For Comic Books and all the people who talk about them. Keep the conversations going.

A special shout out to my Thesis Committee and everyone else who helped these ninety-something pages see the light of day. Thank you all for providing everything from interviews to insight, patience to coffee.

Drew University

College of Liberal Arts

The Virtuous Fan:

Historical Identity and Modern Minority Representation in Comic Book Culture

A Thesis in Anthropology

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts

With Specialized Honors in Anthropology

May 2015

Abstract

Comic books are a powerful communicative medium. Even so, the comic book community—made up of dedicated readers—is a subculture associated with stigmas such as perpetual adolescence or social awkwardness. The comic book community is also stereotypically known to consist only of white, straight males. Despite this, new minority characters emerge as discourses around how minorities should be represented occur within the subculture. This thesis explores a phenomenon that is seemingly contradictory: how can progressive conversations around accurate minority representations be taking place in a community perceived by mainstream American society as only immature, socially inept white Men? Ethnodata was collected through a mixed-methods research project and analyzed in the context of cultural history. What emerged were three themes that are identified as 'virtues' due to their moralistic nature in the subculture. These virtues are essential to community identity, and are also helpful in conveying the 'geist' of the culture. Furthermore, because of their permanence throughout the subculture's history, these virtues help inform how seemingly contradictory discussions about minority representations can organically take place in the comic book community.

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Introduction

Comic books are an exciting art medium that relies on multimodal communication to reach readers. The synthesis of literature and visual cues in a sequential format leaves endless possibilities to explore. Not only is the medium a very powerful communication tool, it has also inspired a community of fans who share specific knowledge, behaviors, and experiences related to comic books. Stereotypically, the fanbase of comic culture has been portrayed as white straight male, so much so that fans who do not fit this demographic description are sometimes rejected from the fanbase. Recently, a movement in the comic community has sparked debate and conversation, mostly over social media, on minorities in comic books. In particular, female comic book readers have become suddenly more visible to the mainstream community. Consequently, within this community of readers, the traditionally present discourse around comic books has moved to topics of community inclusion and diversity representation of minority readers. This movement speaks to several things about the comic book community: the identity of a comic book reader, the potential that minority readers see within the medium as a social justice tool, the influence that comics have over identity and stigma, and the comic book community as part of a fan-driven consumer relationship with publishers.

One of the reasons I decided to research the comic book community was that I felt, as a fan myself, I was witnessing something strange occur in the culture. In 2014, a major change took place in mainstream superhero comics. For decades, one of the more powerful and prominent female characters within the Marvel Universe, Ms. Marvel, was

a statuesque and supermodel-like blonde woman name Carol Danvers—she was the epitome of a 1970s American woman. In 2014, after Carol Danvers started to call herself 'Captain Marvel,' Marvel publishing company took a massive risk and effectively bequeathed the historic superhero title "Ms. Marvel" to a teenage Pakistani-American Muslim girl from Jersey City named Kamala Khan. The new Ms. Marvel series was one of the top-selling comic books of 2014 and went through six unexpected reprints. The fact that a legacy Marvel character like Ms. Marvel could be successfully reframed as young Muslim girl with immigrant parents from Pakistan—something that could have never been as successful in the comic book environment of the 1990s or 2000s—indicated to me that some profound changes were afoot in terms of superhero comics readership. Hours of website clicks and article reading led me to realize this was a long time coming: minority readers lamented over the lack of minority superheroes. Furthermore, my impression was that many white male readers (the dominant and well represented demographic) were supportive of this change. For a community stigmatized as close-minded and as the epitome of dominant white male culture, how could these conversations about ethnic and gender diversity be taking place happen without significant pushback? Why was it now so easy for fans of this medium to now have these engagements with diversity, and what were the rules to these discussions? Kamala was being celebrated by a community who should theoretically reject her. Admittedly, many new fans and non-readers jumped on the Kamal Corps (the name for fans of Kamala and a reference to the former Ms. Marvel's Carol Corps) bandwagon and contributed greatly to the buzz, but this certainly didn't negate the acceptance of old fans. What's more, conversations around her representation was broadly welcomed. What had always been a

clearly defined and distinct subculture in American society—the stereotyped comic book geek—was exploring and re-imagining media misrepresentations of race, sexuality, gender, and identity more than I felt broader American society was. Right in front of me, a whole progressive conversation about media representation over gender and race was unfolding in a medium I had long been a fan of and I wanted to know how and why discourse was working within fandom.

My observations and interviews led me down several paths and what emerged was the presence of themes in the community discussion which centered on ideals and beliefs. I call these comic book reader 'virtues'. Although there is a lot of critique about minority groups and diversity, when these virtues are present, the conversations seem to be more amicable. When these community virtues are being contradicted or are not present, the conversation seems to become more strained.

This thesis is organized into three sections. The first two sections lay a foundation for the rest of the work by addressing aspects of the medium and the community. The third section identifies three particular virtues (genuine fan, defending the underdog, and discourse proximity) are outlined, followed by several recent controversial cases where these virtues are invoked to shape diversity discourse.

A Note About Prioritizing Female Representations in this Research

When this research project was first organized, the topic of interest was representation of three minority groups (women, ethnic minorities, and the LGBTQ community) in comic media. Race, LGBTQ, and the intersectionality of these three communities still hold important places in my final ethnography, but they no longer take the center stage. Further, it should be noted that these themes deserve to be investigated

in their own research projects with more depth and priority. The biggest reason for a refocus on the female comic fan experience was that during the research period of this project, feminist discussions (such as a push for better female representation) were most prevalent in my perspective throughout interviews and observations. Going into the community to look at attitudes about representation, I had discovered that minority fans were already very aware of misrepresentation and that they were taking action through social media to change it. A few of the bigger instances I highlight are recent online discussions that received broad popular coverage in both online and print media. Examples vary from the misrepresentation of a possibly Transgender character in a recent Batgirl Comic to complaints about lack of female heroes in a licensed DC board game. While general community opinion is changing; publishers, comic book fans, and many creators have been insistent (if not vocally then with choice of content) that women do not read comic books or choose to not participate in activities associated with comic book culture. Because of these long standing opinions throughout the industry, women are not considered an important consumer demographic for most mainstream publishers. Many argue that the poor representation of women in the comic book industry is only reflective of their absence in the comic book community. Andrew Wheeler pokes fun at this sentiment in his 2014 *Comicsalliance.com* article "Why Big Muscles Aren't the Same Thing as Sexy Curves." He makes the tongue in cheek conclusion that male superheroes aren't being sexualized for female readers the same way female superheroes are being sexualized for male readers "because as far as most superheroes are concerned, women don't read comics" (Wheeler). Similarly, other minority groups such as LGBTQ community or ethnic minority fanbases are invisible and characters from these

backgrounds are usually underrepresented. This is also why there will still be examples drawn from the actions of other minority groups besides females in this project. Despite the fact that the image of the broader comic book community does not include strong female, LGBTQ, or minority ethnic group fan bases; their presence has grown like the stereotyped fan community itself. Not only are these minority fans existing among the general comic book community, they are all also using the internet to connect on shared experiences of being a minority reader who loves to read comics and to demand better representation.

Methodology

For this study, I choose to use several methods to collect and analyze my data. The beginning steps of my research involved constructing a survey that provides data for defining cultural domains and common themes within the Comic Book Reading Community of the United States (see Appendix E, F , and G). This survey also served the dual purpose of collecting much needed demographic data on this community. I asked for definitions, free lists, and demographic information throughout the survey. The survey was conducted through a Google Form. Google forms was chosen because it free, it is flexible with questions, it is easily shared, and it has no restrictions on how many responses can be submitted. As far as I know, only one report of a possible glitch had been made by an informant, but the glitch was not found when further investigated. The individual reported was sent an alternative URL to the survey and was able to complete successfully. Every individual who took the survey had to agree to terms of the study, and there were no age restrictions. Unfortunately, while the survey was very helpful in finding patterns and themes, the demographic data pulled some questionable responses

from individual respondents, and needs to be further looked into (See end notes on Data before Appendix). All of these forms received IRB approval (See Appendix B).

The choice to use free list prompts was to gage a general sense of perceptions readers had towards comic books and representations in comic books by distinguishing repeat themes. Usually 15-20 respondents are needed for specific identifiers (such as, for example, a list of ethnic group names) but for a vague topic or domain, 30 to 40 people are an appropriate size for finding repeat domains (Bernard 225-227). After 51 participants responded to free listings, I was satisfied with the amount of data that was compiled for lists and removed the section from the survey. This was, in part, to be an incentive for participants to finish the survey in case they felt discouraged by length and also to avoid unnecessary redundancy. I also noticed some complaints or confusion with the listing section.[1] In future studies, it might be helpful to consider alternatives to digital listings, add explanations of survey sections, conduct listing separately in real life, or eliminate listing all together.

The promotion of the survey was through Facebook, online comic book forums, Twitter, and Blog sharing. Individuals, friends, family, and contacts also were asked to (and did) share the survey when possible. Printed cards with the survey link and contact information were handed out to readers, left in comic shops, and handed out at 2014 NY Comic-Con (See Appendix C). I also received much promotional help from the Comic Book stores Time Warp Comics and Dewey's Comic City. The owners were supportive by letting my post flyers, spend time in their stores, hand out surveys and promotional material, and by sharing the survey in their own public media sphere. This type of

[1] Some participants thought the free list prompts were misleading questions to be a part of a wider statistic, and gave answers that reflected a disagreement with the survey question. Interestingly, this concern is understood when considering the virtues I later identify in my thesis.

promotion was, appropriately for this study, a non-probability sample. When research is focused on the collection of cultural data, it is preferable to seek intimate numbers of expert informants rather than large samples of random individuals (Bernard 143-144).

The second method used, and most drawn upon in this thesis, was focus groups and interviews. I conducted both formal and unstructured interviewing techniques. Impromptu, unstructured interviews were primarily conducted been in comic books stores with store owners, store employees, and customers. Each individual had to sign a release form when recorded, stating they understood my research and were comfortable with being recorded (See Appendix A). Those not comfortable were asked permission to have notes taken of their thoughts or to be contacted via email. These individuals signed release forms relevant to the media that they felt comfortable responding with. For formal groups that were pre planned, they tended to be online or in specialized places. For instance, I interviewed three times at a Coffee Shop not far from Dewey's Comic City. When online, Skype software was used and instead of signing a form I asked interviewees if recording was acceptable. No focus group participants or interviewees were under 18 years of age without legal guardian consent.

It should also be noted that a website dedicated to information on this research was made and maintained throughout the project. Although I would have liked to utilize the website more, there were moments throughout my research when the website was a useful tool to provide clarifications to responses, communicate feedback, and to continually participate in the research. Using websites in this manner is an increasingly accepted practice in much contemporary media and online anthropology (Wilson and Peterson 2002). A Wordpress site was used to promote the research, provide updates to

interested parties when possible, and have a place of contact and reference for the community. I have received tips on other sources from comic readers, was given feedback, and the site allowed me to have conversations with several individuals located far away. My intention is to post my final research on my site for all of the comic book reading community to see, as many readers are interested in the results. I find this very important since my goal is that my research services or, at the least, is of interest to the community I am studying.

Much of the data gathered for this research project was also collected using anthropologically accepted forms of participant observation such as unobtrusive observations and performing in-situ interviews in comic book stores and at a major comic convention. I went through the experience of making every Wednesday a celebration, checking comic news as a ritual habit, participating in comic universe discussions with regular readers, and spending time in comic book stores and online forums. I learned to lament my rapidly depleted wallet and become obsessive with organizing which comics I was going to buy for the month. These practices may have not been the most challenging culture shock, but the experience was most certainly engrossing.

Part One

The Power of Comics: Orientation to the Comic Book Medium

Flipping through a copy of the 2013 title, *Punk Rock Jesus,* in a Barnes & Noble, I was thinking of all the places a comic like this would be banned. *Punk Rock Jesus*, written by Sean Murphy and originally published by DC Vertigo, is about a clone of Jesus of Nazareth (DNA courtesy of the Shroud of Turin) who grows up to become a punk rocker. *Punk Rock Jesus* explores mature themes that vary from genetics to religion all in the comic book medium. "Comic Books are powerful," I had said to my mom placing the paperback on the shelf. "They are?" She said, genuinely surprised. Her reaction isn't unusual, and perhaps more aligned with how our society views comic books.

Comics and the individuals who read them are not usually associated with words like powerful, art, mature, or literature. Especially literature: despite exploring similar themes and narratives, *Punk Rock Jesus* would probably never be compared to Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*. This isn't to say that comics will never be recognized as a powerful communicative medium. On the contrary, we are increasingly beginning to see the value of studying the art form as a society and comics are being taken seriously by academia and the public alike. This is partially because we are starting to realize what "comics" as a medium entails. As the community and medium progress, the reasons to study comic books and the culture surrounding them also increase. While it would be difficult to explore every argument supporting research of comic books, it is worthwhile

outline what makes comics such a special reading experience and profile some of the current academic discussions on comics. The following sections briefly cover how we define comics, visual characteristics of comics, the bimodal experience of reading a comic, and comic books as a tool in educational and activist domains.

So what is a comic? In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* by Scott McCloud (1997) the definition of comics is "a juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (20). This definition is widely used, and perhaps aided the realization that sequential art is a very special form of communication. However, it does leave some other issues to consider. In their 2009 book *The Power of Comics: History, Form & Culture*, Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith point out that this definition would include items like the Bayeux Tapestry, a linen embroidery work 224.3 feet long made around 1100. While identifying the Bayeux Tapestry as a comic may help make comic books seem more respectable by association, it's a problematic definition when talking about comics in the context of modern industry and pop culture. Instead, they propose the following working definition: "As an art form, a comic book is a volume in which all aspects of the narrative are represented by pictorial and linguistic images encapsulated in a sequence of juxtaposed panels and pages" (Duncan and Smith 3-4). This definition does not negate McCloud's term, but instead clarifies that the comic book behaves almost like a repackaged form of comics. Comic books could even serve as one example for how the comic medium has progressed and how artists have explored the creative potential of comics. For this research, I reference the comic book definition by

Duncan and Smith because it accounts for the arrangement of the comic book in volumes and implies the distinctive presentation of the modern product.

Usually only images are invoked when one thinks about comic books, but the power of comic visuals doesn't just stop at interpretation of icons. Many other types of visual comprehension are occurring when one reads a comic book. While there are many processing factors for a comic reader, consider these two: determining the function of an image and understanding the conveyed mood of an art style. Most characteristic comic book images can be sorted into three "functional" groups; sensory diegetic images, such as onomatopoeia; non-sensory diegetic images, like dream sequences; and hermeneutic images, usually in the form of visual metaphor or cultural reference. Readers need to be able separate the images in the physical world depicted inside the comic book that sometimes simulate other senses called sensory diegetic images from the images representing thoughts, ideas, or internal states called non sensory images. Additionally, readers need to recognize hermetic images which offer commentary or narrative without actually being a part of the story plot (Duncan and Smith 155-161). As readers sort through these images and their possible functions, they also need to consider information conveyed by the expressionism in art style choice. Something as simple as a line, and by extension style of drawing, can promote a mood based on it's width, strength, and angles (McCloud 125). Similarly, other visual variables such as color or detail choices can also promote a mood. A current running 2013 Archie title, *Afterlife with Archie*, exemplifies this use of expressionism. Traditionally, the world of Archie Comics is famous for it's small town and teenage domestic narratives. Depicted in simple, bubbly lines, with bright colors, Archie comics tend to look childlike and optimistic. In *Afterlife with Archie,*

Archie and the Riverdale gang must survive through a zombie apocalypse started by Sabrina the Teenage Witch bringing back Jughead's dog from the dead. The look of this series is dark and sombre; the palette mostly made of blacks, oranges, and reds. Characters are drawn more realistically and shadows overtake many scenes. The comic has a pulp horror aesthetic much different from the teen romance comedy mood of the traditional Archie Comics, but in both variants the artists are using line and color to convey mood to their readership. Although the audience is taking in a comic visually, the manner in which something is drawn can also be sensory information to the reader.

Beyond the visual aspect of comic books and the use of symbolic language the compilation of the visual and written mediums is another academic dialogue in itself. The experience of reading a comic book involves interaction between multimodal formats, or multiple mediums of communication. Therefore, the reader must draw upon multiple semiotic resources to decode a comic book. The reader needs to comprehend not just the visuals in between the panel box, but the how words, pictures and spaces are portrayed and interact within a comic; or what is referred to by Duncan and Smith as "the interanimation of meaning." The interanimation of meaning describes that synthesis of text and image that is so unique to the comic book. When a reader experiences a comic book they do not only need to be conscious of both text and image, but they also need to understand that the relationship of the two mediums creates "a meaning beyond what is communicated by word or picture alone" (Duncan and Smith 154). These semiotic responses rely on the reader's perception and the artist's interpretation. Since comics Intertwine both literary communication and the visual arts, it goes without saying that there is something quite unique about the comic book medium and the sequential art

form. Perhaps this complexity of comic book media that has attributed to a thriving comic book culture with an extensive history.

