INK AND INTERACTION: ANALYZING THE AUDIENCE HISTORY IN THE PRINTED LETTERS OF 1980s COMICS

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ABSTRACT

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Comic studies, an interdisciplinary field encompassing history, anthropology, and literature studies, has witnessed significant growth. However, despite its evolution, a notable gap exists in the analysis of comic fan letters, a key aspect of understanding the readership and the dynamic between creators and consumers. This dissertation explores the limited existing works in this area, such as Jeffrey A. Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* and John A. Walsh et al.'s chapter on fan mail analysis from "Empirical Comics Research." While these works offer insights, they merely scratch the surface of this emerging aspect of comic studies.

The proposed research aims to fill this gap by focusing on fan letters printed in four selected comic-book series from the 1980s: *The New Teen Titans*, *The Uncanny X-Men*, *Love and Rockets*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. These series, representing mainstream, self-published, and alternative genres, provide a diverse backdrop for studying reader reactions. Analyzing printed letters allows a glimpse into the social relationships and interactions between readers and creators, shedding light on the social and audience history of comics during this crucial period.

The methodology combines qualitative and quantitative approaches, using both contextual analysis of letters and statistical examination of gender ratios. Inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's social distinction theory, the study aims to explore potential differences

in concerns and interactions between mainstream and indie comic-book readers. By leveraging Bourdieu's framework, the research seeks to unravel the complexities of cultural consumption within the comic-book audience, going beyond conventional sales statistics.

The dissertation structure, akin to Jonathan Rose's audience-focused approach in *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, dedicates separate chapters to each comic series. These chapters contextualize the series, delve into publication history, and highlight creators. Examining examples of letters, their context within the narrative, and creator responses forms the core of each chapter. The concluding chapter synthesizes findings, offering a comprehensive understanding of comic-book audiences in the 1980s and proposing potential directions for future research in this understudied domain.

DEDICATION

I would like to take the time to dedicate this to myself for all the blood, sweat, and tears that eventually filled these pages with what some might consider "passable" academic writing. This dedication and my heart also go out to all the other graduate students struggling with burnout, anxiety, depression, and uncertain futures.

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INTRODUCTION

"It is unfortunate that very little demographic data exists on comic readership. Comic Chronicles (2010) provide an excellent breakdown of which titles are read, but not who reads them." — Gavin Weston, "Superheroes and Comic-Book Vigilantes"

"[comic] investigations suffer from the same difficulty as the other media discussed in this study: a dearth of analysis of audience attitudes toward the text." — Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures*

"fan mail constitutes a largely unexplored source of information about the reception of characters, stories, and creators." — Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*

Comic studies include scholars ranging from fields such as history, anthropology, literature studies, and more. As comic studies continue to grow, it is apparent that there have been too few attempts to analyze comic fan letters within the past four decades. There are a few notable works such as Jeffrey A. Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans: Milestone Comics and Their Fans* (2000), John A. Walsh, Shawn Martin, and Jennifer St. Germain's chapter, "'The Spider's Web': An Analysis of Fan Mail from Amazing Spider-Man, 1963–1995" within the edited collection, *Empirical Comics Research: Digital, Multimodal, and Cognitive Methods* (2018), and Jennifer Haywood's *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (1997). These few scholars, however, have barely established the foundation for this emerging side of comic studies.

Analysis of fan letters is an opportunity to understand the people consuming this comics culture. This is also an opportunity to gain insight into the relationship between creator and consumer. Often printed within the pages of comic books lies a snapshot of a unique social relationship that could alter the narrative and the trajectory of these publications. The one caveat of this proposed analysis comes with any research involving

ephemeral material in that the letters mailed to the publishers were only sometimes stored after receiving them. For this study, only the printed letters will be examined. Importantly, though, these letters were published and are the ones every other reader saw. It could be speculated until eternity about the content of the letters that did not get printed. However, these were published when comic-book shops were still sparse, and there needed to be a consistent avenue for readers and fans to discuss what they had read about outside of their local circles.

Fan mail is an opportunity to understand the readers consuming this culture and their social relationship with creators. What we know as modern comic books gained popularity during the 1940s, and the comic industry has thrived and evolved for over half a century into a significant cultural force in the twenty-first century. This cultural force, or consumer culture, is a new front in which comic studies can continue to thrive. What is it that readers are consuming in comics? Do these readers view themselves as a community with distinctive tastes in comics? Are there commonalities between comic-book series fan letters? Do creators interact with letter readers differently? These are the questions that will be answered through a close examination of four selectively chosen comic-book series from the 1980s. *The New Teen Titans* (1980-1996), *The Uncanny X-Men* (1978-1991), *Love and Rockets* (1982-1996), and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1984-1995) all have their unique spots in comic history during the 1980s. *The New Teen Titans* and *The Uncanny X-Men* were chosen because of their popularity, being the top sellers for their respective publishers, DC Comics and Marvel Comics, and in comic-book sales overall at the height of their popularity in the 1980s. They represent mainstream publications with large reader bases. *Love and Rockets* represents the

underground/alternative series that pushed the envelope of kinds of stories told in comics. Lastly, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* was picked because its self-published roots were originally a parody of early 1980s superheroes. These series were popular in their own way but with varying target audiences due to their mainstream or subversive characteristics. These series come from various backgrounds of publications, either mainstream, self-published, or alternative. What connects them all, besides the period, are the letter columns printed inside. Examining these published letter columns within comic books will bring an understanding of how readers reacted and interacted with the creators. Furthermore, this will be a chance to understand who these readers were and why they read comic books. This analysis will gain insight into the social interaction, which will ultimately help us understand the social and audience history of comics.

For a lot of these printed letters, general themes can be surmised as shown in John A. Walsh, Shawn Martin, and Jennifer St. Germain's chapter, "'The Spider's Web': An Analysis of Fan Mail from Amazing Spider-Man, 1963–1995" within the edited collection, *Empirical Comics Research: Digital, Multimodal, and Cognitive Methods*. Having obtained a complete collection of PDFs of every issue within the series *Amazing Spider-Man*, from 1963 through 2006, these researchers analyzed thirty-two years' worth of fan letters printed in the respective letter column. Using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software, they could recreate the PDF letter pages into Word documents, allowing them to run a digital analysis over the massive amounts of text to see patterns, general topics, and spikes when a vital story event occurs.

Throughout the thirty-three years of their primary source material, the most dominant topic was the commentary on the series' creators, specifically the writers and

artists. “The topic modeling analysis revealed that the process of making comic books and the individual creators responsible for them are a dominant concern of letter writers.” One interesting fact from this analysis was an increase in the number of letters written in the 1970s that commented on characters. A significant story arc occurred in issues #121 and #122 (June and July of 1973), which showed the deaths of Peter Parker’s (Spider-Man) longtime girlfriend, Gwen Stacy, and his adversary, Green Goblin. The series' creators printed fan reactions throughout four issues, #124-#127. Even though both characters were significant to the overall story of the *Amazing Spider-Man*, “fan reactions were more focused on the shocking death of the love-interest rather than the demise of the villain. Fans voiced various sentiments, from disgust and disbelief to praise and admiration for the bold plot twist and portrayal of life’s harsher realities."

As stated before, reading comic books was quite the opposite of a passive activity for fans. Active reading was critical for fans of diverse ethnicities, looking for the same diverse ethnicity in comic books as in the real world. Jeffrey A. Brown wrote in his book, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*, as a popular text medium, “the reading of comic books is interpreted according to the ideological encodings of the producers and the socially positioned, fandom-based, decodings of the audience.” Brown focuses on Milestone Comics and fans' response to the representation of its progressive interpretation of black masculinity; his work offers insights into how to approach fans seeking diversity.

The superhero genre has always dominated the comic-book industry, laden heavily with heroic imagery. Those familiar with representation within this medium and specifically this genre will know that combining comic books and diversity has always

been an issue. Since the conception of the comic-book form, most creators have been white males until contemporary times. The combined problems of a lack of diverse representation and a non-diverse creative team created a history of primarily generic, white male superheroes. This, in turn, affected readership. “For decades young readers have encountered a defining and idealized image of heroism that was explicitly honest, law abiding, chaste, excessively masculine, and above all, white.” This meant that “for comic book readers from different ethnic backgrounds there were no heroic models that they could directly identify with, no heroes they could call their own.” For these readers from different ethnic backgrounds, they had to “imaginatively identify,” as Brown stated, across race boundaries often to relate to a superhero.

A more recent work regarding letter columns is Professor of North American Literary and Cultural History Daniel Stein's 2021 book, *Authorizing Superhero Comics: On the Evolution of a Popular Serial Genre*, in which there is a chapter where he scrutinizes the transformative influence of letter pages within comic books, particularly their pivotal role in shaping the discourse around these serialized narratives. Providing some early history of letter columns, Stein showed these paratexts stemming from the late 1950s and gaining prevalence by the 1970s, where letter pages emerged as fertile grounds for negotiated interpretations of comic book content. Referencing Matthew Pustz (scholar of American Studies and author of *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*) in his analysis, Stein contends that these columns were pivotal in constructing a culture around comic books, forming communities of readers bonded by their shared adoration for the medium. The significance of these letter pages extended beyond mere communication; they functioned as authorized spaces within the comics themselves,

fostering dialogue between creators and audiences, nurturing ongoing commentary on series, and laying the groundwork for subsequent forms of criticism, from fanzines to contemporary academic studies. Stein shows that readers were not only politically positioning themselves in relation to their beloved characters but also adopting a proto-scholarly role, citing verbatim passages in their letters, thereby influencing the evolving discourse.[1]

Beyond discourse, Stein explains that these pages played a material role in anchoring the evolving discussion within the serially published print medium, fostering what he termed as a "serial historiography" or an accumulating archive akin to the backlog of stories. This emergence of discursive and material space resulted from intersecting human and nonhuman influences: a select group of industry professionals deciding to experiment with letter pages, readers engaging with editors through written commentary, and postal regulations mandating the inclusion of text pages. While acknowledging the curated nature of these columns, supported by verified letter writers, Stein makes it crucial to note that these spaces provided a public forum for commentary on series, underpinning a rich tapestry of dialogue within the comic book culture.[2]

Alongside scholars like Brown, Walsh, Martin, Germain, and Stein, most early research comes from librarians and teachers concerned about students' reading. Articles on audiences from special issue *Journal of Graphic Novels Comics* (2011) include "'To be a part of the dialogue': American adults reading comic books" by Stergios Botzakis, "'Aint I de Maine guy in dis paRade?': towards a radical history of comic strips and their

[1] Daniel Stein, *Authorizing Superhero Comics: On the Evolution of a Popular Serial Genre* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2021), 35-37.

[2] Stein, *Authorizing Superhero Comics*, 51.

audience since Peterloo" by Michael Demson and Heather Brown, "The irony of 'cool club': the place of comic book reading in schools" by Shari Sabeti, and "The Android's Dungeon: comic-bookstores, cultural spaces, and the social practices of audiences" by Benjamin Woo. In regards to different ways to approach the audience, there is Matthew Pustz's *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*; Martin Barker's two articles 'Seeing How you can See: On Being a Fan of 2000AD' in *Reading Audiences: Young People and the Media*. and 'Taking an Extreme Case: Understanding a Fascist Fan of Judge Dredd.' Alongside Barker is Amy Nyberg's 'Comic Books and Women Readers: Trespassers in Masculine Territory?' in *Gender in Popular Culture: Images of Men and Women in Literature, Visual Media and Material Culture* and Mel Gibson's "'You Can't Read Them, They're for Boys!' British Girls, American Superhero Comics and Identity" in *International Journal of Comic Art*.

As one may have noticed about this list of related literature, most are articles. Most of the books often only indirectly mentioning any audience studies. This is not meant to deride those who have articles published. Still, it is more a comment on the lack of significant scholarship directly focusing on audience reception of comic books and the relationship between creator and audience. My dissertation hopes to address this lack of scholarship. Focusing on the 1980s, a crucial period before the onset of the internet and online forums will help open more dialogue for works before and after this timeframe.

The basic framework for this dissertation stems from Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2010). Most works on printed culture focus on the creator, the context, and the celebrities or intellectuals who use them. Rose flips this by focusing on readers and students, ergo, audience history. Researching

through almost two thousand memoirs of common readers via diaries, school records, social surveys, oral interviews, library registers, letters to newspaper editors, and fan mail, Rose found that a significant minority of British workers liked to buy and read classic literature, which was assumed to be for only the elite in society. Utilizing Erving Goffman's frame analysis, Rose also shows that readers can interpret what they are consuming differently from one another based on their own experiences and interpretations. Regarding understanding the audience, previous comic-book studies focused primarily on sales records. The reader's reactions through letters to the editors and repercussions are a resultant that happens between the reader and a text. In this case, each reader created their unique outcome from reading comic books. These unique reactions and interactions lead to the next interpretative framework of understanding audiences as active consumers of culture.

Comic scholarship commonly treats audiences as passive consumers of culture, but Jennifer Hayward argued in her book *Consuming Pleasure*, that "Serials, like other popular texts, require active participation on the part of consumers. At the very least, a series of choices must be made: which serial to read or view, with whom, where, while doing what." Assuming an audience is passive or ignoring their impact silences an invaluable story. Theoretical frameworks of mass culture production make this grievous error and lack space for "the very real pleasures and satisfactions of audiences; the practices surrounding consumption of serial texts; the function such texts may serve for the individual and for the community." The letter columns of comic books facilitated space for readership and creator interaction, but few scholars have attempted to analyze these columns. Numerous comic-book series include letter columns, but this analysis will

focus on the aforementioned comic-book series: *The New Teen Titans* (1980-1996), *The Uncanny X-Men* (1978-1991), *Love and Rockets* (1982-1996), and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1984-1995).[3]

Knowing that the audience is not passive allows for an adjacent focused study using Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of social distinctions through cultural consumption. In his 1984 work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of the Taste*, Bourdieu states that art and cultural consumption fulfill a social function of legitimizing social differences. One's life experiences may lead to a deeper understanding of an art piece or its context rather than just a base examination of its primary qualities. During the 1960s, Bourdieu surveyed over twelve hundred people in France. With this information, he found that education and social origin were the two most essential components for understanding how a person consumes culture. These letters may or may not reveal a letter writer's social/economic class, but there are plenty of opportunities for readers to reveal their race and gender, which will reveal more about the diversity of the readers and their reason for this comic culture. Bourdieu has provided a framework and more questions that can be asked. Are mainstream comic-book readers concerned more about different topics than indie comic-book readers? Does the interchange between creator and audience differ between mainstream and indie readers? Bourdieu's work will help us understand the audience of comic books of this time and if there are any descendible differences between mainstream and indie comic-book readers.

As a methodological approach, I use both qualitative and quantitative data. Through collecting primary data by myself, I will first contextualize and analyze the

[3] Haywood, *Consuming Pleasures*, pg 2.

letters printed in the letter columns of each comic book. From this sizable data group, I intend to draw exemplary examples showing how each comic-book series houses a unique audience and creator relationship. From there, I compare these relationships from each comic-book series.

The quantitative side of this research involves using the information writers freely give in their letters to show gender ratios across the series. Not only will my methodology cover individual pieces, but it will also cover the larger overall composition of what is being printed. This analysis will ultimately lay out an extensive understanding of the audiences of comic books from the 1980s, providing a more profound understanding than what base sales statistics might provide.

As for an outline, this dissertation will be straightforward. Much like Hayward's *Consuming Pleasure*, my body chapters will take on each series separately. Each chapter will contextualize each comic-book series, providing relevant publication history and highlighting the creators. After that, each chapter will cover various examples of letters to the editors, their context with the comic-book narrative, and the response by the creators. The first chapter will cover *The New Teen Titans* (1980-1996). Next will be the second mainstream comic book, *The Uncanny X-Men* (1978-1991). The third chapter is dedicated to the alternative comic book *Love and Rockets* (1982-1996). Then, the fourth chapter will cover the self-published *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1984-1995). This will then lead into the concluding chapter that will succinctly summarize my findings and point to a broader understanding of this research and what possible directions it could go from here.

CHAPTER ONE

"DC COMICS' RENAISSANCE:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE AUDIENCE OF THE NEW TEEN TITANS"

"Just as our perceptions of the printed page color our future experiences by way of shaping our viewpoint, so do our past experiences color the way in which we perceive the events on the printed page." –T.M. Maple, letter printed in issue #12 of *The New Teen Titans*

A caption jumps out from the cover page, "WATCH OUT, WORLD! HERE COME… THE NEW TEEN TITANS!" Approved by the Comics Code Authority and officially sealed with the DC Comics brand, the cover revealed six super-powered young adults amid a struggle for their very lives. "THE MOST **SENSATIONAL SUPER-STARS** OF ALL ARE BACK – IN **ALL NEW ACTION!**" Some characters like Boy Wonder Robin, Kid Flash, Wonder Girl, and Beast Boy would be familiar to average comic-book readers. Yet three new characters arose: an empath named Raven, an alien named Starfire, and a half-human/half-machine named Cyborg. Similar to other groups of superheroes such as the Justice League or the Avengers, readers of all ages across the nation could get their hands on this thrilling all-new preview and debut of a reformed superhero team free. Actually, almost free. They would have bought the No. 26 issue of *DC Comics Presents* for only fifty cents, a decent price for twenty-five pages of the original comic-book story and sixteen free pages of the extra *The New Teen Titans* insert. Not too bad of a price for over forty pages of entertainment. Young adults and children thought so, too, back in October of 1980 when this comic-book issue was first published. As exhilarating as it would be to see this reformed group of Teen Titans battle a highly

intelligent and massive single proto-plasmic cell from another dimension, however, there is something essential to gain within the pages of this series as it unfolded in the next four years. What would be most beneficial, historically, that is, was how readership responded to serialized material that was presented to them at monthly intervals.

In 1989, comic-book historian Mike Benton wrote, "the American comic book has touched the lives of nearly everyone alive today."[4] This is evident when examining written letters to the editors. Letters for this series were printed in the *Titans' Tower* column that appeared in nearly every issue. The letter column provided a forum for readers to catch mistakes, give opinions or suggestions, or say what they liked or did not like about the series. The *Titans' Tower* was also a hub for this readership community. Marv Wolfman, creator and writer for *The New Teen Titans,* remarked about the importance of this feature in comic books:

> The letter columns were a way for fans to meet each other but in the comics itself. Today we have the internet, but it's not the same. If you were a 12 year old and you wrote a letter that was actually published, you felt a part of the comic. Your name and thoughts were in the comic. Anyone can post to the internet; there's nothing special about that. But if you were one of five letters printed in the comic you felt special.[5]

This made letter columns such as *Titans' Tower* all the more important and why examining its contents is necessary. The primary purpose of this study will be to attempt to understand who the audience was for the first volume of *The New Teen Titans* (1980-84) and what they wrote about in their letters. One of the primary questions embedded in

[4] Randy Duncan, and Matthew J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2009), xvii.

[5] From email correspondence with Marv Wolfman on February 28th, 2018.

this work seeks to answer is: Did reader response shape *The New Teen Titans*? This is an important question to ask for all mainstream comic-book series. Audiences' roles are too often assumed to be passive. All of these inquiries about readership will be answered through the identification of theoretical issues, a summary of the publication history of *The New Teen Titans*, an analysis of the letters and their common themes, such as reactions to characters and criticisms, and then finally, an examination of the audience's role in shaping this comic-book series.[6]

Towards the end of the 1970s, the publishing side of comics, at least for DC Comics, was not doing quite as well as the recently released smash-hit *Superman* film (1978) starring Christopher Reeve. New models of distribution were being imagined to overcome this stagnation. The miniseries was a recent idea adopted from television for *The Untold Legend of the Batman*. To capitalize on the appearances of comic-book shops, *Superboy Spectacular* #1 was sold only to comic shops and not newsstands, a sign that the comic-book industry market was evolving. Newsstands returned whatever copies of comic books that did not sell back to the publisher. Comic-book stores kept all the copies as they were sold to the stores on a no-return basis. This meant the stores could try to sell them later or hold on to them for collecting. This cut down publishing costs for small-press titles, increased profits, and potentially sold more titles that would have needed to be more profitable in the previous market-style distribution. Thus, a direct market emerged for DC and comic-book publishers. There will be more on the direct market and its importance later.

[6] From this point onwards, *The New Teen Titans* title will be shortened to the acronym, *TNTT*.

This early period of the 1980s saw the beginnings of the importance of comic-book stores. As longtime DC comic-book editor, writer, and executive Paul Levitz noted, "The comic shops were rapidly becoming the only growth area for DC's publishing program, and although still just 10% of the business, became more and more the focus for the future."[7] At this time, Len Wein brought together his lifelong friend Marv Wolfman (who previously worked for Marvel) and up-and-coming team-book artist, George Pérez, to work on a project. Together, they would relaunch the already twice-rebooted *Teen Titans* series. "Mixing a touch of romance with classic heroic melodrama, and adding distinctive new characters Cyborg, Raven, and Starfire... all tuned for the slightly older comic shop customers, they created a title that would be DC's sales leader throughout the 1980s."[8] This rebooted series would help carry DC Comics through this stagnant period. Unfortunately, because the methods and sale figures in the reported sales of comic books are flawed, the exact number of copies sold will likely never be known, but there are ways to gauge how popular the series was. From an interview, Wolfman unofficially admitted that during the middle of the publication of the first run, *TNTT* had passed the widely popular Marvel title, *X-Men*. "Technically, we're number two in terms of sales. Which isn't bad for a book that's been around for only two years."[9] While the series was number one for DC Comics and number two for mainstream comics, it also won some awards, backing up the claims about why the series sold so well. *TNTT* won the

[7] Paul Levitz, *75 Years of DC Comics: The Art of Modern Mythmaking* (Köln, German: Taschen, 2017), 454.

[8] Levitz, *75 Years of DC Comics*, 454.

[9] "New Issue Club Express: The Titans Speak!" *Lone Star Comics*, no. 117 (1982), http://www.titanstower.com/new-issue-club-express-117-the-titans-speak/.

prestigious Eagle Award for "Best New Comic of 1980," voted on by fans in Great Britain.[10] *TNTT* received two Saturn Awards announced at the July 4th New York Comic Art Convention. Wolfman got the Best Writer Award, while Pérez won the Best Cover (Titans Annual #1) and the INKPOT award at that year's San Diego convention.[11] But how did the series win these awards? What made it so popular? Levitz glossed over the finer points as to why *TNTT* was such a success. Yes, it did have some romance and classic heroism, but something far more critical drew in readers. That something was characterization.

Characterization was an element in mainstream comic books that came in relatively late. As a building block in creating fictional characters, this element adds depth and relatability and generally makes comic books more interesting. It is a characteristic of the medium that most scholars need to consider in the history of comics, particularly the superhero genre. The earliest comic-book stories had characters with few distinctive features that differentiated them from one another besides their superpower. Characterization arose when a group of creators, primarily writers, entered the field in the middle of the second half of the twentieth century. Known as the "new generation," they grew up reading the medium and "gravitated to the field voluntarily." At the beginning of the industry, most creators used the job of creating comic books as a stepping stool to better jobs in advertising. In a position thought so lowly, some creators were even so ashamed to have worked the job that they used pen names instead of their real ones for

[10] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), Ben Oda (l), "Dear Mom and Dad," *The New Teen Titans* #20, DC Comics, Inc., (June 1982), 21.

[11] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), Ben Oda (l), "Crossroads," *The New Teen Titans* #39, DC Comics, Inc., (February 1984), 24.

their finished works. For most comic-book characters before the development of characterization, the industry tended to make characters carbon copies of one another. For example, in the early 1960s, when the original *Teen Titans* series saw publication, the male characters, such as Robin and Aqualad, had the same body and facial features. Only the different hair and costume styles separated them from each other. Wolfman once called this the "Betty and Veronica" Syndrome: the hair is different, but everything else looks the same. This was all in the spirit of saving money through reduced production time. Often, their background stories or subplots given to these characters were just as barebones or completely absent. In this time of easy replication, making huge profits outweighed having good storylines or relatable characters.[12] But the new generation had grown up caring for these characters and wanted to see them keep growing and develop into more fantastic characters. Having entered the comic-book industry in the mid-1960s with the future editor of *TNTT*, Len Wein, Wolfman was part of the new generation and had to "contend with the hostility and intransigence of a field which had not changed in twenty-five years."[13]

Adding characterization to a comic book was risky, mainly for the team working on the series. If one title went down for DC Comics, the company still had others to work with; it would only partially affect the company. If a title went down, the writer and others working on it would be out of money. Characterization was also against the norm. The basic idea behind creating comic books for the longest time was that readers wanted

[12] Dwight R. Decker, "The New Teen Titans: An Interview with Marv Wolfman," *The Comics Journal*, no. 79 (January 1983), http://www.titanstower.com/comics-journal-79-marv-wolfman-interview/.

[13] Mark Shainblum, "An Interview with Marv Wolfman," *Orion Magazine: The Canadian Magazine of Space and Time*, no. 2 (1981), http://www.titanstower.com/orion-2-marv-wolfman-interview/.

action. There was a belief that only hardcore fans enjoyed characterization. Thus, catering to the smaller portion of readers would be unwise. However, as the new generation entered the field and started testing the readership on different proportions of characterization and action, the reaction came back highly positive in favor of adding characterization to action. Therefore, future comic books saw increasingly complicated storylines.[14]

This new generation grew up reading comic books created by people who believed money was the ultimate goal in the industry. When Wolfman, Wein, and Pérez breathed new life into the downtrodden *Teen Titans* series, they did so with the idea that the characters in these stories mattered and that it was essential to develop them. They overwhelmingly succeeded. As past audiences, they knew precisely how unrelatable comic books could be. Still, since they cared about the stories and characters, they knew connecting to readers through these fictional creations was important. Soon enough, characterization had finally emerged in the comic-book industry.

While these new generation creators entered the industry hoping to develop characterization, how audiences interacted and shaped the series still needs to be examined. While a previous generation of audiences grew up to fill the creator role, a new one, or rather, an ever-evolving audience, reacted to this change in core values of comic-book creation. Comic scholarship tends to treat audiences as passive consumers of culture. However, as Jennifer Hayward stated in her book *Consuming Pleasure: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera*, "Serials, like other popular

[14] Decker, "The New Teen Titans."

texts, require active participation on the part of consumers. At the very least, a series of choices must be made: which serial to read or view, with whom, where, while doing what." Assuming an audience is passive or ignoring their impact silences half of the story. For theoretical frameworks of mass culture production that makes this grievous error, there lacks space for "the very real pleasures and satisfactions of audiences; the practices surrounding consumption of serial texts; the function such texts may serve for the individual and for the community. All of these deserve attention."[15] While Hayward investigated how serial audiences used their texts in collective interpretation, predicted, metacommentary, and creation that engaged them through examination of Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), comic strip *Terry and the Pirates*, and soaps, this analysis will focus entirely on the first volume of the rebooted mainstream comic-book series by DC comics, *The New Teen Titans* (1980-84). In Hayward's work, a significant catalyst was technology and material production. For this study, the direct market and characterization emerged as a catalyst within the industry and comic books, altering the audiences' composition. Characterization and the direct market developed together in the early 1980s, where this analysis shall focus.

Before the emergence of the direct market, comic book distribution occurred primarily via the newsstand system. This system, however, was corrupt. An example given by comic book creator Jim Shooter showed how this system was corrupt. If a distributor ordered one thousand copies of a comic book, a publisher would send them said order. Since comic books would not be his top priority in terms of sales, the

[15] Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 2.

distributor would probably only send three hundred of the thousand copies ordered to the individual newsstands. Hypothetically, two hundred of the three hundred sent were bought, creating an almost seventy percent sell-through. This would be decent if the original number of copies ordered by the distributor was three hundred. Since it was not, it means only two hundred of the thousand sold. The corruption occurred here due to affidavit returns being the industry standard before the 1980s. The distributor would skew the number of copies sold in their favor. If they reported to the publisher that they only sold one hundred and fifty, they only had to pay for that one hundred and fifty instead of the actual two hundred copies sold. The remaining copies they "received from the publisher—which [they're] supposed to destroy," they will put "into bricks and sells to the local Costco OR throws them into the paper wolf and sells the pulp OR sells them for a nickel apiece through the black market."[16] To counteract this blatant corruption, the direct market came into existence.

Comic-book shops helped establish this new direct market. The stores would buy a certain number of copies of a comic book. They would then sell as many as possible, and the copies they did not immediately sell were left up to the store on how to handle them best. Either by keeping a back-stock of a series to sell later, adding to collections, or they could do whatever they want with the copies except return them to the publisher. Major publishers began shifting to selling comic books only to these stores. Perhaps unknowingly, this altered the demographics of those who could buy comic books. "Because the comic shops were few and far between compared to the ever-present

[16] Keith Dallas, "Note on Comic Book Sales and Circulation Data," *American Comic Book Chronicles: The 1980s (1980-1989)* (March 2013), 7.

newsstands of old, they attracted primarily comic book readers who were old enough to get there on their own, by bike, bus, or car, rather than the younger kids who bought comics to keep themselves amused while their parents went shopping." This creation of the direct market meant that comic-book readership primarily consisted of readers who had enough money to purchase the now higher-priced comics and had the means to travel to these locations. This meant there was a shift to an older audience.[17]

TNTT was primed for this older demographic of readers. When asked if Wolfman was writing *TNTT* for a teenage audience, he responded, "No, I'm not trying to aim it at teenagers. This is a book about teen-agers that I think anybody can read."[18] A shift to adult readers was reflected in the letters readers sent in. For example, C. Emery believed growing old to be a burden and wanted the new series to reflect youthful days in the past. "Make the Titans 16 years old again. Although this will create a problem with continuity, my reason is this: Teenagers and sub-teens want to read about teenagers. Adults want to read about Teenagers (and be teenagers again). No one wants to read about people 20-25. It's an uninteresting stage becoming beset with responsibility."[19] Emery, who appeared to be a part of the older group, probably found the escapism in a series anybody could read. Perhaps Emery's letter also pointed out why the series was such a hit and why the series had so many letters written to the editor each month. Yet, what caused a casual reader to be a letter writer like Emery?

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[17] Levitz, *75 Years of DC Comics*, 455.

[18] Decker, "The New Teen Titans."

[19] Len Wein (ed). Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Frank Chiaramonte (i), Adrienne Roy (c), Ben Oda (l), "Enter: The Fearsome Five!," *The New Teen Titans* #3, DC Comics, Inc. (January 1981), 26.

From this new demographic of readers, a sub-group of fans engaged in an increased level of fandom. There are many different levels of fandom for culture, particularly comic books, as comic-book readers "may be fans and collectors, but not all readers engage in this level of activity. Likewise, most fans may be collectors, but not all collectors are necessarily fans. And not all fans engage in the same types and array of activities, such as publishing fanzines and attending conferences." What is essential to understand about the readers who were writing letters was that they were engaging in a "rudimentary form of social networking" with other letter writers and the creators of the series.[20] However, this engagement in social networking went beyond the letters themselves. Toward the end of the first volume, Wolfman received multiple letters regarding information on Teen Titan Fan clubs that formed nationwide. Although there was not an official fan club, Wolfman encouraged fans who were part of one to send letters providing information about the club so that other readers could join in if they wished. The only thing Wolfman asked in return was to receive copies of fanzines published. The first club info printed by Wolfman, titled *Titan Talk*, was established by Margery Spears in Renton, Washington.[21] Two issues later, Joseph F. Richani's letter boasted of his new fan club, *TITANIUM*, which had nearly one hundred and sixty

[20] Ian Gordon, "Writing to Superman: Towards an Understanding of the Social Networks of Comic-Book Fans," *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* vol. 9 no. 2 (November 2012), 121.

[21] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), Todd Klein (l), "Endings... and Beginnings!," *The New Teen Titans* #34, DC Comics, Inc., (August 1983), 24.

members.[22] While fan clubs are a different topic outside of this analysis, this showed the Titans' Tower's power in connecting readers and how strong of a "rudimentary form of social networking" these printed letters were. Perhaps this caused a reader to become a letter writer: a chance to connect with other like-minded individuals and an opportunity for one's opinion to be seen by all who read the series. While the connecting effect of the letter column was apparent, who exactly was writing these letters?

Before delving into individual letters, it is vital to understand the overall makeup of the letters printed in *Titans' Tower*. As stated before, this research spans from the first issue of *TNTT* in November of 1980 to the last issue of the first volume in 1984. The first volume had forty issues, two annual issues, and a four-part miniseries. The annual issues and miniseries did not contain printed letters. Neither did the first two issues of the series; due to the nature of writing stories and getting the draft to the printing stage, letters concerning the beginning of the series began to appear in issue #3. For most of the series, it was a single page with three to five letters. Later in the series, Titans' Tower increased to two pages within the first volume, with room for more letters. The number of letters, which were counted according to gender, was taken into account. The graph below tracks the breakdown of the letter-writers by gender between the years 1980 to 1984 except issue #37, an issue that either did not have a letter column printed in it or the copy examined no longer had the section:

[22] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), Keith Pollard (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), John Costanza & Todd Klein (l), "Feedback!," *The New Teen Titans* #36, DC Comics, Inc., (November 1983), 24.

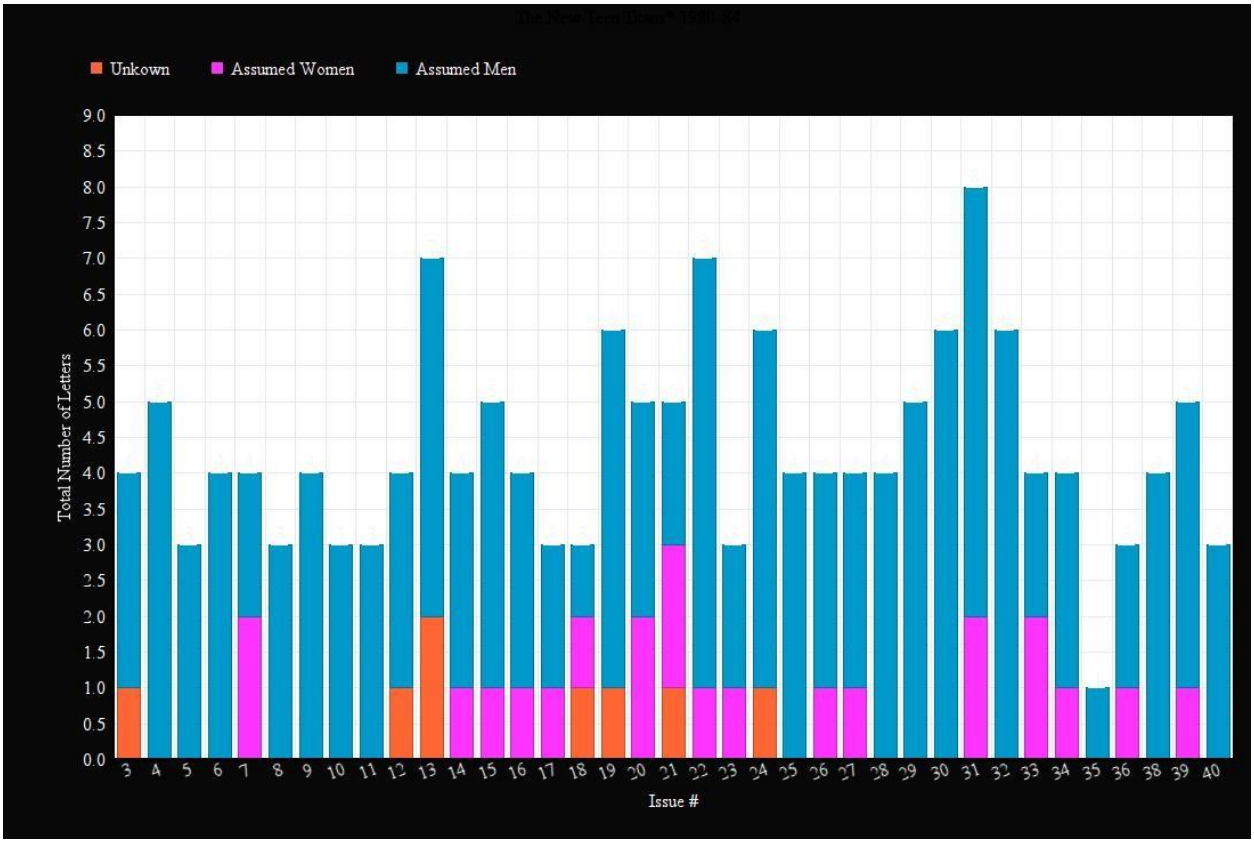

Figure 1. Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), *The New Teen Titans* #1-42, DC Comics, Inc., (1980-1984).

For the most part, each letter printed in Titans' Tower was accompanied by the name and address of the person who sent it. Based on the name in the letter, these were sorted into three categories: assumed women, assumed men, and unknown. If the given name could not determine the immediate binary gender, the letter was sorted into the unknown category.

To quantify this analysis, the total number of letters examined in the series totaled 160. Males wrote one hundred and thirty of the letters. Percentage-wise, this was 81.25% of the letters printed. Twenty-two letters, or 13.75% of the total letters printed, were from females. This left eight letters (5%) left to the unknown category. The number of letters

printed was largely one-sided to those written by males. Some issues had only male letters printed. Does this suggest that males wrote four-fifths of the total letters written to the editors? Absolutely not. That ratio will only be confirmed if all the letters ever sent are examined, which is impossible.

For the reason why these letters saw print, Wolfman has stated that he chose the letters if they had brought up exciting ideas. It would be unwise to assume anything from this quantitative analysis suggests anything about the total number of letters sent in. Nevertheless, it shows that most printed letters were from males with a small voice from female writers. These were the letters that were published and the ones that every other reader saw. That is why this research is essential. It could be speculated until eternity about what letters did not get printed, but these were published when comic-book shops were still sparse. There needed to be a consistent avenue for readers and fans to discuss what they had read outside their local circles. What exactly did these letters discuss, then?

For a lot of these printed letters, general themes can be surmised as shown in John A. Walsh, Shawn Martin, and Jennifer St. Germain's chapter, "'The Spider's Web': An Analysis of Fan Mail from *Amazing Spider-Man*, 1963–1995" within the edited collection, *Empirical Comics Research: Digital, Multimodal, and Cognitive Methods*. Having obtained a complete collection of PDFs of every issue within the series *Amazing Spider-Man,* from 1963 through 2006, these researchers analyzed thirty-two years' worth of fan letters printed in the respective letter column. Using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software, they could recreate the PDF letter pages into Word documents, allowing them to run a digital analysis over the massive amount of text to see patterns, general topics, and spikes when a critical story event occurs.

Throughout the thirty-three years of their primary source material, the most dominant topic was the commentary on the series' creators, specifically the writers and artists. “The topic modeling analysis revealed that the process of making comic books and the individual creators responsible for them are a dominant concern of letter writers.”[23] One interesting fact from this analysis was an increase in the number of letters written in the 1970s that commented on characters. A significant story arc occurred in issues #121 and #122 (June and July of 1973), showing the deaths of Peter Parker’s (Spider-Man) longtime girlfriend, Gwen Stacy, and his adversary, Green Goblin. The series' creators printed fan reactions over four issues, #124-#127. Even though both characters were significant to the overall story of *Amazing Spider-Man*, “fan reactions were more focused on the shocking death of the love interest rather than the villain's demise. Fans voiced various sentiments, from disgust and disbelief to praise and admiration for the bold plot twist and portrayal of life’s harsher realities."[24]

This dramatic event for Parker created characterization for him and gave him more depth, perhaps even making him more relatable to readers. At any rate, this showed that readers respond to what happens to characters within stories and not just a commentary on creators. It also showed that reading comic books is quite the opposite of a passive activity for fans. As will be established, when characterization became a natural occurrence within comic books in the 1980s, and readers could relate and invest in these characters, it became logical that most letters primarily shifted to commentary on

[23] J. A. Walsh, S. Martin, & J. St. Germain, “’The Spider’s Web’: An Analysis of Fan Mail from Amazing Spider-Man, 1963–1995,” in J. Laubrock, J. Wildfeuer, & A. Dunst (eds.), *Empirical Comics Research: Digital, Multimodal, and Cognitive Methods* (New York: Routledge, 2018, forthcoming), 11.

[24] Walsh, “The Spider’s Web,” 17.

characters. This became apparent when examining the various fan reactions to the characters within the *TNTT* series. Perhaps one of the most talked about characters was Cyborg, a young, black superhero from a short line of previous black superheroes.

As stated before, reading comic books was quite the opposite of a passive activity for fans. Active reading was critical for fans of diverse ethnicities, looking for the same mixed ethnicity in comic books as in the real world. Jeffrey A. Brown wrote in his book, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*, as a popular text medium, "the reading of comic books is interpreted according to the ideological encodings of the producers and the socially positioned, fandom-based, decodings of the audience."[25] While Brown focused on Milestone Comics and fans' response to the representation of its progressive interpretation of black masculinity, his work offered a few insights into how to approach the new Teen Titan superhero, Cyborg.

The superhero genre has always dominated the comic-book industry, laden heavily with heroic imagery. Those familiar with representation within this medium, specifically this genre, will know that combining comic books and diversity has always been an issue. Since the conception of the comic-book form, most creators have been white males until contemporary times. The combined problems of a lack of diverse representation and a non-diverse creative team created a history of primarily generic, white male (and a few women) superheroes. This, in turn, affected readership. "For decades young readers have encountered a defining and idealized image of heroism that was explicitly honest, law abiding, chaste, excessively masculine, and above all, white."

[25] Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 2.

This meant that "for comic book readers from different ethnic backgrounds there were no heroic models that they could directly identify with, no heroes they could call their own."[26] For these readers from different ethnic backgrounds, they had to "imaginatively identify," as Brown stated, across race boundaries often to relate to a superhero. These older comic-book stories did not help; they always displayed nonwhites as henchmen, savages, and criminals. However, the age of white superheroes began to fall in the 1960s.

The 60s and 70s saw an increase in demands for racial equality. Marvel was the first to venture out with new superheroes aligned with this movement. Notable characters such as the Black Panther (an African native, not an African American) and the Falcon (a reformed "hoodlum" that would not rise above the status of Captain America's sidekick for some time) never hit the mark on what most wanted to see for blacks in American society. In the Marvel series *Hero for Hire* (1972), Luke Cage was the first African-American superhero to star in his comic book series. However, with a staff of all-white writers, it was clear to most that the series was created to profit off the early 1970s sensation of blaxploitation films. These films "featured badass, highly sexualized protagonists with ghetto street smarts," and so did *Hero for Hire*.[27] DC Comics debuted their first African-American superhero in 1972, backup Green Lantern John Stewart. This publisher also had another lesser-known black character.

The first appearance of what would be the original *Teen Titans'* first central black character came in an issue in 1970, a black teenager named Mal (short for Malcolm). As

[26] Brown, *Black Superheroes*, 3.

[27] Duncan, *The Power of Comics*, 50.

the series continued, Mal eventually joined the group in their adventures, despite having no superpowers.[28] And unlike Robin, Mal did not have the luxury of money to buy gadgets to help him fight. The series was slow in developing the new character. In the beginning, Mal was restricted in dialogue. Even when the character said something, it was usually stereotypical lines for a black character. Unfortunately, soon after Mal joined the roster, signs of him becoming an atypical "angry young black" character began to show. For example, in issue #32, Mal conversed with Kid Flash and said, "I feel strung out, Flasher—Like the first time I snitched an apple off the fruit stand... and hoped the fuzz was friendly to hungry ghetto kids!"[29] The cliché lines with outdated slang for Mal continued in the same story: "Wally, like the old honky saying... have I gone white with fear--'cause I'm really scared, man!"[30] This is not to say that occasionally the writing for the character showed some depth. For example, in issue #38, the Teen Titans conquered their deepest fears. In a sort of daydream, the readers found out that Mal's deepest fear was of open spaces. The source of Mal's agoraphobia, as it turns out, was an incident that occurred when three white kids in an alley jumped him.[31]

Knowing that Mal did not connect well with audiences, Wolfman had to adjust his new black superhero to ensure that readers would like him. Cyborg, aka Victor Stone, is a young black man who is half-human and half-machine. Victor gained his cyborg-ness

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[28] Dick Giordano (ed), Bob Kanigher (sc), Nick Cardy (i)(p), "A Penny for a Black Star," *Teen Titans* #26, National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC] (Mar.-Apr., 1970), 14.

[29] Murray Boltinoff (ed), Steve Skeates (sc), Nick Cardy (i)(p), "A Mystical Realm, A World Gone Mad," *Teen Titans* #32, National Periodical Publications, Inc., [DC] (Mar.-Apr., 1971), 15.

