on J'onzz, and Green Arrow in issue #23.[13] Frequent letter writer Guy H. Lillian praises the DC atelier for using the rotating membership, because it keeps stories from becoming overly complex, a sentiment that mirrors that expressed by DeVries's earlier letter.[14] Unlike DeVries, though, Lillian sees both sides, also pointing out in his letter that, because members frequently team up in common duos (e.g. Superman with Batman, and Flash with Green Lantern, to cite Lillian's examples), if writer Fox leaves out one member of a duo, he has to leave out the other member of the duo in order to keep the story from feeling "lopsided," as Lillian puts it.[15] In his response, the Editor points out that the story dictates whether all members should be part of the issue or whether only some should.[16] The Editor later recognizes praise and criticism regarding the number of heroes in an issue as a trend he has seen in the mail.[17] In a comment, the Editor says that "an analysis of the mail favoring the number of super-stars to be featured in each story leads to this general conclusion: the *younger* the reader, the *more,* super-stars he favors in each issue—and vice versa for the older reader."[18] Though there are only one or two letters printed each issue discussing preferences for more or fewer heroes, this editorial comment from Schwartz indicates that many readers wrote letters weighing in on the conversation.

This conflict between readers from the letter columns formed the basis of the plot for "Missing in Action," where the DC atelier used the text of the comic to justify their choices to include only certain heroes in a particular issue. The issue begins with a splash page showing Superman, Green Lantern, J'on Jonzz, the Atom, and Hawkman connected by the "JLA emergency signal."[19] Underneath this image, some text reads "Have you ever been troubled by the question: Why don't all the Justice League members show up at all meetings and participate

in every adventure? If so, your troubles are over—for at long last this puzzler is answered—by the absentee members themselves!"[20] The opening text references the reader arguments about rotating membership that favor more characters being included in each issue. While this may seem coincidental, the following page uses the visuals to directly connect reader letters to the question from the opening splash page (Fig. 5). The first panel of the issue depicts honorary member Snapper Carr amongst a pile of mail. Snapper says, "Another batch of letters asking how come all ten members of the JLA don't participate in every case!"[21] Snapper answers the question of why all team members do not show up to every meeting within the same text bubble that he mentions the letter conversation. His answer is that "they're not obliged to," and the rest of the issue details how those depicted on the first splash page ignore a call to the JLA because they are busy in other ways.[22] Snapper explains the procedures for dealing with absences, such as his job

Figure 5: ***Justice League of America*** **Issue 52 "Missing in Action—5 Justice Leaguers" (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1967) depicts honorary member Snapper Carr answering reader questions that have appeared in the letter columns.**

recording minutes for those who miss meetings to review later. In this way, the DC atelier uses the main comic to speak back to readers, doing so by incorporating representations of reader views into the issue. Both the text and the image in this panel represent the letter columns' conversation about rotating membership within the context of the comic story. These representations demonstrate acknowledgment from the atelier that the letter columns are integral to the comic.

In commercial comics of the 1960s, the separation of authorship (textual creation) and ownership (legal rights) coupled with the rise of participatory readership in the correspondence zone to position comics reading as an interactive practice. The lack of recognition for authors that stemmed from corporate ownership, along with the hourly pay system, made a space for readers to contribute to the narratives depicted in comics. At the same time, editor Schwartz, by encouraging readers to write in letters to fill story gaps or to allow readers to help determine the plot of subsequent issues, took a commercial space and used it as a way to model what a comics reader should be. More than just using the letter column as a way to correspond with authors, letter writers corresponded with one another, creating the public of comics fandom. Based on Schwartz's decision to publish addresses, comics fandom grew as readers formed communities around these alternate stories.

Defining Interactive Reading in the Correspondence Zone

The letter columns that allowed for liberal democratic practices emerged in the 1960s, when calls to collectivity coexisted with the rise of liberalism and the valuing of individual expression and creativity. The correspondence zones of the *JLA* series helped shape comics fandom's

connection to this history. Schwartz encouraged comics readers to interact with the stories they were reading in several ways, but particularly by filling gaps in an established narrative and telling alternate versions of established stories that included new characters. In the *JLA* series, Schwartz mobilized the increasingly important role letter columns were playing to have readers interact with the stories from the atelier. Drawing on practices he established in single character series, Schwartz printed letters that aimed to fill in the gaps of the story. At the same time, he made reader involvement crucial to the series by having readers vote on which new characters to include in a team. Because these characters brought their histories with them from their single character series, having readers vote on characters was akin to having readers vote on details of future narratives. The DC atelier solidified these aspects of comics reading—filling in gaps and telling alternate versions of stories—by thematizing them in the main comic. Schwartz and the rest of the atelier encouraged this reader involvement by printing the letters and by incorporating the suggestions from letters into the comics stories. These practices of interactive reading in public highlight the privileging of individual creativity so popular in the 1960s, while the formation of a public from these readings allies the correspondence zone, simultaneously, with calls for community and collective action. Moreover, analyzing the way the atelier defined reading as an interactive practice reveals a more liberal conception of DC comics in the 1960s than is presented in most accounts.

Drawing on a practice established in the letter columns of single character series, Schwartz promoted the practice of readers writing letters to fill gaps in the narrative as told by the atelier for *JLA*. In the letter columns of *Green Lantern,* letter writer F.N. suggests that, when letters point out mistakes in the story, Schwartz should ask other readers to write explanations to fill in those plot holes.[23] In his comment on this letter, Schwartz solicits such explanatory letters from

readers and says he will print those letters in the *Green Lantern* letter column when he receives them.[24] Afterwards, writing letters to question or to fill in gaps becomes standard practice, and continues in the letter columns for *JLA*. For example, in the issue "Super Exiles of Earth," the members of the JLA are put on trial for crimes committed by evil doppelgangers. They learn each other's secret identities when the impostors testify in civilian guises at the trial, and at the end of the issue, once order is restored, they expose themselves to amnesium in order to forget those secret identities.[25] In a letter column discussing the story, letter writer Phil Castora points out that the "one thing wrong with the story" is that they made "the JLA members forget each other's identities" at the end.[26] It is a testament to expectations of reader involvement that Castora ascribes this detail to the DC atelier "experiment[ing] to see if your readers do or don't want the JLA to be familiar with each other's true identities."[27] He gives feedback about the detail in a way that assumes the atelier wants readers to justify a potential flaw, filling in the gaps in the narrative. Then, the Editor explains that identities will, for the most part, remain secret because of "company policy," though he says that there were "some readers who feared" that those who already knew each other's secret identities would not be affected by the amnesium, implying that he received many letters from readers pointing out that the amnesium would mess up continuity across the DC Universe.[28] Rather than explaining how this would work himself, Schwartz follows his response with a letter that fills in the plot hole other readers pointed to. In this letter, John Devries says, "of course Superman's amnesium suggestion at the close of the story was definitely necessary, as he explained. It won't affect the Superman-Batman and Flash-Green Lantern teams at all, since they knew their partner's identities *before* the JLA embarked on exile."[29] The recognition of not just one, but many readers writing in to question the atelier,

coupled with the printing of Devries's letter that fills in the gaps they identify, shows Schwartz, as an editor, encouraging his readers to fill in gaps as part of their comics reading experience.

This reading practice of filling in narrative gaps is then reaffirmed when the atelier incorporates reader suggestions into the comics while also thematizing the diegetic history and remembrance of the *JLA* series through the souvenir room. The souvenir room is mentioned in the first issue of *JLA,* when the heroes say they will put the defeated Starro the Conqueror into the room, and continues to be referenced throughout the series.[30] In a letter responding to a mention of the souvenir room in a previous issue, reader Michael Fassetti asks to see the souvenir room, asking that the atelier fill in a gap he sees in the narrative: the souvenir room is mentioned, but those references only call attention to the absence of its depiction.[31] The editor responds by saying that "maybe this plea will prompt Fox to stop beating around the bush and open the door to this inner sanctum."[32] Schwartz's response suggests that Fassetti's plea could have an affect on the plot of subsequent issues of the *JLA,* that the atelier could respond by filling in the narrative gap Fassetti has identified. They do so a few issues later in "The 'I' Who Defeated the Justice League," where the team members take the spectacular Amazo, a being defeated in an earlier story that possesses all of the powers of the Justice League members, out of the souvenir room in order to defeat the imaginary being that has used something called "robber force" to prevent them from working with one another to defeat it.[33] The issue begins with a panel depicting Snapper Carr down in the souvenir room, surveying spoils from the past, including Amazo, Starro, and Kanjar Ro's Cosmic Boat, visually filling the absence Fassetti remarked upon, while also connecting that absence to the history of the narrative of *JLA* as a series by referencing past victories.[34] After being captured by a mysterious being called "I," and robbed of their ability to work as a team, the members wonder how they can defeat this foe when

Snapper comes up with the idea to look in the souvenir room, where he suggests they use Amazo to defeat their mysterious foe. The panels that depict the team going down to the souvenir room fill in details about the room, such as the fact that it is under headquarters, that the elevator

Figure 6: The atelier listens to a fan request when they depict the souvenir room in *Justice League of America* Issue 27 "The I Who Defeated the Justice League" (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1964).

requires a secret password, and that the floor of the elevator disappears into the floor of the souvenir room (Fig. 6).[35] Inclusion of items from past issues not only references the history of the series, but also points to the gaps in that history, where the souvenir room is mentioned, but not shown. The narrative of "The 'I' Who Defeated the Justice League" then repairs those gaps not only through its depictions of the previously absent souvenir room, but by tying the present story to the past events in making an object from the souvenir room (Amazo) an integral part of the plot. In doing so, the writers suggest that history is important to remember, but that all histories contain gaps, in this case, the absence of the souvenir room as anything more than a mention.

In addition to filling gaps in past narratives, Schwartz also encouraged *JLA* readers to help envision new narratives through the practice of voting on which characters should be included in the team. Reviewing the development of a specific genre of letters that I call "grading letters" in the letter columns of *JLA* demonstrates how I see character voting as connected to envisioning new narratives. In these letters, readers evaluate character performance based on the character expectations they formed by reading single character series, and highlight the ways that character abilities affect the plot of the *JLA*. Often, these reader evaluations take the form of bulleted lists, where readers highlight a pairing or a character and then list a grade. The first grading letter appears in the first letter column for *JLA,* establishing the grading letter genre as integral to the history of the series. In that first letter, reader Jerry Bails claims to be reporting the rankings his fan club has come up with and remarks on the popularity of each character based on the group vote.[36] While this example does not quite get us to thinking about how characters shape new narratives, it does show how comics fans were using these interactive reading practices to create a new public. Bails's letter also establishes the genre, providing a model others build on as

subsequent grading letters focus more on evaluating characters, demonstrating how readers' preconceptions shape character expectations. In the next grading letter, Jonathan Lighter evaluates each individual character's performance in the series so far, beginning with praise for the admission of Green Arrow into the JLA when he claims that "such a dashing personage will enhance future storylines."[37] This comment, in addition to linking character, or "personage," to plot, already begins to link voting on characters to "future storylines," since, at this point, readers had just voted the Green Arrow onto the team. The list he gives includes suggestions for improving the use of each character, such as the suggestion that Aquaman who "has no real super-powers, and might be better if sent to a desert world where he would have to scrounge for water."[38] Again, we see a linking of the character detail "he has no real super-powers" to a suggestion for a future narrative. By including character details in the same sentences as mentions of new narratives, Lighter's letter highlights how the grading letter links character details to narrative potential, and as the letter genre evolved further, readers kept emphasizing the connections between character and plot, though they moved from discussing individual characters to character pairings from fight sequences.

The grading letter from Richard West is the first to take what will become the standard form of the grading letter for the rest of the series, evaluating how pairs of heroes worked together in a previous issue.[39] West's evaluations range from flippant—his evaluation of the Wonder Woman vs. the Mercury Blob is just "Oh brother! End of this report,"—to more engaged with how character traits affected the narrative, such as in his evaluation of Green Lantern vs. The Golden Bird, where he claims that it is strange that Green Lantern always fights a yellow villain, but he hopes he "continues to do so as his solutions to such difficulties augment the interest of the story."[40] As with Lighter's comment above, West connects Green Lantern's vulnerability to the

color yellow, a character trait, to his suggestion that the authors keep using this ability in future narratives. But West's letter takes things a step further by also highlighting how that character trait played out in this narrative, linking character details not only via proximity, but also by going into detail about how they affect the plot. Together, these letters, as well as the other ones of that genre published throughout the 1960s, demonstrate that readers could see how character choices delimited possibilities for future narratives. They also demonstrate the stranger relationality Warner deems necessary for public formation, as each subsequent letter follows the genre established by the previous one. Most of them do not know each other, but they have establish what a grading letter should look like, and by following those rules, they define themselves as part of the same public.

Based on this connection between characters and the new narratives they make available, Schwartz's calls for readers to vote on new JLA team members involved the readers in telling new stories. In this case, the seriality of the series, the fact that it is ongoing, is significant because the atelier had to tell a new story in each issue. Therefore, this ability to tell new stories was deliberately built into the very form of the series from the beginning, and asking readers to take part in forming those new narratives by choosing characters helped continue to form the public of comics fandom. Having requested reader input in single character series like *The Flash, Green Lantern,* and *Wonder Woman,* it is unsurprising that the atelier added Green Arrow to the team because a number of *JLA* readers wrote letters to the editor requesting that Green Arrow be included in the team and, according to Schwartz, "when a multitude of readers takes the time to sound off on a particular subject, our editorial ears perk up—and listen."[41] Schwartz indicates in this statement that the atelier will listen to character requests from readers, and, as a result, readers begin writing in to request that The Atom be added to the team, a fact that

Schwartz acknowledges in the letter column of the issue where The Atom becomes part of the JLA.[42] The first two times that new members joined the JLA, the readers wrote unprompted to make character requests, and, recognizing the trend, the next time Schwartz was looking to induct a new member, he asked for reader input, requesting that readers write letters detailing which hero should be inducted next into the JLA and why.[43] Notice that the request for readers to justify their choices would require explanations of character details that would help shape new narratives. When the vote was complete, Schwartz printed a representative letter from reader Jack Callenberg that details why Hawkman should be the next member of the JLA, following up with a comment that states that readers had voted for Hawkman over other superheroes.[44] This voting ensured that readers helped determine the new narratives that the JLA would tell, as character details helped drive plots. As the grading letters indicate, the characters people voted for had specific strengths and weaknesses dictated by the way the characters were written in their individual series. Therefore, when readers voted on particular characters, they gained input into the development of future storylines, because the atelier would then have to create plots that mobilized characters' specific skill sets as determined by other DC writers.

The atelier thematizes the interactive reading practices of both filling narrative gaps and using character details to determine new stories in the issue "Cavern of Deadly Spheres," where the reader-voted Atom plays a crucial role in the story, as the JLA members take on the role of active comics readers. In the first chapter of the issue, the evil Maestro defeats the members of the JLA by capturing them in spheres that correspond to their superhero weaknesses (e.g. Superman, weakened by krypton, is in a bubble made of kryptonite and Green Lantern, powerless against the color yellow, is in a yellow bubble).[45] The chapter is a self-contained story that looks like business as usual, except that it ends in the defeat of the JLA, who are all captured

in bubbles. The reader-voted Atom plays a role, as he uses his ability to shrink himself to travel through a telephone wire. This use of an established ability by a reader-voted character references the usual kind of reader involvement in telling the stories, that of voting on characters. Yet the story does not end there. In fact, the second chapter reveals, via a fictional letter from "Jerry Thomas," the proclaimed author of the story in the first chapter, that Thomas wrote the story because "for a long time, he's wondered if the Justice League could ever be defeated."[46] Jerry Thomas, whose name is a combination of frequent letter writers and co-creators of the fanzine *Alter Ego* Jerry Bails and Roy Thomas, stands in as the kind of active reader that the correspondence zones of the letter columns have encouraged throughout. We see him fill in the narrative gaps. He sees a question the DC atelier has not answered (How could the Justice League be defeated?) and creates a new narrative to fill that gap, including his suggestion in the letter represented within the comic's panels. By reframing the story in the first chapter as a representation of fan generated fiction, the atelier reinforces the notion, established in the letter columns, that comics reading is an interactive practice.

The representation of Thomas in print, as opposed to in person, is significant, as the revelation of the earlier comic story as part of a letter reframes both that story and comics more generally as a form of correspondence. Not only does the comic represent letter writing as part of comics reading, but it also frames comics writing itself as letter writing by showing that the comic featured in the first chapter came in the mail with Thomas's letter. This correspondence quality is heightened as Snapper tells the JLA members that there is a flaw in Thomas's story and they wrack their brains to figure out the gap.[47] Again, we see a thematization with the comic of the gap filling from the letter columns, as Snapper, the represented reader, points to a gap in Thomas's story. Finally, the Atom identifies the mistake in a panel that shows him, depicted in

color, pointing to Thomas's panel, depicted in black and white (Fig. 7).[48] The choice of the reader voted Atom as the hinge point demonstrates how reader participation in the form of voting

Figure 7: In *Justice League of America* Issue 15 "Cavern of Deadly Spheres" (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1962) the reader-voted Atom discovers the plot hole in Jerry Thomas's tale of the defeated Justice League.

for characters helps form the narrative. At the same time, the panel emphasizes the print nature of the comic the reader is engaging with and shows the comic character pointing to a specific gap in the narrative that he then fills with an alternate story, claiming that he was too small to hear the music that entranced the rest of the team, and therefore was able to warn them.[49] The way the JLA members, who are in this story the readers, fill the gap in the narrative is by exploiting the abilities of a reader-voted character, tying the two interactive narrative practices established in the letter columns together. At the end of the issue, Snapper says that he plans to "sketch this [alternate ending] out on bristol board and send it to Jerry Thomas with our compliments," which means the alternate ending would not only be printed, but sent to the original author, just as, say, a story suggestion in a reader letter might be printed and sent to DC.[50] By depicting the members of the JLA reading a comic, pointing to gaps, and then writing a new narrative to fill those gaps, the atelier defines comics reading as an interactive activity. Moreover, by citing actual fans and a representation of fan fiction, the issue legitimizes fan fiction as an art form on par with comics

making, while at the same time acknowledging that fan participation in the form of voting impacts new narratives by positioning the reader-voted Atom as the hinge point of the alternate ending. The interactive reading practices are here defined as not ancillary, but integral to the comics reading experience. This active comics reading, encouraged and made possible by the development of the correspondence zone of the letter columns, was the foundation for the formation of the public of comics fandom.

Comics Fandom

While Schwartz and the rest of the members of the DC atelier encouraged interactive reading and established the letter column correspondence zone as a public forum throughout the early '60s (comics discussed above range from 1961-1967), young people were organizing for various political and social causes. As one of the largest generations, the baby boomers were a strong economic, political, and social force, connected via mass media and time spent together in the schools. At the same time, economic prosperity and increased leisure time resulted in the valorization of individual creativity and self expression. Already, I have shown both the valuing of individual expression—through the validation of interactive reading practices—and the valuing of community—through the correspondence zone as public forum—in the correspondence zone. These attributes of comics fandom were even more salient as the fandom extended beyond the letter columns and into the lives of its participants via fanzines like *Alter Ego*. After a brief recounting of historians' discussions of community and individuality, this section situates the public of comics fandom within its historical context.

As historian David Farber notes, in the '60s, "[I]n overcrowded schoolrooms, in front of televisions, many of the young people who were raised amid unprecedented prosperity and optimism found their own ways—some acceptable to their elders and some not—to give shape and meaning to the many years they shared with one another."[51] Farber highlights how increased numbers of matriculating students and higher graduation rates coupled with the rise of television advertising targeted at the new economic force of the baby boomer generation to give young people "a sense of being co-participants in a new world partially of their own making."[52] Along with this collective sense, young people watched collective organization influence political and social change during the Civil Rights Movement of the '50s and early '60s, and so believed in the power of collective action.[53] They participated in—and, via the television and other media, saw their peers participate in— the Civil Rights Movement, the Students for a Democratic Society, and the Free Speech Movement. If you were young and wanted something, you organized based on your "vision of an engaged citizenry forging their own collective fate."[54] Historians Alexander Bloom and Wini Brienes remark on how, amidst this atmosphere of collective action, politics and culture became intertwined: "Cultural activities resonated with political analyses—rock n' roll, counterculture literature, and rural communes were as much a part of the transformation as were sit-ins, demonstrations, and civil disobedience. Politics resonated with cultural meanings—music, drugs, and lifestyle experimentation all shaped political action."[55] Collective action morphed into community formation in the cultural sphere as participants strove for "new types of community" and "new personal identities."[56]

This last pairing highlights how the celebration of the individual coincided with the mobilization of the group, as leisure time increased and self expression and creativity became even more valued. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle mention how "the end of work

would herald the onset of a vast leisure society in which human pursuits, liberated from the drudgery of alienating, soul-slaying labor, might be redirected to self-actualization involving the cultivation of one's individual talents," and Farber ties the rise of the individual to economic motives even more directly as the "personal consumption on which economic growth increasingly depended" valued "license, immediate gratification, mutable lifestyle, and an egalitarian, hedonistic pursuit of self-expression."[57] While the valuing of collective action and community formation help to explain why comics fandom formed during this period, the emphasis on individual creativity sheds light on why that community formed around interactive practices, where readers had the opportunity to express their ideas about their favorite ongoing series.

The story of the formation of *Alter Ego*, one of the first comics fanzines that helped define the public of comics fandom, shows how the celebration of individual creativity and organizing for a cause coincided in the formation of comics fandom. Founder Roy Thomas (of "Jerry Thomas" fame) begins his history of *Alter Ego* with the line "*Alter Ego* owes its existence to the Justice League of America."[58] He goes on to discuss how *JLA* writer Gardner Fox connected him to Jerry Bails, then a professor at Wayne State, because of their mutual love for the *Justice League of America* as a revival of the *Justice Society of America,* detailing how the correspondence between Thomas and Bails centered first on a desire to turn *JLA* into a monthly series and then on a letter writing campaign to get the Atom revived in the *JLA* series.[59] During their campaign to revive the Atom, Thomas happened to mention to Bails that he had written and drawn a parody comic of the *JLA* called "The Bestest League of America, "starring Green Trashcan, Wondrous Woman, Cash, Aquariuman, and S'amm S'mith, the Martian Manhandler, and featuring Superham, Wombatman, and Aukman" (Fig. 8).[60] Based on the news that DC

would revive the Atom and on Thomas's description of his parody, Bails came up with the idea to start a Justice League of America newsletter that "he wanted to publish and distribute to such

Figure 8: The roster of the "Bestest League of America" from Issue 1 of *Alter Ego* created by Roy Thomas demonstrates how the public of comics fandom was built on individual creativity.

JLA fans as he could contact, both through the letter pages of the comic itself and in other ways."[61] As the idea for the fanzine crystalized, the original conceit was still based on the activist mission of getting older members of the Justice Society revived in *JLA*, as noted when Bails plans that "each contributor [to *Alter Ego*] will sign his article with the name of the character he wishes to see revived, or created."[62] In the first issue of *Alter Ego*, Bails stated the activist mission of the fanzine as "devoted to the revival of the costumed heroes."[63] Here we see comics fans coming together to advance their mission of reviving beloved characters, using their combined power as a collective to influence the atelier based on their expressions of their individual desires.

On the one hand, they used the printed addresses to form a collective. As Roy Thomas points out in the introduction to one of the reprint volumes of the *JLA* series, Schwartz's decision to print addresses in the letter columns formed the basis of comics fandom, as letters and then publications like fanzines sent from one fan to another criss-crossed the country.[64] Schwartz himself has claimed that he started printing addresses in order to allow fans to connect with one another, particularly because addresses printed in the science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories* helped him become a member of science fiction fandom.[65] From this connection, with the formation of *Alter Ego,* the newly formed public moved to collective action as they aimed to get their favorite superheroes revived. Even apart from this collective action, which soon died away, comics fandom expanded as a cultural community. Though the first issue of the fanzine featured only work by Thomas and Bails, each subsequent issue brought more contributors and provides a picture of comics fandom as ever expanding. The second issue is the first to include the letter column, which includes a printed letter about another fanzine, *Comic Art* by Don and Maggie Thompson, which included pieces on non-superhero comics, thereby extending comics fandom

beyond just superheroes.[66] The third issue had three contributors other than Bails and Thomas, and the fourth issue included the voting for the first Alley Awards by the newly formed fan organization the Academy of Comic Book Arts and Sciences.[67] The formation of a fan organization to vote on awards for best accomplishments in comics for the year demonstrates a solidification of the fan community in the first year. In an era when young people were often coming together either for collective action or as members of new cultural communities, it makes sense that comics fans connected to form a community.

On the other hand, this community was built on a foundation of individual creativity and self expression as established in the correspondence zone of the comic. *Alter Ego* contains parodies, fan fiction, fan art, and fan discussions of favorite heroes and characters. Indeed, Thomas's mention of the "Bestest League of America" as part of the original impulse for the creation of *Alter Ego* suggests that creativity and self expression form a basis for fandom. Subsequent issues included original stories and artwork that, like other fan fiction and artwork, used characters published by Marvel and DC to tell the stories fans wanted to tell or that they wish were told in the series. Even the original activist impulse—to get the Atom revived—stems from the idea that the desires of fans could influence the atelier and that the atelier cared what fans thought, ideas established in the letter columns of *JLA*. In his introduction to the history of *Alter Ego,* Jerry Bails characterizes comics fandom as a "creative tradition," manifesting the "possibilities of self-expression" that derive from comics as a "medium of self-expression that invites the reader to write or draw a story of his or her own."[68] This idea is fostered and promoted by first Schwartz's encouragements of interactive reading practices and then by the atelier's representation of those reading practices within the comic itself. The community

formation and interactive reading encouraged of and practiced in comics fandom were consonant with youth culture in the 1960s.

Conclusion

Schwartz decided to democratize the practice of comics reading at a point in time when both community and individual creativity were valued in the larger culture. By allowing space for and encouraging fans to fill in narrative gaps and tell new narratives by voting on characters, he defined comics reading as an interactive practice, and when the atelier represented this type of interactive reading, they reconfirmed that definition. The same kinds of interactive reading practices that appear in the correspondence zone formed the basis of comics fandom via fanzines like *Alter Ego*. Analysis of the history of *Alter Ego* reveals that it, too, was established with the 1960s values of community and individual creativity in the foreground. Tracing comics fandom from the correspondence zone and into the fanzine demonstrates how serial comics form publics that are temporally grounded, as Warner claims they should be. Viewing comics through a print culture lens reveals this historical context, helping us see how practices in the correspondence zone helped establish practices within fandom that match the values of the era.

