POSTFEMINISM IN FEMALE TEAM

SUPERHERO COMIC BOOKS

by

Elliott Alexander Sawyer

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The following faculty members served as the supervisory committee chair and

members for the thesis of_____Elliott Alexander Sawyer_____.

Dates at right indicate the members' approval of the thesis.

_____Robin E. Jensen_____, Chair   ____5/5/2014____
                                                          Date Approved

_____Sarah Projansky_____, Member   ____5/5/2014____
                                                          Date Approved

_____Marouf Hasian, Jr._____, Member   ____5/5/2014____
                                                          Date Approved

The thesis has also been approved by_____Kent A. Ono_____

Chair of the Department/School/College of_____Communication_____

and by David B. Kieda, Dean of The Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

Comic books are beginning to be recognized for their impact on society because they inform, channel, and critique cultural norms. This thesis investigates how comic books interact and forward postfeminism. Specifically, this thesis explores the ways postfeminism interjects itself into female superhero team comic books. These comics, with their rosters of only women, provide unique perspectives on how women are represented in comic books. Additionally, the comics give insight into how women bond with one another in a popular culture text. The comics critiqued herein focus on transferring postfeminist ideals in a team format to readers, where the possibilities for representing powerful connections between women are lost.

Postfeminist characteristics of consumption, sexual freedom, and sexual objectification are forwarded in the comic books, while also promoting aspects of racism. Through utilizing the methodologies of close textual and close visual analysis to study the team comics, the moments and arguments of postfeminism in the comic books come to light. Furthermore, close textual analysis is utilized to understand the critical response to the comic books, and how that response often overlooks aspects of postfeminism. The comic book companies argue that women are receiving fairer representation because they are shown in teams, but the team format provides a greater platform to further objectify women. Overall, the comic books argue the further marginalizing of women in popular culture through the ideals of postfeminism.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Comics are a unique popular-culture art form with the potential to inform, persuade, and model attitudes and behaviors. As Groensteen (2009) illuminated, comic books are a "story-related pleasure," an "art-related pleasure," and a "medium-related pleasure," a combination that cannot be found in any other medium whether it be film, television, photography, or novels (p. 10). At the most basic level, comics are normally a combination of word and text, most often organized in a narrative and presented in a sequential order. The term includes: comic books, graphic novels, newspaper cartoons, and other similar forms, and, in this respect, it encompasses a large selection of art. For instance, a piece with art in a sequential order but without any words, like in an airplane safety manual, would constitute a comic. The wide assortment of what is considered comics provides an opportunity for scholarly study.

Although they are often overlooked by communication scholars, comics provide powerful and reflective messages about our culture. As Duncan and Smith (2009) explained, "at their best, comic books can accommodate content as profound, moving, and enduring as that found in any of the more celebrated vehicles for human expression" (p. 2). However, there are two sides to the understanding of comics. The first is that they serve as powerful vehicles that provide "a rich tapestry of…attitudes and philosophies

that reflect varying approaches to issues that continue to haunt, confound, and rile the American public" (Palmer-Mehta & Hay, 2005, p. 390). In this respect, the possibility exists for comics to challenge the status quo, create change, and develop profound meaning. However, the second side, as Duncan and Smith claimed, emerges when the potential to challenge cultural norms in comics is warped. Although comics can "function as catalysts for the raising of social consciousness among their readers, the industry that produces them has a less consistent record for taking more direct action to change existing disparities in power relations" (p. 265). In my forthcoming analysis, I plan to focus on the postfeminist portrayals of female superhero teams in American comic books. I argue that many comics focusing mostly or solely on women embody postfeminism in that there is an emphasis on sexual freedom, consumption, self-empowerment, and sexual objectification.

Rhetoric in Comics

An increase in studies of comics as rhetorical texts has unfolded in recent years (Duncan & Smith, 2009). Particularly, scholars as of late have been drawn to analyze representations of race and gender in comics, while some authors, like Rifas (2012), focus on ideology. In this review, I will first speak to the plight of the comics scholar and the representation of ideology within comics before reviewing studies of women and female superheroes in comics. Ultimately, scholarship on ideology and representations of race and propaganda informs my study by showcasing different approaches to critiquing comics and by providing an excellent starting point to guide my analysis of all-female teams in superhero comics.