[30] Boltinoff, *Teen Titans* #32, 16.

[31] Boltinoff, *Teen Titans* #38.

after a lab incident that killed his mother and destroyed half his body. He believed the incident was his father's fault and hated him, despite his father saving his life by turning him into a cyborg. For a time, Victor believed himself to be a freak and an outcast. Every time his father showed up, Victor would get angry and moody. It was not until Victor's father explained what happened in the lab and that he (Victor's father) would die soon that Victor came to terms with his new life and renewed his relationship with his father before he passed away. But this happened over the course of many issues. Cyborg wearily started as an angry character in the series, but something was different this time around with this black superhero.

Initial letters in the *Titans' Tower* noted this change. Jay Michael Dickson said that initially, he "didn't like the characterizations of Cyborg... Cyborg seemed to be 'that proud angry young black' stereotype... But you actually gave a reason for Cyborg to be that way, a reason not connected to his race." Wolfman responded quickly to the letter, "We're glad you picked up on Cyborg's 'anger,' Jay, because even up here at the office several people thought his anger was typical, comic-book stereotyping." The character's creator said, "It's our belief that based on what happened to him, black or white, Victor Stone would be rather mad at the cards Fate dealt him. Hopefully, as we further explore Cyborg and his problems, he will become more three-dimensional, more real to all of you." And Cyborg did become more real to readers, as many letter writers noted.[32]

Al Schroeder III wrote, "I like the new Titans VERY much. I love the art, and they are all good characters who interact well. Cyborg stole the show with his brooding

[32] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), Curt Swan (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), Ben Oda (l), "Trigon Lives!," *The New Teen Titans* #5, DC Comics, Inc., (March 1981), 26.

melancholy and strength."[33] Chuck Small noted that the new group was "very mysterious and exciting. Cyborg is a black super-hero but with no major black comic book slang and no moralizing. Maybe an occasional 'hey, Man' but every Titan, heck, most teens speak with some sort of slang."[34] Alicia Wu saw that Cyborg's anger did not define his character completely, having stated that he "is bitter, but he doesn't let his negative feelings interfere with his work as a TT."[35] With Brad Horning's letter, Wolfman's Cyborg became more real to readers than he could have wished for as the series moved away from its initial issues: "Victor Stone, Cyborg, the person who is part machine, is as much a human as any of us so-called normal people. He proves that it is not how much a human you are, but how much life you live."[36] All these letters have positive comments about this new black superhero. However, one letter stood out from the rest.

In issue #18, L.D. Yelverton had written that he loved the new series. Yelverton continued, discussing how they could understand and identify with the characters' personal problems within the comic book. One character was particularly relatable to Yelverton:

> Each character is unique, especially Cyborg. I have for the first time in comics seen a major Black character who is not stereotyped. I should know since I am black and I have been there. In DC comic-book land, all blacks live in a major ghetto, talk street language and are always screaming prejudice. Cyborg is progressing issue by issue. We know he went to college. His slang is less noticeable. Victor has warmth, dignity and pride in himself and not once has he

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[33] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), Ben Oda (l), "Against All Friends!," *The New Teen Titans* #4, DC Comics, Inc., (February 1981), 26.

[34] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #5, 26.

[35] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Carl Gafford (c), John Costanza (l), "Assault on Titans' Tower!," *The New Teen Titans* #7, DC Comics, Inc., (May 1981), 26.

[36] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), Ben Oda (l), "Clash of the Titans," *The New Teen Titans* #12, DC Comics, Inc., (October 1981), 26.

> stated the obvious. More power to him… I earnestly appreciate your efforts in this magazine.[37]

Yelverton's letter was the only letter in this volume of *TNTT* that specified what race they were. While all the other letters primarily mentioned his character growth, this letter was unique in that the reader specifically mentioned how they related to the character. The letter writer also appeared well-versed in the representational history of black characters within DC comics. Wolfman had a thankful response:

> What can we say, L.D., but thanks. With each issue we feel we're gaining a better perspective of our cast of characters, and therefore we try to give them a more realistic attitude and personality. We are trying to carve out real people within the confines of a super-hero title, and we appreciate that you fans keep writing to tell us that we're succeeding. Quite frankly, we think because of the fandom that has developed around the Titans, we are in the position of constantly trying to do things better. We don't feel it would be right to let you fans down.[38]

Wolfman, however, expected this type of response.

In an interview with Mark Shainblum of *Orion Magazine: The Canadian Magazine of Space and Time*, Wolfman talked about his character Cyborg and how he knew readers would react to him. Wolfman had always liked Cyborg because he knew that the character would receive the most negative comments due to his portrayal as a "young angry black" superhero at the beginning of the series. "[Cyborg] was very negative and embittered and all that, but I knew we were going to change him. The mail went exactly the way I expected it to, so he is a personal favorite for that reason." This

[37] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), John Costanza (l), "A Pretty Girl is Like a – Maladi!," *The New Teen Titans* #18, DC Comics, Inc. (April 1982), 26.

[38] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #18, 26.

character design and reception were premeditated. It appeared that Wolfman had understood at the time how comic books treated black characters and that they were received poorly b the readership. "Cyborg, because of his background (which I knew long before his origin was published) had to be embittered. And it's not because he is black, but because of what happened to him. All the other characters had to have their personalities based on where they were from, and when you change a character they grow within the context of the book." Cyborg was a cleverly crafted character, one of the first of a few black superheroes whose anger was not tied to his race. Wolfman had created a character designed and implemented with the readership in mind. If this much care was put into the one nonwhite superhero within *TNTT*, what about the female superheroes?[39]

The female characters within the Teen Titans group caused the most dramatic shift in the original lineup. The *Teen Titans*' original cast of characters was Robin, Kid Flash, Aqualad, and Wonder Girl. Wonder Girl, aka Donna Troy, was the only female member of the original group. She was also the most stereotypically written character. The character was written to be more concerned with how boys look, wooing over Rock'n'Roll stars and pondering her chances of going out with boys she liked. She was also very juvenile compared to the other team members and would rather dance to music than train with the other members. But with the addition of Raven and Starfire, almost half the team in *TNTT* is female. This three-to-four ratio allowed this series to explore more character issues and perhaps entice a growing female audience. Wonder Girl was a sidekick to Wonder Woman and had similar abilities (super strength, flight, Amazon

[39] Shainblum, "An Interview with Marv Wolfman."

combat experience, etc.). Still, she seems to have matured quite a bit and has become a unique individual in the revived series.

In this new series, Donna was a freelance photographer engaged to her fiancé, Terry Long (a Professor of History!). Donna appeared to be a strong and independent woman who has sometimes led the team in Robin's place. Her dialogue showed readers how far she had come from the original series. For instance, Donna began having trouble with a lazy model when doing a model shoot for a jean company. The company owner thought Donna was the problem. However, she set the record straight, saying, "Listen here, Mr. Delevi, you may know jeans, but I know photography. You want this ad done right, get that squirming flake out of here. She may stroke your masculine ego, but as a model, she's the one who stinks."[40] She even held her own against fellow team members. When Changeling asked her, "What's red and yellow and gorgeous all over?" Donna remarked, "The same one who's gonna turn you black-and-blue-and-red all over—if you don't cut out those chauvinist remarks!" While Donna now exhibited the same strong, independent nature and attributes associated with Wonder Woman as an icon for feminism, the other female characters were unique in their own ways.[41]

The first of the new female members was Raven. She came to the group seeking help stopping her father, supervillain Trigon, who wished to destroy Earth. Mysterious and very shut-in about her past and emotions, Raven is an empath who can manipulate and read other people's feelings. She also could astral project black energy into a form of

[40] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), Ben Oda (l), "A Day in the Lives...," *The New Teen Titans* #8, DC Comics, Inc., (June 1981), 3.

[41] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #7, 17

a Raven, which she could use to teleport members of the group or attack. However, as an empath, she abhorred all violence as she felt the pain of those around her and tried to steer the group towards the path where no one gets hurt. If she were to have a motto, it would be, "There is never a point to violence."[42] Having been raised in a different dimension in a monastery, she now attends college to try to understand the various social aspects of humanity better. Raven offered an interesting take on the use of nonviolence. Readers enjoyed her, as seen in Keven E. Patterson's letter, "I'm in love with Raven. Marv has brought the haunting darkness from *Dracula* and injected it into the world of super-heroes. It's got me crying for more, but I hope the eventual revelation doesn't strip away the impact this figure now holds. Needless to say, keep Raven."[43] While she and Wonder Girl have these mature thematic qualities, the last female character in the group does not.

The second newest member was Koriand'r, aka Starfire. Starfire was an alien who crash-landed on Earth after escaping from the evil clutches of her sister, Komand'r (aka Blackfire). With the ability to fly, use super strength, and shoot destructive blasts of ultraviolet energy (known as starbolts) from her hands, Starfire was easily one of the team's strongest members. She was also the most naïve of Earth customs and rituals, adding an element of innocence to the group that often created humorous situations. However, her reception was rocky at first, primarily because of the lack of depth in her character. In his letter, Patterson said, "If you decide to dump Starfire, you'll get no

[42] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #8, 6.

[43] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Pablo Marcos (i), Jerry Serpe (c), John Costanza (l), "Last Kill!," *The New Teen Titans* #6, DC Comics, Inc., (April 1981), 26.

complaints from me. Her powers are nothing unique, and she reminds me too much of Storm of the X-men." The one thing he did enjoy was the idea of a "romance between her and Robin, and that's about the only reason I'd wish to have her remain."[44] While Starfire's characterization took many issues to develop, two problems with the character hold her back. The first was a series of innuendos throughout the dialogue between Starfire and her love interest, Robin, whom she always called Dick (Robin's actual name was Richard Grayson). There have been at least eight or so separate moments within the first volume where Starfire would say a line like the following, "Let me come with you, Dick. Okay? Please?"[45] And it is only her character that refers to Richard as Dick.

The second issue with Starfire was her outfit. A two-piece swimsuit would offer more protection from attacks than the suit she wears. Though, regarding showing bare skin, Cyborg is close behind Starfire (Fig. 1). Printed in issue #8, Mark R. Yanko's letter sought to address this with the creator. The letter began by commenting on the two more prominent female characters, as Starfire was his favorite character:

> Donna's friendship with Princess Koriand'r, laced as it is with elements of light humor, is nice to see, as is the latter's naiveté in matters earthly. One question, though: if clothing is such a novelty to Starfire, what then is the explanation for her costume? If it's armor, it certainly can't offer much protection. Lastly, a suggestion. How about a new costume for Wonder Girl? The one she's wearing strikes me as rather gaudy.[46]

There was a response to Yanko's letter, but Wolfman's reply only addressed his first inquiries and comments on Changeling. Yanko was addressing a serious issue in this

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[44] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #6, 26.

[45] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), John Costanza (l), "Terra in the Night," *The New Teen Titans* #28, DC Comics, Inc., (February 1983), 13.

[46] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #8, 26.

letter. If a comic book features two relatively prominent and strong female characters, what good does it serve to have one dressed in a bikini-like suit all the time with a naïve attitude that diminishes her? It was a very pointed question by a reader aimed at the male creators who were writing dialogue for and drawing a scantily cladded woman. This letter served as a reminder that an almost entirely all-male team was creating this comic book.[47]

[47] The exception to this almost all-male creative team for *TNTT* was Adrienne Roy who was the color artist for the series.

Figure 1. Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), Curt Swan (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), Ben Oda (l), "Trigon Lives!," The New Teen Titans #5, DC Comics, Inc., (March 1981), 3.

When letters addressed something particular about one of the female characters, they usually had comments regarding the other female characters. Therefore, examining how readers wrote about these women as a group would be logical instead of dissecting and splitting each letter into separate parts. The initial reactions to these characters were overall positive. As Chuck Small noted in his letter in issue #5, Wonder Girl "is still wondering about her past, but at the same time she is still the strong-willed female of the group." Of the new members of the Titans, he thought they were very mysterious and exciting. "Starfire seems very interesting with her space-born and proud personality and powers. She fits well in the new group." In regards to Raven, she "has a fantastic costume. While I dislike an overuse of her mysteriousness, I suspect she'll become more personable in future issues."[48] Most letter writers liked Wonder Girl's direction, and Starfire became more accepted after receiving an entire story arc devoted to the conflict between her and her sister, Blackfire.

While men wrote most of the letters printed, there were women who extensively identified with the female characters. This can be seen in Alicia Wu's letter, where the main reason she loved TNTT was the characters themselves. "They seem to be more than just characters in a comic book. They are people, and as such they each have a definite personality and feelings." One aspect of the series that Wu noticed was that the three female characters were just as powerful as the male characters, which she believed "makes up for the fact that they are in the minority." Regarding each female character, Wu noted that Wonder Girl had matured since the last iteration, displaying more

[48] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #5, 26.

confidence and self-reliance. For Raven, she was the guiding force of the group. For Koriand'r, "(I'm loathe to call her Starfire) is attracted to Robin, and she and Wonder Girl are already close friends." Wu even commented on how the Teen Titans should develop in the future, stating that it "should definitely become a close-knit group, but not so close that they don't have differences of opinion once in a while. Conflicts between the various members will keep the group exciting, as long as you don't overdo it and make them on the outs all the time." This letter showed that the letter writer was well aware of the characterization of these characters. Wu's letter also revealed that she felt confident enough to advise the creators on where to take these characters in future stories as they continued developing them. While there were numerous compliments on the characters similar to the style of Wu's letter, there were also a handful of criticisms.[49]

While Wu noted that the female characters were just as powerful as their counterparts, Mark Lagasse believed the two sides were uneven in one aspect. Printed in issue #15, after a story arc that only featured the female characters of the group for a couple of issues, Lagasse noticed that the women were dominating the comic book. Because of this, "there was a noticeable lack of humor this time around. It gave the comic a different tone, not necessarily a better one, but different nonetheless. How come the women couldn't crack any one-liners?" In response to Lagasse's letter, Wolfman believed that humor "had little place in this tale, and would, we think, have rudely interrupted the proceedings." Lagasse was valid only because the female lineup did not have a character like Changeling, who was purposefully created to throw out one-liners. However, some

[49] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #7, 26.

readers felt the need to comment on issues that were more critical than the lack of humor on the female side.[50]

Later in the first volume, in issue #31, Margie Spears had a part of her letter directed to the leading pencil artist, George Pérez. Spears had written, "Even though you are reportedly pleased at the way you are now drawing the girls, I'm not happy about the diet you have put Wonder Girl on. Let Raven and Kory be skinny, but WG has been historically, as Changeling would say, stacked. The boyish Kristy McNichols figure just is not *her!* Please put back the *zoftig* into WG!" Spears' letter shows that it is not just the male readers who are interested in seeing the voluptuous drawings of these female characters. Wolfman seemed to do his best to avoid the issue when he started by stating, "we kinda think Wonder Girl looks about perfect the way she is, but I will gladly pass your comments along to George. If anything, our Mr. Perez certainly likes his women zoftig." The response from the editor was somewhat dismissive, and it did not come off as caring about what Spears thought was an issue in the representation of women's bodies in this medium. As if to confirm this issue, a similar letter appeared three months later.[51]

Amy Sacks began her letter by stating that it was no surprise why *TNTT* had become the DC comic book of the 1980s. However, her only problem with the series (and almost all other "group mags" for this matter) was the body images of female superheroes. Sacks wrote, "I'm no Miss America when it comes to face and figure, and just once, I'd like to see a heroine who isn't either." She continued in her letter,

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[50] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), John Costanza (l), "The Brotherhood of Evil Lives Again!," *The New Teen Titans* #15, DC Comics, Inc., (January 1982), 28.

[51] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), Ben Oda (l), "Inferno!," *The New Teen Titans* #31, DC Comics, Inc., (January 1982), 28.

describing the female characters that have appeared in the series: "I mean, Raven is a knockout, Donna is stunning, Kory is dazzling, Frances is a starlet, and now we have Tara, who's as beautiful as the lot of them put together." She then made her point loud and clear, "Just once, I'd like to see a heroine who is intelligent, powerful, deadly, and caring, BUT PLAIN-LOOKING. You'd be surprised at what it would do for the fragile egos of non-cover girls everywhere." Again, similar to the previous response, Wolfman responded dismissively, writing directly underneath the letter, "Amy, we kinda thought Terra was rather plain-looking--by super-heroine standards at any rate."[52] The creators appeared self-aware of issues with representations of strong female characters and did a decent enough job characterizing Wonder Girl and Raven. Nevertheless, Starfire seemed like a little boy's fantasy character regarding her outfit and parts of her dialogue. In terms of changing the body images of the female characters represented in their work, they appeared dismissive to such suggestions and humorously shrugged off such critiques of their work.

Most readers enjoyed that Gar Logan, aka Changeling (known initially as Beast Boy and then reverted to Beast Boy years later), was kept relatively unchanged from his appearances in the older series. With the power to change into any animal or beast he has seen, Gar by far has the most one-liners and "cracks" the most jokes out of the group. This level of campiness was what all characters emanated back in the original series. However, the creators added a little twist to Changeling in *TNTT*, playing off his campiness. Readers gained crucial insight into Gar's character in a single panel on issue #3. While on his own, Gar began talking to himself about what he and the others are

[52] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #34, 25.

going through as they try to form a new Teen Titans group. One line stood out the most: "And if I didn't keep telling jokes all the time I think my head would blow up from depression!"[53]

The Changeling is one of the first characters to exhibit signs and speak about his depression. Gary Thompson noticed this about the character and stated, "Gar's been an absolutely refreshing comic relief after nearly suffocating in the constant air of gloom and doom which surrounds his teammates. Besides, Changeling's speech to himself showed he still has feelings of depression but now he chooses to deal with these feelings more constructively by being snappy rather than snappish." While this tiny moment of characterization did not garner much notice in the *Titans' Tower* (there may have been more letters not printed), the series creators decided to continue this particular motif for Gar as the series moved forward.[54]

In issue #14, Gar opens up to the group about his anguish, which stemmed from losing his birth parents and then his adoptive ones. Having an emotional burst of dialogue, Gar told the other Teen Titans, "You think you understand this, but you really don't. For years I've been suffering because I've virtually seen two sets of parents killed. Oh, I've gone on, haven't I? Laughing like a lunatic – spouting stupid jokes – hoping they'd ease the pain. But you know, every joke only made the pain hurt more." After Gar leaves to chase down the villains of the story, Cyborg reveals to the other members of the

[53] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Frank Chiaramonte (i), Adrienne Roy (c), Ben Oda (l), "Enter: The Fearsome Five!," *The New Teen Titans* #3, DC Comics, Inc. (January 1981), 15.

[54] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), "...Like Puppets on a String!," *The New Teen Titans* #9, DC Comics, Inc. (July 1981), 26.

group, who do not seem to understand Gar's issue: "Lissen—That kid's confused and lost—he's tryin' ta prove himself because none of us takes him seriously. We lissen to his corny jokes an' think he's a flake an' order 'im around with a 'Do this,' or 'Do that'! But he's a kid who's deep down good…An' he's real troubled." Despite this dramatic characterization, not many letters were printed that discussed Gar and his depression. In addition, unfortunately for this selection of the series, it ends right before the popular "The Judas Contract" four-part storyline (issues #42-44 and *Tales of the New Teen Titans Annual* #3 (1984)). In the story, Gar learns that his love interest and recently added fellow team member, Terra, was an undercover spy for one of the Teen Titans' prominent villains. Perhaps this tragic story involving Gar would have garnered more printed letters—an issue to explore in future research. While little talk was published about Changeling, this next character had a brief moment in the limelight.[55]

One exciting outcome from characterization came from the somewhat lackluster Kid Flash (Wally West). Until issue #18 of *TNTT* (April 1982), he had very little going for him in terms of depth to his character besides some angst over his contentious relationship with the new character Raven. Kid Flash had been a team member of the original series and a mainstay character since then. Nevertheless, as far as his character goes, Wally had just been known as Flash's sidekick, with similar powers of superhuman speed. However, with issue #18 came a level of characterization that caught many readers off guard.

[55] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i) Adrienne Roy (c), Ben Oda (l), "Revolution!," *The New Teen Titans* #14, DC Comics, Inc. (December 1981), 17.

With issue #18, "A Pretty Girl is Like a – Maladi!," the story featured a guest appearance of Russian superhero Starfire (Leonid Kovar), who had worked with the group in the older series. Yes, fans quickly pointed out the name overlapping with the new team member Koriand'r (her codename was Starfire). To summarize the story, a rogue Russian wants to kill all Americans and uses Kovar's fiancé (Maladi) to do it by infecting her with a radioactive contagion that spreads through contact. Kovar comes to America (by orders of his government) to stop her from unknowingly spreading the contagion, and unfortunately for him, she dies in the end. Kovar kept his mission of eliminating Maladi a secret until the end (a big shocker for Kid Flash). All along, the Teen Titans group believed him to be attacking an innocent woman and tried to thwart his actions. While the group attempted to stop Kovar from his secret mission, Kid Flash took a tough stance against the Russian being in America in the first place.

Wally revealed more of his character when he stated, "I never **trusted** him, [Robin]. You can't trust any of his people. Look what they did in **Afghanistan** and **Angola**." Also, while talking to Kovar, "Don't tell me you've forgotten your old fighting partners already? Or is your memory as poor as your country's honor?" and "Sure you don't! Just like your government doesn't want to intimidate Poland, eh?" When the rest of the Teen Titans notice Wally's behavior and confront him, he responds, "Maybe because I knew our politics were always different. Look, I don't put you down for being Liberals. Why attack me for being a Mid-Western Conservative?" Wally continued this way throughout the story with lines such as "This time that Commie's not getting away!"

and “Mercy? My God! Did you people show mercy in Hungary or Czechoslovakia, in Afghanistan or Poland?”[56]

None of this politically charged Cold War dialogue escaped readers' notice; not until issue #22 did letters discussing issue #18 see print. There was such a reaction that Wolfman began the letter column stating that most people were concerned about Wally West and him coming out as conservative and expressing such hostile views against the Russian superhero. Selena A. Apple began her letter by stating that she had enjoyed the series since its preview issue; however, “What's Kid Flash’s Problem? I know he's conservative (I'm a liberal) but it doesn't seem that his views would make him so hostile. Couldn't he keep them to himself and allow [Kovar] to state his reasons for being here?... [Kovar] is not responsible for his country's actions.”[57]

These types of responses populated the *Titans’ Tower*. Greg Witol addressed his letter to “Comrades” instead of the usual “Dear Editor.” His letter was short and to the point, “I was really burned up at Kid Flash. As a Ukrainian I feel the same [Kovar] must have felt when those disgusting remarks were thrown at him.” Timothy R. Corrigan’s letter related his gladness that “someone is informing the young people of this great land of ours that the Russians are human beings who love, learn, feel, grow, think, and are not just villains.” In these “troubled times so many of my so-called fellow 'adults' are poised above the panic button because of the situation in Poland. I don't pretend to condone their actions but there is a difference between governments and people.” David Schmidt

[56] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #18, 6, 11, 14, 17, 19, 20.

[57] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), Ben Oda (l), "Ashes to Ashes!," *The New Teen Titans* #22, DC Comics, Inc. (August 1982), 26.

thought it was one of the best issues in the series so far and that he thought it was frighteningly realistic. Schmidt "enjoyed seeing a Russian character portrayed as the hero of the story. I'm sick and tired of seeing all Russians played as mindless drones of their government. As shown in this story, everyone has feelings and emotions. I hope Kid Flash understands."[58]

One of the more powerful responses from the letter column came from Omar Kozarsky. Addressed to Marv & George, Kozarsky wrote:

> During World War 2 there were many Germans who didn't agree with their government's decision to go to war just as Americans didn't like the idea of going to Vietnam. You think Russia is any different? Being Russian myself I know that not all the people favor their government's military actions. They are certainly not 'cold fish' armed with automatic rifles ready to take over helpless countries in the name of Communism.
>
> Kid Flash called Russia's honor poor. He makes it sound like we're the good guys and they're the bad guys. He thinks only of Russians slaughtering innocent people in their sleep. Someone should inform Wally of the incidents in the Dominican Republic and Vietnam. If Kid Flash and the other Titans set good examples for us to follow, perhaps the Cold War would be over for once and all.[59]

Most letters came out against Kid Flash's newly exposed political views. Some readers felt personally attacked, as seen in Witol and Kozarsky's letters. Even those who did not appear to have any ties to the regions (Russia or Ukraine) saw fit to counter the conservativism shown by Kid Flash with their liberal ideology. On the other hand, some were not so quick to condemn Kid Flash. Aaron Mathisen was glad Wally gained some depth to his character and believed this made the Teen Titans multi-faceted, stating, "There is no hard and fast rule that states that merely because one is young and obviously

[58] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #22, 26.

[59] Ibid.

sensitive to the problems of today that he can't be a political conservative." Paul D. Shiple liked issue #18 and thought the political confrontation in the comic book would have occurred precisely how it would in real life. Shiple thoroughly enjoyed Wally's conviction and stated, "I know many people who believe the same as Wally."[60]

Wolfman printed his response to those who had written in at the end of this Titans' Column. In his response, Wolfman explained that he and his team tried to do more than just villain-fighting and that since so many responded, he felt they succeeded. The writer wanted to clarify that they never said Wally was right in his beliefs. The real message was that it would be folly to "judge one many by the actions of his government." Wolfman continued, stating that Kid Flash was wrong in his attitude toward Kovar, but "there is nothing we know of that dictates that Super-heroes must always be right, that they must always be non-political--an impossibility when one must live in the world--or, for that matter, that they must be wrong."[61] Interestingly enough, in an interview in *The Comics Journal*, almost half a year after issue #22 came out, Wolfman explained his method of characterizing Kid Flash after being asked why the character had been making "anti-Soviet cracks." Wolfman believed that some of it was exaggerated. "What you try to do sometimes to establish a character the first time is maybe go a touch overboard and then bring them back. Very often the younger readers will not understand the subtleties."[62] He went on to say that he would never go to that lengths again to establish a character, but he wanted a character with a conservative background. Wolfman

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Decker, "The New Teen Titans: An Interview with Marv Wolfman."

succeeded in this endeavor, whether this pleased or displeased his readers. It might be telling to say that no other issue in this first volume had as many political messages embedded into the story as this particular one. Perhaps such vivid reader reaction made Wolfman wary of devoting another story to politics. What was shown printed here were examples of readers from all across the political spectrum. Though most seemed to be turned off by Kid Flash's political stances, some related to it. The next and final character did not have as many letters concerning him as the previous. [63]

Probably the most iconic character of the *TNTT* series since its conception and to its contemporary form, Robin (aka Richard/Dick Grayson) stood as the leader of the group and was similar in many aspects to his adult counterpart, Batman. Having no superpowers, Robin had to rely on gadgets, wits, and feats of strength somewhat within the range of standard human capabilities (some acrobatics were exaggerated). This character was ripe for deep characterization, but unfortunately, there was nothing shown as dramatic as Gar's depression or revealing as Kid Flash's political views. Within this limited analysis selection, Robin's only real characterization was his rocky relationship with fellow team member Starfire and his angst as a sidekick living in the shadow of Batman. Unfortunately, most of this characterization was deeply explored in later stories outside the first volume. Part of the reason why it took so long for Robin to receive any characterization is that Wolfman wished to explore the newer characters more thoroughly before returning to the older characters. Another issue was that it was not easy to do anything dramatic with the character within the *TNTT* series because Robin was appearing alongside Batman in a different comic-book series at the same time. Any

[63] Decker, "The New Teen Titans: An Interview with Marv Wolfman."

change with Robin required coordination from two teams attempting to tell two different stories. Thus, it would take time to agree on the direction the character could start heading towards. This is not to say that readers were not happy with the character. In John Austin's letter in issue #38, he stated, "In The New Teen Titans Dick Grayson has been given more substance than several hundred issues of Detective and Batman comics ever did." Other letters mentioned how glad they were to see Robin finally having an intimate relationship with someone and perhaps ditching his alter ego as Batman's sidekick for something different. Sadly, this occurred after issue #40.[64]

Most of the individual letters presented in this analysis have been positive. While some might believe this was simply a ploy by Wolfman, who ran the *Titans' Tower*, it ultimately represented how the letters came into the office. In a foreword in the letter column for issue #4, Wolfman stated that as the piece was being written, the series had only been on sale for a week, and their offices were already packed full of letters with praise. "To date there have been no negative letters, which explains the overwhelming positive tone to the tomes below. We're really not trying to stack the Deck in our favor: we're just printin' 'em like we get 'em."[65] When asked directly in an email correspondence on how the letters were selected, Wolfman stated, "I chose letters that brought up interesting ideas. Also, 99% of the mail was positive but I always wanted to

[64] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), "Who Is Donna Troy?," *The New Teen Titans* #38, DC Comics, Inc. (January 1984), 24.

[65] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #4, 26.

publish at least one negative, if only to start some controversy." While 99% of the mail was positive, the 1% negative mail deserves attention.[66]

Bill Henley, Jr. did not believe that the series deserved the word "new" in its title. "So far there's been *nothing* new about them. The inter-group bickering and fighting, the monstrous embittered hero, the wisecracking, obnoxious hero, the cheesy super-villain group, the ridiculously overly-complicated plotlines stretching issue after issue…we've seen it all before, many, many times." Henley also gave a word of warning to the creators. Unless they rethought what they were doing with this comic-book series' direction and style and did not copy other super-group titles, this new run "will sink even faster than the last revival, despite the nice art and passable scripting." Wolfman started the response to Henley by stating they were sorry he did not like what they were trying to do with the title and that he was entitled to his own opinions. "With the introduction of more emphasis on their civilian identities, we believe the Titans has totally broken the mold of all other super-hero group books. Each character has their own life outside the Titans, and that is something unique unto ourselves." The response to Henley's letter tried to reassure him that what they were doing was something unique and that it would take a couple of issues for there to be enough characterization for these characters to develop more. Wolfman concluded his response, hoping Henley would keep reading and keep in touch if they changed his mind. Printed in issue #9, this is the first negative letter published for the series. All the previous letters had only been simple suggestions or minor complaints. Even though the series is unique in what it was trying to do, Henley

[66] From email correspondence with Marv Wolfman on February 28th, 2018.

was not entirely convinced about this new approach to comic books. Having been printed in issue #9, it would be reasonable to say that this letter was most likely written around issue #5. Perhaps characterization was not for everyone.[67]

While there have been letters showing who may not like certain aspects about specific characters or even outright did not enjoy the new series, this particular writer did not like the representation of war or the lack thereof. In regards to a battle in space that turned into an all-out war with the Teen Titans group fighting on one side, Stu Krull wrote his letter concerning the morality of presenting a war: specifically, presenting war in a comic book "without fully expressing the consequences of [it]." Printed in issue #30:

> Putting super-heroes in a war, a real war, seems to only glorify war, presenting it as one long super-hero fight, where no one really gets hurt or dies. The battle on Okaara barely showed any of the dark, terrible realities of war, and the narrative only hinted at it. Only the scene on page 7 with Raven and the bleeding alien convinced me that it was properly handled. But it was so brief! Please, remember it is your responsibility to show the children reading your comics that reality is different. If you're truly trying for credibility and realism in your comics, then do it. Page seven was the only time in the entire war sequence where someone was actually shown bleeding… Thank you for letting me get that off my chest, and please remember that art, even in a comic book, is an imitation of life...and death.[68]

In response to Krull's trying to inform these creators what their responsibilities should be, Wolfman took a pointed stance against Krull's opinion. Wolfman immediately disagreed with Krull, stating, "It is not our responsibility to let children know the differences between fantasy and reality. Our job is to do an entertaining comic, one that will hopefully thrill you, keep you interested and get you involved." The creator of the new

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[67] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #9, 26.

[68] Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), Ben Oda (l), "Nightmare!," The New Teen Titans #30, DC Comics, Inc., (April 1983), 24.

series stated that it was up to the parents of young readers to explain the difference between fantasy and reality.[69]

Continuing, Wolfman said that the medium indeed had taste and morality guidelines, "but to try and cater so much to the younger crew would mean losing older, more mature readers." In regards to these young readers, Wolfman believed there was a tendency that as one gets older, one believed that the younger was "dumber." He believed otherwise. "I have a daughter who is now six years old. She's know the differences between what's real and what's not for several years. Children are not stupid. And to treat them as such would, to my mind, be a mistake." This had been one of the more heated exchanges between the reader and creator. Coming off the Comics Code Authority, which regulated what could and could not be shown in a comic book, it would be no wonder why Wolfman took such a hard stance against Krull's opinion about responsibilities.[70]

Unfortunately, no follow-up letter was printed if Krull had written a response to Wolfman's. There were so many letters coming in each month that topics for each new letter column had to focus entirely on a newer topic, so rebuttals to Wolfman's responses never appeared. What has been shown are some of the more critical letters that were printed within the *Titans' Tower*. Both positive letters and negative letters could be critical of the series. So far, only minor changes have been suggested to the series' creators. However, there had been a few instances where readership and letters written by fans did indeed change this comic-book series drastically.

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[69] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #30, 24.

[70] Ibid.

While this research has been primarily based on the printed letters within *The New Teen Titans* series, there have been some avenues to venture into the letters that were not printed. That avenue is through Wolfman himself, not through a current interview, as asking someone to remember a specific letter from almost forty years ago would be a longshot, but through interviews and commentary on Wolfman contemporary to the series. For the first significant example, in issue #14, Wolfman started the *Titans' Tower* with some messages for the readers about what letter publishing and production schedule was like at the office. Before ending his opening, Wolfman wished to thank Karen E. Weber of Huntington Beach, California, for her "very long and fascinating letter on Gar Logan." Weber had raised many points concerning Changeling that the creators would "definitely incorporate into future issues."[71] Of course, for this analysis, that sentence raised many alarms for examining what Weber had written to the editors. What changes did she cause for this character? Why did the creative team choose to heed her consultation?

Even though it was mentioned earlier that asking Wolfman about a specific letter would be a long shot, it was thought he might have remembered such a character-altering letter. Alas, a brief email exchange with Wolfman himself confirmed the original fear. Luckily, the overall research of this first volume was not finished when Wolfman's disparaging reply to Weber's letter arrived. In issue #28, Andrew J. MacLaney asked about Changeling's powers. In issue #24, Changeling and the rest of the team were in outer space, fighting aliens and Starfire's sister, Blackfire. For a few pages, Changeling

[71] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #14, 26.

was shown to have changed into a Gordanian, a fictional sentient alien race. MacLaney "was under the impression that he could only change into Earth creatures, hence his old name, Beast Boy. Was I wrong? Are his powers more like those of Chameleon Boy of The Legion of Super-heroes?" An interesting question indeed, as Changeling was shown to have only been able to change into living animals on earth and dinosaurs. Wolfman began by answering MacLaney's inquiry, stating that Gar could transform into any animal he has seen, and they believed the Gordanians to be some type of animal.[72]

For whatever reason, Wolfman then felt compelled to extend this answer about Changeling and decided to give more print time to Weber:

> Gar has also come to serious attention of Changeling fan number one. Karen Weber of California, who recently sent George and me a massive 60 plus page researched treatise on animals, their abilities and how the Changeling can use each animal to its utmost. She cross-referenced the work, set it up by ability and animal, and has generally made life much easier for George and me. The work deserves some sort of prize, and Karen, hopefully by the time this sees print, you" have received our thanks. You did a great job and we truly thank you for it. Now there will be no excuses when we make mistakes.[73]

While this was in no way a substitute for being able to examine all sixty-plus pages of the original letter sent by Weber, this confirmation by Wolfman was one of the first significant instances where reader responses to the series shaped *TNTT*. Part of creating characters would have been designing creative uses for a superhero's powers, especially with a character like Changeling. Now future instances of Changeling using his powers have more than likely derived from Weber's work and research on the possibilities of the character. This was a primary instance of how readership directed a character's makeup,

[72] Wein, *The New Teen Titans* #28, 24.

[73] Ibid.

but the following example is how readership shaped the representation of a character, specifically Cyborg.

Printed in issue #40, John K. Austin's letter stated that he loved Cyborg and his apparent love interest, Sarah Simms. Simms was a character introduced early in the series and has made several appearances. Still, the relationship between her and Victor has hovered around being close friends or perhaps even more than that. Austin said in his letter that Cyborg and Simms' relationship "could be groundbreaking and I encourage you to move it forward. You've got my support." Unfortunately for Austin, an earlier fan letter sent to Wolfman decided the fate of Cyborg and Simms.[74] In the interview with *The Comics Journal*, Wolfman was asked if he was edging Cyborg towards an interracial romance with Simms.

At first, Wolfman considered it but thought there was nothing wrong with a "good healthy friendship that is not based on a sexual background between them." However, a letter that he received sealed this decision. A letter was sent from a "black leader who felt that we had seen a lot of interracial relationships, but we haven't seen that many good, solid black-black relationships to show that a black hero doesn't always go together with a white heroine and vice-versa." That letter came early in the relationship between the two characters and reconfirmed Wolfman's decision for them to be good friends. As a character, Cyborg did not have an actual girlfriend at the time. Therefore, Wolfman decided to keep the relationship at that level. No other details were given about the letter

[74] Marv Wolfman & George Pérez (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), Romeo Tanghal (i), Adrienne Roy (c), Bob Lappan (l), "Lifeblood!," *The New Teen Titans* #40, DC Comics, Inc., (March 1984), 24.

and who wrote it. No printed letter within the first volume matched what was written in the letter either.

Much could be speculated on who this "black leader" was, but it would appear that he understood the issue of having an interracial relationship happen. It was rare for black male superheroes to appear in comic books, even rarer for black female superheroes, let alone substantial black female characters. There were no prominent black female characters in the first volume of *TNTT*. The only nonwhite female in the team is Starfire, whose skin has a tinge of orange, but even then, she passes off as human (and perhaps as a white female, to be specific) when she is out in public (if she is not in her revealing costume). As for female characters, regarding significant changes by reader response, another example came from a different interview regarding Raven.[75]

In the interview with *Lone Star Comics* (#117), Wolfman revealed that he had no interest in writing for the mystical character Raven. The DC and Marvel comic universes were both filled with these types of characters, such as The Phantom and Dr. Strange. It was not until Pérez did a visual mockup for the character that Wolfman came around to the idea of the character. Both Pérez and Wolfman knew what the character's face looked like, but since Raven wore a hood that kept it in a shadow, they did not intend to show readers her face to keep the aesthetic of mysticism. Pérez stated, "We thought we'd wait at least a year before Raven's face was revealed, but initial reaction was negative. It was the fans. They thought she was too mysterious, and couldn't identify with her." As if to confirm this analysis from back in 1982, Wolfman continued the conversation by stating,

[75] Decker, "The New Teen Titans: An Interview with Marv Wolfman."

"This is an example of when fan comments actually affect the book. It was so overwhelming that fans thought she was A) The Phantom Stranger's daughter—which we knew all along she wasn't—or B) that they didn't like that kind of character." The creators decided that Raven's face would be revealed in issue #4 to make her more relatable to the readership. On a side note, Raven's face was wholly redrawn for issue #8, but since her face was covered by shadows from her hood, it seemed readers did not notice the difference, or at least did not care enough at that point to write letters to the editors. Surprisingly, none of these letters concerning Raven's relatability appeared in the *Titans' Tower*. However, some letters speculated who she might have been or if she was the daughter of some other important DC character. Nevertheless, none criticized the mysteriousness. This might be telling of how Wolfman may have played out the makeup of the letter column itself. Ultimately, whether through massive written feedback or individual letters, the *Titans' Tower* was an active sphere of communication between creators and readership. The ability to be an active sphere has made this analysis all the more critical in understanding the TNTT audience.[76]

Individual letter writers have altered the series, such as Weber's 60+ page letter that helped define Changeling's abilities and usage. There were also groups of feedback on events that shaped future storylines, such as when Kid Flash came out as Midwestern conservative. After that story, politics completely vanished from the storylines (at least within the first volume). On the other hand, there were also times when the creators

[76] "New Issue Club Express: The Titans Speak!" *Lone Star Comics*, no. 117.

brushed aside or wholly ignored readers who had written in, concerned about the representation of women within the series.

While individual letter writers have affected the series, another important aspect is considering the masses' impact. Readership's reactions to consistently bad renditions of black characters and then black superheroes in comics, such as Mal from the original *Teen Titans*, led to the creation of Cyborg, a character who helped break the mold of "young angry black" characters. With anger no longer tied to race, Cyborg was able to reach more readers who could relate to him. This sentiment was reflected in the letters published in the *Titans' Tower*.

Further research for this analysis could be expanded in three ways. The first would be comparing the letters in the series' previous iterations to those in this analysis and letters found in later issues. As the series grows closer and closer to the onset of the internet, it would be fascinating to see how the readers who wrote letters evolved and reacted to this cultural change. The second way would be to compare the letters of this series to a similar series that started during the arrival of characterization within comic books. The *Superboy* series, rebooted in the 1980s for DC Comics and sold strictly to comic-book shops, would be an excellent comparison. Though not a comic book based on an entire group of characters like *TNTT*, *Superboy* would be superb as it is based on a longtime and well-known superhero, Superman. The third way to expand this analysis would be to dive into the digital humanities. As previously mentioned in an article's use of OCR software to digitize letter columns from the *Amazing Spider-Man* series, the tool would be a great asset in seeing the larger and perhaps more subtle patterns often missed when examining a large body of letters.

This analysis has proven quite handily that reader response shaped *TNTT*. Through studying their market, individual letters, and how the series' creators responded, it has become more apparent who the audience was, what they were concerned with in their letters, and why they wrote them in the first place. The makeup of printed letters seen might be an indication as to the makeup of readership in general. Though men wrote most of the printed letters, other writers were women, non-white, old and young, politically left and right-leaning, and so forth. The letter writers themselves were diverse, and they were part of the readership. A shift in how comic books were sold narrowly focused on a new range of older readers who were more self-sufficient than the younger audiences. These readers were concerned with what was happening to the characters they could relate to. The series' diverse cast of characters allowed a wider range of audiences to include themselves more readily and easily than previous superhero comic books. Also, the letters column did act as a social network and gave letter writers a chance for their voices to be heard by a large group of like-minded individuals.

There have been too few attempts to analyze fan mail within the past four decades: Jeffrey A. Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans: Milestone Comics and Their Fans* (2000), and others. At the end of the highly critical work *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (2005), Jean-Paul Gabilliet wrote: "fan mail constitutes a largely unexplored source of information about the reception of characters, stories, and creators."[77] However, fan mail goes much further than that. Fan mail is an opportunity to understand the people consuming this

[77] Jean-Paul Gabilliet, Bart Beaty, and Nick Nguyen, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 363.

culture, consuming comics so much so that since the 1940s, the comic industry has thrived and evolved for well over half a century into a significant cultural force in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER 2

"UNCANNY LETTERS OF THE X-MEN:

'AND SINCE I CAN'T TALK TO HIM, I TALK TO YOU.'"

Fight fiercely, X-Men, fight, fight, fight,
Don't let your fellow mutants down.
The Hellfire Queen is dressed in white,
But black and yellow's going to win this round.
Though we have sent the old Brood Queen away,
We will remember her on Mother's Day.
("M is for the million eggs you laid, Dear.")

Fight well, New Mutants, fight, fight, fight,
Show them that these kids don't flee.
Although the X-Men have the might,
Rahne'll chase Lockheed up a tree.
("Och, he scorched me tail!")
Though Kitty calls us X-Babies now,
She'll change her tune when 'Berto shows her how.
("Colossus, it's not what you think!")
Karma will possess them all, and fight, fight, fight.
("Make them fight themselves!")

Fight fiercely, X-Men, for this joint,
It's been our home for many years.
We'll show them mutants have a point.
("On the tall.")
Proclaim our cause until the public hears.
We will defend these ivy-covered halls.
If all else fails, we'll just walk through the walls.
("Good God, there's muties coming out of the woodwork!")
Let's win this one for mutantkind, and fight, fight, fight.

For Xavier's dream we'll fight, fight, fight.
The hope he gave us must not fail.
We'll win some laws for mutant rights,
And Gyrich won't keep us in jail.
And we will know our victory has come
When Kit can say, "I'm a mutant, Mom!"
("You must have got it from your father's side.")
So for our children, mutants all, fight, fight , fight.

Fight fiercely, mutants, one and all.
We'll even let Magneto play.
We'll help him win his latest brawl
If he'll agree that humanity can stay.
Our basic causes are the same, of course.
There's got to be a better way than force.
But till we find it, mutants all, we'll fight, fight, fight.