As serial comics evolve, readers and authors respond to both the reader and author relationships and, sometimes, to the public of comics fandom established here. The industrial, work for hire authorship discussed here, for example, forms a particular point of contention because of the way it divorces labor from the marketplace. At the same time, what here appear to be democratic reading practices, are cast elsewhere as commercial pandering that, rather than making the comic a discursive space for community building, detract from conceptions of

comics as art. In these arguments, the necessity of listening to readers holds the comic back from reaching its full potential. As with many of the student led organizations of the early '60s, this fandom was largely straight, male, and white, and later authors, like Gaiman in the 1990s, will respond to this homogenous public. In the following chapters, I will show other comics authors push against these models of authorship and readership, but I will also show them recognizing the potential of the correspondence zone as a powerful space for the building of counterpublics.

Chapter 2

Reinscribing Diversity: *Wimmen's Comix* in the 1970s

"What happens is somebody sees a comic and goes, 'Oh, that's cool! That's what I want to do.' And then they do a comic. And then there are three comics, and someone else sees it, and draws a comic. That's the way it works. It grows. And suddenly you have a community. In the first issue of *Wimmen's Comix* in 1972, there were ten women, all of us in San Francisco. But as soon as that book came out we started getting submissions from women all over the country. They saw the book and said, 'Oh look! Women can draw comics. This is a comic I relate to.' And they sent us stuff." - Trina Robbins

Trina Robbins, founder and author of *Wimmen's Comix*, a serial anthology of cartoons by and about women that began in 1972, captures how the serial structure of the anthology promoted unity and diversity, as the women related to the women's experiences they saw depicted, and the community spread out of San Francisco and across the country. The published stories served as models that showed potential women cartoonists that comics could depict women's experience. At the same time, the variety of styles and genres included in the anthology format made a space for diversity that critics claim was lacking in the women's liberation movement more broadly. Through a revise and resubmit structure made possible by serial publication, the authors took action by increasing the number of women cartoonists in the male dominated sphere of underground comics, building a counterpublic of women authors. Women authors used the multiple layers of the comics form to capture the diversity of women's experiences. By providing space for diversity and dialogue via the correspondence zone and by fulfilling the activist mission of increasing the number of women cartoonists, they overcame the major critiques of the lack of diversity within the feminist movement.

There is little scholarship on *Wimmen's Comics*, though that will likely begin to change with the Fantagraphics reprint of the series in 2016. Margaret Galvan is one of the few scholars who has discussed women underground cartoonists, and she points out how paying attention to feminist underground comics provides a more diverse picture of feminism in the 1970s, including representations of diverse bodies.[1] My analysis, with its focus on the print comics form, aligns with hers. However, I push her argument further by exploring how both visual vocabulary and serial publication format allowed for the diversity critics find lacking in the

feminist movement. Like Galvan, I argue that comics served a vital function in calling attention to diversity within the 1970s feminist movement, but they do so not just through their representations of diverse bodies but also through the dialogue the serial publication structure promotes, a dialogue we find in the correspondence zone as new authorial practices shift the zone from the letter columns to the comics themselves. In that correspondence zone, we see lesbian feminists in dialogue with straight feminists as each mobilizes comics' unique combination of text and image to stress unity and difference simultaneously while concurrently contributing to the activist mission of increasing the number of women cartoonists.

While analysis of the comics themselves provides a window into diversity, interviews with the authors tell a new oral history of the series that uncovers its activist mission. I conducted the interviews throughout the winter of 2014 and spring of 2015, asking questions about the editorial process, including how the rotating editors selected their contributors and why these women turned to comics as the form for expressing their feminist message. These interviews revealed the activist mission of the authors and editors, providing insight into the revise and resubmit system they used to teach women to improve their cartooning craft. Moreover, including the women's own words furthers my own feminist project of allowing these women, often ignored in histories of underground comics, to speak for themselves about their work. Paired with the visual and textual analysis, the interviews provide a more complete picture of how and why this print form fits within the larger feminist movement.

Correspondence Zone Moves Center Stage

The correspondence zones of underground comics shifted from the letter columns to the comics themselves, so that, in serial underground comics, the public dialogue moved center stage. This shift happened based on several evolutions in authorial practice that changed the relationship between readers and authors, mainly practices related to copyright ownership, and thus, oversight and censorship. While authors of commercial comics worked hourly for large

companies who both owned and oversaw their labor, authors of underground comics owned the copyrights to their labor and, because their comics were self-published, they had more control over the content. Most underground authors viewed themselves as artists, distanced from such commercial concerns as reader feedback. Instead, they produced stories in whatever genre and style they saw fit, and, when some readers saw these stories, they decided to try their hand at creating comics. Both the changes in copyright and the less strict gatekeeping resulted in an increased variety of styles and genres that provided models for budding cartoonists, encouraging readers to become authors, which, in the case of *Wimmen's Comix,* served the feminist activist mission of increasing the number of women cartoonists and helped create the feminist counterpublic.

One of the major features of the underground movement that differentiated it from commercial comics was the claiming of copyright by the individuals performing the labor of drawing and writing. During the Silver Age, copyright belonged to the comics house (e.g. DC in the case of the *Justice League of America*) and that house had strict rules concerning style, content, and character that served to ensure brand uniformity in the face of the destabilized authorship created by the piecemeal work system in the atelier. Authors worked for an hourly wage on whichever book the house wanted, and the house style was meant to make sure characters were recognizable, no matter who was drawing them, as well as to avoid any Comics Code violations. The status of the copyright in an issue of *JLA* demonstrates its role in the authorship of the issue. The box that indicates copyright in every issue of *JLA* mentions no individual authors, but mentions National Comics Publications (DC's official name) twice, once after the "by," where we would usually find an individual's name, and once following the date next to the copyright symbol. Individual author names appear neither on the cover nor anywhere else within any of the issues.

By contrast, the copyright in underground comics, often as a backlash to these commercial practices, belonged to the artist. Both Trina Robbins and Lee Marrs, as well as a few others, had experience with the mainstream by the time they started working on *Wimmen's Comix* and found

it limiting because of the rules attached to corporate ownership and piecemeal work. Marrs found "the subject matter of mainstream comics boring" and lamented that "the company made all the money," because it owned the copyright.[2] Issues of *Wimmen's Comix* demonstrate the self consciousness about copyright that cartoonists expressed in interviews, and these preoccupations with copyright are part of how each individual author situates herself as an artist. Copyright symbols proliferate on the majority of pages across 20 years of issues of *Wimmen's Comix*. The inside front cover of each issue features "Copyright," the date, and then lists all the women involved in the issue. And the insistence on copyright doesn't stop there: throughout the 70s, each individual story includes at least one copyright symbol followed by the name of the artist. Because of copyrights, authors of commercial comics, often unmentioned even on the front covers of issues they created, were viewed as mere laborers churning out cheap material, while underground authors claimed copyright ownership in order to gain recognition as artists.

Authorial copyright ownership opened up comics' storytelling possibilities beyond superheroes, making a space for more transgressive content. The tight control over copyright in commercial comics resulted in limitations of content, even down to the issue of drawing style. Terre Richards equated corporate ownership with content limitations in commercial comics, mentioning that commercial entities were so strict as to have people employed to check whether there were certain lines that suggested genitalia on superhero characters. By contrast, underground comics were "putting the art back in the control of the artist, opening up possibilities for exploration of new content.[3] Trina Robbins suggested that this opening up of possibilities of content helped attract her to the underground, since undergrounds "were comics about our lifestyle, the hippie lifestyle," and therefore easier for her to draw.[4] That "hippie lifestyle" as depicted in the comics, was full of sex, drugs, and rock and roll, with sexually explicit material and drug use making frequent appearances. Some of the comics depicting taboo subjects had a more activist bent meant to reveal the invisible, as was the case with mental illness as depicted in Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* or with

environmentalism skewering major auto companies as depicted in Last Gasp's *Slow Death* anthology.[5]

My author interviews support Laura Saguisag's assertion that the sense of transgression in the underground was linked to the idea that the authors, who grew up during the Comics Code crackdown of the 1950s, saw comics as an inherently transgressive medium.[6] In the 1950s, Frederick Wertham, a child psychologist, published *Seduction of the Innocent*, a book that linked comics reading, then a popular past time on the level with television in the 1990s, to a rise in juvenile delinquency. The controversy reached the Senate, at which point comics companies created the Comics Code, opting to self-regulate rather than chancing governmental regulation. While recent research from Carol Tilley has suggested that many of Wertham's claims were at least specious if not blatantly fabricated, the Wertham controversy loomed large in the media of the day, situating comics as a transgressive medium.[7] In remembering their experience reading comics as children, many of the underground authors I spoke to situated comics as transgressive spaces. Joyce Farmer borrowed comics "about WWII and a lot of stuff that was later banned with the Comics Code" from an friend's older brother because she "found them scary, but intriguing."[8] While conversations around the Code focused on comic books, newspaper strips, accessible to anyone who got the newspaper, were also spaces of transgression. Sharon Rudahl was drawn to newspaper strips because "a lot of them referenced political or social issues" not mentioned in the "cautious" front part of the paper.[9] For example, Terre Richards was drawn to Al Capp's *L'il Abner* because Dogpatch was "a mythical world where people lived a different way," including "Sadie Hawkins Day where the women got to chase the guys, and, if you caught the guy, you got to marry the guy…As girls, we were taught that you have to wait until a boy asks you out. You never asserted yourself or initiated romance in real life, but [in Dogpatch] that was actually allowed."[10] Even as a kid growing up in conservative Alabama, Lee Marrs took advantage of the ability of comics to "get around the rules using humor" because "people are conveniently disarmed" by drawings.[11] All of these claims situate comics as spaces of transgression.

Having developed these views about comics as transgressive spaces early on, the women of the underground turned to comics to explore taboo subjects related to women's experience. Hillary Chute has suggested that women's experience is germane to comics because of comics' formal qualities.[12] What we see in comics by women from the underground reaffirms this idea, suggesting that not only formal qualities, but also perceptions of the comics medium guided their storytelling choices. Underground comics by women explored all sorts of taboo subjects, such as abortion in Lyn Chevely and Joyce Farmer's *Abortion Eve*, masturbation in Aline Kominsky-Crumb's comics, and lesbian experience, as in Roberta Gregory's *Dynamite Damsels*.[13] Though there were other spaces such as feminist magazines and small press books devoted to depicting women's experiences, Terre Richards highlighted how the authors of *Wimmen's Comix* saw comics specifically as an opportunity to make women's experience visible:

> [W]omen were not getting the whole story of what women's experience was like…There was nowhere where women could read that or see it…Who else was telling stories about women embarrassed about the way they didn't fit the standard of perfection and beauty? Or telling stories about some really tough issues like domestic violence and rape? We knew we were breaking ground when we were telling these stories…and we thought that these were our lives, so there must be other women like us.[14]

As mention of subjects like domestic violence and rape suggests, depicting the variety of women's experience meant broaching taboo, often explicit subjects, and underground comics, with their preoccupations with sex, provided an ideal space for making women's experience visible.

While copyright ownership and less oversight opened up space for depicting more transgressive material that could take on pressing women's issues like abortion and sexual violence, the conception of the cartoonist as artist created distance between the author and the reader. Many authors distanced themselves from their readers, because they viewed listening to reader input as an act of pandering associated with the commercial sphere. They were out to

make art, not a commercial product, and so cultivated authorial personas independent of their readers. Roberta Gregory presents as a quirky artistic genius, stating that her "career seems to be that [she] gets this idea about something to do and nobody else is doing it. It always seems to be something off the wall, like a humorous thing about feminism, which was uncommon in 1973."[15] The fact that she "always had stories in [her] head and they were always kind of different and not what everybody else was doing," along with the gaps she saw in the market, drove her artistic production more than readers, who seemed only to give evaluative criticism, not suggestions about plot or character as we saw in the letter columns of commercial comics.[16] In fact, when underground authors talk about their interactions with readers, generally, those interactions are evaluative (e.g. "I love your comic," or "I hate your drawing"), rather than substantive.[17] Instead, as underground publisher Denis Kitchen, who worked with many of these women over the course of their careers, mentioned, "artists didn't really think about readers; they wrote stories they thought were entertaining and hoped they would sell."[18] This remark links the artist mentality to the lack of commercial concern by highlighting that authors created their stories prior to thinking about the readers they might sell them to. The ability to depict women's experience, both real and imagined, paired with the dialogic structure of the correspondence zone, situate the series as a space for feminist counterpublic formation.

Reinscribing Women of Color and Lesbians

Numerous historians attribute the downfall of the feminist movement to its lack of diversity. In an effort to present a united front achieved by not judging other women, the movement ended up with a lack of dialogue as women were urged to "repudiate all economic, racial, educational, or status privileges that divide us from other women."[19] For example, in her response to the Miss America protest of 1968, one of the first social actions of the feminist movement, Carol Hanisch critiqued the "egotistic individualism," of the participants, linking it with an "anti-womanism" that emerged as a result of a "spirit of every woman 'do her own thing.'"[20] As a result of this

view, women focused on their sameness rather than their difference. This view of difference as "egotistic individualism" meant that, in their actions and conversations about women's experience, women did not discuss how facets of identity other than gender could impact experience, and led to the fracturing of the feminist movement. As literary historian Carla Kaplan puts it "awareness of the exclusionary politics of American feminist 'sisterhood' and…attempts to open feminist circles up to a proliferation of feminisms, to turn from simple solidarity to coalition politics and new, more complex understandings of identity politics, to open up challenges to the category of identity itself" ended the practice.[21] Black women and lesbians, in particular, spoke out against this homogeneity, stressing how their experiences differed from those of the white middle class straight women who made up most of the movement. Eleanor Holmes Norton stresses that the experience of black women differed because "if women were suddenly to achieve equality with men tomorrow, black women would continue to carry the entire array of utterly oppressive handicaps associated with race,"[22] and Martha Shelley highlights how "society has taught most Lesbians to believe they are sick, and has taught most straight women to despise and fear the Lesbian as a perverted, diseased creature."[23] Daphne, an anonymous participant in Anita Shreve's retrospective study of consciousness raising, discusses how when she came out as a lesbian to her group, "no one said a word. Not one word. Not then, not ever. It was the weirdest thing. It was as if I were the invisible woman."[24] This testimony mentions her fellow feminists' silence concerning issues of identity, its refusal to address how being a queer woman might affect her experience, as making her feel "invisible."

In writing for women like themselves over a period of time, taking advantage of their new freedom to depict previously taboo examples of women's experience, the authors of *Wimmen's Comix* formed their own counterpublic that managed to capture both solidarity—via all the works appearing in the same series—and diversity—via the multiple opportunities the layers of the comics form afforded. They wanted people to read their work and gain an understanding of the variety of women's experience, even if they did not want to interact with their audience. A list of titles from the first issue highlights the variety of genres available, with "All in a Day's

Work" by Lee Marrs, "A Teenage Abortion" by Lora Fountain, and "Can This Marriage be Saved" representing possibilities for more realistic storytelling, and "There I Was" by Michele Brand, "Tales of Sativa" by Sharon Rudahl, and "The Cyborgs" from Patricia Moodian taking advantage of fictional storytelling options.[25] Often, with new genre options open to them, the authors offered a blend of fiction and reality in a way that both highlighted the surreal elements of realistic experience and demonstrated that fantasy could indeed turn into reality. By placing stories from fictional genres like science fiction, fantasy, and alternate history next to more realistic genres like memoir, documentary, and autobiography, the authors of *Wimmen's Comix* situate the present in the context of possibilities for what comes next.

Lee Marrs's "All in a Day's Work" falls into the realistic genre of memoir, but blends in elements of fantasy that represent the main character's thoughts as she responds to her options, all of which seem equally horrifying. The story depicts a woman wandering from job to job, searching for a place where she does not have to deal with sexual harassment. While individual images show realistic situations of sexual harassment, first at a large firm and then in a hippie establishment, the lack of panels makes the reader's eye wander on the page, just as the protagonist wanders from job to job. At the same time, the lack of panels creates a lack of white space that makes everything feel cramped in a way that mimics the woman's inability to escape from her situation as a sexualized woman in the workforce. After these experiences, Marrs shows the woman isolating herself in a large room, dividing the page into four panels, the only ones in the whole story. The panels zoom out on the woman sitting at her desk, making her appear smaller and smaller until, in the last image, we see her as a tiny figure with a large hand reaching in to grab her. While the panels lessen the claustrophobia of the other pages, they also emphasize her loneliness as she withdraws from society. At the top of the following page, the panels are gone again as she reenters society and the cramped feeling returns as she considers her options: "Join a W.L. commune?" "Go on the road?" "Capitalize on sex?" "Adjust?" In the center of the image, the spread-eagled naked figure of the woman serves to break up the various options with her limbs acting as panel borders (Fig. 9). She is at once vulnerable in her pose and

trapped by her options for finding community, all of which seem less than ideal. By introducing the more fantastic elements that depict the woman's consciousness in an otherwise realistic story, Marrs highlights the horrors of real women's experience and makes visible women's

Figure 9: This image from Lee Marrs "All in a Day's Work" *Wimmen's Comix* 1 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1972) captures how a woman is trapped by many unappealing options.

psychology.[26]

In the same issue, Sharon Rudahl's "Tales of Sativa" falls into the genre of fantasy, but by situating social problems that plague reality within that fantasy, she uses the genre to suggest what might be. The story opens as a fantasy, with a panel showing Sativa and her lover on horseback and the text marks the genre as fantasy by situating the time period as "after civilization." The characters discover a city, enter, and find a multitude of realistic social problems, including homeless cripples, women performing sexual favors for men in power, and abandoned children, all of which are shown in distressing detail surrounding a panel that depicts Sativa entering the city. Unlike Marrs's protagonist, though, this woman is in a position of power, able to choose whether or not to help these suffering souls. While the man looks around and would like to "get out of this city," Sativa would rather "help raise the consciousness level around here," a nod to the feminist practice. She returns with him to the hills and has sex with him, achieving orgasm as shown by her large "Wow!" exclamation. However, while women in real society might feel they have to choose between fulfilling sexual experience and helping those in need or "raising consciousness" about social problems, Sativa, because she is a character in a fantasy ends the story by "[leaving] her old man to go fight in the city." Rudahl suggests, through her blend of fantasy and reality, what society could be, if only we recognized the possibilities.[27] Through this blend of fantasy and reality that calls attention to what society is alongside what society could be, *Wimmen's Comix* uses its multiple genre possibilities to capture an aspirational element of feminist discourse.

Through this diversity of genres, the serial anthology was able to overcome one of the major critiques leveled at women's liberation by presenting lesbians and women of color. *Wimmen's Comix* Issue 6, the "Special Bicentennial Issue" co-edited by Becky Wilson and Barb Brown, gave the women a past as a "herstory," a historical account focused on female figures who have been left out of history books, to go with the present and future represented in other genres.[28] And this past was woven from a diverse array of figures, including women of color and lesbians who felt alienated from the broader feminist movement. Amongst Sharon Rudahl's "Katy

Cruel," drawn in a high contrast clear line style with a story from a "popular ballad of colonial America," we find Roberta Gregory's penciled depiction of a frontier lesbian couple in "Mary Ann Wilson: Frontier Artist," with a story taken from the only existing document about the lesbian couple (a neighbor's description of them).[29] Also, we have Dot Bucher's superhero story of "Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad," crafted in a flowing energetic line and Petchesky's "Reactionary Comics" tale of Pocahontas and John Smith, represented in the style of commercial comics, situating women of color within the herstory.[30] By including many different kinds of women, the *Wimmen's Comix* herstory issue made space for discussing how facets of identity other than gender might affect a woman's experience, a space denied women in the women's liberation movement.

By using a revise and resubmit system to train and publish new women cartoonists, these women created a counterpublic of women authors in the male dominated field of underground cartooning. The editors of the series position women as a counterpublic in the mission statement printed on the inside cover of the second issue that they "[hoped] that publication of high quality beginning work [would] give our wimmen artists a chance to be seen, and a foothold in 'the industry' based on their talents of mind, hand, and eye, rather than the more traditionally requested parts of their anatomy."[31] This statement identifies the action of the group as increasing the number of women cartoonists in the male dominated field of comics, acknowledging their outsider status, and using it to build a new community. Part of how this group accomplished that mission was through the variety mentioned above. As my description of stories in the Bicentennial Issue indicates, the variety of genres was accompanied by a variety of styles. This variety of genres and styles in published stories provided models that readers could choose from when creating their own work. If a budding cartoonist wanted to tell a more autobiographical story in a cartoony style, the anthology provided models for that. If she leaned more towards science fiction in an art deco style, there were models for that right alongside the autobiographical stories. Therefore, the anthology expanded readers' definitions of what comics

could be and opened up storytelling possibilities in a way that invited them to participate, to try to publish their own comics.

Once they decided to go this route, the serial anthology provided a place for them to publish, and the rotating editorial board of women in San Francisco provided mentorship, instructing these new cartoonists in the craft through a revise and resubmit system. A quote from Terre Richards captures how the system worked:

> We alternated editors and made it our mission to make 50% of the book open to new contributors. We were willing to work with submissions from new women artists when their work wasn't ready for publishing. There might be a problem with the lettering style, or the comic wasn't drawn to the right ratio format. We would write letters back and say, 'We like your ideas, but this is the format. You might want to try working on your comic balloons. Look at the way some of them are drawn. They shouldn't take up more than a quarter of the panel.' We were trying to teach people how to make a comic. There were women who would redraw it and resubmit it and then it would be published in future issues.[32]

This statement highlights how the editors trained the women in the craft of cartooning, providing them with the skills necessary to enter the male-dominated field. At the same time, the anthology format, which allowed for many short stories, proved more inviting for beginning authors than trying to publish a full length comic on their own did. Lee Marrs and Roberta Gregory, both frequent contributors to *Wimmen's Comix*, went on to publish graphic novels, and both credited the anthology with providing them their start.[33] Together, the anthology format and the revise and resubmit system worked towards the authors' activist mission of increasing the number of women cartoonists in the male-dominated underground, a theme that ran as an undercurrent with all the authors.

By training women and providing them with a place to publish the genres and styles of stories they wanted to publish, the editors at *Wimmen's Comix* formed a counterpublic of women cartoonists. And because their action did not rely on unity of purpose as other forms of feminist

activism did, allowing diverse viewpoints did not threaten their mission. Each additional woman they published, no matter her identity, helped them fulfill their activist mission. The serial format contributed to this mission in numerous ways. Sometimes, the serial format contributed when the published comics served as models, resulting in stories from issue to issue stressing similarity. Other times, the serial format encouraged dialogue as women responded to one another in ways that were discouraged within the united front of women's liberation. This latter function of the serial format demonstrates how, as the correspondence zone moved center stage, it provided a necessary space for dialogue about difference within the feminist movement.

Case Study

So far, I have shown how *Wimmen's Comix* provided space for addressing diversity, as well as an opportunity to fulfill an activist mission of forming a counterpublic of women cartoonists. In this section, I return to the concept of the correspondence zone in order to demonstrate how these opportunities for diversity and action end up situating the series as a vital site for discussing LGBT issues within the feminist movement. Up until now, I have discussed individual stories from the perspective of the anthology, which provides variety within an issue, though I have hinted at cross-issue production in thinking about published comics serving as models for potential cartoonists. Now I will consider how the serial format created dialogue across issues via the correspondence zone as women responded to published issues. The case of Roberta Gregory responding to Trina Robbins's coming out narrative demonstrates both how the revise and resubmit system of the anthology format encouraged more women to become cartoonists and how the variety of genre possibilities made the series a public place for dialogue about LGBT issues within the feminist movement. In many ways, this case study ties together the threads I have laid out so far—diversity, serial publication, variety of style and genre—in order to explore how authors mobilized these possibilities to present what Carla Kaplan refers to as "feminisms," or forms of feminism inflected with other facets of identity.[34]

Moreover, while my previous discussion could be applied to other kinds of serial publications, such as feminist magazines, this case study demonstrates how comics envision the tension between feminist identity and lesbian identity while still maintaining unity. Robbins, a straight woman, was able to publish her story without being silenced, yet the story written by Gregory, who identifies as a lesbian, is clearly in conflict with it. At the same time, the visual vocabulary for each story represents the tension between the feminist movement and lesbian identity. Robbins's emphasis on spectatorship separates the other feminists from their lesbian friend and the gag narrative genre separates the reader from the lesbian character, while Gregory uses comics' ability to visualize conflicts between text and image and thought and speech to capture the difficulty of lesbian experience within a feminist movement she depicts as heterosexist. The iconic similarity between some of Robbins's and Gregory's images only serves to highlight the vast differences of their stories, yet they both appear within the same series. The comics form thus, because of its combination of different tracks of text (thought bubbles, narrative boxes, speech bubbles) with images, can simultaneously present unity and difference without threatening a safe space or an activist mission.

In issue 1 of *Wimmen's Comix*, Trina Robbins published the first lesbian coming out story in comics. "Sandy Comes Out" is told as a gag narrative in the third person, with images of the reporter framing the story.[35] When Roberta Gregory discussed how she decided to submit her work to *Wimmen's Comix* she said that

> Seeing the variety of stories made me think I could get my own weird stuff published and people would read it. I remember seeing the first couple of issues and Trina had her 'Sandy Comes Out' story. And I thought, 'Well, she's telling about her lesbian friend. That means I could tell a lesbian story.' There were always these stories where some woman goes off and meets the wrong guy and regrets it, and then she meets the perfect person and they fall in love. And I thought, 'Why don't I do this from a lesbian point of view?' I sent it in and they said it was exactly what they were looking for, so they printed it in issue 4.[36]

Notice Gregory's mention of the variety of stories as an encouragement to submit her work, as well as to the evaluation and publication of her story. As a result, we end up with two stories clearly in dialogue with one another that use two different genres to tell a lesbian coming out story.

"Sandy Comes Out" is drawn in Robbins's characteristic style that is similar to the style of Archie comics, and presents a lesbian coming out story from the point of view of the straight artist spectator in the genre of a gag strip, where a story culminates with a funny situation and a punchline. The first panel shows "the artist" looking out at the reader and holding a board where she has drawn the title "Sandy Comes Out" as it appears on the first page of the comic we are reading. Her text bubble mentions that this is a "true life comic" that "really happened to my friend Sandy." All of these details combine to provide authority over the story, while at the same time distancing the narrator from the experience depicted. These events did not happen to the narrator, they happened to "her friend," and we see the difference between the narrator and her friend through the character depiction: while the author has light colored curly hair, the friend has black straight hair worn in pigtails.