This communication also relies heavily on context clues and shared cultural formations. Understanding of cultural context is required to pick up references, and therefore have a complete meaning of the work. This context, or cultural fluency, is vital to communicating the events or themes of a comic. In a different cultural context, the message can become scrambled from at least original intended themes or visual assumption. This is why comics can usually be considered culturally reflective. A notable example of how comic books are culturally reflective could be the transitions that Captain America has gone through over the ages. First created during 1940s as the embodiment of the American spirit, the early Captain America was drawn on the cover of his first issue punching Hitler in the face. This was of course in tune with a pro-action sentiment, which was admittedly strongest amongst Jewish-American creators, but a vast American sentiment nonetheless (Maslon, Laurence, and Michael Kantor 70-73). Captain America seemed to disappear post war (perhaps his disappearance is reflection itself on United States culture during this time), but in the 1960s creators tested the waters with a story about "Cap" to see if the character would resonate with audiences enough to sell. Not long after the decision to bring Captain back was made, JFK was assassinated in 1963. Suddenly, reinstating Captain America as the lost American spirit seemed more relevant than ever. Cap, who was found frozen by the Avengers and then revived (almost like a literal "refinding" of the 1940s American spirit), was very much still an idealized symbol of the 1940's when reintroduced (Maslon, Laurence, and Michael Kantor 151-153). His story became an exploration of how American idealism and citizen trust were

being confronted in a time of rebellion and moral ambiguity, particularly in terms of foreign policy and war. Indeed, at one point he throws away the superhero title Captain America for the name 'Nomad' in order to show a disconnect from American ideals and the American government. Captain America is one character, but what he stands for and his development are directly impacted by what is going on in the United States around him. Because his character allows him to commentate organically on politics and the nature of the United states, this happens literally. In one page from a 1970s comic he feels the growing skepticism of the American Government. While brooding over how he awaked in "the day of the anti-hero--the age of the rebel and the dissenter," Captain America reaches a pessimistic conclusion: "perhaps--I should have battled less--and questioned more!" (Maslon, Laurence, and Michael Kantor 153-155).

As a medium that incorporates narrative text with visuals, the comic book has the ability to convey a different level of interpretation than other artistic tools of communication. This is also why there has been much consideration for bringing the comic book and graphic novel into educational and political spheres such as libraries, schools, and social activism. Indeed, particularly in education, the multimodal design of graphic novels is motivation enough for further investigation as a possible literacy panacea such as the study conducted by Connors titled *Weaving Multimodal meaning in a graphic novel reading group* (Connors 2012).[2] Although recognizing the study had limitations, Connors found that students used multiple semiotic resources that varied between color, layout, and facial expressions in order to interpret graphic novels at

[2] Graphic novels are entire whole works. Comic books (sometimes called floppies, or books) are singular small serial issues, and Paperback Trades are the single issues collected together in a graphic novel size. For this research I focus on Comic books, specifically of the Superhero genre. However, for this section on the comic medium, graphic novels will be referenced to help explain aspects about comics as powerful communication.

different levels, all of which aided students with critical interpretation of the accompanied English text (Conners 2012). With the opportunity to draw on more resources, the opportunities for successful communication increased.

Despite comics and comic books having associations with adolescence, the medium is very conducive to expressing difficult subjects varying from from political stories, tragic histories, or to autobiographies. The aforementioned *Maus* and *Maus II* (1991) are critically acclaimed biographical-self reflection works and a very important presentation of what terrors the Spigelman family experienced during the holocaust and its aftermath. Additionally, the famous graphic novel, *Persepolis* (2000), is about author Marjane Satrapi and her experiences growing up during the Iranian revolution. Like *Maus*, this autobiography demonstrates that comic books are able to open up the work to receive more chances of understanding or empathy by the reader. Leigh Gilmore describes this experience between what Satrapi accomplishes with the graphic novel medium during a scene in which she discovers a childhood friend's body: "She chooses not to draw something she witnessed and thereby expands the repertoire of traumas representation to omission, silence, and depiction of the void. […] She challenges readers wherever they are to accept the act of witnessing as a dynamic position within (and beyond) the graphic memoir" (161-162).[3] This is not to take serious subjects and mellow them down with the visual aesthetic of comics for youth consumption, but instead gives the creator more ways to communicate their emotions or experiences with the reader, that our otherwise extraordinarily difficult. The result is a powerful tool to explore and convey powerful emotions.

[3] See *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi Page 142 for this image.

The use of comics as a powerful communicative tool also extends to scholarly knowledge. Other layers and types of information can be piled onto a bimodal comic book beyond the aforementioned ways to explain an event or emotion. For instance the internal states, mood, or reflections that the authors experienced can be expressed while simultaneously delivering the story's events. The creator can easily flip in-between internal thoughts and the actual story, as Art Spiegelman pauses in-between his father's narrative to illustrate symbolic images featuring himself about how he is processing this information. The ability to illustrate reflective moments such as these can make a big impact on a reader trying to comprehend how a scenario is impacting an individual. Since the nature of the comic book has more possibilities to induce successful communication, it follows that it would be a helpful tool in the classroom. Jee and Anggorio discuss this concept in their article *Comic Cognition: Exploring the Potential Cognitive Impacts of Comics*. There is already a mild trend to implement academic or science concepts in comic books, a few examples include titles such as *Clan Apis* (about Bee behavior), graphic novel versions of Shakespeare, and a comic I was personally handed, *The Cartoon Introduction to Economics*. Jee and Anggorio concluded that a helpful science or academic graphic novel needs to be wary with maintaining accuracy while still creating a compelling work. However, if executed correctly, the added ability to explain scientific concepts with other elements such as images and narratives can be very effective (Jee and Anggorio 2012). When applied in politics and activism, Comic books have also shown they can still be a powerful educational tool for communication. After an infamous New Delhi gang rape in 2012, filmmaker Ram Devineni was inspired to create the graphic novel *Priya's Shakti* which was released in 2014. Priya is an average girl in an Indian

village but after a brutal rape, Priya is cast out of her community and her family's home. While alone in the jungle, Priya prays to the Hindu goddess, Parvati, for help. She is sent a tiger (a symbolic representation of her Shakti) and travels village to village in hope to change the way these communities perceive rape and treat rape victims. The story of Priya is powerfully depicted in the comic book platform. This coupled with the concept of augmented reality (where if read on the app, real victims weigh in on the issue of rape throughout story) has made Priya's gender equality movement influential. When asked about the choice of medium in an interview for the Website *The Diplomat*, Devineni stated that "the comic book is a powerful tool for educating children and teenagers about gender-based sexual violence. It is perfectly designed for them and can be read in 15-20 minutes [...] the comic book and identification with Priya will start a conversation and should be used with other materials in schools" (Rehman).

This statement by Devineni grasps at something important about comic books; the differences of literacy cognition, the easy and narrative format, the flexibility to convey difficult subjects, and use of the comic book as a tool are all important aspects that make the medium special. It is these powerful elements of the comic book that may have helped inspire a whole subculture around the medium.

Part Two

Defining the Comic book Community

The community under examination in this research project is consumers (a term I henceforth use to refer to readers who read, engage and discuss comic media, not necessarily buyers) of North American Comic books and who currently reside in the United States. This community also tends to self-identify as comic book fans. It is difficult to determine precisely which groups of individuals make up this sub-culture, and what actions or behaviors warrant inclusion into the community. However, within the context of this research project, the boundaries I set around the group called the 'comic book community' are inclusive, and may slightly deviate from previous studies on comic book fans where focus remained on what took place inside comic book shops or conventions. One such study that comes to mind was conducted in a comic store called Daydreams Comic and Cards. The resulting ethnographic work was titled *Comicbook Culture: True Believers and Fanboys* and remains to be the most prominent ethnography on the comic book fandom.

While I recognize the culture group I am studying to be generally the same group that Pustz researched; leaving the space of the comic book shop for further investigation allows for a wider comprehension of who participates in the fandom and the different ways they participate. The choice to observe interactions outside of the comic book shop is helpful in many ways, but there are a few particularly relevant rationales for doing so.[4]

[4] An interesting point brought up to me was the use of the words 'fan' and 'fandom' over 'reader.' As the paper goes along, one will see I start using 'fan' more frequently in moments relating to a cultural spirit,

First of all, the comic book store is no longer the only main hub of social interaction for the community, so limiting research to this one space (as wonderful as it is) leaves out many individuals who do participate in the discussion of comic books either online or in other spaces. The behaviors of participation varies and therefore a fan's participation may not always be centered around The Comic Book Shop. This is especially true when investigating female readers. In Pustz' study, he observed female customers would only walk in to make purchases and then quickly leave the shop without taking part in other community activities (Pustz 5). This should indicate that we are unable to rely on individuals gathered in a single location to be the best representation of comic book readers. Continually, the presence of other opportunities to express cultural involvement makes defining the comic book community a bit more difficult. Problematic questions arise when trying to draw lines around the people who would be researched. Surely a community member (as defined in this research) had to be currently living in the United States, read North American Comics, and somehow participate within the culture of comic book readers. Other definitions of comic book readers can be quite broad, Duncan and Smith define comic book fans as "consumers of comic books who have a manifest commitment to the medium" and further along in their work they describe the fan as "someone who wants to take part in the dialog about the medium" (9 & 173). Pustz devotes a whole chapter to a 'spectrum of contemporary readers' in which he distinguishes particular fan groups by their preference in genre or their particular relationship with comics. A fan may only identify with Batman the character, enjoy only

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specific behavior, or virtue. After listening to a few interviews over and looking through my notes, I realized the community talked about itself as fans, and as a fandom. It is possible that this is why this progression from reader to fan occurs, but after the ethnodata review, but I feel confident that using these identifiers helps convey an extra sense of how the community views itself, and therefore is a helpful label to keep utilizing.

silver age comics, or choose to limit their purchases to indie books; but as Pustz discloses, "the most important element of a fan ... is the perception of having a vested interest in comic books" (70-71). This research encompasses all of these individuals who meet the following criteria: a comic book reader is an individual who consumes (reads, not necessarily purchases) Comic Book media on a relatively regular basis and interacts with the community in various ways over elements relating to the comic book medium.

It should be mentioned that throughout my interviews, informants were aware of another type of fan, the "superhero fan." A superhero fan is an individual who loves a comic book character or team, specifically from the superhero genre but doesn't actively read the comic. These fans may have impressive understandings or knowledge of their favorite characters or teams, but stay away from the actual medium of comic books more so than the comic book fan. The response to these fans varies from considering them legitimate fans to 'poser nerds.' Some community members, particularly the comic book shop staff, discussed how even though these fans find an interest from films or TV shows, the hope is that they can be made into a legitimate comic book fans by expanding their interest into the comic store. As it stands, although this group emerges and overlaps exist, I chose to exclude them from this research in the interest of time and to maintain focus.

Early Fandom History

The Comic Book Fandom itself has a very unique history, grounded in appreciating community dialogue and the comic book medium. The special means that comic book readers went through to self organize makes it very apparent that an early feeling of fandom camaraderie is responsible for the expansive community today. Pustz

recognizes this as an "element of play and pleasure" suggesting that fans instigate in play by asking questions, voicing opinion, self reflection or just listening and learning about comics (70). As we discussed earlier, readers take in different semantics in various ways to decode a comic. At the intuitive core of why comic books are causal to community dialogue is this deeper interaction with comic books as a medium that, ultimately, allows more room for interpretations and discourse. The first comic book fanzine was created in 1936 but a more collective movement formulated around EC (Entertainment Comics) in the 1950s. Even if discourse was inevitable, the community still needed instigators to start reaching out and connecting with other fans. Older EC fans lit a flame to dialogue and fandom connections with their productions of mimeographed fanzines. These "EC-Addicts" fizzled out when the industry decided to implement the Comics Code (Duncan and Smith 175-176).[5]

The build up to the Comic Book Code as well as the after effects where strangely condemning and conducive to comic book culture identity. During the late 1940s and early 1950s a mania swept America attacking comic books as a bad influence on impressionable children. Headlines and articles started to appear condemning comics, and the infamous book that demonized comic books *Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today's Youth* was published in 1953 (Duncan and Smith 39). The author, sociologist Fredric Wertham, is demonized himself in the comic book community like a poster child for the historical attack on comic books (Judy and Palmer 2013). Concerned mothers, and religious organizations seemed to behind the anti-comics

[5] The regulations of the comics code affected all publishers, but EC because produced Fantasy and Horror Titles they were deeply impacted by the Comic Code. The topics that made series like *Vault of Horror, Tales from the Crypt, Weird Science and Weird Fantasy* popular were now unpublishable. Needless to say, EC was hit hard financially and tried to gain support from EC fans, asking them to take action on the issue before ultimately going bankrupt (Duncan and smith 177).

sentiment. What's more, studies and articles in Women's magazines focusing on the determinants of comic books and their readers seemed to pop up into the American spotlight (Wright 91). As it will be discussed later, it is true that the hysteria encapsulated a lot of themes and stigmas associated with the comic book fandom even today.[6]

In 1954, a senate subcommittee investigation on Juvenile Delinquency declared that violent and inappropriate media consumption was being pushed on American Children. Concerned about raising alarm against comics, in fall of 1954 a self-regulatory Comics Code was implemented by Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America (Duncan and Smith 39). Not unlike the self-regulatory Film code, the comics code outline general elements and themes that creators could not depict if they wanted a Comics Code Authority seal of approval. Even as the industry felt the difficulty of the Comics Code, it wouldn't be long until fans would try to reconnect over what content of comic books was left.

It was in 1960, that fans started to make stronger connections and find each other through zines and letter columns with the help of creators and older fans. For example, Julius Schwartz is one of many figures credited with helping reignite the fandom in two ways, by reinvigorating the character The Flash which drew in readers and by helping foster conversations between fans, spending time valuing that proximity between fans and creators by supporting cons and responding to fan mail (Duncan and Smith 45). Two fan publications that follow became important emphsais of the growing collective: a

[6] Historian Wright offers that this debate over comics was less about comics and more about concerns and conflicts about cultural power. In particular, questions around defining and protecting American capitalist culture, and the ability of the next generation to uphold these cultural idealisms. The result was a hyper focus on new popular cultures which adults "debated (and continue to debate) the issues on a microscale, in a sense controversies over certain products of youth entertainment. Comics would be succeeded by motion pictures, television, rock-and-roll, video games, and the internet as the disputed agencies of cultural power operating on the nation's youth" (87). Wright sees this incident as a flow of American history, a specific example in the larger continuous struggle between generation over idealisms and power.

column on comics in the fanzine Xero presented at World Science Fiction Convention in 1960 and the realization of the fanzine Alter-Ego in 1961 (Pustz 44). Soon an estimated of 500 people were actively regularly involved in the fandom network and and more fanzines joined Alter-Ego. Strangely enough, the descriptions of Fanzines are not unlike an internet forum or fansite. Fanzines, included newsletter pages, collecting information, amateur art, and a place for dialogue (Pustz 45-46). What seems to become more important from this place on for our purposes in study is the progression of the fandom to cultural spaces.

Cultural Spaces

The comic book community is expansive, but there are three locations that are currently important and that I tentatively explored: the comic store, the convention, and more recently the internet. Not only are these location safe spaces for comic book fans to be within their own community, but entering these spaces also allows fans to express their reader identity and exercise use of their community-specific knowledge. The following sections attempt to describe the general atmosphere of these locations and to present several instances where readers are expressing their identity as fans or using these spaces in other ways to partake in comic book culture.

Comic Store

As you walk in, somewhere there will be a rack of colorful and brand new comics. Most of the time back issues (much older comics) are hidden in boxes that customers can browse. Perhaps a section of the store is devoted to games or card packs. Maybe there is an aisle of art supplies or collector products like comic sleeves. There is a good chance that as you wander, you will come across artfully displayed action figures. Some will be very detailed and spectacular and others smaller and more collectable, such

as the very popular POP figurines. Customers will tend to be caucasian males that vary from their teens into late adulthood. However, in North New Jersey by no means is it surprising to see any racial minority reader of any gender looking for a new issue to buy. It's possible that shoppers are quietly gazing at the new comics, concentrated on titles and thinking over their pull list (their list of comics to buy for the week) but there will probably be a few groups talking together, or a bunch of customers lingering at the check out counter. It is probable that tables and chairs are set up in a corner of the store where a tournament of Magic: The Gathering or Pokemon (both popular card games frequently played in comic stores) are taking place. Now that you've spent some time here, something may seem a bit 'off' to you if you do not regularly read comics. Maybe it's that the symbols and material on the rack are so familiar (Superman, Spiderman, Batman) but at the same time jarringly alien (why does Batman have four different running titles? What is this 'Spiderverse' event?). Perhaps it's how the customers and staff are on a first name basis and spend time talking to each other like friends. Whatever it is, you can tell that there is something more going on in this space than just commerce. Welcome to the typical Comic Book Shop.

While it is important to recognize the Internet can be considered a neohost for comic book culture and conventions as large-scale community gatherings, it is impossible to downplay the role of the comic book store historically and in the modern day. The birth of comic book shops partially emerges from the dysfunction of the mass-market distribution model in the early 1970s (Duncan and Smith 92). Because the American comic book progressed from syndicated newspaper comic strips and collected anthologies; comic books where sold in newsstands and corner stores alongside their

predecessors. This was problematic for two general reasons, the first being the inconsistency of where and which comics were being sold frustrated readers. The second is the financial strain this model put on distributors. Since retailers could return covers of unsold comics (later it would be affidavit receipts) for credit, most of the cost of a failed comic fell upon the distributor (Duncan & Smith 92-93), While this model may have worked for newspapers and the contained stories of comic strips, it was a faulty process for selling the increasingly complex stories found in comic books. The success of Phil Seuling and other comic specialty shop owners in the early 1970s helped move of the comic book industry to a direct market distribution. Much of this success was from Seuling's deeper understanding of what the fans wanted, which was a means to regularly and reliably buy specific titles they were emotionally invested in (Duncan & Smith 67-68).