Fight fiercely, X-Men, for the chance
To someday throw our masks away.
("Not you, Cyclops!")
We'll walk outside in shirt and pants
And throw our colored long-johns in the bay.
And we'll abolish the old phrase for good:
"Muties! There goes the neighborhood!"
Let's win this one for real estate and fight, fight, fight!
by A. Willoughby & A. Weisner
(Whichever line you particularly dislike, the other one wrote it!)[78]

If the tune roughly seems familiar in any way, it is because two comic-book readers wrote it to match Tom Lehrer's "Fight Fiercely Harvard." Alison Weisner and her unnamed friend from Portland, Oregon wrote in a letter to the "X-ecutives" (the editor and assistant editor at the Marvel Comics Group), which saw publication in the #188 comic-book issue of *The Uncanny X-Men* of December 1984. Sometime before writing this letter, Weisner and Willoughby were distraught to learn that the fictional Xavier Academy, home of mutants and the superhero group, X-Men, had no college fight song. What you see above is their remedy to the dilemma. The response to this gift of a letter is remarkably short in comparison, though, "As humbly — and far more gratefully — accepted."

[78] Ann Nocenti (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Romita, JR (a), Dan Green (a), Tom Orzechowski (l), Glynis Wein (c), "Legacy Of The Lost," *The Uncanny X-Men* #188, Marvel Comics Group, (Dec 1984), 31.

More could have been said about the effort, research, and fantastic ability to summarize eighty issues worth of narrative (Hellfire Club, Magneto, New Mutants, mutant rights, character romances) into one fight song. Though this letter is just one of the hundreds that made print for this series and one of the possibly thousands that were mailed to the Marvel Comics Group editors, we again see the importance of these letters from readers, by seeing how much effort and care that was put into crafting them. *The Uncanny X-Men* (UXM) series parallels *The New Teen Titans* (TNTT) in many aspects. Still, the UXM has marked differences in the letters published in relation to its story regarding criticism, gender, race, and politics.

While we have seen how audiences have shaped the publication trajectory of TNTT through writing letters, there were also specific themes that could be sussed out by grouping similar topics within the analyzed collection. The two series, TNTT and UXM, have quite a number of similarities: superhero group, characterization, publication timing, rejuvenation of an older series, award-winning, and sales-topping figures. Does this mean the topics found in UCX will be the same as those in TNTT? Or could the readers have written in letters that are dramatically different? These two similar series from different publishers present a unique opportunity to understand audience reception history concerning comic books.

The primary purpose of this chapter will be to examine the audience reception via published letters of UXM from 1975 to 1985 in comparison to what was found in the previous chapter regarding TNTT. Even though the creators groomed and pieced together the letter page, these forums still consist of letters written to the creators. Could specific story topics have generated similar or different audience reactions? What parallels can be

found? Or will there be no differences at all? The previous chapter covered several theoretical issues and topics used when approaching this type of research; this chapter will continue to use those methods and attempt to bolster the theoretical framework of this dissertation with additional works. Answers to the questions raised about this unique publication situation will come to the surface as I examine the publication history of the series, themes found in the letters, similarities and differences between the letters in the two series, and a breakdown of the makeup of the letters examined during this timeframe.

As discussed and shown in the previous chapter, published letters in comic books, or "lettercols" labeled as such by comics fans, or paratexts as marked by academics, have a history of being marginalized in early comic history, even being removed from comic books when being re-printed by publishers or digitally scanned for archives. However, "book history and print culture scholars have shown [that] paratexts serve as thresholds, mediating relationships between authors, readers, publishers and others involved in textual production or consumption of the text."[79] French literary theorist Gérard Genette states that texts rarely appear by itself in a naked state. They come with "reinforcement and accompaniment" by paratext. If not explicitly evident, this idea is transferrable to comics. For texts of all manner, paratext "surround[s] it and prolong[s] it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb, but also in its strongest meaning: to *make it present*, to assure its presence in the world, its 'reception' and its consumption," Genette continues by stating that "paratext is for us the means by which a text makes a

[79] Leah Misemer, "Reading Comics at the Threshold: A Round Table on Letter Columns & Other Comics Paratexts," *The Middle Spaces: Comics, Music, Culture* (blog), September 15, 2020, accessed April 14, 2022, https://themiddlespaces.com/2020/09/15/reading-comics-at-the-threshold-part-1/?blogsub=confirming#subscribe-blog.

book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public." This reinforces the argument for the importance of published letters in audience reception. The comic book creators may curate the letter column, but they are still part of the whole object that is a comic book reading experience.[80]

While this focus is on the letter pages of UXM, it is essential to remember why these letters were written in the first place. In the Blue Age of comic books (Blue is used in sequential order from the previous Bronze Age to signify the era of digital comics), a term coined by comics scholar Adrienne Resha, anyone with access to the internet can post a one-day turnabout review of the comic book they just read, explaining why they did or did not like it. Four decades ago, a fan would have to wait three to six months to hopefully see their printed letter, name, and address on the letter column page. Before the explosion of conventions, the myriad of fan clubs, or comic-book stores, letter pages were the central hub for fans almost worldwide to express their like or dislike of a comic-book story publicly. "Chosen by the title's editor (or, in some cases, the writer), a few lucky fans would get the opportunity to share their opinion with not only the creators, but a captive audience of fellow fans as well. In fact, some of the most prolific fans had letters printed almost every month in various titles, becoming minor celebrities in their own right." A blog post by Mark Engblom, an avid reader of the *Iron Man* series from the 1980s, recalls a letter he had written when he was only thirteen. Having just read *Iron Man* #132 (1980), Engblom was baffled about how Iron Man could beat the Hulk in a fight. After writing a scathing letter and sending it off, Engblom happened to pick up *Iron*

[80] Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean, "Introduction to the Paratext," *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 261, https://doi.org/10.2307/469037.

Man #138 six months later, and to his surprise, there was his letter printed in the letter column. "I have to admit, it does feel kinda cool having made it into a pre-internet letters page, back when it actually felt like an accomplishment having your opinion out there for all to see. For that matter, it'll be there for all time, printed in the back of an actual comic book...still floating around in collections around the world. It's only a molecule of 'immortality', to be sure, but 'Fanboy Valhalla' nonetheless." Of course, entry into Fanboy Valhalla came with a price of a defensive response to their story choice by the writer printed underneath Englbom's letter, but he made it.[81]

While looking at a firsthand account for understanding one of the many reasons why fans write letters, namely for reviews/likes and dislikes, is excellent for a basic understanding of personal motivations for letter writing,there also needs to be a continual visit to find a deeper understanding of comic-book fans writing letters through theoretical frameworks. In the previous chapter, I brought up Jennifer Hayward's book, *Consuming Pleasure*, regarding the treatment of audiences as passive consumers of culture. For this chapter, let us begin by looking at the social relationships of fans and comics. In an article titled "Comic Book Fandom: An Exploratory Study Into The World Of Comic Book Fan Social Identity Through Parasocial Theory," Anthony Ramirez investigates how comic-book fans identify with comic-book characters through parasocial theory to gauge different levels of identification and fandom/attachment. Ramirez explains parasocial theory is "based on an interpersonal relationship that viewers or readers develop, bonding with performers or celebrities that they see on screen or with characters

[81] Mark Engblom, "The Letters Page = Fanboy Valhalla," *Comic Coverage,* May 7, 2007, https://comiccoverage.typepad.com/comic_coverage/2007/05/the_letters_pag.html.

in their favorite book."[82] These relationships or attachments are often referred to as parasocial relationships or parasocial interactions. Through surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and gratification media-based research, parasocial theory has been confirmed to show that these relationships affect their audience members. "To such fans, these characters are not just stories in a book or in a movie. These characters are a part of the person's life and having at least some type of impact on them, not quite as a real life person has but in the sense of who they are and aspire to be." For the comic-book fans that participated in the studies, their favorite character(s) always seemed to have impacted or inspired the person's life. In particular, the "moral code" of the character was what was frequently cited the most by the participants. Having their favorite character do the "right thing" regardless of what situation they were in was what was admired most. For one participant, "the core concept of having an alter ego, somebody that can be an everyday citizen and also put on a suit, for the sole purpose of protecting. I think that is the initial concept that drew me into comics in the first place."[83]

To be sure, fans wished to be more like their favorite characters, but they also hoped for the characters to be more like them. As scholar Christopher J. Galdieri explores in his chapter, "Leadership Elections in the Silver- and Bronze-Age Legion of Super-Heroes" within Benjamin Woo and Jeremy Stoll's edited collection, *The Comics World: Comic Books, Graphic Novels and Their Publics* (2021), fans wished for characters to reflect their concerns of diversity and representation. During the Bronze and Silver Ages

[82] Anthony Robert Ramirez, "Comic Book Fandom: An Exploratory Study Into The World Of Comic Book Fan Social Identity Through Parasocial Theory," *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*, 2015, 56, https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd/1131.

[83] Ramirez, "Comic Book Fandom," 65-66.

of the Legion of Super-Heroes group (*Adventure Comics*, late 1960s), "The Legion Outpost" (letter column title) held elections for which readers cast ballots for the fictional team's leader position. "The results of the Legion's elections suggest that the readers often advanced an expansive conception of heroism by electing characters who did not necessarily fit the heroic mold that was prevalent in superhero comics at the time. Legion fans, in many cases, ensured that the team was led by characters who were female, underestimated, or identified by readers (if not depicted by creators) as gay. In doing so, these fans challenged existing conceptions of what heroes-super and otherwise-truly are."[84] Fans took this opportunity to elevate what would have been a mere popularity contest or random selection to help make the comic more accessible/identifiable for readers. In regards to this study, Galdieri and Ramirez's works show the importance of various relationships and concerns fans had between comics and readers, which often get expressed and responded to by creators within these letter columns. However, this push to make superhero characters more diverse and representative of readers did not come from just the fan side. The creators of UXM pushed the idea of character identity and meaning beyond the threshold of what was typical for comic-book series at that time.

In 2021, author Douglas Wolk chronicled his 27,000+ Marvel superhero comics reading journey in the appropriately named work, *All of the Marvels*. Beginning in 1961, Wolk walks through all of these creative works and publication history and argues that these Marvel comics constitute the "longest continuous, self-contained work of fiction

[84] Christopher J. Galdieri, Benjamin Woo and Jeremy Stoll (eds), "Leadership Elections in the Silver- and Bronze-Age Legion of Super-Heroes," *The Comics World: Comic Books, Graphic Novels and Their Publics* (Jackson: University of Mississippi. 2021), 182.

ever created: over half a million pages to date, and still growing."[85] Reading all of these comics is an impressive feat that I am jealous of and puts the number of issues I have read to shame. In his overview of the *X-Men* series within his chapter, "The Mutant Metaphor," Wolk shares his thoughts on the UCX series:

> For ten straight years, *The Uncanny X-Men* was the unstoppable behemoth of American mainstream comics both as a commercial enterprise and as art: a fantastically rich, inventive story about the meaning and value of group identity. Once the creative team of writer Chris Claremont, penciler/coplotter John Byrne, and inker Terry Austin set it in motion, the series' form and cast and setting constantly mutated, sometimes radically, around Claremont's assured, raconteurial voice.
>
> Claremont and Byrne figured out how to use the protean metaphor for oppression and marginalization that was embedded in *X-Men*'s premise, and turned it into rocket fuel for their stories. They gave their characters a level of emotional depth and complexity that was unprecedented in mainstream comics, and rewarded their long-term readers with narrative arcs that developed over months or years.[86]

In a footnote in Wolk's chapter on the X-Men series, the author makes an apt comparison explaining why these comic-book series keep readers coming back for more. Akin to what was brought up in my previous chapter, the footnote reads, "The podcast Jay and Miles X-Plain the X-Men—a weekly commentary on mutant comics—refers to X-Men as 'comics' greatest superhero soap opera,' which is a good way of putting it, although most soap operas don't have the luxury of treating clones, interdimensional travel, and resurrection as commonplace."[87] It was during this golden era of X-Men that Wolk claims

[85] Douglas Wolk, *All of the Marvels: A Journey to the Ends of the Biggest Story Ever Told* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021), Front Flap Jacket.

[86] Wolk, *All of the Marvels,* 136.

[87] Ibid., 136-137.

Claremont "mastered the storyteller's greatest trick... [the] imperative of making the audience need to find out *what happens next*."[88]

Besides having more character depth than previous superhero comic-book characters, what specifically allows readers to empathize with a group of mutants? Wolk states that the metaphor behind the mutant idea is the most ingenious innovation of the series. "Mutants as despised and oppressed Other."[89] These superheroes have sworn to protect a world full of people that hate them, a world of Homo sapiens (as opposed to the mutants being Homo superior). "That hate and fear is directed toward them as a group and binds them as a group. What either the X-Men or their enemies do is inseparable in the public eye from what mutants do."[90] What makes the mutant metaphor brilliant is its inherent ability to be generally applied to many groups of people. Its identification is group based, not towards a specific individual, increasing its generality. Combine this with the fact that persecution in the X-Men is coming from humans, not some giant alien from outer space, something everyone who reads the series can relate to. If you're a kid "growing up in a place where people hate and fear you for what you are—no matter what that is—then *X-Men* is the story that tells you that *you can be yourself, and it's going to be hard, but there is hope*."[91]

Jumping back almost two decades, however, 1963 marks the year a particular small company renamed itself the Marvel Comics Group. Within these first two years

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[88] Ibid., 147.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid., 157.

after the name change, Stan Lee and Marvel Comics launched several new titles as sales steadily increased. Some titles followed the same formula as *Fantastic Four*, and some went in new directions. However, what most of these new series have in common in comparison to their 1940s or even 1950s counterparts is the undeniable fact that they are still being published in one form or another today, decades later.[92] The original *The X-Men* series appeared in 1963, coincidentally the same month *The Avengers* was introduced. *The X-Men* featured a small group of teenage mutants with various superpowers. United and led by Professor Charles Xavier (Professor X), Cyclops, Marvel Girl, the Beast, the Angel, and Iceman battled evil mutants determined to eradicate humankind or take over the world. Co-created by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, this comic-book series is widely known for tackling social issues like stereotyping, racism, and diversity.[93]

The 1970s had its ups and downs for Marvel Comics Group: Kirby exiting, John Romita rising. For *The X-Men* series, no new stories were published after issue #66 in 1970; only new cover art with repeated stories were put out. However, in 1975, President of Marvel Comics James Galton proposed the following idea to Stan Lee and editor Roy Thomas. There "should be a team of super heroes from countries other than America."[94] Thomas seized this opportunity to revive the X-Men series with an international team. Shortly afterward, writer Len Wein and artist Dave Cockrum introduced the new mutant team in *Giant-Size-X-Men* #1 (1975). With Canadian mutant Wolverine, Colossus from

[92] Roy Thomas and Peter Sanderson, *The Marvel Vault: A Museum-in-a-Book with Rare Collectibles from the World of Marvel* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2007), 85.

[93] Thomas, *The Marvel Vault*, 90.

[94] Ibid., 129.

the U.S.S.R., Nightcrawler originating from Germany, Storm from Kenya, Thunderbird, a Native American of Apache descent, Sunfire of Japan, and Banshee from Ireland, though the latter three eventually dropped from the team. Nonetheless. from this giant-sized issue, the series became a bi-monthly publication.

It was only after one issue that Wein, who was already busy with other series, handed over the writing responsibility of *The Uncanny X-Men* to relative fledgling Chris Claremont who joined the Marvel group six years prior in 1969. "Influenced by such science-fiction writers as Robert Heinlein, Claremont rapidly developed a distinctive authorial voice. Together, he and Cockrum took the X-Men characters, both old and new, in surprising new directions." As the series progressed, it saw a number of different artists, like John Byrne taking over Cockrum's position in 1977. The one constant for this series was Claremont. With Claremont and Byrne's combined visions for the UCX, they pushed what was possible within the superhero genre to new boundaries.[95]

The 1980s saw the usurping of the creators of the 1960s comic books with those who had read them then. While *The Amazing Spider-Man* was still the most popular character at Marvel, hitting its 200th issue milestone in January of 1980, the UCX soon became the company's bestselling series. Over a decade since Claremont took over, UXM's "average monthly sales grew from about 116,000 copies an issue to more than 430,000, now an unthinkably huge figure." As author Wolk writes, "People who worked at comics stores in the mid-'80s, like me, knew that the biggest sales day of each month was the third Thursday, when the new issue of *X-Men* came out."[96] To put those sales

[95] Ibid., 130 & 132.

[96] Ibid., 137.

numbers into perspective, it would be “the equivalent of a pop band releasing a Top 10 single every month for ten years.”[97] Famous storylines such as the "Dark Phoenix Saga," "Days of Future Past," and additional characters added to the story, like young teenager Kitty Pryde and the infamous Hellfire Club, captivated readers more and more with each issue being released.[98]

For the "Dark Phoenix Sage," Jean Grey, aka Marvel Girl, emerges from what was supposed to be a deadly spacecraft crash landing as her new alter ego, the Phoenix. During the incident, a cosmic entity known as the Phoenix inhabited her body, giving her limitless power. A mutant villain named Mastermind from the Hellfire Club takes notice of Jean's newfound abilities and mesmerizes Phoenix over time, turning her into the Black Queen to serve the Hellfire Club. With this mind control, the "dark side of [Jean's] personality awakened, and Phoenix transformed into the insane Dark Phoenix, a threat to the entire universe. If Jean was like Dr. Jekyll, then Dark Phoenix was a cosmic version of Mr. Hyde, wielding limitless power." The X-Men team eventually fought and subdued the Dark Phoenix, with Professor X able to revert her to her original personality. However, the Dark Phoenix had destroyed (consumed, if you wish to be technically correct) an entire solar system filled with living, sentient beings.[99]

The then editor-in-chief Jim Shooter pushed for the idea that a character going insane was no excuse for slaughtering that many beings and that Jean must be punished. The saga ends with Jean committing suicide in front of her lover Cyclops to stop herself

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[97] Wolk, *All of the Marvels*, 137.

[98] Thomas, *The Marvel Vault*, 135.

[99] Ibid., 136.

from transforming into Dark Phoenix. This story has been compared to the Galactus Trilogy from the *Fantastic Four* by Lee and Kirby, one of the most recognizable comic books in publication history. The current X-Men series still revisits this incident, and the story transcended the comic-book medium to the movie screen in 2006.

The follow-up storyline, "Days of Future Past," was also a huge hit. The two-part issue story (#141 and #142) saw the X-Men team prevent a political assassination that, if successful, would have resulted in a dystopian future where the mutant population is forced into labor camps or even outright massacred. Again, this story transcended comic books unto the big screen in 2014. As the series progressed through the middle of the 1980s, sales continued to rise, making UXM the bestselling comic book for Marvel and the entire American comic-book industry.[100]

Specific sales records for 1980s mainstream comic books leave something to be desired as an accessible and reliable source. However, here is a snapshot of the sales for the UXM series in February of 1984. In a post of a comics sales chart from *Amazing Heroes* #49 (1984) by Sam Humphries, a list of titles that went on sale during that month was provided with a number given at the end of each listing which indicated the average number of copies the comic sold per store. Here are the top five (of the top 100): 1. *Marvel Secret Wars* #2 — 206.6, 2. *X-Men* #182 — 153.0, 3. *Alpha Flight* #11 — 112.0, 4. *Amazing Spider-Man* #253 — 103.4, 5. *Tales of the New Teen Titans* #43 — 96.2. As you can see, the jump between the top two and the bottom three of the five is quite significant. This is also pretty impressive for UXM, seeing it sitting comfortably second to the *Marvel Secret Wars* series, one of Marvel's most ambitious and popular cross-over

[100] Ibid., 137.

events. But as sales historian John Jackson Miller notes about the chart, these figures are only from Capital City Distribution, not including Diamond Comic Distributors. Therefore, it is not a complete picture of the comics sales world. Nonetheless, it says a lot about how well the series did then. Comic-book readers were buying issues of the UXM series, so what exactly did they say when they wrote letters to the creators?[101]

In October of 1978, issue #114 of UXM hit the shelves, and within its pages, David Zimmermann of 157 Lemay Gardens Ct., St. Louis, Missouri, found the letter he had written. Perhaps adding more to this excitement was a lengthy response from the editor. Zimmermann wrote a simple letter, offering general praise for the work being done in the series, but he also noted that he did not feel the need to write many letters simply "because I find no reason to waste paper. You people know exactly what you're doing and all you deserve is praise. Lots of praise."[102] While I could continue to type about the importance of these letters, I find that the response given to Zimmerman by the editor of the letter column does quite an excellent job:

> David—and all of you out there who echo his sentiments about writing (or not writing) to us—no letter we get can in any way be considered a waste. It's feedback, an expression of how our audience feels about the work we produce. Without these insights—whether from grade-school kids or grad school adults; a page of crayon or ball-point pen or a ten-page typed thesis—we're stumbling in the dark. And it doesn't just apply to complaints, or gleeful calls for No-prizes; sometimes, it's really nice just to get a letter like yours, that tells us we're doing good work and heading in the right direction. It's all important, pal; as important to us as the people who write them. Because without those people buying the mags in the first place, there wouldn't be a Marvel.[103]

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[101] Heidi MacDonald, "The Unbelievable World of 80s Comics Sales," *The Beat*, December 1, 2014, https://www.comicsbeat.com/the-unbeleivable-world-of-80s-comics-sales/, accessed April 25th, 2022.

[102] Roger Stern (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Jean Simek (l), Terry Austin (i), Glynis Wein (c), "Desolation," *The Uncanny X-Men* #114, Marvel Comics Group, (Oct 1978), 19.

[103] Stern, *The Uncanny X-Men* #114, 19.

The responder is right. It's all important. Whether a letter talks about easing the emotional turmoil of John Lennon's passing by comparing it to a superhero's death, simply asking the question "Why?" to a plot point, or even requesting a fictional thirteen-year-old girl to start doing drugs (more on that later), these letters represent a cacophony of responses to a comic-book series. But within this, almost chaotic mixed bag of faceless voices comes threads of common themes that can be drawn out. The first theme of letters found in this letter column, similar to that of TNTT, are letters of praise and critique. Often the first criticism of published letter columns is that the editors pick only those letters praising the work being done. However, this is far from the truth.

Printed letters of constructive criticism are found throughout the entire Claremont run of UXM. One of the more common complaints early on was that the series was still stuck in the bimonthly publishing phase, a problem Claremont inherited. A letter from Debbie Lipp (#116, DEC 1978) explains that if a comic-book series is bimonthly, it should be something rather remarkable. "One should find it essentially memorable. Two months is a long time to wait for your favorite comic to come around." Usually, within these two months, Lipp can reread her entire X-Men collection. Characters need to progress and evolve. The old narrative method of piecemeal one-shot stories that do not add to the greater story will no longer cut it, especially for a bimonthly publication period. "If this book were monthly, you could have gotten away with this story without a word of protest from me, but it's not. And, although the story was flawless, it means a long wait to find out what happens to my favorite super-folks." The editor's response agreed and acknowledged that all the points in Lipp's letter were valid. They also

informed Lipp and all the other readers that they'd addressed the issue because the series would be published monthly—a number of readers approved of this move.[104]

While some letter writers offered valid constructive criticism, others could have been more constructive in their critiques. Sam Mandel of Highland Park, Illinois, had his letter published in the October 1976 #101 issue. Starting his letter, Mandel states that the X-Men series was their favorite comic magazine for a long time. Alas, it was no longer. "The new X-Men are the worst Marvel creations I can remember. Chris' scripting is really lousy. He has left all the new X-Men as one-dimensional characters, the best (or worst) examples being Colossus and Storm." After taking issue with Claremont's writing, Mandel went after the art. "Dave's art is almost as bad as Chris' writing. He is great at drawing aircraft such as the Harrier and Space Shuttle, but I've never seen Jean look so ugly, and the way he draws Scott, well, it is so awful it pains me to think of it."[105] Luckily for the editors at Marvel, Mandel did not write their letter to criticize the series but to offer a helping hand:

> All is not yet lost, however. here is my plan to save the X-Men:
>
> 1) Have Colossus and Storm get married and leave the X-Men and go back to Africa or some other place, as long as it is far away.
>
> 2) Kill off Nightcrawler by having him save the group at the cost of his own life. He was a poorly conceived character in the first place, since he can not have a real alter-ego, and a super hero can't become a 'real' character without one. After all, what would Spider-Man be without Peter Parker?
>
> 3) Have the Banshee return to Ireland. Though he is a good character, he is not good with a team. Use him as a guest star on occasion, but not too often.

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[104] Roger Stern (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), Tom Orzechowski (l), Glynis Wein (c), "To Save the Savage Land," *The Uncanny X-Men* #116, Marvel Comics Group, (Dec 1978), 19.

[105] Archie Goodwin (ed), Chris Claremont (w), Dave Cockrum (a), Frank Chiaramonte (i), J. Costanza (l), B. Wilford (c), "Like A Phoenix, From the Ashes!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #101, Marvel Comics Group, (OCT1976), 18.

> 4) Have the new new X-Men composed of Cyclops, Marvel Girl, Iceman, Angel and the Wolverine. The Wolverine is really the only good new X-Men, and I see great potential for development of his personality, his evident hatred of his claws (I love the way they come out of his hands), his loneliness, etc. He is the perfect replacement for the Beast in the new new X-Men.
>
> 5) Replace Chris Claremont and Dave Cockrum with anyone![106]

Not everyone was a fan of the new team lineup for the X-Men series, as shown by Mandel's letter. Nor were some fans excited for the new writer and artist Claremont and Cockrum. But there is always resistance or hate for change in many aspects of comic books, especially creators or character lineups. The editor was not afraid to print letters such as this one, something Mandel practically dared them to do. Mandel continues in their letter, "I don't expect this letter to be printed, but I think that many people feel the way I do, and it's up to you, Stan, to do something about it. I used to end all my letters with 'BRING BACK THE X-MEN,' and I'll say it again this time: BRING BACK THE REAL X-MEN!"[107]

First, Mandel addressed this letter to Stan Lee, not the usual-seen Marvel editor or Claremont. Lee, of course, co-created the original series with Kirby. Secondly, this letter is reminiscent of an issue with most fandoms happening today, namely toxic fandom entitlement of popular culture. However, not only did the editor choose to print this letter, he took the opportunity to call out the reader, explaining that they were in the minority with those who did not care for the direction the series was going. "We're going to let your letter speak for itself, Sam. Of course, we disagree with your comments and suggestions. In our opinion, those changes would totally destroy the book—but then,

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[106] Goodwin, *The Uncanny X-Men* #101, 19.

[107] Ibid.

we're prejudiced." They continue to say that of the few hundred letters they received regarding their most recent story arc, Mandel's and about a half-dozen were the only ones who did not like where Claremont and Cockrum were taking the series. The editor could have stopped there but instead gave an open invitation to everyone else to chime in. "Anyone in the audience care to response to Mr. Mandel's letter? You write 'em an' we'll (meaning this armadillo—Claremont and Cockrum being too cheap/lazy to help out, the bums) read 'em. And print (some of) 'em."[108] One response to Mandel's letter was published three issues later (#104) by letterhack (a person who regularly gets published in comic-book letter columns) Jo Duffy. Though she starts her letter stating how she loves the series and offering praise to Claremont and Cockrum for their writing and art style, she ends her letter with a comment towards Mandel. Duffy wrote, "Sam Mandel has right to his opinion, but anyone who could dislike this comic must be out of the twilight zone." A scathing response to Mandel's letter, indeed. Duffy's letter earned her a response from the editors giving her thanks and specifically mentioning Claremont and Cockrum sending their thanks.[109]

As previously stated, any change to a popular series, especially one that introduced a variety of new characters like Ororo (Storm), a black superhero that has power over the weather, there will be resistance or even backlash. As the UXM series progressed, Ororo had great character arcs, which included a drastic change of looks from attire fitting of "Storm Goddess" to embracing punk style with a Mohawk. She even eventually took over the role of team leader for the group, but she also temporarily lost

[108] Ibid.

[109] Ibid., 19.

her powers later on.[110] However, after several years of publication, one reader was determined to eliminate the character. C. Chen wrote to Claremont directly, saying they hate Storm. "She is an arrogant, self-pitying brat who has no right to be on a good super-hero team, much less in a good comic book. I think seriously that she should be killed off. I know it might not mesh with your future plans, but please spare us." Chen felt the last few stories based around Ororo were lifeless and dull. They do not care what happens to the character, "except maybe that she has a horrible death." They make it clear that they have always wanted Ororo to die. Not only is Ororo a boring character to Chen and despite the writer's insistence that she is a beautiful woman, "the majority of people I talk to think she is ugly, callous, uncaring and would make a great bad guy. Kill her, marry her off, or give her a lobotomy, I don't care. Just get rid of this sop." Chen wishes Claremont would write about any other character than Storm. Much like in the spirit of the response to Mandel's letter, the column's editor let Chen know that opinions are not absolute truths: "It's a free country, 'C.', and everyone's entitled to their own opinion."[111]

There are different forms of criticism, like Mandel's or Chen's, for instance. There are also letters with viable criticisms, with a higher level of engagement with the popular culture material at hand. We arrive at another printed letter Debbie Lipp wrote (#121, May 1979). Addressed to "People," meaning everyone working on the series, Lipp explains that if the editors have been reading her letters, they would know she is one of

[110] Readers such as Sean Gonsalves and Anthony J. J. Rosso both wrote in and were published in the same issue, with the former saying they hated Storm's punk look and the later loving her new look. (#182, JUNE 1984)

[111] Ann Nocenti (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Romita, JR (a), Dan Green (a), Tom Orzechowski (l), Glynis Oliver (c), "To Save Arcade?!?," *The Uncanny X-Men* #197, Marvel Comics Group, (SEPT 1985), 31.

the X-Men series' staunchest supporters. However, when she went to the store to pick up issues #115 and #116, Lipp was highly disappointed with the confusing writing, flaws, and lack of effort. For this narrative arc, the X-Men team finds themselves in the Savage Land (akin to *Journey to the Center of the Earth*), teaming up with Ka-Zar (a Tarzan type of character) and others. This is her scrutiny: "The entire story was rushed and confusing. Too many elements were jammed into too few issues." Too many characters were thrown into the story, giving zero explanation as to why they appeared; others seemed to be used to fill up space. "Speaking of clutter—who are Tandy Snow and Kloss? They served no purpose, were given no identity, didn't even speak—so why were they there? Maybe KA-ZAR fans know these people, but comics are too expensive these days for you people to assume that even the biggest fan reads *all* your titles." Even the art by John Byrne was not safe. As "great as he is, was not up to par. Sure Ka-Zar was drawn beautifully—his identity came out totally. But Kirk Marston... looked far too much like Karl Lykos. The individuality wasn't there." Lipp ended the letter with a positive note, stating what she did enjoy about the story arc. She also concluded: "Face it—*Chris Claremont* and *John Byrne* are *the best*, so I find any lessening in quality disturbing."[112]

Compared to Mandel's, Lipp's letter response was excellent because instead of skirting around the criticism or simply not responding at all, they took ownership of what was seen as a rush job and lower quality than usual:

> Concerning your major criticisms... we have no easy out. Possibly even no defense. Hindsight is a wonderful thing and *Chris* has been mentally kicking himself over that issue for months now. In retrospect, both he and editor *Roger Stern* agree that it was a classic case of not seeing the forest for the trees... We concentrated on flash-carding all the characters and situations, without giving

[112] Roger Stern (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), Diana Albers (l), Glynis Wein (c), "Shoot-Out at the Stampede!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #121, Marvel Comics Group, (MAY 1979), 31.

> them any real context—both in relation to themselves and to the X-Men... *Chris* and *John*—and *Roger*—have all promised themselves that they won't do it again. Wish 'em luck, *Debbie*; they'll need it.[113]

A level of respect on both sides, reader and editor, can be seen in this example. This particular letter and response indeed shows the importance of these relationships.

While some letters have the purpose of some form of literary criticism, others are simpler in just letting the creators know how much their work is hated. Michael Kifoyle's letter contained only one sentence addressed to the editor: "Enclosed is one torn-to-pieces, punched, ripped, cursed-at, and strangled copy of X-MEN #173. You guys have really ticked me off this time." Two significant things occurred within issue #173. One, Storm received a considerable makeover and style change to punk. The second was that Wolverine's wedding was canceled, and the relationship ended due to unknown interference from a villain. It is hard to say which major event spurred Kifoyle's anger.[114]

Other letter writers are more descriptive in their letters of anger regarding narrative plot choices. April Curry addresses "Mister Claremont 'n' Byrne" in a letter published in issue #139 regarding the death of Phoenix (Jean Grey). "After reading X-MEN #137, I have one thing to say to you: I hate you both! Why did you kill Phoenix off?! I still don't believe what you did! How could you do such a thing?!" In a state of disbelief, Curry continues to ask why they killed off, in her opinion, one of the best characters to come out of the Marvel Universe in a long time and one of the best X-Men in the group. "The X-MEN used to be my favorite mag, but after this hideous issue I

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[113] Stern, *The Uncanny X-Men* #121, 31.

[114] Ann Nocenti (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Romita JR (a), Dan Green (a), Tom Orzechowski (l), Glynis Wein (c), "Madness," *The Uncanny X-Men* #182, Marvel Comics Group, (JUNE 1984), 31.

seriously doubt if I will ever touch another issue again!"[115] Curry then explains exactly why she is so upset:

> My little sister, who is ten years old, always reads the X-MEN as soon as I get it from the comic store. When she saw the ending of issue #137, she got so upset that she cried! Pretty dumb you might say. But not to a child that young! Had I known the ending ahead of time, I would never have let her read it! Phoenix was her favorite X-Men until you fools killed her off! You idiots should know by now how attached and involved your readers can get to your characters![116]

Curry's letter makes an excellent example of how important these fictional characters are to readers. Jean Grey is an essential character during this arc because she became arguably the most powerful superhero (and villain due to the nature of the Phoenix powers) on planet Earth, if not the Marvel Universe itself. This was a rare chance for a female superhero to reign on top of the cosmic power scale. However, the character's life was cut short.

Though anger runs through this letter, Curry makes a unique observation: "I bet if Phoenix had been a man, you guys would have wrote in the story that he was emotionally strong enough to control his power. However, since Jean was a woman, you guys killed her off!" Curry compares Jean to other superheroes who wield cosmic-level power, such as Dr. Don Blake/Thor (not the most accurate or similar comparison lore-wise, but her point still stands nonetheless). She continues by exclaiming, "She deserved better than what she got! I'll never forgive you for what you did to Jean!" Enough letters with fans' reactions to the death of Jean Grey came in, both positive and negative, to warrant two magazine letter columns of print. But Curry's letter sparks a more prominent theme of

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[115] Louise Jones (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), Tom Orzechowski (l), Glynis Wein (c), "...Something Wicked This Way Comes!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #139, Marvel Comics Group, (NOV 1980), 28.

[116] Jones, *The Uncanny X-Men* #139, 28.

letters regarding characterization, which builds connections between superheroes and readers. What kind of themes regarding characterization did readers write in letters about?[117]

For superhero comic books such as TNTT and UXM, it continues to be necessary to state how much characterization matters. Comics benefit from aligning with literary culture and visual art, meaning there is less reliance on the narrator's direct description that, for instance, novels often rely on. In comics, a reader can physically see the character. There is less reliance on the reader's imagination to visualize a superhero. This means, however, that more importance is laid upon the actions and interactions of the superheroes to achieve their absolute potential. For Verde of Meadville, PA, as far as she was concerned, Claremont's "feel for careful and mature characterization keeps him among the very best writers in comics. Ever." UXM #109, specifically pages 11 and 14, were "filled with delicious bits of characterization."[118] In these pages, we see Kurt Wagner (Nightcrawler) heading out on a date to see Star Wars when he catches Scott Summers (Cyclops) brooding by himself. The two chatted with each other; Summers feels "shafted by the world" and wishes he could change the circumstances of his life. Wagner offers insight, stating that Summer is not the only one who got a bad deal in life having to wear optic lenses all the time, considering that Wagner was born furry and blue. Wagner states, "We are what we are, Scott--wishing won't change a blessed thing. Nor

[117] Ibid.

[118] Roger Stern (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), Annette Kawecki (l), Glynis Wein (c), "Showdown!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #113, Marvel Comics Group, (SEPT 1978), 19.

will feeling sorry for yourself. I learned very early on that I must either accept what I am or go mad and though I am now occasionally crazy, I am not insane."[119]

As Verde describes their relationship with these characters, we understand how strong a connection the reader can make. Issue #109 "made me feel more pain for a character than I have in a long, long time. I can understand. To some extent, we all can. Not many mutants out here, but I think a lot of us feel trapped by the accidents of birth or circumstance that made us what we are. I know I have." Verde continues to share their pain, helplessness, and fear, but also an understanding of where that line of thinking leads towards self-destruction. "I wish I could tell him that being beaten down by these feelings is part of existence, that you can't hide behind routines of 'responsibility', that the only way to live is just to do it. Thought is only good for so much." At the end of the letter, Verde thanks those involved in making a "funny book" that could give her such an intense experience and wishes to see Summers make it out all right. "And since I can't talk to him, I talk to you." Her letter is one of the many letters that stand apart from the group studied for this chapter—an emotional, heartfelt description of a relationship with a superhero due to characterization. Claremont responded personally, echoing similar sentiments of the importance of Verde's letter: "Yours is that kind of letter... one of a number we've received lately telling us how real and alive the X-Men have become for many readers. I can't think of a higher compliment to me as a writer than that, because to me, making these characters real is what the craft of writing is all about. With you, and

[119] Archie Goodwin (ed), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), Joe Rosen (l), And Yanchus (c), "Home Are The Heroes," *The Uncanny X-Men* #109, Marvel Comics Group, (FEB 1978), 11-14.

others—so far as the X-Men are concerned—it seems I've succeeded, and, from the bottom of my heart, I thank you."[120]

About three years after Verde's letter was published, we see Carolyn Amos from Fort Worth, TX echo similar sentiments with a letter just as personal. "When I was a very awkward teenager, the original X-MEN appeared. It was a godsend of sorts, helping me recover some sense of the goodness of an individuality I'd too often heard labelled 'abnormal,' 'freakish,' 'gimpy,' 'weird,' and worse." Two years before sending this letter, Amos was introduced to the new X-MEN and fell in love with it. She continues in her letter describing their traits and how they feel relatable. Wolverine's violence and sensitivity. Storm's poise and hidden fears. Colossus's simplicity and disastrous impetuosity. Kitty's spunk and self-consciousness. Amos' outlook closely matches Nightcrawler's (Kurt Wagner), as she describes herself as having misshaped hands and feet and having to wear an artificial limb. She states she can no longer pass for "normal" than Kurt. "Like Kurt, and sometimes with or through him, I discover that it truly is better to be a whole 'me' than 'normal,' that humor helps defuse anger and to dissolve self-pity, that one's self is infinitely preferable to any 'image,' and so much more." Amos ends her letter saying that the number of characters that represent "misfits," whether in books, comics, movies, etc., is few and far between. However, being able to celebrate positive images of disabilities in the series is a "terrific example that different can be good — excellent, in fact!"[121] Several letters illuminate the human condition, confirming this

[120] Stern, *The Uncanny X-Men* #113, 19.

[121] Louise Jones (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), Dave Cockrum (a), Josef Rubenstein (i), Janice Chiang (l), Glynis Wein (c), "And The Dead Shall Bury The Living!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #149, Marvel Comics Group, (SEPT 1981), 31.

series' writing and art quality. If I had the writing space, I would very much enjoy being able to discuss and show them all off. While many of these letters often take up a fair amount of space in the letter column, occasionally, a letter will state what Verde and Amos wrote, but in far fewer sentences. For example, Tom Cornell of Ft. Madison, IA, wrote simply saying, "Thanks for giving us people, instead of just another bunch of super-heroes. I love them all. It's easy, too; because I know them all."[122]

Verde and Amos' letters represent the rare occasion readers write to discuss disability representation. However, readers have also sent in numerous letters regarding the representation of gender, feminism, and race. Having sorted through the pool of published letters in this timeframe shows that readers are indeed concerned enough about these topics within this comic-book series. While there might have been a stubborn few who voiced their opinion of opposition to these progressive changes in diversity and representation, it is clear from the popularity of the series and the letters published that this refashioned X-Men team was what was wanted by the community.

With praise for representation in some aspects comes legitimate criticism. Brenda Robnett of Bakersfield, CA (#117, JAN 1979) loves the X-Men and all of the talented creators behind it, and the series is easily among her top five favorite comic books currently. She also states that she is more likely to write a letter when upset about something than when she is happy. This letter concerns how the creators have handled Phoenix (Jean Grey) for the past few issues. Robnett notes that Marvel Girl (Jean Grey before becoming Phoenix) was the weakest member of the X-Men team; most of their

[122] Roger Stern (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), John Costanza (l), Glynis Wein (c), "'Twas the Night Before Christmas...," *The Uncanny X-Men* #119, Marvel Comics Group, (MAR 1979), 19.

heroines are not all that powerful. But then came along Phoenix. "At long last a POWERFUL super hero and a woman at that!!! What could be more wonderful?? Phoenix' battle with Fire-lord in X-Men #105 confirmed my happy suspicions: a truly SUPER super heroine had finally been introduced in a Marvel mag!! HURRAY!! HURRAY!!" Phoenix was so strong that she saved the entire universe in issue #108 to Robnett's enjoyment. But shortly after that issue was when the shift began.[123]

Phoenix's powers gradually deteriorated, along with Robnett's happy hopes. Her powers failed her in #110, and she even reached her limit fighting a non-cosmic power-level villain in #112. "I HATED that! I want a superheroine of limitless power. She could still be vulnerable, she could still be beaten. It would just take more ingenuity than sheer raw power to beat her. I don't want a Superman perfect hero. I'm not advocating that. I just want a heroine who is special." It would take a clever writer to make a good story for a character like the Phoenix, as Robnett states, but she believes Claremont has what it takes. She then steps back in her letter to bring a more prominent issue to the surface. "Why can't Marvel have a least one super heroine worthy of the name??? Woman are not necessarily the 'Weaker Sex'. They are what you make them—at least in comic books." Marvel's policy is not just to have weak superheroes but non-existent superheroines. Marvel has superheroine/women issues, but that is not to say that other comic-book publishing companies do not, either. “The Women in Refrigerators” trope is prevalent in many comics. This is a literary trope in which a female character suffers (or winds up brutally murdered and stuffed in a refrigerator) to advance the male character's story.

[123] Roger Stern, (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), Clem Robins (l), Glynis Wein (c), "PSI War!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #117, Marvel Comics Group, (JAN 1979), 19.

Unfortunately for Robnett, Phoenix does not have a happy ending, as she probably found out if she continued reading the series.[124]

The response to this letter by the editors is interesting in two ways. Calling Robnett's letter an impassioned plea, they "wished" they had the time and space to give it the answer it deserves. This is interesting because they have received letters longer than Robnett's and given an earnest response in previous letter columns. Though they open the conversation for other readers to join in, they provide no contribution or actual response. It reads as if they skirt around answering Robnett. This was not the first time the editors skipped out or decided not to give an honest answer.

Published in #125 of September 1979, Jana C. Hollingsworth of Port Angeles, WA, gave her opinions on some of the recently printed stories, stating what she liked and did not like. This included the introduction of the Canada-based superhero group Alpha Flight. This gave her some excitement, providing her with new female mutants to add to her "handy-dandy, up-to-the-minute Marvel Mutants List." Towards the end of the letter, Hollingsworth brought up a statistic to the editors: "Were you aware that, of Marvel's mutants, 53 are men and only 7 are women? Assuming that Alpha Flight are all mutants, the statistics are now 57 to 9." 86% of all the mutants introduced so far have been males, while only 14% have been females. Nonetheless, she was excited for more stories involving Alpha Flight and the next issue. This is not Hollingsworth's first mention of the lack of female representation in comics. Published precisely one year beforehand, in #113 September 1978, she wrote a letter that discussed some concerns regarding Jean Grey. Concerning female representation, Hollingsworth stated, "I've complained before about

[124] Stern, *The Uncanny X-Men #117*, 19.

the over-abundance of orphan and motherless super-doers." She greatly resents the fact that far more superheroes have fathers than mothers. "So be sure to make the most of Jean's two alive and present parents. You might even bring in Jean's sister from Albany (see X-MEN #22, page seven, panel 3). You've got super-heroes with brothers, but no super-heroines with sisters." In response, the editors say it is great to hear from her, a frequent letter writer. They assure readers that they have possible plans already for Grey's sister. However, nothing of actual notice occurs with that character for this examination.[125]

Most of the response to Hollingsworth's 1979 letter was dedicated to editors thanking everyone for their letters and their hope for the future narratives to be even greater. The last sentence, almost a side note even, was given in parenthesis: "(By the way, your mutant hero statistics are a fraction off; Vindicator, Sasquatch and Shaman are not mutants, so the male/female ratio is 54 to 9.)" Ironically enough, the percentages of male and female remain the same of 86% male mutants to 14% female mutants. In their attempt to offhandedly correct Hollingsworth, the editors continued to prove her point about the gender makeup of known mutant characters. Namely, an abysmal skew in favor of male over female characters.[126]

As the series progressed, Kitty Pryde, a thirteen-year-old girl, joined the X-Men team with the ability to phase through matter. Though this only slightly alleviated the percentage of female mutants previously mentioned, it gave the readers a new character

[125] Stern, *The Uncanny X-Men*, #113, 19.