The way the comic calls attention to spectatorship serves to distance the narrator and the reader from Sandy, the character who comes out in the story. We first see Sandy talking to herself in front of the mirror saying that "you must find a positive alternative to the dehumanizing nuclear family…some way to smash phallic imperialism," a statement that grounds her coming out in a feminist activist impulse. As the narrative boxes suggest, she then recalls her first crush on a girl and convinces her women's group to go to a gay bar. The panel where the women's group enters Ruby's, the gay bar, depicts two women with long hair kissing in close up, two women with very short hair scowling at each other across the bar, and several silhouettes in the background showing women holding each other close (Fig. 10). In the very back of the image, we see the women enter, contrasting white against the shadow and cross-hatching that

Figure 10: Trina Robbins "Sandy Comes Out" *Wimmen's Comix* 1 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1972) depicts Sandy and her women's group as spectators at Ruby's, a lesbian bar.

characterizes the images of the women in the bar. The women entering the scene are clearly spectators as one exclaims, "Far out!" Much like the depiction of the narrator in the first panel, the coloring and their looking emphasizes their separateness from the scene they are encountering.

The gag serves to ally the reader with Sandy, as we are both simultaneously surprised, but the presentation of fluid sexuality as a gag serves to further distance the reader from Sandy. After she realizes the bar is "blowing [her] mind," Sandy goes into the bathroom to regain her composure and encounters a person she originally thinks is a man. The reader starts the scene in the bathroom with Sandy's point of view, looking over her shoulder at a person who looks masculine. We see no markers of femininity, the person appears to be going to the bathroom

standing up, and their features are angular in a way we normally associate with men in commercial comics. But the person turns out to be a woman, as they turn around in the last panel of the page, revealing breasts. Sandy is embarrassed, and the reader might be, too; we have our moment of realization at the same time. However, this gag, complete with set up and surprise both for the reader and the character, in strip form, is left hanging. While the author's narrative continues on the following page, this is the last we see of the scene in the bathroom. There's no attempt to empathize with the trans person in the bathroom or any effort on Sandy's part to learn what the experience might tell her about her own unexpected sexuality. Because the gag narrative form does not foster understanding, this moment of confrontation separates the reader from Sandy, at a moment when it could have allied us with her. We are once again aware of our position as spectators.

This positionality of both the narrator and reader is emphasized once again on the last page. Despite her inauspicious beginnings at the gay bar, the following full page panel shows Sandy in her "San Francisco gay/hippie commune." She is naked in bed with another woman as various semi-transgressive scenes occur in the rooms surrounding her including a man in a dress, two men hugging, and two women practicing the unladylike sport of karate. Along the top of the panel, we see a tangle of human limbs and faces in ecstasy, lending an orgiastic air to the scene. The narrator appears in reporter mode, fully clothed with her notebook perched on her lap and her hand ready to take down Sandy's answer. She asks Sandy, "Do you agree with Ti-Grace Atkinson when she says that feminism is the concept, lesbianism the ideal?" a very reporter-like question that echoes Sandy's activist energy at the beginning of the story. The speech bubble with this question occupies the center of the panel, drawing the reader's eye and making Sandy's response even more surprising. Sandy seems to have abandoned her ideals as she slurs her speech to the narrator in saying, "Lissen, couldja come back another time?" As this reading shows, the author uses the framing of the story and the depicted narrator to distance herself from her subject, while at the same time allowing the reader to identify with Sandy as she experiences the strangeness of coming out. The reader is a spectator, as much as the narrator is. Even in the

bathroom scene, the reader allies with Sandy in her own moment of voyeurism, and then has their own role as spectator emphasized by the gag narrative format. In the final panel, the reader continues to feel that sense of voyeurism as it shows the debauchery of those in the gay/hippie commune. At the same time, the author separates herself from this debauchery by appearing as the fully clothed narrator, the only non-transgressive body in the space who closes the frame of the story with her serious question.

Roberta Gregory's "A Modern Romance" responds to "Sandy Comes Out" by presenting a lesbian coming out story that plays with the narrative form of a commercial romance comic. While Gregory twists the heterosexual nature of the romance narrative by making this a story of lesbian coming out, she uses the genre's preoccupation with thought bubbles to depict what it feels like to be in the closet, where one's thoughts and actions conflict, as well as what it feels like to be queer in a heterosexist society, where one's thoughts and feelings are rejected. We see moments that harken back to Robbins's comic, but these serve to emphasize the difference in point of view that manifest in the different choices of genre.

Like Sandy, the main character Anne is involved in a women's movement, but unlike Sandy, whose lesbianism at first strengthens her camaraderie with the group, the women in Anne's group reject lesbian sexuality. The story begins with a text-only panel that describes Anne as someone who "made great grades, but not so many friends" in high school, went to Junior College, and then "woke up" at Metropolis University. She goes through a few growing pains, trying to find a place to fit in in the big city, and discovers Women Students Union as a place where she can make friends. However, "radical feminist Jane Watson" proves a dividing force. A panel on the first page depicts Anne standing with the many diverse women in the group. The figures are all facing the same way, but instead of Anne having a scowl on her face and a complaint in her thought bubble like the other women in the panel, she appears with her heart thumping and birds and hearts twittering over her head as she blushes. She has feelings for Jane and those feelings separate her from the rest of the feminist group. Unlike Sandy, who goes with

her women's group as a spectator to explore a gay bar, Anne's sexuality separates her from the feminists she thought were her comrades.

As with Sandy, Anne's moment of realization comes as she looks in the mirror, but Anne represses her sexuality rather than deciding to explore it. Gregory depicts Anne's confusion, using thought bubbles to describe her thoughts and feelings. Instead of remembering a crush from when she was little and deciding to explore her possible queer feelings as Sandy does, Anne represses the thought that she "never did care much for guys" with "No. I musn't say things like that!" When she confronts herself in the mirror, Anne cries and decides to try to lose her virginity in what she considers a "normal," meaning heterosexual, way by going on a date with a boy who is "always kind of looking at [her] funny." The motivation for the date with the boy stems from a desire to conform, and not from sexual attraction, and Gregory depicts this conflict in Anne's thought bubbles, helping the reader see the point of view of the character.

This conflict between heterosexist society and the queer individual becomes even more apparent as Gregory uses thought bubbles to depict both the boy's thoughts and Anne's thoughts. From the very beginning, Anne and the boy (we never know his name) fail to be on the same page as Anne overdresses for their date to the movies. The panel showing them at the movies depicts their thoughts conflicting while the image shows the boy making sexual advances. The boy thinks, "I'm glad I asked her out after all," while Anne thinks, "I wish he'd stop feeling me," as the boy leers at Anne and Anne returns a scowl. Without the thought bubble, we would have been able to see the conflict, but the way the two bubbles divide the panel down the middle and draw our eyes to the collision of the bodies of the two characters, as well as the content those bubbles provide, enhances understanding of the conflict Anne is experiencing as she attempts heterosexual romance. Thinking about the comic at the level of the page (as opposed to as a series of panels) also draws our eyes down to the panel below this one, where we see Anne kissing the boy, despite the fact that, as her thought bubble says, "I wish I wouldn't keep seeing

Jane whenever I close my eyes." This panel stacking highlights how the heterosexual romance is actually conflict, rather than the expected love or fellow feeling.

Gregory also draws attention to how being queer and closeted results in a conflict between what one thinks and how one acts. She emphasizes this disjoint through Anne's thought bubbles juxtaposed with the images of the date, which could have come out of a romance comic. Boy meets girl, they go to the movies, drive somewhere secluded, and start becoming intimate. The visual track conflicts strongly with Anne's thoughts as shown in the thought bubbles. Unsurprisingly, as the boy gets more aggressive, Anne gets more worried until she shouts "No!" and the boy pushes her out of the car to walk home. This experience causes Anne to develop a fear of heterosexual advances as she thinks about running and hiding from any boys that might stop to pick her up. This conflict, represented by the conflict between text and image, provides the twist in the story from heterosexual romance narrative to the queer romance narrative. While romance novels and romance comics were mainly about heterosexual love, Gregory uses this narration to spin that tradition on its head. Anne must escape a heterosexual relationship in favor of an idealized lesbian relationship with Jane, and that lesbian relationship is the modern romance of the title.

From the time that Anne gets into Jane's car, in contrast to the conflicting thought bubbles that characterize Anne's interactions with the boy, Anne and Jane appear to be on the same page. In the first panel where we see them together, Jane says, "I trust I'm headin' you in the right direction?" The fact that Jane speaks, rather than just thinking, and the fact that she invites dialogue by asking a question, fosters a relationship that allows Anne to open up to her. Gregory emphasizes this dialogue by including more speech bubbles than thought bubbles, highlighting that, after Anne confesses her feelings for Jane and comes out of the closet, their relationship can be open and honest; there are no longer thoughts conflicting with actions. Instead, they talk to each other and become intimate. After Anne's confession, the only thought bubbles that appear express Anne's feeling that, "it all seems completely natural," and Jane's

thought that "I know exactly what she's going through." The latter of these thoughts speaks of the empathy we see demonstrated on the rest of the page.

The openness of the speech bubbles is enhanced by Gregory's depiction of the sexual encounter, which also enacts a "coming out" of the comic at the same time Anne is coming out. No longer closeted, Anne and Jane are shown having sex over the next few panels, with full frontal shots of both figures included in the series. The characters' nudity, accompanied by the somewhat graphic depiction of lesbian sex, highlights the openness of this relationship. The comic itself comes out of the closet at this moment, as we move from the conflict of the earlier panels, through the coming out moment, and onto this depiction of lesbian sexuality. While the heterosexual union depicted in romance comics was always coded and clothed because of obscenity concerns, Gregory takes advantage of the freedom available to underground comics authors to show uncoded and unclothed sex. Obscenity concerns, like romance stories, are representations of societal expectations, so Gregory's work both demonstrates, through her depiction of her characters, and performs, through its structure, a reworking of those expectations.

Figure 11: Roberta Gregory's "A Modern Romance" *Wimmen's Comix* 4 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1974) depicts the main character Anne (in the double pocket shirt above) finding a place to belong at a lesbian bar.

Following this scene of sexual union, Gregory includes a panel of Anne and Jane going to a lesbian bar, just as Robbins depicts Sandy going to a lesbian bar, but Gregory depicts the lesbian bar as a place of belonging. While Sandy and her women's group appear as separated spectators of the shadowy scene, Jane and Anne appear amongst the women (Fig. 11). Only their respective speech and thought bubbles differentiate them from the rest of the group, where women are shown just talking to one another. There is nothing salacious about this scene like the kissing silhouettes depicted in Robbins's story. Instead, Anne thinks that, "I'm among people with whom I belong for the first time in my life," emphasizing the sense of community the image shows with the use of "among" and "belong."

Despite the idealization of this romance, the story does not end on a happy note. After experiencing a sense of belonging, communion, and love with Jane and the lesbian community, Anne must go back to campus, where she is forced back into the closet and then ostracized by her peers when they discover her affair. The conflict between Jane and her former friends is most evident in a panel in the middle of the bottom of the page, where Anne is pushed into a narrow space on the far right side in order to make room for the multitude of speech bubbles criticizing her (Fig. 12). While some of the bubbles say things like, "It's none of our business," or "so what," the ones that take up the most space and are therefore the most noticeable say things like, "they should kick her out of here!" or "the Bible says they're all going to hell!" This talking overwhelms Anne who scowls at the speech bubbles while thinking, "Now I know what Jane meant by all the years of shit!" Anne has gone back to thinking instead of speaking and is being crushed by all the people telling her what they think of her.

In the final panel, this overwhelming criticism causes the queer couple to turn their backs on society and head behind closed doors, essentially recloseting them. The panel shows Jane and Anne from behind through a doorway as they talk to one another. In the foreground, we see

Figure 12: At the end of Roberta Gregory "A Modern Romance" *Wimmen's Comix* 4 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1974), Anne is criticized and then recloseted.

women looking at them as they walk away. The doorway makes a frame within the frame, calling our attention to the way doors cut off being able to see. At the same time, we are reminded of all of the spectators in Robbins's story, as we see similar figures depicted here. As some romance comics would, the story ends with a quote about love from literature. In this case, William Blake has the last word with an exhortation to "children of the future age reading this indignant page," or to readers. The quote mentions that "in a former time, love! Sweet love was thought a crime!" The story ends with a recloseting because queer love is still "thought a crime," and not accepted by society.[37]

Gregory responded to "Sandy Comes Out" with "A Modern Romance," published three issues later, and critiques Robbins's story by including similar elements that remind us of that story accompanied by a change in point of view and genre that encourages the reader to empathize with the lesbian characters. While the gag narrative in "Sandy Comes Out" involves a distancing of the reader from the subject via the depicted narrator, Gregory uses the genre of the romance comic's preoccupation with thought bubbles in "A Modern Romance" to depict what it feels like to be in the closet, where one's thoughts and actions conflict, as well as what it feels

like to be queer in a heterosexist society, where one's thoughts and feelings are rejected. Instead of downplaying the tension, the authors use the particularities of the comics form to dramatize that tension. Rather than diversity threatening the activist project of increasing the number of women cartoonists, the dialogue actually uses diversity to further the mission as Gregory sees Robbins's comic and decides to draw her own in response. Together the two present a dialogue between a heterosexual and queer feminist that is integral to our understanding of LGBT experience within the feminist movement.

Conclusion

Although the stories in *Wimmen's Comix* confront readers with the kinds of conflict created by diversity within the feminist movement, because they use the multiplicity of the comics form to depict different kinds of women's experiences within the same series, they overcome critiques of lack of diversity within the women's liberation movement. Shifts in authorial practices of underground comics allowed women to address taboo subjects, forming a counterpublic of women cartoonists. These authorial practices allowed for varieties in style and content that add an aspirational aspect to the series, by presenting a blend of fiction and reality, a blend of what is and what could be. By reinscribing different identities within this context and by accomplishing an activist mission of increasing the number of women in publishing, the series fulfills the promise of women's liberation without falling into some of its traps. My reading of the correspondence zone as a space of dialogue demonstrates that including comics in examinations of feminist media from the 1970s could reconfigure our understanding of the feminist movement, particularly regarding queer identity in relation to the movement.

As a chapter in the history of comics readership and authorship, we see the first backlash against the authorial practices of commercial comics, as authors situate themselves as artists intentionally covering taboo subject matter in the form they have come to see as appropriate for taboo subjects. Conceptions of transgression were linked to the Comics Code, which established

rules that could be violated by underground cartoonists in ways that were unavailable to commercial comics. Underground comics thus served as an incubator for innovation in comics that resurfaced in commercial comics from the mid-1980s when the Code ceased to be a factor. The idea of author as artist and the consequent distance from readers followed the return to the commercial sphere, but the discussions about identity enabled by the lack of oversight in the underground shifted with the author-as-artist concept. As a result, authors began to tackle substantive social issues in the comics, using letter columns to extend those conversations in a public forum, often provoking open disagreement in order to create counterpublics.

Chapter 3

Comics in the Culture Wars: Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* Series, 1989-1992

"Robert Mapplethorpe's sexually explicit photographs have drawn the attention of the Federal Communications Commission, which is investigating complaints against a public television station that broadcast some of the pictures…Roger Holberg, a lawyer for the agency, says that if materials are judged to be obscene, they can be banned from the airwaves." (*New York Times* August 17, 1990)

"I have a feeling the Concerned Mothers of America letter will generate mail like never before, all in favor of Mr. Gaiman's realistic depiction of modern society through the graphic arts medium…Since homosexuals do exist, it would be puerile to say that those types of characters are off-limits to writers." (Letter writer Brian Oliver Sheppard in *Sandman* #47, 1993)

These two quotes capture the conversation about art and obscenity that raged in America in the early 1990s, a battle that reconfigured what kinds of art government could fund and touched on issues of censorship and representation. They both represent public dialogue around two cases of obscenity charges. The first comes from public discussion of controversy surrounding Robert Mapplethorpe's posthumous *The Perfect Moment* exhibit, a target of censorship based on developing obscenity codes for government funded art. The newscaster claimed that he showed the explicit photographs because they were part of the news, but conservative organizations raised an outcry about his use of obscene material that led to the FCC investigation. The second quote comes from the letter columns of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series of comics published by DC from 1989-1996, which was written in response to similar charges of indecency raised in a letter Gaiman printed from the Concerned Mothers of America, who objected to the series' depiction of queer characters. Sheppard's letter appears in a letter column devoted to responses to the Concerned Mothers of America, in an issue that is the first of the new Vertigo line, a line that claimed comics as literature.

The quote from *Sandman* demonstrates the power of comics in the 1990s as spaces for dialogue that fall under the radar of mass media. What the New York Times quote does not say is that Mapplethorpe was gay and that his photographs often depicted homosexual sex. The conversation about the censoring of these photographs from the airwaves therefore presents a double act of removal of queer representation through censorship: representations of gay bodies are removed from television and Mapplethorpe and his work are denied their queer identity in public conversation. Queerness can be erased from this high profile visual art exhibition because, unlike the comic, the exhibition does not include a space for dialogue. Dialogue about the exhibition must happen separately, and that separateness allows questions about free speech to eclipse representations of queer identity. In the *Sandman* discussion, however, because it takes place in a comic that includes a letter column correspondence zone, queer representation's relationship to debates over First Amendment rights remains intact, as queer representation becomes the basis for fighting censorship. This letter, and those that accompany it in the letter column of this issue and the several preceding it, demonstrate how the correspondence zones of comics, because they were both public and integral to the main comic, made space for those wanting to defend representations of queer sexuality. Because these conversations take place in the letter columns of single issues and most scholarship on *Sandman* focuses on the trades, which do not include these letters, these conversations have been erased from comics scholarship. In this chapter, I argue that viewing *Sandman* as a series from a print culture perspective that takes into account reader letters and advertisements not included in trades allows us to see how comics became a vital site for discussing the intersections of debates about art and queer representation in the late 20th century.[1]

Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series, which details the exploits of Dream, the ruler of a land of stories called The Dreaming, is a favorite of literary scholars because of its use of literary allusion. Shakespeareans love the "Midsummer Night's Dream" and "The Tempest" issues, and scholars have used the series to highlight the similarities between comics and oral storytelling, comics and dreams, and comics and the mythic romance.[2] Given that the series is highly innovative in terms of style and content, it is no surprise that one scholar has analyzed its formal characteristics to discuss the semiotics of comics.[3] While I agree that the series deserves the academic attention it has received, scholars rarely take into account the entire series, instead focusing on one or two story lines collected in trade paperback format. I argue that looking at the series from the perspective of print culture allows us to track its development, thereby integrating the series into its larger cultural context. Print culture methodology is as much interested in paratexts as the text itself, which include covers, ads, and reader letters. The latter two are absent in trade paperbacks, so I have gone back to the original printings of the series to examine these aspects of the comic.

Reader letters printed in the letter columns, in particular, served an important role as correspondence zones in the development of the series. As I discuss with the letter columns of the *Justice League of America* in Chapter 1, these letters, create a dialogic space for the formation of a public. In this case, the correspondence zone helps form a counterpublic within comics fandom that is more accepting of queer representation in comics. Recognizing the power of the correspondence zone to create a counterpublic, the editors (and sometimes Gaiman himself) self-consciously craft the discussions included, printing provocative letters in order to encourage other readers to respond. The correspondence zones, then, make space for discussions amongst the changing audience as Gaiman positions comics as art and creates a counterpublic

that sees the potential for queer representation in comics, rather than viewing such representation as obscene.

These two discussions in the correspondence zones enter into ongoing conversations about the definition of art and questions of queer representation happening during the series publication. The censorship of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funded Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit, *The Perfect Moment*, demonstrates how conversations of art and representation were bound to one another, as representation of queer sexuality was denied the status of art and removed from the Corcoran Gallery. Viewing the development of the *Sandman* series alongside the Mapplethorpe incident, which was happening during its publication, shows how once a creator claimed their creation as art, their work became subject to attempts at censorship from conservative watchdog organizations. However, unlike the high profile Mapplethorpe exhibit, divorced from its commentary, comics included the correspondence zone, an ideal space for dialogue about representations of queer sexuality that preserved, and even highlighted, the connection between conversations about the definition of art and conversations about queer representation.

After providing some background on public conversations about art and representation in the culture wars of the 1990s, as well as some discussion of how comics authorship and readership changed, I show how censorship of the Mapplethorpe exhibit ties those conversations together in order to provide context for my discussion of the *Sandman* series during the controversy and through the presidential election that followed, from 1989-1992. Viewing the series from a print culture perspective allows me to track its development. First, I show how Gaiman both positioned himself as a comics author who was heir to the legacy of DC and positioned comics as art by situating the comics crossover, where characters appear in series not their own, as a

literary allusion. In this context, the correspondence zone provided space for the old comics audience and the new comics audience to discuss the changes in comics as they became art, helping each side understand the others' point of view and defining the new counterpublic of comics fandom. Next, I show how, once the series had achieved the status of art, it came under attack by the conservative watchdog organization the Concerned Mothers of America for its representation of queer sexuality. However, unlike the Mapplethorpe exhibit, which became a stand-in for censorship debates to the exclusion of conversations about queer representation, comics provided a correspondence zone when Gaiman printed the Concerned Mothers of America letter in order to provoke a response from readers. My analysis demonstrates how comics' inclusion of dialogic spaces made them a vital site for discussing key debates around art and queer representation in the culture wars.

Art and Representation in the Culture Wars

The culture wars of the 1990s were defined by public debate, with the media representing conservatives, who espoused traditional values, on one side and liberals, who advocated for change, on the other. Sociologist James Davison Hunter is credited with coining the phrase "culture wars" in his 1991 book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. The prologue, composed of representative news stories followed by descriptions of two opposing viewpoints, aims to set up key debates in the conflict and highlights the role the media played in the culture wars. The first of these is over the issue of domestic partnership in gay rights, and the news story presents two opposing viewpoints: one from the supporters who "view today's vote as a test of San Francisco's reputation as an 'island of civility,' and one from opponents who "believe

the proposition would undermine the sanctity of the nuclear family."[4] The news story is followed by the perspectives of Chuck McIlhenny, a Presbyterian pastor opposed to the bill, and Richmond Young, a gay man who knows McIlhenny by reputation.[5] The fact that the news story articulates the same opposition as the viewpoints, accompanied by the fact that Young knows McIlhenny based on his media presence, highlights how the culture wars were always a public debate. Although many have since argued against Hunter's claim that there are two opposing sides based on survey data of middle America, in a defense from 2007, Hunter emphasizes how his claims about sides were never about "the opinions of average Americans," but instead about public culture "as systems of symbols and other cultural artifacts."[6] Indeed, in the original book, Hunter argues that the culture war is created because personal "differences are often intensified and aggravated by the way they are presented in public."[7] In other words, the culture wars, as defined by Hunter, were always a media based conflict. Therefore, it makes sense to focus on media as public cultural objects to gain a better understanding of the culture wars.

Questions surrounding the definition of art and questions of gay rights were key debates in that conflict. Hunter's introduction identified debates about gay rights, abortion, evolution, free speech, obscenity in art, and separation of church and state. In that context, the question of gay rights appears alongside obscenity in art, which is allied with the Mapplethorpe controversy. Later in the volume, Hunter explains that the deeper question underlying the Mapplethorpe controversy is over "how art is to be defined," tying questions of obscenity to the larger question, "What is art?"[8] These two issues would continue to appear alongside one another, reverberating throughout public culture as the idea of the culture wars spread. In Pat Buchanan's 1992 speech to the Republican National Convention, which did much to popularize the idea of the culture wars, he sites both Bill Clinton's support of the "homosexual rights movement" and George

Bush's stance against "the raw sewage of pornography that pollutes our popular culture," a likely reference to the Mapplethorpe controversy given its high profile, again placing the two issues alongside one another.[9] However, in both of these instances, particularly given the continued referencing of the Mapplethorpe controversy, there is surprisingly little recognition given to how the issue of gay rights and the issue of defining art are intertwined.

Before I go on to discuss the Mapplethorpe controversy further, I want to explain how I see gay rights issues as being tied to issues of queer representation. Gregory S. Jay suggests a useful connection between the two ideas by connecting textual representation to physical representation, demonstrating in his introduction that the many valences the word "representation" has accumulated. Building on Althusser and Foucault, Jay states that representation is "at once conceptual and physical," and that representation derives its power both from "the conceptual and affective rhetoric of…sign systems" and from "the material and institutions that house and produce them [those signs]."[10] In that sense, representation in the media is tied to more political questions of gay rights because recognition from the media institutions that produce the signs builds towards physical representation in other public venues as the "actual practices and economic arrangements…give the most fantastic ideas the power of life and death," or, in slightly less extreme form, have political and legal ramifications. As such, questions of queer representation become intimately tied to debates about gay rights.[11]

The controversy over the Mapplethorpe exhibit demonstrates how it became a lightning rod for questions surrounding the definition of art. In the summer of 1989, amidst conservative accusations of obscenity, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. cancelled the NEA-funded *The Perfect Moment* exhibition of Mapplethorpe's photographs. While the original incident was linked to charges of obscenity in Andreas Serrano's "Piss Christ," a photograph displaying a

crucifix in a jar of urine and another NEA funded art piece, Mapplethorpe's name and his work became a bellwether for debates about art and censorship. Senator Jesse Helms brought examples of Mapplethorpe's photography to the senate floor during hearings concerning what kind of art the government should fund, and Dennis Barrie, Director of the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, was arrested on obscenity charges in 1990 when his museum displayed Mapplethorpe's work.[12]

Based on the controversy surrounding the role of the NEA that the exhibit engendered, *The Perfect Moment* played a role in larger conversations about the definition of art, but those concerns have often eclipsed the role the exhibit played in issues of queer representation. Gay historian Jack Fritscher points out how Mapplethorpe's role in debates about censorship and obscenity have erased his homosexuality, and in her discussion of the made for TV docudrama *Dirty Pictures*, Dorothy Barenscott points out how the media distanced Mapplethorpe as an individual from the controversy because of his homosexuality, both during the controversy and in the film from 2000, where the heterosexual Dennis Barrie is presented as the hero.[13]

My reading of the Mapplethorpe controversy reveals that questions of art were intimately tied to questions of representation. The attempts at censorship were debates over government funding for art, but they were also tied to questions of queer representation. In the hearing where Helms showed several of Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs, he labeled them obscene and called for more restrictions on what constituted art in the eyes of the government. The proposed Helms Amendment stated that the government should not support "obscene or indecent materials, including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, *homo-eroticism*, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts" (emphasis mine).[14] Legislation concerned with defining the terms of art aimed to take away opportunities for queer

representation. Indeed, in the case of Mapplethorpe, the removal of his art from the Corcoran gallery removed a queer artist representing gay culture from the walls of the museum. While the censorship of his work at the Corcoran, rather than succeeding in censoring Mapplethorpe altogether, drew large numbers to subsequent shows, the fact remains that he was denied representation in the Corcoran and again in the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center.[15]

Moreover, the limits placed on the NEA because of the Mapplethorpe controversy had repercussions for queer representation in future government-funded art. In 1990, the NEA denied fellowships to performance artists Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller on decency standards. The NEA Four, as this group became known, took the organization to court on the grounds of free speech, but the original decision was upheld, legalizing the censorship of three openly gay artists (Fleck, Hughes, and Miller) and condoning the censorship of a performance piece on AIDS from Finley.[16] Attempts to more narrowly define art, therefore, resulted in quashing of queer representation, both from the perspective of representations in the mainstream media and the perspective of physical representation within the museum context. Conservative forces made similar attempts to erase queer representation by calling a boycott of the *Sandman* series, but, because comics include the dialogic correspondence zone, the attempted censorship backfired as the creators mobilized the correspondence zone to spark discussion.