Popular-culture scholars often face critique because of their choice of study both from within and outside of the academy. This is increasingly true when the scholars analyze a text that is cherished by many. Rifas (2012) explained the problem that cultural scholars often face when he stated, "If you persist in trying to *do something* about an offensive comic, then you are guilty of trying to interfere with an artist's right to free expression" (p. 224. Emphasis in original). Cultural scholars face difficulty in critiquing a comic that is offensive because, as a result of their critique, they are often labeled as stubborn by the readers. Without critical intervention, however, problematic portrayals or other issues in comics may go unexamined. In due course, the ideologies portrayed in comics can negatively affect a multitude of avenues from the dominant culture to the reader's own sense of self.

Indeed, ideology plays an important role in how comics are interpreted. Rifas (2012) claimed that, "Ideologies rarely appear in comics as explicitly stated principles, but rather in words and pictures from which readers, consciously and unconsciously, pick up hints for building mental methods of how the world works" (p. 226). In order to convey ideologies, comics function as "imagetexts" that utilize both textual and visual communication (Mitchell, 1994). The represented ideology may convince readers to ascribe to certain beliefs because of their reading of a comic. Comics do not solely cause readers to assign to a particular ideology, but they may be one part in the whole of reinforcing an ideology across the larger culture.

Representations of race and gender are some of the most apparent ideological descriptors on the comic book page because of their visual cues. When these representations are misused to the point that they no longer resemble a semblance of

reality (this may be excused in some genres like animal cartoons or sci-fi), scholars

expose how images and text are transmuted. In this process, scholars still often run into a

backlash against their critiques, especially when they encroach on someone's beloved

comic. As Royal (2012) explained:

> To put it bluntly, comics – by necessity – employs stereotypes as a kind of shorthand to communicate quickly and succinctly. This being the case, it is up to the comics artist to tell her or his story as effectively as possible without slipping into the trap, even inadvertently, of inaccurate and even harmful representations. (p. 68)

Comics and their creators may purposefully or unintentionally misrepresent characters or

reality in order to fulfill presumed stereotypes, perpetuate ideologies in our culture, or

otherwise appeal to readers. For rhetoricians and cultural critics, it is important to

explore these representations and interpret their meaning, as well as consider how they

may impact society at whole.

One example of a scholar engaging in this kind of analysis is Rifas (2012), who

specifically spoke to representations of race in the Belgian comic *Tintin*. In the comic,

Tintin and his dog take an expedition to the Congo where the African people are

represented in the stereotypical minstrel style of gigantic lips, black skin, and the inability

to wear clothes properly. Rifas explained that the comic was commissioned by the

Belgian government to educate the people on the government's involvement in the Congo

colony, but the comic's author, Hergé, displayed the African people as buffoons needing

help in running their own nation. Rifas argued that despite Hergé's position as one of the

most celebrated European artists of all time, the misrepresentation of race is nonetheless

important to bring to the public's attention. To Rifas, ideological critique exposes how

many readers overlook the representations of race in one of Hergé's comics in the process

of celebrating his other works. Overall, ideological critiques of representations of race and gender allow the scholar to unearth some of the hidden meaning in cultural artifacts such as comics.

Murray's (2012) piece on the first issue of *Captain America* released in 1941 also offers a critique of ideology. Specifically, Murray focuses on how *Captain America #1* functioned as a form of propaganda for the United States to join WWII because it predates American involvement. Murray claimed that, "the need to be aware of manipulative messages is perhaps all the more urgent in popular texts, which are often presented as 'mere' entertainment, but are actually powerful instruments of persuasion" (p. 130). This quote foretells Murray's argument that comics cannot be dismissed as churned products of popular culture with no intrinsic value. Instead, comics must be considered a part of cultural studies because they reflect dominant values in society. Murray continued to explain that *Captain America* functioned as a tool by the comic industry and the Jewish storytellers to encourage young readers to help participate in the war. Murray argued that, "unable to participate directly [in the war], young readers [were] motivated in other ways" (p. 137). These other ways included donating a dime to become part of the "Sentinels of Liberty" to support Captain America in his plight against the Axis. Throughout his article, Murray demonstrated that comics do not just reflect culture but can contribute to it.

Both Rifas' and Murray's articles focused on historical comics from earlier in the 20th century. McGrath (2007), by contrast, focused on the more recent example of the representation of gender in superhero comics. McGrath's study followed *Amazing Fantasy* and *Araña* wherein a young Latina girl gains powers similar to Spider-Man.