[126] Roger Stern (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), Tom Orzechowski (l), Glynis Wein (c), "There's Something Awful on Muir Island!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #125, Marvel Comics Group, (SEPT 1979), 19.

to latch onto. She was youthful, intelligent, and provided a fresh perspective of having a young character deal with the realities of being a mutant and transitioning into a more adult-orientated world. Readers like Julie St. Germaine of Isla Vista, CA (#136, AUG 1980) were thrilled about Pryde. To Germaine, Pryde is "young, unsure of how to handle her power, and most amazing of all: she's not pretty! I like that skinny, flat-chested kid. I like her suburban corniness and her resourcefulness." Pryde not being sexualized like most superheroines is essential to this letter writer. She even requests that the creators stop calling her "Cute Kitty Pryde" because her lack of "beauty" is a good quality, and the character would be ruined if they keep "giving her the cutes." She also wants Pryde's powers expanded upon since it is a power two other Marvel characters already have (Red Ghost and Vision).[127]

Germaine believes that Pryde's youth and relatively normal home life make the character stand out from the rest of the team members. Dealing with divorcing parents, building a mentorship relationship with Ororo, and having a crush on Colossus are all important aspects of Pryde's character. Most importantly for Germaine is that "Kitty Pryde is growing up from a sheltered child to a young woman who has to face the existence of evil in the world. Here is the powerful portrait of a scared child who is forced to be a heroine." Pryde not only offers a unique character perspective but also helps balance the gender makeup of the X-Men to three females to four males (at one point, it becomes even with the exit of Cyclops). The response to this letter was a

[127] Jim Salicrup (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), Tom Orzechowski (l), Glynis Wein (c), "Child of Light and Darkness!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #136, Marvel Comics Group, (AUG 1980), 31.

heartfelt thanks and asked Germaine to stick around to see what they have planned next for Pryde.[128]

However, the excitement for introducing Kitty Pryde continues after Germaine's letter. Over a year and fifteen issues later, Amy Cohen, self-addressed as age fourteen from Brooklyn, NY, addresses Claremont directly with her letter. She praises the marvelous new character, noting her personality, innocence, age, and wide-eyed look, but feels Pryde needs improvement. Cohen thinks that Pryde's personality is:

> too 'wishy-washy' or 'goody-goody.' No teenager her age is 'goody-goody' in this generation. This generation is very different. All the teenagers Kitty's age are involved in school, friends and of course — drugs! How come Kitty doesn't go to school like everybody else? How come she doesn't have friends her age? you must create Kitty's views of everything, like drugs, sex, friends, career, school, etc. It will give popularity to the comic because all the readers are living in the real world. The X-Men don't; they are living in the imaginary world.[129]

Two things immediately stand out from Cohen's letter. The first is the high level of cynicism for her generation. The second is the want for Pryde, a fictional child character, to be involved in sex and drugs to be more realistic. Drug awareness plots for comic books are nothing new to this medium in trying to be more relevant to modern issues. For example, Green Arrow caught his sidekick Roy "Speedy" Harper shooting heroin back in a two-part story in 1971. Harry Osborn, a major character from *Amazing Spider-Man*, was shown to be a drug addict as well in the same year. Even TNTT had a drug awareness special run for three issues in 1983.

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[128] Salicrup, *The Uncanny X-Men* #136, 31.

[129] Louise Jones (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), Jim Sherman (a), Bob McLeod (a), Tom Orzechowski (l), Bonnie Wilford (c), "X-MEN MINUS ONE!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #151, Marvel Comics Group, (NOV 1981), 31.

Cohen believes a three-issue or longer story about Pryde getting involved in drugs (marijuana or alcohol) would save many lives. For this reader, Pryde is not just a fictional superheroine she can relate to; she sees Pryde as having the potential to be something more; a message or a symbol. To Cohen, Pryde is a tool or solution to a social issue that more than likely stems from former President Richard Nixon's "War on Drugs." "I don't like to see some teenagers my age get involved in drugs an risk their lives. I really want you to tell the world how bad drugs are. If you print that, it will make the readers think about drugs and will save a lot of lives!" This is an interesting comparison of two letters regarding introducing a single comic-book character. Both can relate to and enjoy reading stories about the character. While one reader is concerned about the sexualization of female superheroines, the other is concerned about its relevance to current social issues. In response to Cohen's letter, the editor noted that having to grow up while being a mutant makes Pryde such a fascinating character. After thanking Cohen for her "moving thoughts," the editor ensures readers that as time passes, "you can bet we'll see Kitty confronting these dilemmas, including the ones you mentioned." Though within the span of issues, I examined, Pryde never does encounter any drug issues; she is more relegated to relationship issues with other team members, mostly her on-and-off boyfriend Colossus.[130]

These readers have brought up a lot of interesting points regarding Pryde. Unfortunately, the letter column can also be problematic to issues such as feminism and gender. Dean Anton Sherwood began his letter by touching upon a problem he had with some dialogue between characters regarding scientific accuracy. Touching on some of the

[130] Jones, *The Uncanny X-Men* #151, 31.

outfit designs and colors for characters like Wolverine and Nightcrawler, Sherwood mentions Pryde: "Loved the clothing machine. The 'Mary Marvel' in #156 and the 'Captain Alabama' in #157 are the first designs I've liked on Kitty since her debut in royal blue. I wonder how many people spotted Kitty on the cover of #157. Obvious in hindsight, but I guess I'm not a breast man." To give context to this letter, UXM #157 features a cover with Pryde disguised as Phoenix (deceased at this point). Typically, Phoenix/Jean Grey is drawn to be industry-standard sexualized, with more pronounced feminine features. In this particular cover art, Phoenix (Pryde in disguise) is not drawn/colored quite to the same degree of sexualization as readers would generally see Phoenix. As if to justify Germaine's letter about not wanting to sexualize a thirteen-year-old fictional child, Sherwood writes that despite not being a "breast man," he could tell that the Phoenix shown on the cover was Pryde in disguise. More importantly, though, the editor for the column decided to approve this letter to be published, despite knowing the makeup of their growing audience and the issues they were concerned with.[131]

Poor decisions regarding gender do not stand alone. Race representation and issues came to the forefront of UXM when the creators decided to change the direction of the X-Men team makeup and go for a more diverse and international group of characters. One of the new characters introduced in *Giant-Size X-Men* #1 (May 1975) was Thunderbird (John Proudstar). As an Apache Native American, Thunderbird possessed superhuman athletic ability. Unfortunately, or disappointingly to some, he was killed during his second mission with the new X-Men team in #95 (October 1975), the second

[131] Louise Jones (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), Dave Cockrum (a), Bob Wiacek (a), Joe Rosen (l), Janine Casey (c), "Binary Star!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #164, Marvel Comics Group, (DEC 1982), 31.

issue of UXM. Thunderbird's death was even more pointless as he sacrificed himself to remove the villain Count Nefaria, who was later brought back. One reader took particular notice of this. In the letter column, Tom Runningmouth (#97, February 1976) stated how proud he was to see "one of my people, an American Indian—America's First Citizens—become a member." However, to his dissatisfaction, the creators started to make him hot-headed and not work well with the team. Runningmouth was angry to see how Thunderbird was being mistreated in his eyes. But then it happened. "[The] Clincher was in X-Men #95. You killed him. Why was he chosen? Why Thunderbird?"[132]

Dedicating slightly over two paragraphs of letter column space, the editors gave Runningmouth what they described as a "serious answer." "[We] here at Marvel strive to put a semblance of reality into our comic books." Elaborating, they explain that death is part of the reality that we live in. People die in real life, and so do characters in comics. "It happens." As to why Thunderbird was specifically chosen, the first reason given was because his superpower of superhuman athleticism was already abundant in many of the other characters present, if not a given for most superheroes. According to this response, the second reason given, and the worst characteristic of Thunderbird, was that the character had no direction regarding character growth. "All he was, all he really ever could be, was a wise-cracking, insolent, younger, not-as—interesting copy of Hawkeye the Marksman in the Avengers—and if you have any questions as to the problems Hawkeye's been having as a character, just look at all the roles he's taken in the past ten years." To the writers and creative team, Thunderbird deserved a better fate than being

[132] Marv Wolfman (ed), Chris Claremont (w), Dave Cockrum (a), Sam Grainger (i), Annette Kaye (l), Don Warfield (c), "My Brother, My Enemy!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #97, Marvel Comics Group (FEB 1976), 19.

another "Hawkeye," which is why he had to die. "Because, when you think about it, it was better that he die with honor rather than spend the rest of his comic-book life trying to force himself into a persona he wasn't." While they were sorry Thunderbird had to die, they also thought it was for the best.[133]

To Runningmouth, this entire response must have sounded like an excuse for lazy writing, especially as the UXM series progressed. Yes, superhuman athletic ability is a given power to most superhero characters, but it was not unheard of for superheroes to develop new abilities. In 1962, within *Journey Into Mystery* #86, Thor gained the ability to time travel simply by swinging his hammer around.[134] Just a few issues later in the series, Jean Grey acquires the Phoenix powers, and Kitty Pryde develops various uses for her seemingly simple power of phasing, such as being able to walk on air. Rogue, a character who joins later in the series, permanently (at the time) steals Carol Danvers' (Ms. Marvel) superhuman powers. For the direction for character growth and popularity concerns, it is almost silly to say that a character had no direction to go, especially after only appearing in three issues. Given proper backstory development and situations to learn more about a character is a given for good character writing, something all of the other X-Men characters were provided. Ironically, it must be pointed out that Hawkeye has been one of the main characters in Marvel's Cinematic Universe since 2011, starring in multiple franchise films and eventually their short series, not to mention the amount of solo series and team-ups Hawkeye has had. All the while still just being "Hawkeye the

[133] Wolfman, *The Uncanny X-Men* #97, 19.

[134] Stan Lee (ed)(sc), Jack Kirby (p), Dick Ayers (i), Artie Simek (l), Stan Goldberg (c), "On the Trail of the Tomorrow Man!," *Journey Into Mystery* #86, Atlas Magazines, Inc. (NOV 1962).

Marksman." In revitalizing a comic-book series to reach a broader audience with a diverse and international cast of characters, it seems incredibly antithetical and problematic to kill off one of the series' first-ever person of color as quickly as the creators did.[135]

Despite the fumbling of Thunderbird's character, there have been other non-white characters introduced in UXM. Although wary of how the creative force behind the series will treat the character Ororo, long-time "X-fan" Marilyn Brogdon of Bronx, NY, writes to say how intriguing Claremont's writing is. Having read the series since 1967, Brogdon "thought it highly unlikely that all 'good' mutants were Caucasians who just happened to live on the east coast on the United States." She continues to say how the emergence of an international and interracial team is a significant step forward. Her interests now lie with one particular character, namely Ororo. "As a young black woman, I am particularly interested in Chris' development of Ororo. I wonder how Chris will handle her relationship with a group of white males." Is there a possible romance between Ororo and Peter? Will Claremont avoid the cliché of the domineering and super-strong black woman? These are the questions Brogdon hopes will be answered in future UXM issues. This is an example of a letter writer explicitly stating their race and pointing out race representation issues, much like Runningmouth's letter published a year before Brogdon's. Fortunately for Brogdon, Ororo was not only a popular character (and still is

[135] Wolfman, *The Uncanny X-Men* #97, 19.

today) but also received rather great character story arcs throughout the series, making her iconic to the X-Men franchise.[136]

It would be expected of a comic-book letter column to have specific topics such as race, gender, and feminism make appearances. Politics is also a topic one would assume to show up now and then, as seen with TNTT when Kid Flash made his political alignment of Midwestern conservative known to his teammates and readers alike. Or when the Teen Titans team had their run-in with Russian superhero Starfire (Leonid Kovar). Subsequent letter columns were populated with numerous letters with readers expressing their reactions and thoughts on the politics at hand. With UXM, the series had its share of politically infused stories. One of the first major narrative plots with political overtones comes in #102. During a fight with the supervillain Juggernaut, Storm has flashbacks to her early childhood in Cairo in 1956, the year of the Suez War (Suez Crisis or the Second Arab–Israeli War).

The flashback is displayed across several pages (Fig. 1). Ororo's parents moved from Harlem in the summer of 1951 to Cairo when she was only six months old. The text reads: "Time-cut--five years up the line to Cairo in that fateful year of 1956 the year of the Suez War. Nasser had nationalized the canal, you see, and the British and French governments had responded by invading Egypt in concert with the Israelis. In a matter of days, the three-pronged attack had Egypt on the ropes... ...and 'Allied' aircraft roamed the Suez skies at will." Ororo's father prepares his family to leave their home, as the bombing targets of the aircraft are too close to their house. As the family moves away from the

[136] Archie Goodwin (ed), Chris Claremont (w), Dave Cockrum (a), Sam Grainger (i), John Costanza (l), Janice Cohen (c). "The Fall of the Tower," *The Uncanny X-Men* #103, Marvel Comics Group (FEB 1977), 19.

window, "a French Vautour Fighter-Bomber caught a flak burst as it swung into its strafing run... the pilot ejected, was taken prisoner and repatriated after the war. His plane went down-- with a full load of bombs and fuel..." The fighter-bomber is then shown to crash into Ororo's home, killing her parents. Afterward, Ororo becomes a beggar and eventually heads south, where Professor X eventually connects with her.[137]

[137] Archie Goodwin (ed), Chris Claremont (w), Dave Cockrum (a), Sam Grainger (i), John Costanza (l), Bonnie Wilford (c), "Who Shall Stop The Juggernaut?," *The Uncanny X-Men* #102, Marvel Comics Group (DEC 1976), 11.

Figure 1. Archie Goodwin (ed), Chris Claremont (w), Dave Cockrum (a), Sam Grainger (i), John Costanza (l), Bonnie Wilford (c), "Who Shall Stop The Juggernaut?," *The Uncanny X-Men* #102, Marvel Comics Group (DEC 1976), 11.

The creators went above and beyond to show the violence in Egypt and those involved (Israel, Britain, and France) in inflicting said violence during the Suez War. This display of wanton violence aligns with how President Eisenhower describes American

public opinion of the Suez War in a message to Prime Minister Eden: "I must tell you frankly that American public opinion flatly rejects the thought of using force, particularly when it does not seem that every possible peaceful means of protecting our vital interests has been exhausted without result." The Suez War is deeply nuanced and more complicated than my simplification here. Though this issue was published two decades after the start of the Suez War, perhaps this was chosen for its relevance to the earlier 1973 Yom Kippur War, another conflict between Egypt and Israel.[138]

The second example of the politically infused narrative comes in #123 and #124. Reoccurring villain, Arcade abducts all the X-Men team members and tortures each of them. Colossus, aka Piotr "Peter" Rasputin, was born on a Soviet collective farm in Siberia and can cover his entire body in metal. Xavier recruited him to help rescue the original X-Men team. Afterward, he decided to stay in the United States and remain an X-Men. During his torture, Peter is confronted and brainwashed by a fake KGB officer. Addressing Peter as "young comrade," the officer presents himself as Colonel Alekei Vazhin of the KGB-- The Committee for State Security charges the dazed and confused superhero as a traitor. This entire conversation is translated from Russian. Vazhin makes Peter question himself when he asks, "What loyal son of a Mother Russia offers his services, and his super-powers, to a team based in the United States?" The next time we are shown Colossus, he appears completely brainwashed, wearing a red worker jumpsuit with the CCCP abbreviation (for Soviet Union) and a headshot of Lenin and the hammer and sickle symbol. Colossus begins to attack the other X-Men team members, declaring,

[138] "163. Message From President Eisenhower to Prime Minister Eden," U.S. Department of State, accessed June 2, 2022, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v16/d163.

"No longer am I the X-Man, Colossus -- A traitor to his motherland and his people! Now I am the Proletarian-- workers' hero of the Soviet Union! And my first mission is -- to smash the X-Men!"[139] This ends issue #123.

The cover for #124 shows Colossus in this Proletarian costume, fighting Storm and Cyclops, with the latter yelling, "Don't you understand Colossus? We're your friends!" (Fig. 2) The caption at the bottom of the cover page reads in red, "He was one of the X-Men-- Now, He's the power-mad Proletarian!"[140] The creators are heavy-handed. They delivered a straightforward political message of the evilness of Soviet Russia and Communism. There is no subtlety being used here, with Colossus turning on his team and trying to kill them until the other members can beat him up until the effects of his brainwashing wear off. Considering the year these comic-book issues were published, it was 1979, which marked the late phase of the Cold War and when these kinds of popular culture imagery depictions were common.

[139] Roger Stern (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), Tom Orzechowski (l), Glynis Oliver (c), "Listen--Stop Me If You've Heard it--But This One Will Kill You!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #123, Marvel Comics Group (JULY 1979), 17, 30.

[140] Roger Stern (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), Tom Orzechowski (l), Glynis Wein (c), "He only laughs when I Hurt," *The Uncanny X-Men* #124, Marvel Comics Group (AUG 1979), cover.

Figure 2. Roger Stern (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), Tom Orzechowski (l), Glynis Wein (c), "He only laughs when I Hurt," *The Uncanny X-Men* #124, Marvel Comics Group (AUG 1979), cover.

Having these politically charged narratives for Storm and Colossus, one would believe that a discussion in the letter columns would appear akin to TNTT. However, it is

quite the opposite. No letters discussing politics or political stances appear within any of the examined published letters. Is it possible that the editors did not publish any letters about politics, despite heavily including the topic in their storylines? Or did the readers not care enough to write regarding politics or even engage with the political topic given to them. It could also be that the readers did not know or care about this political issue. Perhaps what is being shown in these letters is what French historian Roger Chartier calls "appropriation."[141]

Originally used by French philosopher Michel Foucault, which he uses to describe authoritative power and control over representation, conduct, and thought, Chartier shifts the emphasis over to a way an interpretive community adopts a cultural form. "According to this formulation, the basic human activity of making meaning (or the refusal to do so) always takes place in the act of reception and in relation to the interpretative norms and expectations of a particular community of readers." This shifts from understanding institutional control towards the more complicated process of discovering how communities circumvent these intended outcomes to forming their own. In the case of Chartier, he presents two drastically differing reading outcomes from one text, distinguishing popular reading and how various cultures appropriate readings differently.[142] Chartier explains the importance of placing appropriation at the center of cultural and historical approaches as it allows us to prevail over what he considers the

[141] Roger Chartier, 'Culture as Appropriation: popular cultural uses in early modern France' in Steven L. Kaplan, ed., *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (Berlin, 1984), 230.

[142] E. D. Friedman, "Review of Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer, by R. Chartier, L. G. Cochrane, M. Doueihi, & D. D. Hall," *SubStance*, vol 26 no. 1 (1997), 163. https://doi.org/10.2307/3684838.

two definitions of popular culture. These two definitions include: "popular culture as a completely autonomous symbolic world, and popular culture as molded and manipulated by high culture."[143]

Coming to a similar conclusion is American literary and cultural studies scholar Janice A. Radway. Published the same year as Chartier's work on "Culture as Appropriation," Radway's "Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature" shows a diligent study of appropriation by an interpretive community of female readers. These readers consumed mass-market published romance works while Radway analyzed reader response-criticism against popular criticism.[144] Chartier helps explain the role of appropriation with mass-market published work:

> Commodities like mass-produced literary texts are selected, purchased, constructed, and used by real people with previously existing needs, desires, intentions, and interpretive strategies. By reinstating those active individuals and their creative, constructive activities at the heart of our interpretive enterprise, we avoid blinding ourselves to the fact that the essentially human practice of making meaning goes on even in a world increasingly dominated by things and by consumption. In thus recalling the interactive character of operations like reading... we increase our chances of sorting out or articulating the difference between the repressive imposition of ideology and oppositional practices that, though limited in their scope and effect, at least dispute or contest the control of ideological forms.[145]

All of this is to say that there is importance in both regards to the explicit and implicit intentions of any cultural text, which suggests an expansive audience with a just as varied possible amount of reading responses.[146] Taking this theoretical framework back to this

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[143] Roger Chartier, *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (1995), 89.

[144] Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); 221-22.

[145] Chartier, *Forms and Meanings*, 92.

[146] Ibid., 92-93.

study, a superficial reading of these comic books would have us believe that readers strictly took in the more than subtle political messages of the violence of the Suez War and the evils of Communist Russia. But examining these published letters reflects that these readers extracted their messages from the comic books. Readers may no longer care or even heard about the conflict so many decades after the Suez War. Or they were more concerned with the representation of disability, gender, feminism, and race.

Ironically, perhaps more contemporarily ironic, the most political letter published in the letter column for UXM was from then President of the New York City Council Carol Bellamy in #140 of 1980. Printed for all the "Marvel Readers" to look at, Bellamy wrote this letter to remind perusers of comic books that despite all of their superpowers, Spider-Man and the other Marvel superheroes are powerless against diseases like polio, measles, and rubella. These diseases can be prevented, and for a number of States, it is the law, "NO SHOTS. NO SCHOOL!" She urges readers to call the Immunization Hotline or their local Health Department. In a short response to Bellamy's letter, adding to the message's urgency, the editor tells readers to take her advice to heart and ensure that they and their siblings have gotten their vaccination. "We can't stress this enough, really. There's no excuse for not having your shots — not in this day and age. One, two, three, and it's over... painless and permanent protection against those diseases. Think about it." Letter columns are no stranger to PSAs. As mentioned before, even the narratives have been used to spread drug awareness. Though no reaction or replies to

Bellamy's letter were printed, it is amusing to imagine what the response would be in this day of age.[147]

One unexpected theme in the letters was excitement for the various locations illustrated for UXM, backdrops for the superheroes' many adventures. This included New York, Egypt, Scotland, Japan, and Canada. To what does UXM owe this aspect of internationalism? The Claremont Run, a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada-funded academic initiative micro-publishing data-based analysis of Chris Claremont's sixteen-year run on UXM and spinoffs, led by J. Andrew Deman, researcher and author who specializes in the comics medium, mostly attribute this to Claremont's experience and love of travel. Because of the internationalist aspect of the new characters and settings they find themselves in, "Claremont's X-Men played an important role in cultivating in comics the concept of 'transnational media,' which can roughly be defined as media works that have the capacity to be consumed (and loved) outside of their country of origin."[148] In this regard, the most significant published letter response came from when issues #120 and #121 showed an unnamed (but recognizable as Pierre Trudeau) Canadian Prime Minister, who gave orders to a Canadian superhero composed team (Alpha Flight) to capture Wolverine. Alpha Flight and the X-Men team inevitably clash in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.[149] (Fig. 3) Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's cameo was not the most morally upstanding appearance, as his want to return Wolverine

[147] Louise Jones (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), Tom Orzechowski (l), "RAGE!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #140, Marvel Comics Group (DEC 1980), 29.

[148] The Claremont Run (@ClaremontRun), Twitter, November 17th, 2021, accessed June 2, 2022, https://twitter.com/ClaremontRun/status/1460950820334227456?t=vmixULXI2s4ye8RJuQNHWg&s=19.

[149] Stern, *The Uncanny X-Men* #121, 16.

to Canada was financially motivated. Having spent so many millions of government money on Wolverine to be used as a weapon, he wanted his "property" back. However, this comic-book moment is still considered a fan favorite despite this ill light. As a side note, Pierre Trudeau's son, Justin Trudeau, currently serving as Canadian Prime Minister, appeared in Marvel's 2016 *Civil War II: Choosing Sides* #5. Unfortunately, my attempts at finding any exact news article or a video covering the then-Canadian Prime Minister in the comic book has yielded no results (primarily due to paywalls or outdated archives).[150]

[150] "Justin Trudeau Is in a Marvel Superhero Comic like His Dad, except Justin Gets the Cover | CBC News," CBCnews (CBC/Radio Canada, June 28, 2016), accessed June 2, 2022, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/justin-trudeau-joins-canadian-superheroes-for-marvel-comics-cover-1.3655625.; Scoot Allan, "Alpha Flight: North of 20 Facts about the Canadian X-Men Spinoff," CBR, January 27, 2019, accessed June 2, 2022, https://www.cbr.com/alpha-flight-everything-to-know/#:~:text=Uncanny%20X-Men%20%23120%20not%20only%20featured%20the%20debut,a%20cameo%20from%20then%20Prime%20Minister%20Pierre%20Trudeau.

Figure 3. Roger Stern (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), Diana Albers (l), Glynis Wein (c), "Shoot-Out at the Stampede!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #121, Marvel Comics Group (MAY 1979), 16.

On a whim, Claremont and Byrne had decided to change the story setting to Calgary (Byrne's hometown), and little did they know that an avalanche of letters from

Canadian readers would also come to an equally surprising amount of Canadian media coverage. Within a special note printed on the top of the letter column for #125, Claremont reveals how much excitement these two issues had received. "In the space of two weeks—partly due to the presence of a certain Prime Minister on X-MEN #120's splash page— we were deluged by calls from newspapers, wire services, radio and TV stations, and national magazines. Out of the blue, X-MEN #'s 120 & 121 became an instant coast-to-coast media event." The first letter published mentioning the inclusion of Canada/Calgary in the recent stories came from Sheldon Wiebe (#125, SEPT 1979). They were excited about the potential of Alpha Flight and listed several other points of what they liked about issue #120. One of the items listed was that they loved seeing his hometown of Calgary, the Calgary Tower, and Centre Street & 8th Avenue in comic-book form. Lastly, humorously, they asked one tiny favor: "Oh, yes—would it be too much to ask if I wanted you to spell Ottawa correctly, Chris?" On the first page of issue #120, Ottawa is misspelled as 'Ottowa.' After thanking Wiebe for their letter, the editor wanted to let Wiebe, other readers, and reporters know that Claremont's original script had Ottawa spelled correctly. Still, it somehow became scrambled when the book went to lettering.[151]

Previously mentioned letter writer Jana Hollingsworth said in her letter how delighted she was with the Canadian setting and characters. Describing the Canadian atmosphere as realistic, she states that #120 gave her a more "convincing picture of Calgary than nearly any comic has ever given me of New York."[152] Heather Proctor

[151] Stern, *The Uncanny X-Men* #125, 19.

[152] Ibid.

(#126, OCT 1979) was excited to see Canada and Canadian superheroes in comics finally. She wanted more, but also, "Canada as a whole wants more! If you doubt this, you should have been watching TV and reading newspapers in Alberta, MacLean's had Pierre Trudeau's picture in it; so did the Edmonton Journal and so did many news programs on television. It's most heartening to discover that Alberta isn't just a supplier of beef and oil, that we have our occasional exciting moment." Again, her only two complaints are the spelling of Ottawa, and she wishes the creators would rename Alpha Flight team member Major Maple Leaf to something better. To this last request, the creators changed the character's name to Vindicator (much cooler sounding, in my opinion). They also acknowledge the continual mass of letters chastising them for their spelling error.[153]

Of course, there is always an outlier to the norm or at least an interesting read for this series of thematic letters praising the setting in Canada. Written directly to Claremont and Byrne, Laura Webb (#127, NOV 1979) dramatically begins her letter quoting an inscription from the cairn in the Peace Garden on the border between Canada and the United States. This serves to remind herself to watch her temper and anger as she begins to list the injustices, insults to her country and people, and clichés used in #120 and #121. She accuses Claremont of typecasting because of the names given to the members of Alpha Flight; Shaman, Sasquatch, Aurora, Northstar, Snowbird, and she even mentions Wolverine. Webb declares shame on Claremont and demands Byrne hand in his Canadian citizenship for "falsely" describing Calgary as bitter cold in winter. Then, she accuses

[153] Roger Stern (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), Tom Orzechowski (l), Glynis Wein (c), "How Sharper Than a Serpent's Tooth...!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #126, Marvel Comics Group (OCT 1979), 19.

Cyclops of being chauvinistic and claiming (it is unclear) either Cyclops of Claremont of being a bigot. According to Webb, these clichés and mistakes would not have been made with a Canadian as a co-plotter. This reader felt the need to write a letter because she was disappointed with the story and the "next time you set the adventure outside the States—check your information for accuracy, and forget the clichés."[154]

Claremont responded directly to this letter, saying, "I understand your feelings, Laura—but, to a large extent, I think they're grounded in misconceptions." Indeed, most, if not all, of Webb's complaints are founded on either misconceptions or misunderstandings. Claremont continues his extended response by walking through Webb's listed complaints and excellently explains the reasoning behind each one. Would calling an American hero "Captain America" be called any more cliché than calling a Canadian superhero something that conveys their superpower and origin? He acknowledges Calgary does not have brutally cold and snowy winters, but as established in the story, a freak arctic blizzard was summoned over the area. Claremont then goes into deep detail as to why characters made certain choices in the story, which all tracks with how the characters had previously acted. Ending this entire letter column, dedicated to Webb's letter and Claremont's response, the writer closes the page with, "There's a lot more I'd like to say— but I'm afraid, as usual, we're pretty much out of space." Letter columns dedicated to one letter and response are undoubtedly rare. Usually, this only happens when editors or creators feel that questions or accusations are serious enough to warrant the entire letter column space. In this instance, Claremont felt that Webb

[154] Roger Stern (ed), Jim Shooter (ed-in-chief), Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (a), Terry Austin (i), Tom Orzechowski (l), Glynis Wein (c), "The Quality of Hatred!," *The Uncanny X-Men* #127, Marvel Comics Group (NOV 1979), 31.

deserved a response, even though she attacked and accused the writer and Byrne with several unsubstantiated claims. This letter could have easily been not chosen to be printed at all, but perhaps the purpose, at least for researchers like myself, is to see the extremes of readers and their commitment to their held identities and beliefs.[155]

Examining these letters individually provides invaluable insight and the quintessential seeing the forest for the trees approach. However, we must step back to see the overall picture and compare what was seen through these letters. As before, assessing the overall makeup of letters printed in the X-MAIL letter column is vital in learning more about the publication's readership. (Fig. 4) Like TNTT, each printed letter in X-MAIL was accompanied by a name and (usually) address from the person who sent it. Based on the name in the letter, these were sorted into three categories: assumed women, assumed men, and unknown. If the given name could not determine the immediate binary gender, the letter was sorted into the unknown category. Horizontal values show the publishing year. With 107 total issues, 268 letters were examined: 173 letters were written by male readers, female readers wrote 80, and 15 were unknown. Percentagewise, this means 64.55% of the total were male, 29.85% were female, and 5.59% were unknown. This does not include off-shoots and miniseries printed alongside this primary run.

[155] Stern, *The Uncanny X-Men* #127, 31.

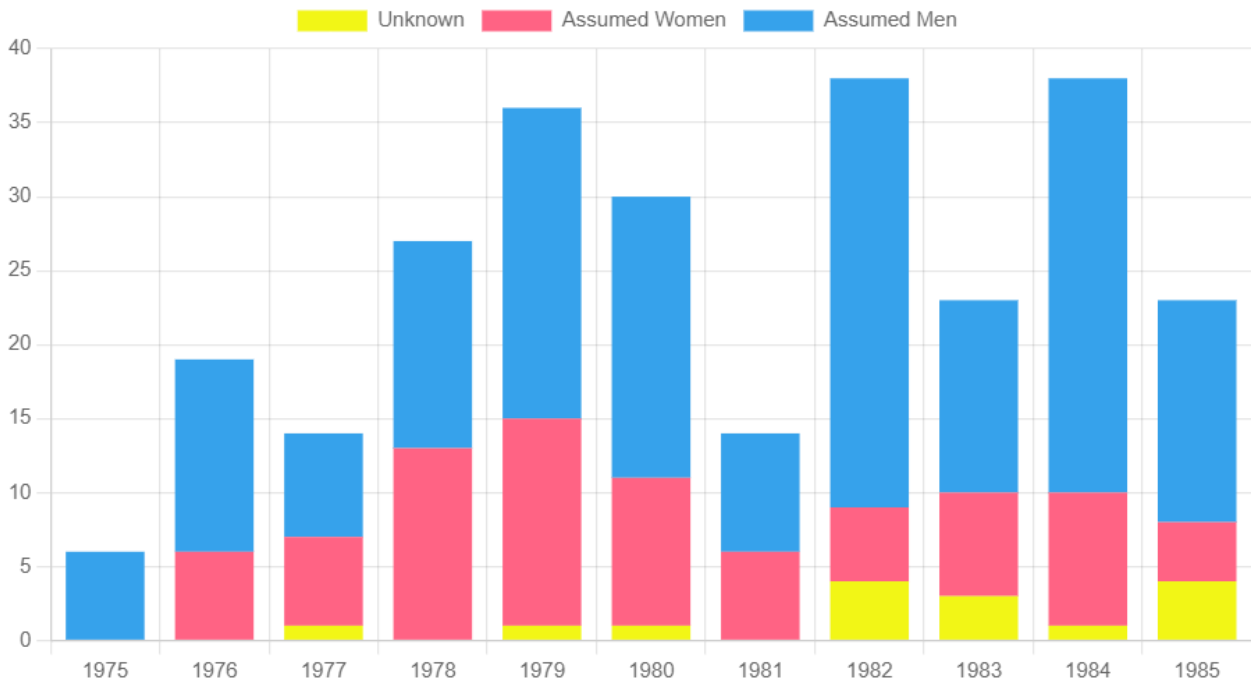

Figure 4. Chris Claremont (w), *The Uncanny X-Men* #94-#200, Marvel Comics Group (1975-1985).

Also, unlike the TNTT series, the letter column for UCX never expanded past being one page in the time frame examined. For context, Claremont started midway through 1975, so that year only had three issues under his name. 1976 and 1977 had six issues, while 1978 had eight issues because that was the year the series started being published monthly. 1979 and onwards, all had twelve issues each. Unlike TNTT, the number of issues examined in UCX made it more sensible to examine the gender makeup by year instead of by individual issue. For clarity, thirty-six issues (33.64%) were without a letter column printed or with some other memo or write-up from the editors or creators. Two-hundred-and-seven of the letters printed had a response given to them. This means that 77.24% of all printed letters had a response printed alongside them. Side fun fact, 21 letters, or 7.83%, were No-Prize winners/attempts.

Comparatively, while the examination of TNTT was forty issues over five years, the examination of UCX was 107 issues over 11 years. However, UCX was originally published bi-monthly for its first four years. One-hundred-and-sixty letters were examined in TNTT, while UCX had over one hundred more. 81.25% of TNTT letter writers were male, while UCX had 64.55%. Female writers were 13.75% and 29.85%, respectively. Finally, TNTT had 5%, and UCX had 5.59% left to the neutral writers. The gender ratio for letter writers is less lopsided within UCX than in TNTT, with an almost 20% difference between the total number of male letters printed. While this statistic may only partially be accurate for the complete number of letters sent to the editors for X-MAIL, it shows an interesting and more diverse ratio of letters selected for print. It would be interesting to see if this ratio continues to be this way in the series as it continued into the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s, but that would be a project for a later time.

One exciting aspect of these published letters, though negligible on the statistics brought forth, are letterhacks. A letterhack is someone who repeatedly had their letters published in comic books. A name you might have seen repeated in this chapter is Jo Duffy, whose real name is Mary Jo Duffy. As Duffy explains her beginnings as a letterhack, her name "started appearing on comics on a series of gushy but extremely sincere fan letters around '72 or '73.…That was before e-mail so if you got a letter printed you were like "Oh cool!" and you'd exponentially send many more letters. Many people who became pros in the late '70s were the unofficial letter column gang: Dean Mulaney, Kim Thompson, Mark Gruenwald, Ralph Macchio, Rob Roadie, Peter Sanderson."[156]

[156] Jason Thompson, "Jo Duffy, Interviewed by Dwight Jon Zimmerman, in Comics Interview #27 (1985)," Pulp: The Manga Magazine: 5.08 American Manga, accessed June 16, 2022,

Only a few years after writing in letters, she became a comic-book editor and writer for Marvel. As stated, some of these letterhacks went on to do work in the comics industry. Seeing what they wrote then is often quite amusing. For instance, Kurt Busiek wrote in a letter for UXM #143 (1981), saying, "I've watched the book degenerate, watched the X-Men become a perversion of what they once were, watched you twist and mangle characters you virtually created.... I can no longer justify buying the X-MEN, not even to keep my collection complete. Each issue hurts too much." A couple of years later, Busiek started writing *Power Man* and *Iron Fist* for Marvel; he's even written a number of X-Men stories.[157]

I must clarify my rationale for ending on issue #200 of December 1985. As the main series became increasingly popular, the number of off-shoots exploded within the decade, which include *Dazzler* (1981), *The New Mutants* (1982), *X-Factor* (1986), *Excalibur* (1987), and a myriad of one-shots/limited series involving Wolverine, Kitty Pryde, and others. If I wished to capture the entire picture of the X-Men letter column experience, I would need to dive into these other series and UXM. This then leads to the second reason: writing space. As much as I wish I could fit in every published letter and analyze them, there is not enough space within this single chapter. The same issue occurred with the TNTT series when it began to branch off. I included most of the essential/popular narrative arcs and character origins within my spread of research

https://web.archive.org/web/20041213154330/http://www.pulp-mag.com/archives/5.08/interview_duffy_01.shtml.

[157] Wolk, *All of the Marvels*, 153.

regarding this series. Enough to accurately analyze and represent the experience of the letter column these readers kept writing to.

There is a future for this particular scholarship that compares the entirety of the two series, TNTT and UXM. Coming back to Wolk, the author states in his book that parodies of UXM were widely popular and successful. Explicitly saying that "DC Comics' biggest success of that era was the very similar superteam soap opera *The New Teen Titans*; and Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird's self-published 1984 comic *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* was a homemade spoof of *X-Men*… that unexpectedly grew into a media empire of its own."[158] TMNT (*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*), which will be explored (particularly its readers) in the next chapter, can easily be seen as a spoof of the idea of X-Men, but given the history of TNTT and its predecessor series, I would be hard-pressed to see it as a spoof or parody. The topics covered in the stories, the ideas behind the characters, and the reasoning behind their formation of a team of superheroes are widely different. Even the themes and reactions of these stories' readers differentiated, particularly in politics.

The most remarkable difference between the two series is the mutant metaphor, being the "other" or "outsider." The mutant metaphor is more closely related to sexuality, as when you are a mutant when you come of age or hit puberty, your powers or gifts usually manifest at that time. Wolk notes that "LGBTQ readers have embraced X-Men like few other comics, although its plots have often hinged on straight romances. It

[158] Ibid., 162-163.

definitely has more characters who are canonically not cis-hetero than most superhero comics, if still relatively few of them."[159]

Though these characters have not canonically come out as gay, lesbian, etc., until decades later, their implications within the stories are still there that readers have identified and related to. In a letter published in #188, written directly to the character Kurt Wagner, David M. Peabody wished to thank the mutant. Although the two have never met, Peabody knows him from the chronicles of Wagner's adventures in UXM. "I have watched as you became part of the X-Men, struggling to belong, to be accepted by some small fraction of humanity, if not by society at large. I have seen you struggle with demons from without and within." Witnessing Wagner's battles, Peabody notes that the character's mutation, his unique appearance (three toes on each foot, three fingers on each hand, and blue fur) sets him apart from the rest of the world. This reader then explains his side: "Yet in my way, I am far more hideous to society than your outré appearance might ever be considered. I, for one, find you most handsome, for it is the souls of men that I see." Peabody continues, "It is that deviation which has made me an outcast. You accept, you are, you live your differences (a) because you must and (b) because you are strong enough to do so; I, for many years, have cowered and believed the lies of those who feared and sought to destroy me, either in spirit or in fact. Only now, because I have found another who can survive his tormentors, have I begun to live, love and be free." Peabody ends his letter thanking Wagner again for his own life, as the character has taught him that his uniqueness does not exist to torment him but to help others.[160]

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[159] Ibid., 148.

[160] Nocenti, *The Uncanny X-Men* #188, 31.

This has been an excellent opportunity to analyze these two mainstream comics' letter columns, allowing us to see the similarities and differences between the most popular, if not top-selling, series of their times. The analysis for comparing these two series together could be extended to the first runs of each series over a decade before where this chapter started or go all the way forward to today. It would be fascinating and insightful to see how reactions to comic-book stories changed over the decades during the same series publication run, especially when compared to a similar series. But this particular research aims to examine the readers across the board as best as possible. And while sexuality was hinted at or implied during the UXM series, what will readers' reactions look like in a non-mainstream series? Instead, one of the first comics to start the alternative comics movement of the 1980s--The Hernandez brothers Gilbert, Jaime, and Mario's work, *Love and Rockets*--had a letter column completely different from what we have seen in mainstream comics.

CHAPTER 3

"STARVING FOR FRESH FRUIT SUCH AS YOU PRODUCE: AN EXAMINATION OF LOVE AND ROCKETS LETTER WRITERS"

> Out of the eight strips this time 'round "Heartbreak Soup" was the winner. No Von Eeden-esque panels to get this across. Not necessary, just talent for telling a funny/good/entertaining story. I think that's all anybody needs in this business. Reel Peepull comix with no ridiculous dialogue coming out of the mouths of 14 year olds. Oh shit! I'd just love to have an *X-Men* Cross-over with this! Hahahahaahaahahahaha! Could'yer just imagine Kitty Pryde amongst this little bunch? No, I'd better stop before I die laughing like Toco! I was only joking about the *X-Men*, honest! Cerebus is enough! We don't want you doing it too![161]
>
> Ross Cowin, Stafford, England (*Love and Rockets* #5)

To prepare you for what is to come, this particular letter writer, Ross Cowin, uses his knowledge of mainstream comic-book artist, Trevor Von Eeden (Black Lighting, Batman, Green Arrow, and Power Man) to jest that "Reel Peepull comix" do not require the standard superhero comic-book building blocks. And while it would be funny to read *a Love & Rockets* & *X-Men* crossover as Cowin suggests, he would rather not have *Love & Rockets* be tainted by mainstream comics as Cerebus is known to do. Building on the foundations of what is known as underground comix and fanzines of the 1960s and 1970s, alternative comics continued the theme of rebellion against mainstream comics. This rebellious attitude oozes within the letters published. In step with the fans that will be examined, this chapter makes a hard transition away from the mainstream comics by examining letter writers found within *Love and Rockets*, a series created by the Hernandez brothers: Gilbert, Jaime, and Mario. But even in this alternative comic series,

[161] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Peppy White (prod.) (design), Janet Toombs (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), David W. Olbrich (promotion), *Love & Rockets* #5, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (March 1984), 33 .

we find similarities and connections with the previously discussed letter columns, most of which are filled with insightful letters. But to understand these particular letter writers, we must first understand how and why such comics were able to come into existence.

By the early 1980s, a few creators were surprisingly successful in self-publishing their black-and-white comics. This included Wendy and Richard Pini's fantasy series *Elfquest*, Dave Sim's *Cerebus*, and Harvey Pekar's autobiographical *American Splendor*. During this time of self-publishing, as Wolk explains in his book *Reading Comics* (2007), a wave of black and white publishers, followed by a wave of quasi-mainstream color comics publishers, stepped into the scene of comic book publisher history and began working entirely within the direct market. This included publishers such as Pacific Comics, First Comics, and Eclipse Comics. These smaller publishers usually picked up creators with a history working for the two big companies (Marvel and DC) but had never gotten the chance to produce work that would pass the scrupulous Comics Code.[162]

Like most underground comix, most alternative comics published during this time were known for their boundary-pushing with mature and graphic depictions, not so much for the actual content. Several series are critically acclaimed: Howard Chaykin's science fiction political satire *American Flagg!*, printed without the Comic Code's seal of approval, from Marvel and Bill Sienkiewicz came *Moon Knight*, and DC's science fiction series *Camelot 3000*. However, in this chapter, we are concerned with only one publisher and one series. During this time, a small publisher called Fantagraphics began publishing black-and-white comics. Fantagraphics was mainly known for publishing *The Comics*

[162] Wolk Douglas, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 2007): 42-43.