The Rise of the Author

Based on the publication of both Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight*, 1986 is often marked as the year when American comics grew up. After moving through the growing pains of underground comics, which are often cited for their uneven quality,

alternative comics emerged on the scene. These alternative comics were published by small presses and, like underground comics, explored adult stories. The difference was, they were striving for quality in storytelling and art, and usually did so via authors who, like those who participated in the underground, saw themselves as artists. Art Spiegelman and Francoise Mouly published *RAW*, which lay somewhere between avant garde art and comics, and Gilbert, Jaime, and Mario Heranadez gained recognition for their series *Love and Rockets*, which depicted a realistic community of punk Latina and Latino characters. As Charles Hatfield points out, in this context, supported by indie presses and the emergence of comic stores, which ensured that work would make it to the intended audience, comics authors became well known.[17] The idea of author as artist followed comics authors, like Moore and Miller and Gaiman, as they began telling more complex, adult stories for commercial companies like DC Comics. Part of this ability for authors to tell more complex, adult stories in commercial comics came from a loosening and then disappearance of the Comics Code, which led to companies allowing creators more freedom to tell the kinds of stories they wanted to with the characters the companies owned. This was particularly the case under editor Karen Berger at DC, who became well known for giving her artists free reign to write their stories, which were marketed for adults. The various series she edited became known as the "Berger books" and eventually became the series in DC's Vertigo line.

It wasn't just writers who were gaining recognition for their labor. The comic book was still a collaborative production, but unlike the work for hire model of the 1960s, all creators—from pencilers to letterers, cover artists to inkers—were given credit in the books. For example, all *Sandman* comic books include three names on the front cover: Gaiman, the name of the penciler (the artist), and the name of the inker (the colorist). Inside the front cover, we find the names of

everyone who worked on the book, including behind-the-scenes people involved in publication, such as marketing managers and assistant editors. One example that stands out is the rise of Todd Klein, the letterer for the entire run of the *Sandman* series. After Issue #21, where Klein uses different lettering for the speech of Dream and each of his siblings, he gains recognition in the letter columns, as people comment on how well his lettering fits each family member. [18] At this point, Klein moves from being just another name on the inside cover to being recognized as an author who makes choices that affect how readers view these characters. This move of the letter writer, who has a role normally not considered to be artistic, signifies how readers began to recognize each member of the atelier as an author. In this sense, the comic had multiple acknowledged authors, members of the atelier who contributed to the creation of the text.

Despite the rest of the atelier gaining recognition for their labor, it is clear that readers saw Gaiman as the guiding force behind *Sandman*, and this is evident even in their interactions within the correspondence zone of the letter column. While in the 1960s, fans had used this space to make suggestions and point to plot holes, in the letter columns of *Sandman*, letters were more likely to be evaluative comments on previously published work than suggestions for future directions. The letter columns evolved into a space where readers would discuss the mythology of the series, its various allusions to literature and art from numerous cultures, or commentary on how the series was changing comics. In other words, the letter columns were still a space of discussion for readers, but those readers recognized Gaiman and the rest of the atelier as artists with a specific vision, so readers remained separate from the authors of the series. While Gaiman and Berger may have received critiquing letters, by not printing them, they established that the letter columns were not a space for critique, instead encouraging subsequent readers to write letters for a different purpose: to connect them to one another. Gaiman and Berger seemed

to recognize the value of this community, and when each took on the editorial role of choosing letters, they crafted provocative conversations about the evolving status of comics as a medium, and eventually, about the role comics could play in queer representation.

Comics Become Art

The *Sandman* series, with these roles established for authors and readers, was being published throughout the Mapplethorpe controversy, and, as comics were redefining themselves as a medium, they became ideal places for representations of queer sexuality. As Ramzi Fawaz notes, comics have long been a space for queer identity exploration, and Gaiman's stories demonstrate that he recognized this potential, as he depicted the possibility of comics to represent the outcasts of society, the people who did not quite fit in.[19] Gaiman slowly developed comics into art by first positioning himself as inheritor of DC comics, and then reaching out to new, literary audiences with his Shakespearean crossover. The letters included in the letter columns provided a space for dialogue where comics fans and literary types alike could praise the series, reaffirming comics as art. After the series achieved this literary status, in response to the *A Game of You* storyline, which mobilized the new storytelling possibilities of comics to depict queer sexualities, the Concerned Mothers of America (CMA) wrote a letter accusing Gaiman of obscenity. When Gaiman printed the letter, he provoked responses from readers that turned the correspondence zone into a space for counterpublic formation, allowing readers to discuss the relationship between queer sexuality and obscenity. This analysis shows how, in contrast to the high profile Mapplethorpe controversy where queer representation was censored

in both the exhibition and the discussion, comics provided a space to discuss how questions of art tied to representations of queer sexuality.

The Doll's House storyline revives the old DC Sandman Hector Hall as a figment of an abused boy's imagination, in order to pit new comics against old comics. The fight between Dream and Hector Hall positions the series within DC continuity, thereby ensuring the buy-in of comics fans and establishing the series as heir to the legacy of superheroes. Hector Hall, the most recent version of the Sandman character created by Jack Kirby, is an earlier version of Dream, one comics readers would associate with the old form of comics. When we first meet Hector Hall in "Moving In," he appears in the primary colors traditionally used in superhero comics, with his bright yellow and red cape, and with unnatural dialogue like, "It is tickling my hand. Ha-ha! Oh dear!" and "Mother! Save me! I am falling to the ground! Oh! Oh!"[20] The panels on the page are meant to be read linearly, as the sequential numbers indicate.[21] The bright colors and overblown language contrast sharply with the dark shading of the page on the right of the spread that depicts Jed, the aforementioned speaker from the panels with Hector Hall, held captive in a basement, forced to urinate on the wall and sleep under a ragged blanket. The narration about Jed is more natural and affective, with lines like "The floor is uncomfortable, and his bladder aches," and the panels are layered on top of one another instead of arranged in neat lines.[22] Through this spread, Gaiman emphasizes how comics can be a crucial escape from a traumatic reality as Jed escapes into the primary colored world, at the same time that he critiques their formulaic simplicity. The numbered panels and the stilted dialogue highlight how superhero comics have appealed to the lowest common denominator, and the juxtaposition with the basement panels shows that comics can be something more. As we follow the story, we come to learn both that Jed's abusive foster parents keep him in the basement and collect money

from the state, as well as that Brute and Glob, characters from the earlier DC Sandman series associated with "brute strength and base cunning," have walled Jed off from the rest of the Dreaming.[23] The association of physical and mental captivity, heightened by the fact that Jed escapes the basement at the same moment Dream penetrates the barrier Brute and Glob have erected, positions the simplistic storytelling in superhero comics as detrimental. Gaiman, as a comics fan, clearly believes that while comics can provide a crucial sense of escape, they have been hampered by their adherence to formula. The walling off of Jed's dream world prevents him from having more complex fantasies that might be more cathartic or more useful during this traumatic experience.

Therefore, Gaiman presents the series as improving upon the comics tradition, as Dream and Hector Hall come face to face, the new comics confront the old comics, in what becomes a laughable battle where new comics clearly win (Fig. 13). When Hector Hall goes out to fight Dream, who Brute and Glob have described as a "Nightmare Monster," Chris Bachalo, the artist

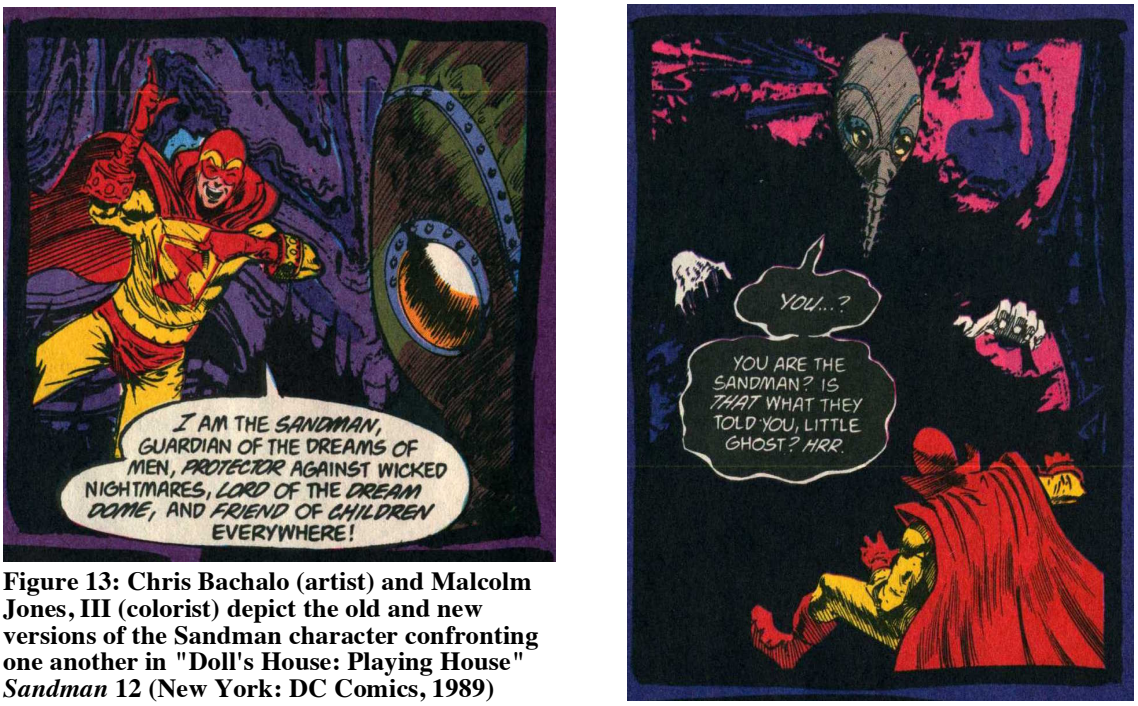

Figure 13: Chris Bachalo (artist) and Malcolm Jones, III (colorist) depict the old and new versions of the Sandman character confronting one another in "Doll's House: Playing House" *Sandman* 12 (New York: DC Comics, 1989)

for the "Playing House" issue, captures both versions of Sandman in two panels. In the first, Hall appears in his primary colored getup and, in the stilted dialogue of his genre says, "I am the Sandman, guardian of the dreams of men, protector against wicked nightmares, Lord of the Dream Dome, and friend of children everywhere!"[24] Morpheus, depicted with subtle shading in dark purples and greens, laughs at him. In the second panel showing both versions of Sandman, Dream, surrounded by a swirling pink and purple landscape, dwarfs Hall before laughing at him and breaking through the barrier.[25] These panels depicting the conflict between the old form of comics and the new, position Gaiman as both inheritor of the comics tradition via the continuity of the DC Sandman character, and improver of that form by opening it up to more complexity in terms of form and content.

While the critique of superhero comics as formulaic might seem like a claim that would enrage comics fans, the letters pages suggest that, because comics readers are used to crossovers, they instead also position Gaiman as the inheritor of the comics form. In the two letter columns that discuss these issues (letter columns generally have a 4-5 issue delay, so that letters about issue #11 are printed in issue #16, issue #12 in issue #17), numerous letters congratulate Gaiman on including Hector Hall. Letter writer Alan Blodgett, first says that his "first thoughts concerned what was to be done with the Sandman created by Jack Kirby and later used by Roy and Dann Thomas," a statement that situates him as a comics fan, and then goes on to say that he is "most impressed with the development of this book which is setting a benchmark for the industry in just its first year of publication."[26] This comics fan wants to see the improvements Gaiman is planning to make to comics, and sees him as changing the industry. In the letter columns of issue #17, Neil Ahlquist identifies as a comics fan by stating he's a "devoted fan of Infinity, Inc.," where Hector Hall was last seen, then specifically sites the confrontation between

the two versions of Dream, before saying that "no other book on the racks blends horror and fantasy as well as this one does."[27] Both of these comics fans, rather than taking offense at the critique of the genre, see Gaiman's conversation with it as Gaiman improving upon it by making comics more complex. By playing up his DC legacy, Gaiman keeps comics readers interested in the series. The fact that the discussions are taking place in the letter columns, a traditional facet of the comics experience, also connects *Sandman* to the comics tradition.

After *The Doll's House* storyline, Gaiman writes a collection of tales entitled "Dream Country" that positions literary allusion on the same level as comics crossover as he strives to make comics art. We see the Greek muse Calliope held in thrall to a desperate modern day writer, enter the dreams of cats, watch the first performance of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* alongside a fairy audience, and glimpse the depression and isolation of the DC superhero Element Girl, aka Urania Blackwell. The last two stories are tied to together via thematic and visual parallels that draw connections between Shakespearean characters and comics characters, insisting that comics can be literature, whether they discuss literary or popular characters.

The role masks play in both texts highlights their similarities and ties them together. In "A Midsummer Night's Dream," the real fairy Puck steals a mask from the actor playing Puck in order to take part in the play, making mischief as he goes.[28] The mask is part disguise and part truth, allowing Puck to appear human and take part in the play. He takes off the mask when Oberon calls him home and announces he's decided to stay in order to "confusticate and vex" the mortals of this world.[29] In the panel, Puck holds the mask on both sides and peers over its top edge, calling attention to the mask's status as a material object meant to hide (Fig. 14).[30] A panel in the subsequent issue "Façade" uses similar visual iconography as Death peers over one of

Element Girl's masks.[31] In the story, we learn that Element Girl makes these masks in order to appear normal in public. Like Puck, Element Girl uses the mask to appear human, to fit in. The text on the similar panel highlights the thematic role masking plays as Element Girl says, "I couldn't

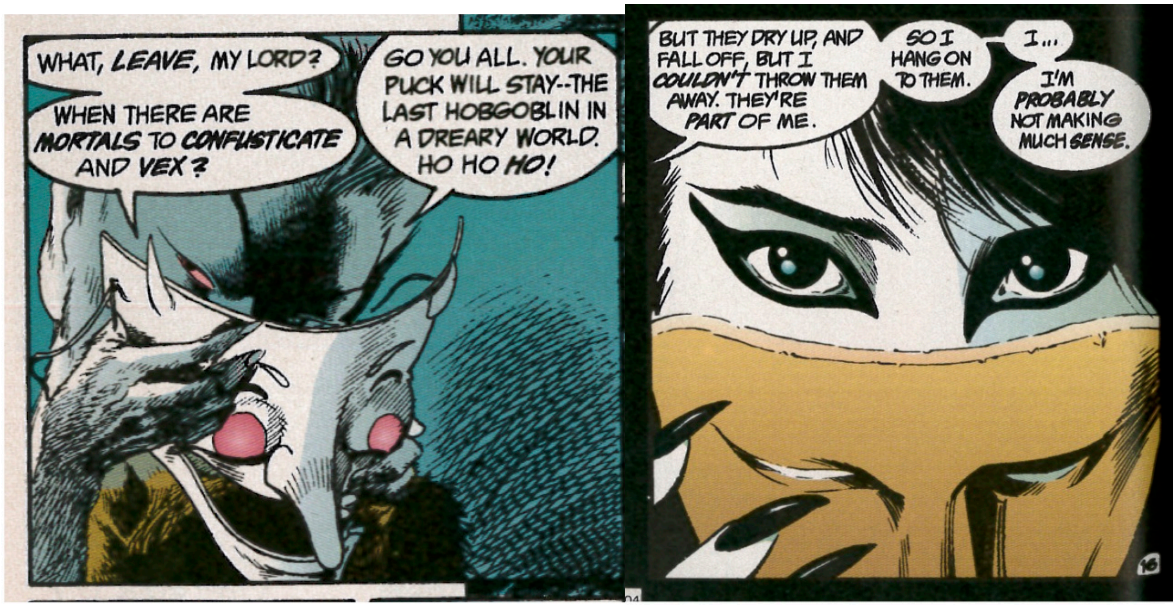

Figure 14: Artists Charles Vess in "Dream Country: A Midsummer Night's Dream." *Sandman* 19, (New York: DC Comics, 1990) (left) and Coleen Doran in "Dream Country: Façade." *Sandman* 20, (New York: DC Comics, 1990) (right) use similar iconography in a Shakespearean adaptation and a story about DC character Element Girl, drawing a connection between literary allusion and comics crossover.

throw them [the masks] away. They're part of me."[32] Much in the same way Puck masks himself with a mask of himself, so Urania masks her identity with an ideal of herself. The use of secret identities in both stories also recalls the role secret identities have played in comics, where superheroes often question which identity, the super or the normal, is more real. And each story ends with a self-conscious description of Puck and Urania respectively as part of Dream Country: unmasked Puck speaks the end of Shakespeare's play, where he casts the play characters as "visions" that are "no more yielding than a dream,"[33] and Death tells Urania that "mythologies take longer to die than people believe" because "they linger on in a kind of dream

country."[34] Both of these moments highlight that Shakespeare and comics characters come from the imagination and, therefore, are appropriate subjects for comics. At the same time, the complexity of the Element Girl storyline, focused on the non-super life of a DC superhero, demonstrates that superheroes can be complex characters on the same level as characters from Shakespeare. Each is just another story, and comics are an artistic storytelling form.

Assistant editor Tom Peyer then reinforces the idea of literary allusion as comics crossover in the letter column of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" when he gives William Shakespeare a "guest credit" for the dialogue of the play within a play and suggests that it's too bad that Shakespeare is dead, because "he might have written *the* definitive Batman story."[35] This moment positions Shakespeare as comics author and highlights how early modern theater was a popular medium similar to modern day comics. Like comics, theater was seen as entertainment for the masses. Like Gaiman is trying to do for comics, Shakespeare's work was instrumental in bringing respect to theater, lifting theater up in the posthumous publication of the First Folio. Peyer makes us ask, if Shakespeare had written Batman, might we consider comics literature?

Reader letters suggest that this increased complexity and literary allusion captured new kinds of comics readers, readers who usually thought of themselves as readers of literature to the exclusion of comics. The series captures these readers early on. In issue #16, where we also hear from comics fan Alan Blodgett, we hear from Leslie J. Wood, who begins her letter with "I am not a comics fan," and then goes on to discuss how her boyfriend introduced her to the series, which she finds "truly deserving of the term graphic novel" because Gaiman has "opened [her] eyes to another option for writers."[36] These kinds of letters continue throughout the series. In the letter column of issue #28, Julia Witwer writes such a letter, first stating that she is "not usually impressed with comic books," and then moving on to ally the series with early novels,

claiming that "the merging of words and pictures may mean a new direction for literature…if it's treated seriously enough."[37] In the same letter column, Robert Ravazi states that "*Sandman* is not a comic book but a literary work of fiction whose medium is pictures," separating the series from its comic book lineage in order to claim it for literature.[38]

These kinds of letters become so common that letter writer Mike S. Edelstein writes a parody of them in issue #59, mocking the new literary audience from the perspective of a comics fan, which the editors use as a provocation to spark discussion about the changing audience of comics as they vie for the status of literature: "It seems every letter begins with the classic, 'I never used to read comics, but last week my (enter beneficent acquaintance here) gave me issue numbers 3, 293, 621, and I blah blah blah…Letters in the Sand is the only lettercol whose contributors *never* discuss other comics…or how incredible the transformation of the graphic literature medium has been over the last fifteen years."[39] Edelstein's letter marks the divide between the old and new audience, emphasizing that the new audience fails to see the improvement of the form authors like Gaiman are encouraging. The editors print several responses to his letter, including one from Sanna Edwards in issue #64 where she says to Edelstein that "you and your type make me feel as if somehow I'm not worthy or I can't appreciate [comics] properly because this is the first real comic I've ever read. Yes, you've been here a long time, I do respect you for that, but please don't judge me because I haven't."[40] She then goes on to discuss how comics are inaccessible because once you gain an interest in something, you've missed much of the story and can't find back issues unless you luck into them. In the same letter column, assistant editor Alisa Kwitney discusses how she asked herself which group she belonged to, since she read comics from a young age, stopped, and then picked up again when a friend gave her Alan Moore. She ends her discussion by coming down on neither side, providing a middle position as an

alternative option to the polarizing old/new dichotomy Edelstein's letter set up.[41] By printing both letters and her middle ground, Kwitney creates a public dialogue about the changing audience of comics and creates a counterpublic of comics fans, exposing long time comics readers to the point of view of those just discovering comics, and showing both parties that not everyone fits into one category or the other. This dialogue argues for a more inclusive comics counterpublic within the comics community, encouraging fans to welcome the new readers who have come as the medium approaches the status of art.

While Gaiman took advantage of The Dreaming as a space that includes all stories to both position himself as heir to the comics form and the improver of that form, conversations in the letter columns demonstrate that the series, because it included more complex stories, was aiming to reach a more literary audience in addition to comics fans. By taking advantage of the letter columns as a correspondence zone, the editors aimed to help the long time comics fans accept the new comics fans and vise versa by exposing both kinds of readers to the others' point of view in the context of thinking about comics as literature, as art. At the same time, the editors demonstrated that there was a middle ground, that the categories of old and new were not quite as stark as readers might think, and that their reading public could and should exist in that middle space. This expansion of categories mimics the expansion of the storytelling possibilities of comics to include literary themes. As the form was improving to reach the status of art, it was able to become a venue for discussions of identity, but it also appeared on the radar of conservative watchdog organizations, who attempted to censor queer representation.

Discussing Queer Representation in Art

The *A Game of You* storyline and the subsequent conversations about it demonstrate how Gaiman used the expansion of storytelling possibilities in comics to encourage readers to revise their notions about categories of sexuality, allying the redefinition of the comics form with more liberal understandings of sexuality. *A Game of You* recounts the exploits of Barbie, who tries to rescue her dream world, which has been usurped by a creature called the Cuckoo. She is aided by a cast of women characters, including the witch Thessaly, her lesbian neighbors Hazel and Foxglove, and Wanda, her transgender friend. Throughout the story, Gaiman thematizes both boundary crossing and penetration at the same time that he highlights how categories of sexuality are unfixed and changeable. In issue #41, which falls right after the *A Game of You* storyline has ended, Gaiman uses the letter columns to promote dialogue about what content belongs in comics and about sexuality by printing a letter he received from the Concerned Mothers of America (CMA), a conservative organization that objected to his depiction of lesbian sexuality. In doing so, he and the editors at DC, turn the comics correspondence zone into a counterpublic in response to conservative claims of queer sexuality as obscenity. At the same time that this conversation is happening in the letter columns, Karen Berger, the editor, begins showing ads for the new Vertigo line, which gave creative freedom to its artists, and therefore came to stand as a symbol for comics as art. Thus, the Vertigo line is ushered in with conversations about how the new serial comics can revise misconceptions about sexuality, providing a place of dialogue and belonging via the correspondence zone. Together, these three moves—the story, the letter column, and the ad campaign—emphasize how the public nature of the correspondence zone in serial comics serves as a discursive forum for readers wanting to defend more liberal notions of sexuality.

The storyline thematizes boundary crossing in both physical and metaphorical senses while weaving in the permeability of categories of sexuality. The first issue, "Slaughter on Fifth Avenue," opens with a visual penetration as the panels slowly zoom from a long shot of the fantastical world The Land into the dark interior of a cave. At the end of the scene, Martin Tenbones says he will cross the boundaries between worlds to find Barbie who will save them.[42] The next scene, which takes place in the real world, also highlights the crossing of thresholds as Wanda first enters Barbie's apartment and then goes around the complex looking for cream for Barbie's coffee.[43] Artist Shawn McManus depicts Wanda knocking on the doorways of the

Figure 15: Trans character Wanda meets lesbian character Hazel in the doorway in "A Game of You: Slaughter on Fifth Avenue," *Sandman* 32, (New York: DC Comics, 1991), which thematizes boundary crossing throughout.

women who will eventually band together to find Barbie, and the panels serve both to introduce us to them and to continue the theme of boundary crossing as Wanda enters their apartments and returns to Barbie's with cream in hand (Fig. 15).[44] McManus reinforces this boundary crossing visually when depicting Dream as he observes these events from within The Dreaming. The panel borders are black instead of white and, therefore, are less stark; in the middle tier, the speech bubbles cross the border, and in the bottom tier, the crow Matthew's beak crosses the panel boundary. Morpheus's speech reinforces this permeability of boundaries as he says that

"something travelled from one state of existence to another," referring to Martin Tenbones crossing into the real world.[45] From these beginnings, we see many boundaries crossed, including Barbie crossing over into The Land, Thessaly, Foxglove, and Hazel crossing the Moon Road, various characters permeating the boundary between the living and the dead, the waking and the dreaming, and finally, the Cuckoo crossing into other worlds.

In addition to crossing the boundaries between represented physical spaces, McManus graphically depicts a number of instances where the boundaries of the body are crossed via penetration.