Referencing Ray Oldenburg's book The Great Good Place, Pustz identifies the comic book shop as "a meeting place, a forum, a Mecca, the "great good place" its patrons need to lead a complete life" (25). It is a special location where conversation and behavior on comic books can be exercised without worry of stigma or isolation. One of the biggest appeals to comic consumers is the relationship customers have with store owners and staff. These relationships help shape the community and contribute greatly to the identity of a regular comic book fan. Special interactions that the store owners have with their consumers are one contribution to the fanbase-family atmosphere of comic book shops. For instance, recommending underrated comics or warning customers away from others makes customers feel as though owners and staff are acting in the fan's best interest; and they usually genuinely are. Dave, the owner of Time Warp, was regularly

cited as the guy who recommends the perfect first comic book. This stems from one of the most important functions of going to a comic book store mentioned beforehand: discussion about comic books with fellow readers and shop staff.

But it is not just the discussion that comes from comic books that is important, but other fan-related behaviors as well. Forms of special treatment or acts that declare camaraderie in the experience of being a comic book fan are very conducive to a comic shop/customer relationship. One of the best examples is how Time Warp accommodates their busier fans. Wednesday being comic release day tends to be a noisier atmosphere for time warp. Although the store is set up to be open around ten am, the door is left unlocked and several customers will stroll in early. My first time observing a customer walk in before opening, I assumed it was abnormal and thought that the customer would be asked to leave. Instead, the staff did a quick check of who came in, and then greeted them cheerfully. I learned that a handful of customers who used the bus stop across the street to commute were allowed to come early into the store. This way, busy customers could pick up their comics before catching their bus for work. All the employees who worked Wednesdays mornings knew who the commuters were by name.

When I asked Dave about this, he remarked, "I consider it doing good business." While this is true, Dave's decision to allow his commuting customers grab books early has several functions besides just "doing good business." By accommodating his shop to the time needs of his customers, Dave has made these customers feel like Time Warp is "their shop." And it is. By making an exception to the rules for several special customers who really need the store to be open early, Dave makes these fans feel cared for. He is telling them that the store has an interest in their schedule, and that the store cares enough

to make their pick up convenient by doing what a good friend would do: giving them what feels like special access.

What gives this interaction further significance to the comic book fan is the time sensitive nature of the fandom's material culture. There are a few elements in comic book fandom that are time sensitive such as buying con tickets, the length of comic titles and series, and scheduling pull lists. But the wednesday rush to buy higher demand comics before they sell out is one of the bigger time sensitive elements in participating in comic book fandom. So when Dave chooses to allow customers who don't have the time to pick their books up early, the act tells an understanding of the wednesday experience. The store knows that the more avid fan will want to grab books before they are sold out and the store knows about the disappointment felt when you can't get a book because of circumstances out of your control. The relationship is no longer seller to buyer, but comic book fan to comic book fan.

Interactions like this create a different shopping experience for comic book fans that have "their store." This identity within the store certainly contributes to their identity as a comic book fan. Besides these little things the store does for their customers to make them feel like the store is THEIR store, there are also sometimes more explicit identities within a store community. One day while volunteering at Time Warp, the ASL ice bucket challenge was increasing in popularity. Dave, the storeowner, made a comment about how the challenge was making its way to "the perimeters of the Time Warp Family" on Facebook. When I asked him to talk more about what "the time warp family" was, he launched into describing what, funny enough, resembled a Hawaiian kinship system. Dave recognizes, albeit humorously, three generations in the Time Warp Family. *First*

Generations are customers who regularly buy comic books and are the first in their families to buy from the Time Warp store, while *Second Generations* are customers whose parents have also (and usually continue) to buy comics from the store. *Ancients* are customers who have been involved with Time Warp since the store's inception. Time Warp is still waiting for the first of the *Third Generation* to come along; Dave joked about maybe offering a lifetime discount to the first customer born as a *third generation*. While these generational groups may not be regularly talked about, as Dave was explaining I noticed his employees nodding in recognition. Alyssa told me later she herself was a first generation, but mentioned there were definitely a few second generation customers, including some of the younger Time Warp employees.

While not always extending to a humorous use of family or mystic honorifics, there are other examples of using nicknames to distinguish customer groups. At Dewey's Comic City, they roughly identify several customer groups as well. Their customer base is split among what time of day these groups come in and sometimes what school the customer goes to. Several times when asking about best times to come in to visit, employees distinguished between a few groups who usually mingled to chat together. The employees referred to the mingling customers as The Morning Group, Lunch Group, and Evening Group. The customers in these groups vaguely know each other well and will stop shopping to talk. This behavior is regular enough that the employees can name the names of customers and sort which groups they belong to. One last group, Kubies, are not categorized for shopping at a specific time and then mingling regularly, but because they all attend the famous Kubert School located a town over in Dover NJ. Dewey's has become their base store for comics while attending The Kubert School and the students

recognize the term. In our first single interview, recent Kubert School graduate Alexia identified as such. When I asked Alexia if she was a Kubie, without hesitation she nodded "yup, I'm a Kubie, I use that term myself."

Usually titles or nicknames are used with the customer's knowledge and the customer themselves use it with pride. The fact the customers are aware of these titles makes their use distinct from just nicknames that a shop would use to describe a customer type. These nicknames function as reaffirmation of local identity, loyalty to a specific shop community, and are a practice in claiming "belonging" to the community.

Conventions

The first thing you might have noticed when walking into the 2014 New York Comic Convention is the blast of heat and roaring noise. Like every year before, this year's convention was held in the large Javits Center in Manhattan, but the space still feels crowded. Advertisments, costumes, and larger company sponsored gimmicks sprawl across the show floor. A cartoon themed car is being auctioned off, a *Dance Dance Revolution* tournament is happening, and a mechanical moving Smaug (J. R. R. Tolkien's fictional dragon) head to promote *The Hobbit* are just a few of the spectacles at the Con. Sometimes impromptu battles between cosplayers dressed as the right characters will break out, and attendees are constantly asking to take photos of other attendees' costumes. Anywhere else, and these spectacular items or carefully dressed people would be the center of attention and the object of much gawking. But here, at the NYCC, they are barely registering on the radar. The costume reconstruction of a Transformer, or the huge billowing banners with characters faces on them are competing against the

engulfing noise of the fandom, an exhaustive vibe that now defines the experience of attending a con. The con is divided up into several general spaces, the show floor, the artist alley, and the panel area. The show floor features exhibitors, companies, organizations that promote or sell materials for the attendees to sift through. Walking through the large numbered aisles on the show floor, you'll find names like DK book publishers, the online fan clothing store *Welovefine.com*, and even the individual celebrity hanging out at affiliated booths.[7] Artist Alley is a designated space for artists, writers, and sometimes crafts people who promote their art, network with each other, or sell their work- or as the NYCC website explains "Artist Alley is the place to rub elbows with the greatest pencilers, inkers and writers from every corner of comics" (New York Comic Con). Artists need to go through an admission process to receive a table at the convention, and it's also a place to spot a lot of indie comic creators. This space is also associated with The Block, which is supposed to be a smaller, organized area featuring larger brands or names in popular culture design or art. The lower floor of NYCC there were conference rooms and signing lines. The huge gym like space was crammed with roughly shaped lines snaking around each other to get into panels or to meet with a celebrity for a signing or photo-op. The humming vibrations of these spaces is not unlike a white noise roar in visuals and sounds; a genuine bombardment of popular culture imagery.

The very first comic book conventions have a very neat history but were not as extravagant. Pustz reports that a casual get together in 1963 put together by Jerry Bails in his own home was unknowingly foreboding of the comic book conventions to follow.

[7] I had personally witnessed the heart breaking quest of a friend's younger sister trying to track down Jeremy Shada (*Adventure Time* Voice Actor and her future husband) after he tweeted he would be hanging out at a show floor booth for a few hours.

The idea of popular culture conventions was not a new one to most fans at the time. Science fiction conventions started as early as--- and with fandom crossover between the two subcultures, the idea of a meet and greet based comic book event was pretty well received. In 1970, these fan meetings were moved to the U.S. Grant hotel, where fans did their normal fan practices of talking, swapping, and buying or selling. Soon the gathering had to be moved to a larger space and in 1985 San Diego Comic Con was held in the Convention and Performing Arts Center (Salkowitz 57). If anything, the origins of comic book conventions are more telling of the community and their sincere love for the comic book medium. Since the initial gatherings, comic conventions have grown exponentially. In 2002, Comic Con in San Diego had over 10,000 attendees, in 2005, there were over 100,000 (Salkowitz 56-57). At the 2014 NYCC, the event's website reports 151.000 attendees, making it the largest comic book convention in the nation (New York Comic Con).

Why do so many fans swarm to these hives of nerdcore culture? One of the first reasons is the news, swag, and merchandise. As more entertainment industries have snuck their way into comic conventions and many times announcements, special updates, or exclusive material will lure fans into a panel. After all, it was as the 1976 San Diego Comic Con where Lucasfilm first announced Star Wars via slideshow presentation (Salkowitz 57). It is also a place to network and connect. Alexia, an aspiring comic book artist and Kubert School graduate summed up her comic convention experience as "Got what I needed to get done." Alexia was able to meet some cool artists and spread her card around. She recalled being happy about picking up some books and getting some signatures, but it was play and work: networking and scoping out Artist Alley was

important. The convention space, as a gathering of fans and professionals, is also the interactive space for 'the sketch game.' One informant, Won, told me about his collections of minor sketches and signings. Fans will bring items or special media for artists to do little commissions which usually come with a price. The art is unique and valuable, and people involved with collecting sketches start to recognize each other at conventions because of the regularity. Won told me how he'll sometimes have the names of people he regularly runs into at cons in his phone next to a convention or online user name.

Another possibility is that by going to a convention fans are participating in an act of collective identity. One particularly exciting and identity filled experience of attending NY Comic Con is this phenomenon of walking attendee hordes. I attended my first NY comic con in high school and realized the strangest thing about arriving to the Comic Con was not sorting out directions to the center but the flow of con-goers from subways and trains streaming right into the Javits Center, where the convention has been held for years. There are several ways you can spot a NYCC-goer, the two biggest being cosplay and the NYCC pass that hangs from hundreds and hundreds of necks heading to the convention. While I do not know if there is any academic commentary on how con-goers use their convention badges; there was definitely a sense of identity when wearing a pass. Salkowitz recalled a similar experience inside the airport on their way to San Diego Comic Con. He and his wife would keep an eye out for Superhero T Shirts, themed Jewelry, and other "telltale signs of membership in the tribe of True Believers" (23). Salkowitz predicted that this scene would be replicated in many more airports very soon "over the next two days, in airports all around the world, under-ground rivers of fandom

were bursting out into the open, forming the tributaries of a mighty torrent surging toward San Diego" (24). The image of fan made rivers and tributaries is not lost on someone who rode NJ Mass transit to NYCC. On the east coast, 2014 NYCC-goers were wearing the passes over their jackets and pulling them out of sweatshirts while still on the trains. Leaving the station, the mix of cosplayers and badge wearers formed a stream out of Penn Station and out onto the street. The Javits center, being a very walkable distance, can be reached easily several different ways. As I attended the 2014 NYCC, I recognized this strange phenomenon from my previous trips to NYCC and decided to walk around a few blocks before heading toward the center on my last morning attending. East or West coast, the "Telltale signs" of being a fan remained similar, and it is true, the walk is almost like an identity parade.

Female Experience in Comic Book Community

To start off this brief survey on gender-specific experiences in the community, I ironically turn away from my research and look to an exaggerated and stereotyped scene from the popular show, The Big Bang Theory:

Penny, Amy, and Bernadette are the three main female characters of the popular (but controversial) show The Big Bang Theory. While the guys are away on a Star Wars themed trip, the girls decide to go and have a look at comic books. As they enter the local Comic Book Shop, a live audience laughs while every single white male customer turns to stare at the three women. "Why are they staring?" Bernadette, asks nervously. "Who cares just soak it in...helllo boys" says Amy. Stewart, their friend and owner comes out "Oh hey…." and quickly turns to notice all the men ogling the three women. "Would you please stop staring? They're just girls. It's nothing you haven't seen in movies or in

drawings." As Amy, Penny, and Bernadette (also stereotypically) ask for recommendations to understand why their boyfriends like comics so much, Stewart has to keep the men in check as they start to stare again: "I swear I will turn the hose on you." The audience continues to laugh.

Although extremely stereotyped, this particular Big Bang Theory episode describes an exaggerated gendered experience that women are expected to have when they walk into a Comic Book store. While no one has ever mentioned needing a hose to keep male geeks at bay; many female readers reported gendered experiences and stigmas in the comic book community throughout interviews and internet observations. This is not at all surprising considering the dominance of Caucasian males in mainstream comic book production since the industry's inception (Wright 250). While the history of the industry is definitely a large component, it seems that the community still questions if caucasian male dominance in production has anything to do with lack of female readers. As Stan Lee has asked, "do less females read comics because they seem to be aimed at a male audience, or are they aimed at a male audience because less females read them?" (qtd in Wright 250). Moving past seeking explanation for lack of female readers, there is one thing is for certain: whether it's because of female biological wiring or a consumer choice based on the lack of princesses, the consensus amongst the dominant culture is that women tend to not read comic books.

From this consensus, grouped perceptions of females have arisen and each tend to affect how women are treated within the community, their readership identity, and their representation and authenticity as fans. Not unlike how certain adolescent behaviors are expected within the fanboy stigma, certain gendered behaviors are expected from women

readers (or women's relationship with nerdom in general) and these expectations color their treatment within the dominant culture of the community. Naturally, some female (and male) readers try to facilitate a conversation around these different experiences to change or explain them. One big example of this is the creation of female characters, or narratives, to explain, objectify or compartmentalize the existence of the female fan. For the most part, women have very little control of representation over these groups. Unfortunately, all these male perceptions of the female tend to involve sexualization, femininity, or invisibility as dominating elements- even if the individuals categorized in these groups do not identify with anything more than enjoyment of the hobby.

As one delves into women-oriented geek culture sites like *The Mary Sue* or Tumblr Blogs such as *We are Comics*, it feels like there exists an internet-wide frustration over the general perception (mainstream and within the community) that women don't read comic books. A CNN *Geekout* article reporting on the increasing female demographic in the comic book community played on this idea of rarity with their headline: "Are Women Comic Book Fans as Rare as Unicorns?" In fact, the more well known Unicorn Project documents women readers participating showing off their fandoms, the beginning of the About section reads: "many people have written about females in the geek community, and how the group is often dismissed and overlooked. Although all this literature is important and valuable, we want to take it to the logical next step- to create an avenue that *shows* women are in the geek community. Lady geeks exist; we're an important part of the geek community, and we're not going to disappear" ('The Unicorn Files: About the Project'). Invisibility of female 'unicorn' readers is

important to highlight because it seems to support this "hot nerd"[8] concept; a concept that I believe (when considered in its more traditional sense) may allow a certain degree of acceptance but the constantly sexualized nature of these gendered experiences results in the 'hot nerd' being more reflective of the male dominant culture. The "hot nerd" in the comic community stems from a deep disbelief that a female can genuinely enjoy and "get" comic books the same way a male can. Furthermore, these girls are rare, making them more desirable since the chances of coming across a girl who reads comics is theoretically uncommon (thanks to them being Unicorns). The time I spent at Time Warp Comics at Cedar Grove there was one recurring joke centered on Alyssa being a "Hot Nerd." Dubbed a hot nerd by one of their customers (after his attempt to flirt with her by asking her out to Victoria Secret); Alyssa would many times joke about being a hot nerd herself to laugh off a flirting interaction. The first time I witnessed flirtation between Alyssa and a Customer was only few hours into my first Wednesday at Time Warp. A customer stopped by Alyssa who was on her computer and asked her to look up Green Lantern Wedding rings. While keeping a straight face that sometimes flickered to reveal uneasiness, Alyssa let the customer tell her about the wedding rings and how much he liked them. Later when the customer was out of the store, Alyssa looked at Nikita then

[8] My informants varied quite a bit when I asked what their definition of a hot nerd was. It seems that there has been a recent push to include all genders under the "hot nerd" title, so it should be noted that this term seems to be going under a transitionary phase. One informant even referred to this difference by saying there is a "traditional definition." If we were to discuss a "traditional hot nerd," sometimes red hair (or dyed hair), gothic attire, or glasses are associated with this concept, but there is really no physical commonalities amongst "traditional hot nerds" except young and probably female. One could look to actress, writer, and producer Felicia Day as an example of the traditional hot nerd. Do a quick Google search and phrases such as "hot nerd" and more extremely "the Queen of Nerds" are scattered among the search results. Her constant participation in fandoms of video games, super heroes, comics, and tabletop games seems to be the biggest appeal to her fans. It is important to report that I have gotten a few responses such as "an attractive nerd is anyone who is hot and like nerd things" and "of course guys can be hot nerds." The reason I write that a hot nerd 'tends to be female' is because this sexualization tends to be another frequent perception of placed upon the female comic reader.

said "I think I was just proposed to!" Nikita joked back at Alyssa, "it's because you're just such a hot nerd."