McGrath found that the main character was objectified and made more sexual throughout the comic such as when Araña crafts her costume. She argued that the issue with representation was not just a single case in this comic book but actually a systemic problem within the corporate world of comics. McGrath found that the young Araña faced the same gender discrimination and sexualization as the older women superheroes. Therefore, the dominant ideology of female suppression and objectification was reified despite being presented against the backdrop of individualism.

The examples above showcase a variety of approaches to comics and how they communicate ideologically. Ideology is important to understanding comic books because it directly interacts with hegemony, which can be seen in comics and other forms of popular culture. I forward, throughout this thesis, Dow's (1990) conception of hegemony because of its entanglement with postfeminism. Hegemony and the hegemonic process "refer[s] to the various means through which those who support the dominant ideology in a culture are able continually to reproduce that ideology in cultural institutions and products while gaining the tacit approval of those whom the ideology oppresses" (p. 262). In this thesis, I plan to examine how the dominant ideology in a postfeminist society is represented and reiterated in female team superhero comic books. Postfeminism, as I lay out in the subsequent section, focuses on self-empowerment and sexual freedom often against the backdrop of consumption. I ask in my thesis: how is postfeminism reflected in all-female team superhero comic books and what do these representations mean for American culture?

Postfeminism

Postfeminism is a mixture of feminism, feminist backlash, and anti-feminism. Gill (2007) claimed that, "what makes contemporary media culture distinctively postfeminist, rather than pre-feminist or anti-feminist, is precisely [the] entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas" (p. 161). Postfeminism purports to be a powerful tool for women, but actually constitutes them as lacking in agency. Negra (2009) described this best when she explained that, "by caricaturing, distorting, and (often willfully) misunderstanding the political and social goals of feminism, post-feminism trades on a notion of feminism as rigid, serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult and extremist" (p. 2). Agirre (2012) and Faludi (1991/2006) understood postfeminism as an overwhelming tone against feminism that is reinforced by the cultural elite. Sarikakis and Tsaliki (2011) explained that postfeminism argues that "feminism itself is no longer needed – it has become a spent force" (p. 112). The media is saturated with examples of "girl power" and "real" depictions of women such as the musical group Spice Girls or the television series *Ally McBeal*. These examples of "girl power" or "realness" counteract many of the strides forward that second-wave feminism created (Genz, 2009). What is reinforced through the strategies of postfeminism is the idea that, through consumerism and overt displays of sexuality, women can assert a deeply feminized power. In actuality, postfeminism demands that women buy and display specific, culturally aligned performances. Postfeminism works to take feminism's success and turn it on its head.

There are a few ways that the representation of women is utilized by popular culture. Budgeon (2011) described the role of popular culture by stating, "popular perceptions of gender relations often suggest that feminism can now safely be relegated

to the past" (p. 281). By pushing feminism into the past, popular culture employs different, but equally troubling, female stereotypes to reinforce the idea that change has been made. The role of popular culture in reinforcing female stereotypes faces an even more insidious task as Negra (2009) explained: "popular culture insistently asserts that if women can productively manage home, time, work, and their commodity choices, they will be rewarded with a more authentic, intact, and achieved self" (p. 5). Therefore, postfeminism claims that if women juggle all of their predetermined "responsibilities," they will feel complete and empowered. Popular culture is a strong force in deciding the role of women in a postfeminist world, and it works in a way that sabotages other forms of feminism that are more positive (Whelehan, 2000). Postfeminism plays the part of the popular culture magician where strong representations of women in popular culture are an illusion that appear and disappear; the representations are always present and always missing with a sleight of hand. In that sense, postfeminism shows a powerful women who is also flawed, but, through her flaws, she can find power again through consumerism or sexual identity.

In considering how women are represented as either strong or weak, we must ask how women are then defined in popular culture texts because the representations of women impact reality. In the comic books I examine, women are often defined in the postfeminist sense of empowerment through sexual freedom and consumerism. Whelehan (2000) argued that postfeminism is when feminism is something that women should be liberated from in order to focus on consumption and sexuality. Gill and Scharff (2011) further claimed that postfeminism emphasizes individualism, self-surveillance, choice and empowerment, and puts an emphasis on consumerism.