Thessaly cutting George's skin off with a knife takes up a whole page as Gaiman's language, depicted in narration boxes, overlays McManus's graphic images. Gaiman chooses words like "incision," "pierces," "slicing," "cuts," and "cutting," describing the process slowly as McManus shows one panel with the knife going in behind the ear and one with the knife going in above the eye as blood drips down from the cut. The whole ordeal lasts nine panels (a full page), and then Thessaly takes the face and nails it to a wall, another penetration.[46] This incident, paired with images of Martin Tenbones being shot[47] and Wilkinson being speared,[48] as well as Maisie's recounting of her trans nephew being found dead after being bashed in the head with a wrench,[49] emphasize the permeability of body boundaries.

Gaiman links the boundary crossing and penetration to issues of sexuality via the lesbian character Hazel. Hazel reads as a butch lesbian when she answers the door for Wanda, depicted with short hair and a button down shirt and tie stretching over large breasts.[50] Throughout Wanda's time in her apartment, she keeps calling up to Foxglove, her lover. However, in a scene from "Lullabies of Broadway," Hazel confides in Barbie that she had sex with a male co-worker who is "gay mostly" and that she thinks she might be pregnant.[51] Gaiman highlights the

expectations about sexual categories through Barbie who, when Hazel confides she might be pregnant, says, "Hazel, you're. I mean. You're a dyke," demonstrating how labels related to sexuality encourage certain expectations, namely, that lesbians do not sleep with men and, therefore, cannot get pregnant.[52] This act of sexual penetration recalls the other boundary crossings and allies them to issues of sexuality, emphasizing how the boundaries society places on sexual categories are just as permeable as other kinds of boundaries.

If Hazel allies the thematization of penetration to issues of sexuality, Wanda's story serves to emphasize the consequences of not fitting neatly into a category of sexuality as prescribed by society. In a conversation with Barbie, we learn that Wanda's parents were not supportive of her coming out, that her "parents tell their friends [she's] dead," and that she only has one aunt who ""prays for [her] to repent her wicked ways."[53] We learn both from her nightmares about surgery and from Hazel pointing out to Wanda that "You've got a thingie" when she sees her in her underwear, that Wanda has not had, and probably has no intention of getting, gender reassignment surgery.[54] In childhood, Wanda sought solace in the dream world of comics, which were full of weirdos like her, and she claims she "wanted to be Bizarro, when [she] grew up. Bizarro Alvin."[55] Wanda's fantasies of being a comic book character highlight how comics could be a place of belonging for those who do not neatly fit into the categories society has placed them in.

However, throughout the storyline, Gaiman depicts superhero comics and the culture surrounding them as reenforcing traditional expectations of gender. In Wanda's nightmare, the Weirdzos she identified with when talking to Barbie about comics try to make her fit neatly into a societally defined category by performing gender reassignment surgery with a saw after Wanda tells Weirdzo Lila, "I'm a woman" (Fig. 16).[56] In the following panels, Wanda is depicted first

as the kind of muscular male common in comic books as she protests the surgery, and then, once she is strapped down to the operating table, as a scrawny, more realistic looking male. The last panel

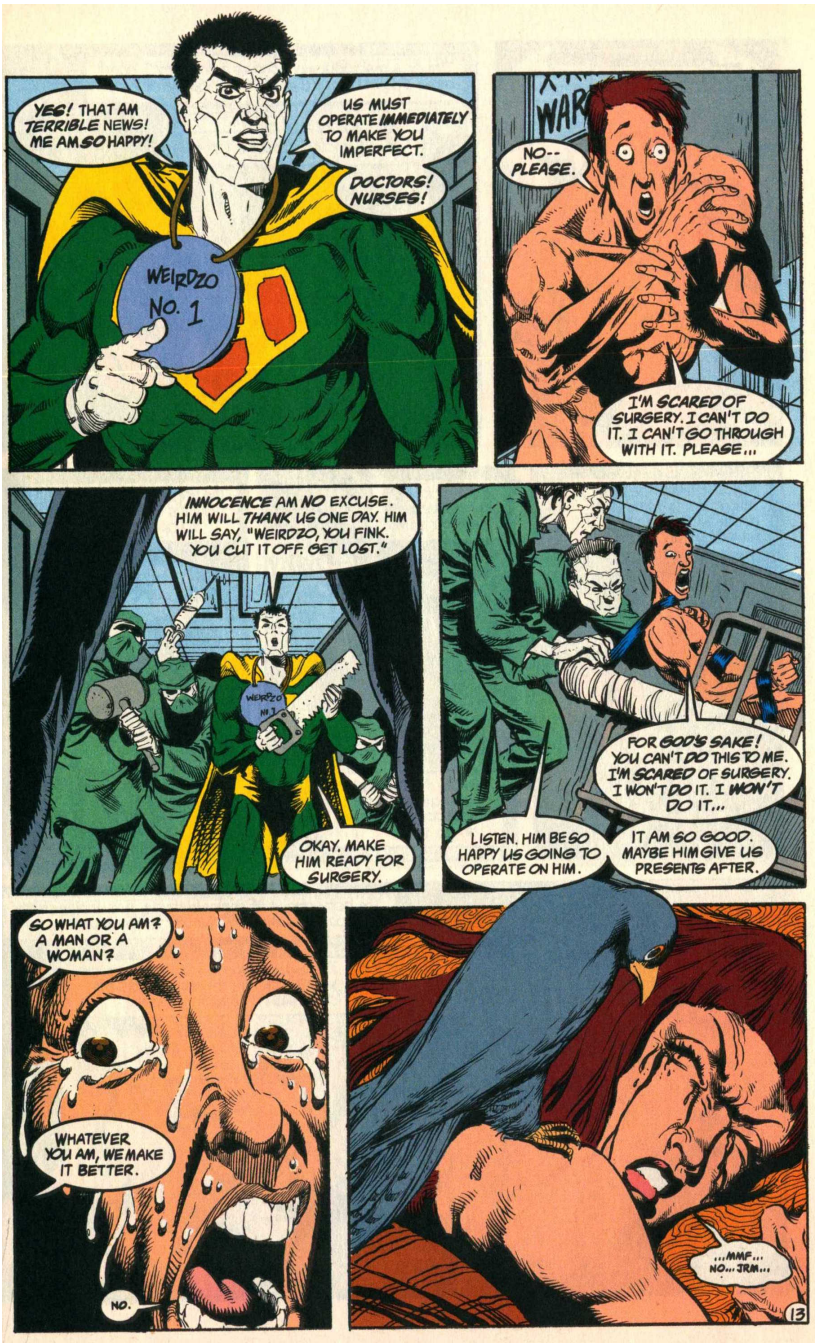

Figure 16: Trans character Wanda's bad dream represents superhero culture as a dominant, repressive force that enforces gender norms in "A Game of You: Lullabies of Broadway." ***Sandman*** **33, (New York: DC Comics, 1991)**

of her dream is a close up of her crying face as someone off panel asks, "So what you am? A man or a woman? Whatever you am, we make it better."[57] This speaker gives Wanda only two clear-cut choices in terms of gender identification and suggests that a person who does not fit neatly into one of those two categories is sick. By depicting this anti-trans attitude via characters that look like comic book superheroes, Gaiman and McManus point to how comics have played into conservative views about gender, even though they have the potential to be spaces where those who do not fit in to society could find belonging.

Comics are treated as one of many conservative forces that the women in the story must engage in dialogue. In the last issue, "I Woke Up and One of Us Was Crying," Barbie lays a superhero comic on Wanda's grave as she recounts her experience at the comic shop where she bought it, including the "greasy guy behind the counter who seemed really amused that [she] was female and asking for this comic."[58] Though people like Wanda have found a sense of belonging in the weirdness of comics characters, comics' conservative views of gender as textually represented in the comics and in the communities surrounding comics have served as a barrier. The comic shop is just one of the conservative forces depicted that insist categories of sexuality remain starkly delineated. When Barbie meets the Cuckoo, who ends up being a younger version of herself, she also gives voice to conservative views of how boys and girls have different kinds of fantasies, where boys "hide their faces in secret identities, and listen to the people who despise them admiring their remarkable deeds" and girls imagine "their lives are not their lives."[59] This delineation of gender fantasies is contrary to Barbie's role in this narrative, where she is both Barbie and Princess Barbara, just as Clark Kent is Superman, and she saves The Land with her boon. Wanda's Aunt Dora is another conservative force depicted in the story. Before Wanda's funeral, Barbie meets Aunt Dora, who insists on calling Wanda "Alvin," calling

her "a sinner" and telling Barbie to "make sure that you talk about their son" to Wanda's parents.[60] Gaiman emphasizes her conservative nature when she says, "God gives you a body, it's your duty to do well by it. He makes you a boy, you dress in blue, he makes you a girl, you dress in pink. You mustn't go trying to *change* things" (italics in original).[61] Her insistence on clear-cut gender categories and her opposition to change identify her as the voice of conservatives who see people like Wanda as sexual deviants. Barbie responds by crossing out "Alvin" and writing "Wanda" on the headstone in flaming pink lipstick, reinscribing Wanda's identity and shutting Aunt Dora out during the car ride back.[62] In both of these instances, Gaiman suggests that comics can provide an answer to these conservative gender politics if they can overcome their own conservative gender views and explore more complex notions of identity as he does in this story. Through the sympathetic and realistic depictions of characters like Hazel and Wanda and even Barbie who highlight the permeability of categories of gender and sexuality, Gaiman creates a counterpublic within comics fandom that recognizes comics as literature where outcasts could find belonging.

Yet the new status that comics as art attracted put the series on the conservative radar. This is not the first issue of *Sandman* that includes representations of queer characters—Dream's sibling Desire is gender queer and we meet drag queens and lesbians in earlier issues—yet this is where we find the conservative response, an attempt at censorship of art that would remove queer representation from comics. But, because comics include discursive spaces of conversation within the medium itself, as opposed to divorced from it, as is the case with the Mapplethorpe art exhibition, and because Gaiman recognized the potential of the correspondence zone to form a community, instead of the boycott succeeding, it sparked dialogue about queer representation. These conversations helped create a counterpublic of comics readers, opposed to

the traditional conservative views of formulaic comics and chauvinistic comics communities, as much as they were opposed to right wing efforts of censorship. Because these conversations are tied to the medium they are discussing, found within the same covers, proponents of First Amendment rights do not co-opt the discussion. Instead, the printed letters in the correspondence zone end up creating a more accepting counterpublic of comics readers, one that would not leer at a woman in a comic shop or protest against representations of queer sexuality in comics.

Gaiman uses the affordances of the letter column correspondence zone to encourage exchange in a public forum when he prints the letter from the Concerned Mothers of America (CMA). In what he identifies as the fourth time he has taken over the letters page for the editor, Gaiman chooses to print a letter accusing *Sandman* of "glorifying homosexuality" and claiming that the organization will boycott the series until he writes a letter of apology to be printed in the American Family Association Journal, a newspaper dedicated to the conservative watchdog organization.[63] According to their current website, the journal "has been on the frontlines of America's culture war" since 1977, and the current video advertisement posted there states the mission as "providing those who share their beliefs with practical ways of getting involved in the culture war."[64] Thus, Gaiman's decision to print this letter signifies comics taking part in the culture wars of the 1990s, and places that entrée in a public and dialogic space where readers can write back against the views of both CMA and the conservative views represented in the comic.

The public nature of the responses helped create a counterpublic of comics readers. In the same letter column as the CMA letter, he prints a letter from Laura Adams, a self-identified transgender individual who identifies Gaiman's portrayal of characters like her with the expanded possibilities of the comics form when she says, "There are several subjects that are taboo for comics (probably because of the 'lowest common denominator' audiences of most

books as much as social stigma), including and especially gender identity."[65] As Gaiman does through his less than flattering portrayal of superhero comics within the story, Laura also thinks of superhero comics as limiting the social issues they are able to explore. She goes on to discuss how she identified with Wanda and how the realistic depiction of the character helped one of her friends better understand Laura's choice to come out. Another reader, Shaun Hill, begins his letter by saying that "knowing the variety of readers comics attract (not all of them being liberal left-wing politically correct radicals like myself), I know you're going to get some negative responses to the 'alternative genders' Neil presents so matter-of-factly here. And I want to come down firmly on the grateful, affirmative side."[66] Shaun makes a political and cultural identification that he sets in opposition to those who will send "negative responses" like the CMA and more conservative comics readers. Later in the letter, Shaun mentions appreciation for Gaiman's depiction of permeable categories of sexuality, saying "Sex and sexuality aren't a strictly codified system of right and wrong answers…they are more accurately a spectrum of feeling and behaviors that can easily result in messy couplings (as in Hazel's with her 'mostly gay' co-worker Raphael) as in 'orderly' marriage and monogamy."[67] Though neither of these letters is directly responding to the CMA letter because they are printed in the same issue, their placement within the same letter column makes them feel like answers to the CMA: why should we depict issues of gender identity in comics? Because people can gain a sense of belonging and understanding from those images, and because these fictional representations might cause some readers to better understand that categories of sexuality are permeable. Gaiman suggests that, by moving beyond gender normative superhero tropes to explore more complex stories full of real, flawed characters, comics as art can accomplish this goal.

Letters written in response to the CMA controversy highlight how the letter columns become correspondence zones where published reader responses form a counterpublic with more liberal views of sexuality. In the next letter column, which occurs two issues later in issue #43, Kim Vickery, from the Texas Human Rights Foundation, highlights how *Sandman*, because of its opposition to CMA and its depiction of lesbian and transgender characters, has become a symbol for queer activists when she writes in even though she hasn't read the book because it was mentioned in the newsletter for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, San Francisco.[68] As indicated by her addressing "Ms. Kahn," rather than Gaiman, Kwitney, Berger, or any number of other people directly involved in *Sandman,* she was responding to the call in the newsletter to write to Jenette Kahn, President of DC, to "encourage DC to continue lesbian visibility in the comics."[69] Additionally, unlike with the Mapplethorpe controversy, where questions of free speech eclipse conversations of queer representation, divorcing the two conversations from one another, the boycott of *Sandman* stays tied to questions of free speech. By printing the letter, editor Alisa Kwitney sets the series up in opposition to conservative forces like the CMA. In that same letter column, there are three other mentions of the importance of depicting queer characters, and the conversation continues for several issues.

The letter column in issue #45 is devoted entirely to responses to the CMA letter that help define the counterpublic. After stating that all the letters will be responding to CMA, assistant editor Lisa Aufenanger emphasizes the political importance of the contents by saying "And since 'family values' are such a hot topic in the presidential election campaign, what better time to read what you Sandman fans feel on the subject."[70] By connecting the debate in the letter columns to the presidential campaign, Aufenanger politicizes the contents of the letters, suggesting that their contents might be useful in democratic debates over family values. Letter

writer Stephco Alien continues the political engagement when he says that Gaiman's characters "are a welcome change from the stale, conservative right-wing atmosphere" advocated by CMA.[71] Several letter writers say that they will buy more copies of the series in order to counteract the boycott, many cite the idea of America being founded on principles of religious freedom, several suggest that the letter is an attempt at censorship, and all applaud the realistic depiction of queer characters. When Gaiman decided to print the CMA letter as a provocation, he mobilized serial comics' potential for fostering dialogue via the correspondence zone in a way that would create a counterpublic of more accepting comics readers than the ones he depicts when Barbie visits the comics shop.

This situating of serial comics as a space for democratic discussion and debate coincided with the rise of comics as art capable of exploring complex subjects as indicated by the fact that these culture wars conversations coincided with the rise of the Vertigo line. Issue #43, which contains the first responses to the CMA letter, also includes the first mention of the Vertigo line in a half ad that appears under the last page of the letter column.[72] In the next issue, the same ad appears in the same place, only this time we can see the whole ad.[73] In looking at the two ads side by side, it looks as if the letter column has lifted, like a curtain, in the second ad, revealing the Vertigo label. This visual integration of the more adult Vertigo line with the letter column suggests that the democratic discussions about adult issues like queer representation have ushered in the new line. In the back of #47, the first issue with the Vertigo imprint, editor Karen Berger writers that she "was always looking to help create and edit titles that would appeal to the older reader who wanted something new and challenging to read, to people of both sexes who read other things besides comics," a statement that emphasizes how Berger envisions comics as literature.[74] By using comparative words like "older" and "new," Berger positions this line of

comics, and the readers who read it, in opposition to the old form of comics, defining the new counterpublic of comics readers. Paired with this view of the line producing comics as art, in an interview from 2001, when Vertigo had been successful for some time, Berger stated that the Vertigo mission was to "provoke a response from the reader," and that the stories were meant to be controversial, a statement that supports the idea that comics could be a place for debate within the culture wars.[75] The association of the CMA debate and the rise of the Vertigo line allies the redefinition of comics as art with the expansion of categories of sexuality.

Conclusion

Mapplethorpe's queerness, inscribed in an exhibition, was erased from public discussion in the mass media, thereby preventing the public conversation from touching on the controversy's implications for queer representation. By contrast, examining the development of *Sandman* maintains the connections between battles over the definition of art and battles over queer representation because the correspondence zone provides a discursive space within the medium. Gaiman never denied his comics legacy, instead embracing it in order to show comics fans and literature readers alike what comics could be. As comics strove towards the status of literature through storytelling complexity, realistic character depiction, and literary allusion, they encouraged readers to discuss this change in the letter columns, using the correspondence zone to help create a new kind of comics audience. In striving towards being art, the series attracted the same kinds of conservative organizations that attempted to censor Mapplethorpe. However, while conversations about the high profile Mapplethorpe exhibit were able to erase queerness because they were separated from the exhibit itself, because comics included the correspondence

zone in the letter columns within the text, responses to obscenity charges preserved the connection between discussions of queer representation and free speech denied the Mapplethorpe controversy. Examining high art and comics side by side highlights the erasures in the discussion of Mapplethorpe, while also demonstrating the impact that studying comics can have on understandings of larger cultural contexts, situating the correspondence zone as a crucial site for dialogue.

We also gain insight into the continued development of the correspondence zone within the history of comics. Like the correspondence zones of the 1960s, the letter columns delimit the zone in which authors teach readers how to interact with cultural objects. However, we see the influence of the underground comics of the 1970s as multiple authors all gain recognition in various places within issues. Rather than letters asking who the artist is or who the inker is, the whole atelier is given credit at the beginning, and the list of editors appears at the top of the letter column. The most telling example of this shift is the continued praise of letterer Todd Klein in the letter columns. Another legacy of the 70s is the expansion of storytelling possibilities to include representations of queer characters. While these queer representations constitute the correspondence zone for *Wimmen's Comix,* here, the letter columns provide additional space for discussion from those who do not wish to become cartoonists.

The greatest shift we see in the correspondence zone is the creators' conscious use of the space to promote dialogue. Edelstein's letter and the CMA letter, as well as several others printed throughout the run, are meant to provoke a response, even if they are printed without comment. Thus, the editors shape the discussion in a more transparent way, taking advantage of the space to encourage readers to contribute discussions of relevant cultural issues about the changing comics medium, as well as about the culture at large. And readers recognize the letter

column as part of the reading experience, calling it the best letter column in comics. The use of reader-generated content prefigures current day practice via social media and other interactive user experiences on the web.

These shifts in the relationships between authors and readers also reconfigure how authors teach their readers modes of social action in comics. We can already see a blurring of the two categories via the solicited reader responses used in crafting the correspondence zone of *Sandman*: readers value other readers' contributions along with those of the atelier. As comics move to the web, this distinction continues to collapse as authorship becomes tied to reading while reading becomes an authorial, public practice.

Chapter 4

Readerly Authorship: Cooperative Competition in Webcomics of the 2000s

The various correspondence zones discussed in this project have helped us see the social and political roles comics have played throughout the 20th century as authors and readers have used the serial format to form publics and counterpublics. In addition to helping us see this formation of publics and counterpublics, studying correspondence zones has helped us catch a glimpse of author and reader relationships. Each chapter has tracked these textual forces as they have evolved through the history of serial comics. In this chapter, I want to focus our attention on what the correspondence zone reveals about authorship in the economic context of the web. In many ways, the correspondence zones of print comics have Web 2.0 characteristics. Not only is reading part of writing, but writing is part of reading, as reader responses are published in the letter columns and readers easily produce new content as authors in the serial anthology. Communities form around published reader input, as they might in the online forum of a television show or webcomic. The later issues of the *Sandman* series appeared during the early days of the Internet and contain ads for DC's partnership with America Online, claiming that the service will allow fans to "talk directly with artists, writers, and editors" and "meet other DC comics fans."[1] In the same issue, Gary Ushaw, another author for DC, discusses the Internet as the "hot new thing" and recommends that fans "drop by one of the comics groups and be welcomed with open arms and a big virtual kiss by fellow comics fans the world over." In those forums, they might be able to chat with him about his current title, but "for those of you who still cling to the belief that you can exist quite happily outside the global village" he provides information about the current title in the back of an issue of *Sandman*.[2] There's a sense that the

correspondence zones of print comics are moving online as people connect to one another via the Web. In 2002, DC officially ended the practice of including a letter column, with editors citing the Internet as the reason.[3] Correspondence zones of all kinds abounded, as readers and viewers gained access to the email inboxes and screen names of their favorite authors and other cultural producers and those authors offered speedy responses to their queries and critiques. In other words, by shortening the delay in response time that existed in print because both letters and comics traveled long distances, the Internet gave the correspondence zone to a wider range of audiences, allowing counterpublics to flourish as everyone found their own niche.[4] As a result, the function of the kinds of correspondence zones I have been discussing throughout this project, while no less common, is less vital.

My analysis in this chapter is based on a facet of Web 2.0 that moves beyond interactivity, instead situating the consumer as a producer through the figure of the "produser." These produsers produce, not just responses to content, but original content, creating fan fiction, videos, or art based on the characters they love. While we've seen hints of this fan creation before in Chapters 1 and 2, the Web space provides access to more tools, making this kind of fan production both more common and more widely disseminated. Reading leads to authorship as the distinctions between author and reader collapse. Many scholars of participatory culture have gravitated towards this kind of fan production in order to recognize and claim agency for women and other marginalized audiences.[5] This is well-trod territory.

Instead of returning to that territory, I want to focus on the correspondence zone of reciprocal guest comics in webcomics in order to flip the figure of the produser on its head, to examine how, on the Internet, not only is reading often an authorly practice, but authorship is a readerly practice. Authorship always serves an economic function as the author originates with

capitalism, and so we continue to expect authors to compete with one another in the marketplace. In the context of the Internet, this economic function of authorship meshes with the figure of the produser in an attention economy, and relationships between authors shift as a result. In this chapter, I show how authorship and readership function in the broader context of the attention economy of the Internet. Authors, rather than solely competing with one another, develop partnerships in the form of webcomics collectives that help them compete for the limited supply of attention through cross promotion. Part of that cross promotion happens when they situate themselves as readers in public by recommending one another's work. Webcomics authors take advantage of the collapse of readership and authorship on the web as part of their economic strategy of cooperative competition. Based on this analysis, I argue that the correspondence zones of reciprocal guest comics in webcomics, where two authors post public readings of each other's work on each other's sites in the same space as the main webcomics, present a valuable archive that shows how relationships in an attention economy differ from those in a capitalist economy.

The joking rivalry between Jeph Jacques, author of the webcomic *Questionable Content,* and Sam Logan, author of the webcomic *Sam and Fuzzy,* captures how the traditionally competitive category of authorship is tempered by cooperation in an attention economy. In his newspost for July 7, 2004, author of the webcomic *Sam and Fuzzy* Sam Logan posted a callout of Jeph Jacques, the author of the webcomic *Questionable Content*: "I've decided to pick a fight with good buddy and fellow Dayfree-presser Jeph, of Questionable Content. My reasons for doing so are numerous. For one thing, he has more readers than me. But more importantly, he offends me on a *profound and inexcusable level*. Also, he is kind of shifty looking, and I hear he has unpleasant body odor."[6] That evening, Jacques started a thread on Sam and Fuzzy's forum

called “Sam Logan is a Scoundrel and a Poltroon,” where he insulted Sam with claims such as “Sam Logan stages brutal hobo fighting tournaments in his basement, or as he calls it, his ‘Hobolliseum of Doom,” and “Sam Logan talks about you behind your back. I’m not gonna say what he says about you, but it’s not very nice.”[7] Other readers joined in, adding their own insults about either Logan or Jacques to the thread. On July 8, Jacques responded in his newspost with “It has come to my attention that Sam Logan has called me out to start a webcomic rivalry! Now that we are HELLA RIVALS I can confide in you, my trusty readers, that Mr. Logan is a fraud, a coward, and a villain most nefarious.”[8] On the same day, a reader with the username coldplayplaya started the thread “QC vs. Sam and Fuzzy” in the *Questionable Content* (*QC*) forums, claiming that “we need more fuel for the fire!”[9] Readers picked sides, or did not, but the main point of the rivalry was to come up with the most ridiculous insult, much in the same vein as the one upsmanship present in “yo mama jokes.” At first glance, this rivalry, begun with Logan’s claim that Jacques has more readers than he does, makes sense when we think traditionally about authorship, a category designed to promote the individual as part of a capitalist economic system.

But upon closer examination, we see that the relationships between individual authors change when placed in the economy of attention that defines the Internet. This rivalry is a joke meant for the purpose of promoting one another rather than a sincere competition. The pages with the insults I just referenced also include links to each other’s websites, so that, even amidst their “rivalry” the two authors are providing access points to each other’s work. They promote one another because Logan and Jacques both belong to Dayfree Press, a webcomics collective where all members link to one another in order to increase readership across the board. Logan mentions their common membership in his original callout (“fellow Dayfree Press-er Jeph”), and, even

more telling, the Dayfree Press ad on Jacques's site on the day he throws down the gauntlet is for Logan's *Sam and Fuzzy*. These links, then, helped each author advance in Google search results, which, in the early 00s, were based on the number of links to a site. The fact that the rivalry is a joke meant for promotion, rather than a true attempt at competing with one another, captures the kinds of relationships authors in an attention economy have with one another. In the online context, authors still compete for the limited resource of readers' attention (as James G. Webster reminds us, there are still only 24 hours in a day and audiences must choose what media to consume), but that competition is tempered by a spirit of cooperation.[10] Jacques and Logan, as individuals, still have to compete for the limited resource of attention, but they do so by bolstering one another's web status via links. Rather than just competing against one another as authors might in print, the currency of links in the early Google search algorithm encouraged partnerships that helped individuals compete in an increasingly crowded marketplace. That spirit of cooperation causes us to rethink traditional notions of romantic authorship, particularly as authors position themselves as readers of one another's work.