"Hot nerd" is not a unique concept to the comic book fandom. In fact, like all of these perceptions of females, could be considered an archetype in general the nerdcore community. A Hot nerd tends to be an attractive female who fervently enjoys activities that fall into nerdcore popular culture. The concept of the hot nerd also transcends fandom's and specific popular culture communities, although in the gaming community "gamer girl" is more frequently used.

Considering the discussion of The traditional hot Nerd and how disbelief is intertwined with the concept, the sexualization or genderfication of a fan can be discouraging to female readers.The presence of the female body as being more important than the individual continues into experiences that aren't necessarily related to absolute rejection on the nerd girl. For instance, sometimes her knowledge, work, or taste seriously despite credentials. On the subject of Alyssa's blog, Greg commented, "I Swear to god, if Alyssa were a dude, she would have more people going onto her review website. I feel like a lot more people would think about it-consider it."[9]

So what actually happens in a comic book store when a women walks in? In truth it really varies. Many of the readers I talked to who were female said they felt comfortable in their stores, but they also reported gendered experiences. Particularly, a subtle gatekeeping was most common. Marlene recounted a conversation with the guys who run her frequented comic shop and their disbelief when she demonstrated some knowledge about comic books. Many times, difference of treatment almost seems to be

[9] Greg, 12/27/14

an oblivious pushback onto female readers, one that is not meant to aggressively keep women out of a space, but an unfortunate side effect of preconceptions of what a stigmatized fanboy should be.

Of course these actions occur on an individual and shop by shop basis. Fortunately, this is something that minority groups in the comic book fanbase seem to understand. To keep track of shops, a tumblr blog called "Safe Spaces for Comics Fans" allows comic book readers to submit accounts (positive and negative) of minority experiences. Then stores are tagged as safe or not safe depending on these experiences. If a store is unsafe, they have a strike through their name. Viewers can comment on some of the experiences, allowing for other customers to vouch for the store or confirm these behaviors. Posters are also asked to keep in mind all minority groups, so one store may be female friendly, but not LGBTQ friendly.

The three New Jersey stores I frequented were all very open and comfortable to the female reader comparatively to what a female fan may expect in a normal comic book store. Although there were instances where gendered experiences occurred, as figures of authority in this cultural space all owners and staff did their best to maintain a welcoming atmosphere. In fact, it was largely in part of all the stores conscious initiatives to maintain an inclusive atmosphere that I credit them for changes in comic book culture for the local pockets of fan communities they host. Both Dan and Dave employ female comic book readers and/or gamers as staff. Whether they are conscious of this or not, the choice to

hire a staff member with enthusiasm and knowledge with disregard to their gender helps normalize the idea that a girl can partake in nerd culture.[10]

[10] This is not to negate discredit the negative experiences of the Female fan in comic book shops. These experiences exist and do happen, but for the sake of focus and page length, the complexities of the topic will have to be omitted for another time.

Part Three: Core Community Values and Diversity Discourse

Traditional Values Setting the stage for negotiations in representation

In 1905, Max Weber produced his landmark work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in which he theorized that Protestant values were a contributing force behind the rise of western capitalism. Weber argues that it is these shared similar values that made the behaviors and notions of capitalism more appealing to a protestant public, namely individualism and the importance of hard work. It was these traditions, ideas, and values that help mobilize other, perhaps seemingly unrelated, components of a culture into a new direction.

When addressing the question at hand—how can progressive discourse around diversity representations take place in a stereotypically white male community—Weber's method provides a helpful mechanism for evaluating this contradiction in popular American comic book culture.[11] By prioritizing history and ideas, Weber expounds upon the ways in which certain values—spiritual, cultural, political or philosophical—assisted in the development of an economic form. In a loosely similar fashion, by prioritizing the role of history and ideas, one can begin to make sense of the cultural moral–landscape of comic book culture and thus better empathize with the cultural sensibilities of the comic book community. Specific virtues about what makes a true fan—a sense of duty to defend the medium, a genuine love for comic books, and the traditional culture of

[11] I cannot reinforce enough the existence of other sections of comic book genres and camps that I am regrettably unable to incorporate. It is vital to recognize the work here may apply to these pockets of comics culture as well, but these themes I am about to discuss are built on conversations around mostly 'popular' superhero genre comics.

discourse amongst fans and creators—help foster conversations about racial, gender, and other diversity representations of fans and in turn, the representation of minority comic book characters. I call these thematic elements community 'virtues' as they are some of the dominant ideals relative to reader experience and identity.

In comics culture, behaviors and values of the subculture make up a particularly distinguished character. This ‘distinguished character’ encapsulates the fandom’s values and beliefs in a similar manner that the Capitalist ‘spirit’ or the Protestant ‘ethic’ encapsulates American Capitalism or Protestantism morality. Using the words ‘spirit,’ ‘ethic’ and even ‘distinguished character’ all serve the purpose to grasp at a similar idea; that is, within any domain of culture, within every institution and, crucially, within distinct and bounded sub-cultures such as comic book fandom there exists a binding or unifying shared narrative or set of values. This is not to imply a direct analogy between comic book culture and American economic forms, but instead helps us orient the type of subject we are dealing with in comic book culture is similar in essence to an ethic, a spirit or, as Boas might put it, a *geist*, which helps to facilitate coherence and that fosters a certain set of ideals or "moods and motivations" towards the broader society and by extension towards constructions such as race, gender and existence (Geertz 1973, 90).[12] In my research, I found that my comprehension of this ‘geist’ emerged from an understanding of it’s intertwined relationship with cultural history.

The shape of a distinctive communitas and the cultural notions and sensibilities of the comic book community become clearer as one investigates how this ‘geist’ moves throughout cultural history to be present in contemporary fandom. Weber asserts that in

[12] This point can be reaffirmed when one considers that the title of Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and The Capitalist Spirit* was translated from the original German title *Die protestantische Ethik und der **Geist** des Kapitalismus.*

any historical or sociological study, it is essential to understand and elucidate and, most importantly, interpret the spirit that continually permeates through the community. In the case of my ethnographic study and the sub-culture under consideration—comic book fandom—the spirit or 'geist' which currents and threads its way through the community is rooted in the three virtues that I explore in this section: being a true fan a sense of authenticity about comic book fandom and a thoughtful discourse between fan and creator. Only then can we truly come to understand the broader interconnected whole of meaning that defines the cultural attitudes within the subculture of comic book fans towards ideals of interest in this study such as tolerance, inclusion and diversity. While acknowledging a similar historically-oriented approach as Weber, three virtues which permeated throughout fandom consistently surfaced and deeply informed my comprehension of the contemporary ethnographic data collected around diversity conversations. These virtues are also integral to the identity of the comic book reader (or, at the least, consistent behavior) and help differentiate individuals into the ultimate community binary: the reader and the non-reader.

Loosely considering a method to inform us about comic book culture may seem insignificant, especially since Weber used this approach to explain more grandiose themes of religion and economics. Even so, I agree with Pustz (1999) that we, as investigators of cultural spaces and meaning, should consider observing present subcultures as "a useful laboratory for studying Americans' relationship to popular culture and for studying the ways in which cultures in general evolve out of—or perhaps into—states of conflict" (22). Conversations around power and struggle within subcultures that define their identity in marginalization, such as the comic book

community, are extremely important to document as the United States is finally awakening to deeply institutionalized economic, racial and gendered inequalities. My own interactions with my generation, the millennials, has intuitively highlighted how representation and claiming of identity are major focuses in the contemporary student's pursuit for social justice. Increasingly, it feels as though my peers and colleagues are no longer only concerned about aggressive segregation, but also with issues such as micro-aggressions, understanding appropriations and history, formulating identities, and comprehending representations that can lead to a life experiencing stereotype threat to more tragic incidents of police brutality. As social media allows us to contribute to the larger conversation, it becomes apparent that simply having the tools to communicate is not enough. A spirit of open, welcomed dialogue is necessary to create meaningful discourse among disagreeing bodies, and while there are vast differences in the conversations of representation in comics culture and American culture at large, comic book fandom is arguably succeeding in maintaining an open atmosphere to the contributors who also adhere to fandom's sensibilities and virtues.

As such, this discourse has pushed mobility, or perhaps a better word is negotiation, amongst community members on diverse representations in fandom identity and in the medium. The goal of my inquiry is to understand why a community well known to be, in the past, homogeneously white male was also becoming the most responsive entertainment community to negotiate and present three-dimensional and nuanced representations of minority characters directly with their minority fans. [13] To be

[13] Not that all representations are smoothly being discussed quickly, the community is, for example, particularly slow when it comes to changing sexualization of their female characters. Even so, we will see how explicit and direct interaction with the fans is linked to historical expectations and do make a difference in representation progress.

sure, fandom and geek culture identity certainly has its own internal tensions surrounding race and gender, but there is still an underlying sense of inclusion and tolerance for the outcast. This is not to say that no conflict is present in the community at all. Throughout my study, strange and brief moments of conflict between members—especially under the focus of gender—would break out and disrupt the scene. I realize now that these few moments, which first felt seemingly random and regressively sexist in light of new celebrated female superheroes, can be informed by the designs of John Fiske on the semiotic resistance by marginalized popular culture groups at a micro level (1989).[14] A laboratory of popular culture relationships and internal subculture conflict indeed.

A deeper examination of the meanings in conflict within comic book culture is probably expected and tempting, but for this study, I only go as far as to recognize that these aggressions are something to explore on their own and would probably require an interpretative analyses or "the hermeneutic method is extended to the study of all kinds of texts, including jokes, sermons, songs, and even actions" of the comic images the community discusses (Bernard 415).[15] No doubt the comic book would be rife with textual symbolic readings. My goal in this work is to help put the comic book fan community into some historical and anthropological context and to understand the values and ethos which wends its way through the community and shapes narrative

[14] These moments I am referencing are two controversies over two variant comic book covers (Batgirl #41 and Spider Woman #1 which lead to one of the more heated and uncharacteristically enraged comic community debates on social media—in particularly Twitter—called by their associated hashtags: #changethecover, #savethecover, #gamergate #SJW #comicgate. Like the entire experience of the female fandom, this conflict is riddled with nuances that would be best explained in its own separate chapter for a book-length project.

[15] Matthew Pustz in fact, did explore how the comic book collective could also host such deep conflict—but he did so in a 220 page book. What's more, Pustz also investigated during 1990s, a time before the cultural move to the internet and the intertwining with other nerdcore cultures, or the emergences of the Social Justice Warriors and Gamergaters. These added complexities with new platforms and melding with other subcultures merit more than a undergraduate thesis.

commonalities—such as shared attitudes, priorities, and inclinations –which are otherwise difficult for the non reader to empathetically comprehend. Perhaps, with the three identified common virtues from an admittedly crude thematic sorting, I can provide an explanation of some of the symbolic narratives in the community which can help inform a future interpretative analysis study on these subculture conflicts. It is through this discourse that I engage in to find dominant themes, and I believe the answer lies in several historical and cultural elements which all play a role in setting the stage for the current diversity dialogues taking place within comic book fandom.

Virtues of the Fandom Identity: The Genuine, The Underdog, & Proximity

The comic book fan identity is forged in virtues and idealisms more so than in any shared specific physicality amongst it's members, despite the stereotype of white male homogeneity, and it is these virtues which also guide the community's moral landscape and cultural priorities. This assertion is demonstrated as interactions and conversations are better understood in light of three virtues which involve and inform the 'geist' of the comic book community. As it will be revealed, the first of these virtues I discuss involves how genuine or authentic fans are in their sincerity and in their experience around comic books. Since the core of the identity of a fan involves their positive relationship with comic books, as mentioned earlier in this work, it is no surprise that demonstrating a strong, sincere, and positive relationship with comic media has become an important theme in the 'geist' of the community. I call the second virtue the marginalized/underdog narrative because it is fueled by the fandom's historical struggle, information which is passed down like a community mythos, and a shared underdog narrative amongst fans.

Both play into aligning oneself with or defending the marginalized (and by extension, defending the comic community itself) as well as opposing oppressions, like censorship, from dominant American society. A third virtue involves the expected discourse amongst fans and between fans and creators. This expectation has much to do with the birth of the comic book fandom as well as it's historically mutualistic relationship and tangled growth alongside the industry. I continually found that when judging the validity of a diversity themed critique or comment, important virtues relating to identity and medium where always referenced to reach the most virtuously sound conclusion. When these virtues are 'proven' to be met by those who are critiquing the community, discussions about diversity representations were more accepted.

Swafford recognized a type of judging and sorting of inquires in his essay *What Can you Tell me about [blank]?: Exploring social rules of fan talk.* Swafford details what he calls "borderline questions." These were questions audience fans asked at comic convention panels which panelists would passive-aggressively reject for two reasons. First, so they could evade a topic they were not prepared or comfortable to talk about, and second, so they could demonstrate to the rest of the audience what topics were and were not acceptable to discuss. What constituted a borderline question changed from panel to panel, but most aggressive way in which borderline questions were deflected tended to be the same: mocking the asker, usually questioning the authenticity of the fan through their knowledge of continuity and recent titles (Bolling & Smith 76-87). What is useful to us here is that Swafford recognizes a sorting process in this fandom gathering over what topics are okay to discuss and which are off limits. Determining the appropriate inquires was important, and similarly to diversity discussions now taking place, the community

continues to grapple with determining if a critique was breaking or adhering to the fandom's virtues. demonstrate the manner in which an assertion of these virtues can control a discussion though several interactions at comic convention panels.

With that in mind, we will see when minority fans invoked the particular virtue of 'being a genuine fan' or another virtue of relying on the unique "creator accountability and the expectation of fan/creator discourse," the responses seemed to be not only well received but very much supported. These next sections discuss the virtues that are invoked and called upon in community discourse around diversity. I too agree with Weber that it is important to outline some historical aspects that have contributed to each of these three values because the historical movement of these idealisms is how their power of influence take root. Therefore, each sub-section addresses how that particular reader virtue moved, progressed, and in some manners shaped the community throughout fandom history. Hopefully the walkthrough from the traditional historical context of the virtue to how it's being practiced in culture negotiations today, will inform us more about what makes deep historical sensibilities of comics culture so conducive to diversity discourse. Continuously, we explore these virtues throughout later presented case studies and narratives, one will notice these virtues begin to intertwine with one another and weave to formulate the fabric of the community 'geist.'

The Genuine Fan

One of these core values of the fandom is being a genuine reader, authenticity in interest and experience is integral to the fandom identity. "Genuine" can play into two attitudes: the proof of being a 'true' fan through various activities or knowledge, or secondly, a sort of encouragement towards the 'pure of heart' newcomer who really

wants to learn more about comic books. These two attitudes may seem a bit contradictory, but a long time ‘true’ fan is equally obligated (though perhaps the word ‘obligated’ doesn’t do the voluntary enthusiasm justice) to support the community in other ways. This can sometimes include accepting new genuinely interested fans into the community medium to spread and share the magic of comic books. Marvel played on this ‘true fan’ feeling by identifying ranking of fans in their Bullpen Bulletins during the 1960s-70s. These lists of titles were dubbed "hallowed ranks of Marveldom" and included ranks such as RFO (Real Frantic One-buys three marvel comics monthly), KOF (keeper of the flame-"recruits a newcomer to marvels rolockin' ranks") and FFF (Fearless Front Facer-"an honorary title bestowed for devotion to Marvel above and beyond the call of duty") (Pustz 54). Not only is this language evocative of military and religious themes and effectively inspires a feel of the soldier or the missionary, an appeal lies in a lopsided self-aware, even campy, humor which is most certainly infused within these honorifics. Even so, they are telling of some of the activities that make a fan a true fan and are associating ranking with these behaviors.

A personal love of comic books is really a key characteristic of a comic book fan, and fans will go to great lengths to demonstrate their expertise. After all, the birth of the fan is intertwined with the specific appreciation of the comic book. Expertise intersects components of fandom in many ways, but it was also frequently a demonstration of belonging and authenticity. In his essay *You’re not a true geek, I am: The Role of Communicative Aggression in Geek Culture* , Chad Wertley observed that a demonstration of knowledge is also an “identifier for who is really a geek and who only watched *The Avengers* movie […] knowledge serves as a way to distinguish the masses

from the "true" geeks." (109). While Wertley investigated the many subgroups in geek culture, the argument that a level of respect which comes with knowledge rings true for the forum-oriented comic book community. The particular body of knowledge that the comic book fan usually draws upon is continuity. Continuity is a consistency in stories or in character design as well as the "intertextual links amongst separately published narratives" (Duncan and Smith 190-192). I have also personally witnessed that knowledge on current culture news, an understanding of community and industry history, and information on creators and artists also earn points of respect in the community. Needless to say, I quickly discovered that stating outright that I was collecting research for an undergraduate thesis was a very much supported endeavor in this community where knowledge was respected and therefore a great tactic to establish a presence in some of my frequented locations.

The importance of continuity and knowledge can possibly be best understood when one considers the historical situation of the fandom and how readers fostered a relationship between each other through the medium. The hallmark thread of the comic book fan was that they read comic book in part because it meant that they were also tapping into a shared common body of knowledge accessible across the nation by a network of like-mined fold in a time before the internet.