Similarly, Genz (2009) argued, "postfeminism does not reject women's rights and equality outright but redefines them in terms of a liberal individualist politics that centres [sic] around lifestyle choices and personal consumer pleasures" (p. 21). This is the sort of action that Gill (2007) showed earlier in which the feminist self is rescripted to focus on postfeminist goals. McRobbie (2007) explained the sexuality side of postfeminism in more depth when she argued that new young women, "brazenly enjoy their sexuality without fear of the sexual double standard" and "the absence of finding a husband is countered by sexual self-confidence" (p. 38). Busch (2009) added that individualized freedom for women means they can "refuse men's assistance in favor of self-sufficiency, independence, and autonomy" (p. 89). All of these scholars seem to argue that postfeminism encompasses key core concepts of: empowerment, lifestyle, consumerism, sexual freedom, and independence.

Scholars wrestle with the difficulty of critiquing postfeminist texts because such texts manipulate viewers into believing that they uphold women's independence and freedom of choice. It has been found, however, that the texts utilize postfeminism as a front for serious troubling of women's representation. Nguyen (2013) provided two strong examples of postfeminism at work. The first involves SlutWalks, a group that attempts to reclaim women's bodies and sexuality from the threat of physical and sexual violence. However, Nguyen concluded that the organization reaffirms the very definition of "slut" through their depictions in the media which reinstalls "the very objectification the movements are invested in challenging" (p. 161). Nguyen's second example focuses on the website SuicideGirls that offers softcore pornography with images of nude, "alternative" women with tattoos and piercings. Nguyen contended that "with the

seductive lures of empowerment and freedom of choice, SuicideGirls takes advantage of this depoliticization of women's sexuality for corporate gain" (p. 164). She concluded that there is an illusion of free choice for the female models, but the corporation controls the women's bodies through the veil of celebrating them. Overall, Nguyen provided two strong examples of postfeminism at work in the representation of women by focusing on sexual freedom and consumption.

Pitcher (2006) offered another example of postfeminism's role in popular culture by focusing on the pornographic *Girls Gone Wild*. The video series primarily concentrates on women exposing their bodies in public areas or in private in order to be recorded and sold to assumedly male consumers. The women revealing themselves on camera are framed as making an individual choice that leads to personal empowerment. Because these women allegedly choose to expose themselves, they are framed by the series as examples of individuals who have taken ownership and pride over their bodies. However, Pitcher argued that the pseudo-personal empowerment is actually a concealment of *Girls Gone Wild*'s goal of exploiting women's bodies for financial gain. Therefore, the videotape series is a postfeminist text by showcasing women's reclaiming of their sexual bodies only for the enjoyment of the consumer. Like SlutWalks and SuicideGirls, Pitcher explained that sexual freedom and consumption often act together to undermine representations of women.

Class is also directly related to the consumption that Pitcher and Nguyen conveyed because people in the upper classes can consume more frequently and for more expensive items than those of the lower classes. Jolles (2012) investigated the fashion industry by critiquing the contradiction of women in lower classes needing to both break

the rules of fashion and follow them. The author included classism into the discussion of

postfeminism and how people of the upper class have the luxury to break fashion rules

while those of lower and middle classes must follow them. Jolles focused on shows like

What Not to Wear in order to ultimately question how classism interacts with

postfeminism. Therefore, postfeminism is emphasized as a regulatory force focusing on

the middle class as they try to aspire to the upper class. Overall, Jolles argued that

postfeminism encompasses a classist element, an element that underlies its persuasive

effectiveness. Jolles' case study also shows the importance of critiquing postfeminism

with other social categories like class or race to further understand postfeminism's

pervasiveness.

On the face of it, achieving the second-wave goals of empowerment, sexual

freedom, and independence sounds like feminism was a success, but it is how those

topics are articulated that is problematic. The media coerces women to reenact their

traditionally defined femininity and girlhood. As Tasker and Negra (2007) explained,

"the transition to a postfeminist culture involves an evident erasure of feminist politics

from the popular, even as aspects of feminism seem to be incorporated within that

culture" (p. 5). Indeed, women are represented in the media as asserting their

independence but are actually conforming to the reestablished norms of society. Female

empowerment in a postfeminist world is to talk dirty, have sex, buy clothes, and never

achieve any real change in policy or societal beliefs about women. By diverting the focus

on women and culture as a whole, postfeminism restricts women from further advocating

for more rights, equal treatment, and a more positive representation in the media.