In the interest of exploring how and why webcomics authors situate themselves as both rivals and partners, I begin by explaining authorship and readership in the attention economy of the early 00s. In this context, authors cooperated to compete by joining webcomics collectives, forming partnerships for cross promotion based on the currency of links. I show how they adopt a readerly authorship, recommending one another and drawing guest comics that are interpretations of one another's work, all the while increasing the number of links for each others' sites with the assumption that those linked will return the favor, thereby boosting both authors' status on a Google search page. The correspondence zone of reciprocal guest comics,

then, shows how the partnerships between authors developed by webcomics collectives combined with the public readership as a strategy for competing in an attention economy.

Part of my aim in this chapter is to produce a study of a certain period in the history of webcomics that divorces them from a pervasive association with masculine geek subculture. I define webcomics as comics produced for the Web and made accessible via a URL, a definition that purposefully excludes both comics scans and digital comics accessible only via eReader files. The form has been around for more than twenty years and, spurred on by Internet developments, has undergone drastic changes in that short period of time. The tendency of the limited amount of scholarship on the subject is to either get caught up in utopic possibilities, as Scott McCloud does in *Reinventing Comics,* or to make broad generalizations about the form without historicizing, such as Fenty, Houp, and Taylor do in claiming that "many webcomics are written within and for the hacker/geek subculture."[11] While this statement may have been true in the early part of webcomics history, a period when production of web content was the realm of mainly geeks and hackers, it certainly does not hold true today, when webcomics on all sorts of subjects from all kinds of authors abound. While Andreas Gregerson's discussion of *Penny Arcade* is more aware of the development of the webcomic as a medium in the context of the wider Internet, the decision to focus on *Penny Arcade*, a webcomic about video games and gamers, continues to suggest that webcomics come from geek subculture.[12] Thus, my discussion focuses on two webcomics that fall more into the romance genre during a particular pre-Twitter period of webcomics history in order to provide a more diverse, historically oriented view of the medium.[13] At this time, forums and comment threads were the most likely spaces for readers and authors to correspond. The version of PageRank, the Google search algorithm that plays a large role in determining the economics of authorship discussed here, is also specific to the early 00s,

as Google changed its search algorithm around 2008 because PageRank was too easily hacked.[14] Therefore, the discussion of authorship and economics discussed here should be taken as a modern historical account, rather than a discussion that would apply to Internet authorship today.

Cooperative Authorship

Reading and writing on the Internet are characterized by a blurring of the lines between these two forces as reading becomes a more interactive process. Axel Bruns named this blurring of boundaries "produsage," which he defines as "the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement."[15] He connects the emergence of produsage to the shift from an industrial economy where "only industrial producers…were directly involved in production processes, while audiences were cast in the role of consumers,"[16] to a networked economy, where "the creation of shared content takes place in a networked, participatory environment which breaks down the boundaries between producers and consumers and instead enables all participants to be users as well as producers of information and knowledge—frequently in a hybrid role of produser where usage is necessarily productive."[17] To relate this description to authorship and reading, whereas, in an industrial society authors and other privileged members of book distribution networks, such as printers and booksellers, were the only ones who could shape texts, in the networked society of texts on the Internet, readers, as produsers, can also shape texts. In other words, while it may have made sense to separate scholarship on authorship from scholarship on readership in the industrial age of print, in the networked age of the Internet, it makes more sense to examine how interactions between the two forces might shape texts. In webcomics, the blurring of the two roles in the practice of guest

comics is symptomatic of a reconfigured relationship between authors in the attention economy that serves as the gateway to the material capitalist one. Positioned via webcomics collectives in a relationship of cooperative competition where authors compete for attention rather than funds, webcomics authors situate themselves as readers AND authors, promoting one another's work and guesting on one another's sites.

Because of its origins, authorship is always bound up in questions of economics. When the economics of authorship shift from those of the capitalist system of material goods to the attention economy of the Internet, relationships develop the quality of cooperative competition. I began this chapter by laying out the rivalry between Sam Logan and Jeph Jacques because I wanted to highlight how economies of authorship on the web are still competitive, but are also cooperative. Competition doesn't go away entirely; it just shifts so that those trying to reach audiences or sell products aim to capture attention on the Internet as a means of attracting currency in the capitalist economy outside the Internet. As Richard Lanham reminds us, just as money is limited in a capitalist economy, attention is limited in the attention economy of the Internet, where ideas take the place of material objects.[18] As Damian Ryan explains in his textbook, *Understanding Digital Marketing,* "With the internet airwaves now so busy, the threshold for making even the smallest ripples on the web is high. This places huge importance on creativity and the ability to resonate with consumers in a memorable, emotive and engaging way."[19] Webcomics authors, like everyone else on the web, must compete for audience attention in order to gain readers, and studying how they do so helps illuminate the kinds of relationships in the attention economy more broadly.

One of the main ways to gain attention on the Internet is through Google search results, which operate based on the PageRank algorithm. In the early days of Google, this algorithm

determined the order of search results based on the number of links a page received from other sites. Sites that received a large number of links appeared higher in the search order than sites that received fewer links. The resulting hierarchies created have drawn much attention from political scientists and Internet theorists alike. In his study of how searching algorithms and surfing behaviors affect political blog visibility, political scientist Matthew Hindman situates this hierarchy, which he terms the "Googlearchy," within the attention economy when he states that "online concentration comes from the sheer size of the medium and the inability of any citizen…to cover it all,"[20] and claims that, as a result, the "number of links pointing to a site is the most important determinant of site visibility."[21] Internet theorist Clay Shirky discusses how the PageRank algorithm creates a "power law" wherein the "rich get richer, or the more links you have the more links you get."[22] In this context, it makes sense that cooperation could help authors gain attention within such a system: if I agree to link to you and you agree to link to me, then we both get links that help us advance in the search results order over people who don't have those partnerships.[23] Based on this understanding of the Googlearchy, we can see how webcomics collectives, which provided a sort of "virtual bookshelf" of webcomics sites via their front pages, helped webcomics authors gain attention. They received links from the collective front page, as well as from one another via the rotating ad that appeared on each member's site, making cooperation a way to compete for attention.

The mission statement for Dayfree Press, the collective to which Jacques and Logan belonged, captures how webcomics authorship is characterized by cooperative competition. Founded in 2003 by Neil Gustavson, the Dayfree Press mission was to, "bring a small group of web cartoonists together in order to be a stronger force on the internet."[24] In the collective, authors cooperate as a "small group of web cartoonists" that form a "community of readers and

creators."[25] However, unlike other groups of authors, from coterie writing groups to the Bloomsbury group, these authors used their community to become more competitive, to "be a stronger force on the internet" by "sharing readers" and "cross-promoting each other."[26] This cross promotion allowed each member to gain a more advantageous position in the results for Google search. Each member of the collective placed an ad on his or her site, and that ad rotated to advertise each of the webcomics from the collective at different points, providing valuable links. Not only would the *Sam and Fuzzy* ad on the *QC* site I mentioned earlier help *Sam and Fuzzy* move higher in Google search results, but it would also draw readers' attention to *Sam and Fuzzy* and provide access through a link to the site, thereby facilitating a carryover of readership from *QC* to *Sam and Fuzzy*. The participation in the collective helped collective members access the limited supply of attention and build bigger audiences.

Cooperation with the other collective members allowed authors to attract the attention of readers in the virtual space of the Internet and facilitated their participation in the capitalist economy that exists outside the web space.[27] The rivalry I began with, long running though it is (there are references to it each time Logan or Jacques write guest comics for one another or attend a convention together), is insincere, characterized by its joking one upsmanship rather than any kind of actual substance (I'll refer you back to the fact that it begins because Logan thinks Jacques is "shifty eyed"). It is, instead, the parody of a rivalry in a space characterized by cooperative competition, as captured by an autobiographical panel that Jacques posted on *QC* after sitting with Logan at a booth for the comics convention Sakura-con in 2007. The text references the rivalry: the box at the bottom right says "Sam and I are mortal enemies," and the speech bubbles suggest that each author is drawing their character abusing the other author's character. Logan's says "I'm drawing Fuzzy decapitating Pintsize!" and Jacques's says "I'm

drawing Pintsize anally violating Fuzzy!" (Fig. 17).[28] Yet the two authors are sharing a table and sitting

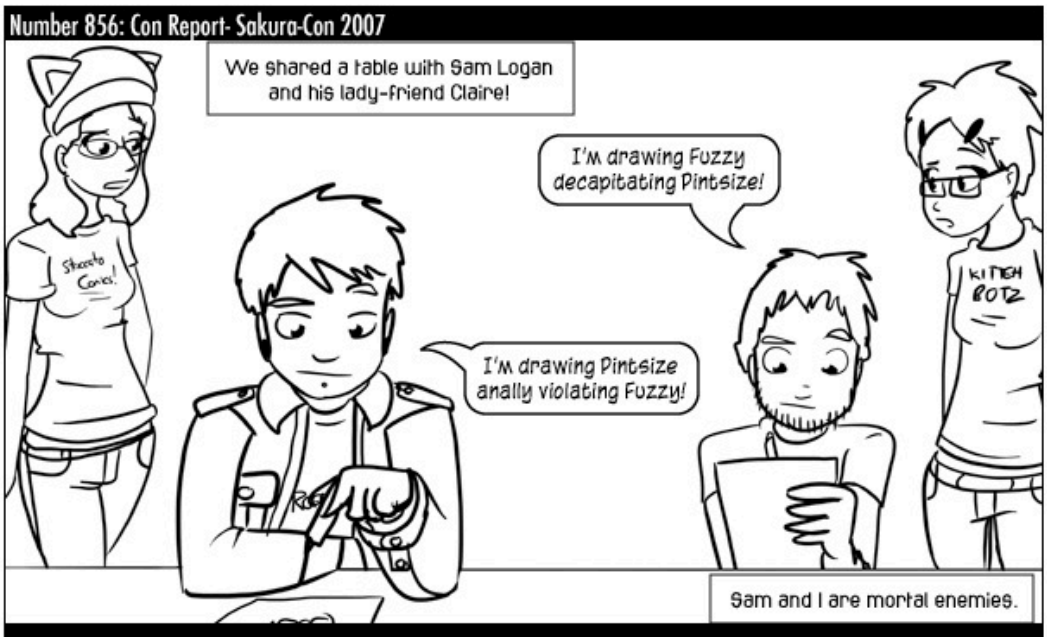

Figure 17: Jeph Jacques, "Con Report: Sakura-Con 2007" *Questionable Content* 856 captures how the joking rivalry between Jacques and Logan helps the two authors compete in the capitalist economy beyond the Internet.

amicably next to one another, as was common when authors were in the same collective, since members often networked with one another in order to split the cost of attending conventions where they encouraged their loyal readers to buy the material goods—shirts, prints, books—that earned them their living. The cooperative competition that originates in the Internet space, then, also permeates webcomics author interactions in the capitalist space of material goods.

In this example, we begin to see how this cooperative competition leads to a destabilization of the competitive focus we would expect in material authorship as the authors borrow characters from one another in a version of a comics crossover that begins to position them as readers of one another's work while also positioning them as authors. Each is authoring his own drawing, but the use of the other author's character situates each author as a reader, too. The relationship between these authors demonstrates how their cooperation helped them compete in an attention

economy, and illuminates how the dominance of Google encouraged cooperative economic relationships in the Internet space. The form of readerly authorship we see in this panel is characteristic of authors' attitudes towards one another, as they participated in the Internet culture of reading recommendation so prevalent on the Internet in order to promote their fellow authors in the hopes that they would return the favor. This form of public reading, then, is another facet of the cooperative relationships formed by collectives.

Recommended Reading

In the context of webcomics collectives, authors position themselves as readers in order to promote one another's work. Examining how they situate themselves as readers in this context provides a better understanding of how authors cooperate in the interest of competing. Others, like Bruns mentioned earlier, have acknowledged the many ways in which readers interact with what they read online, focusing their attention on comments sections and reader forums. Indeed, we see evidence that readers both email Jacques and discuss his work in reader forums, when Jacques mentions such aspects of the reading community in his newsposts.[29] My opening example shows that both readers and authors engaged with these spaces, as Jacques's and Logan's callouts of one another originated in their respective forums. These spaces have provided space for the formation of counterpublics around such issues as sexuality or mental illness. In 2012, *Questionable Content*'s character Claire came out as trans, and the subsequent relationship that developed between Martin and Claire fostered conversations about acceptable representation of transsexuality.[30] Similarly, Danielle Corsetto's inclusion of an asexual character in *Girls with Slingshots* has made webcomics a space for discussions of asexuality.[31]

Allie Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half* and RH's *Robot Hugs* have been particularly influential in building communities for those who struggle with depression, as readers have spread these authors' depictions of depression around via social media, encouraging more recognition of this mental illness.[32] Responding to one another and to the author, the users that participate in these forums and comment threads take advantage of the correspondence zone of webcomics because there is no space for these conversations in mainstream media. While I acknowledge these spaces as correspondence zones where we see readers and authors interacting with one another in a public space, based on my economic focus and the fact that these kinds of correspondence zones are prevalent in virtual spaces other than webcomics, I look at spaces where webcomics authors position themselves as readers of one another's work as part of their economic strategy of promoting one another. In fact, the culture of recommending readings on the Internet more broadly is, I argue, what makes this strategy of readerly authorship so prevalent. What we find is that reading in this context is characterized by recommendation links, bound in the web of the economic structures of cooperative competition.

In a broader context, reading on the Internet is tied to a culture of recommendation. In *Spreadable Media*, Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green adopt the term "spreadability" in order to analyze how, "audiences play an active role in 'spreading' content, rather than serving as passive carriers of viral media."[33] They suggest that, while spreadability may have existed before the Internet as readers recommended texts to friends or created commonplace books, texts now spread faster, and that spreading defines our media experience on the Internet.[34] In the "enhanced book" for *Spreadable Media*, Geoffrey Long recognizes that webcomics, enmeshed in this culture of reading recommendation, "have spreadability sussed," because they can easily be shared through links, posts to social media, and through the copying and pasting of strips under

Creative Commons licenses.[35] While even these above examples highlight the somewhat imprecise use of spreadability, my point in referencing this text is to show that reading on the Internet is characterized by recommendation: today, when people enjoy an article or text they read, they frequently post it on social media, and many people determine what they will read based on what appears in their Facebook or Twitter feeds, and even in the early 00s, bloggers kept "blog rolls," lists of links to other blogs, that created networks while at the same time positioning the blogger as a reader of the blogs linked.[36] Moreover, because webcomics exist in this context, reading a webcomic is often associated with spreading and recommendation.

Therefore, we can see author recommendations of other webcomics as a public readerly practice. When an author recommends another webcomic, we assume that author has read the recommended comic. For example, the lists of "Recommended Reading" that appear on most webcomics pages serve to situate the author as a reader, just as blog rolls situate bloggers as readers. When this practice of recommendation is accompanied by other readerly practices, such as evaluation or interpretation, the readerly author manifests most clearly. These interpretations usually appear below the comic in the newspost, a discursive section of the page where the author will sometimes provide links to other comics. In one newspost for *QC*, Jacques highlights additions to his Recommended Reading list, evaluating each comic as "excellent," "wonderful," and "superb."[37] He moves beyond evaluation in a later post to include interpretations, such as for *Schlock Mercenary*, which he describes as "a sci-fi epic that mixes humor and science in a way all its own."[38] Each of these recommendations, evaluations, and interpretations is accompanied by links that provide access to the comic being recommended.

Because the Google algorithm situated links as a kind of currency in this period, the practice of recommending becomes part of the cooperative competition that characterizes economic

relationships in this attention economy. By situating themselves as readers and providing links to fellow authors' work, webcomics authors are promoting other authors, cooperating with them in order to increase the amount of attention each gets. We can see this culture of recommendation connected to economic success in the newsposts from the early days of *QC*, where Jacques gains readers via links to more successful webcomics from that time, most notably John Allison's *Scary Go Round* and Jeffrey Rowland's *Wigu*.[39] I read this culture of recommendation attached to links as part of the cooperation, particularly because, when Jacques thanks those who link to him, he links to their sites. In this way, each author gets one more link that could help gain attention, both via the link and via the higher standing in the Googlearchy.

The practice of creating guest comics is also a way in which authors situate themselves as readers of one another's work, because guest comics are interpretations—and sometimes critiques—of the other person's characters and story. In his *QC* guest comic, David Willis both critiques Jacques and presents interpretations of his characters. The strip begins with the text "We've replaced *Questionable Content*'s impenetrable indie-rock references with equally-impenetrable Transformers references. Let's see if anyone notices."[40] For a few panels, Jacques's characters, as drawn by Willis, discuss transformers as promised, but then the view begins to zoom in to Faye's chest, obscuring the speech bubbles completely.[41] Together, these panels both critique Jacques's use of references to obscure bands and present Willis's interpretation of Jacques's tendency to interrupt serious story lines with stilly strips about boobs and butts. In the process, Willis demonstrates a knowledge of *QC* that positions him as a reader. When the comic appears on the *QC* website, Jacques links to Willis's comic *Shortpacked* in the newspost, commenting that it is "a delightful read" and recommending it to readers.[42]

Reading on the Internet is tied to a culture of recommendation and authors, as they recommend their fellow authors in the interest of drawing attention through cooperation, mobilize this aspect of Internet reading as part of their economic strategy. Each author links to fellow authors' work, providing access and a valuable link that increases each author's possibility of gaining attention in the crowded Internet marketplace. In this context, guest comics, as often parodic interpretations of existing webcomics, show authors reading in public, providing critiques and interpretations of other authors' characters. Often, when an author guests for someone, the guest returns the favor at a later date. These reciprocal guest comics create correspondence zones where we see authors and readers interacting in a public space in a way that allows us to explore how readership and authorship are reconfigured in the attention economy of the Internet.

Reciprocal Guest Comics

If we consider the currency of links, the practice of reciprocal guest comics makes economic sense. The usual practice when a cartoonist draws a guest strip, is to label the guest strip with that person's name and then link to the guest author's webcomics site in the newspost. Often, the author who wrote the guest strip will reciprocate the favor for the person who ran the guest strip. Drawn in the style of the guest author, the guest strip runs in the same web space as the normal author's strips (i.e. If I go to the normal website on the day of a guest strip, I will see the guest strip in the same place I would see a strip drawn by the regular author), and usually provides the guest author's interpretation of the characters in that webcomic. Think of guest comics as akin to fan fiction, but, rather than appearing in a fan-only space, the fan fiction

appears where the media it interprets appears, foregrounding the guest cartoonist as both reader (because the strip is an interpretation, a reading) and an author (because the strip is marked by the guest cartoonist's style and ideas).

Shortly after the announcement about the rivalry between Logan and Jacques, Logan composed a guest comic for *QC* that Jacques claims "distills every aspect of QC down into one single comic."[43] Early in *QC*'s run, the main drama of the strip stems from the tension between Faye and Marten, roommates who have a lot in common. Marten wants to be with Faye, but just when we think they are about to finally get together, something else comes up. The guest strip from Logan highlights our most recent reading experiences by having Faye start to tell Marten something only to be interrupted by a variety of distractions including Marten's robot Pintsize playing golf in the toilet; Steve, a character we haven't seen in awhile, emerging gasping from the closet; and government agents searching for the space owl mentioned a few strips before (Fig. 18). In the last panel of the strip, we learn that Faye was not, in fact, trying to tell Marten that she loved him as her repeated "Marten I lo—" would suggest. Instead, we find that she was merely trying to tell him that she lost one of his musical albums.[44] The way Logan both exploits reader desires and drops in obscure references demonstrates that he reads *QC* on a regular basis, and his authorship of this strip constitutes his interpretation of the strip. By placing this strip on the *QC* website, Jacques and Logan effectively share authorship in a way characteristic of cooperative competition.

Figure 18: In Jeph Jacques, "QC Guest Week: Sam Logan," *Questionable Content* Logan shows he is a reader of *QC* by referencing the endangered space owl and by teasing readers with the relationship between Faye and Marten.

The cooperative competition that destabilizes the boundaries between author and reader continued when Jacques wrote a corresponding guest strip for Logan in November of 2004.[45] Jacques tells us in his newspost for *QC* where he links to his guest comic on *Sam and Fuzzy* that he wanted to draw out the similarities between *QC* and *Sam and Fuzzy* in his guest strip, such as the will they/won't they drama between Sam and Alexa—akin to the drama between Faye and Marten that Logan references in his guest comic—and the similar impishness of Pintsize and Fuzzy.[46] Like Logan's guest strip, Jacques's guest strip situates him as simultaneously author and reader: while the strip is drawn in Jacques's style, the demonstrated knowledge of Sam, Alexa, and Fuzzy shows that Jacques reads *Sam and Fuzzy*. In the strip, Jacques's characters visit the bookstore where Logan's characters work (Fig. 19). While they are visiting, Fuzzy sets all the books by Arthur C. Clarke on fire. When Alexa goes to put out the fire, her clothes get burnt away, and she threatens Sam and Fuzzy with the fire extinguisher. Faye, Marten, and Pintsize leave during these shenanigans, remarking on how Sam and Alexa would make a good couple.[47]

But Jacques' guest strip adds yet another complication to blur the boundaries between readership and authorship by including his own characters, Faye, Marten, and Pintsize, in the guest strip. Indeed, though the strip appears on Logan's website, the first and last panels feature only *QC* characters as the three walk into and out of the bookstore where Sam and Alexa work.[48] These panels, because they show Jacques drawing his own characters, do more to situate him as an author than they do as a reader. But there are also panels that feature only the three characters from *Sam and Fuzzy*, such as the panel where Fuzzy tells Sam that he has set the works of Arthur C. Clarke on fire or the one where Alexa returns with the fire extinguisher.[49] These panels situate Jacques as more of a reader. The crossover panels that depict both *QC* and *Sam and Fuzzy* characters situate Jacques as author and reader simultaneously, as he brings characters

Figure 19: In Sam Logan, "Guest: Jeph Jacques" *Sam and Fuzzy*, Jacques blurs the boundaries between readership and authorship even more by including some panels with only his own characters (4), some panels with only Logan's characters (1,3), and some panels with both his and Logan's characters (2).

authored by him in contact with interpretations of characters drawn by Logan. My point in going through this analysis is not necessarily to sort out the fine-grained degrees of authorship and readership present in different situations, but to show the ways in which, in the same comic, an individual can be situated simultaneously as author and reader because the line between the two is less stark than previously claimed. Moreover, it is economically advantageous to situate authorship as a readerly practice, because that positioning encourages the cooperation that helps gain attention in two ways, one connected to our previous explorations of strategies associated with readership, and one associated with our previous discussion of strategies associated with authorship. The public nature of the guest comic reading helps gain attention on the original author's site because the guest author's work is posted there and people see it, usually attached to the guest author's name somewhere in the panels. That guest comic is also followed by a link to the guest author's site, demonstrating the cooperative relationship between authors that helps gain attention via Google search. Thus, the correspondence zone in reciprocal guest comics mobilizes both the cooperative authorship and the public nature of readership, and its public nature provides a window into how those aspects of authorship and readership combine to help authors compete.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates a culmination of the shifting correspondence zone, as reciprocal guest comics possess some familiar characteristics of the other correspondence zones I have examined throughout. Webcomics, published in the same kind of creator-owned space as underground comics, share the quality of the correspondence zone taking center stage. While in

underground comics, the serial nature and the revise and resubmit system created a dialogue that comes from authors who were once readers, in the case of webcomics, that relationship shifts, as individuals who are already authors position themselves as readers in order to help one another compete in the economic context. At the same time, there is an acknowledgment of the value of the correspondence zone that we see in the letter columns of *Sandman* that appears in webcomics, though the former is interested in social value, while the latter is more concerned with economic value. There's even a connection to comics of the 60s in the sense that both forms use the correspondence zone to create in person communities of fans in 1960s comics and authors in webomics. In many ways, we see the different aspects of the correspondence zone recognized throughout this project—its blurring of authors and readers, its public face, and its potential for community building—used for economic ends. While this might seem a pessimistic view let us not forget that the correspondence zone originated from an economic impulse to give readers what they want in an effort to sell more series, showing that economic desires do not preclude more liberated social expression. As Sarah Sillin has noted, guest comics have been a space of gender critique that has had transformative effects on authorship.[50]

While authors and readers are often discussed separately, studying public interactions between these two entities in the correspondence zones of comics allows us to reframe authorship and readership in a broader context. In webcomics, guest comics blur the line between readers and authors in a way that situates authorship as a readerly practice in the name of cooperative competition, reconfiguring our understanding of authors' relationships to one another and providing a different perspective on the figure of the produser so common in discussions of Web 2.0. Cooperating via collectives to increase the number of links to their sites via reciprocal linking and recommending their fellow authors' work in a way that takes

advantage of the culture of reading recommendations in the Web space, instead of just competing, authors form partnerships that help them succeed in an attention economy. The author's ability to represent him or herself as simultaneously author and reader stems from a shift in the economics of authorship determined by the attention economy of the Internet. Traditionally bound up in the capitalist system of competition and distinction attached to material goods, authorship on the Internet develops into a system of cooperative competition, where the power of the group helps the individual access attention through cross-promotion. Guest comics are one of the forms that cross-promotion takes, thereby tying the practice to economic strategy. The blurring of boundaries between reader and author encouraged by this system of cooperative competition demonstrates how cooperative economic relationships were advantageous on the Internet in the early 00s, suggesting that, even when still part of a capitalist system, competition is not the only way to succeed. The fact that these authors remain attached to their own individual projects—this is not collective authorship—suggests that the individual is still a key component in this system. Yet the cooperation through community building that helps these individual authors promote themselves suggests that competition and cooperation are not quite as opposed as they may seem. Looking at the correspondence zones in webcomics, then, helps us reframe our understandings of readership and authorship, while at the same time highlighting how economic cooperation and competition can go hand in hand in the attention economy that serves as the gateway to the capitalist system.