Whertley reported that a certain class status was awarded to those who could demonstrate a mastery of knowledge belonging to the particular geek subculture, while those who could not explicitly show knowledge were placed lower on a hierarchy (110). While I did not notice in the comic book shop or at comic conventions a strong hierarchy of knowledge present, a level of knowledge was most certainly treated with respect, and

in the case of staff, a skill.[16] Learning this body of knowledge is difficult, and fans need to put time and effort into mastering some of this knowledge because having this information is looked at as an expression of passion and dedication to the narratives in comic books. One could argue that this is also why individuals who seem to consume merchandise or only showcase the popular comic book aesthetic without exhibiting a genuine respect or interest in reading comic books sometimes cause a reaction. More often than not, there seems be a variance in emotion from quiet disdain to exasperation towards 'fake fans.' Only once through my inquires did I witness absolute apathy towards the subject. Especially in the comic book shops I interviewed where the employees did their best , or at least stated that it was their priority, to connect newcomers to comics. When I asked Joseph, an employee of the recently opened East Side Mags Comic Shop in Montclair, NJ, felt about fake nerd girls, he admitted he understands why the concept exists :

> You feel like you've worked so hard and that, you know all this stuff and you've been doing this forever and all of a sudden people come in and they say it's all so cool but they don't really like it. You know? They're just saying it because now it's cool… I know it sounds kind of dumb, but I definitely get where they're coming from. You know? Where they feel… I guess it's just an authenticity thing. If someone comes in here, if anyone comes in here, right? I want to find them comics and find them something they're interested in. But like, every once in a

[16] However this could be due to the fact that I was not actively analyzing interactions in dynamics where knowledge and hierarchy could possibly be displayed at comic con, and perhaps this is something less likely to witness at stores because a regular would know these rules and would know how to walk around this hierarchy.

> while we get someone who comes in and is like "can you teach me how to be a nerd" and I was just like "really?"[17]

The dismay Joseph felt over during this interaction he describes demonstrates a conflict between judging the ethical behavior of a prospective fan based of what seems to be her motivations for walking into the comic store. In fact, for me to call this individual who walked in a fan is incorrect because of how disingenuous they are. Joseph wants to share how great comics are to curious people, which requires maintaining a level of inclusion. However, he can't contain his exasperation over someone being perceived as a geek for fashion or popularity. Joseph emphasizes, that *anyone* who doesn't like comic books but is trying to perpetuate the fandom culture as a fad is a little frustrating to him.

One may feel that the need to prove a genuine love of comics creates a stiff atmosphere and facilitates exclusion from outsiders, in particular, one uncomfortable practice in the comic community is called gatekeeping.[18] However, there are intercommunity critiques about this practice, usually citing this duty to spread comic love and how gatekeeping can undermine that mission.[19] I observed that fans would talk about how the genuinely interested but non reading masses are always openly welcomed into the community. I saw this recurring theme in comic shops to not only sell books and facilitate comics culture, but to help new readers discover the joy of comic books or to teach younger readers more continuity. I jokingly asked several staff at Dewey's Comic City in Madison, NJ if they felt like talking comic books was one big 'knowledge-game.' As one younger staff member eloquently put it "I feel like it's more about a *learning*

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[17] Joseph Siegel, 1/23/15

[18] Indeed, excessive Gatekeeping (in this context, the testing/quizzing of a fan on continuity knowledge and comic book lore to prove 'being genuine') is one of the more gendered experiences I heard about, unfortunately this subject in itself would need its own section in a 'Female experience' chapter.

[19] See example in the Case Study section 'Idiot nerd girl' on the comic about walking into a comic store.

game." He then went on to describe how the older staff members and customers were constantly having discussions and teaching him new facts. He felt this whole atmosphere, this transference of knowledge and continuity lore, was really cool and exciting. These behaviors fall well within the idea of being a "Keeper of the Flame," as marvel calls those who promote their comics.

This sort of genuine enthusiasm is an important trait of the fan because this feeling genuine enthusiasm is not only an initial characteristic that separates the fan from the mainstream American culture but it is also a shared passion and exciting experience. Continuously, enculturating a prospect reader into the comic book community and helping them develop an appreciation of comics fulfills that duty of the seasoned fan to spread a love of comics book as a medium, after all, we've seen how, historically, the birth of the fandom relied on the support of older and enthusiastic fans who wanted to reach out the other readers.

The Underdog Narrative

The underdog narrative is specifically related to the stigmatization of comic book readers in American society. Despite the increase in the broad popularity of comics books in contemporary American society, the Comic Book Community has traditionally been associated with negative stereotypes of a marginalized community. The stigma portrays the comic book fan as a very nerdy, bookish, frail (or without an ideal or attractive body) Caucasian male who hasn't grown out of childish things such as comic books. Therefore, they are also immature in other aspects of development into independent adulthood. When a fan reads comics during their adulthood, the behavior "is somehow seen as a sign of psychological maladjustment or arrested development" (Pustz 208-209). This notion

that a comic book fan has development and independence issues has been reiterated since one of the first studies of comics in the 1940s by Katherine M. Wolf and Marjorie Fiske (Pustz 33). Wolf and Fiske concluded that comics, in moderation, can be healthy for a child. However, once that child is addicted to comics as a fan then their reading behavior becomes an indication of neediness. According to Wolf and Fiske, the rationale for being a fanatic of the superhero genre was the need for a god-like figure to help the child cope with their own physical inability (Pustz 33-34). Such studies perhaps pushed a form of social of stigma related to immaturity upon the community that continue to have long term historical repercussions on fandom's identity.

We can see continuations of such conclusions fleshed out in modern day examples of the comic book fan stereotype and how the mainstream imagery of the culture is also really engendered. Consider how Duncan and Smith invoked "comic book guy" from the popular TV show *The Simpsons* in order to demonstrate a caricature of a comic book fan as overweight, antisocial and a bit arrogant with his knowledge of fantastical worlds (Duncan and Smith 174). *The Big Bang Theory* is another more recent example. The show has been the subject of much controversy over how the lead male characters, all scientists and huge comic book fans, are portrayed. Marlene, the personality behind the blog and YouTube channel ILikeComicsToo, brought up this show when asked about stigmas that might keep female readers away. Although Marlene admitted she thinks the show is occasionally funny (as do I), she recognized the protagonists as exaggerated caricatures of comic book fans:

> I'm not gonna lie, I think Big Bang theory is super funny at times. I know people hate it to death and I'm like-I mean that's fine you don't have to like it. I think *it is* a little damaging in a sense that it does reinforce...um..the stigma of- [imitating a viewer] 'oh comic book fans must be like these pseudo-autistic like, uh..no life

> nerds who are all scientists and don't know how to interact with women and they all have these weird social issues. That must be what a comic book fans like and they go to these comic book shops and talk with each other and hide from real life'.[20]

One could argue the TV show just presents general stereotypes of the nerd, but delving deeper into *Big Bang Theory,* the treatment of comic book fans becomes complicated. Although all of the main cast members are presented as traditionally nerdy (with the exception of the character Penny, both male and female leads are all passionate scientists and wear 'nerdy' clothing such as thick glasses or mismatched conservative clothes) only the male cast are depicted as being interested in any fan culture and are chastised for doing so by their female counterparts. Marlene identified this discrepancy in the TV Show. Even though The Big Bang Theory has represented women in science ("some of the women in that show are smarter than the main characters that are men"), Marlene feels that the female comic book reader is nonexistent: "the women are also like super smart or whatever but they can't read comic books because they're chicks so there's no way they can like that stuff." By depicting female characters in this manner, the writers are simultaneously securing negative stigmas about comic book readers and engendering the comic book fandom as a male only community to their many viewers.

These negative depictions have impacted the community in their identity and most certainly in their solidarity in shared experiences of everything from contempt to disdain from society. Within the first few pages of his book, Scott McCloud remembers his childhood attempts to trump the stereotypes of comics by explaining the medium's potential to friends, but how it only ever ended in frustration (Scott). After childhood, various readers have recalled having their comic books thrown out by significant others

[20] Skype video interview with Marlene of *ilikecomicstoo.com*, 1/5/2015,

and family members throughout different developmental stages of their lives. This narrative is common enough for Youtube Commenter vaffangool to joke about it: "In defense of the anecdotal *mother-who-threw-out-the-comic-book-collection*, it is thanks to her attic cleaning super powers that collectability is become a legitimate function of rarity." Perhaps this is due to the fact that this contempt for comics seems to intensify as the reader reaches adulthood, and then when adulthood is actually reached, comics are expected to be rejected altogether as something immature.

Other extensions of the culture, either in behavior or other merchandise, are also marked as adolescent. Rocco Versaci, Author of *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature*, jokes about the series of action figures in his office (Galactus, Silver Surfer, and The Thing) and how the presence of these giant action figures perched upon his filing cabinet makes it difficult to wave off the association of immaturity with comics—especially to the members of the academic community who stop by (Versaci 2). In his extensive account of comic book history, Wright identifies this "lack of respect" by retailers and distributors as one of the contributors to the industries financial difficulties, particularly in the 1970s (255). Clearly it is not, and historically has not, been very favorable to admit a love for comics as an adult in America. This perhaps help explain why marginalized groups and comic book readers feel some how kindred; something about this underdog narrative resonates with comic book readers, having probably gone through similar alienating experiences themselves.

While the shared experience itself isn't virtuous (though perhaps a bit more like a collective struggle which is respectable to have had), aligning oneself with the underdog (and by extension aligning with a shared narrative of the comic book community) means

you are supporting the perceived marginalized, and in a sense, protecting the weak. They were, at a fundamental level, outsiders and underdogs and for a long time they served as guardians and gatekeepers of fandom. The experience of marginalization within this original comic book fan community, often presented as the antithesis of traditional well-adjusted American male adulthood, have made comic book readers ultimately more inclined to accept these new, emergent voices in their community when these voices also shared a marginalized narrative. Indeed, this experience of many comic book readers, even the traditional white male community, is one that is echoed by the heroes they read about.[21]

The less inclusive response that comes from this underdog narrative is a sense of duty behind certain attitudes of the comic book community, particularly in protecting the community from harmful elements such as commercialism, censorship, or slander. Much of this precaution could be attributed to the history of stigmatization and controversy that the community has undergone and perhaps it would not be amiss to consider the cohesive comrade is of the community as a result of the outsider status of the comic book fan. That being said, it is clear that this call to defend this community is also very much apart of the fan identity, and many times the stigma of the fan or moral panic leading to the comics code is almost treated like an origin myth. Such is demonstrated in the essay by Jon Judy and Brad Palmer *Facing Front True Believers: Panels as Exercises in Image Management* in which the experience of presenting a particular research finding was not

[21] One particular example that comes to mind is a video from the Youtube Channel 2brokegeeks over a Batgirl Controversy. In the video titled Geek Rant: Batgirl Cover Youtuber Omar states, "We're comic book fans. We're supposed to be the best. Not perfect, but the best. because we believe in heros. We believe in good" (2brokegeeks). Many times these heros who champion good and protect the week also have origin stories that harken to similar underdog narrative which make them even more appealing to readers. Indeed, one informant in my survey had cited the relatability of Superman. Even though Superman is 'the man of steel,' he is also the ultimate alien immigrant as well as a small town farmboy with humble beginnings.

well received at a panel. One of the authors presented on his findings at an academic conference: that the influence of the infamous and often demonized Dr. Fredric Wertham was not (according to the scope of consulted newspapers and headlines during 1930-1950s) as influential in the anti-comics movement as the comic book community makes him out to be. Continuously, the research also indicated that the national scope of the anti-comic book movement was and has been exaggerated by scholars. Unintentionally, the author had tapped into something by accidentally breaking fandom conduct:

> For the rest of the conference, the author received a decidedly frozen shoulder from his fellow attendees. What had happened did not immediately make sense to the author, but in the ensuing years he has put together a narrative to explain it. It seemed (based on interactions at scholarly conferences such as those held by the Popular Conference Association and the National Communication Association) that most comic scholars were, like the author, fans at one time. [...] In other words, one can see their scholarly presentations as what symbolic convergence theorists would call fantasy themes: stories members of a group tell each other in order to define themselves and to pressure members into behaving according to group norms (Bormann, Cragan, and Shields, 2001). The authors has violated the norms of the culture by daring to suggest that Wertham's role as our hobby's boogeyman was an exaggerated one, and so he had earned disdain of one of the conference's most prominent names and, consequently conference attendees in general (Bolling and Smith 93).

As Bolling and Smith convey in their essay, more was going on here then a concern over accuracy of research. Hating Wertham was an important part of the communities history, he was the villain. Being the underdog in a national censorship campaign was also very much apart of the community's history. They had been wronged by overzealous and paranoid groups who had attacked the validity of the comic book community, and therefore to take sides with these enemies, or even downplay the atrocities, was aligning yourself with that camp.

This feeling of duty to protect the community doesn't just apply to people outside the comic book culture. For instance, if a creator seems to make choices about a character

that a fan has strong feelings about, it becomes a personal matter that invokes a defense against disingenuous development. As Pustz acknowledged, "Many fans take events in their favorite titles--and in the industry as a whole--very seriously. If they perceive characters as being misused or misrepresented, fans often become angry and will not hesitate to share these feeling with creators [....] fans feel a sense of ownership and hence become very angry when they see professionals and publishers destroying "their" hobby or running "their" favorite characters. For some fans, this intensity evolves into a sense of obligation to defend the medium.industry hobby against those threatening it or attempting to promote it among non-readers" (71). While I do not doubt there are fans who hold general contempt over getting non readers interested in comics, my interview and narrative based ethnodata (as we saw in the previous section) would implied otherwise. Two recent changes in two popular characters exemplifies that discourse cited concern over character protection and genuineness as a priority over just promoting comics to non readers for the sake of expanding fanbase. In the summer of 2014, Marvel announced that Thor would be a female and that the African American Falcon would take up the mantle as the new Captain America. Naturally, these changes were met with a lot of controversy. When the topic came up in my interviews, readers generally stated comments than can be summed to this effect: 1) they shouldn't change the characters because that's who these characters are, 2) this is all just a marketing scheme, not an actual exercise in diversity, and 3) these transitions make no sense.[22]

From the outside these excuses could seem questionable, but because they critique the genuineness of these motivations, this discourse is tinted with a sense of duty to

[22] One staff member from Dewey's (John) actually talked about how he was unsure how they would pull this off while keeping to continuity, but he also was interested to see how they would explain female Thor still being called Thor. His curiosity and concern over continuity took precedent to Thor being female.

defend aspects of the fandom's virtues. These older fans feel that they have seen it all, and therefore expect a sort of corporate catch which only serves the marvel to make fast money instead of being accountable for rich and quality content. These gimmicks are a trap to the new fan and an offense of intelligence to the old. Even so, It is unfortunate when such actions inadvertently fuel exclusions of minority fans or perpetuate more stigma.

Discourse in Reader and Creator Proximity

There has been a long tradition in the comic book community surrounding forums for discussion about comic books and talking about comic book is one of the bigger components that makeup comic book culture. In fact, talking about comic books almost follows a ritualistic practice among comic book shop regulars. It could be considered a sort of greeting or a signal to instigate longer conversation about comics, a conversation that regulars know would not be entertained or even accepted outside of a location that houses the comic book community. "This dialogue takes place in comic book letter columns, in fanzines, on the internet, at comic book conventions, and even some academic conferences" (Duncan smith 173).

It's important to note that conversations or comments of comic books can also trump regular American social norms, especially in comic book culture locations like stores or conventions. Rarely is it acceptable to butt into a conversation in earshot, but it is not uncommon for someone who is standing by to jump in a conversation about comics in a store. Not unlike a secret codeword, if a superhero, artists, title, event or writer is name dropped, it tends to be a welcome for anyone in earshot to mention any knowledge or opinions they have on the subject. This is because comic books have become a

common ground for starting conversation. Perhaps even more so than other mundane common ground such as shopping at the same store, or noticing someone likes the same beverage that you do. In fact, I asked a Dewey's Staff member and a few straggling customers what's the difference between talking about comic books, and talking about coffee? John took a few minutes to think, and finally responded:

> John: Nobody is personally invested in coffee. Comics… comics are… when you're really into it, the characters are people. They're people you know and you're going through these stories with them, you're going through their lives with them.
> Customer: I can very much agree with that, if you connect with the character you want to find out where they're going.
> John: I mean, a cup of coffee is a cup of coffee. So the reason people congregate at places where there are comics and talk about comics, it's because it's a thing that you all do. You're all talking about a person that you know and the thing that affects you on whatever level that it affects you.. whereas coffee, I mean again, I don't know how to say it.... it's just coffee. It's a liquid that you drink. I mean, okay sure maybe you like hazelnut more than you like the vanilla but it;s still just coffee. You don't have…
> Customer: ..a personal investment and follow the story of coffee
> John: Right, you're not showing up saying 'did they put the vanilla on for a minute longer than they normally do so it's a little hotter?'[23]

Current representation negotiations are really propelled by the cultural expectation of conversation between the fans and creators. As we have reviewed in the brief beginnings of fandom section, discourse is an extremely important aspect of participating in comic book culture. It is what motivates fans to seek each other out or locate cultural spaces where they can participate in dialogue; remember Duncan and Smith's definition of a fan: "someone who wants to take part in the dialogue about the medium." What is even more holy than fan discussion is the assumed flowing discourse between comic creators and their fans over created content. What is it about comic book culture that makes discourse between fan and creator so cherished? How did it even come to be? Duncan and Smith

[23] A recorded exchange from 1/16/15 at Dewey's

offer the possibility that "truthfully, many fans want to take part in the comic book industry, but for those who don't make it, thinking, talking, and writing about comics is the next best thing" (173). Perhaps this observation speaks to the importance of dialogue in between fans and creators because after all, "often it is hard to tell the difference between the fans and professionals" (Pustz 108). Indeed, if a professional is a fan, there is a chance they have taken the desire to discuss comic books with them into the industry. The soon-to-be professional students of the Kubert School admitted that our focus group did not feel too out of the ordinary, because they love getting together and talking comics in their free, though limited, time.