Instead, women are built as consumers and constantly at odds with their appearance by

trying to pass as sexy yet respectable. Genz (2009) claimed that:

> Women [in postfeminism] are offered the promise of autonomy and endowed with the status of active agents by voluntarily objectifying themselves and actively *choosing* to employ their capacities in the pursuit of a feminine appearance and a sexualized image. (p. 95. Emphasis in original)

Additionally, "postfeminism fetishizes female power and desire while constantly placing these within firm limits" (Negra, 2009, p. 4). The limits to power are the portrayals in the media of women who achieve great things but only in light of strict expectations over their appearance and economic status. Therefore, the trials and triumphs of second-wave feminism are neglected and countered in postfeminism to show an independent woman who is not quite as independent as one might think.

To best understand postfeminism it is important to investigate how it works in different circumstances. This includes considering aspects of people with different backgrounds and degrees of intersectionality. Projansky (2001) claimed:

> Because postfeminist discourses work hegemonically to transform feminism in the service of heterosexual masculinity and a dispersed, depoliticized, and universalized white, middle-class feminine/feminist identity, they must sidestep feminist theory and activism that, by addressing the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, nation, and class, complicate and problematize a feminism (visible in popular culture) that focuses exclusively on (white) gender. (p. 14)

Projansky explained that the focus of postfeminism is within a limited scope of White, middle-class women. This makes considering people that fit outside of this hegemonic demographic increasingly difficult. Postfeminism attempts to remove politics from women's representations by either ignoring them or making those representations a non-issue. Therefore, it is increasingly difficult to challenge the representation of women in a postfeminist society because perpetrators claim that there is no political motivation behind their influential portrayals of women. When media makers or others are accused

of misrepresenting women, they can argue that there was no negative intent behind the representations. Whether representing aspects of postfeminism is on purpose or not, it poses negative ramifications for all women and culture as a whole. Postfeminism appeals to White, middle-class women while it also conceals its political motivations of removing all women's agency.

In order to best understand Projansky's claims conceiving postfeminism's sidestepping of intersectionality, in the thesis I would like to investigate representations of race. More specifically, I will consider how race is depicted in female-team superhero comics and what these depictions might mean for readers. Disability will also be an issue to uncover, although less is written about it in postfeminist studies.

Race in Postfeminism

Interrogating race in postfeminism adds an extra dynamic to analysis because postfeminism generally attempts to deny racial difference. It simultaneously positions Black women, for instance, as outside of its focus while absorbing them into its influence. I want to follow up on Projansky's (2001) claim that women of color who are shown in postfeminist texts, albeit rarely, are assimilated into postfeminism in an effort to ignore the intersection of race and gender. Assimilation, for Gray (1995/2004), is "the complete elimination or, at best, marginalization of social and cultural difference in the interest of shared and universal similarity" (p. 85). Racial difference can visually remain like differences in skin tone, but often this is only tacitly acknowledged. Appeals to assimilation refuse to acknowledge difference by neutralizing signifiers of race and making them seem unimportant.

Postfeminism comes close to succeeding in its attempt to "erase race" and focus just on consumption and sexual freedom (Projansky, 2001, p. 74). Butler (2013) described the hurdle women of color face in postfeminism when she said that:

> The versatility of postfeminism functions as a double-edged sword with regard to women of color: on the one hand, it allows nonwhite women to participate in its deployment and enjoy its rewards, albeit in narrowly circumscribed ways; on the other, it works to conceal the underlying power relations that reproduce hegemonic ideas about race, gender, sexuality, and class. (p. 50)

In a postfeminist world, race is minimalized and dampened in a hegemonic power grab, but some differences can remain. A female character of a different racial background is shown infrequently in postfeminism because postfeminism ultimately relies upon Whiteness.

However, Butler (2013) delineated how scholars might focus on race and how non-White characters highlight and circumscribe that Whiteness in postfeminism. She argued that postfeminist scholarship only acknowledges race in postfeminism instead of actively criticizing it. Butler claimed that "the argument that postfeminist discourses exclude women of color or queer women is not wholly incorrect, but it is an inadequate rendering of the relations of power that produce them" (p. 49). She utilized the case study of pop singer/rapper Nicki Minaj who identifies as both a Barbie and a "bad bitch." Butler explained that Nicki Minaj represents an avenue for postfeminist scholarship to follow in examining people of color because of the possibility Minaj presents to reify and disrupt the status quo. Understanding examples like Nicki Minaj unlocks doorways into viewing how race interacts with postfeminism. Scholars must not ignore or write off the importance of race in postfeminism because it neglects the potential the two categories possess when presented together.