Journal, a magazine containing news, interviews, and reviews of comics. What helped this publisher the most in their endeavor to be a comics publisher? Fortunately, one of their first publishing series was the Hernandez brother's *Love and Rockets* (L&R). L&R quickly became their flagship title and drew interest from those who saw the uniqueness and genre-bending talents of the trio of brothers.[163]

Having grown up just north of L.A. in Oxnard, CA, Mario, Gilbert, and Jaime Hernandez lived through the punk era of the 1970s, watching monster movies, listening to rock 'n' roll, and reading and drawing their comics. It was Mario who had the idea of putting together a self-published book that would be titled *Love and Rockets*. L&R was first drawn in 1980; at the time, Gilbert was out of high school and drawing for himself, believing that he "was going to make it by drawing for fanzines" because he "had this dumb idea that fanzines were still showcases for new artists." This was during what Gilbert called the barbarian fad. "That's all there was in professional comics and fanzines. I drew barbarians and practiced because of course I liked drawing barbarian girls." For the other two brothers, Mario was married and working in construction while Jaime was going to college and being a full-on punk rocker.[164]

Jaime did not believe that any of the work he had drawn was professional enough when L&R came out in 1981. Gilbert said this was because "it still didn't look like a Marvel comic." Because their work did not match the same as what was seen in mainstream comics, Jaime could not see their work becoming a comic-book series. "Because we were doing it our own way, and we thought, well, we're doing it wrong. So

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[163] Wolk, *Reading Comics*, 42-43.

[164] *The Comics Journal*, no. 126 (January 1989): 72.

maybe this will be good for a fanzine." This is why the first issue of L&R was more akin to a fanzine in format than a traditional comic book. Adding on to their startup troubles, it did not help that there were seemingly no underground publishers willing to publish new people. Just as the brothers lost interest in cartooning, Mario connected their group with a friend who worked at a college that helped run the print shop.[165]

After returning a stack of "lousy" paper prints, the brothers tried to spread their self-made fanzine to anyone willing to take a copy at a Creation Con (San Francisco). Reaching those outside the convention, Gilbert took a chance by sending a copy to Gary Groth, an editor at *The Comics Journal*. This was because "these are the meanest sons-of-bitches in the world... If we can take their abuse, we could take anything... Fuck these guys, I can send this to those guys, they can't do nothing to me... Well, maybe they'll review it." Two weeks later, Gilbert received a letter from Groth saying, "Wow, this is great, we want to publish our own comics, how would you guys like us to publish you?"[166] While everyone the brothers had previously talked to had told them they had to create their comics, write, or draw in a certain way, Groth was the first person to do it their way.

Not being mainstream nor underground, L&R traversed a new space in comics when it turned into the flagship title of Fantagraphics Books in 1982.[167] Though Mario dropped out of the creative force behind the series almost entirely soon after it was

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[165] *The Comics Journal*, no. 126: 73.

[166] Ibid., 74.

[167] Marc Sobel and Kristy Valenti (ed.), *The Love and Rockets Companion: 30 Years (and Counting)* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2013), 10.

acquired by the publisher, the other two brothers learned and grew more confident in their craft, dropping what some saw as the genre trappings of the comics medium. "Jaime began by interspersing his tongue-in-cheek science-fiction series 'Mechanics' with more realistic vignettes set in the southwestern barrio Hoppers 13." Following his brother's steps in honing their style and craft, "Gilbert took the plunge with 'Heartbreak Soup,' a series of stories set in the mythical Central American town of Palomar."[168]

Going from independent publishing to Fantagraphics allowed the brothers to make a decent living. Circulation numbers for the bi-monthly (sometimes longer than that) averaged low, anywhere between 18,000-19,000. To put this in perspective (as discussed in the previous chapter), UXM's average monthly sales were at about 116,000 copies an issue when Claremont first started. Sales rose to a staggeringly impressive 430,000 for a monthly issue over a decade. Despite this sales volume difference, which was not lost on readers of L&R, some letter writers voiced their hopes that the publication would find its market. As Richmond Gardner noted in their letter in issue #8, "I mean, really, when *The X-Men* only sells about 350,000 copies in a nation of 220 million, I sorta kinda think there's room for expansion."[169]

Along with lesser monthly sales, working for an independent publisher like Fantagraphics had other downsides. One of them was being looked down upon by others in the industry. Early in their partnership with Groth at Fantagraphics, the Hernandez brothers were attacked for working with the publisher. This attack came from the pages of

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[168] Sobel, *The Love and Rockets Companion*, 10.

[169] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Peppy White (prod.) (design), Janet Toombs (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), David W. Olbrich (promotion), Mike Catron (circ.), *Love & Rockets* #8, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (Sept 1984), 2.

WAP!, a newsletter for comics freelancers edited by such big names as Steve Gerber, Steven Grant, and Frank Miller, which had just recently started publishing themselves. In this first issue, they printed a story, without verifying with those involved, claiming "that the Hernandez brothers were paid so poorly for *Love and Rockets* that they were painting Gary Groth's house to make ends meet."

Of course, the Hernandez brothers and Groth were furious. Jaime considered this kind of commentary to be rather cowardly. He said, "Obviously, it was to get at [Groth]… I still haven't talked to those guys. I thought it was really chickenshit that they never apologized to Fantagraphics—the lie was as much about them as it was about us. I still haven't heard from them. I live in the same state, I'm usually in the same town." The lie comes from the contention between mainstream and independent publishers of comics. Groth's vision and mission for *The Comics Journal* (TCJ), and by extension, Fantagraphics, was to denounce the evils of "mass market junk" coming out of the big two publishers Marvel and DC, and continue to be a provocateur, shake things up, and challenge the status quo of comic publications. This, of course, would naturally garner attacks from those embedded in the opposition. Despite this attempt at public shaming, the brothers never let this bother them. Gilbert enjoyed it, as it "keeps things hopping with me. I don't give a shit. If the whole comics industry starts dumping on Fantagraphics, I wouldn't worry." This also made Jaime want to back up Fantagraphics even more.[170]

With the relationship between L&R creators and publisher being solid, the connection between L&R creators and other creators is hit or miss; what about the

[170] *The Comics Journal*, no. 126 (January 1989): 110.

relationship between L&R creators and letter writers? In an interview with Neil Gaiman in TCJ #178, when asked to describe their (Jaime and Gilbert) relationship with their fans, Gilbert said they were "trying to piss off our parents, but we're trying to woo the fans… I think we're still trying to bring them along with us on this bumpy journey, but you know, we've had a few casualties on the way and they've gone to other books."[171] What this translates into is perhaps Jaime and Gilbert having a blunter or more forthright attitude about their characters, choices, and stories than what we have previously seen in mainstream comics. This approach often clashes with fan entitlement for comic creations, which has always been a toxic trait of any fandom. But as will be shown, how the Hernandez brothers handled entitled fans was more of a keep-at-arms-length policy or, in some cases, an emotional reaction approach. This is quite a contrasting method to the ones seen with DC and Marvel.

To give an example, at one point during Jaime's "Mechanics" story series, one of the main characters, Maggie, starts gaining weight. Several fans wrote letters or what Groth called "hate mail" regarding this character change. In a piece written in TCJ, Jaime's reaction was almost hostile, stating that Maggie would stay fat and that the more he received these kinds of letters, the less he would pay attention to them.[172] Some of these letters regarding Maggie's weight change were published.[173] At first, the only

[171] *The Comics Journal*, no. 178 (July 1995): 96.

[172] *The Comics Journal*, no. 126: 85.

[173] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Tom Mason (prod.) (design), Mr. Nels (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), Andrew Christie (promotion), Julie Strand (circ.), Linda M. Gorell (type), *Love & Rockets* #17, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (June 1986), 2.

published response to these letters in the letter column came from another reader. P.M. Stephens mentioned in his letter from #19:

> I am especially intrigued by the realistic sideline of Maggie's weight 'problem.' A recent letter asked that you return her to her 'former weight of 120' (whatever). I think that the writer missed the point. Maggie is no less Maggie when she weighs 180; a body is as real for its pain as its perfection; hers is made manifest in easting. Thus her weight is irrelevant as an issue. And after all, this is not Penthouse, you know.[174]

Despite this fan explanation, Groth made mention of this issue seven months later in #22. Stating that one of the two most often asked questions in letters was, "When is Maggie going to lose weight?" Speaking on behalf of Jaime, Groth said that only Jaime knows, and he is not telling. "She could just stay that way forever."[175] Even years after the change in the character, Jaime is still getting letters regarding Maggie's weight change. "They're still coming. The ones who have dropped the comic for those reasons—I don't need those kind of readers anyway."[176]

Perhaps a key idea lost on many fans with entitlement issues is that these characters are an extension of those who created them. It is easier to grumble or complain about a character that has passed through many hands, where groundwork has been laid about what entails these creations like Superman or Batman. However, for relatively new characters, who go through one long continuous journey with the same writer/artist, it becomes unsound to say, "You should be doing this; there's no question about it." Or

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[174] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Tom Mason (prod.) (design), Dave Nelson (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), Joe Sacco (promotion), Rachel Enger (circ.), Linda M. Gorell (type), *Love & Rockets* #19, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (Jan 1987), 2.

[175] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators) (c), Doug Erb (prod.) (design), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), Rachel Enger (circ.), Teresa Moore (prod. assist.), *Love & Rockets* #22, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (Aug 1987), 17.

[176] *The Comics Journal*, no. 126: 85.

"Oh, wrong, I found this out of character." As the Hernandez brothers and no doubt other comic creators go through this battle of proprietary interest, Jaime perhaps put it best when fans thought a particular article of clothing worn by Hopey, one of the other lead characters in "Mechanics," was apparently out of character. In a single panel, Hopey was shown to be wearing garters in a humorous sex scene. Jaime defensively responded to these letters in TCJ #126 by saying, "She did it as a joke, and *she did it*… I felt right doing it… so it was."[177] This is merely a snapshot of the relationship between creators and letter writers for L&R. Therefore, let us take a step back to gain some perspective on the examined series.

We again take a moment to look at the forest for the trees. For this particular examination of L&R, 23 issues in a total of the 34 issues examined had a letters page, giving a percentage of 67.6% of all issues examined having a letters page. In total, there were 150 letters printed (with two letters reprinted in #21 from a previous issue). Out of this total, 116 were written by assumed men, assumed women wrote 22, and 13 were written under gender-neutral names (one of these letters was co-written by a couple, a man and a woman). Men wrote 77.33% of letters printed. Women wrote 14.67% of printed letters. This leaves 8.67% of the remaining letters written by gender-neutral authors. One hundred eight letters responded to, giving a 72% response rate. Only one letter was a no-prize attempt (a whopping .67%!). This can be seen in Fig. 1, which shows the gender breakdown of letter writers with the number of letters on the Y-axis and the issue # on the X-axis.

[177] Ibid.

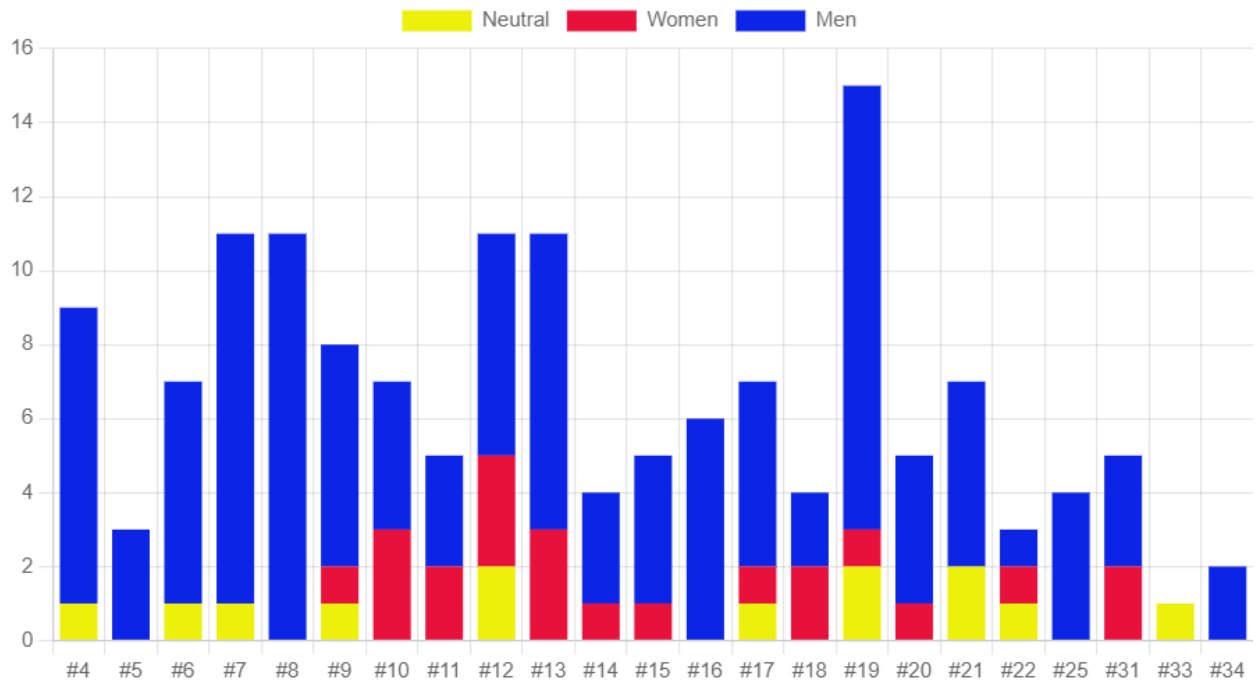

Figure 1. Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), *Love & Rockets* #1-#34, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (1982-1990).

The first volume of L&R continued until #50 in May of 1996, a range outside the parameters set for this research. I extended the analysis to issue #34 (published in Dec 1990) to get a complete picture of the letter writers of the 1980s, as some letters took several months to see publication. However, even though the series continues from #34, the frequency of letter pages appearing in each issue almost drops off completely. Despite this, I believe that a sizable chunk of data has been gathered and offers some unique and exciting insights as we look at the proverbial forest.

So far, in this analysis, we have covered 34 issues over around eight years for L&R, 40 issues over five years for TNTT, and 107 issues spread over 11 years for UCX. Comparatively, TNTT and UCX had a more stable publication release schedule than L&R. The more interesting comparison to these three publications is that all have their letter writer gender ratios relatively the same. L&R had 77.33% men, 14.67% women,

and 8.67% neutral. TNTT was 81.25% men, 13.75% women, and 5% neutral. UCX had 64.55% men, 29.85% women, and 5.59% neutral. The breakdown of the gender ratio for letter writers shows L&R to fit between the two giant mainstream series, siding more closely towards TNTT.

This is interesting as the L&R series had such vocal proponents for the representations and depictions of strong female characters. But upon looking at the letter column overall, it was not until issue #9 in November of 1984 that a letter written by a woman was published. After the first published letter written by a woman, the ratio of men to women letter writers fell into line with what has been found with the other analyzed series: primarily men. Having seen the larger picture of the makeup of the letter column, the next logical step will be to examine these letter writers more closely. Luckily, it just so happens that the editor and creators for this series have provided us with an opportunity to critically look at what they considered the ideal letter-writing fan.

Within the editorial opening to the letter pages, written by Groth for issue #7, he makes two points. The first was to note that Gilbert's drama "Heartbreak Soup" is coming into its own as a continuous story, beginning to rival Jaime's "Mechanics" in popularity and balancing the comic in terms of art dynamics. The second point highlights the "star letter" in this issue. A correspondent from Fitzroy, Australia, "who in many ways exemplifies the kind of intelligent non-fanatical comics' reader we're trying to reach with *Love and Rockets*."[178] Roger Weddall's relatively long letter saw print and opposed the non-intelligent fanatical comic readers.

[178] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Peppy White (prod.) (design), Janet Toombs (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), David W. Olbrich (promotion), Mike Catron (circ.), *Love & Rockets* #7, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (July 1984), 2.

Weddall begins his letter explaining that, due to him being an editor of the publication *Thyme*, he received and immensely enjoyed an unsolicited copy of L&R #1. It was unlike anything he had read before. "It was obviously a comic, of sorts, but the relationship of *Love and Rockets* to Superman was a rather tenuous one, and it didn't even occur to me to look in the local comics store to see if I could find out more about it. It had been years and years since I'd looked at anything but a Carl Barks story, and the idea of buying 'comics' to read was a foreign, or at least long-forgotten, notion."[179] He had since been engaged with readings such as *Cerebus the Aardvark* by Dave Sim.[180]

Months after reading the first issue, Weddall kept thinking about the color cover and his idea of what comics could be, which had since radically changed. "I still thought occasionally of 'BEM' and Maggie the would-be mechanic, and re-read their stories, but still didn't think of pursuing *Love and Rockets* any further. I didn't think there was anything (any further issues) to pursue." A year later, Weddall walks into a store with sidestacks of comics and sees three more issues of L&R. He thought #2 was good, especially "Mechanics." Despite praise in the editorial for the story, Weddall was a little cynical of just how highly praised the stories were by the editor, "but in retrospect I have to agree almost completely with what was said." L&R itself, as a whole, was different from anything he had seen before, and he liked it. But despite his exuberance for the fledgling series, Weddall began feeling a sense of guilt for not spreading the good news to all of his friends who were already reading *Cerebus*. And now, as of writing this letter,

[179] : Carl Barks, an American cartoonist, wrote and drew Disney comics for characters like Donald Duck and Scrooge McDuck.

[180] Groth, *Love and Rockets* #7, 2.

he is sitting down to read #3 and #4, hoping they will be just as good as the first two issues.[181]

Having enjoyed stories like "BEM" and "Mechanics," Weddall continues to explain where he is coming from and his reasoning for writing this letter:

> Perhaps I'm not the best placed or informed to write a letter of encouragement, having so little as I do to do with comics of any sort, but still I feel I have to write you to express how appreciative I—and the friends I have thus far shown it to—am of what you've been doing. Really, the label "comics" doesn't seem to fit—comics are all that League of Super Heroes nonsense and Mickey Mousery. (Barks and what Sim is doing also fall outside what I feel the label adequately covers—but they're a "whole 'nother" different kettle of fish.) The thing that strikes me so much about your best pieces, at least, is the way that the ordinary and the unusual or bizarre combine together so effortlessly to present a picture of a world that, while definitely not ours, just rings so true.[182]

He loves the ability of the Hernandez brothers to capture the ordinary, everyday, commonplace daily life with a sprinkle of the "most unlikely" thrown into the middle of it. When the cup is about to overflow with dinosaurs, revolutions, women wrestlers, and escaped monsters, the "human" people are there to keep it grounded.

To balance his seven-paragraph long letter, Weddall uses the last paragraph to assure those reading that despite his praise, he does have some criticism. "There are times when I don't think the mixture works, 'Radio Zero,' for instance, did not really appeal to me, it meant nothing and the characterization seemed inadequate. As a piece of a larger jigsaw perhaps it had its place, but I couldn't really say, on its own it didn't really seem to work." There was no directly published response to this letter; aside from the mention in the editorial.[183]

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[181] Ibid.

[182] Ibid.

[183] Ibid.

Given this prime example, what can be drawn out to be the ideal L&R letter writer fan? The magic of discovery, the awe of reading something seemingly never done before, the borderline abhorrence of anything resembling mainstream comics, appreciation for characters that are "authentically" weird and tied along with the fantastical extraordinary, the hope for the greatness of future issues, and a small dash of criticism for a story that did not quite click. These are the characteristics of the ideal L&R letter writer fan. However, the only difference between these characteristics and those found in the letter writers for mainstream comics is the loathing and persistent tiredness of mainstream comics.

What exactly is this characteristic of utter resentment? This is not only found in this ideal L&R letter-writing fan, but also in many letters within the letter column. This idiosyncrasy is a feeling of cultural elitism. The boast of prestige or cultural capital, if you will, is best understood by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In short, Bourdieu states that popular culture is what society deems as a failure of trying to be high culture, therefore making it inferior. Something is high culture or "complex" because often it requires more time, effort, and money. This then marks those who consume popular culture (in Bourdieu's terms) as dupes of the system for partaking in such trash culture that they need to be freed from the shackles of base thinking by the intelligentsia/culture makers/bourgeois, which is what we will see here with these L&R letter writing fans compared to mainstream (Marvel and DC) fans. I first wish to take this opportunity to

explore this theoretical framework, provided by Bourdieu, more in-depth to fully realize the relationship between these fans and comics.[184]

The main symptom of this prestige and dislike stems from how L&R fans view mainstream comics and readers. L&R fans view mainstream comics as mass culture and their readers as consumers. In actuality, mainstream comics are not mass culture but popular culture. Working from Bourdieu's theory, media scholar and cultural theorist John Fiske breaks down the study of popular culture into three branches of study in his book, *Understanding Popular Culture*. The first direction of the study of popular culture situates it outside of any model of power, maneuvering it towards a consensual model, a form of ritual management of social differences that produces a level of conformity. "It is a democratic version of elite humanism, which merely resituates the cultural life of a nation in the popular rather than the highbrow."[185]

The second direction of popular culture situates it directly within a power mode, emphasizing the dominating forces at play, almost wholly removing genuine popular culture. But this placement of dominating forces replaces popular culture with mass culture. This is then:

> imposed upon a powerless and passive people by a culture industry whose interests were in direct opposition to theirs. A mass culture produces a quiescent, passive mass of people, an agglomeration of atomized individuals separated from their position in the social structure, detached from and unaware of their class consciousness, of their various social and cultural allegiances, and thus totally disempowered and helpless.[186]

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[184] Pierre Bourdieu and et al., *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 1-2.

[185] John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, Second ed. (London England: Routledge, 2011), 20.

[186] Fisk, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 20-21.

The issue with these two directions of popular culture studies is that they both go to extremes in opposite directions. The first attempts to avoid any hierarchical power of domination that leads to harmony in popular culture amongst societies. The second leans too far into a model of power, leaving no room for the agency for not only genuine popular culture but also an agency for the consumers of it. Given the previous work shown in the chapters beforehand, the analysis indicates that audiences/fans/readers have agency and power in consuming popular culture. We also see from the preliminary examination of L&R fan letters that their view of mainstream comics falls more in line with this second direction of popular culture: the big two publishers, Marvel and DC, as the dominating forces leaving no agency and their readers as the mindless, passive masses.

The third and final branch of popular culture that Fiske focuses on, which closely matches what is occurring within these letter pages between mainstream and alternative comics, is a popular culture that acts within a site of struggle. This study of popular culture accepts the power of dominating forces, but focuses on how popular culture evades, avoids, resists, and subverts these forces. "Instead of concentrating on the omnipresent, insidious practices of the dominant ideology, it attempts to understand the everyday resistances and evasions that make that ideology work so hard and insistently to maintain itself and its value."[187] This outlook sees popular culture as progressive and optimistic as it finds social change and the drive for it stems from the consumers.

Fiske sheds light on the difficulty of understanding popular culture by defining it. The problem in understanding it is that pop culture is contradictory in capitalist industrial

[187] Ibid., 21.

societies. It is a commodity driven by a profit-motivated industry with its own needs. Popular culture is also a culture of the people with relevance to their immediate situation, often against capitalism (see any significant box office failures of movies). Pop culture is a continually evolving variable. But as Fiske makes clear, pop culture is not consumption, but rather culture; "the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system... culture, however industrialized, can never be adequately described in terms of the buying and selling of commodities."[188] Culture is a constantly shifting, thriving process that can only be made from within and never imposed upon by higher or outside forces. As a culture, pop culture is also an ever-changing entanglement of social allegiances, which are made up of various individuals from across an entire spectrum of social categories such as race, gender, class, etc.[189] With this amount of complexity brought forth regarding pop culture, we next need to understand that, regarding these letter writers, simply choosing between official and pop culture is not what is happening. Instead, they consciously make complex decisions in which their end goal is pleasure and a sense of identity.

Circling back to the start of this conversation regarding cultural elitism, we need to understand and briefly examine how comics reached the point of elitism and how readers decided to get there to achieve identity and pleasure. In Denis Keegan's Master of Arts thesis, “Comic Book Fans: Productivity, Participation and Creativity” (Dublin City University), we are shown that in post-*The Seduction of the Innocent* by Fredric Wertham (1954), the comic-book market saw a mass exodus of adult comic-book readers for

[188] Ibid., 23.

[189] Ibid., 24.

almost the next two decades. Psychiatrist Fredric Wertham's book was written as a warning of the negative effects that comic books have on the youth, resulting in juvenile delinquency. As comics scholar Carol Tilley points out, Wertham was not alone in his thoughts on comic books. At the end of World War II, literary and cultural critics such as Sterling North and Stanley Kunitz condemned superhero comic books "because of their perceived violent and Fascist elements."[190] However, since superhero comic-book stories helped the war effort and adults had other major concerning issues on their mind, the was never a giant consensus to overturn the comic book industry. "Superhero titles continued to be published following the end of the war, but publishers introduced new genres such as romance, jungle, horror, and true crime, which flourished. In part, publishers intended these new genres to capture the reading interests of more mature readers, especially veterans and other young adults who grew up on superhero comics but now wanted more substantive reading matter."[191] Though publishers had intended these newer genres to be read by a more mature audience, it did not stop younger readers from latching on to titles such as *Untamed Love*, *Forbidden Worlds*, and *Shocking Mystery*. However, *Seduction* was taken seriously at the time of its publication in 1954 and helped launch a campaign of censorship.[192]

A result of this campaign was that by imposing the Comics Code by the publishers themselves resulted in the perception that comics were only for children, and

[190] Carol L. Tilley, "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics," Information & Culture, vol. 47, no. 4, 2012, JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43737440, accessed 13 Nov. 2023, 384.

[191] Tilley, "Seducing the Innocent," 384.

[192] Since Wertham's sources were made widely available in 2010, his research has since been disputed.

the image of an adult reading comics grew a negative connotation. The crime and horror comics that drew the majority of adult readers dropped in number of titles. "In 1952, there were approximately 630 titles being published; by 1956, this had dropped to near 250 titles. Readership fell from approximately sixty million to roughly thirty-five million."[193] Along with this drop in adult readership, Keegan shows that comics as a whole became more isolated.

With the classification of comics as juvenile and devalued by society, comics became untended and allowed to grow in isolation. "Because comic books were held in such low regard, they were effectively invisible and became the preserve of enthusiasts/fans and children."[194] A consequence of this growth in isolation, Keegan explains, is the shift of language of comics to meta-language of comics, which came with the requirement of expected knowledge, ideas, themes, clichés, history, etc. This further increased the isolation of comics from new or casual comics readers. Additionally, since comics were perceived as juvenile, all of this required meta-language and knowledge was viewed as irrelevant information with no importance. These consequences coalesce into "fueling both fan loyalty and perpetuating the self-consciousness of the medium vis-a-vis its lack of cultural worth."[195] Even other entertainment mediums, such as television, kept comics out of the limelight even longer.

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[193] Denis Keegan, "Comic Book Fans: Productivity, Participation and Creativity," Master of Arts, Dublin City University (2000), https://doras.dcu.ie/18910/1/Denis_Keegan_20130521102616.pdf, 38-39.

[194] Keegan, "Comic Book Fans," 39.

[195] Ibid.

With this subdued state of existence, an opportunity to reinvent itself arose within the comic medium. It is here that we have the 1960s underground comix movement. "By calling themselves 'comix' rather than comics, the undergrounds distanced themselves from the subject-matter, agenda, and market of mainstream comics."[196] Sometimes mimicking Marvel and DC characters, underground comix creators would primarily return to older roots and pay homage to creations such as Krazy Kat or Disney characters. But eventually, the movement became more well known for its satire, political, raunchy, mature, and vandalization of past and present comic creations.

Despite this seemingly hardline dichotomy, fans and readers of mainstream comics and underground comix often overlapped. This was partly due to how issues were sold then and the nature of collecting comics. For mainstream comics, they were still working on the "sale or return" basis through corner stores and newsstands. This meant it would be several months or longer before any economic feedback was generated. It also meant that readers who picked up a series, not from the beginning or had gaps in their collection, had to search for back issues. On the underground comix side, they were being sold through headshops. In time, some of these shops began favoring the comics retail business and focused more on stocking and selling second-hand and remaindered comics.[197] However, to put this new comic-store transition into perspective, by 1987, the number of retail stores dedicated explicitly to comic books increased to about four thousand. This is astonishing as there were fewer than one hundred during the mid-

[196] Ibid., 44-45.

[197] Ibid., 48.

1970s.[198] Thus the line between mainstream and underground comix fans remained blurred, not only because of the emergence of comic-book stores, but also because a majority of mainstream comic readers were now college-aged, and the appeal of counter-culture within the comic medium itself allowed them to traverse both worlds.

However, this evolution of sales only increased the pop culture's isolation. As Keegan states, "The exclusive nature of comic shops, allied to the increasingly self-referential art and storylines of most comic books popular with fans meant that, while direct sales and the spread of shops increased sales, readership did not widen as much as it deepened."[199] The reliability of purchasing comics blossomed with comic-book stores, increasing the number of fans; it also led to the ease at which fans could collect. This allowed already established, aging fans the ability to collect and spend more. Comics were now being made by fans for fans, giving little consideration to those who might try to join or were unfamiliar with the medium.

Power soon shifted away from mainstream publishers, Marvel and DC, towards fans again. With the power shift, fans began to seek out a specific attribute of comic books. One of the critical marks of mainstream comics was their quick and easy art reproducibility. Fans began to hunger for more "quality" art with less focus on content. With this hunt for art arose a stardom system with comic artists. in the past, creators often left their names out or used pseudonyms out of shame via association with the low-brow medium. But now, with individuals creating their own underground comix, direct

[198] Kurt Eichenwald, "Grown-Ups Gather at the Comic Book Stand," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, September 30, 1987). https://www.nytimes.com/1987/09/30/business/grown-ups-gather-at-the-comic-book-stand.html.

[199] Keegan, "Comic Book Fans," 50.

sales, fanzines, and conventions gave possibilities to rising stars and fame within the community for their stylized art. The pendulum would eventually swing back, and a hunger for more sophisticated content soon came on the heels of this hunt for art. Thus, prizing rarer and perceived high-quality art and content increased an already private community within a secluded community.

Reaching the 1970s and into the 1980s, we return to familiar territory as alternative comics reach prominence and store shelves via direct sales. Similar to underground comix, these alternative comics usually expressed the personal views of their creators. L&R, launched in 1982 by the Hernandez Brothers, is an excellent example of the differences between underground and alternative. With themes, characters, and content focused around Hispanic culture, the Hernandez Brothers' work also contained violence and sex, but never needlessly, unlike the rampant usage in underground comix.

But with the change to direct sales, comic-book series began to be seen as a commodity, including our examined series, L&R. The newest staple feature of what helps define a comic-book fan was becoming a collector. As Keegan keenly explains, the supply began to gradually meet the demand of fans, and then:

> a new obsessiveness came to the fore, with the search for complete sets of titles and a desire to have all paraphernalia connected to a character or creator becoming common. Comic books came to be seen as investments. This led to collectors buying multiple copies of particular issues with a view to selling them at a later stage, along with absurd care being taken to preserve comics in pristine 'mint' condition. By the end of the 1980s this obsession with collecting meant that in the Dow Jones Top 100 Movable Commodity Index (June 1988), comics were listed fourth, after industrial diamonds, fine art and furniture.[200]

[200] Ibid., 62.

This evolution in buying comics is another indicative attribute of the shift to the isolated community of adult fans. In 1987, Buddy Saunders, president of Lone Star Comics (a retail chain in North Texas), stated, "If we had to give up every customer below the age of 15, we would survive... If we had to give up everyone above the age of 17, we'd be out of business."[201] Marvel Comics commissioned a survey that found that the average age of comic-book readers was roughly twenty-years-old, with Baby Boomers and those directly behind them entering the comic market. The survey also found that the average reader spent over $10 on weekly comics.

Interestingly, it is not the newly published comics that cost the most, with a price tag of 75 cents to $1.15. The more expensive comics are the slick paperbacks and hardcovers that cost $2.50 to $20 a copy. The estimated total comics retail sales from 1983 were $200 million, but by 1987, the estimated retail sales (not including used comics) were up to $350 million.[202]

With comics taking on the role of an investment, prices for copies skyrocketed in little as weeks or months. Some issues even jumped upwards to $500 after a few years. The jargon usually seen in Wall Street now populated the comic-book trade. "Buyers can be speculators or long-term investors. Tips about the potential value of yet-unpublished issues can create a huge demand for a comic. Then there are market adjustments, such as when the values of comics published in black and white plunged."[203] With this

[201] Eichenwald, "Grown-Ups Gather," *The New York Times*.

[202] Ibid.

[203] Ibid.

understanding of the next stage of the comic market, who exactly were these readers and fans?

A few studies/surveys have been done for this particular time frame, two of which were sponsored by DC Comics. A 1991 survey by Mark Clements Research showed the gender spread of readers to be 87.4% men and 12.4% women. A 1992 Media Research Inc. (MRI) survey showed a significant variation with 93.1% men and 6.9% women. The 1991 survey showed almost twice the amount of female readers as the 1992 survey. This is a far more accurate measure of readership than counting letters to the editor. However, if there was a larger proportion of published letters by women than actual women readers, it would be significant because it suggests that even if women readers were relatively few in number, they were more engaged and active readers. Though, it must be noted that the second survey, titled "A Survey of Young Upwardly Mobile Men," intentionally left out views and replies from all women participants.[204] This undoubtedly marks the first survey in 1991 to be a more accurate in its findings.

Another notable survey conducted by First Comics in 1984 via a readers' poll shows some interesting results. Like Fantagraphics, First Comics was a successful independent/alternative comics publisher riding the direct-sale market wave. Having published the results in *Starslayer* #20 (Sept. 1984), the survey found the average age of readers to be around twenty-five. The intermediate education level is some college (71.3%), most were either students or professionals as occupation, and the gender breakdown showed 90.4% male to 9.6% women. This readers' poll showed an immediate age drop-off at thirty-five. The reason for this may be because this would be the age for

[204] Keegan, "Comic Book Fans," 72-73.

marriage and starting families. For reference, a 35-year-old at this time would have been in their teenage years around the time of the comics fandom evolving in the 1960s.

In comparison, *Comic Buyer's Guide* did its survey the same year with around 6,000 votes. Published on May 17th, 1985, they found the most common age was fourteen years, with the arithmetical average being about nineteen years. The gender breakdown for this survey was 5,579 male ballots to 309 women ballots, or 94.8% male to 5.2% women. For this survey, only thirty-six voters were over the age of forty. An interesting comparison of the discrepancy of generations between the two surveys, but with gender ratios remaining somewhat within expected ranges.[205] These were not by any means perfect survey/poll studies. These readers' polls and surveys were sent out inside comic-book issues and required the reader to complete and return the polls, a similar effort akin to writing letters to the editors.

Perhaps the one key element linking all these surveys and descriptors of comic-book readers is that they used a portion of their disposable income to buy comics. According to the MRI survey of comic-book readers, "the median number of comic books bought (in the last thirty days) was 39.6 with an average expenditure of $97 in the same period. 97.1% bought comics to add to their collection."[206] To prove that comic-book readers were not semi-literate (reading only comic books), the same survey showed that 91.6% of the comic readers had purchased books (not comic books) within the last twelve months, whereas the U.S. national average of consumers sat at 44.1%. The

[205] Rob Imes, "The Aging Demographic of Comic Book Readers," History in the Making, May 17, 2021, https://robimes.blogspot.com/2021/05/the-aging-demographic-of-comic-book.html.

[206] Keegan, "Comic Book Fans," 73.

national average of consumers showed that the average number of books bought was seven compared to twenty-five from more ardent comic-book readers. On top of this, the survey showed that these comic-book readers went to the movie theaters, listened to music, and played/bought video games more so than the national average, cementing them as consistent cultural consumers.

Let us take this chance to recap how these cultural consumers fit in with L&R fans. Alternative comics (arising from underground comix), such as L&R, are a subset of a niche cultural community within an isolated community of comics. These comics are not as widely distributed, often more erratically too, less accessible (not every comic book shop has them, even more so with newsstands), and usually intended for a narrower audience (older) than mainstream (which breaks the stigma of made for little kids), with "celebrity" artists/writers behind their creation who go against rules and guidelines (CCA). These alternative comics are also inherently worth more as a cultural product in quantity and price. For example, L&R #34 (1990) was initially sold at $2.50; the cost of an issue went up to $2.75 in the next issue. Comparatively, UCX #124 in 1979 cost 40 cents, UCX #200 in 1985 cost $1.25, and UCX #257 Jan 1990 went back down to only $1.00. In the realm of comics, alternative comics were very much avant-garde, both high in price and cultural value. What exactly then urged these readers to buy independent comics over mainstream? Were they predisposed to buying them naturally?

Bourdieu would say no, they are not. Returning to Bourdieu's book *Distinction* (1984), he refutes the idea of encountering art appreciably through natural inclinations. This is due to what Bourdieu describes as 'the aesthetic disposition,' or the ability to see form over function, moving past the 'sensible properties' that make up the primary

stratum of a cultural product, i.e., lacework is delicate.[207] Having 'the aesthetic disposition,' or knowledge/history of the work, allows for a deeper appreciation of the secondary stratum. Through social experiences, education, and class distinction, one can learn to truly appreciate art beyond the surface level and gain aesthetic appreciation. Therefore, as Bourdieu states, "the encounter with a work of art is not 'love at first sight' as is generally supposed, and the act of empathy, Einfühlung, which is the art-lover's pleasure, presupposes an act of cognition, a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code."[208] Building upon this aesthetic disposition through his study of the French bourgeoisie, Bourdieu shows a burgeoning style of detachment from necessity and function, a lifestyle of detachment from cultural economics for creating art for art's sake. This new lifestyle comes from a growing aesthetic disposition that favors form over function, which makes a dependence on this relationship. A relationship that pursues and accumulates cultural capital while withdrawing from economic necessity.[209] As this relates to alternative comic-book readers, their relationship can be seen in seeking the cultural capital of their own alternative comics that circumvent the mainstream publication systems, which publish strictly for money in their eyes.

Within the field of comics during this era of the 60s through the 90s, groups of comic-book readers were distancing themselves from the grasp of symbolic power held by mainstream comic-book publishers. This relationship requires a constant struggle to

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[207] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 2-3.

[208] Ibid., 3.

[209] Keegan, "Comic Book Fans," 77; Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 53-54.

legitimize itself by acquiring these cultural products and knowledge and abhorring mainstream comics and their readers. Rather than fuel the machine pumping out superhero magazines, they turned their entertainment spending towards accumulating seemingly elevated comics. These readers changed their lifestyles to put their aesthetic disposition toward gaining more cultural capital. To seal their new lifestyle, these readers shunned mainstream comics to perpetuate the idea that mainstream comics (popular culture or lowbrow) were beneath compared to alternative/independent comics (official culture or highbrow). Keegan, whose thesis helped pull together this theoretical framework, concluded that we cannot:

> justify the dichotomy between official and popular culture (between high and low culture). While the distinction has always been politically charged and value-laden, it has lost much of its descriptive power. The subjects in this study, in their consumption and their creativity, ignore the distinction, or more correctly, refute the discreteness of the two.[210]

I beg to differ. This showcasing of L&R fans' letters clearly and repeatedly demonstrates that a clear distinction is being made regarding their own high culture and that which is considered low culture. They recognize the difference between low-brow mainstream comics and high-brow alternative comics.

Much has been discussed in regards to the theoretical framework surrounding this particular examination, and instead of putting the cart before the horse, let us take a look at a number of these fan letters for L&R to see what is being written which shows their cognizant distinction between official and popular culture. Starting with issue #9's (November 1984) letter column, S.J. Hatekeyama from Florissant, Missouri, wrote in to share their love for L&R. For Hatekeyama, the series stands "above the mire and muck

[210] Keegan, "Comic Book Fans," 166.

which stagnates in the neighborhood comic book shops." Although, they admit that too often, they give in and buy too much of the "gagful pop published for teen mutant-ninja-loving four-color zombies like myself." Despite this, they are all too happy when "every now and then a truly outstanding piece of work redirects my taste (i.e. buying habits) back to that state-of-the-art excellence which is all too absent from the Big Two mass-marketed trash." This fan would have checked most of the boxes if there had been a checkbox for all the discussed theoretical framework attributes. The wording used to describe mainstream comics as "mire and muck," "gagful pop," "mass-marketed trash" versus "state-of-the-art excellence" signals a clear distinction between lowbrow and highbrow. Hatekeyama also uses a self-inflicting chaff of being a "zombie" for buying comic books like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (TMNT). They even mention redirecting their taste/buying habits to a cultural good considered worth more. This is just one of many examples of distinction within the L&R letter column.[211]

In issue #11, John Macleod from Ontario, Canada, takes a jab at anyone who calls the top-rated 1984 Marvel crossover series *Secret Wars* interesting. Edward Bowers' is printed below Macleod's letter, who claims that the Hernandez Brothers are writing more relatable comic stories than "what all the mutant fans say Claremont is writing but actually is not." Ian Smyth (from issue #12) was going to give up on super-hero type comics and maybe comic books in general because he now finds them shallow and silly. That is until he got his hands on L&R. In issue #14, Linda Dunn ends her letter telling the Hernandez Brothers to keep up the excellent work and then prophesying that "*Love and*

[211] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Tom Mason (prod.) (design), Janet Toombs and MAD Mary (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), David W. Olbrich (promotion), Mike Catron (circ.), Love & Rockets #9, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (November 1984), 2, 33.

Rockets will be around long after everyone is tired of teenage mutant telekinetics with tuition problems." Dunn is shortly followed by Andrew Littlefield, who asserts that "too many comics fans never lift their heads from the pages of their favorite four-color fantasy to ever learn about what has been going on in life, literature, and cinema for the last 30 years." As a self-described man of culture, Littlefield boasts of his aesthetic disposition, taste, and style that only a few non-official culture consumers could achieve.[212]

Keeping the tradition alive in these letter columns, Joshua M. Ottenberg of Philadelphia, PA (#16) begins his letter with, "In an industry dominated by the super-hero fantasy genre, Los Bros are a refreshing exception to the tedium of pretentious, self-centered, teenage-mutant mentalities."[213] Even later in the series, in issue #22, Kerri Ann Oberhauser perpetuates this separation of comic culture quality by stating, "No one—no where—no how has ever expressed more of the spectrum of life than you have in your comic between the pages. No fake super-hero bullshit—no super-hero soap operas (a la young mutants in love)."[214] Despite these flavorful comments, the printed letters have only made offhand comments regarding their disregard for mainstream comics.

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[212] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Tom Mason (prod.) (design), Mark Thompson (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), Larry Reid (promotion), Sharon Kingsford and Carys Kresny (circ.), Linda Gorell (type), *Love & Rockets* #11, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (April 1985), 1, 31; Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Tom Mason (prod.) (design), Mark Thompson (prod. asst.), Mr. Hambone (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), David W. Olbrich (promotion) (circ.), Linda M. Gorell (type), *Love & Rockets* #12, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (July 1985), 2, 35; Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Tom Mason (prod.) (design), Wim. Jr. (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), Andrew Christie (promotion), Julie Strnad (circ.), Arlene Easter (type), *Love & Rockets* #14, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (Nov 1985), 2, 35.

[213] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Tom Mason (prod.) (design), Mr. Mace (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), Andrew Christie (promotion), Julie Strnad (circ.), Linda M. Gorell (type), *Love & Rockets* #16, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (March 1986), 2, 35.

[214] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators) (c), Doug Erb (prod.) (design), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), Rachel Enger (circ.), Teresa Moore (prod. assist.), *Love & Rockets* #22, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (Aug 1987), 17.

Regarding issue #18, Marc Saucier of Gulfport, MS, has made an entire spectacle of his contempt. Saucier had given up comic books. He was bored with all the "bullshit about teenage mutants, aliens, guys and girls with capes and leotards, etc., etc." Underground comix were not doing much better in this regard either: "a lot of guys playing with guns, death, blood, etc.— Rambo in komik book form. . . I was tired of blood and death and elves and mutants and super-powers and super-villains and all that stuff."[215] All of this, according to Saucier, was fine if you were at the young age of 14 or 16, but it had gotten tiresome for him. And it was not just the comic books.