This idea of proximity between fan and creator seems even more organic when one considers how this relationship has historical roots, one part from advertising campaigns and one part in idealistic practice. One of the most notable examples is the efforts of Stan Lee during the early Marvel period which Duncan and Smith term "Marvel Mania." Lee contributed to marketing in many ways for Marvel, the built relationship between the readership and his persona as an interactive entity was definitely a profound one. To demonstrate this steady building of a fan/creator relationship, Duncan and Smith highlighted a few moments in Marvel history where Stan Lee found ways to interact with fans. These moments included an added letter column in Fantastic Four #3 where fans were prompted to write to "Dear Stan and Jack" instead of "that Editor' Jazz," Fantastic Four #11 released with a bonus story that was requested by fans, and minor insider jokes such as changing the credits from Stan Lee and Steve Ditko to "Smiling Stan Lee" and "Swinging Steve Ditko" on Spider-Man #10 (180-181). These almost fourth-wall moments and insider jokes made fans feel like they had a relationship with

the creator and, of course, the perpetuated this relationship. DC, whose Julius Schwartz was credited with initiating the first letter page and later added fans addresses to facilitate connections (Brooker 62-63). Networking fans was one feat, but he also found a way to connect his comic book more closely with the fanbase as equals. In his comics, he promoted fanzines and in response his team was regularly awarded prizes or received a lot of positive acknowledgement (Brooker 64). Acknowledgement for fandom involvement still happens today. As we will see later in one case study, creators demonstrating an egalitarian relationship with fans through social media even when they make a mistake, will be met with a lot of praise from the community.

Disagreeing with the popular belief that there is a close proximity between creators and fans, Christian Sager argues this relationship is exaggerated in his essay *Tense Proximities Between CCI's Comic Book Consumers, Fans, and Creators*. Sager outlines three observed examples during the 2008 CCI where he notices strains in expected camaraderie between these seemingly close community groups. In his first example, Sager confirms Pustz's more pragmatic argument for why such accessibility (at least at conventions) exists: there are fewer fans to compete with for creator time or attention. Comics are such a niche medium and fandom, it could be easier for a fan to interact with a comic artist instead of more notable and popular TV stars in nerdcore spaces like Comic Conventions (Sager 163). The second example seems to outline that specific tension between fan and creator. During a Dark Horse Comic's Panel hostility between one fan and a creator over the quantity of Hellboy comics being produced prompted some back up from fellow panelists. Sager observed that this "unity among panelists seemed to reflect the exclusivity of the comic book creator community" (165).

The third example details the anger of aspiring artists waiting in a long line to meet with a comic book editor. After a volunteer made a mistake with line organization, resulting in some of the new artists to lose their spot, most of the responses were explosive and hostile. Sager attributes this anger not necessarily to the mistake made with lines, but to the extra unmet expectation of close proximity between these aspiring artists and the exclusive group of seasoned creators. He concludes that the perpetuated proximity is mythic and causes tension between fans and creators when they actually interact at cons (167-168).

Even so, one could look to the continued existence of discourse between fans and creators outside conventions as proof of this proximity. Letter pages, particularly the continued pages in Marvel comics, are one example of demonstrated communication. These pages allow for fans to send in their thoughts to their favorite comic creators, and the creators in turn address questions or showcase unique comments. However, as Sager points out, these letters were picked and could "codify an identity for their fans, presenting the letters from those they wanted to best reflect their ideal consumer" (155). This was probably bad news for the minority fan, or any fan, which had problematic concerns or critiques that a creator has a hard time addressing. In other words, creators could have control over what they would respond too, and therefore had a level of control over what they would be held accountable for.

Sager may make a compelling point, but whether or not this virtue of maintaining proximity is fully practiced or not really necessary for fans to benefit from its expectation. I believe that even though there may be suspicion about the sincerity of close proximity of relationship and fan, the *expectation* that such a relationship and dialogue

exists is consistent and it is the level of accountability the fans can pressure creators into that is important. This is heightened with social media and technology, and the genuine proximity between fans and creators has increased, while the expectations remain the same. This has created a culture of accountability within the larger American culture as a whole but more so organically within the comic book community due to the historical expectation of a relationship between creator and fan.

Case Examples

Last section, I described some of the binding commonalities which contribute to formulate a comic book community 'geist.' I explained these binding commonalities in an organization of three thematic groups I call community virtues. In order to convey a sense of how these virtues move throughout the community history, and how they intertwine when used in fan discourse, I barely touched upon current conversions of diversity and changing representations. The following case studies illustrate dialogues about diversity where these virtues were first identified and support the possibility that the traditional, critical and discourse oriented culture of the comic book fan has been conducive to breeding discussions about representation and later results in a sort of change or acknowledgement for the minority fan. These discussions among fans has been aided by the use of social media and the historical, expected responsibility of major publisher creators to interact and account for the content in their comic books. Because of these traditions and the ethical pressure to adhere to them, when minority fans use social media and technology to negotiate their representations, the dialogue is more urgent and productive. The following outlines recent cases (occurred in 2014 to early April 2015) in which fans used social media to provoke discussions about minority representation with

creators and sometimes managed to make narrative or production changes. While historical context is always important to consider, and there is also the intuitive argument that technology has been pushing American culture to a more politically correct discourse as a whole, it would seem that in the comic book community this combination of discourse and critique sits well with the fanbase.

Historically, the comic book industry has not produced the best representations of minority characters. Some earlier gems include (I Jungle comics, chompie, etc). In his book *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the history of comic book heroines,* Mike Madrid writes about historical "types" of female heroines throughout the ages, such as The Debutantes, The Partners, and The Victory Girls. During his introduction, Madrid points out some of the more common setbacks for female superheroes: "one of the things I noticed is that female superheros are often not allowed to reach their potential; they are given powers that are weaker than their male compatriots, and positions of lesser importance....any power these women have is often overshadowed by their overly sexualized images" (Madrid vi). These representations have continue to be contested to this day. Particularly with social media, fans can make more direct complaints with creators and publishing houses. They can uphold the representations they feel do justice, and correct the representations that fail to meet the minority groups standards. Intuitively, an non comic book reader may feel that with such a historical denial of female readers, and lack of attention to other minority readers in the past, that having egalitarian communication between creators and fans would not be a possibility. However, the traditional expectation of creators and publishers to maintain an

active relationship with fans helps propel these conversations about representation, and we shall see that negotiations between popular comic creators and fans are taking place.

"What Girl Can I Be?"

The virtue of the genuine fan to promote diversity involves something that seems morally contradictory in pious American society: merchandise. Whether on purpose or not, females tend to be stuck with minimal amount of choices, poor product design of female specific items, or even the blatant exclusion in games and apparel.[24] This is unfortunately a significant statement within the comic book industry. Merchandising in comic book culture is a pretty important aspect of the community and fan identity. At its most meaningful, symbols on merchandise can be a way fans find each other or sometimes even act as a declaration of belonging of the community. After talking about how fans can sometimes feel a "weird sense of owning" one Kubert Student, Varga, admitted feeling a frustration with non-fans wearing T-shirts:

> A lot of times, when I see people wearing clothes, especially when they just get them from the big stores and they just have a shitty Marvel character on them or something or just Batman I feel like, you're not really entitled to wear the t shirt. Like you're not a big enough fan. You know how a lot of times people just buy something because it looks cool and they don't know the meaning behind it? We know every single story, we know every continuity that there is, so it means a lot more to us. [25]

Not only is this insight layered with information on how important being 'genuine' is to readers, but this connection between a virtue and purchasing, owning, or wearing

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[24] Marlene, and the Kubert School Group all had mentioned lack of t-shirt options for women. Sometimes found it mildly, annoying, one Kubert Student said it was getting better. Marlene pointed out the existence and growth of *HerUniverse*, a nerdcore themed online clothing store and *Red Bubble* a fan made t-shirt making website, as examples of the market the Comic Book industry is missing out on,

[25] Varga, Kubert School Focus Group, 1/23/2015

symbols can help us understand the significance of what it means to not have more options of merchandise for women in the comic book industry. In a passionate conversation about toy figures, staff member John from Dewey's pointed out: "The merchandising is a huge, huge part of it. If nobody thinks...if you can't convince the people in charge of the money that there's a market for it, you know if there's no precedent for there to be a market for it… they're not really going to take a chance on it. Which is why, you know, anything with Batman on it? Yes, let's do it." What John was getting at with this comment was meant to explain how select merchandising was really a general industry money making initiative, but this comment also hits the core to why items for females are not produced as much. John is explaining that at the end of the day, merchandise is really motivated by money, and when this idea is applied to women being left out of marketing and merchandise, it is reflective of what the community thinks about women fans: nonexistent or not interested. Since superhero items are more geared to males, the already gendered stereotype of the basic comic book fan becomes more apparent.

In September 2014, a wonderfully written blog post by Peter V. Brett was circulating within the comic community and put DC on the defensive for a big merchandise oversight. Brett and his young daughter, Cassie, both love superheroes. Brett describes in his post how Cassie admires heroines like Wonder Woman, Hawkgirl and Batgirl. She even regularly makes costumes to dress up like them. When they receive a Justice League of America board game as a gift, Brett is initially suspicious but hopes that the game turns out to be inclusive and aids in family bonding. Instead, he recalls the experience of discovering that there were no female superheroes in the game:

> But sure enough, we opened up the game to find four player heroes to choose from, and at least two dozen villains, and not a female in sight. "What girl can I be?" Cassie asked, digging through the game pieces. "I don't think there are any girls, sweetie," I said, anger building in me. Cause really, DC & Wonderforge? WTF? You know it's 2014, right? Cassie put down the game pieces. "I don't want to play this, then." She turned and moved to leave the room, and it broke my heart. In part for her, and in part because I love superheroes, and this should be something we can share (Brett, 'Y Axis')

Brett is basing this account in morality. It is not about buying and selling an item and customer dissatisfaction. It is about an industry choice which violated the very virtues meant to be perpetuated by comic book theme of the game. Brett's opening reminds us that Cassie is a fan, maybe young and unknowledgeable, but her behaviors are virtuous because they are out of a genuine love and interest for her heroes. When Brett writes "Cassie put down the game pieces" he doesn't need adjectives to help explain to us that Cassie let go of the game because she is an uninterested female, or a easily distracted child. It is because she sensed she was not welcome to play, and this exclusion translates to rejection. A passing of the fandom flame, a spirit supported by these very virtues is snuffed out. The post went viral, in part because of a reposting through the website *TheMarySue*, and according to Brett in a followup post: "In the time since, the story has collected a few hundred comments, and seen wide support and signal boost. The issues I have trying to keep my daughter comfortable in the genre community clearly resonated with countless other parents in the geek realms" (Brett, 'Y Axis Update: Wonder Forge Responds'). The comments section on the original blog post was filled with agreement and support by blog followers stressing the importance of protecting the interests of genuine fans and inclusion of the marginalized female fan (here extending to the underdog narrative). It took only a few weeks for Wonderfordge responded with an apology to Brett:

> First off, let me just say that we screwed up, and everyone here knows it. It's an internal regret for our team that we did not include female superheroes in the game. And it's a personal regret because so many of us are parents of daughters, who understand firsthand the importance of developing playthings that are inclusive and convey to girls a sense that they can do or be anything. I myself am a mom of 3- and 4-year-old girls and I share your views 100%. In any case, I wanted to let you know that as a company we really learned the lesson. For our next game, DC Super Friends Matching, we included 3 female super heroes: Wonder Woman, Batgirl, and Hawkgirl. This game is a better example of our work. (I'd love to send you a copy if you think your daughter might enjoy it.) If we ever do another run of the Axis game, we will revise it to include female characters. I appreciate that you called us on this and held us accountable. I have shared your post with our product development team, as well as our licensing and senior management teams. It has inspired good internal dialogue on the subject and a renewed commitment to featuring female characters in our super hero games. Thanks for keeping us honest, and we hope that our future offerings will be more to your liking (qtd. in Brett, 'Y Axis Update: Wonder Forge Responds').

Wonderfordge made a good move, not because of a regular public relations moment (though of course that factors in) they were appreciative being critiqued, being held "accountable." Furthermore what's important is the "inspired internal dialogue" and the promise to learn from their mistakes.

Idiot Nerd Girl

On May 8th 2010 a user on Gaia Online Forums posted the "Idiot Nerd Girl" Meme. The meme is an unknown young girl in huge thick glasses with the word "Nerd" written on her hand. Some meme phrase examples include: "OMG Star Trek is so cool...I love Luke Skywalker!" and "Favorite Comic Book Character?...X-MAN." Originally, the image was used to make fun a girls who considered themselves nerds but had little knowledge or skill in fandom activities. The meme has been promoted through sites such as UpRoxx and Buzzfeed usually with a compilation of the best made memes. The

hilarity of the meme relies on the female nerd fumbling over Star Wars, Anime, Comics, and technology related mistakes; all of which demonstrates the 'Fake Nerd Girl' as an invader to all sorts of fandom subcommunities and outing herself out over the most basic mistakes ('idiot girl meme'). "Fake nerd girls" are accused of taking advantage of the supposed rareness of "hot nerd girls" by "pandering to nerds" through pretending to enjoy popular nerd culture. They are portrayed as females who either have an obvious lack of knowledge of a fandom or who appreciate fandom's that don't really hold a place in popular nerd culture. Because of this, Fake nerd girls are acting almost the acting antithesis of being genuine in their lack of interest, knowledge, and therefore authenticity.

A backlash to this meme occurred not long after it's popularity rose. The website Feminspire published the article "Nerd Girls are Real Nerds Too! (and Why This Meme Sucks)" in July 2012 and about a month later Rachel Edidin (an editor for Darkhorse comics) started to tweet idiot nerd girl memes with alternate messages ('idiot girl meme'). On August 29th 2012, Rachel Edidin wrote an editorial for Feminsphere in which she invokes the fandom virtues throughout her writing:

> "I hate it because it vilifies enthusiasm. I hate it because, as a member of the geek community and a geek-industry professional, and especially as a feminist geek, I nurture a deep and abiding dislike for gatekeepers" (Edidin).

Edidin is identifying herself and the female geek as the "pure of heart" genuine fan discussed earlier with credentials to boot. The valued belief for the community to be inclusive to all those who have a place in their hearts for comic books.

> "This is what I see when I look at the Idiot Nerd Girl meme: the colleague who sat on a panel with three men, a subsequent write up of which listed each of the guys by their professional qualifications and her as just "a good-looking gal"; the friend who was cornered by a group of guys in her comics shop who would not and could not believe she really liked comics even when she nailed every question of an impromptu quiz on superhero

> continuity [...] geek after geek who's been ostracized and humiliated for being the wrong gender or the wrong color or the wrong sexual orientation or too pretty or not pretty enough or otherwise failing to meet a narrow rubric designed to justify the insularity of a community that prides itself on being forward-thinking" (Edidin)

Here, the role of the Underdog, which the stigmatized fan should only be able to empathize with too well, is now being associated with idiot nerd girl and any minority community member. The choice to highlight the stories about panelist introduced without qualifications and the friend who was subjected to a quiz are powerful ones for a community that is aware of rank by experience and knowledge.

> "I know that a lot of self-identified–and more externally-identified–geeks and nerds are distrustful of outsiders, and that that mistrust is often grounded in an early personal history of harassment and marginalization. I know this because they're my friends and lovers and colleagues, and because it's my history, too. Like many of my peers, I looked to the geek community as a safe haven, and by hook, crook, and happy accident, I was lucky enough to land in a corner of it that truly was." (Edidin)

Edidin outright places herself as the genuine fan with the same story. She exhibits insider knowledge of the fandom's duty to defend the community from slander, contempt, or disrespect, but assures the readers that she is 'Nerd Girl,' and not an outside danger. She is very much the practitioner of the fandom virtues and considers herself to be blessed to be a part of the community. Needless to say, her article was a powerful one. *Knowyourmeme.com* credits this article as a trajectory point in which the story was covered by several other websites not long after (Bust's Magazine blog, the Atlantic, the Daily Dot, SkepChick are just a few) ('idotnerdgirl'). The reappropriation of the meme (or anti meme as the web site The Mary Sue called it) stuck after Edidin "decided to take back idiot nerd girl meme" and soon the new idiot nerd girl became more popular in posts and Tumblr notes with new memes generated by fans (Edidin).