Conclusion

Creating Publics Through Seriality

I have shown throughout this dissertation that comics form counterpublics through their seriality. I have focused on how the lens of the correspondence zone reveals the potential for dialogue within serial formats. As I have used the correspondence zone to look across genres, I have shown how analyzing the spaces within serial texts where readers write and authors read reveals the formation of counterpublics, communities of strangers whose conversations stand in conscious opposition to more public discussions as tracked by mainstream media, such as television and newspapers. While, as I have mentioned before, correspondence zones exist in other serial media, like newspapers and magazines, readers' ability to shape the stories comics tell makes them particularly suited to the study of counterpublic formation through seriality. Many of the counterpublics I reference here, such as the queer counterpublic of Chapter 3 or the feminist counterpublic of Chapter 2, also correspond with each other in zines, journals, and underground newspapers in ways that break down the binary between readers and authors. Readers contribute to larger debates and respond to previously published articles, all the while demonstrating an awareness of writing to and for others like them. Yet, the moment where the reader becomes an author in comics differs because, while comics readers also engage in debates about the work they read, they also can shape subsequent comics stories, influencing the main text because it is crafted. Comics envision worlds, which is important for marginalized communities who are left out of the frame of mainstream media. In the comics examined here, we see readers who write to make suggestions that shape future narrative and readers who take over the pen to create comics themselves in response to previously published work. In these

crafted contributions, readers can express hopes for the future, not just of the series, but for their counterpublics, as they take advantage of this aspirational aspect of seriality to suggest what could be. When these contributions are published, comics combine what is with what could be, which I see as an important act of world-making. In other words, readers gain access to authorship because the narrative can be changed from issue to issue, and they use this access time and again to help envision a future for their counterpublic.

In this chapter, I consider the correspondence zone as a concept that sits at the intersection of theories about authorship and readership, publicity, labor, and feminist thought. In bringing these theoretical lineages together, I recognize the creative and intellectual labor around authorship and readership in a way that is attentive to publics that may otherwise fall outside the scholarly frame. These publics of marginalized individuals establish community and publicity through comics, which are often viewed as trash media. By breaking down the binary between readership and authorship in order to recover the cultural labor of readers of serial comics, I make the feminist move of telling an alternate history of the medium that distances itself from the rise of the graphic novel that dominates current scholarship and naturalizes the romantic auteur figure.[1] In leaving seriality out of the narrative of the history of comics, we miss their subversive potential, and this account, cutting as it does across genres, recaptures that potential. Drawing on the methods of feminist cultural studies to reveal the formation of these publics reframes our understandings of seriality in relation to publics, emphasizing the important role serial texts can play in forming publics and counterpublics. In providing a self-organized space for dialogue that constantly renews attention with each issue, developing awareness among readers of the qualities of a pre-existing community, serial texts encourage the acts of world-making necessary to public formation. They also remain temporally linked. The comics

discussed in this project demonstrate public formation through seriality in post-World War II America, but the correspondence zone exists in any serial medium that makes space for audience input. The conclusion of this chapter discusses the limits and possibilities of the correspondence zone concept and makes suggestions for future directions.

Readers and Authors

As I've shown, the correspondence zone can be the comic itself or can be an attached, integral part of the comic. Where the correspondence zone occurs depends on the relationships between readers and authors for that particular genre, which are in turn shaped by how the series is published. In this study, the self-published comics of chapters 2 and 4 feature a correspondence zone within the comic, indicating a cooperative relationship between readers and authors, whether that cooperation stems from activist or economic goals. The correspondence zone is central in these self-published spaces because those who want to publish have to pass through fewer gatekeepers, such as editors and professional publishers, and those they do have to pass through are like-minded, part of the same counterpublic. With the commercial comics discussed in chapters 1 and 4, however, comics content must pass through a number of gatekeepers to see publication, such as series editors, company editors, and publishers. Commercial comics from one of the big two (DC and Marvel) also have to fit into current histories of both the character and of the larger world for that company (e.g. the Marvel Universe), a fact which curtails reader involvement even more. Moreover, the Silver Age comics discussed in chapter 1 had to comply with the Comics Code, which forbid such possibilities as depictions of violence towards authority figures or exploration of sexual content.

In other words, commercial companies lacked the freedom to publish just any reader written story, because of all the gatekeeping that happened before publication.

Returning to Darnton's diagram as discussed in the introduction, we see how the different elements of the cycle can exert pressure on the dotted line that tracks the relationship between readers and authors, as well as how that relationship necessitates revisions to the model.[2] We could see the character and universe history as "intellectual influences" and the Comics Code is a "legal sanction," although a self-imposed one. These two elements provide a context that helps form the reader and author relationship. The "economic and social conjuncture" has a slightly more nuanced relationship to readers and authors. As I mentioned in chapter 1, the correspondence zone originally developed based on economic motives, as a gauge of reader satisfaction, and even its community building function could be seen as serving the economic function of maintaining a loyal audience of purchasers. Yet I would also add that the reader and author relationship, in its development of counterpublics, helps shape those social and economic forces, as those counterpublics fulfill an activist mission or even just create a sense of community for marginalized individuals. For example, the women of *Wimmen's Comix* mobilize the relationships between readers and authors to alter women's social context by increasing the number of women cartoonists. The dialogue between straight women and lesbians within the serial anthology also at least has the potential to alter relationships between those two groups within a broader social context, as well. In forming a public that is self consciously opposed to the mainstream public, comics correspondence zones call attention to the way author and reader relationships have the potential to affect social context. This represents a change to Darnton's model, where the arrows only extend out from the middle, rather than going both ways.

The breakdown of the binary between readers and authors detailed here also suggests that individuals can move among and between the author and reader labels of the diagram. Readers who decide to publish their responses in a letter column and do so often enough that they gain recognition (as Jerry Bails and Roy Thomas do in the *JLA* letters), are still readers, but are at the same time authors. The same goes for the women who respond in comics form or the webcomics authors who are simultaneously readers and authors. Clearly, the relationship between these two entities is more complex than the diagram indicates. We might, instead, envision an elongated box for readers that allows for their placement on a continuum that corresponds to the degree of authorship they demonstrate in their reading. Readers who just read and do not write would sit on one end of the continuum, while readers published in letter columns would sit towards the middle, and readers who create comics themselves would sit at the end closest to the author, or even, perhaps, overlap with the author box. Of course, even this approach oversimplifies as diagrams are wont to do, especially when we consider readers playing different roles at different times, such as Roy Thomas as letter writer, *Alter Ego* editor, and creator of fan-written comics. Despite these drawbacks, revisions to Darnton's model are useful because they allow a reframing of the role readers can play in shaping a text and of the role this reading can have on reshaping society.

In situating the author and reader along a continuum instead of as binary categories of textual interaction, I recognize the creative and affective labor of readers that are moved to write. Romantic notions of authorship feature the lone writer laboring over his text (for the Romantic writer is frequently a man in these visions), but reading, with its visions of people curled up with books in comfy chairs, is seldom seen as difficult or of creative value. Yet the readers examined here do work, expressing their feelings about texts and their cultural contexts in an effort to

change their cultures. They create cultural objects that open up dialogue about important issues, such as the relationship between lesbians and the broader feminist movement or gay representation in art. While not all readers engage in this cultural labor, reclaiming readers' textual contributions as labor via the correspondence zone elevates these particular readers, most of whom come from culturally marginalized groups, as cultural contributors and alternative world-makers.

I continue a tradition of feminist cultural studies in recovering the creative and affective labor of marginalized individuals, and in doing so continue another feminist tradition of telling an alternate history, one that reshapes our understanding of comics history to include marginalized voices by paying attention to seriality. Traditionally, alternate histories are meant to denaturalize how top-down narratives contribute to the structural oppression of marginalized groups.[3] I contend that the usual top-down approach to comics history, one that ignores the seriality and ephemerality of the medium, erases the marginalized voices of the counterpublics I discuss. Seriality, in this case, is allied to ephemerality, to the fact that people read comics for fun and then throw them away. Instead of telling a history meant to elevate comics via the graphic novel, I focus on how the comics form has gained power from its status as a pop culture medium that reaches larger audiences because it is economically easy to access and viewed as disposable fun. In a sense, I'm more interested in a bottom-up history of comics than the frequently told top-down one focused on the creative productions of auteurs.

Seriality and Publicity

From the perspective of public sphere theory, this project highlights the role seriality in general and the correspondence zone in particular can play in forming publics and counterpublics. This is not to say that only serial texts can form publics, but that they might be particularly suited for doing so. In the introduction, I referenced Warner's claim that the "concatenation of texts over time," with their call and response structures, helped build publics. Now, I want to return to Warner's work, particularly his "Publics and Counterpublics" essay, which discusses seven requirements for a public to come into being. Since I see the first three tenets—publics are self-organizing, a public is a relation among strangers, and public address is both personal and impersonal—as characteristic of print publics in general, I focus on the last four—a public is constituted through attention, a public space is created by the reflexive circulation of discourse, publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation, and a public is poetic world-making. In my analysis, I draw on the examples discussed throughout this project in order to demonstrate the implications that examining the publics created by serial comics can have for theories of publicity.

In the essay, Warner discusses the "kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation," setting aside concrete audiences and monolithic notions of "the public."[4] His first three tenets add up to an understanding of a public as the "self organization of…a body of strangers united through the circulation of their discourse."[5] In the comics I've discussed, the correspondence zone, as a published space, provides this space for discourse. In his discussion of the fourth tenet, Warner claims that "a public exists only by virtue of address" and, as a result, "must predicate some degree of attention, however notional, from its members."[6] As Warner rightly notes in this section, "texts clamor at us," so the ability to grab attention is paramount. Published over time, serial texts are able to constantly renew reader attention with

the publication of each new installment. This continued engagement with a series results in the reader identifying as part of the public that reads that text. For example, the webcomics authors of Chapter 4 curate reading lists of their favorite webcomics, positioning themselves as part of the reading publics of other authors as part of their cooperative competition. They are able to identify as readers of these other webcomics because the texts they are reading include a new installment at intervals. While these readers may belong to many other groups—student, male, upper middle class, etc.—each new installment continually renews their attention to the series, allowing them to identify as part of the public of the webcomics they read. With webcomics authors, this continual status as reader allows the authors to form their collectives that help them compete in the attention economy. With serial texts, attention is grabbed and held, giving readers more time to self organize as a public through their discourse in the correspondence zone.

This sustained attention allows serial texts to develop a lasting knowledge of themselves. As Warner states, "no single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, even a single medium" because "a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse."[7] Here is where the call and response structure of serial texts works so well, since "only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and when a responding discourse can be postulated, can a text address a public," and because serial texts are linked through their presence in the same series, they provide the kind of social link Warner stipulates.[8] As in *Wimmen's Comix,* where Gregory's "A Modern Romance" responds to the discourse created by Robbins's "Sandy Comes Out," serial texts facilitate this call and response structure necessary for public formation. At the same time, the two stories are linked because of their inclusion in the same series. The letter column correspondence zones, where readers write and respond to

one another across issues of the same series in a social way, emphasize this call and response potential even more clearly, such as when readers of *Sandman* responded to the CMA letter Gaiman printed.

Chapter 3's description of the queer counterpublic in the correspondence zone of *Sandman* also emphasizes serial texts as punctual and historical, which Warner asserts is "crucial to the sense that discussion in currently unfolding in a sphere of activity."[9] This quality of publics "presupposes an ability…to address [a] scene of circulation as a social entity," as a group of people that will pay attention to it. Gaiman, in forming his queer counterpublic, published the CMA letter in timely fashion as a response to the current culture wars, knowing that it would rally his readers into a public that stood against such biased views of what kinds of identity art should represent. Without a sustained audience to speak to or a forum like the correspondence zone in which to speak, Gaiman could not have rallied a public around the issue of queer representation in art.

This sustained attention, call and response, and reflexivity combine to create an act of world-making. As Warner states, "public discourse imposes a field of tensions within which any world-making project must articulate itself," a fact that suggests all publics must create through discourse the world they hope for themselves.[10] People participating in publics assume that the strangers they address identify similarly, as in Warner's discussion of queer publics where no one is closeted or of the public of *Field and Stream*, which addresses only hunters and fishermen as its public.[11] Serial texts sustain these worlds, allowing a more complex act of world making as different aspects accrete over time with each new issue that includes additional reader input. I show this in the first chapter, where readers of the *JLA* series write in letters directed at their public of fellow readers, referencing events in past issues of *JLA* or other DC series. The readers

who write in speak to an audience of comics readers who is similarly engaged in the stories and characters of the medium. Those letters develop genres over time, like the evaluation letter, and also gain recognition from the creators, who, through representing the *JLA* team as comics readers, codify what it means to be part of a comics reading public.

It is significant that many of the types of texts Warner references—newspapers, magazines, serial essays—throughout his essay are serially published. In fact, in the middle of the essay, he references serial texts without actually naming their seriality when he claims that "The key development in the emergence of modern publics was the appearance of newsletters and other temporally structured forms oriented to their own circulation: not just controversial pamphlets, but regular and dated papers, magazines, almanacs, annuals, and essay serials."[12] The claim that these texts "developed reflexivity about their circulation through reviews, reprintings, citations, controversies" could easily be applied to what I have shown in serial comics: readers form publics by expressing their views about previous issues, by quoting, referencing, or responding to previous issues, and by agreeing and disagreeing with one another over cultural issues that may or may not relate specifically to the series.[13] Moreover, the "reviews, reprintings, citations, controversies" Warner mentions are all made possible by the correspondence zone, where published reader input enters into dialogue with previously published content in a public space.[14] Serial texts form publics through correspondence zones, and comics should be studied as serial texts because of their role in forming publics and counterpublics.

So why does it matter that serial comics form publics? How do those publics differ from groups of readers who don't choose to or are unable to communicate with strangers who are also readers? The key to answering these questions comes in Warner's discussion of publics and agency.

> The moment of uptake that constitutes a public can be seen as an expression of volition on the part of its members. And this fact has enormous consequences. It allows us to understand publics as scenes of self-activity, of historical rather than timeless belonging, and of active participation rather than ascriptive belonging. Under the right conditions, it even allows us to attribute agency to a public, even though that public has no institutional being or concrete manifestation.[15]

Participating in a public is an act of agency on an individual level and has the potential to be an act of agency on a collective level. Each reader of serial comics that decides to identify with the public or counterpublic the comic forms demonstrates agency, which is especially important to recognize with these marginalized audiences. Whether they are getting their favorite characters included in future issues, increasing the number of women cartoonists, positioning queer representation as elevating rather than denigrating, or increasing readership, in each chapter, we see how these publics serve an activist function: they envision a different kind of world and then engage in dialogue that aims to make that world a reality.

Conclusion

As my acknowledgment of the serial texts in Warner's work indicates, the correspondence zone is not unique to comics, but can exist in all serial media where there is potential for public dialogue. Letters to the editor in newspapers and magazines or responses to previously published articles in academic journals, can be seen as additional print based correspondence zones. Because correspondence zones exist where readers are moved to write and to publish that writing, they can only occur in media with the flexibility to showcase reader input. Movies, for

example, are not a serial medium, and therefore lack correspondence zones. Television, while serial, traditionally lacks ways of incorporating reader input. Yet, as the medium has moved to the Internet, where comment sections are prevalent, it has developed the potential for correspondence. Both this example and my examination of webcomics in Chapter 4 show how correspondence zones are not limited to print, but also abound on the Web. Posts and comments on a blog are correspondence zones, as are the comment sections and episodes of series on YouTube. In the digital realm, linking ability increases dialogic potential. Whereas a printed letter could name a previous letter writer, a correspondence zone on the Web can link to the original post. What might looking at all of these things through the same lens accomplish? Like my examination of comics publics, these examinations could reveal alternate communities becoming publics with agency. Not every conversation in a comments section works to create a sense of self-organized relation among strangers or a sense of belonging to the same community, but some do. Not all installments of a blog respond to previous posts on the same blog or reference the community of readers, but some do. In other words, the correspondence zone is a useful lens for considering how publics form around serial media.

While my analysis has focused on comics in post-WWII America, there are many other approaches to the correspondence zone in comics that would reward further study. Considering serial publication of comics in other countries would provide insight into the culturally specific ways that publics form. For example, the *Wimmen's Comix* community discussed here had a connected French counterpart through *Ah! Nana*, a French serial anthology of women's cartoons that, like *Wimmen's Comix,* provided an alternative to the male-dominated comics sphere. Yet, while *Wimmen's Comix* ran for 20 years and was recently anthologized, *Ah! Nana* ran for 9 issues and has largely been forgotten. These differences in reception may be tied to such cultural

differences as the status of comics in the media landscape in each country and the role women played in that landscape. Women cartoonists were more prevalent in other series from the French underground, such as *Metal Hurlant* and *Le Canard Sauvage*, so perhaps the counterpublic that the women of *Ah! Nana* tried to create seemed unnecessary. It would also be interesting to look at the seriality of manga from Japan, another major comics tradition. Manga are frequently originally published in genre specific serial anthologies in installments then collected into square bound book series that can stretch for years. How does this publication structure affect who they reach and how might such long running publications demonstrate how publics evolve over time?

I also believe there is much left to study regarding the correspondence zone in American comics, particularly in regards to letter columns, which are so frequently left out of collections. What was the response to the introduction of minority characters in mainstream comics of the 1960s and 70s? Marvel's *Luke Cage*, for instance, problematizes the incarceration of black men. Did this depiction attract minority readers to the series? If not, was the issue discussed in the letter columns in a way that formed a counterpublic? The revival of letter columns in the past ten years, particularly in creator-owned Image comics, but also in such Marvel properties as *Ms. Marvel* and *Black Panther*, would provide an interesting case study for examining how the Internet and the print letter column work in tandem to create publics. Such an analysis would illuminate some media specific aspects of the correspondence zone. Examining these spaces has the potential to recover additional publics of marginalized audiences, and therefore would help aid our understanding of these communities. It would be beneficial to put these dialogues in conversation with other aspects of print and digital culture in these communities, as such an approach would help us understand the role comics specifically have played in counterpublic

formation. In sum, seriality in all of its forms should be taken seriously because of its potential to create dialogue that in turn forms publics and counterpublics, using their creative and affective labor as readers to envision a different world.

Endnotes

Introduction

[1] Ibid., 25.
[2] Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, "Look On My Works, Ye Mighty," *Watchmen* 11 (New York: DC Comics, 1986), 23.
[3] Ibid., 23.
[4] Ibid., 28.
[5] Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, "A Stronger Loving World," *Watchmen* 12 (New York: DC Comics, 1987), 6.
[6] Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, "Fearful Symmetry," *Watchmen* 5 (New York: DC Comics, 1986), 29-32.
[7] Interestingly, DC Comics just announced the new "*Watchmen* Collector's Edition Boxed Set," which preserves the story's seriality by collecting 12 hardcover issues in a slip case. However, since this collection will cost over $100, it is unlikely to affect most people's experience of the text in the future.
[8] Bart Beatty, "Comics Studies: Here Be Dragons" (presentation for the International Comic Arts Forum Columbus, OH November 13-15, 2014)
[9] For example, Alex S. Romagnoli and Gian S. Pagnucci, *Enter the Superheroes: American Values, Culture, and the Canon of Superhero Literature* (Lanham/Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2013) includes *Watchmen* in their graphic novel canon along with *Maus, Persepolis*, and other graphic novels that are frequently taught (20).
[10] Jan Baetans and Hugo Frey, *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.
[11] Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2007), 100.
[12] Alex S. Romagnoli and Gian S. Pagnucci, *Enter the Superheroes*, 21-22.
[13] For example in Paul Gravett, *Graphic Novels: Everything You Need to Know* (London: Aurum Press, 2005) he excludes serial comics from the book.
[14] While Darnton meant to lay out the field of book history, his work is often cited where the fields of book history and print culture intersect, such as in the introduction to the *Oxford History of Popular Print Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), where editor Christine Bold cites his work as influential in the development of the print culture field (5).
[15] Robert Darnton, "What is the History of Books?" in *The Book History Reader*, eds. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), 16.
[16] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Book History Reader*, eds. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), 285.
[17] Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi, eds, introduction to *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature* (Durham/London: Duke U P, 1994), 5-6.
[18] John T. Caldwell, "Authorship Below-the-Line," in *Companion to Media Authorship,* eds. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2003) and David Brisbin "Production Design and the Invisible Arts of Seeing" in same volume.
[19] Judd Ethan Ruggill and Ken S. Mcallister, "Invention, Authorship, and Massively Collaborative Media" in *Media Authorship,* eds. Cynthia Chris and David A. Gertsner (New York/London: Routledge, 2013).
[20] Michele Hilmes, "Never Ending Story: Authorship, Seriality, and the Radio Writers Guild" in *Companion to Media Authorship,* eds. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2003).
[21] Carl F. Kaestle, Helen Damon-Moore, Lawrence C. Stedman, Katherine Tinsley, and William Vance Trollinger, Jr., introduction to *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading since 1880* (New Haven/London: Yale U P, 1991), 50.
[22] Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

[23] Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers* (Durham/London: Duke U P, 2002).
[24] See also Susan David Bernstein and Catherine DeRose, "Reading Numbers by Numbers: Digital Studies and the Victorian Serial Novel," *Victorian Review* 38, no. 2 (2012): 43-68; and Mark W. Turner "Periodical Time in the Nineteenth Century," *Media History* 8, no. 2 (2002): 183-196 among others.
[25] See Amanpal Garcha, *From Sketch to Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1991); and Trish Ferguson "Bonfire Night in Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 67, no. 1 (2012): 87-107 among others.
[26] For a study of reading through autobiography see Katherine Tinsley and Carl F. Kaestle's "Autobiographies and the History of Reading: The Meaning of Literacy in Individual Lives," in *Literature in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880,* ed. Carl F. Kaestle (New Have/London: Yale University Press, 1991), 225-244. For an examination of reading through scrapbooks and commonplace books see the essays in Susan Tucker, Katherine Ott, and Patricia Buckler's *The Scrapbook in American Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); and Ellen Gruber Garvey's "Scissoring and Scrapbooks: Nineteenth-Century Reading, Remaking, and Recirculating," in *New Media 1740-1915,* eds. Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), 207-227; while Christine Pawley's "Better than Billiards: Reading and Public Library in Osage, Iowa," in *Print Culture in a Diverse America*, eds. James P. Danky and Wayne A. Wiegand (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 173-199; and Elizabeth McHenry's *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African-American Literary Societies* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2002) look at library and literary society records.
[27] Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions* (University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 8.
[28] Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, "Fearful Symmetry," *Watchmen* 5 (New York: DC Comics, 1986), 12.
[29] Ibid., 17.
[30] Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, "Look on My Works, Ye Mighty…," *Watchmen* 11 (New York: DC Comics, 1986), 6.
[31] Ibid.,13.
[32] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York/London: Routledge, 1992), 46.
[33] Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson, eds, introduction to *The Participatory Cultures Handbook* (New York/London: Routledge, 2013), 4-7.
[34] Jennifer Gillan. *Television and New Media: Must Click TV* (New York/London: Routledge, 2011).
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[38] Robert Asen, "Seeking the Counter in Counterpublics," *Communication Theory* 10, no. 4 (2000): 424-446, 441.
[39] Ibid., 438.
[40] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 56.
[41] Ibid., 90.
[42] Ibid., 91.
[43] Ibid., 84.
[44] Ibid., 119.
[45] Amy J. Devitt, *Writing Genres* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 15.
[46] Ibid., 21.
[47] Ibid., 29.
[48] While letter columns existed in comics before this time and descended from letter columns in science fiction pulps, Julius Schwartz at DC was the first to make them a regular feature of the comics.

Chapter 1

[1]Matthew J. Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), 44-46; Bill Schelly, *The Golden Age of Comics Fandom* (Seattle: Hamster Press, 1995).

[2] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 84.

[3] Laurence Maslon, *Superheroes!: Capes, Cowls, and the Creation of Comic Book Culture (*New York: Crown Archetype, 2013), 139-140.

[4] Jeffrey K. Johnson, *Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society, 1938 to the Present* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 89.

[5] Ibid., 97.

[6] Bart Beatty, "Comics Studies: Here Be Dragons," (presentation for the International Comic Arts Forum Columbus, OH November 13-15, 2014).

[7] See Larry Tye, *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Superhero* (New York: Random House, 2012) and Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2004) for more information on Simon and Schuster v. National Periodical Publications (DC).

[8] These ads are found throughout the issues of *JLA,* but specific examples can be found in Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Drones of the Queen Bee," *Justice League of America* 23 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1963); and Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "The Deadly Dreams of Doctor Destiny," *Justice League of America* 34 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1965).

[9] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Doom of the Star Diamond," *Justice League of America* 4 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1961), n.p.

[10] See John Broome and Gil Kane, "The Amazing Theft of the Power Lamp," *Green Lantern* 3 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1960), n.p. for the letter from the Comics Hounds and John Broome and Gil Kane, "The Challenge from 5700 AD," *Green Lantern* 8 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1961), n.p. for the letter from Ken Gentry.

[11] These responses to one another also demonstrate the formation of the comics community as the letter writers interact and respond to one another in the correspondence zone of the letter columns. For John Pierce's letter see John Broome and Carmine Infantino, "The Mirror-Master's Magic Bullet," *The Flash* 119 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1961), n.p.; for Ricky Mass's letter see John Broome and Carmine Infantino, "Land of Golden Giants," *The Flash* 120 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1961), n.p.; and for the letters Mass is responding to see John Broome and Carmine Infantino, "Here Comes Captain Boomerang," *The Flash* 117 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1960), n.p.

[12] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Cavern of Deadly Spheres," *Justice League of America* 16 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1962), n.p.

[13] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Drones of the Queen Bee," n.p.

[14] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Four Worlds to Conquer," *Justice League of America* 26 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1964), n.p.

[15] Ibid., n.p.

[16] Ibid., n.p.

[17] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Case of the Forbidden Superpowers," *Justice League of America* 28 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1964), n.p.

[18] Ibid., n.p.

[19] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Missing in Action—5 Justice Leaguers," *Justice League of America* 52 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1967), n.p.

[20] Ibid., n.p.

[21] Ibid., n.p.

[22] Ibid., n.p.

[23] John Broome and Gil Kane, "World of Living Phantoms," *Green Lantern* 6 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1961), n.p.

[24] Ibid., n.p.

[25] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Super Exiles of Earth," *Justice League of America* 19 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1963), n.p.

[26] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Crisis on Earth One," *Justice League of America* 21 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1963), n.p.

[27] Ibid., n.p.