Ultimately, investigating race and other categories like ableism (the discrimination of people with disabilities) in a postfeminist framework opens scholarship up to discover new aspects of postfeminism left unexplored. By tacitly acknowledging and even ignoring these categories, understandings of postfeminism are weakened because the opportunity to uncover nuances is left alone. Thus, in the following analysis, I attempt to attend to representations of race in female-team superhero comics to better delineate how race is communicated in postfeminist texts. Additionally, I focus on how persons who are differently-abled are represented. These analyses are often set against the comics' backdrop of sexual objectification.

Methods

In my study of comics, I plan to utilize a mixture of close textual analysis and visual analysis. Comics are considered by some to be a code or "system" of image and text which requires a special set of skills for reading (Groensteen, 2007). As Duncan and Smith (2009) inferred, "reading comic books requires a different type of literacy because on the comic book page the drawn word and the drawn picture are both images to be read as a single integrated text" (p. 14). When focusing on the actual comic and not just the words or images separated from each other, a distinct language emerges (Harvey, 1994). A method for studying comics must be grounded in both text and image (Duncan & Smith, 2009). Mitchell (1994) advocated for studies that recognize an image and text argumentation structure in what he calls "imagetext" (p. 89). Jensen (2005) outlined imagetexts by explaining that, "visual images often are 'read' using text, text is usually accompanied by associative images, and, more often than not, text and images are

presented together" (p. 4). To that effect, images must be considered as interrelated to text and vice versa because they cannot be separated from one another. Comics communicate via imagetext because they employ both images and text where the text becomes wedded to the image. Mitchell further claimed that, "in the typical comic strip, word is to image as speech (or thought) is to action and bodies" (p. 90). This blending of the two is so common that the speech or text emanates from a character via a speech or thought balloon to visually and verbally represent their words or thoughts. I will explain below how close textual and visual analysis can be employed to examine comics as imagetexts.

Close Textual Analysis

Close textual analysis is designed to look at the deeper meaning and interconnectivity of language. Things like patterns, different styles, and turns of phrase arise out of a focused look into the inner workings of words and meanings. In the past, scholars enlisting close textual analysis have focused on both delivered speeches that are later transcribed and written bodies of text. For example, Campbell (1980) examined a speech Elizabeth Cady Stanton presented to Congress in 1892. Campbell posed that the speech was unlike others because it made no arguments, nor did it contain traditional evidence, but it did utilize different types of speech like the lyric mode, a tragic mode, and an appeal to humanism. The article provided examples from the speech in order to critique them along those frameworks to better understand the nuances of the text. Specifically, Campbell explored an example from the speech where she looked at the lyric tone and style, and she later claimed that "repetition and parallelism are much used;

the structure is associative; the evidence is the evocation of personal experiences" (p. 306-307). Campbell repeated the formula of taking a large example from the text and then interrogating the quote based upon style and structure throughout her piece. In the end, Campbell claimed that the speech "is a statement about the meaning of feminism" and that "philosophically, it reminds us of the conditions of every human life: that each of us is unique, responsible, and alone" (p. 311). By making this claim, Campbell asserted her interpretation of the speech based upon her close examination of the text. Campbell's piece on Stanton is a strong example of how to take a text and find its intricacies. She utilized Stanton's unique speech to further studies on lyric style and to make a statement about feminism. Nevertheless, Campbell broke apart the speech in sections and summarizes what she sees in those parts that are relevant to her studies on feminism.

Other authors look at specific words and phrases from within the text in order to make a statement about rhetoric. Black's (1994) analysis of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address provides another viewpoint into close textual analysis that is complimentary to Campbell's. Black separated the syntax into greater detail than Campbell to understand the intricacies of the Gettysburg Address. Black pieced and pulled apart the speech after declaring that it is a "sacred" text worthy of acclaim and study (p. 22). His approach is suited for public address with its extra attention to detail and for keeping the analysis within the speech rather than making a larger statement about society such as Campbell. First, he broke each line down of the speech, and then he pulled out the patterns. His first object of study is the audience and how they are implied or called into the speech both in the immediate audience and in the United States as a whole. His discussion of audience echoed his formulation of the second persona (1970), and it sets the stage for the

rhetorical appeals Lincoln makes in the speech. Black claimed that the speech is filled with "tension and resolution" in his discussion of the structure of the speech (p. 27). Black, throughout the rest of the examination, applied various terms and categories to the speech such as archetypes, irony, and ethos in order to show its wide range. He is thorough in his examination of the Gettysburg Address in order to enlighten fellow public address scholars about its inner workings.