In the example to follow, consider the differences between two presented critiques of the comic book shop space and how fans reacted to how creators handled their critiques. The discourse around female fans and their experiences in the comic book shop is varied, but when examined with community values in mind, a pattern emerges between what critiques of the comic shop are accepted and which critiques are rejected. Female fans have been working to explain to the general community that what could be mistaken for female absence in the comic book shops could really be a reflection on how "female customers commonly become uncomfortable or feel unwelcome as a result of the gazes of male patrons who are surprised to see women in that setting" (Pustz 8). Unfortunately, this experience seems to be very typical, or at the very least, stereotyped. Trying to instigate humor and critique, a Buzzfeed video "If Geek Girls Acted Like Geek Guys" makes fun of a conversation between a female staff member and a male customer. The gist of the video is a genderswap of the typical things girls who walk into comic book stores may hear: "I'm so tired of the Fake Geek guys, they're just trying to impress us Real Nerd girls" "Who got you into comics? Your Mom? Your Sister?" "I see you're trying to get into things girls like so that they'll like you" "They don't make comic book movies starring men because men don't go to comic book movies." At the end the male customer declares "I just want to go to a comic book store once without getting hit on. Just once" (BuzzFeedYellow). Like all Youtube comments, of course there was debate and argument in the conversation below. AlexCalibur42 posted: "I feel like there should be a disclaimer on this video "This video was made by people who have never spent anytime in a comic book store Here's a hint, it's nothing like this. People are too busy browsing or actually talking about the comic books to do stupid shit like this. And if

someone's new, regardless of gender, people are always giving helpful input if they ask for it." Vivianne Champagne agreed "To be honest, if you're a legitimate "geek girl" then you don't face this very much. Most people you run into, if you both start talking about geek stuff and you have an honest passion for it along with good knowledge, then you most likely won't deal with dicks like that. And when you do, it's not because of sexism, it's because the guy is an asshole. That's it" (Champagne). In their defense of the store space, these individuals counter with their own experiences to dispel what they feel is a terrible representation of store culture, particularly Vivianne Champagne is using their authenticity as a 'legitimate fan' with 'honest passion' and 'good knowledge' to validate that authority. On the other hand, a few of the commenters felt this satire resonated. Karen Amorim responded recently (early February) to the video with this comment: "yeah, it's like that. i've been going to conventions and comic book stores for 8 years and is always the same. Even when i was fourteen." Not too long after, Zora Domain posted "holy crap this is so accurate that its painful." It was interesting to see more recent comments were occasionally brief confirmations from female fans that this experience is real before being lost in the comment stream of the video while more liked comments involved male fans trying to make sense of the video and other female fans legitimizing negative concerns about the video. Brad Leclerc whose following comment had 279 likes and 58 replies:

> "While I see the comedy in these sorts of things, it would be much MUCH more accurate, and less patronizing, to title them things like "If geek girls acted like fuckwit geek bros". Are there fucking annoying, chauvinistic, jackass geek man-babies out there who say/do things like this? Yes. Lots of them. FAR too many of them. However, conflating it to the broadest possible category of "geek guys" does not nothing but alienate people who would otherwise agree with the premise and want to join in the good fight towards equality and all that jazz. To brutally paraphrase... I just want to

> watch one of these "geek girls vs geek guys" style vids without feeling lumped into the same group as a bunch of asshats just because they share a couple of my hobbies... just once."

Bret Leclerc's comment seems to be an echo of most of the commentators who disliked the video. The language and themes that are being brought up involve a call to defend the male geek as underdog, the concern that the past stigma of the nerdy male comic fans is seeping out in this video and generalizing the marginalized male fan.

Simultaneously, ideas about being a "real" geek girl and being genuine are brought up. What these conversations (and the corresponding amount of likes) reflect is the sort of language and ideas the community is agreeing with on this video. and while the conversation may be a bit split down the middle, the more "valid" and agreed with arguments against the video invoked concerns about attacking the community by using a stigma (the "not all men" really being a big cry of "not all male fans") and claims to being genuine. The video was unsuccessful (or successful in terms of advertising views) because it concentrated on the negative behaviors of the male fan as a collective group, and did not make its main focus on the female fan as a genuine fan. Compare this to other attempts at explaining the female experience in a comic book shop where the female as a genuine fan and an underdog, just like the overall marginalized community, and we see different responses. Noelle Stevenson drew a comic posted on Tumblr that brought attention to the problem but cultivated a lot more support. Stevenson presents herself as a fan and creator "The first time I walked into a comic shop, it was because I published a comic.." she starts. Soon she describes experiences and her feelings of being pushed away throughout the strip. She doesn't put the men creating this environment into a group, but she does show how asking her if she wants my little pony, or looking at sexualized images of women in stores makes her feel: "It's not hard to figure out when

you're not welcome." Stevenson is demonstrating a value, the genuine fan (who is an underdog) without poking into the comic book community. In this manner, the loyalty to defend the community moves from pushing out the misunderstanding outsider is not invoked in the larger community sentiment. According to *comicsbeat.com*, the post got 50,000 shares in 11 hours, and as of March 2014 the comic strip had 84,097 likes. It is important to note the fans on Tumblr and the fans who watch Youtube videos will absolutely vary in demographic, and it is true that even here comments had defensive language or called Stevenson out for not defending herself, but some of the comments are telling about why this particular critique of comics culture was acceptable to them. Bure Burebure wrote about shops needing better customer service (a theme that was echoed in the comments a few times) but finishes with this: "Comics are a niche market as it is in the west, there's no need to keep even MORE people from reading them. I don't really care for a lot of the "social justice" stuff on tumblr but this is basic human decency 101. As a 20 year old male I really don't care who you are, anyone who wants to enjoy comics should be able to do so without a bunch of pretentious nerds doubting their "nerd cred"." The fan can get behind recognizing discrimination in the store, if the critique is angled to protect the genuine fan and include the underdog female as a friend of the underdog male nerd. However, if the critique is determined to be poking fun at the male fan stigma (and by extension the entire cultural community), then explaining these experiences become over run with concerns that the comic book community is being unfairly misjudged.

Bat Girl 37

Batgirl has been revamped. After a miraculous recovery from paralysis, Barbara "Babs" Gordon moves to the new hottest section of Gotham: Burnside. Burnside looks

and feels like the waterfront in Brooklyn NY, Babs has moved in with new cool roommates and she is about to attend a new graduate program. With her move, Babs has also changed costumes. No longer is a leotard and skintight outfit sturdy enough for Bat girl. She now wears a leather jacket, yellow Doc Martian look-a-likes, and is one of the more fully covered super heroines in her skinny jeans. The comic's aesthetic has also changed. Softer lines and pastels are more frequent in the series' pages. No doubt Batgirl's new look will bring in new audiences. And it did. Many female fans were enthusiastic over her launch and it was common knowledge that the title was meant for the younger millennial female demographic.[26] This generally collective feeling towards Batgirl remained until Batgirl's first major villain from Burnside was depicted controversially in Batgirl 37. The first arc of Batgirl follows along a mystery. The first several issues build up to the realization that someone has been impersonating Batgirl's identity. The culprit ends up being Dagger Type, a male wearing a golden bedazzled version of her outfit. Dagger Type throughout the rest of the book, behaves mentally ill, flamboyant, unstable, and delusional. Unsurprisingly, many readers felt the rendition was transphobic and transmisogynistic. Rachel Stevens from *Womenwriteaboutcomics.com* tried to explain the issue in her article *Disappointment Again: Batgirl #37 is Transphobic*:

> "Murderous or deceptive men disguising themselves as women has been a trope in fiction long before the creation of cinema, and it's shown up too many times to list or even count. The trope isn't even subverted here, which is the hell of it. *Batgirl* has been praised for being a breath of fresh air compared to the rest of DC's material, both visually and in its writing. It's been celebrated as feminist and gotten plenty of people interested in

[26] Even so, I know one of the older male staff members at Dewey's had been picking up the title and found it 'fun.' I would imagine there are possibly many more male readers also enjoying the series, Barbara Gordon has gone through many significant transitions from Batgirl to the alias Oracle, and then back to Batgirl.

> comics. The fact that it used a tired transphobic trope in the new creative team's third issue shows that it isn't nearly as groundbreaking as many hoped and believed" (Stevens)

Stevens end up attempting to explain to the readers how transgendered individuals have to walk around with this particular stigma that affects their identity and their personhood. She compares this experience of the visual idea in the comic book to other daily negative tropes of minority groups that are exhausting and painful. Explaining the hurt felt by readers through this underdog narrative hits home to one particular fan.

> "You know, I have a confession to make. I came to your website to read the full story after reading some excerpts on BleedingCool and although I did so hoping to find the reason why Batgirl #37 would be considered transphobic, I had already mostly made up my mind why I didn't think it was transphobic. It's wasn't until I read the sentence " If you understand the reasoning for being upset about those, and don't understand why a transgender woman would be sick and tired of "crazy," murderous deceivers pretending to be women in media, or other transphobia, I want you to ask yourself why." that the penny dropped for me" (Quint).

Interestingly enough, some readers also relied on lack of continuity to make a point about the representation being 'off." *Autostraddle.com*'s staff writer identified as Mey, mentioned the inconsistency in a character she really loved and admired. A level of care and ownership of protecting the integrity and growth of this character seeps in, and how much that growth or characteristic meant to Mey is ringing on different aspects of being a genuine fan:

> "If Barbara didn't know any trans people or have a shown history of being a great trans ally, this behavior might make sense (although it would still be offensive). However, that's the exact opposite of what the case is. [...]Barbara Gordon was one of the few characters I love who I didn't have to imagine as being trans positive. I knew she was. It was canon. Her roommate and one of her best friends was Alysia Yeoh, a queer trans woman of color like me. If you've read *Batgirl #19*, you know that Barbara reacts pretty much perfectly when Alysia comes out as trans to her. She reacts pretty much the opposite way she does in this comic, and it's one of the best moments in all of comics in the past five years. While

> she does seem a bit surprised at first, she immediately segues that into a hug and an "I love you." So in *Batgirl #37*, we see Barbara turned from an ally who had a great reaction to Alysia coming out into someone who sees someone else, who based on what she sees, is very likely a trans woman, and reacts with surprise and even disgust. What if this had happened between Alysia and Barbara before Alysia came out? Would Barbara have accidentally pulled off Alysia's wig (if she wore one) and shouted "you're a man!"? I really don't think so. That's not the Barbara Gordon we've come to know and love, and so this issue seems like a total betrayal of her character" (Mey).

In light of all this, creators Cameron Stewart, Brenden Fletcher, and Babs Tarr issued an apology after waiting out a few hours of disgruntled fans.[27] The response to their apology was general support, and fans kept discussing how much the apology between creators meant to them.[28] They were applauded for coming out and listening to the fans and responding to what the fans wanted. Monitoring some of the dialogue, Cameron Stewart also posted something in response to a general fan concern on the comments age of The Mary Sue article on the subject, which was meant to clarify a few following tweets after the announcement and what the creative team thought the response to the issue would be. Her comment is followed by many 'thanks' and validation that her and the team were doing the right thing.

This is a pretty interesting example of the interaction between fans and creators in the comic book community. We talked about how important discourse, accuracy, and accountability is to fans, and the pressure and expectation for the creators to honor this

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[27] The apology can be found at https://twitter.com/cameronmstewart/status/543886281399631872

[28] Reply tweets following cover mostly show appreciation for apologizing. Joseph Siegel (East Side Mags Staff) had mentioned that he thought it was a good thing the creators apologized because they should care about their particular reader fan base. Likewise, David Bowez (Time Warp) had commented that it was to be expected when you target a particular audience that is more in tune with specific representation issues, and so they should have been aware of their readers. Both comments spoke to that dual ownership of the genuine reader and creator. It was these fans right to voice their opinions (even if they were new concerns not normally brought up in the traditional community) and it was good of the creator to openly respond. It is also interesting that when I came across a few informants about the controversy, they outright admitted they haven't read the issue yet and wanted to go into it seeing for themselves. There didn't seem to be excess symbolism tied to the culture around this controversy the way Batgirl # 41 variant issue was.

level of discourse-genuine or not. Content, accuracy, and continuity critiques around minority representation are not too far of stretch from other sorts of content, accuracy, and continuity critiques.

Conclusion

Our society is starting to put a spotlight on representation. It is not always difficult to recognize when a minority group is presented in a harmful, hurtful, or systemically enforcing manner. But to consistently have real, meaningful dialogue that results in direct change is a whole other victory. Whether it is making people aware of the different circumstances of the minority experience or literally rejecting a harmful representation or changing an alienating product, the comic book community seems to be openly discussing these issues amongst themselves and actively responding to (or sometimes against) each other. In hindsight, perhaps it is the efficiency and direct changes that happen between community and industry that make the whole matter impressive. Even so, I believe that the comprehension of historically intrinsic, core virtues have been a guiding force into the present discourse occurring in the community. These virtues, which I identified as common themes and cultural domains, are not only binding idealisms, sensibilities, and inclinations, that have historically facilitated the 'geist' of the comic book community, and now they are consistently present in current diversity discourse.

This is not to champion the comic book community as a hyper progressive construction producing clear moral judgments. Instead, it is the beginning foundation of the answer to our question: how is a community stereotypically known to be white, straight male, and exclusive, having these types of diversity conversations which are resulting in negotiations and ultimately a degree of direct change? I believe the answer lies in understanding these virtues which help construct the reality and identity of the comic book reader and how this reality and identity fits the marginalized, genuine,

outspoken ‘non-white-straight male’ reader too well. In other words, by viewing themselves as a community from a historically marginalized place and by having virtues and identities that value ‘being genuine’ (or participatory) around comic books over physicality, means the shape of the comic book community is malleable to include other marginalized movements.

From here, the road of inquiry splits into many directions. These themes remain consistently present, and although I may have identified them through looking at diversity discourse, these virtues play into other aspects of the fandom. With an awareness of how these virtues are invoked, they can bring more insight into other neglected topics such as a deeper understanding around treatment of female and other minority readers. What is also compelling, and almost derailed my original investigation, are how these virtues help us understand other layers of the diversity conversation when the tone of debate deviated to another agitated tone. Some conversations inspired aggressive conflict; a defensive righteousness took a stronger precedent over discourse or inclusion and conversations deviated from what was normally observed. One footnoted example included a controversy around two pulled comic book cover variants (Spider Woman # 1and Batgirl #47) started a lot of back and forth between readers on Twitter. But even in moments where aggressive tension is present and the disagreement seems to be about a grander struggle over community power, and not actually over Spiderwoman’s sexualized pose, these virtues are still being invoked in the conversation and a few more steps in investigation reveal that aggressors from both ends believe they are acting in the interest of these virtues. Where we, as outsiders, may see internal conflict, the community may not see it as internal but as typical outsider invasion. Particular interactions such as

these and others like them have more elements in the conflict than the examples I gave earlier and need to be handled with more care. However, separating controversial debates lightly mentioned here from the ones I outlined in my thesis is important, because picking out these moral nuances which make both conversations so different in character is the only possible way to understand the core reasons for conflict as considered by the actors. This is why this virtue and moral 'lay of the land' was important; in order to comprehend the layers around the conflict it was necessary to have a deeper understanding of cultural sensibilities.

In the grander scheme, studying the influence of cultural and historical ideas and how they move across time to affect our moral inclinations in the present day is exciting. It would be interesting to see the implications of applying a self-aware understanding of historically binding values to public policy or international relations. It would seem that a collective cultural sense that determines what is moral righteousness or ethical priorities may be rooted in deep histories that can steer shared cultural ideas and beliefs into specific idealisms, creating different cultural environments, or at least in subcultures. It would be really fascinating to do a comparison between the comic book community and the gaming community (which, after the #gamergate 'movement' is infamously considered to be a very sexist culture) and find the nuances between these communities that makes one look more inclusive and the other seemingly more reactionary. Even so, at the end of this thesis, the hope is that the non-comic book reader has gotten a sense of the ideas and inclinations within the Comic Book reading community, and therefore has a better empathetic understanding of this particularly interesting subculture.

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Appendix and Notes on Collected Data

About Being a Girl

Spring of my Sophomore year, Dewey's comic city (my self proclaimed "college store") was having a wonderful annual blowout sale. My friends had all abandoned me- choosing coffee over feverishly sorting through back issues of comics and I was in the middle of sifting through a sale box of dated X-Men. That's when I accidentally made eye contact with the stranger next to me, an elderly Caucasian gentleman with glasses.

"That's a pretty good series," he said, nodding to the comic I was flipped to in the box.

"Oh yeah? Maybe I'll check it out then" I responded, figuring he was trying to good naturedly point me onto a good read.

"So.. What's a girl like you doing in a comic book store anyway?" He asked me loudly.

Shamefully, I have to admit I didn't know how to respond. At first I was confused "to buy comics...?" I thought. Then his words sunk in and I knew that wasn't what he was asking. my cheeks got red as I realized other customers had heard, some glancing in my direction to see how I would respond. Luckily someone saw my distress.

"You could ask what I'm doing in a comic store...." said a girl across the table from us. Her voice got louder as she continued, "you could ask why I'm going to a comic arts school to be a comic artist." That's when Dan, the owner, strategically showed up.

"Lexi! How's your art going?" Dan loudly asked the girl Lexi who, in my mind, had saved the day.

"Really good..." She said as she started to fill him in on her latest school project.