[28] Ibid., n.p.
[29] Ibid., n.p.
[30] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Starro the Conqueror," *The Brave and the Bold* 28 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1960).
[31] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Drones of the Queen Bee," n.p.
[32] Ibid., n.p.
[33] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "The I Who Defeated the Justice League," *Justice League of America* 27 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1964).
[34] Ibid., n.p. For Amazo see Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "The Case of the Stolen Super Powers," *The Brave and the Bold* 30 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1960); for Starro see Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Starro the Conqueror"; and for Kanjar Ro see Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Slave Ship of Space," *Justice League of America* 3 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1961).
[35] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "The I Who Defeated the Justice League," n.p.
[36] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Case of the Sinister Sorcerers," *Justice League of America* 2 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1961), n.p.
[37] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "When Gravity Went Wild," *Justice League of America* 5 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1961), n.p.
[38] Ibid., n.p.
[39] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Fantastic Fingers of Felix Faust," *Justice League of America* 10 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1962), n.p.
[40] Ibid., n.p.
[41] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "When Gravity Went Wild," n.p.
[42] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Menace of the Atom Bomb," *Justice League of America* 14 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1962).
[43] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Case of the Forbidden Superpowers," n.p.
[44] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Attack of the Star Bolt Warrior," *Justice League of America* 32 (New York: National Periodical Publications, 1964), n.p.
[45] Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky, "Cavern of Deadly Spheres," 1-19.
[46] Ibid., 19.
[47] ibid., 20.
[48] Ibid., 21.
[49] Ibid., 21.
[50] Ibid., 25.
[51] David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 57-58.
[52] Ibid., 58.
[53] Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 12.
[54] David Farber, *Age of Great Dreams*, 193.
[55] Alexander Bloom and Wini Brienes, eds, introduction to *Takin' it to the Streets: A Sixties Reader* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 10.
[56] Theodore Roszak qtd in. Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 14.
[57] Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, eds, introduction to *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s* (New York/London: Routledge, 2002), 11; Farber, *Age of Great Dreams,* 4.
[58] Roy Thomas, "The Alter Ego Story," in *Alter Ego: The Best of the Legendary Fanzine*, eds. Roy Thomas and Bill Schelly (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2008), 7.
[59] Ibid., 7.
[60] Ibid., 7.
[61] Ibid., 7.
[62] Ibid., 8
[63] Roy Thomas and Bill Schelly, eds., *Alter Ego: The Best of the Legendary Fanzine* (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2008), 17.
[64] Roy Thomas, introduction to *Justice League of America Archives Volume* 3, by Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky (New York: DC Comics, 1998), 1.

[65] Julius Schwartz, "The Sound of Celebration," in *Alter Ego: The Best of the Legendary Fanzine,* eds. Roy Thomas and Bill Schelly (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2008), 3. In the same piece, Schwartz claims that when Bails visited the DC offices in New York, he told Bails about science fiction fandom and showed him sci-fi fanzines.
[66] Thomas and Schelly, *Alter Ego*, 25.
[67] Ibid., 31; Ibid., 47.
[68] Jerry Bails, "The Sound of Celebration," 5.

Chapter 2
[1] Margaret Galvan, "Feminism Underground: The Comics Rhetoric of Lee Marrs and Roberta Gregory," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (2015): 203-222.
[2] Lee Marrs, personal interview, January 2015.
[3] Terre Richards personal interview, December 2014.
[4] Trina Robbins personal interview, November 2014.
[5] Justin Brown, *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1972); *Slow Death Funnies* #1-11 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1972-1979).
[6] Laura Saguisag, "Burying Childhood: Underground Comics and the Exclusion of Children" (presentation, Modern Language Association, Austin, TX, January 7-10, 2016).
[7] See Carol Tilley "Seducing the Innocent: Frederick Wertham and the Falsifications that Helped Condemn Comics," *Information & Culture: A Journal of History* 47, no. 4 (2012) to learn more about Wertham's misdeeds; See Amy Kiste Nyberg *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998) for a thorough history of the Comics Code.
[8] Joyce Farmer personal interview, February 2015; While Farmer is normally associated primarily with *Tits & Clits*, her work also appeared in *Wimmen's Comix*.
[9] Sharon Rudahl, personal interview, November 2014.
[10] Terre Richards, personal interview, December 2014.
[11] Lee Marrs, personal interview, January 2015
[12] Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
[13] Lyn Chevely and Joyce Sutton, *Abortion Eve* (Laguna Beach, CA: Nanny Goat Productions, 1973); Aline Kominsky-Crumb, "Goldie: A Neurotic Woman," *Wimmen's Comix* 1 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1972); Roberta Gregory, *Dynamite Damsels* (Long Beach, CA: Self-published, 1976).
[14] Terre Richards, personal interview, December 2014.
[15] Roberta Gregory, personal interview, January 2015.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Evaluative statements from readers featured in interviews with Robbins, Marrs, and Farmer. While I understand that these may just be what these authors remember hearing from readers, the fact that many of them characterized reader feedback as evaluative tells us that they view readers as primarily critics, and therefore are unwilling to listen to them.
[18] Dennis Kitchen, personal interview, November 2014.
[19] Redstockings, "Redstocking Manifesto, " in *Redstockings: First Literature List and a Sampling of its Materials* (Gainesville Florida: Archives for Action, 1968), 8.
[20] Carol Hanisch, "What Can be Learned: A Critique of our Miss America Protest," in *Redstockings: First Literature List and a Sampling of Its Materials* (Gainesville, FL: Archives for Action, 1968), 9.
[21] Carla Kaplan, *Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 27. See also Debra Michals, "From 'Consciousness Expansion' to 'Consciousness Raising,'" in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s*, eds. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (New York/London: Routledge, 2002), 57; and Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 10.
[22] Eleanor Holmes Norton, "For Sadie and Maude," in *sisterhood is powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement,* ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Random House, 1970), 355; see also Francis M. Beal "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in *sisterhood is powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement,* ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Random House, 1970), 342-350.

[23] Martha Shelley, " Notes of a Radical Lesbian," in *sisterhood is powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement,* ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Random House, 1970), 309; see also Gene Damon "The Least of These: The Minority Whose Screams Haven't Yet Been Heard," in *sisterhood is powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement,* ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Random House, 1970), 299-304.
[24] Anita Shreve, *Women Together, Women Alone: The Legacy of the Consciousness-Raising Movement* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), 91-92.
[25] Patricia Moodian, ed. *Wimmen's Comix* 1 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1972).
[26] Lee Marrs, "All In a Day's Work," *Wimmen's Comix* 1 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1972).
[27] Sharon Rudahl, "Tales of Sativa," *Wimmen's Comix* 1 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1972), n.p.
[28] Becky Wilson and Barb Brown, eds. *Wimmen's Comix #6: The Special Bicentennial Issue* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1975).
[29] Sharon Rudahl, "Katy Cruel,"*Wimmen's Comix* 6 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1975); Roberta Gregory, "Mary Ann Wilson: Frontier Artist," In *Wimmen's Comix* 6 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1975).
[30] Dot Bucher, "Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad," In *Wimmen's Comix* 6 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1975); Petchesky, "Reactionary Comics," In *Wimmen's* 6 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1975).
[31] Lee Marrs, ed. *Wimmen's Comix* 2 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1973).
[32] Terre Richards, personal interview, December 2014.
[33] Lee Marrs, personal interview, January 2015; Roberta Gregory, personal interview, January 2015.
[34] Carla Kaplan, *Erotics of Talk*, 27.
[35] Trina Robbins, "Sandy Comes Out," *Wimmen's Comix* 1 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1972).
[36] Roberta Gregory, personal interview, January 2015.
[37] Roberta Gregory, "A Modern Romance," In *Wimmen's Comix* 4 (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1974).

Chapter 3

[1] I switch between literature and art because I see literature as a form of art. During this period, as some were questioning the definition of art, others were questioning the definition of literature as multiculturalism brought the Western canon under scrutiny. And that multiculturalism had to do with representation, just as questions of art were bound to questions of representation. See Gregory S. Jay, *American Literature and the Culture Wars* (Ithanca/London: Cornell University Press, 1997) for a discussion of literature and the culture wars.
[2] For discussions of *Sandman* and Shakespeare see Annalisa Castaldo, "No More Yielding than a Dream: The Construction of Shakespeare in *Sandman,*" *College Literature* 31, no. 4 (2004): 94-110; John Pendergast, "Six Characters in Search of Shakespeare: Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* and Shakespearean Mythos," *Mythlore* 26, no. 3 (2008): 185-197; and Kurt Lancaster, "Neil Gaiman's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream': Shakespeare Integrated into Popular Culture," *Journal of American Culture* 23, no. 3 (2000): 69-77. See Gail De Vos. "Storytelling and Folktales: A Graphic Exploration," in *The Influence of the Imagination: Essays on Science Fiction and Fantasy as Agents of Social Change*, eds. Lee Easton and Randy Schroeder (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co. Publishers, 2008): 92-98 for a discussion of comics and oral storytelling; Richard Walsh, "The Narrative Imagination Across Media," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 4 (2006): 855-868 for a discussion of comics and dreams; and Kathryn Hume, "Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* as Mythic Romance," *Genre* 46, no. 3 (2013): 345-365 for comics and the romance genre, all of which use *Sandman* as their exemplary comic.
[3] See Julia Round, "Visual Perspective and Narrative Voice in Comics: Redefining Literary Terminology," *International Journal of Comic Art* 9, no. 2 (2007): 316-329.
[4] James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), 3.
[5] Ibid., 3-12.
[6] James Davison Hunter, "The Enduring Culture War," in *Is There a Culture War?: A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life,* eds. James Davison Hunter and Alan Wolfe (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 20-22. For oppositions to Hunter's claims about opposing sides in the culture wars, see Alan Wolfe, *One Nation After All: What Americans Really Think About God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, The Right, The Left, and Each Other* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998); Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War?: The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006); and Robert Booth Fowler, *Enduring Liberalism: American Political Thought since the 1960s* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999).
[7] James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 34.

[8] Ibid,, 237.
[9] Patrick J. Buchanan, "1992 Republican National Convention Speech," In *Culture Wars in America: A Documentary and Reference Guide*, ed. Glenn H. Utter (Santa Barbera, CA: Greenwood Press, 2010), 27-30.
[10] Gregory S. Jay, *American Literature and the Culture Wars*, 29-30.
[11] Ibid., 30.
[12] "Mapplethorpe, Robert" in *Culture Wars in America: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices,* ed. Roger Chapman and James Climent (London: Routledge, 2013).
[13] Jack Fritscher, "What Happened When: Censorship, Gay History, and Mapplethorpe," in *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia,* ed. Derek Jones: Online accessed via Jack Fritscher's website, http://www.jackfritscher.com/OtherAnthology/CensorshipEncyclopedia.html; Dorothy Barenscott, "'Sensationalising' Mapplethorpe a Decade Later: What *Dirty Pictures* can show us About the 'Culture Wars' Today," *EnterText* 5, no. 1 (2005): 59-81.
[14] Quoted in the notes of Thomas Yingling, "How the Eye is Caste: Robert Mapplethorpe and the Limits of Controversy," *Discourse* 12, no. 2 (1990), 24.
[15] For a discussion about how the attempted censorship of the Mapplethorpe exhibit increased both its media coverage and its attendance numbers, see Douglas A. McLeod and Jill M. McKenzie, "Print Media and Public Reaction to the Controversy over NEA Funding for Robert Mapplethorpe's *A Perfect Moment* Exhibit," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (1998): 278-290.
[16] "National Endowment for the Arts" in *Culture Wars in America: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices,* ed. Roger Chapman and James Climent (London: Routledge, 2013).
[17] Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University of Mississsippi Press, 2005), 8-30.
[18] Neil Gaiman, Mike Dringenberg, Malcolm Jones III, "Season of Mists: Prologue," *Sandman* 21 (New York: DC Comics, 1990), n.p.; For letters mentioning Klein see, for example Neil Gaiman, Kelley Jones, and Malcolm Jones III, "Season of Mists 2," *Sandman* 23 (New York: DC Comics, 1991) and Neil Gaiman, Kelley Jones, and George Pratt, "Season of Mists 5," *Sandman* 26 (New York: DC Comics, 1991).
[19] Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).
[20] Neil Gaiman, Mike Dringenberg, Malcolm Jones, "The Doll's House: Moving In," *Sandman* 11 (New York: DC Comics, 1989), 4.
[21] I am aware that this page, with its depiction of Jed falling only to reveal the whole story is a dream in the last panel, is a reference to *Little Nemo* by cartoonist Winsor McCay. While Gaiman likely respected Winsor as an innovator of the comics form, the reference on this page is no more complementary than his depiction of superheroes. Through the alliance of the newspaper comic strip with the superhero form, Gaiman positions himself as heir to and improver of all comics history, not just that of superhero comics.
[22] Ibid., 5.
[23] Ibid., 23.
[24] Neil Gaiman, Chris Bachalo, Malcolm Jones, "The Doll's House: Playing House," *Sandman* 12 (New York: DC Comics, 1989), 17.
[25] Ibid., 18.
[26] Neil Gaiman, Mike Dringenberg, Malcolm Jones, "The Doll's House: Lost Hearts," *Sandman* 16 (New York: DC Comics, 1990), n.p.
[27] Neil Gaiman, Kelley Jones, Malcolm Jones, "Dream Country: Calliope," *Sandman* 17 (New York: DC Comics, 1990), n.p.
[28] Confusingly, the *Sandman* issue that includes a performance of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is titled "A Midsummer Night's Dream." In keeping with standard notation, when discussing the play, I use italics and when discussing the issue, I use quotes.
[29] Neil Gaiman, William Shakespeare, Charles Vess, "Dream Country: A Midsummer Night's Dream," *Sandman* 19 (New York: DC Comics, 1990), 22. The scene described with Puck and the mask begins on page 15.
[30] Ibid., 22.
[31] Neil Gaiman, Colleen Doran, Malcolm Jones, "Dream Country: Façade," *Sandman* 20 (New York: DC Comics, 1990), 16.
[32] Ibid., 16.
[33] Neil Gaiman, et al, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," 23.
[34] Neil Gaiman, et al, "Façade," 21.

[35] Neil Gaiman, et al, "A Midsummer Night's Dream," n.p.
[36] Neil Gaiman, et al, "Lost Hearts," n.p.
[37] Neil Gaiman, Mike Dringenberg, George Pratt, "Season of Mists: Epilogue," *Sandman* 28 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), n.p.
[38] Ibid., n.p.
[39] Neil Gaiman, Marc Hempel, D'Israeli, "The Kindly Ones, Part 3," *Sandman* 59 (New York: Vertigo, 1994), n.p.
[40] Neil Gaiman, Todd Kristiansen, Daniel Vozzo, "The Kindly Ones, Part 8," *Sandman* 64 (New York: Vertigo, 1994), n.p.
[41] Ibid., n.p.
[42] Neil Gaiman, Shawn McManus, Daniel Vozzo, "A Game of You: Slaughter on Fifth Avenue," *Sandman* 32 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 1-3.
[43] Ibid., 5.
[44] Ibid., 6-10.
[45] Ibid., 11.
[46] Neil Gaiman, Colleen Doran, George Pratt, "A Game of You: Bad Moon Rising," *Sandman* 34 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 12.
[47] Neil Gaiman, et al, "Slaughter on Fifth Avenue," 21.
[48] Neil Gaiman, Shawn McManus, Daniel Vozzo, "A Game of You: Beginning to See the Light," *Sandman* 35 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 23.
[49] Neil Gaiman, Shawn McManus, Bryan Talbot, "A Game of You: Over the Sea to Sky," *Sandman* 36 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 24.
[50] Neil Gaiman, et al, "Slaughter on Fifth Avenue," 7.
[51] Neil Gaiman, Shawn McManus, Daniel Vozzo, "A Game of You: Lullabies of Broadway," *Sandman* 33 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 4.
[52] Ibid., 3.
[53] Neil Gaiman, et al, "Slaughter on Fifth Avenue," 19.
[54] Neil Gaiman, et al, "Bad Moon Rising," 7.
[55] Neil Gaiman, et al, "Slaughter on Fifth Avenue," 17.
[56] Neil Gaiman, et al, "Lullabies of Broadway," 13.
[57] Ibid., 13.
[58] Neil Gaiman, Shawn McManus, Todd Klein, "A Game of You: I Woke Up and One of Us Was Crying," *Sandman* 37 (New York: DC Comics, 1992), 20.
[59] Neil Gaiman, et al, "Over the Sea to Sky," 4-5.
[60] Neil Gaiman, et al, "I Woke Up," 11.
[61] Ibid., 12.
[62] Ibid., 21-22.
[63] Neil Gaiman, Jill Thompson, Vince Locke, "Brief Lives, Part 1" *Sandman* 41 (New York: DC Comics, 1992), n.p.
[64] American Family Association. "About Us," *American Family Association Website:* Online, accessed January 15, 2016, https://www.afa.net/who-is-afa/about-us/.
[65] Neil Gaiman, et al, "Brief Lives, Part 1," n.p.
[66] Ibid., n.p.
[67] Ibid., n.p.
[68] Neil Gaiman, Jill Thompson, Vince Locke, "Brief Lives, Part 3," *Sandman* 43 (New York: DC Comics, 1992), n.p.
[69] GLAAD/LA, "Media Watch," *Update* 4 (1992): Online, accessed January 15, 2016, http://www.qrd.org/qrd/orgs/GLAAD/old/la/1992/glaad-LA-4.92.
[70] Neil Gaiman, Jill Thompson, Vince Locke, "Brief Lives, Part 5," *Sandman* 45 (New York: DC Comics, 1992), n.p.
[71] Ibid., n.p.
[72] Neil Gaiman, et al, "Brief Lives, Part 3," n.p.
[73] Neil Gaiman, Jill Thompson, Vince Locke, "Brief Lives, Part 4," *Sandman* 44 (New York: DC Comics, 1992), n.p.
[74] Neil Gaiman, Jill Thompson, Vince Locke, "Brief Lives, Part 7," *Sandman* 47 (New York: Vertigo, 1992), n.p.

[75] Jennifer M. Contino, "A Touch of Vertigo: Interview with Karen Berger," *Sequential Tart* 4, no. 1 (2001): Online, accessed January 13, 2016, http://www.sequentialtart.com/archive/jan01/berger.shtml.

Chapter 4

[1] Neil Gaiman, Marc Hempel, Richard Case, "The Kindly Ones 9," *Sandman* 65 (New York: Vertigo, 1994), n.p.
[2] Ibid., n.p.
[3] Hank Steuver, "A Dead-Letters Day: Comic Books End Printed Mail Columns as Fans Turn to Web," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), December 10, 2002.
[4] For example, see the contributions to Elke Zoble and Ricarda Drüeke, eds, *Feminist Media: Participatory Spaces, Networks, and Cultural Citizenship* (Bielefeld, Transcript, 2012) for discussion of women using the affordances of Internet spaces to form counterpublics; and Catarina Landström, "Queering Space for New Subjects," *Kritikos* 4, (2007): Online, accessed March 3, 2016, http://www.intertheory.org/clandstrom.htm for a discussion of queer counterpublic formation online.
[5] See essays in Karen Helleckson and Kristina Busse eds., *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2006); Kristina Busse, "The Return of the Author: Ethos and Identity Politics" in *Companion to Media Authorship,* eds. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2013); and the essays collected in Jonathan Gray, Carl Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (New York: NYU Press, 2007).
[6] Sam Logan, "Friday Night, Pt. 8," *Sam and Fuzzy,* last modified July 7, 2004, http://www.samandfuzzy.com/310.
[7] Jeph Jacques, "Some Facts About Sam Logan," message posted to *Sam and Fuzzy Forums,* July 7, 2004, *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/20040820211652/http://www.samandfuzzy.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=648&postdays=0&postorder=asc&start=0, accessed June 4, 2015.
[8] Jeph Jacques, "Smokin' Ain't Allowed in School," *Questionable Content*, last modified July 8, 2004, *Internet Archive,* https://web.archive.org/web/20040715075129/http://www.questionablecontent.net/view.php?comic=151, accessed June 4, 2015.
[9] Coldplayplaya, "QC vs Sam and Fuzzy"message posted to *Questionable Content,* last modified July 8, 2004, *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/20040715074142/http://www.questionablecontent.net/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=1388, accessed June 4, 2015.
[10] James G. Webster, *Marketplace of Attention: How Audiences Take Shape in a Digital Age* (London/Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 10.
[11] Scott McCloud, *Reinventing Comics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000)*;* Sean Fenty, Trena Houp, and Laurie Taylor, "Webcomics: The Influence and Continuation of the Comix Revolution," *ImageText* 1, no. 2 (2004): Online, accessed March 16, 2016, http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v1_2/group/.
[12] Andreas Gregerson, "'You Wouldn't Get It': 'Penny Arcade' as Gaming Communication Hub and Webcomic," in *Comics and Power: Representing and Questioning Culture, Subjects, and Communities,* edited by Rikke Platz Cortsen, Erin La Cour, and Anne Magnussen (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 23-43.
[13] While there are currently many women and people of color worldwide who produce webcomics, this wasn't yet the case in the early 00s. As a result, to find a webcomic with a long enough history, I turn to a few webcomics written by men known for their diverse representations of women.
[14] It's difficult to pinpoint exactly when PageRank stopped being the sole determiner of search order. A post on Google's official blog from VP of Engineering Udi Manber from 2008 indicates that PageRank was "part of a much larger system," that included other metrics. While other factors besides PageRank may have played a role in search order prior to 2008, the disappearance of the PageRank Toolbar in 2009 alerted webmasters to the change at that time. The introduction of this more complex system resulted in the development of Google Analytics, which appeared in 2005.
[15] Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 21.
[16] Ibid., 17.
[17] Ibid., 21.
[18] Richard Lanham, *Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information* (Chicago/London: Chicago U P, 2006).

[19] Damian Ryan, *Understanding Digital Marketing: Marketing Strategies for Engaging the Digital Generation* (London/Philadelphia: KogenPage, 2014), 269.
[20] Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 57. Also see Henry Farrell and Daniel W. Drezner, "The Power and Politics of Blogs," *Public Choice* 134, (2008): 15-30.
[21] Ibid., 55.
[22] Clay Shirky, "Power Laws, Weblogs, and Inequality," *Clay Shirky's Writings About the Internet,* last modified February 8, 2003, http://www.shirky.com/writings/herecomeseverybody/powerlaw_weblog.html.
[23] For a discussion of PageRank see Technology Quarterly, "How PageRank Works," *The Economist*, September 16, 2004, http://www.economist.com/node/3172188. Farrell and Drezner, "The Power and Politics of Blogs" recognize the advantages of this kind of reciprocal linking for gaining attention in blogs.
[24] Neil Gustavson "The Dayfree Press 'Power in Numbers' Network," *Dayfree Press*, last updated December 4, 2003, *Internet Archive,* https://web.archive.org/web/20030624065759/http://www.dayfreepress.com/mission.shtml, accessed June 2, 2015.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] The connection of the attention economy of the Internet to the capitalist economy of material goods outside the Web space that we see in this panel reminds us of the stakes for capturing attention on the Internet, suggesting why competitive forces still exist despite seeming Internet freedom. While attention might be desirable, there is still the desire to convert that attention into currency to purchase material goods.
[28] Jeph Jacques, "Con Report- Sakura Con 2007, " *Questionable Content,* accessed June 9, 2015, http://www.questionablecontent.net/view.php?comic=856.
[29] Jacques mentions emails and forums in many of his newsposts, but some examples can be found in the newsposts for the following comics: Emails: #121, #304; Forums: #463, #698.
[30] The *Questionable Content* Forum thread "WCDT: 2323-2327 (19-23 November) Weekly Comic Discussion Thread" includes discussion of Claire's coming out as trans. There is also, as of July 3, 2013, a thread titled "Re: Trans discussion arising from comic" whose title indicates the formation of these counterpublics. Forum accessed via the Wayback Machine 13 March 2016.
[31] The character Erin came out as asexual in 2012 and a conversation ensued on Corsetto's Twitter.
[32] See comment threads for "Adventures in Depression" and "Depression Part 2" on *Hyperbole and a Half*. Both *Hyperbole and Half* and *Robot Hugs* have featured in many social media conversations about depression.
[33] Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, eds, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York/London: New York University Press, 2013), 21.
[34] Ibid., 12.
[35] Geoffrey Long, "(Sp)Reading Digital Comics," *Spreadable Media,* accessed June 5, 2015, http://spreadablemedia.org/essays/long/#.VvBbPWQrIy5.
[36] Farrell and Denzer, "Power and Politics of Blogs," 17.
[37] Jeph Jacques, "Apparently They Teach That in High School," *Questionable Content*, accessed June 5, 2015, http://www.questionablecontent.net/view.php?comic=337.
[38] Jeph Jacques, "Backroom Dealing," *Questionable Content*, accessed June 5, 2015, http://www.questionablecontent.net/view.php?comic=1219.
[39] Jacques thanks Jeffrey Rowland and John Allison and links to their comics in the newsposts of *Questionable Content* 73 and 74 respectively.
[40] Jeph Jacques, "QC Guest Week 2007: David Willis," *Questionable Content,* accessed June 5, 2015, http://www.questionablecontent.net/view.php?comic=933.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Jeph Jacques, "QC Guest Week: Sam Logan," *Questionable Content*, last updated July 19, 2004, *Internet Archive*. https://web.archive.org/web/20040726100929/http://questionablecontent.net/view.php?comic=155, accessed June 4, 2015.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Sam Logan, "Guest: Jeph Jacques," *Sam and Fuzzy,* last updated November 11, 2004, http://www.samandfuzzy.com/366.
[46] Jeph Jacques, "Number 230: Lie-dar is Different than LIDAR," *Questionable Content,* November 11, 2004.

[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Sarah Sillin, "Straw Feminists: Webomics, Parody, and Intertextuality" (presentation annual conference of the Modern Language Association, Vancouver, CA, January 9-11, 2015).

Conclusion

[1] I use a feminist concept of labor, here, that is meant to capture otherwise invisible cultural contributions, just as feminist cultural studies has referred to such woman-centric acts as child rearing, homemaking, and crafting as labor in order to make them visible.
[2] Robert Darnton, "What is the History of Books?" in *The Book History Reader*, eds. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London/New York: Routledge, 2006).
[3] We see this as far back as the 1940s with Mary Ritter Beard, "The Haunting Idea: Its Nature and Origin," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader,* eds. Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005) and continues in the 1970s with Christine Delphy, "For a Materialist Feminism," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader,* eds. Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005).
[4] Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," in *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 65-66.
[5] Ibid., 86.
[6] Ibid., 87.
[7] Ibid., 90.
[8] Ibid., 90.
[9] Ibid., 96.
[10] Ibid., 122.
[11] For Warner's explanation of the queer counterpublic where no one is closeted see "Publics and Counterpublics," 120 and for his discussion of the subpublic of *Field and Stream,* see 117 in same.
[12] Ibid., 94-95.
[13] Ibid., 95.
[14] Ibid., 95.
[15] Ibid., 89.

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