As dull as the comic books were becoming, the fans were becoming more annoying to Saucier. "Most of the comics fans I met were either adolescents or retarded adolescents—the kinda guys you met in your computer science classes, the ones that played D&D or Space Death From Mars in their spare time." All of this is to say that Saucier was losing interest in the medium and the fan base. Even worse was the fact that he was being forced to occupy the same space as these "adolescents." Now, Saucier finds himself "in the position of having to go to comic book stores and hang out with these selfsame retarded D&D adolescent unicorn love types, trying to ignore their inane babbling about strength levels and spells and what Prof. Xavier is up to this month." He endures this passive interaction with mainstream fans to dig through piles of "Sado-Maso Man and Radioactive Wonder Horse Funnies" to loot copies of L&R. Despite reluctance towards the comic-book fan culture, he considers himself a "fan" and probably will continue to be until L&R stops being published. This specific example is the most direct

[215] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Tom Mason (prod.) (design), Mr. Nels (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), Joe Sacco (promotion), Julie Strnad (circ.), Linda M. Gorell (type), *Love & Rockets* #18, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (Sept 1986), 2, 35.

targeting of mainstream fans within the same overall community. The use of degrading remarks, reluctance to be associated with, or disgust to occupy the same vicinity of mainstream fans indicates the strong separation between official and popular culture.[216]

To help further understand this separation of fans within the same community sphere, we return to Fiske. Within his essay, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," part of the edited collection, *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, Fiske's most significant contribution is that there is a "sharp distinction between the dominant and fan cultures." This has been shown within this comic fandom, where the cultural value of mainstream comics is lower than these alternative/underground comix. This is due to their broader appeal and widespread publication. However, it is also partly due to the socially constructed separation of discrimination based on gender, race, class, and age.

We can see in these discriminatory efforts in the letters (published) that age and class differences are the main modes of discrimination for these L&R letter writers, often degrading teenagers, young adults, and kids and claiming that mainstream comics are aimed at “little kiddies” while they, the often so-called self-labeled 'college-educated adults,' are reading what they perceive to be more sophisticated and multi-layered comics. This discrimination may have been partly given leeway by the "more mature readers" warning label on the front of every cover of L&R, which often contains graphic sex and violence. However, sex and violence do not necessarily make for mature stories. It is without question that mainstream comics have adult themes, ideas, arcs, and character growth. At times for mainstream comics, these “mature” or more profound

[216] *Love & Rockets* #18, (Sept 1986), 2, 35.

layered attributes are subtlety embedded. They might even be a bit fewer and farther between each issue published on a regularly held schedule, but they can be found within the pages. Nevertheless, it has been shown that these deeper and more mature stories in mainstream comics come with acknowledgement by older, college-going adults, sometimes parents, and other fans from across the spectrum with their written letters.[217]

What we see here with these discriminations are fan-created boundaries. As Fiske states: "Fans discriminate fiercely: the boundaries between what falls within their fandom and what does not are sharply drawn. And this discrimination in the cultural sphere is mapped into distinctions in the social – the boundaries between the community of fans and the rest of the world are just as strongly marked and patrolled.[218] However, contrary to what Fiske continues to go on and explain, the differences set by the boundary are not invested by both sides. In this particular cultural situation, the discrimination in this study is one-sided as virtually none (if any) form of boundary settings from the mainstream letters can be seen thus far. Continuing Fiske's suggestions, readers of mainstream comics are subordinated by age and class, similar to what can be seen as proletarian culture. Alternative/underground comix readers believe themselves to suffer less from perceived structures of domination and subordination, i.e., wide appeal, Comics Code Authority, less graphic sex, violence, immature themes, etc. In turn, however, they act as gatekeepers to those not meeting their restrictive criteria. Fiske states, "It would not be surprising in such a case to find that older fans, male fans, and more highly educated fans

[217] John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," Lisa A. Lewis (ed.), *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (New York, Routledge, 1992), 34-35.

[218] Fisk, "The Cultural Economy," 34-35.

tend to use official criteria, whereas younger, female and the less educated ones tend towards popular criteria."[219] This is exactly what is found in these examined letters. Older, almost always male, college educated fans have set criteria of what constitutes a "good" comic. And if one does not read these “good” comics, then they are immediately seen as lesser in a multitude of senses.

Knowing the attributes, these letter writers seek in what qualifies as a “good” comic is essential in this analysis. This can be done by examining the recurring themes and topics brought forth by the letter writers regarding the comic series. Taking the next step, what are some of the major themes that can be pulled from the letters printed in the series of L&R? What concerns and voiced opinions appear frequently? First, to note the overall sense of these letters, there is an almost immediate sense of a more significant level of maturity, or rather a degree in the age of the letters being written/published compared to mainstream letter columns. Depth of discussion, topics, and language used are some indicators being found. This is not to say the mainstream comics are less meaningful. Still, perhaps the linguistics and terminology used are more in-step with what is expected of an insulated community revolving around underground/alternative comics. Maybe this first warning a reader sees is the most obvious indicator of this sign of maturity. On the fourth issue's cover, a label starts to appear which says, “Recommended For Mature Readers.”

With that in mind, we return to Ottenberg’s previously mentioned letter from issue #16. Moving past his opening cultural elitist remarks about mainstream comics, this letter writer opens an interesting conversation regarding women’s readership and touches upon

[219] Ibid., 36-37.

a recurring theme of identifying and representation. His friend, Al, and their comic-book dealer believe that the continuing story, "Mechanics," and the L&R series overall, is primed and aimed at attracting women's readership due to many stories focused on or around women characters. However, this letter writer has particular qualms regarding those who find these women-centered series unrelatable. He states, "The idea that male readers only like male characters, and female readers only like female characters, is born of an education rank with small-minded, sexist literary values. I say trite comics are trite comics. If women have more sense to read them, then it may be they are smarter than men."[220]

Ottenberg explains in his letter that the fallacy of this idea is that readers only like relatable characters and that to relate to that character, the reader and character must be of the same gender. He claims the superhero industry perpetuates this as selling this idea to a younger audience is easier. But alas! Ottenberg is a grown-up now. "Christ, I'm a God-damned lawyer already. (Excuse the language, please.) Personally, my fantasies are no longer filled with super-heroes." To him, not knowing that fans have aged out of this mindset is a sign that publishers have lost touch with their fan base. He notes that Marvel has attempted to humanize some of their characters. Speaking to the more significant issue, however, Ottenberg continues his thoughts on the matter:

> I mean, the world is made up of both men and women, right? And women have problems too, right? And sometimes they even have the same problems as men do. And, wonder of wonders, sometimes a little change in perspective can throw a new light on something and make it easier to understand. There's real stuff here. So, come out of your coffin. You might learn something. The characters of Los Bros are unpretentious and likeable. I don't 'identify' with any of them because I do not want to be any of them. This isn't a matter of gender, it's a matter of being a whole person, no longer a 10-year-old with an amorphous, undefined self. The

[220] *Love & Rockets* #16, 2, 35.

> stories are mostly charming portrayals of realistically flawed characters trying to cope in a world where good and evil are not always black and white, and the latter does not always triumph over the former. The good story-telling should appeal to anyone who has the taste to recognize it. But, there's the rub. Most comics readers were brought up on two-dimensional characters, in situations where good and evil are cut and dry. Coming from a background that tends to reinforce stereotypes and inhibit growth, instead of breaking down stereotypes and encouraging readers to deal with the tough little banalities that make the world go around. I fear few readers will be able to make the switch from mainstream comics to Los Bros. For them, if the pretensions of the teenage-mutant mentality ever become unsatisfying, they will abandon comics, and a rich source of pop-existential input, forever.

Ottenberg shows an excellent understanding of characterization and why readers are drawn to it. The letter writer could have mentioned race along with gender to round out their argument, but the point being made is still solid. Despite noting that Marvel was evolving their stories, this letter still has the characteristics of elitism: "The good story-telling should appeal to anyone who has the taste to recognize it." Not to mention the previously discussed beginning portion of his letter. Ottenberg fears that mainstream comic readers will eventually become unsatisfied with the medium, never knowing about L&R. The real fear should have been that degrading what mainstream comic readers were consuming and shaming them for it is not the best way to introduce alternative comics to these potential new readers if that was the actual goal.

Ottenberg is correct in regards to women characters, however. L&R portrayed women in a very nuanced and down-to-earth way. The series is aptly named; L&R's significant themes in its numerous stories are love and interpersonal relationships. This includes sexual, romantic, unrequited loves, love affairs, marriage, and hookups. As Derek Royal wrote in his contribution to *Critical Survey of Graphic Novels: Independent and Underground Classics, Second Edition*, "the sexuality represented is largely fluid and nonconventional, leaving the reader to question the role of heteronormativity in the

narrative. Homosexuality, bisexual encounters, fetishism, and other sexual practices are represented in such a way that all become normative within the worlds of *Love and Rockets*." Similarly, gender roles are represented in a multitude of different ways. Jaime's side of L&R is often praised for the depictions of women and how they subvert the patriarchal attitude and male-fantasy figures prevalent throughout comics. These women characters of varying shapes and sizes often discuss and are shown struggling with their body images and physique. On the same branch, Gilbert has been praised for representing women in power and in charge of their life. Nonetheless, critics have accused Gilbert of "fetishizing the female figure, falling prey to the same kind of exaggerated 'fanboy' fantasies found in mainstream comics." Though it is interesting to hear what men fan-letter writers like Ottenberg say about representation, what exactly do women letter writers say in these letter columns?[221]

For one reason, finding the voice of women writers within the letter column was a challenge at first. None could be found for several issues after the first letter column appeared. One reason women reading the L&R series were not so eager to write may be partly because of Groth's editorials. In issue #6, in his usual editorial at the beginning of each issue, he announces the Hernandez Bros. West Coast Tour. All three brothers will appear at four, maybe five comics specialty stores in California in April. They will also be guests at PetuniaCon, the first convention devoted to independent/alternative comics creators and publishers. After listing all the notable guests at the con, Groth jokingly announces he will be the judge at the Maggie-look-alike Mud Wrestling Contest.

[221] Derek Royal, "Love and Rockets," Beaty Bart and Stephen Weiner (ed.), *Critical Survey of Graphic Novels. Independents & Underground Classics* 2nd ed. (New York, Salem Press, 2019), 523-524.

Returning to a more serious tone, he also reports that one of the events at the convention will be a costume parade and that the Con coordinator informed him that costumes would be judged as much on presentation as by the costume itself.

Groth follows this by saying, "And, since it is imperative to attract as many ladies who look like Maggie and Penny Century as possible, anyone who looks like Penny Century, Rand Racem or Maggie and Hopey (not to mention Luba and Archie) should remember that a whacked-out presentation can make up for the relative ordinariness of the 'costume' itself." Continued, "My room number is 406 and I'm looking forward to meeting all you Maggie look-alikes."[222] Soliciting readers and fans of the series to join him in his hotel room probably did not improve the rate of letters by women being written. One letter writer, Garold Reynolds of Santa Cruz, did not care to see this display of creepiness in the L&R series. "It's rather distressing, though, to read Gary Groth's 'announcement.'" Reynolds continues, "Is this really necessary? I realize this was an attempt of humor, but I don't find at all amusing Mr. Groth's attempt to turn these three-dimensional characters into sex objects."[223] Though his concern was for the characters rather than the women, it is interesting to see a letter published that points out the absurd request by the editor. The lack of women letter writers nevertheless continued.

Luckily, I was not the only person to take notice of this absence of women's voices. In the same issue (#8), Reynolds also raised another excellent point besides Groth's questionable editorial, namely that L&R could tap into a largely ignored and

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[222] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Peppy White (prod.) (design), Janet Toombs (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), David W. Olbrich (promotion), Mike Catron (circ.), *Love & Rockets* #6, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (May 1984), 2.

[223] *Love & Rockets* #8, (Sept 1984), 2, 33, 34.

somewhat alienated group of potential comic-book buyers: women. What concerned him was the complete lack of diversity within the column. "I've noticed that every letter published so far in *Love and Rockets* (with a couple of possible exceptions) was written by a man." Of the forty-one letters printed in the column, thirty-eight were written by men (with three neutral gender writers). "I don't know if women aren't reading *Love and Rockets*, aren't writing letters, or if their letters aren't being published," states Reynolds. "But if the magazine continues to present non-sexist stories and non-exploitative covers (how many comics use women's bodies to sell books to an (assumed) male readership?), it seems to me that more and more women will be buying this book." Whether or not Reynolds' letter spurred the editor Groth and Hernandez bros to publish more women's letters or for women readers to write in letters is something that will not be known. What is known is that after this issue, we see the first letter written by a woman.[224]

Karen Weiss and her friends from Washington, D.C. had their letter published in issue #9, the first identifiable women to appear in the column. To these women, the characters Maggie, Hopey, Penny, Izzy, and the rest are considered "a) our friends b) our role models c) great feminists." These characters were cool, beautiful, fun, intelligent, and talented, all characteristics they saw within themselves. What impressed, or perhaps shocked them, was that Jaime created this in his LOCAS series. "By all accounts a male, should not have such insight into female friendships, feelings, and fashions. The excellence of the plot and plight of these amazing chicks is rivaled only by the artwork involved in their depiction." Weird angles, reverse negatives, bizarre shadows, graffiti

[224] Ibid.

pieces, visible panty lines, coupling in the sleeper sofa, and ace bandages are all unique and creative choices that made this fantasy story authentic to Weiss and her friends.[225]

Identifiable letters written by women were not seen until issue #9, with the letter column appearing in L&R starting with issue #4. But after their debut in issue #9, letters written by women became more prevalent, though few compared to their male counterparts. In issue #10, Kate Coffee of Indianola, OK, wrote in to say that women do read L&R and that her writing this letter was to prove it. “I savor the stories, am mad about the art, and just adore Hopey—she's my kinda woman." Sticking with issue #10, Monica Sharp from Holtville, CA, wrote to thank the Hernandez brothers for their exciting and believable portrayal of women characters. As she gets her comics from Mile High Comics’ N.I.C.E. (New Issue Comics Express) service, she wants to get her girlfriend in Oakland a subscription service after talking to her about L&R. They both hate the stereotypical portrayal of women as creatures who need a man to save them. Also, her friend in Oakland has only read *Zippy*. Still, Sharp thinks she will love L&R. Rounding out this particular issue’s letter column, Beth Adams of Boston, MA, told of her recent trip to California, where she discovered L&R. She wanted to let the Hernandez brothers know that there is now a big following in Boston and hopes they keep drawing comics.[226]

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[225] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Tom Mason (prod.) (design), Janet Toombs and MAD Mary (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), David W. Olbrich (promotion), Mike Catron (circ.), *Love & Rockets* #9, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (November 1984), 2, 33.

[226] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Tom Mason (prod.) (design), Janet Toombs (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), David W. Olbrich (promotion) (circ.), Linda Gorell (type), *Love & Rockets* #10, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (January 1985), 2, 20, 50.

It was not until the letter column in issue #11 that we see a specific response to Reynolds' letter from back in issue #8. Linda Crothers of San Francisco had a short letter where she wished to answer Reynolds' call. Crothers wrote, "After reading Greg R's comments in #8 that maybe no women were reading *Love and Rockets*, I had to let my opinions be known—This is one woman who is hopelessly, totally, utterly devoted and loco over *Love and Rockets*!"[227] Another letter written by Michelle J. Cioeta from Prospect Park, PA (#13) chimed in to comment on the strength of the women the Hernandez brothers created. "No Marvel Universe sexism here, for sure. It's about time some comic-book women were strong and human at the same time. I like the way your female characters are their own women, or at least they try. Or you're trying."[228] Cioeta feels that the characters are alive, but independent of their creators. This is interesting because Cioeta does not believe a man can create positive representative woman characters. The track record is not excellent for women characters created by male creators, but it is interesting to see a reader dissociate the creation from the creator.

In the same topical vein as Ottenberg's letter (in #16), Linda Dunn of Carrboro, NC, has her letter published in #14. In it, she asked the big question of why women are not into comics on the same scale that men are. Dunn said the answer is easy. "There are very few comics that have characters that an intelligent, mature woman could identify

[227] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Tom Mason (prod.) (design), Mark Thompson (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), Larry Reid (promotion), Sharon Kingsford and Carys Kresny (circ.), Linda Gorell (type), *Love & Rockets* #11, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (April 1985), 1, 31.

[228] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Tom Mason (prod.) (design), Andrew Christie and Sarah Gregory (prod. asst.), The FBI Staff (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), David W. Olbrich (promotion) (circ.), Linda M. Gorell (type), *Love & Rockets* #13, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (Sept 1985), 2, 42-43.

with. *Love and Rockets* is one of the few comics that has a significantly large female following. A look at the book will tell you why: it has something more to offer than endless fight scenes and lovelorn lamentations. In short, it's interesting."[229] While Dunn has spoken in general for all women who read comics, she admitted, she speaks for herself when she stated that she has grown tired of superheroes who have so many problems that "they could keep Dr. Joyce Brothers tied up for 30 years." Someone not being able to get a date because their skin is green? A superhero having problems relating to life while living in another dimension? These are not real people's problems, Dunn wrote. According to Dunn, the issues presented in L&R are an example of what the comic medium can be when handled by talented, creative individuals. Based on her writing, one must note that Dunn may not understand how real-life issues may be represented metaphorically within the comic medium rather than using realistic methods.

Despite that, Dunn recognizes and relates more to the friendships between the women characters in L&R, as they remind her of her relationships. She continues to say how much she enjoys "the interaction between men and women. At last, women who aren't portrayed as meek mouses who hold their men in God-like regard (Susan Richards, are you listening?) or radical men-haters." For Dunn, a better representation of a women character is Maggie in "Mechanics," who will often lament that "Men are the absolute worst things in the world" while simultaneously "harboring affection and lust" for other male characters. "It's about time realistic attitudes of modern women were portrayed: Us girls love to bitch about men to each other. That sure doesn't mean we're willing to give

[229] *Love & Rockets* #14, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (Nov 1985), 2, 35.

'em up!"[230] Coincidentally enough, not to say that Dunn is wrong about Susan Richards of the Fantastic Four, but the same month this issue of L&R was published (November 1985), *Fantastic Four* #284 also came out. That issue was an accumulation of events where Susan Richards had suffered a miscarriage, had her negative emotions manifest into supervillain Malice, and asserted her name to be changed from Invisible Girl to Invisible Woman. The Invisible Woman still suffered from stereotypes then, but it is an interesting coincidental timing of character changes.

While there are still several other letters written by assumed women readers that comment on the representation of women characters, other exciting topics are brought up that move beyond simple standard praise/thank you letters. For this instance, we move into the intersectionality of politics and comics. In issue #29, the first chapter of "Poison River" appeared, showcasing the history of characters involved with a previously seen prominent character, Luba, of the "Heartbreak Soup" series. Each chapter would follow these side characters around, eventually leading to the beginning of the first "Heartbreak Soup" story. The first letter commenting on this story came in issue #31's letter column. Jane Guskin of New York, NY, wrote in a letter exclaiming her excitement for how glad she was that "Poison River" is overtly political. She exclaims, "Politics is something distasteful to most people in this country, especially most artists—who look down on political statements in art, as if they have no place there." Guskin realizes that the appeal of political activism is quite lacking, mostly because a majority "of the activists are jerks who you wouldn't want to spend five minutes with. Unfortunately, they seem to have no sense of humor." For this letter writer, after spending some time abroad in Nicaragua, she

[230] Ibid.

finds that she cannot separate herself from politics, economics, and the struggles of communities. But when it comes to action, Guskin hates most demonstrations.

On the other hand, she finds riots rather fun. She says the riots in New York are the best, while the riots in San Francisco (where she grew up) are becoming too tame. Guskin's letter is one of the only letters addressing politics in the L&R series and comics. But other letters written by women bring up areas of intersectionality.[231]

The most overt letter considering culture and comics comes from Maria de Los Angeles Pena of Melbourne, Australia (#18). Though writing from the Land Down Under, Pena is Latin American (from El Salvador). Regarding the comic, she is "extremely proud of the way you're presenting our idiosyncrasy to the rest of the world, and that includes introducing a lot of english-speaking people into the world of Macondo, via Palomar." Some of the more exciting points Pena makes about the series is that the world of Palomar is shown through a perception of something akin to the acclaimed Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez. Márquez is known for his literary style of magic realism, which uses magical events or elements in everyday, ordinary situations. The letter writer observes that many of Jaime's characters look similar to that of the famous Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, specifically her eyebrows.[232]

Pena believes that the Hernandez brothers are vindicating "our culture" and introducing it to unaware readers better than any "'fine' artist" as "'fine' art can only be afforded by the 'finer' folk." The irony of the comment, given the perceived cultural value

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[231] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Dale Yarger (Art Dir.), Kim Thompson (prod. manager) (type), Sharon Kingsford and Michelle Byrd (circ.), Monster X and Roberta Gregory (c), *Love & Rockets* #31, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (Dec 1989), 34-35.

[232] *Love & Rockets* #18, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (Sept 1986), 2, 35.

by her fellow fans, is not lost. This affordable fine art also had one particular story Pena enjoyed: 'An American in Palomar.' The story is about an American photojournalist who comes to the fictional town of Palomar. He comes with an agenda and preconceived notions of what kind of view he wishes to portray the people (degrading and damaging) for an award in photojournalism instead of communicating and learning about the culture. Pena writes that the story "was a long needed, sharp, witty and sad piece of criticism of people (not only American) who don't know shit about third world culture and think theirs is better."[233]

As seen in Pena's letter (and a number of those examined beforehand), representation of culture, women, and relationships (community or individual) are at the core of what makes L&R so appealing to most readers. Though Gilbert has stated that he never intentionally meant to have women characters lead the protagonist roles due to his experience growing up in a matriarchal family, incorporating Latino characters and culture is seemingly a conscious decision that is politically motivated.[234] Characters are often shown to be immigrants, frequently victims of stereotyping and prejudice. Returning to Royal's entry on L&R in *Critical Survey of Graphic Novels*, he connects this theme with another, specifically the conflict between the individual and community. "Whether the setting is 1980's punk rock scene in Jaime's comics or the more tranquil and isolated Central American milieu of Gilbert's Palomar, the main characters in Love and Rockets are all a part of some community with which they can identify and against

[233] Ibid.

[234] Brett Burns, *Love in the Time of Comics: The Intersection of Gender and Latino Culture in Gilbert Hernandez's Palomar*, Diss., (University of Georgia, 2005), accessed December 20th, 2022, https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/burns_brett_t_200508_ma.pdf, 46.

which they struggle. In many of Gilbert's stories, conflicts arise between traditional communities and modernity."[235] Stories such as "Human Diastrophism" and "Duck Feet" show how outside influences can alter or destroy traditional views held within a community. Building on this, Royal explains that the Hernandez brothers used their ethnicity to tell these stories and normalize their cultural experiences rather than making it the series' focus. "The Hernandez brothers have shown that a comics creator's work can have an ethnic perspective without making that the grand sum of the comics."[236]

Suppose this ethnic perspective was ever in question, whether it be because of confusion of skin tones due to being printed in black and white or simply because of a reader's interpretation of a character's ethnicity. In that case, Jaime puts these questions to rest. Joseph A. Curtis wrote a letter, published in issue #13, full of confusion, concern, and anger. Rocky, a character in the "Rocky and Fumble" story series, looked to have changed ethnicity in her appearance in issue #11, going from being a black woman to white. The most noticeable difference appears to be the hair. (Fig. 1 & Fig. 2) This pushed Curtis enough to write a letter full of righteous fury over the sudden change.[237] In a rare appearance, Jaime personally responded to Curtis (usually, if there is any response, Groth responds):

> Well, there seems to be some confusion surrounding the ethnicity of the main characters in the 'Locos' Universe, so here's a handy-dandy list of their national origins. Cut it out and paste it up next to your 'Heartbreak Soup' pronunciations.
> Maggie—Mexican
> Izzy—Mexican
> Penny—Mexican
> Hopey—Colombian-Scottish

[235] Derek Royal, "Love and Rockets," 523-524.

[236] Ibid.

[237] *Love & Rockets* #13, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (Sept 1985), 2, 42-43.

Daffy—Japanese
Terry—German-English[238]

Acknowledging the confusion in general over the character's ethnicity, but also skipping over Curtis' prompt over Rocky's ethnicity, Jaime ends his response stating that it is often hard to make readers 'hear' an accent while they are reading. Though the original issue brought up was that of artistic depiction rather than written dialogue, Jaime at least canonizes the ethnicity of the character in his primary story series. And out of all the numerous stories, "Heartbreak Soup" and "Mechanics" are the most talked about series, especially within the letters written by women.

Figure 1. Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Tom Mason (prod.) (design), Janet Toombs and MAD Mary (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), David W. Olbrich (promotion), Mike Catron (circ.), *Love & Rockets* #9, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (November 1984), 25.

[238] Ibid.

Figure 2. Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), Tom Mason (prod.) (design), Mark Thompson (c), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), Larry Reid (promotion), Sharon Kingsford and Carys Kresny (circ.), Linda Gorell (type), *Love & Rockets* #11, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (April 1985), 29.

It is because of letters like Pena's, Guskin's, Dunn's, and others, though a small sample , we can glimpse a substantial, passionate following from women who read comics. As noted by these letter writers, choices were few and far between if one was looking for positive women representation in comics. Feminist comic books had only been able to etch their spot in the world of comics by the 1980s. And as letters such as Weiss and Ottenberg's have pointed out, a mentality of men only reading comics about men and women reading comics about women did not help progressively feminist comic books. In this sense, L&R is a deviation from this norm. The creators are men who wrote strong women protagonists, including many women supporting characters. Though occasionally featuring nudity and sex, it rarely came off as gratuitous. The main

underlying issue with claiming any of this is that there are no actual hard statistics that concretely prove that there was a large following of women. The only evidence we have is from these letters and word of mouth from other readers, critics, creators, and other anecdotal examples.

Speaking of critics, one exciting avenue of examining these letters for different possibilities of extrapolations is to analyze how others have curated their presentation of them. This method has not been available previously simply because there has been no other research on the topic for these specific sources (especially for this series, for that matter). For this study, we are interested in *The Love and Rockets Companion: 30 Years (and Counting)* (2013). Specifically, the Letter Column Highlights section. This work was put together by Marc Sobel and Kristy Valenti, both writers, and critics (Valenti being more of a comics critic), whose work appears in *The Comics Journal*, *Sequart Research*, Fantagraphics publications, and others[239]

Sobel and Valenti describe the letter column of L&R as "frequently funny, often intelligent and occasionally infuriating letters columns (often written by other comics professionals)," representing a lively discussion of the series. What letters were their favorites? What is being highlighted versus not being shown compared to what has already been presented? For the most part, the two have done a decent enough job of highlighting the more exciting/notable letters. However, from the start, a few selected letters have been edited from their original publication in the column. The two editors showcase David Carltock's letter (issue #4), complaining about Groth's introduction

[239] "Marc Sobel," Fantagraphics, accessed February 28, 2023, https://www.fantagraphics.com/collections/marc-sobel.

editorials. The primary issue which stands out is the disappearance of Carltock's comments on Groth and Kim Thompson (type editor). Carltock wrote, "in reading the past three 'editorials' (for lack of anything else to call them), I have come to the opinion that these two people know absolutely nothing about getting reader response."[240] Despite this comment, Valenti and Sobel describe Groth's response to this letter as the beginning of the "first of many sarcastic responses that were to appear in the letters pages."[241] Though, it did not read as sarcastic when you read the initially published letter.

Other letters have been edited from their original print, such as Jack Neigenfind's comment, "Mario is the least impressive of the three but that could change as he gets more practice."[242] Overall, letters that criticize Mario Hernandez do not make an appearance (edited or not). Another common edit is to remove sections of letters that are more risqué, such as Pete Scott's letter, which originally had this comment regarding Jaime's ability to draw women:

> I don't think he could draw an ugly girl even if he tried. His comic strips also show a good grasp of body language. The female characters never seem to stand naturally. Instead they adopt stylized attitudes, posing, preening, and stretching themselves, displaying their bazoomas and thrusting out their gorgeous arses. It's all very appealing to an old voyeur like myself, and I make no excuse for liking it. Maggie and Hopey are two of the most well-rounded (in every sense) comics strip characters I've ever encountered: smiling, wholesome beauties—the Betty and Veronica of the '80s. Penny Century is a vision of perfect feminine symmetry, and Izzy Ortiz proves that while Jaime's characters are not always beautiful, they're certainly interesting and desirable. Wotta vamp! Morticia Addams with a nouveau punk fixation.[243]

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[240] Gary Groth (ed. coord.), Gilbert, Jaime, and Mario Hernandez (creators), Peppy White (prod.), Janet Toombs (c), Freitag & Kim Thompson (type), *Love & Rockets* #4, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (Fall 1983), 2, 67.

[241] Sobel, *The Love and Rockets Companion*, 279.

[242] Ibid.; *Love and Rockets* #4 (Fall 1983), 2, 67.

[243] *Love & Rockets* #7 (July 1984), 2.

Having edited this section entirely, Sobel and Valenti saw fit to leave the first half of the letter in their highlight, which shows Scott's comparison of Jaime's style to that of Will Eisner, Dan de Carlo, and Steve Ditko. That is understandable, given that the first half appears more sophisticated in discussion than the second.[244] Similarly, the two editors did not find any letters to highlight from issue #8, which might have shown a specific letter writer, namely Garold Reynolds, calling out Groth's distressing hotel room solicitation announcement and underscoring the call for more letters written by women.

The editing of the original printed letters is a practice that leaves out an essential aspect of understanding the context in which this series was read and by whom. Another instance of this editing occurs when Sobel and Valenti reach issue #11 regarding Bob Moulton's letter. Like the last example, the two editors left more sophisticated/nuanced comments in their book. Moulton comments, "I've read that you've derived your various styles from this person or that person. I definitely see the Archie influence, but I think I see an influence that no one has yet mentioned: Little Lulu." For most likely appearance sake or content reasons, they left out Moulton's casual racist remark when he continued his commentary: "Not only am I impressed with the artwork, but the characterizations as well. And as a reasonably well-educated Anglo-type person, I'm very amazed at the breadth and depth of your English vocabulary, which exceeds my own." To soften this remark, Moulton continues, "I found myself turning to my dictionary more than once in

[244] Sobel, *The Love and Rockets Companion*, 280.

order to find the meaning of a word." Given the Hernandez brother's ethnicity, it is a surprise that this letter made it to print in the original letter column of L&R.[245]

Despite these editorial choices, Sobel and Valenti provide intriguing insights into the letter column. Unlike what is presented in the previous letter columns, there appears to have been a level of contention between several letter writers and the Hernandez brothers that is mentioned. *The Love and Rockets Companion* shows that in issue #31, letter writer Charlie Harris requested Gilbert, asking if the creator could develop a character whose life "wasn't pure misfortune." Harris would love to see a character that did not have a miserable, depressing life. "Someone I could really care for but not pity." In a rare instance of a response to a letter, Gilbert replied, "None of my characters has had a 'miserable, depressing life.' None. And I don't do requests." A relatively short, curt, and direct response with little elaboration or conversational elements. The two editors of the companion book gained more insight into this particular interaction, saying that the Hernandez brothers received a level of backlash for their answers in issue #31. "Many fans were taken aback by their jagged, irritable tone," they explained. Pulling from an interview titled 'Love Bites' with Robert Young for *The Comics Interpreter* #6 (Winter 2001), Jaime made the following statement regarding how they responded to these letters: "Actually, the few times we did that we were only trying to match the tone of the questions from those particular letters. Little did we know that everybody else in the world were allowed to be assholes but we weren't. That's the way we saw it, anyway."[246]

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[245] *Love & Rockets* #11, (April 1985), 1, 31

[246] Sobel, *The Love and Rockets Companion*, 285-286.

This self-made policy for responding to letter writers is insightful to perhaps how the letter column was curated.

Instead of simply not printing or responding to the letters they found were being "assholes," they decided to have them printed. The logic behind this could be for several reasons. First, they did not have enough "good" letters to fill the page. Second, they used letters like Harris to exemplify what happens when not enough respect is shown in the relationship between the reader and creator. Finally, the letter and response could have been an act to drum up drama that would stir more interest in the L&R series. There have been letters in the mainstream series that critique or leave negative reviews of issues or characters. However, no creator/editor response seen in those mainstream letter columns has created high shock levels or caused backlash from readers.

This sort of open rudeness to letter writers is seen within another issue of L&R. This example occurs in issue #25. The Hernandez brothers asked readers to send in their top album music lists in a previous issue. When issue #25 was published, the creators thanked their faithful readers who sent in their lists. They also informed these readers that if they sent in any tapes of their favorite albums, they would send copies of sketches of characters from L&R in return. However, the last comment in the note expresses their contempt for a number of letter writers: "We should probably also mention that we found some of you to be snotty, anal-retentive assholes from whom we hope never to hear again. Thank you." Aside from this comment, the Hernandez Brothers were happy to report that most of those who wrote in letters for this request were "generally open-minded and serious about your music." Again, in the same way Jaime stated interview

above, these other letter writers were "assholes." There was even less context as to why that was the case for these readers.[247]

Valenti and Sobel cover the rest of the letters in issues without any editing or questionable choices in selecting which ones to highlight. This shows how one can eschew the overall depiction of what a letter column might have looked like in its original form. By editing out sections of letters or selectively picking examples, the bigger picture of what constitutes letter writers and readers as a whole is lost. The letter column may not have been the friendliest or safest space for certain groups of readers, but it is a sphere of social interaction that needs to be examined in its entirety. For without complete context, relationships between consumer and creator can often be misconstrued.

Understanding and analyzing letter columns in comics can be tricky. Due to the ephemeral nature of written letters, getting a hold of original copies of comic book issues or letters, and the as-shown editing process that reprinted letters get in newer collections, getting at the primary sources can be arduous. But getting readers to write letters to a comic book is a process. The letter column for L&R began to disappear by issue #22 (Aug 1987), then entirely gone by #35 (April 1991). In a July 1995 interview with Neil Gaiman, Jaime Hernandez, and Gilbert Hernandez from *The Comics Journal* #178, the trio remarked on the status of their letter column. Being forthright, Gilbert stated that "we don't get much response anymore." Gaiman responded that readers only write letters if your comic is doing two things: you're printing letters and publishing frequently. In the interview, he explains that "if I'm doing something which has no Letters column, has no

[247] Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators) (c), Doug Erb (Art Dir.), Kim Thompson (prod. manager), Rachel Enger (circ.), Dale Crain (c), Kevin Dooley and Maria Savage (prod. assist.), *Love & Rockets* #25, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (March 1988), 4.

expectation that anybody will ever read this letter except for me, I'll get maybe five letters on something. If there is a Letters column, and if there's some kind of implication of, 'If you'll write, your letter will see print,' you'll get 30 or 40 letters." This reasoning matches up with what is seen with L&R after issue #22. By not having a regularly scheduled publishing timeline, readers more than likely felt their chances of publishing their letters plummet. This is coupled with the seemingly random disappearance of the letter column; it is unsurprising to see Gilbert comment on the lack of responses. It also probably did not help the relationship when the creators were shown to call letter writers 'assholes.'[248]

As Gaiman continues in the interview with the Hernandez brothers, he presents the idea that letter writing was not so much of voicing your opinion to the creator but more of creating a spectacle and a desire for a voice or platform for people to listen to you. It is a relatively well-known reasoning for writing letters that "IF I know my letter has a chance to be printed, or IF my voice will have a platform to reach others, then I, as a reader, am more motivated in writing a letter" than simply writing a letter to the creator for correspondence sake. However, this is not necessarily every letter writer's driving purpose. We have seen letters written with many reasons, critiques, congratulations, offering suggestions, and opinions, responding to other letters, and asking questions. All of which points towards wanting to be a part of a community with a common shared interest in comics. The editors and creators might read your letter, but if published, hundreds, if not thousands, will read what you have to say, adding to the ongoing narrative in the letter columns. Creating a spectacle alone is more likely a secondary purpose to these others, whereas joining a larger community is the primary goal. Of

[248] *The Comics Journal*, no. 178 (July 1995): 108-109.

course, some letters written in the mainstream letter columns seem outlandish to garner attention.

Still, the primary purpose is to connect the reader and creator to establish a relationship. Indirectly, writing a letter is similar to meeting your hero, artist, or favorite celebrity. There is a chance there will be an interaction, and you may even get a response. Either creator or editor gave a majority of the mainstream printed letters a reply. Only a small handful of letters in L&R had a response, and most of the time, it was from Groth.[249]

It is tough to say how specifically the inner workings of the L&R letter column operated. Despite multiple attempts to reach out to all three Hernandez brothers and Groth, only Gilbert and Groth responded. Neither one of them wished to speak on the matter. Despite this, it is clear that L&R has had a lasting legacy, as seen in its publication history, the impact on comics and publishers that came after it, and the fans' passion and dedication seen through the printed letters. It has been shown that despite being an alternative comic that shunned the evils of mainstream comics, the letter column had several similarities with its counterparts. The gender ratio of printed letters and letter writers was relatively the same, and letter writers brought up thoughtful and engaging topics concerning social issues, gender, race, and representation. This was surprising, considering how exclusive underground/alternative comic-book consumers have presented themselves. Having seen these letters and their disdain for "teenage mutant ninjas," it will be interesting to see what the next chapter shows as it explores the printed

[249] Ibid.

letters of another independent comic-book series, the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle*. Cowabunga!

CHAPTER 4

"PLEASING SOME OF THE PEOPLE SOME OF THE TIME: AN EXAMINATION OF THE AUDIENCE FOR TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES"

> "Why is it that the phrase 'Different strokes for different folks' kept going through my head as I was retyping these letters? I guess that it's one of the truest of truisms- the 'Unsilenced Majority' hates turtles in space, Ravi Chopra loves it: Cody Dunn can't deal with Mike Dooney's art. John Pappas thinks Dooney's art is great: Jeff True thinks the merchandising of the turtles is 'disgusting', while Frank Buswell thinks it's fantastic, and so on, and so on, etc. etc.. You can't please all the people all of the time. We'll settle for pleasing some of the people some of the time."[250]
>
> Peter Laird, Co-creator of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*

Thus far, we have examined printed letters from two of the most popular comic book series from two mainstream comic-book publishers. We have also seen examples from the principal alternative comic-book series. Our next and final leg of this journey takes us into the printed letter columns of the most well-known independent comic-book series, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (TMNT). In November of 1983, with nothing but a $500 tax return, $200 left in an empty bank account, and $1,300 borrowed from an uncle, Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird took a humorous drawing of a turtle that was standing on its back legs, wearing a mask, and a pair of nunchucks and started a comic-book series. TMNT would turn out to be one of the most iconic pop culture properties of the 1980s and 1990s, and would continue to thrive to this day.

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[250] Kevin Eastman (story and pencils), Lawson (inks), Steve Lavigne (lettering), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #15, Mirage Studios, (Summer 1988), 37-40.

If a definitive independent comic-book series ever existed, TMNT would be it. Having seen the differences between mainstream and alternative comic-book readers' printed letters, which side of the divide will TMNT fall on? Will having similar origin publication circumstances have the series lean more towards what was seen in *Love & Rockets*? Or will having an eventual media franchise eruption propel what readers wrote to the side of *The New Teen Titans* and *Uncanny X-Men*? Through an examination of TMNT's publication history, a retread of Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework on cultural capital, an introduction to a new theoretical framework on convergence culture via media scholar Henry Jenkins, and a broad and close inspection of the printed letters from the first volume, this analysis shows that letter writers had to toe the line of both popular and official culture when consuming this comic-book series.

To understand the letter writers of TMNT, there must be an origin story (like any good superhero comic book has). Back in 1983, having created their joke drawing of a literal upright turtle with ninja garb, Eastman labeled it "Ninja Turtle." Laird would refine this turtle character, with Eastman adding three more Ninja Turtles, each with their ninja-style weapon. To finish the concept, Laird added "Teenage Mutant" to the title at the top of the page. Initially, the turtles would have Japanese names, but the creators found none of it sticking. Moving on to the great Renaissance artists instead (Leonardo, Raphael, Donatello, and Michelangelo), the names "felt quirky enough to fit the concept," according to Laird. A quick fun fact, the original drawing of the turtles sold for $71,700

at an auction in May 2012. However, a single-page drawing does not make a comic book.[251]

Splitting the work between themselves, Eastman and Laird decided to parody one of their favorite series from Marvel using their Ninja Turtles with the idea of just doing a one-shot comic book. Published in May of 1984, the story in TMNT #1 introduces the four ninja turtles: Leonardo with a katana, Donatello with a bo staff, Michelangelo with nunchucks, and Raphael with his twin sai. The first volume of TMNT was in black and white, meaning that the only way to tell the difference visually between the Ninja Turtles was by seeing what weapon they were wielding. Even on the colored covers, they all originally wore red masks (the different colored masks would not come until the cartoon show).

The first TMNT issue began with the Ninja Turtles fighting against the Purple Dragons, the most brutal street gang on the East Side of New York City. After winning the fight, the turtles regrouped with their sensei, Master Splinter, a former pet rat trained in a cage in a dojo (in Japan) mimicking his master's moves, Hamato Yoshi of the Foot Clan. After Yoshi killed his rival (Nagi) over a love interest feud, he came to NYC with his rat and Shen (love interest) and formed a martial arts school. Nagi's younger brother vowed revenge, grew up to be a great Foot Clan ninja, and eventually came to the United States to lead that branch of the Foot Clan, where he became known as The Shredder. The Shredder murdered Yoshi, and Splinter's cage was broken open, allowing the rat to leave.

[251] Rob Lammle, "The complete history of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles," Mental Floss, June 27, 2015, retrieved October 17, 2021, https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/30862/complete-history-teenage-mutant-ninja-turtles.

Eventually, readers are shown a truck accident where a truck was going to hit a blind man walking across the street, but another young man leaped and pushed the blind man out of the way. A canister fell off the truck as it swerved, hitting the young man's head. The canister eventually bounced and broke a young boy's glass bowl containing four infant turtles and knocked them down an open manhole.[252]

When they landed, the canister broke open, releasing a glowing green ooze that covered the turtles. Splinter went down and started to care for them, getting covered in the green ooze as well. He and the turtles started changing rapidly; eventually, they become human-sized and more intelligent after a year. The turtles began copying Splinter's ninja moves as well. He eventually taught them all the ninjutsu he had learned. Requiring names, the comic book shows Splinter using a battered copy of a book on Renaissance Art found in the storm drain to name the four turtles: Leonardo, Michelangelo, Donatello, and Raphael. Because Splinter is old, he tasked the turtles with avenging his master by killing The Shredder. The group challenges the villain and seemingly kills him and his Foot Clan ninjas in a brawl, ending the first TMNT story.

As stated earlier, Eastman and Laird originally conceived this idea as a parody of the mainstream superheroes from Marvel and DC Comics. And if you are familiar with Marvel's *Daredevil*, you would have noticed several similarities between this first issue of TMNT to *Daredevil* #1 from 1964 (Fig. 1 and Fig 2.). Figure 1 shows the original DareDevil origin page from the first issue of that series, where Matt Murdock saves an

[252] Peter Laird (w)(i)(toning)(letter)(cover art) and Kevin Eastman (w)(ink)(cover logo), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #1 Reprint, Special PBBZ Comic Con & Small Press Test Limited ed., Mirage Publishing, Inc., (2005), 16-17.

elderly gentleman from being hit by a truck but gets hit in the face with a radioactive cylinder, giving him his iconic powers. The same situation unfolds in Figure 2, which is from TMNT #1. In this parody situation, however, the canister bounces off the young man's face and hits a glass bowl holding four turtles that fall into a manhole. Additionally, there are even more elements of parody at play in this first issue. For instance, the sensei to the turtles is called Master Splinter, a play on the name of the character who acts as Daredevil's sensei, Master Stick. The other parody is that the leading group of villains is named The Foot Clan, a tease of the group of evil ninjas from *Daredevil* called The Hand.

Figure 1. Stan Lee (w), Jack Kirby & Bill Everett (p), Bill Everett & Dick Ayers (i), Stan Goldberg (c), Sam Rosen (l), *Daredevil* #1, Olympia Publications, Inc., (Feb 4th, 1964), 9.