Lexi and Dan, the shop owner, clearly had a good relationship and had known each other for a bit. The stranger either well intentioned or not- had disappeared. I wanted to thank Lexi, but she was now engaged in conversation with Dewey's owner. Slightly embarrassed, I just decided to leave the shop. I didn't know it at the time, but Lexi would be an informant that I would be referenced to twice by two different people for this research. Since that day, nothing that blatantly uncomfortable has happened again. When I first started laying out the blueprints for the best ways to collect data I was vaguely aware that my gender could be a problem. While my experiences with the community were very pleasant throughout my research, looking back it is difficult to see if there was a gendered factor in to how informants presented themselves and their opinions to me. This is something to consider and mull over when reading the accounts I have presented. It is unfortunate that I cannot offer more self-aware insight on the matter, but this antidote is a reminder that being ‘a girl’ was a possible factor, and some informants may have perceived me with a level of caution or suspicion when discussing issues around race and gender.

Math Woes and Page Limits

If there is one thing big thing I would say contributes to the weakness of this argument (besides time and page limits) would be my over enthusiastic ambition in creating the survey. If you have not yet flipped to the appendix section where my survey is laid out (minus the free lists prompts related to minority representation) you will notice it is an extremely overwhelming work. Sorting through this data to find themes was actually very useful, but the problem of citing 75 accounts is a hurdle I have yet found a solution to, more so in communicating and listing all the examples in a sane format in this thesis.

That being said, although I did my best to sort and work with demographic data on my in SPSS, I was not satisfied with the quality outputs I was producing, which is why this particular information is lacking in this version of this thesis. I do plan to publish these statistics on the website, and the finalized defense if allowed. Two Faculty members of the Drew community have generously agreed to meet with me in the weeks to follow to discuss and check over my work. Another problematic situation was the insane amount of ethnodata, in interviews, observations, focus groups, and online discourse, there was to sort. What is most disappointing to me is that the ethnodata and antidotal accounts I have fall very neatly into supporting this thesis, and yet there is no efficient way to cite them under as support without extending the length of this thesis and disrupting most of the communicative ease that comes with simpler writing.

Appendix A.

Consent Form for Focus Groups and/or Interview Participation

I understand that the research I am participating in seeks to explore themes of representation of minorities and the comic book readership. I understand that notes and audio recordings of what I say will be documented and may be included in the finalized research report.

I understand I have a right to be referred to as an alias in these transcripts. I understand I am a volunteer in this case study, and I have a right to withdraw my participation whenever I choose.

I understand if I have any questions or concerns, I can contact the primary investigator at MEWresearch@gmail.com

I understand I must be 18 years or older to participate in a focus group/interveiw OR have parent or legal guardian consent to participate in this research study.

By signing this form I acknowledge that I have read, understood, and agreed to the terms outlined in this form.

_____

Name of Participant (printed)

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

_____

Name of Parent or Legal Guardian if Participant is under the age of 18 (printed)

_____ _____

Signature of Parent or legal Guardian if Participant is under the age of 18 Date

Notes: Respondents who participated in longer, extended interviews were asked to complete this form.

Appendix B.

DREW UNIVERSITY

ALLAN C. DAWSON
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
CHAIR, INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
CHAIR, INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
PH: 973/408.3292
FAX: 973/679.2821

Sunday, June 15, 2014

Miho Watabe, Department of Anthropology

Dear Miho,

The Institutional Review Board has conducted an expedited review and approved your research entitled "Exploring the Relationship between Comicbook Readership and Minority Representations in Comicbook Media" with the following conditions:

NO CONDITIONS

The approval for your research protocol and the human participants' component of your work is valid through 15-June-2015. If you plan to continue this research past this date, you will need to reapply for IRB approval. If you make any modifications to your research, you will need to obtain IRB approval for those changes as well.

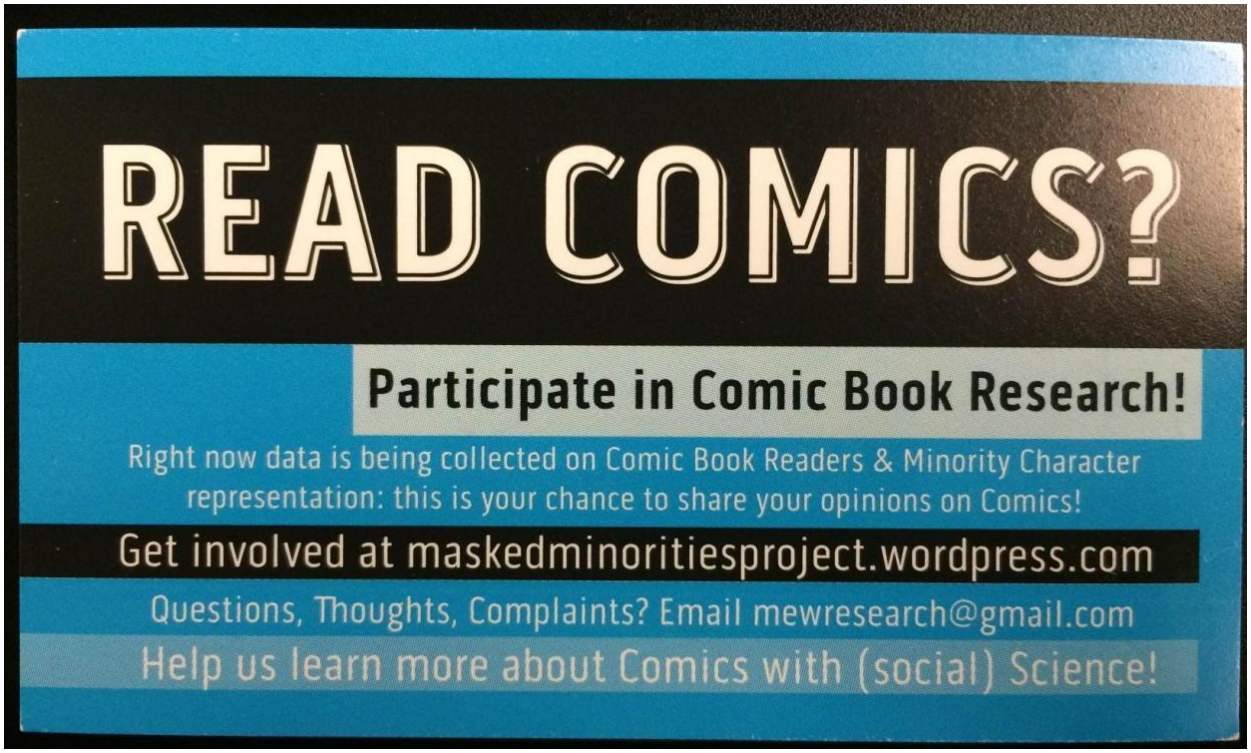
Sincerely,

Allan C. Dawson
adawson@drew.edu

36 Madison Avenue | Madison, New Jersey 07940 | 973.408.3000 | www.drew.edu

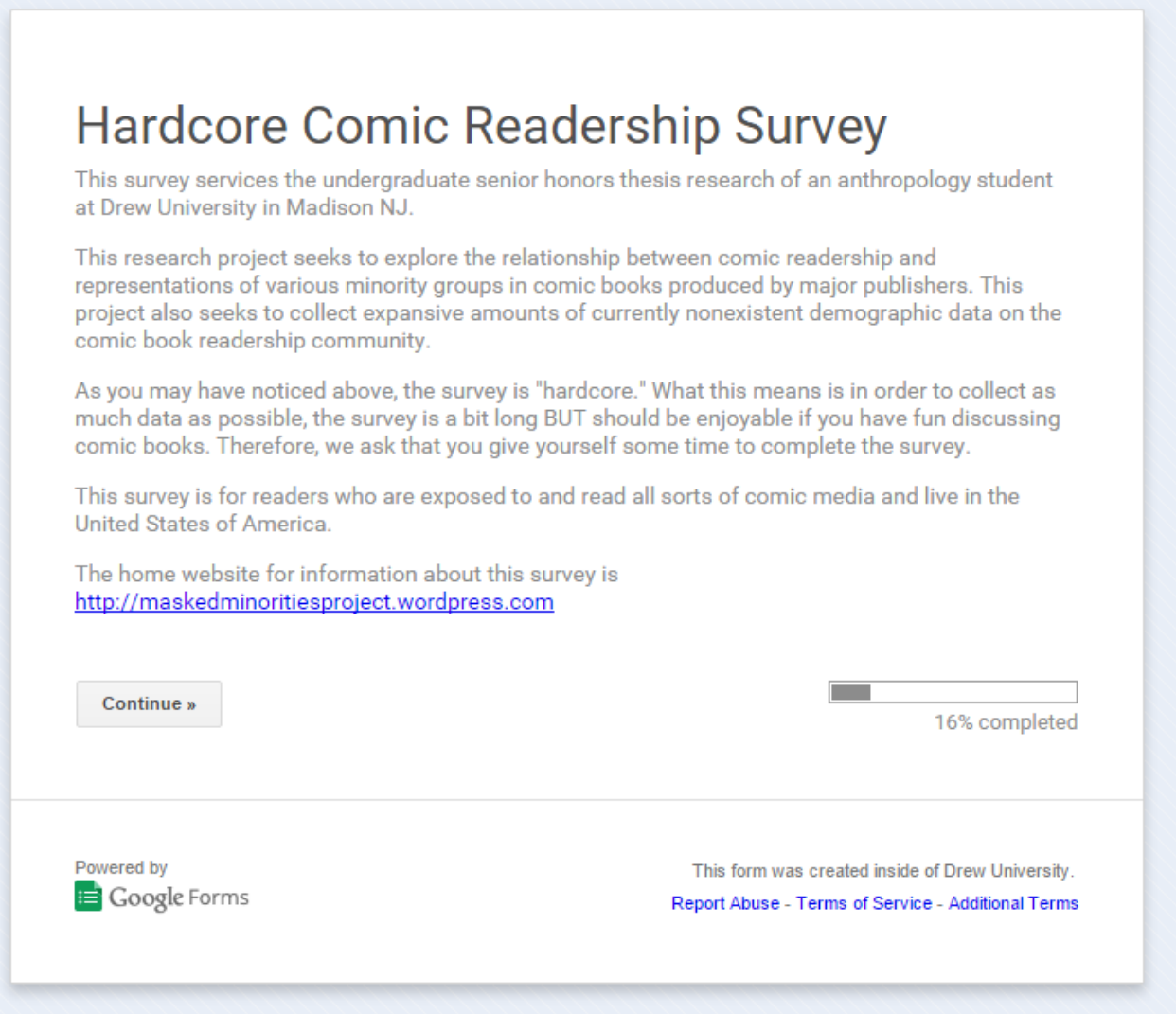
Notes: IRB Approval Letter for research. Valid until June 15, 2015.

Appendix C.



Note: Promotional cards handed out in various comic stores and at New York Comic Con.

Appendix D.



Note: Opening page to the comic book survey online through Google forms.

Appendix E.

Hardcore Comic Readership Survey

* Required

What and how you read

Please check off the comic publisher(s) that made the comics you have read in 2013-2014 and/or currently read: *

- ☐ MARVEL (Examples of Current titles include: Miss Marvel, Uncanny X-men, New Avengers, Ultimate Spiderman, Daredevil, Hawkeye, She-Hulk, Moon Knight, Deadpool)
- ☐ DC (Milestone and Vertigo included)- (Examples of current titles include: Swamp Thing, Batman, Superman, Hinterkind, Wonderwoman, Animal Man, Cat Woman, Aquaman, Justice League)
- ☐ IMAGE (Examples of Current titles include: Clone, Black Science, Saga, East of West, Morning Glories, Fatale, The Manhattan Projects, Sex Criminals, Chew)
- ☐ DARKHORSE (Examples of current titles include: Mind MGMT, Star Wars Legacy, Brain Boy, B.P.R.D ., Buffy the Vampire Slayer, X, Hellboy, Conan, Abe Sapien)
- ☐ IDW (Examples of current titles include: Judge Dredd, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Powerpuff Girls, Kill Shakespeare, Doctor Who, My Little Pony, The X Files, Locke and Key, Star Trek)
- ☐ Dynamite Entertainment- (Examples of current titles include: The Green Hornet, Red Sonja, Turok: Dinosaur Hunter, Kings Watch, Battle Star Galactica, The Shadow, Warlord of Mars, Twilight Zone)
- ☐ Boom! Studios- (Examples of current titles include: Adventure time with Finn and Jake, Day Men, Bravest Warriors, Soldier Zero, 28 Days Later, 3 Gun, CBGB, Clockwork Angels, Lumberjanes)
- ☐ Unsure
- ☐ Other:

Please roughly estimate how many titles/series form each publisher listed have you read from 2013-2014

	I do not read anything by this publisher.	No Idea, But I know I do read comics by this publisher	No Idea	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
DC	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Marvel	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Image	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Darkhorse	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
IDW	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dynamite Entertainment	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
BOOM! Studios	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix F.

What is your favorite on-going series or title(s) from the above publishers and why?
(the publishers are DC, Marvel, Image, Darkhorse, IDW, Dynamite Entertainment, and Boom! Studios)

What is your favortie all time series or title(s) from the above publishers and why
(the publishers are DC, Marvel, Image, Darkhorse, IDW, Dynamite Entertainment, and Boom! Studios)

Which comic book character(s) from the above publishers do you enjoy reading about most and why?
(the publishers are DC, Marvel, Image, Darkhorse, IDW, Dynamite Entertainment, and Boom! Studios)

Which comic book character(s) from the above publishers do you identify with the most and why?
If you feel like there are none you identify with, please state so. -(the publishers are DC, Marvel, Image, Darkhorse, IDW, Dynamite Entertainment, and Boom! Studios)

Are there any comic book characters or series that you want to mention that are not from the list of above publishers?
(the publishers are DC, Marvel, Image, Darkhorse, IDW, Dynamite Entertainment, and Boom! Studios)

Appendix G.

Representations in Comics

Do you feel well represented in comics? *

What idenity group(s) (ethnicity, social status, gender religion, profession etc.) do you feel are BEST represented in the comics you read? *

Can your give examples?

What idenity group(s) (ethnicity, social status, gender, religion, profession etc.) do you feel are NOT WELL represented in the comics you read? *

Can you give examples?

Is there anything you would like to comment on concerning how you relate to comic book characters?

Is there any thing you would like to comment on concerning general representations in Comic Books?

« Back Continue »

66% completed

Appendix H.

Demographic Data

Please Provide your Name
Please note that you have a right to be reffered to by a pseudonym or alias in the report and transcription of this project. We ask for your legal name for contact reasons only.

How would you like to be reffered to in transcripts and the final report of this project if necessary? *
This is the place to enter in a pseudonym or to let us know it's okay to refer to you as your legal name in the final research if needed.

What state do you currently reside in? *

What is your zipcode?
(optional)

What is your Gender? *

What year where you born in? *

What is your sexual orientation? *

If you identified as 'other' to the above question, please specify what 'other' is.
If not, please skip this question.

What is your ethnicity? *

Which of the following best describes your situation? *

How many people including yourself make up your household? *
.

What is the compleate income of your household? *

How would you describe your socioeconomic status/economic class? *

Which of the following best describes your situation? *

Appendix I.

Recorded Interviews

Date	Informant or Space	Location	Length
9/19/14	Jeff Beltran	Drew University Campus, Madison NJ	About 31 min.
12/23/14	Won Choi	DRIP Coffee, Madison NJ	About 1 hour and 40 min.
12/27/14	Dave's Office	Time Warp Comics and Games, Cedar Grove NJ	About 26 min.
1/5/15	Marlene (Ilikecomicstoo)	Skype Video Chat	About 1 hour and 15 min.
1/14/15	Check Out Counter	Dewey's Comic City, Madison NJ	About 44 min.
1/16/15	Check Out Counter	Dewey's Comic City, Madison NJ	About 1 hour and 22 min.
1/20/15	Alexia	DRIP Coffee, Madison NJ	About 1 hour and 41 min.
1/23/15	Check Out Counter	East Side Mags, Montclair NJ	About 12 min.
1/23/15	Kubert School Group	Student's Apartment Dover, NJ	About 1 hour and 18 min.

Appendix J.

Regular and Recorded Informants

Jeff Beck	Owner of East Side Mags in Montclair, NJ.
Alexia Veldhuisen	Kubert School Graduate.
Matt Weiss	Staff Member at Dewey's Comic City.
James Williamson	Customer
Won Choi	Frequent Convention and event goer,
Kevin Schwoebel	Known as "Big Kev." Host of /his own radio show, 'Big Kev's Geek Stuff.' http://bigkevsgeekstuff.com/wpress
John Bush	Staff Worker at Dewey's Comic City.
Gregory Kratky	Staff Worker at Time Warp.
Nicole Tipple	Staff Worker at Time Warp Comics.
David Bowez	Co-Owner of Time Warp Comics and Games.
Alyssa Duclos	Staff Member of Time Warp Comics
Vanessa Solis	Kubert School Student quinncicle.deviantart.com
Varga Tamas	Kubert School Student.
Aysegul Sinav	Kubert School Student. www.fictiondust.com
Josh Zingerman	Kubert School Student. www.joshzingerman.com
Joseph Siegel	Staff Worker at East Side Mags

List of regularly recorded and prompted Informants, in focus groups or individual interviews.