Overall, Black's work in the piece displays an exemplary and detailed approach in its analysis. As we will see in comics, the source material is not as eloquent or carefully assembled as were these speeches, but they do follow patterns of communication that suggest underlying meanings. Taking Black's example, one can look at the sentences or phrases in the comics and seek various interpretations of the text. Black's piece works in conjunction with Campbell's for my intended studies utilizing close textual analysis. Campbell constructed her piece by looking at whole sections of Stanton's speech and described the implications for feminism that may come from future studies of women orators. Black's article, on the other hand, closely focused on each word and sentence of the Gettysburg Address to bring forth the inner workings of the speech. He concentrated solely within the text but provided examples for other scholars to take up his findings in other contexts. In my study of comics, I intend to further both styles of close textual analysis by looking within the text and then drawing connections to outside the text to further research in other fields.

Close Visual Analysis

Close textual analysis applies to visual analysis because the language of images can also be deconstructed. Decoding images allows the scholar to further investigate how issues and beliefs are conveyed that are applicable to real world circumstances. For example, the comics that I intend to study suggest, through their images, the sexualization of women. Without a close reading through visual analysis the deeper meaning of an image, such as how women are objectified, may not readily be apparent. For instance, in a battle scene in a superhero comic book, all of the male characters may be strong and poised to attack the villain, but the few female characters' bodies may be contorted to emphasize their sexual parts. The actual contortion is impractical because one does not simply go about fighting a villain while pushing out their derriere. In this respect, it is important to look at images to see what they say about the rest of society. If all of the male superheroes look strong and all of the female superheroes look like sex objects, then clearly the representation of women is at odds with the representation of men. Images can substantially change the way society thinks about women and men (MacKay & Covell, 1997).

Images are equally important as texts because of their ability to convey a variety of meanings and persuade audiences. Berger (1972) described the power of the image by saying, "it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it" (p. 7). Images, then, are what we put words to, and they are incredibly important to language. Without images, there would not be speech, and without speech there would not be written words. That is why images are so important to our society and culture, and

comics embody that idea. What follows is an explanation of visual analysis as it might apply to comics.

Photography and film are ideal places to look for the study of images because they both heavily rely upon visuality. DeLuca and Demo (2000), in their piece on nature photography and environmentalism, claimed that pictures "are important not because they represent reality, but create it" (244). DeLuca and Demo theorized that nature photography is constructed and framed, and they argued that pictures of Yosemite Valley in the 1860s began a discussion in American politics about environmentalism. The two authors analyzed the pictures through lighting and contrast, photographic framing, and positioning. Since they are working with black and white photographs, DeLuca and Demo did not conduct a color analysis, but their piece is a strong example of employing visual criticism. Overall, the analytical methods DeLuca and Demo employed can apply to other sources like comics because they are not necessarily medium specific. My study of comics functions similarly by taking key positioning or other photographic concepts and considering them in terms of postfeminism.

Some aspects of film studies can carry over to the study of comics because the media closely resemble each other. In describing *Saving Private Ryan*, Ehrenhaus (2001) went into great detail primarily in two scenes focusing on a Jewish character. While describing the actual shots in the first scene he analyzed, Ehrenhaus explained what occurs, "the camera tracks Mellish in a continuous close-up shot as he collapses to the ground and begins to sob. The camera cuts back to the soldiers in the trench. They grimace, lower their eyes, and shake their heads" (p. 325). Although this quote seems like a description because Ehrenhaus merely described what he sees in the film, he soon

moved past the descriptive point and went into analysis in a following sentence. Ehrenhaus described the scene and analyzed the shots when he stated, "The camera returns to Mellish in a low angle, extreme close-up shot, signifying the centrality of his trauma to this scene" (p. 325-326). In these few sentences, Ehrenhaus defined what is taking place in the scene, before then adding in some critical insights based upon those descriptions. Comics studies can similarly apply Ehrenhaus's methods of taking apart the film frame by frame and describing what is occurring. His description relied upon film terms of spacing and framing of shots, while his analysis interpreted the film through those shots. Ehrenhaus provided a strong example of both description and analysis to look deeper into a text and thereby pull apart its significance. Using terminology from photographs and film, the comics scholar can explore comic frames and critique them.