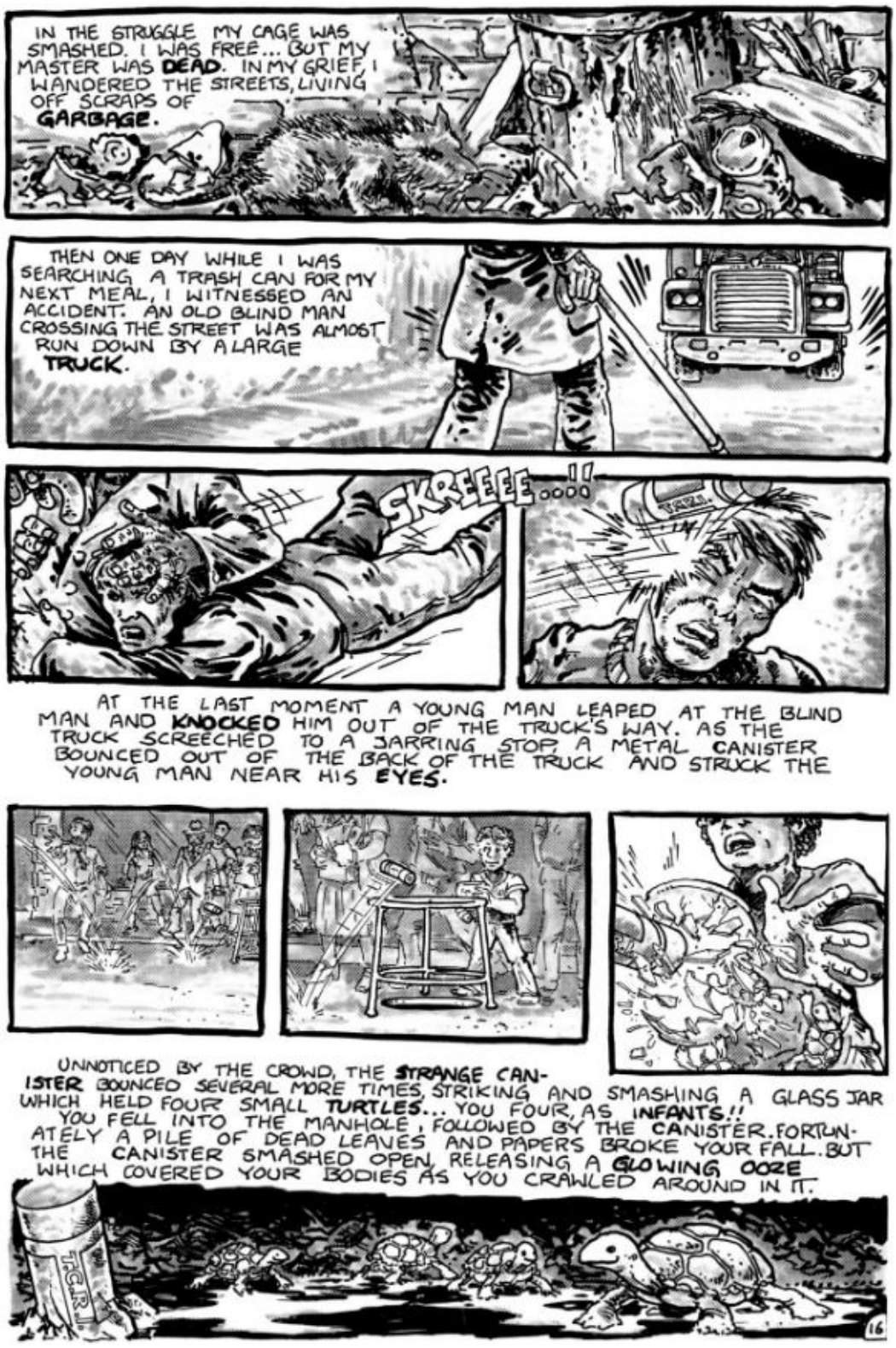

Figure 2. Mark Martin (story and art), Steve Lavigne (lettering), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #16, Mirage Studios, (July 1988), 16.

Whatever doubts Eastman and Laird had about their quirky parody of mainstream comic books selling disappeared faster than a ninja, from "wondering if we'd be burning the unsold copies to keep warm that winter" to selling all 3,000 copies in three weeks. Then a month later, with a second printing of 6,000 copies of the first issue, they were gone in a month. Almost a year later, a 3rd printing of 44,000 copies quickly vanished. There was even a fourth printing with 60,000 copies in 1985 and a 5th printing in 1988. The first issue of TMNT promptly became a collectible overnight, jumping from $25 in 1984 to $85 for the mint condition in 1985.[253] Of course, $85 is a far cry from the copy that sold for $245,000 two years ago in 2021.[254]

With the overwhelming success of the first number, issue #2 opened with an order of 15,000 copies and an even bigger opening total for #3 with 50,000. Sales peaked at issue #8, a staggering 135,000 copies, which is remarkable considering issue #1 started with only 3,000.[255] Of course, with success comes expansion. Mirage Studios began in 1983 with the publication of TMNT #1 the following year, but the only two members of the company were Eastman and Laird. When money eventually started coming in, Mirage Studios went from "just the two of us working out of our living room, to a half-dozen regular (dare I call them 'staff'?)" creators working out of six home studios and a four-

[253] Peter Laird (w)(i)(toning)(letter)(cover art) and Kevin Eastman (w)(ink)(cover logo), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #1 Reprint, 4th Print Extras Only, Mirage Studios, (19855), 1.

[254] Mark Seifert, "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles #1 CGC 9.8 Sells for Record $245,000," Bleeding Cool News And Rumors, September 1, 2021, https://bleedingcool.com/comics/teenage-mutant-ninja-turtles-1-cgc-9-8-sells-for-record-245000/.

[255] Seifert, "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles #1 CGC 9.8 Sells for Record $245,000," Bleeding Cool News and Rumors.

room office." Eventually, the company would get an ample new studio space that would allow all of them to work together.

Laird and Eastman continued to be the primary artists and writers for the series until around issue #15, where other responsibilities of managing Mirage Studio and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle IP licensing became a priority. As the duo noted in their editorial for issue #20, scheduling soon became their most significant problem. Reaching #20 took five years, meaning only four issues were released yearly. This would typically strain any relationship between comic-book creators and consumers, but TMNT had gained a strong following. The pair defended themselves in this editorial, listing why the TMNT series release schedule was so lackluster. On top of the twenty regular issues, they wrote and drew four one-issue TMNT Micro-Series; oversaw six issues of "Tales of the TMNT;" interior artwork and/or covers for seven role-playing game books and supplements; covers, colors, and back-up stories for four 100-plus page TMNT graphic novels; published one issue of *Rockola*, two issues of *Prime Slime Tales*, four issues of *Bade Biker*, and six issues of *Gizmo*; publishing and contributing stories and art to *Gobbledygook*, *Turtle Soup*, and *Grunts*. On top of all that comic book work, they worked on publishing and supplying new covers for two editions of a 560-page TMNT collected edition; worked closely with a toy company and animation studio on the development of a major mass-market toy line and animated show based on the TMNT; artwork and concept and product approvals for sixty-five-plus other TMNT licensees; collaborating on the outline and screenplay and concepts for an upcoming TMNT live-action movie; dealt with all of the related non-creative hassles of the aforementioned licensing deals; collaborating with outside co-conspirators on *Melting Pot* and *Commandosaurs*. Eastman

and Laird were not slacking off during this time. It is, however, challenging for fans to see the entire picture of what creators such as these two contended with alongside the TMNT comic-book series.[256]

Though there was some continuity throughout the series up until the end of the "Return to New York" (1989, #19-#21), with the turtle gang fighting all different kinds of threats (aliens, fantasy villains, The Shredder again, etc.), this feeling of connected storylines ended when Eastman and Laird took a step back. During this period of almost thirty issues, several guest artists and writers came in and often created their interpretation of the Ninja Turtles. It was not until 1992, with the publication of prelude issues (#48 & #49) to the "City at War" series, that Eastman and Laird came back to personally write the story that a sense of continuity picked up again. The "City at War" series eventually closed out volume I with issue #62, marking the end of the series being printed in black & white.

What drew Eastman and Laird away from being the primary creators of the ongoing series? Success is the short answer. At the beginning of the TMNT publication, Mirage Publishing had a small amount of licensing activity in a role-playing game, some trading cards, and collectible figures. By 1986 and into early 1987, during the peak of issue sales of TMNT, Mirage entered into a spread of agreements with Surge Licensing, Playmates Toys, and Murakami, Wolf, Swenson Films. “These agreements put into place the marketing, merchandising, and entertainment engine that would introduce the Ninja

[256] Kevin Eastman (story and layouts), Peter Laird (story and inks), Jim Lawson (pencils), Steve Lavigne (lettering), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #20, Mirage Studios, (Apr 1989), 40.

Turtles to the world at large and fuel the property's tremendous success."[257] There is no denying the truly impressive and expansive reach of the record-setting Ninja Turtle culture outside the realm of comics.

Shortly after entering into all these various agreements, the Ninja Turtles made the following achievements: #1 Rated Saturday morning TV show, and highest rated in its time slot ever for CBS, #1 Rated daily syndicated animated TV strip for children, #1 Top grossing independent film when released in 1990, #1 best-selling toy line in 1991, above G.I. Joe and Barbie, #1 Male action figure toys in 1990 and 1991, with over a 70% market share, #1 Live touring arena show in the U.S.A. in the '90s, #1 Nintendo 8-bit and Gameboy video game in the world in 1991, #1 Kids' breakfast cereal in the world from Ralston Purina in 1991. The success of the TMNT included "multiple theatrical motion pictures, hundreds of half-hours of TV programming, top-10 all-time sales status for worldwide sales of toy action figures, over 1,000 worldwide merchandise licensees, record-setting sales of video games, sold out live-tour stage shows around the world and record-setting fast-food promotions."[258] It is no wonder Eastman and Laird had to share their attention to all the new facets of their IP. TMNT has comic books, table-top roleplaying games, collectible metal figures, toys, tv shows, and movies. Practically everything that makes up pop culture! What did this mean for the fans that had initially started off reading the comic book?

[257] "A BRIEF MIRAGE STUDIOS TMNT HISTORY," The Mirage Group, accessed April 26, 2023, https://www.miragelicensing.com/html/tmnt-history.html.

[258] Ibid.

For the TMNT comic-book fans, the first hurdle they were confronted with was that these new Ninja Turtles appearing in cartoons and as toys were made for a younger audience. The comic-book Ninja Turtles "diced up enemies while spouting the occasional curse word, and one of the Turtles' allies was hockey mask-wearing vigilante Casey Jones, who beat down even low-level crooks with baseball bats and hockey sticks." Playmates Toys wanted to produce TMNT action figures in 1986 but could not reproduce the comic-book's PG-13 attitude because their target audience was 4 to 8-year-olds. Additionally, to create an animated cartoon series, Playmates Toys had to pass television censors. This meant that the turtles had to soften up.[259]

The list of changes included the transformation of the Ninja Turtle's use of swear words to marketable catchphrases such as "Cowabunga!" and "Turtle Power!" The group became more jokester and obsessed with pizza. The Shredder turned into an almost laughable typical cartoon villain, and the Foot Clan was changed to be robots so that the studio could get away with having violence. As mentioned before, the original comic-book series was in black & white, with a colored front page that showed the Ninja Turtles having the same red mask. However, the cartoon changed the color of their masks, blue for Leonardo, orange for Michelangelo, red for Raphael, and purple for Donatello. Additionally, to help viewers help identify which turtle was which, they gave each one a belt buckle with their first initial on them (along with elbow and knee pads, of course!).[260]

[259] Lammle, "The complete history of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles," Mental Floss.

[260] Ibid.

Openingly, the two creators have made it known that they were not thrilled with the changes made to their Ninja Turtles. In an interview with *The Comics Journal*, Eastman stated, "The resolution at the end of the day, even when Pete and I both agreed that, well, there's some stuff we really don't like, and some stuff that we wish we hadn't said yes to, stuff that they wanted to do…But we said…we'll always have our black-and-white comics to tell the kind of stories we want to tell."[261] This is to say that everything that most TMNT fans associate with the Ninja Turtles today (and soon after the franchise expansion) was from teams of ad agencies, artists, toy executives, and screenwriters trying to entice their target audience for their medium adaptation. Knowing that Eastman and Laird had to step back from their duties with the publication, how did letter writers react to this haptic on/off creative leading of the TMNT comic-book series?

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING TO TMNT?!" wrote one concerned admirer, Andy Skwierawaki of Milwaukee, WI. Having loved every issue up to #11, he could not stay silent when issue #12 arrived. "Augh. What were you drunk when you did it or somethin'. Then I got #13… Double Augh Moses. I thought Satan wrote this one and was trying to get you out of business." Not believing what he was reading, Skwierawaki went back through these recent issues and discovered what he thought to be the problem: Eastman and Laird had decided to alternate doing the story and art separately. This letter writer could tell the difference between the art styles of the two creators, who originally worked on the issues together, passing them back and forth. But now that the art was no

[261] Ibid.

longer consistent, TMNT was in danger of losing many customers and their biggest fan, according to Skwierawaki.[262]

Skwierawaki was not the only letter writer to notice the "quality" of TMNT to be slipping. The letter page for TMNT #15 proved to be the culmination of restlessness for a number of letter writers who wished to voice their dismay at the state of the series. "The Unsilenced Majority" wrote in a letter (no address given), labeling themselves as having been a Turtle fan for a long time. However, even though they had every issue (including the limited hardcover book), they saw the early signs of disjointedness:

> The stories are slowly falling apart. Space-age, monster, future topics are not for the turtles. The Turtles belong on the streets. They are becoming less and less realistic for example muttering "Oh, brother", "You fool!", or "Uh oh." These phrases are for 6 year olds. There is also an extreme lack of violence. I mean, these guys are ninja. C'mon, who are you kidding?[263]

Other letter writers like Cody R. Dunn and Ravi Chopra noted this lapse in quality and wanted the duo to return to their old style of excellent writing and art. The reaction from readers through written letters was so great that Laird wrote a response, personally addressing some of the letter writers who had been published.

Writing for himself and Eastman, Laird addressed the multitudes of divided opinions appearing in the letter column. The "Unsilenced Majority" hated the turtle stories in space; Ravi Chopra loved them. Cody Dunn hated Mike Dooney's art done for the series, while John Pappas loved it. As Laird pointed out in his response, these letters' running theme was fear or resistance to change. "We get a lot of mail saying things like

[262] Eastman, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #15, 37-40.

[263] Ibid.

'Your art has changed, I liked the early issues better, you're better when you work together, etc.', usually written in a tone of injured confusion, like 'How could you do this to me? How dare you do anything different?'" The co-creator of TMNT states that this type of response is unfortunate as change is inevitable. It is hard to argue against Laird's next point that the two creators had been drawing and writing the TMNT series for about five years, and inevitably their writing and art skills evolved over that period. "It's unrealistic to expect that someone will remain exactly the same forever, and while that can be difficult to accept, eventually it turns out for the best, for it promotes greater appreciation of the person and his or her work." Fortunately for these letter writers, Laird announced the "Return to New York" story arc, where the duo would work together for the three-part series. While this portion of fans may be satiated, another growing concern amongst the fans coincided with the Laird and Eastman becoming less directly involved with the TMNT comic-book series.[264]

TMNT had comic books, table-top roleplaying games, collectible metal figures, toys, tv shows, movies, and a hand in almost every pop culture outlet. What did that mean for the fans that had initially started off reading the book? At first, most were content with the turtles expanding a little bit into other mediums of entertainment. Rob Sturma of Lindenhurst, IL, believed that on top of making pretty cool TMNT comics, having more turtle products come out like a role-playing game and miniatures was excellent. "Keep it coming! I love it!" Sturma exclaims in his letter.[265]

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[264] Ibid.

[265] Peter Laird and Kevin Eastman (co-creators, writers, and art), Dave Sim and Gerhard (story and art), Steve Lavigne (lettering), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #8, Mirage Studios, (1986), 47-48.

On the other hand, there were letter writers such as Eben Saling from Portland, OR. Saling and his friends were concerned about TMNT's expansion. To them, the action figures were excellent (he liked them), and the TV miniseries were good (but the plot and art left something to be desired). Still, a new comic was coming out (it is unclear if they were referring to the change in the main TMNT series, *Tales of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, or *Turtle Soup*). One of the more upsetting parts was that Eastman or Laird might not even be doing the art for this new comic series. Saling did not wish to see TMNT start as a good comic and then turn into a bad comic with so many variations in its main plot. "What I am trying to say is that change may not always be for the best."[266]

Saling was not the only reader with growing resentment towards the TMNT's success and expansion. Jeffry C. True asked the creators in his printed letter, "What would you call a television series, a feature length movie, action figures and a selling of rights to Archie Comics? I call it a complete and utter sell-out."[267] According to True, if the commercialism was not bad enough, he did not even see Laird and Eastman's names credited in the previous TMNT #13 issue. With the expansion of two more (short-lived) series, *Tales of TMNT* and *Turtle Soup*, True found the quality of their work declining drastically. This fan found it disgusting that they could turn something extraordinary into a "fast buck" and hoped the duo would consider his opinion seriously and act more carefully.

[266] Eastman, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #15, 37-40.

[267] Ibid.

Frank Buswell of Milton, VT, on the other side of the spectrum of disliking the TMNT expansion, wrote to let the two creators know how much he has enjoyed the main TMNT series and its spin-offs. While hoping the success does not spoil the TMNT series, Buswell thinks:

> The publicity the TMNT's are getting with their toys, coloring books and cartoons is just fantastic. It's about time they got what they deserve. I just had to buy my 6 month son the action figures of the turtles. Sure, he's a little young for them now but they will be there when he gets a little older. Might as well start him off with the RIGHT toys, besides, this gives me the time to play with them.[268]

For this fan, as long as the turtles keep coming out in good quality, he will keep buying the new TMNT products.

In response to letters like Jeff True's, Peter Laird had additional words (alongside his original response to those concerned about the quality/evolution of his and Eastman's art). Eastman and Laird have seen enough repeated accusations that by licensing the Turtles, they are "selling out." For Laird, saying "selling out" is "one of those zippy catch-phrases that people toss off without really thinking about what they are saying."[269] To clear up any misconceptions, Laird explained that when they licensed the Ninja Turtles, they were not selling them but leasing them. "Nobody owns the Turtles except Kevin and I, but there are people who rent them temporarily and under our supervision and control. And if there is a good reason that Kevin and I should not make money from

[268] Ibid.

[269] Ibid.

merchandising of the TMNT I'd like to hear it."[270] To Laird and Eastman, all of the petty complaints they heard "sounds like sour grapes." To ease the troubled minds of fans, Laird felt they should know that, of course, the "mass-marketed" versions of the Ninja Turtles were molded to fit their platform and those iterations would not change or influence the originals. In their TMNT comic books, "Kevin and I do what we want and we will continue to do so."

A year later, in TMNT #19, another editorial was printed as a follow-up to the response given to the group of angry fans in issue #15. Feeling obligated to their audience and themselves as creators, Eastman and Laird asked two critical questions regarding labeling. First, "What do you do when it appears you've developed two audiences – one younger, for the wacky animated show and the toys, and one older, for the source material?" Second, "What if those two audiences begin to merge? Younger readers, looking for the wacky comics, but find the grittier originals, and say 'Gross!'"[271] What do the duo propose they do for this predicament? "Nothing. Let them stand on their own." The two distinctive iterations of the Ninja Turtles have been independent of each other and grown in their separate ways, despite the confusion of what is canonical amongst fans. Laird and Eastman feel that even though the TV show, which attracts a younger audience that wants to explore other avenues of Ninja Turtle culture like the comic-book series, should not influence said comic-book series. Putting a label of age and content warning on the book would alter the side Ninja Turtle culture that the two creators still

[270] Ibid.

[271] Kevin Eastman (story and layouts), Peter Laird (story and inks), Jim Lawson (pencils), Steve Lavigne (lettering), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #19, Mirage Studios, (Mar 1989), 40.

have complete freedom over. “Ultimately we decided that there is nothing in our work on the turtles that should be hidden even from the youngest of our readers. It’s a subjective decision, and others with different standards of what is right and what is wrong might disagree with us, and that’s their right… just as it is ours to publish what we think is fit to print.”[272]

Despite this stance-affirming editorial, the issue of audience cross-over and confusion remained pertinent for the TMNT comic-book fans. Though their voice is not visible with their printed letters in the void of letter columns from issue #15 to issue #51, there are more editorials by Eastman and Laird continuing to try and reconcile this issue with their comic-books fans. In TMNT #21, the pair asks readers to consider the following scenario:

> A fifteen year old is avidly following Frank Miller's DARK KNIGHT, eagerly awaiting each issue's release. He loves the new, adult treatment of Batman, and by the time issue #3 is out, he is totally enthralled. Then, just before the fourth and last issue arrives at his local comics shop, he happens to be cruising through K-Mart, and sees, out of the corner of his eye, something horrible beyond belief it's a pair of Underoo's printed with the image of Batman and Robin from the SUPER POWERS animated TV show.
>
> Crushed, his belief in the purity and integrity of his favorite fictional character shattered, the fan refuses to buy the last issue of DARK KNIGHT moaning "Putting Batman on underwear just kills it!" …the 'it' in question being, of course, any value to the character of Batman or his enjoyment of any manifestation of that character. Not only does the fan not buy DARK KNIGHT #4, but stops buying all comics with Batman in them.
>
> Does it sound ludicrous? Does it sound unbelievably stupid? Does it sound like the worst kind of fanboy pouting?[273]

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[272] Eastman, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #19, 40.

[273] Kevin Eastman (story and layouts), Peter Laird (story and inks), Jim Lawson (pencils), Steve Lavigne (lettering), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #21, Mirage Studios, (May 1989), 40.

This mock scenario is in response to what the Mirage Studios creators experienced from several attendees of Fred Geenberg's (a comic convention promotor) Comic Book Marketplace show in New York City in June of 1989.

While staff and creators were operating Mirage Studios tables and book signing, three TMNT comic-book fans (ranging from ages 10-17 approximately) approached the tables and, with "varying degrees of obnoxiousness," argued that since the Ninja Turtles were being licensed out to sell various products, the original comic books (still under the control of Eastman and Laird) were now without value or worth. "The youngest of the three, wearing his unlicensed pirated TMNT t-shirt, looked at the TMNT cereal boxes in our display and said 'When you have a cereal, that kills it.'"[274] Politely arguing back against this group of fans, pointing out that the comic books have no connection to the licensed merchandise (a point repeatedly made), seemed to have no sway on their views. The pair end this editorial, resigning to the hope that most of their readers have reached the point of maturity or level of perception where they can separate the various aspects of one's beloved things.

One aspect that led to this infighting and gatekeeping between fans within the TMNT cultural sphere was examined in great detail in the last chapter, which covered *Love & Rockets*. Returning to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory on cultural capital, which explains how accumulated cultural knowledge bestows social status and power, we see a similar development in the letter columns of TMNT. In early issues, we find published letters such as from Charles A. Mackenzie from Vancouver, BC, who

[274] Eastman, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #21, 40.

begins his letter praising the subtle finesse in the newly published TMNT series. And in a similar fashion to the letters found in L&R, Mackenzie noted, "The turtles and Splinter are likeable and believable without the contrived neuroses I've seen in Marvel comics."[275] He believed the TMNT comic-book series and his other favorites were wonderfully subversive, specifically mentioning L&R coincidentally.

Other similar letters included Dave Vargo's of Avenel, NJ, who liked reading "weird stuff" like TMNT. But he also really despised "money-grubbing companies like Marvel and DC with their over-hyped, childish comics abounding with super wimps in red jammies."[276] Ironically, Vargo considered Marvel and DC comic books childish, but not the comic book about turtles that are ninjas. Perhaps their opinion changed, or they double-downed on their view when the TMNT franchise expanded its audience range a few years after this letter was published. Likewise, Scott Randle of Dallas, TX, says that TMNT is the best comic book they have ever read. Additionally, Randle "always hated comic books and thought they were immature because I had the impression that they consisted of funny-looking humans with special stupid powers who ran around in their 'underoos.'"[277] Thanks to the Ninja Turtles, he now saw that there were more to comic books than just X-Men or Batman.

This is an interesting case of cultural capital because we see the disgust for mainstream comic books in these letters, similar to those examined in L&R. However, we

[275] Peter Laird and Kevin Eastman (story and art), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #4, Mirage Studios, (1985), inside cover.

[276] Laird, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #4, inside cover.

[277] Laird, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #8, 47-48.

also experience a shift of power internally with this audience. The power dynamics were created anew as variations of the single pop culture item were pushed in different directions to reach a broader range of audiences. These new iterations of the Ninja Turtles were seen to have no cultural capital due to their restrictions and alterations that made them more accessible to a younger audience. Now these concerned letter writers had to figure out their position within the greater field of pop culture as readers of comic books and within the newly expanded franchise, which unintentionally dethroned and tossed them into the pit with fans that were seen as lesser. I believe Bourdieu's theory on cultural capital to be an aspect that is not immediately associated with the next step in our theoretical framework: convergence culture. Still, it does help explain and allow us to understand the social dynamics in this fluid power system.

The issue Eastman and Laird were running into with their various clans of fans intermingling can be understood best through the lens of convergence culture. Coined by media theorist Henry Jenkins, convergence culture is not a result but rather a process that changes how media is produced and consumed. Convergence culture can be divided into five categories: economic, global, organic, technological, and cultural. For our purposes, cultural convergence is the category we are most concerned with. An important aspect is that stories continue to build across several media platforms. To give form to thought, here are some examples to help understand: *True Blood*, a series of novels that became a television series; *The Shadow*, a radio drama that became a comic strip; *Pirates of the Caribbean*, an amusement park that turned into a film franchise. All of these are examples of cultural convergence. The most comparable recent franchise to the TMNT of

the 1980s and 1990s would have to be Harry Potter, which exists in books, films, toys, Broadway shows, and amusement park rides.

As Jenkins mentions in his book *Convergence Culture*, this phenomenon of said convergence culture is "where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways."[278] The core of *Convergence Culture* is to argue against the idea that convergence can only be understood as a mainly technological process that groups multiple media functions. Instead, "convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek new information and make connections among dispersed media content."[279] Jenkins' work covers the relationships between media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence. As we now understand media convergence, what exactly are participatory culture and collective intelligence?

The first chapter of this dissertation discussed Jennifer Hayward's *Consuming Pleasures*, which, like Jenkins, does away with the old notion of passive consumers. Regarding participatory culture, Jenkins sees the media producers and consumers as participants (instead of separate entities) that interact with each other in a nuanced way and often with exclusive rules that are rarely transferable to other cases of convergence culture. These interactions are unique because these participants are created to not be equal. "Corporations—and even individuals within corporate media—still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers. And some

[278] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York City; London: New York University Press, 2006), 2.

[279] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 3.

consumers have greater abilities to participate in this emerging culture than others."[280] This means that any conclusions drawn from a case of convergence culture will not apply to other cases, as these power dynamics have many variables.

Participatory culture declares that all individuals are acting with some level of agency. This acting, or consuming on the part of consumers, extends to a greater network of individuals. Convergence begins in the brain of these individuals and with their social interactions with other consumers. As Jenkins explains, through consuming culture, each individual "constructs [their] own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives."[281] However, since there is more information on any given topic, this incentivizes individuals to have social interactions with those who have a similar interest in consuming a particular culture. These interactions and conversations are then a part of a more extensive collective process, or as French cypertheorist Pierre Lévy coined it, a collective intelligence. "None of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills."[282] This collective intelligence is viewed as a source of media power that can be used in daily interactions within a convergence culture. All of this is simultaneously occurring within convergence culture, constantly shifting the scales of agency consumers and producers hold.

[280] Ibid.

[281] Ibid., 3-4.

[282] Ibid.

Building on Jenkins' work, we can begin to understand the complicated nature of the fan-producer relationship. As audience and fan scholar Sara K. Howe elaborates in her article, "Teams, Tears, and Testimonials: A Rhetorical Reading of the Twilight Time Capsule," fan culture is mercurial in nature:

> Recent scholarship on fan culture suggests that the fan-producer relationship is unstable and unpredictable. It suggests, equally, that being a fan is... a fluid subject position. Fans are interchangeably both producers and consumers (and often an amalgamation of both); they desire not only cultural capital but also cultural production, the creation of new texts and experiences. Also, as intimated earlier, producers now more than ever are engaging fans, encouraging fans to move through multiple media for more information about the stories and characters they love.[283]

With no uncertainty, the relationship between letter writers and producers of the TMNT comic-book series is complicated and unpredictable in nature. For instance, are the letter pages considered a fan community? Yes and no. It is a spot where fans have a "corporate component" to oversee the publication and interaction between fans and producers, though this oversight can be undermined through external penpals and fan clubs. This example shows how power shifts through control and subversion.

Relating Jenkins' and Howe's ideas to the fans of TMNT, we can begin by ruling out that the media convergence of the comic-book series was not any technology shift. It is not as if the TMNT franchise shifted to be aired only on Television or seen exclusively in a movie theater. The original medium of comic books still existed alongside these other delivery technologies. However, the addition of these new media platforms caused

[283] Sara K. Howe, "Teams, Tears, and Testimonials: A Rhetorical Reading of the Twilight Time Capsule," *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* vol 5 (2013): 65, https://doi.org/10.5325/reception.5.1.0061.

growth and further distinctions within the fandom of TMNT. Some had only read the comic books, those who have only watched the television, those who have only seen the films, and the multiple variations of mixing and matching of the previous three mediums.

The additions of delivery technologies to this popular culture of TMNT let their respective media industries take hold of the original idea of TMNT and transform it into a more suitable and accessible arrangement for their targeted audience (via licensing). Being turned into a Saturday morning cartoon shifted the story's tone to entice a young audience that watched TV on weekend mornings. Being turned into a live-action film almost entirely did away with any animation/cartoon style and became a movie retelling of the first comic books with some elements kept from the cartoon.

This exploration into a wider audience through different mediums allowed new fans to indulge in their curiosity and need for more material to consume. The most direct avenue for them was to the source of it all, the original TMNT comic books. Now you have fans of the series coalescing: fans who only read the comics and hated the other media interpretations, fans who loved all incarnations of the four turtles, fans who saw the group on film or TV and came back to read the comics. This is what Jenkins refers to as transmedia storytelling. But now, a problem exists that can be seen in most fandoms: toxic fandom, ownership, and elitism.

No doubt this was a confusing time for the TMNT comic-book fans. Those used to reading a gritty, slightly mature version of TMNT were now seeing a children's show that was entirely different. This was also followed up shortly after with a live-action film that combined the two iterations. Which lore is now canon? Are the bandanas the turtles

wear still red or now multiple colors? Is April an ex-scientist or news reporter? What happened to all the violence and language? Why are the turtles eating pizza now?

Any change in a popular culture serialized narrative causes entitled fans to inevitably develop a toxic fandom. They will also hold on to some older (often original) iterations that they believe to be the best version. These toxic fans will then use that as a gatekeeping point to decide who the "real" fans are, what culture is proper enough to consume, and what culture is trash. They will often turn the creators and perceive this expansion into different media as "selling" out, which is another way of saying, in this instance, this popular culture has become too accessible and popular.

These toxic fan voices are often the loudest. That doesn't necessarily make them right or in the majority. But this repercussion of convergence culture happened within this first volume of TMNT, which makes it unique compared to the other three comic-book series shown in previous chapters. The audience of the TMNT comic-book series occupies a space between the old, original medium and the newer ones. This creates new and unique participation occurrences within the culture, often filled with a struggle against gatekeepers and the right to carve out a space for themselves.[284]

Throughout his book, Jenkins has continuously shown that convergence culture enables new forms of participation and collaboration. Turning back to Lévy, Jenkins writes that the French philosopher believes that "the power to participate within knowledge communities exists alongside the power the nation-state exerts over its citizens and corporations within commodity capitalism exert over its workers and

[284] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 24.

consumers."[285] While this is important for more economically inclined popular culture studies, the idea can be reframed into the situation that had been unfolding with the TMNT comic-book letter writers and franchise overall.

The one social or cultural power comic-book fans had was the monopoly of exclusivity to the TMNT fictional world and lore. Of course, any wanderer or curious mind could have walked into a comic-book shop and picked up a copy of the comic book. But entering an insulated community with gatekeepers, or simply navigating a comic-book store, as well as facing gender, sex, and race barriers is no small step.

However, as mentioned before, when TMNT became more accessible through different delivery technologies, the fan base and accessibility to this once closed-off fictional world busted through the floodgates. As Jenkins set us up for, this new power to participate within a knowledge community, whether it now was via Saturday morning cartoons, movies, or even merchandise, existed alongside the original comic-book fandom (nation-state) that now gave itself the authority to determine what was official and what was popular culture.

Another exciting aspect of convergence culture and the letter writers of the TMNT comic-book series was the four-year time gap between the initial group of published letters that stopped at issue #15 and the second group of published letters that began again in issue #51. With this gap, we can see how letter writers' feelings changed, if at all, towards the convergence culture that started to occur and was still happening at the time. As a prime example of this time skip, Mike Leong of Nelson, British Columbia,

[285] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 245.

wrote a letter published in issue #52. He had been following the Ninja Turtles' adventures since their beginning in 1984. Since their conception, Leong stated that:

> they've been turned into toys, their skin color has changed so many times it makes me dizzy, they've been swallowed by a cow's head and spat out, met more stupid mutants than I can count, and even been turned into, gulp, sissies. Don't get me wrong just because Leo carries a pair of razor-sharp ninja-to, doesn't mean he has to use 'em, right?... Ninjas, the ones I know about, actually kill people. It was their job. They are assassins. So, please, bring back the real TMNT. The ones who squashed crime without mercy, punished the Foot with no quarter given, and, yes, even killed lawbreakers sometimes.[286]

This letter writer still found himself beset by the multiple iterations of TMNT, yearning for the original (more violent) portrayals shown years ago. Luckily for this fan, the current "City at War" storyline would be precisely what they are looking for.

In the same mindset as Leong, J. Pettis, a first-grade teacher from Killeen, Texas, had already seen one of their letters published in issue #51. Now, in issue #59, they were inspired to write again to give an update on the state of TMNT culture. As a first-grade teacher, Pettis found keeping tabs on the "other" Turtles useful. This amazed their young students, who found it hard to believe they would know any of the Ninja Turtle characters. However, for Pettis, "After enduring all the pizza, the phony surfer lingo, and the goofy Heroes-in-a-Half-Shell I can stand, it's comforting to turn to the 'real' Turtles: gritty, tough, black & white."[287] Unknowingly, Pettis has given us a unique insight and perspective into the crossing paths of the TMNT franchise fan groups. An older, pining

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[286] Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird (story), Jim Lawson and Peter Laird (Script), Jim Lawson (Pencils), Keith Aiken (inks), Mary Kelleher (lettering), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #52, Mirage Publishing, (Oct 1992), 29.

[287] Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird (story), Jim Lawson and Peter Laird (Script), Jim Lawson (Pencils), Keith Aiken (inks), Eric Talbot (tones), A.C. Farley (cover), Mary Kelleher (lettering), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #59, Mirage Publishing, (May 1993), 25.

for the original TMNT fan and letter writer suffers from the cultural lingo and knowledge shared by the younger fans of the turtles. The letter reads as if Pettis tolerates their first graders' enjoyment knowing they can always turn to the "real" Ninja Turtles.

On the other end of the spectrum, within the same letter column as Pettis' letter (#59), Leigh Butler of Aurora, CO, wrote into cheer on the co-creators regarding their licensing. Butler saw that many "freaks with too much time on their hands have been saying that you are too big on merchandising." According to this letter writer, those "freaks" needed to find a new hobby because any idea as original as "the Turtles should be plastered anywhere-the-heck you want it to be!" Butler understood that Laird and Eastman had to run a business and wished other fans would also realize that.[288] As if to compliment Butler's letter, two more letters in issue #59 praised the different media platforms the Ninja Turtles were appearing on. Brian Tomaselli (Bedford, OH) and Wendy Fay (Auburn, MA) both wrote in to congratulate the pair of creators on the third TMNT movie. Tomaselli could tell that they helped write the story for the movie and thought it was awesome, while Fay loved the fight scenes.

There were even more letter writers chiming in about their love of everything Ninja Turtles. Dean Lewis of Grandville, MI, started their published letter commenting on the "City at War" storyline and how enjoyable it was. They ended their letter by saying, "Even though I am supposed to be a responsible adult now, anyone can tell I'm still a Turtle freak from my collection of figures, t-shirts, comics, and posters. What can I

[288] Eastman, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #59, 25.

say? Make Mine Mirage."[289] Lewis has embraced the entirety of Ninja Turtle culture. Although, there is still a social stigma that Lewis brought with his letter when he stated, "I am supposed to be a responsible adult now." Would he consider himself more of an adult if he had only collected TMNT comics? Or is it considered childish to be associated with any Ninja Turtle product? The spectrum that fans present themselves and draw lines in for what is socially acceptable within and without the sphere of comics is as varied and interesting as the number of Ninja Turtle products that were out at the time. Nevertheless, Lewis' embracing their status as a "Turtle freak" shows the range of consumers within cultural convergence.

Out of the many letters that talk about their views of the TMNT cultural convergence, there is one letter that genuinely takes a step back to observe and reflect on their fellow audience. Jeff Sanders of Winter Park, FL, had been sitting on writing this letter for years, primarily due to indifference. He wrote to express his appreciation and respect for comic art, which would not have been developed had he not been introduced to the Ninja Turtles. To this fan, the characters were real, and he enjoyed them in a way similar to engaging in a good friendship. With this understanding and point of view, Sanders turned his attention to others who consume TMNT culture:

> I've observed that a wide variety of ages, professions, and personalities take delight in your work, although I find it strange that not many of those are readily inclined to open up any discourse on the subject, as compared to enthusiasts of other comic stories and characters who seem to go on endlessly about the complexities and nuances in the "mainstream" comics. Grown professional men who go to comic book stores seem to have no problem with taking up an animated conversation about the characteristics and livelihoods of Spiderman or Spawn, but then shirk away from admitting they might actually look at a Turtles

[289] Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird (story), Jim Lawson and Peter Laird (Script), Jim Lawson (Pencils), Keith Aiken (inks), Eric Talbot (tones), A.C. Farley (cover), Mary Kelleher (lettering), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #60, Mirage Publishing, (June 1993), 25.

> story. I used to think this was due to the confusion of the public images; that is, the seemingly fine line between cartoon, live action, and original source representations that becomes emulsified when delivered to us whole. In my opinion, the thing that makes them work for children makes them work for the rest of us too, in that they are as real and flesh and blood as you and me, and that we feel a bit of ourselves in each one of those characters no matter how young or mature we envision ourselves to be.[290]

Sanders ended his letter with a simple "thank you" but leaves us with a unique understanding of how a letter writer and fans develop an awareness of their connections to TMNT and the social rules and interactions amongst fellow fans of different Ninja Turtle mediums. He brought up an interesting point here in understanding that not only is there a perceived image of who enjoys TMNT comics and its various adaptations within the fandom, but also from the outside. One's makeup of these "public images" permeate throughout a fandom with multiple medium iterations, designating who should typically enjoy which medium. This particular letter writer also does an excellent job transcending those imaginary boundaries in explaining the universal appeal of the Ninja Turtles, no matter what medium they appear in.

There is a unique and unintended consequence of convergence culture directly related to the TMNT comic-book series, the one power relationship that has yet to be considered in this back-and-forth between creators and consumers. The obstacle both must contend with: parents. Journalist Kathleen Doheny wrote an article titled, "Turtle Trouble : Children: Some parents believe Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles encourage aggression. Others say the Turtles are just harmless fun" for the *Los Angeles Times*, covering the growing concerns of parents for their children.

[290] Eastman, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #60, 25.

As one child's parents (Debbie and Rholan Wong) described in the article in 1990, their 3-year-old (Derek) had developed a morning ritual that reduced their morning routines' fussiness. Their child would first watch the "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" cartoon while eating breakfast. Then he would pick 1 of his 6 TMNT T-shirts, a pair of Turtle socks, and shorts to wear. Lastly, Derek would grab a Turtle toy or sword to swing and slice through the air before he climbed happily into the car, shouting, "Turtles fight with honor!" Doheny writes, "Like many other toddlers, Derek had fallen under the spell of the pizza-loving, sword-carrying reptiles that have enjoyed the limelight ever since last spring's blockbuster movie of the same name."[291] Other adults at the time were not so enthusiastic about children's excessive love for Ninja Turtles. Mary Alvidrez, a child-care provider in West Los Angeles, believed that the children under her charge were getting too carried away with the fantasy play. "The older kids would do karate on the younger ones," Alvidrez mentioned. And now she has banned the Ninja Turtles from their center. "No more Turtle T-shirts or toys; no more words like 'cowabunga (a Turtle favorite).' Turtles are fine at home, but not at Mary's." This was merely a battle being waged in the bigger war of daycare centers and schools that began to ban Turtle wear and toys. Some even began to offer Teddy bears to kids who turned in their Turtles.[292]

Before Ninja Turtle merchandising gave parents an out for blaming their rambunctious kid's behavior, parents were concerned about the comic-book series. Larry Mindy of Chicago, IL, wrote a letter published in TMNT #8 (1986). Mindy started off

[291] Kathleen Doheny, "Turtle Trouble : Children: Some Parents Believe Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Encourage Aggression. Others Say the Turtles Are Just Harmless Fun.," *Los Angeles Times*, August 12, 1990, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-08-27-vw-116-story.html.

[292] Doheny, "Turtle Trouble," *Los Angeles Times*.

being very critical of the state of the series that was beginning to slip art and story-wise. "The turtles are best in the city fighting thugs, killers, muggers in the alleys, rooftops, streets and sewers. This space stuff sucks – Star Wars is dead!" Besides hoping the "space opera" story arc would end soon, Mindy wanted the creators to know that their comic book was very violent. "'Taking off heads'? Kids read this, you know. 'Kick ass'? 'Damn' all the time. You guys are an influence. Please consider that."[293] The mismatched logic and irony of stating that TMNT is too violent and uses too many swear words immediately after pleading for the creators to return the Ninja Turtles to their natural state of fighting thugs, killers, and muggers is an interesting opinion. Eastman and Laird responded with a simple statement: "What can we say except. 'Chacun à son gout'?"[294]

Tensions between perturbed parents and creators Eastman and Laird must have peaked in the two years between this last letter and this newer one from Bonnie M. Winter of Anchorage, AK. Published in TMNT #15, Winter's letter begins by telling how her 10-year-old son had purchased four of the TMNT comic books at a comic-book store in town. "After he brought them home I read through two of them and was quite shocked at the foul language and violence depicted in them." Winter called the comic-book store and talked to the manager, who suggested she write a letter to Laird and Eastman voicing their dissatisfaction.[295]

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[293] Laird, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #8, 47-48.

[294] A French phrase for "To each their own."

[295] Eastman, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #15, 37-40.

Like Mindy, Winter believed that a publishing company that prints material for children should carry the responsibility for that material. Without any warnings clearly labeled on the front regarding the language and violence depicted, Winter, thought that these comic books should not be printed. At worst, they should have a warning for parents and proprietors of stores. "My son will no longer buy your comics nor will my friend's children until you take some responsibility for the material you print. It saddens me to see the deterioration of what was once a trusted industry reduced to such a low standard that I must police comic books that my children bring home."[296] When Winter referenced the deterioration of a "trusted industry," we can assume she is referring to the Comics Code Authority (CCA) and the seal used by the Comics Code to show compliance to its code of regulation. Though the CCA lasted into the beginning of the 21st Century, it was voluntary, meaning some publishing companies refused to use it while others found creative workarounds to subvert the censorship. At the end of Winter's letter are signatures who felt the same as her (six signatures follow, of which only "Theress Ortega" is fully legible). In contrast, the two creators' response to Mindy's letter was relatively short. Laird's response to Winter's letter was extensive.

Laird began his response to Winter by stating he found responding to her letter difficult since she did not provide specific examples of "foul language" and "violence" within TMNT issues. He did not consider any language used in the comic books to be "foul," nor does he believe it to be fair that Winter claims to understand the purpose of the violence used in TMNT if they have read only two issues. The violent actions in their

[296] Ibid.

comic books were "not gratuitous; it is not explicitly gross or graphic. If you had read all of our books, you would have seen that we try to use the 'off-screen' approach wherever possible, keeping the actual act of violence outside of the panel."[297] Laird continued, saying that if Winter had bothered to read the series, she would have seen that the Ninja Turtles never go out looking for trouble, fighting for the sake of fighting, being bullies, using excessive force, continuously cursing, using slang, or poorly structured language. The Ninja Turtles speak with correct grammar and syntax (unless under duress or excitement). The co-creator told Winter that:

> If you had spent the extra effort to really read our books, you would have also seen that the values that we promote through the Turtles' words and actions are positive ones, including respect for the rights of the individual, reverence for the wisdom that comes with age; and recognition of the value of a caring family life, among others. Yes, the Turtles aren't perfect characters - they lose their tempers, they squabble, they insult one another. But they also help others in need, and try to do the right thing, and care for each other. And isn't that the way it is in real life? Why shouldn't our comic book reflect that?[298]

It becomes apparent that Laird is going out of his way to make an example out of Winter to make a more significant point, especially considering just how long this response was. Almost an entire page from the letter column is devoted to his printed response.

From here, Laird expanded to the larger picture of people "fussing and fuming over sex and violence in the media." The idea that merely exposing a child to either or would turn them into a sociopath or psychopath is beyond Laird's belief and goes against all common sense. A Explaining that millions upon millions are exposed to this kind of media daily, with so few of those millions turning into violent cases, Laird knew that

[297] Ibid.

[298] ibid.

there was no simple "cause and effect" relationship. What truly matters is how "the parent or parents of each child bring that child up and that is scary to some who would rather not make the effort needed to teach their children to lead good and just lives." Instead, these parents find convenient scapegoats via comic books, movies, TV, etc., because finding something to cover for their own failings is easier.[299]

Having said this, Laird returned to Winter, explaining that he knows he will never convince her that it is okay for her son to read the TMNT comic book. Even though their standards and perceptions were wildly different, Laird wanted Winter to try and expand her view of comic books as a medium strictly for children. As we know, this is a stereotypical view of comics. We also know this has never been true of comics. Laird explained, "Comics can be for young kids but they can also be for teenagers and they can be for adults. In fact, they can be for all ages, and that is the way we approach the Turtle books. We believe they are suitable for all ages, and do not require some kind of label to protect innocent young children from their contents."[300]

Closing his response, Laird asked if Winter truly believed that “At best these comics should not be printed." If she genuinely does, Laird comments that he is glad that she is not in charge of the world and would hate to live in the kind of "creatively constipated, simple-minded, and fascistic world you would surely create." As Laird put it, saying such a mind-bogglingly insensitive and dictatorial statement would be the equivalent of him telling Winter that "At best Bonnie Winter should never be allowed to

[299] Ibid.

[300] Ibid.

speak her mind."[301] This is one of the most extended and critical responses to a published letter in all four comic-book series examined in this analysis. Given that the last letter concerning the influence of TMNT on children had a simple "to each their own" response, it would not be presumptuous to assume that a number of letters were written that brought up this issue.

But one issue these letter writers did not pick up on was the political messages in the TMNT series. Or rather, the lack thereof. Besides popularity, and publisher size/type, a significant characteristic that makes TMNT stand out as a comic-book series from the previous three examined series is its lack of overt societal, political, and cultural messages. TNTT, UXM, and L&R all had stories with social and political commentary along with a number of their stories. TMNT only has one out of the sixty-two issues in its first volume. In issue #12 (Oct 1987), the Ninja Turtle gang, Splinter, April, and Casey, have been laying low in upstate New York. During a picnic, a student named Don from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, who's been held against his will by survivalists, stumbles about the group at the farmhouse area. The survivalists are part of a group named "The Committee to Rebuild American Patriotism," led by a man named Skonk, and all carry fully automatic weapons. (Fig. 3 and Fig 4.) It is learned that CRAP had obtained a nuclear bomb through the university student and wished to use it to start a war with the USSR. The Ninja Turtles help Don in taking out the members of CRAP along with diffusing the nuclear bomb. Skonk ends up blowing himself up and leaves Don mournful that a human being died, ending the story with: "After all, in this world

[301] Ibid.

plagued by terrorism and poised on the brink of nuclear armageddon... ...Who doesn't want to survive?"[302] No published letters were found that addressed the politics of TMNT, but that does not mean there were not any letters written in, which is an aspect of this study that cannot be included. While TMNT may not have the same political and social messages as the other examined comic-book series, how does it compare to letter-writers' demographic breakdown?

[302] Peter Laird (story and art), Steve Lavigne (lettering), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #12, Mirage Studios, (Oct 1987), 36.

Figure 3. Peter Laird (story and art), Steve Lavigne (lettering), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #12, Mirage Studios, (Oct 1987), 8.

Figure 4. Peter Laird (story and art), Steve Lavigne (lettering), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #12, Mirage Studios, (Oct 1987), 33.

Similarly, as with the preceding chapters, we come to the portion of the chapter where we take a step back to see the forest for the trees. For the analysis of the first volume of the TMNT series, 20 issues of the total 62 issues had letter pages, giving us a percentage of 32.3%. From those 20 issues, there were 115 printed letters in total. Out of this total, 86 letters were written by assumed men. Assumed women wrote 23 letters. 6 letters were written by gender-unknown writers. This means that 74.8% of the printed letters were written by men, 20% by women, and 5.2% unknown. This breakdown is shown visibly to fully realize the contrasting values in Fig. 5, which shows the gender breakdown of letter writers with the number of letters on the Y-axis and the issue # on the X-axis. Of all 115 letters, 56 (48.7%) were given a printed response. And finally, out of all 115 letters, only 1 letter was a no-prize (.9%!).

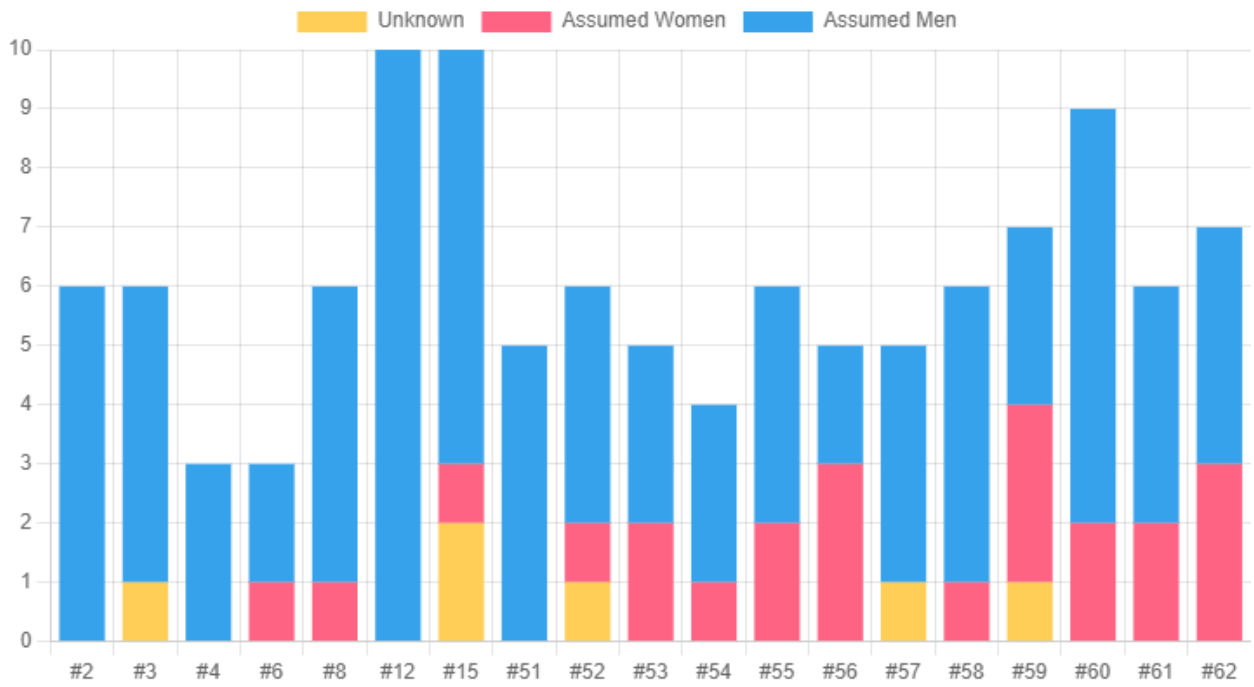

Figure 5. Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird (w), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #1-#62, Mirage Publishing (1983-1993).

From 1984 to 1993, this analysis of TMNT covered 62 issues over nine years. This puts TMNT into the second longest year range and second highest number of issues examined when compared to TNTT, UCX, and L&R. Circling back to these series, we again see that the breakdown of gender ratio for letter writers is still relatively the same. TMNT had 74.8% men, 20% women, and 5.2% unknown. L&R had 77.33% men, 14.67% women, and 8.67% unknown. TNTT had 81.25% men, 13.75% women, and 5% unknown. UCX had 64.55% men, 29.85% women, and 5.59% unknown. What makes these statistics so interesting is the fact that all of the series come from wildly different publishing companies (barring Marvel and DC are both mainstream) that had series with different tones, styles, target audiences, and creators/editors choosing which letters to print. And yet, statistically, they are similar. Without direct input from the creators/editors, it is difficult to say whether the percentages are what they are due to the volume of letters coming in from each gender, biases during the selection of letters to print, or simply the fact of times of who was reading the series and felt the need to write a letter.

The similarities between the TMNT and L&R comic-book series are apparent through the letters that often complained about mainstream comic books and gatekeeping other readers by trying to convince them that they were not "true fans" if they did not have similar tastes in cultural consumption or fit a desired demographic (age, class, race, gender, class, etc.) Bourdieu's work on cultural consumption allows us to understand better these letter writers and the motives that drive them. But the major commercial success of TMNT complicated these relationships even further, as the mythos of TMNT expanded beyond just the singular vehicle of the comic-book format. This was where

Jenkins' work on convergence culture allowed us to transcend into the multi-faceted world of different mediums serving one particular piece of popular culture. Combining the two theories allowed us to understand the complex relationships that continued to develop between producers and fans who had their letters printed and displayed their views on other fans. This would be an excellent continuation of this particular type of study, observing how comic-book fans reacted to off-shoot media of the same series. For instance, *X-Men: The Animated Series* started in the 1990s, and seeing how letter writers contended with the show versus the ongoing comic-book series would be an exciting extension of what has been observed here already.

But for TMNT, its letter writers had quite a unique journey compared to the other comic-book series examined. A startup, independent publishing company consisting of two men working out of their living rooms, using all their savings and a loan from an uncle to expand quickly into a legitimate publishing company (with staff!) with ventures into the toy market, animation television, and live-action movies. Originally intended to be a short parody of mainstream comics, TMNT swiftly became a part of that mainstream culture it sought to parody. Much like how Eastman and Laird had to navigate the new fronts of their franchise, these letter writers had to traverse the new landscape of TMNT fandom and the split attention of the creators who had to shift their focus on other projects.

Astonishingly, despite the unique publication history, the make-up of letter writers remained the same, as shown in the gender breakdown of writers. There were other similarities to the other letter columns examined. There were letters printed that were supportive; others were negative; fans wanting to connect with pen pals, others concerned

about collecting issues. All of these traits are commonly found within all the letter columns. But each one had its uniqueness that needed to be highlighted. TMNT creators and letter writers had to live in both worlds of alternative and mainstream. It was through an examination of TMNT's publication history, a retread of Bourdieu's theoretical framework on cultural capital, an introduction to a media scholar Henry Jenkins' theoretical framework on convergence culture, and having both a broad and close inspection of the printed letters from the first volume of TMNT that this analysis shows that letter writers had to toe the line of both popular and official culture when consuming this comic-book series. I would recommend anyone to go back and read through this series, even if the Ninja Turtles did not eat pizza or say, "Cowabunga!"

CONCLUSION

From superheroes to the village of Palomar to mutant ninja turtles, this study has confirmed that published letters to the editor are a great and resourceful opportunity to understand the readers consuming this pop culture and their relationship with its creators. Through the printed fan letters of these series, we have seen that readers are consuming comics for many reasons. These reasons vary from art and story appreciation, gender, sex, race representation, social commentary, a break from the pop culture mainstream, or even just a brief moment's escape from the real world.

Only a chosen few of the written letters made it into each letter column, making each person who made the cut special from the rest. This elevated status not only fulfilled a desire from the fan writing to be heard but also responded to directly (for a good majority of the letters, anyway). For these reasons, I believe those who saw their letter printed viewed themselves as a community of chosen ones. However, these fandoms of comic-book readers were also a community in a larger sense. Because of similar tastes in culture, whether mainstream superheroes, alternative, or independent comics, readers found themselves in a community of those with similar interests where the whole could see individual voices. Even though a part of community building (at least locally) happened at comic-book shops, the letter column had the unique feature of reaching out to fellow readers and the creators.

Having distinctive tastes kept these communities from being seen as an indistinctive group. Love for the soap opera-like superhero stories, hate for these mainstream, repetitive stories, love for more realistic or relatable stories, and love for a

fresh, new parody of the worn-out plots divided this larger community of comic-book readers into sub-communities. Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital plays a central role in discovering and understanding why these distinctions were made and why these readers made sure to separate themselves from each other. Consuming the lesser pop culture over the official culture created a sense of elitism with the larger comic-book community.

Despite these differences, there were commonalities among these letters. Although the letters found within the L&R and TMNT series showed a particular distaste for superhero comics, a majority of these readers had their introduction to comic books from this superhero genre. And though they seemed to have grown away from reading these, most of these elitists would name-drop famous comic-book artists such as Joe Kubert, Gil Kane, Steve Ditko, Neal Adams, Will Eisner, and even Jack Kirby in their written letters. An aspect that all the letter columns shared (that will be discussed later) is that the gender ratio of the printed letters was relatively the same across the board, a roughly 1/6 women to 5/6 men statistical finding. Lastly, the most prominent common themes between the letters were what I would call the generic praise/criticism letters. These letters offered general opinions on art, writing, story-telling techniques, and character development.

While the letter writers had similarities and differences across the series, so did the creators in how they interacted with them. In comparison, the creators' responses for TNTT, UXM, and TMNT were tamer or perhaps formal/professional in their responses to readers. The first two being more marketable to younger audiences, keeping a relatively peaceful relationship with their readers would make sense. Peter Laird and Kevin Eastman were friendly but not bashful when confronting letter writers who wished to

censor their work. The Hernandez brothers of L&R were the opposite of these three. They were not hesitant to call out readers who were being "assholes." But across the board, the creator's responses were usually enthusiastic to hear from readers and provide an answer to their inquiries when possible.

Jennifer Hayward in *Consuming Pleasures* argues that "Serials, like other popular texts, require active participation on the part of consumers. At the very least, a series of choices must be made: which serial to read or view, with whom, where, while doing what."[303] This theory is confirmed in the interactions between readers and creators of these comic-book series. These letter writers are not passive consumers of popular texts. There was a series of active decision-making to choose what series to read based on taste, when and where to read these comic books with whomever they choose, create their outcome from the reading, and then make the exceptionally active choice to voice their opinion or questions into a letter and send it off (with their money) to be read and responded to by the creators hopefully. Previous comic-book studies tend to focus on sales records when talking about readers, making them sound passive and removing any individualism they may have. Assuming an audience is passive or ignoring their impact silences half of an invaluable story.

This newfound understanding has come from a close examination of four selectively chosen comic-book series from the 1980s. *The New Teen Titans* (1980-1996), *The Uncanny X-Men* (1978-1991), *Love and Rockets* (1982-1996), and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1984-1995) all have their unique spots in comic history during the 1980s.

[303] Jennifer Poole Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997) 1.

While not every published letter could be specifically mentioned within this piece of scholarship, there were a great many that did make an appearance. The research process for this project demanded that I read over every printed letter. This means I examined 593 letters and 232 comic-book issues over more than 30 years of publication. Not every issue had a printed letter column, unfortunately (or fortunately?).

I can best describe my methodology as a micro approach. Reading each issue usually gave me sufficient context to understand what the letter writers were discussing. Without doing my due diligence and reading the stories along with the letters I would have left out crucial contextual information. While all letters certainly deserved care and consideration, it was apparent that I did not have the writing space or the time to write about every single printed letter.

This led to my method of either grouping letters into a common theme or highlighting single stand-out examples. Common themes throughout all the series included likes and dislikes for the written story and artwork, no-prize error finders, suggestions for future stories or character arcs, and upcoming conventions. Each series, however, had unique themes that letter writers brought to the forefront. These included themes of gender, sex, race, representation, politics, and social issues. Even more unique themes were found in the L&R and TMNT series, specifically those focused on the low-brow culture status of mainstream superhero comic books. These kinds of letters drew my focus on spotlighting them in this project. They showed what was important to these letter writers and what they could draw out personally from reading these comics.

My selection of which letters to present in my writings did not rest on whether it had a response from an editor/creator, though sometimes it did help in making the letter

unique in terms of the interaction between creator and reader. I also included the foreword remarks from the editor or creator. Usually, these provided an insight into a larger happening in fan mail that did not make it through to the printed letter column.

I decided to create graphs that show the deduced gender representation of letter writers across each series. Figure 1 shows the 42-issue run of TNTT volume 1; Figure 2 displays the 107 issues of UXM; Figure 3 has the 34 issues for L&R; Figure 4 presents the 62 issue run of TMNT. TNTT, L&R, and TMNT all show the breakdown of gender by issue. Due to the lengthy volume of UXM, that series displays by year. Each bar represents the total number of letters according to the individual issue or year, with different colors representing the makeup of genders.

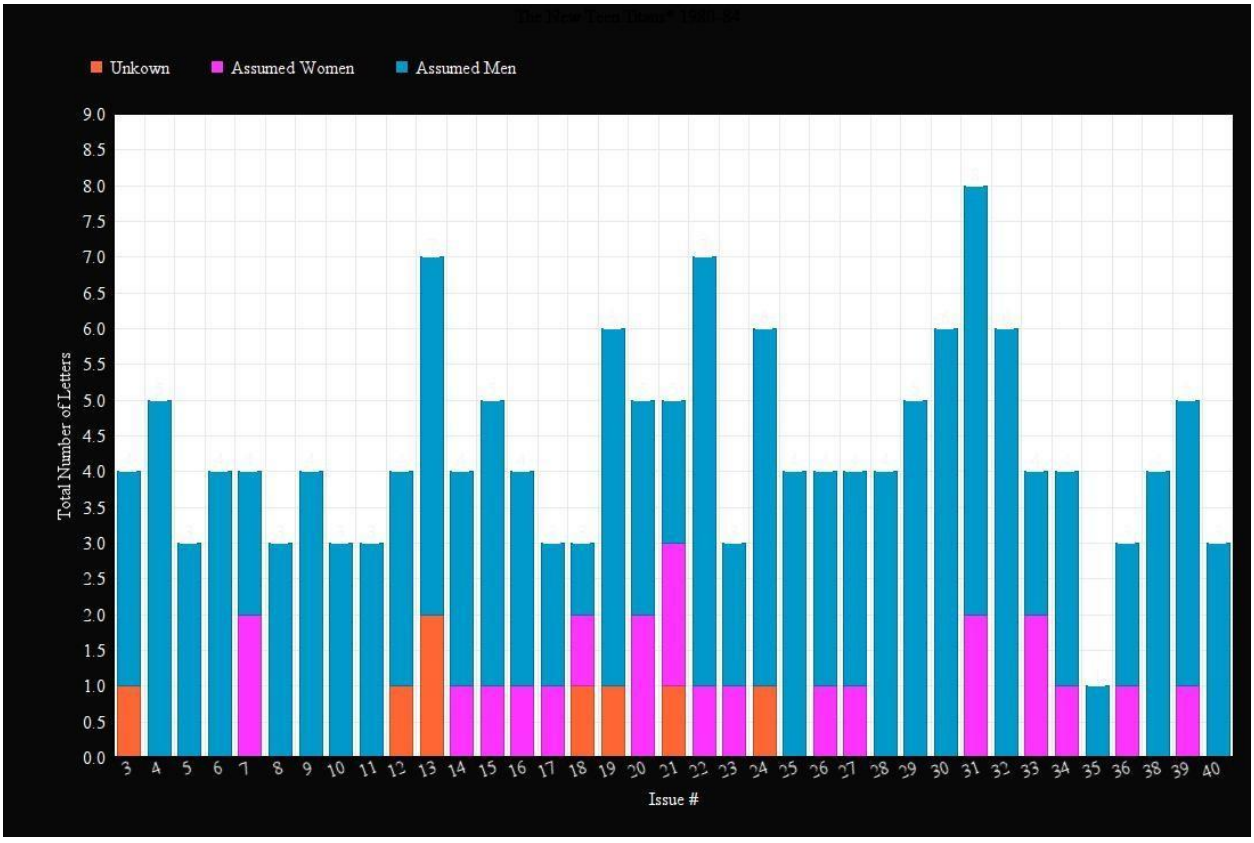

Figure 1. Len Wein (ed), Marv Wolfman (sc), George Pérez (p), *The New Teen Titans* #1-42, DC Comics, Inc., (1980-1984).

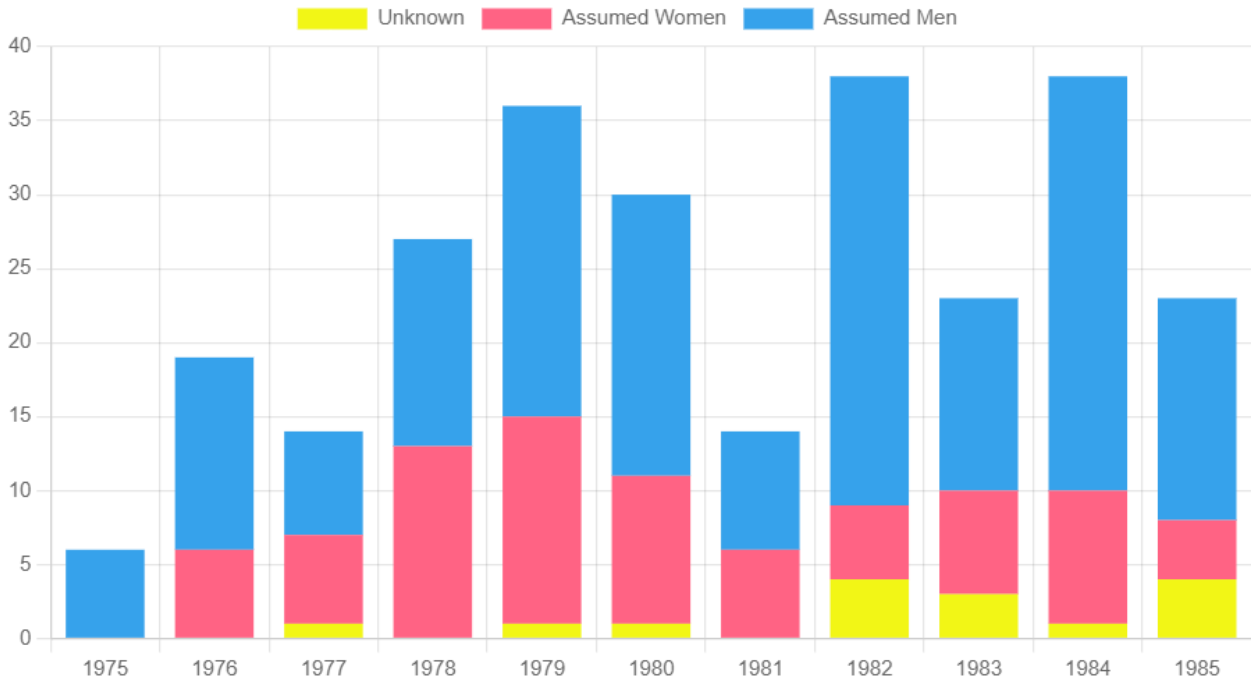

Figure 2. Chris Claremont (w), *The Uncanny X-Men* #94-#200, Marvel Comics Group (1975-1985).

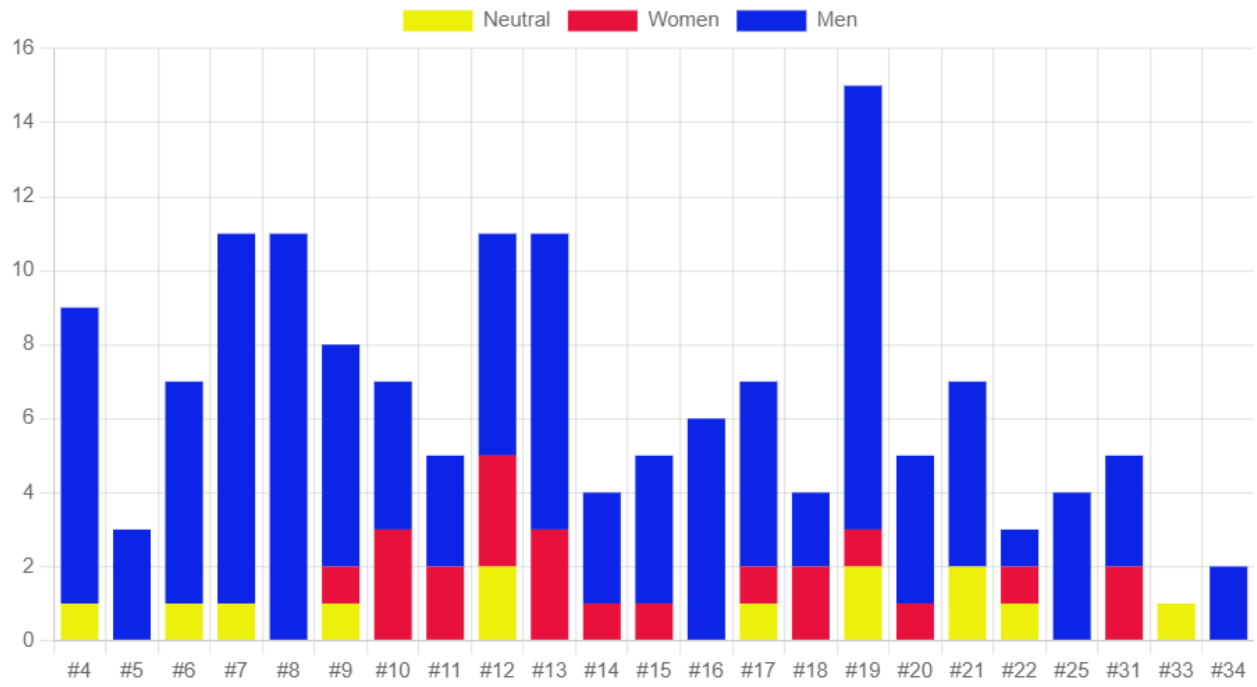

Figure 3. Gary Groth (ed.), Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez (creators), *Love & Rockets* #1-#34, Fantagraphic Books, Inc. (1982-1990).

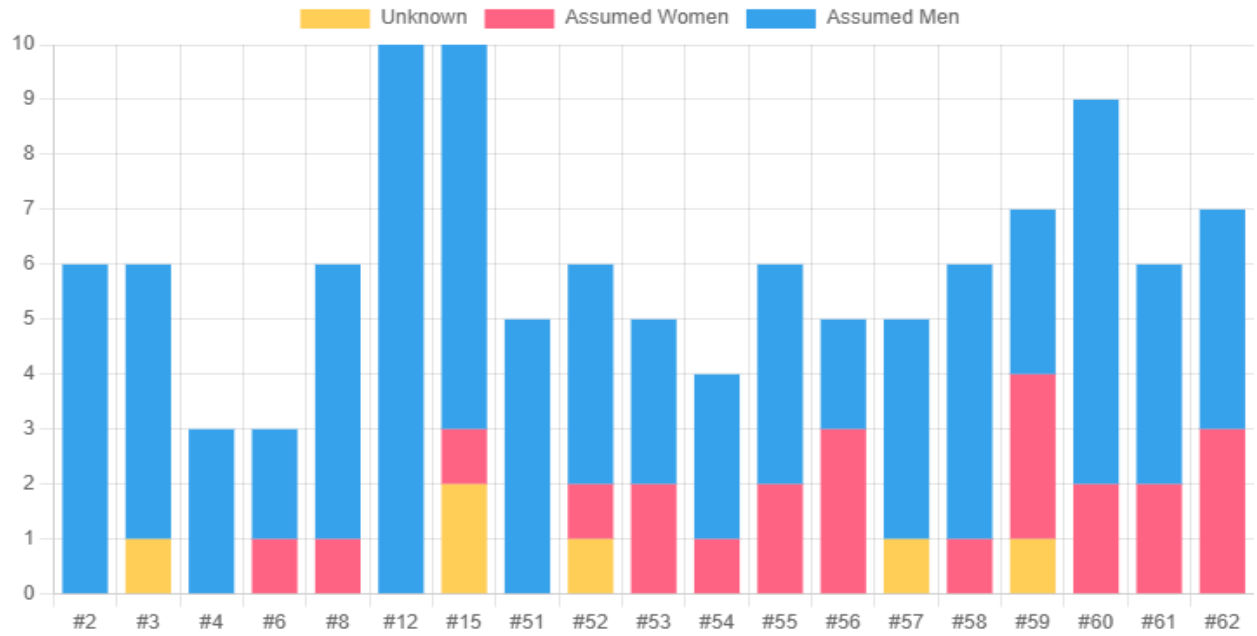

Figure 4. Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird (w), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #1-#62, Mirage Publishing (1983-1993).

As mentioned in the previous chapters, the gender ratio breakdown for published letter writers across the series is as follows: TMNT had 74.8% men, 20% women, and 5.2% unknown. L&R had 77.33% men, 14.67% women, and 8.67% unknown. TNTT had 81.25% men, 13.75% women, and 5% unknown. UCX had 64.55% men, 29.85% women, and 5.59% unknown. The most significant gap between specific genders for all the series is the 16.7% gap between the men of TNTT and UCX (TNTT has the most significant percentage). For women, UCX had the highest percentage, with a 16.1% difference from TNTT, which had the lowest. The most significant gap for neutral is 3.67%, L&R leading that category, with TNTT having the lowest again. The series with the largest gap between genders is TNTT, with a 67.5% difference. The gender differences for the other series are L&R with 62.66%, TMNT with 54.8%, and UCX with 34.7%. My initial take would have been that UXM would have had the greatest difference between genders based on the amount of comic-book issues included in the examination compared to the other three. Given the longer timeline and more letters, I surely thought the number of men writing in/being published would have made a far greater difference.

One aspect of published letters mentioned beforehand was information given freely by the writers themselves. Throughout the first three series covered, TNTT, UXM, and L&R, a few letter writers would make their race known to readers. This generally occurred when issues specifically handled a topic regarding race. This is also probably why no letters stating race appeared in the TMNT letter column as the series itself never dealt with racial topics.

There are not enough examples of published letters mentioning race to make any sort of worthwhile graph or statistic. For TNTT, there was L.D. Yelverton's letter where

she, a black woman, commented that Cyborg was the first major black character in comics who is not stereotyped. In UXM, there were two instances. Tom Runningmoth, an American Indian, stated how proud he was of seeing Thunderbird become a member of the X-Men team. He also stated how disappointed he was to see the character's mistreatment and eventual death. Marilyn Borgdon, another black woman, commented on the interracial makeup of the X-Men team, specifically mentioning the development of the character Ororo. Lastly, there was Maria de Los Angeles Pena, a Latin American from El Salvador. The only person to specifically identify their race in the letter column of L&R (though, there were a few who had written a few words in Spanish). Pena was extremely proud of how the Hernandez brothers presented the idiosyncrasies of Latin America.

All the series are produced with distinct tones, styles, target demographics, and different teams of creators and editors responsible for selecting which letters to publish. Despite these variations, the statistical patterns exhibit surprising similarities. Without direct insights from the creators and editors, it becomes challenging to determine whether these percentages result from variations in the volume of letters received from each gender, potential biases in the selection process for publishing letters, or reflect the demographics of readers who were compelled to write letters during that particular period.

The only viable sources I could readily find that come close to something worth comparing were the few studies/surveys mentioned back in Chapter 3 (L&R). There were two DC Comics-sponsored surveys. The first was a 1991 survey by Mark Clements Research that purported a gender breakdown of readers to be 87.4% men and 12.4%

women. The second survey by Media Research Inc. in 1992 showed a more obscure variation of 93.1% men and 6.9% women (though, remember this particular one left out views and replies from all women participants). The third survey I mentioned was done by First Comics in 1984 through a reader's poll via mail-in ballots found in their comic books. Their findings saw a breakdown of 90.4% male to 9.6% women. Comparatively, the average percentage of published women letter writers I found through my examination of the four series showed a remarkably higher percentage than those found for women who read comic books. My average of 19.57% is over their highest percentage of 12.4%. That is well over a 50% increase. Of course, this leads to more questions. Did women comic-book readers tend to write more letters than men? Did creators have a bias towards publishing letters written by women? If we could compare the proportion of published letters by women with the proportion of female readers, we could perhaps see evidence of editorial bias against female letter writers. Burning questions that will unfortunately not be answered by this scholarship.[304]

The questions that I was able to answer started off with the *Titans' Tower* letter column in TNTT. Here, Marv Wolfman, creator, and writer for the series, remarked on the uniqueness of the readership community hub that is letter columns. Having your letter published made you feel like you were a part of the comic. And unlike the internet, where anyone can post, being one of the few letters published made the person feel special. While the primary purpose of this first chapter was to understand who the audience was

[304] Denis Keegan, "Comic Book Fans: Productivity, Participation and Creativity," Master of Arts, Dublin City University (2000), https://doras.dcu.ie/18910/1/Denis_Keegan_20130521102616.pdf, 72-73.

for TNTT and what they wrote about, it also sought to answer the question of whether reader response shaped the series.

With this series, we began to explore the importance of characterization in mainstream comic books. This narrative feature came in relatively late in the publication history of comic books. When younger comic book readers finally entered the field of comic books, they brought with them new ideas like characterization that went against the norm. With this new feature came increasingly complicated storylines that saw readers become invested in the stories and relate more to the characters. Because we know that consumers are not passive but rather active in their participation (Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasure*), we see the outlet for these readers to participate through the letter columns. Through these individual letters of story/character opinions from readers, we see their influence on TNTT characters, such as Changeling's (aka Beast Boy) power and Kid Flash's political views. We also see the power of massive written feedback that led to the creation of a nonstereotypical black character, namely Cyborg. This led to the next chapter's big question of whether all the themes and findings from this mainstream superhero series repeated similarly.

The UCM series parallels TNTT in many aspects, such as being a mainstream superhero series, a narrative revolving around a team of superheroes with characterization, a diverse cast of characters, and award-winning writers and artists to bring it all together in a congruent timeframe to TNTT. Still, we see differences in the letters published about the series' story and representation of gender, race, and politics. I began the chapter by asking these two questions: Will the topics found in UCX be the

same as those in TNTT? Or could the readers have written in letters that are dramatically different?

Building upon the theories of the previous chapter, we first looked to French literary theorist Gérard Genette, who states that texts rarely appear by themselves in a naked state. They come with reinforcement and are accompanied by paratext. This is the case for comic books as well. Paratexts such as letter columns are essential in understanding the comic-book reader experience completely. Omitting published letters is leaving out an entire reader experience, where a fan would have to wait between 3 to 6 months to hopefully see their letter printed. While we have seen various reasons readers write in letters from the previous chapter, we went deeper into this discussion with Anthony Ramirez's article, "Comic Book Fandom," which uses parasocial theory. Fans identify with comic-book characters to form fandoms and attachments, making the superheroes a significant part of these readers' lives. Through this, we see that readers wished to be more like their favorite characters and for the characters to be more like them through diversity and representation. However, this was not a one-sided push as the writers and artists for UXM pushed the line for what character identity and meaning were for typical superhero comic books.

An interesting comparison between these two series is the opposite reactions to Cold War culture references. TNTT had Russian guest characters appear for storylines and had a major character, Kid Flash, express their Cold War conservative views. UXM had narrative flashbacks to a few specific incidents, and a major character became a walking cliché of American views on Cold War Russians. Numerous letters written to the creators of TNTT shared the reader's views on politics and social commentary. Wolfman

even had to address the readers concerning Kid Flash's political opinions because of the volume of mail they were receiving. However, the letter column in UXM was void of any printed response to this subject. This could be because the references in UXM were a bit more dated, and readers had become distanced from those specific instances. Still, it is interesting to see how dynamically different a letter column can be even though the two series practically mirror each other.

For both of these series, the two groups of letter writers were generally the same. Both showed anywhere from surface level to deep interests in the characters, narratives, and art. However, given my methodology of choosing published letters that either take these surface-level questions to the next level or bring up topics that piqued my interest, these kinds of letters appeared more often from women than men. I found that women letter writers tended to go deeper into representation issues than men, who a majority stayed at surface-level praises and critiques. This then begs the question of whether written letters with surface-level topics by women were chosen to be ignored by the creators/editors or if it was still largely a numbers game of which gender sent in the most volume of mail.

In terms of being dynamically different, however, the L&R series and its letter writers could not have been any more so. Not only are the stories different in the comic books, but the attitude of the letter writers presented proved to be drastically changed. This chapter switches gears from a mainstream comic-book series to an alternative comic book. With a foundation of underground comix, the Hernandez brothers self-published an incredible series with unique stories that pushed boundaries with their genre-bending talents.

As far as letter writers go for L&R, there is an immediate tonal shift in maturity and cultural consumption. Though most of these L&R readers had their start in superhero comics, they now saw themselves above mainstream comic-book culture. With their monopoly of niche knowledge of comics, these readers were examined through the theoretical lens of Pierre Bourdieu's framework of cultural capital in his work Distinction. Seeing themselves as consumers of high culture within the comics world, they are quick to explain that what comic books a person reads reflects on their status in these social spheres. However degrading, gatekeeping, and often toxic these fans were, they did find themselves reading an acclaimed comic-book series that is well known throughout the comics community now, but being an alternative comic, they did not sell nearly as many issues as the previous mainstream series.

L&R served as an example of what it takes to maintain a letter column. As Neil Gaiman noted to the Hernandez brothers, there are two things you need if you want readers to write in letters. Creators need to be printing letters and they need to be publishing the series frequently. Unfortunately, both the printed letter columns and then the L&R series altogether eventually stopped being printed frequently and consistently, until it ended altogether. L&R also provided a unique study as the companion book written for L&R contained many edited and stripped-down versions of the printed letters found in the original prints. Whether to improve the image of the series or the fans themselves, this shows the importance of using sources in their original printing. Despite these differences, L&R's letter column had several similarities to the other series. The gender breakdown of published letter writers and engagement on topics such as social issues, gender, race, and representation all appeared within these printed letters. Here too

I saw a higher amount of deep-topic letters written by women. Though both gender L&R letter writers disdained TNTT, UXM, and mainstream series, they also mocked the next series covered, TMNT.

One of the things that made TMNT an exciting series to examine is that it started as an independent series that boomed into the mainstream, taking its fans along with it. Because of this, I found traits belonging to the alternative L&R letter writers mixed with the mainstream TNTT/UCM letter writers. TMNT started as a parody of the mainstream Marvel series *Daredevil*. Subverting the norms of superhero comic books along with being dissociated from mainstream publishers as an independent publisher, TMNT grabbed the audience seeking cultural capital.

Returning to Bourdieu's theory with these initial fans, I built upon this framework with Henry Jenkins' work on convergence culture. As TMNT grew from a small, 2-person publishing company to a multimedia mega-hit, the variety of audiences for the series grew exponentially. It is here we see the traits of letter writers in L&R appear. While movies, cartoons, toys, and more came out under the Ninja Turtle branding, fans still tried to claim that the original comic-book series was the best cultural iteration. Aside from this uniqueness, the TMNT letter column shared a number of traits as the other three. Letters that were supportive, negative, readers seeking pen pals, and tales of collecting issues can be found not only in TMNT, but all of the other series. Though there was not as much difference between the topics for both men and women in this letter column, it was apparent that more men wrote complaining about the other TMNT franchise groups (Saturday morning cartoons, toys, movies, etc.).

As this study ends, I wish to return to Howe and her article on the "Twilight Time Capsule" from the TMNT chapter. At the end of her work, she raises several questions applicable to all of the studied series' letter writers. The number of hermeneutic problems Howe lists are the following:

> How should we read sites like these that claim to be "all about the fans" but in fact are run by corporations and are intended to serve those corporations' interests? What, if anything, do these sites offer to fans, and how are fans using them? Does "corporate-run" necessarily mean "exploitative"? What do such sites reveal about the ever-shifting relationship between producers and consumers?[305]

In Howe's case, producers and consumers interact in new and unusual ways through interactions on the internet. But here, with consumers and producers interacting through the letter columns of TMNT and other comic books in general, we too must also ask challenging questions. These letter columns are all about the fans that write in letters, yet the column is questionably curated by the producer side with no real transparency about how certain letters make the print. Sheer randomness? Blind luck? Whatever happens to fancy the editor that particular day? Letters that serve the publisher's best interest? Are these social spheres of interaction exploitative due to publisher oversight? These questions must be considered when drawing any analysis from these studies.

There is no doubt that these letter columns are producer-constructed fan communities. However, if there was an overt agenda from the producers controlling the letter pages, such as self-interest, it is not immediately apparent. There would be little or no letters that challenge or critique the work being done by the producers if self-interest

[305] Sara K. Howe, "Teams, Tears, and Testimonials: A Rhetorical Reading of the Twilight Time Capsule," *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* vol 5 (2013): 72, https://doi.org/10.5325/reception.5.1.0061.

was the main goal to accomplish. Or if the primary purpose were to drum up drama, there would be fewer positive comments or letters that wanted to thank the creators for their work. To say that the letter column is a complicated sphere of social interaction would be an understatement. While there are multiple avenues in understanding fan experiences and relationships between producer and consumer (i.e., conventions, signings, comic-book stores, clubs, etc.), the letter column is a partial but crucial puzzle of the bigger picture in this endeavor. Tracing the relations between producer and consumer through the letter column has lent exciting and new insights into the field of audience and comics history.

As Howe lays out in their article, and this analysis agrees entirely, fan studies have come a long way, relatively recently, to say the least. However, there is a constant need for new theories of production and reception to thoroughly understand the intricacies of "fan-run and corporate-run texts, spaces, and practices that are becoming increasingly noticeable these days."[306] Or, in this case, historians and culturalists have overlooked items as trivial or insignificant. It would be hard to say that there are not a number of theories or "lenses" a scholar could use in an interdisciplinary approach to comic-book letter writers. And it is in this endeavor that I wholeheartedly agree with Howe:

> We must take a multipronged approach grounded in rhetoric—that is, in theories of persuasion, communication, and meaning making—to reveal, comprehend, and analyze the various and contradictory arguments instantiated throughout both corporate-run and fan-run fan sites. We must generate and employ new methodologies and ways of seeing that both account and allow for the rich

[306] Howe, "Teams, Tears, and Testimonials," 72.

> multiplicity and frenzy of fandom, that resist singularity, and that permit us to experience the tensions, risks, and potentials… from a range of positionalities.[307]

This study alone branched out to gender, sex, race, class representations, comic and fan studies, cultural capital, and convergence culture theoretical frameworks.

Besides new theories, there should be an improvement, I hope, in future studies of letters published in comic-book letter columns. One methodology that I saw that I could not use myself was based in digital humanities. Previously mentioned in an article's use of OCR software to digitize letter columns from the *Amazing Spider-Man* series, the tool would be a great asset in seeing the larger and perhaps subtler patterns often missed when examining a large body of letters. If I had the time, resources, and space, this method would have added new and interesting insights.

It could be argued that my methodology is flawed in several ways. For starters, my extraction of the whole mass of printed letters was only a fraction of the total number examined. In certain instances, some letters did not meet my criteria of being exemplary in their topic or the discussion they brought about. I considered these the mundane letters, those who write in to offer simple critiques or praises of different facets of their respective comic books.

But in my defense, these letters were helpful in the macro examination of the assumed gender breakdown of letter writers. I did try to notice any pattern to these common letters to pry out questions such as, "Why is everyone praising this artwork?" Or "Why is everyone disliking this story?" If these letters led to something significant in

[307] Ibid., 73-74.

terms of lending itself to any of the theoretical frameworks utilized in this examination, I did my best to include them in my work. Even if they were unrelated to these theories, such as letters that appeared to be personal, insightful, brought forth new information, and even stirred drama, their representation was at least attempted to be included. Probably the second flaw in this study would be my lack of success in obtaining access to an archive of unprinted letters. Though not from lack of trying, the creators I could contact had no interest in my work or gave little effort in responding. I do not blame them. Who in their right mind would want to contend and be disturbed by a desperate Ph.D. candidate?

Capturing the voices of comic-book readers lost to time is a losing battle in the greater war of understanding comics historically. The digital preservation of comics has shown only to care about the narrative of the comic, and it is rare to see a complete comic book scanned in its entirety with ads and letter pages. Given the ephemeral nature of written letters to comic-book creators, collections are few and far between. And to top it off, the sad fact is that those who did write letters have grown too old to remember or have passed on. Today is the golden age of trying to capture the many voices with a rising interest in comic scholarship. I hope this study will spur those who wish to explore the unexplored. Or perhaps it would be helpful for anyone who needs a good term paper topic.

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