In order to read or otherwise study comics as imagetexts, one must view both text and image at the same time. When examining comics, it is always important to keep in mind that the two are married together to create the full impact of their material. Throughout my analysis of comics in this thesis, I will refer to panels or pages as imagetexts because the image and the text in the balloons on the page are inseparable. Usually, I will key in on a panel – a separated and usually sectioned off space that acts as a slice of time in a comic – alone and describe it based upon its text and image. As I move through the page, I will critically examine the text from a close textual analysis perspective. At the same time, I will explore what the images are suggesting through a visual analysis. Many additional visual analysis terms will come from film and photography, such as costuming or angles. I intend to utilize both textual and visual analysis as ways to uncover the postfeminist tenets of sexual empowerment, freedom, and

consumption within the text.

Comic Books and the Need for Critical Attention

I will begin the discussion about superheroes by offering a clear understanding of how prevalent the genre is in current times. To prove the point of garnering attention to superhero comics and the representation of women, I will provide some quick numbers to show just how popular superhero comics are by utilizing sales data from 3 consecutive months towards the end of 2013. These sales numbers are only for comic books and not the longer graphic novels or other serials. The numbers are meant to indicate the top selling comics but also to show the reach of comic books and their messages. In all 3 months, not a single female character-led book reached into the top 10 highest selling comics. It could therefore be argued that there is less likelihood of positive female roles being shown when headlining female characters do not reach the top comics slots. Ultimately, this means that negative role models or other interpretations of women are far more likely to be spread and disseminated than positive ones in comics.

I will now break down some numbers of the sales data and then offer some explanations of what that data might mean. In July 2013, the top 10 selling comics – all superhero comics – sold an estimated 1,038,319 issues (Mayo, 2013a). The top 10 in August sold 1,059,873 comics (Mayo, 2013b). Finally, there was another increase to 1,097,784 superhero comics in the top 10 sold in September (Mayo, 2013c). There are a couple of ways to look at this data with the first being surprise and the second being skepticism. In an ideal world, one would hope that more than 1.1 million people read the top 10 superhero comics in September. However, a few things need to be kept in mind.

The first is that people may have shared their comics to their friends, but that cannot be calculated. The second is that some customers are likely buying other comics in the list and are counted more than once. The final critique is that these numbers indicate how many comics were sold to distributors, not customers. Many of the comics included in the data could still be on store shelves or kept in boxes. The data are still impressive, however. For cultural artifacts, there is not a limit to X amount of people having to see/read/experience the product in order to justify studying it, but I argue that these numbers give the comics scholar more credence in studying a medium that is often neglected. In addition, these are only the top 10 selling comics with countless more superhero comics – including female-led – sold in the top 300. The numbers add up to create a cultural text that is popular among many members of the general public. As I will explain later, this is clearly not the only reason to study superhero comics. What is inside the comics is more important to understanding how the comics represent women than how many people see it (although a balance is best), and how the comics under my purview negotiate postfeminism is integral to this study.   Superheroes often function as symbols for hope, change, and progress. The appeal of superheroes seems to be increasing if the number of superhero films that are released every year is any indication (Treat, 2009). However, the representations of women as superheroes are still lacking through both the number of female superheroes and the quality of their representations. This lack of positive representations further indicates the negative portrayal of women in the media (Taylor, 2007). My goal is to provide more examples of the trivialization, increased sexuality, and overall depowering (literal and figurative in comics) of women in today's society through studying the postfeminist texts of female superhero team

comic books.

There is a disagreement in the comic book studies academy, through scholars like Coogan and Wolk, about whether or not superheroes should be studied. It is typical to see scholars discuss the critically acclaimed holocaust memoir *Maus*, Iranian memoir *Persepolis*, or *Watchmen* (Cates, 2011; Chambliss, 2012; Coogan, 2006; Danziger-Russell, 2013; Duncan and Smith, 2009; Pustz, 1999; Romagnoli & Pagnucci, 2013; Round, 2011; Versaci, 2007; Wolk, 2007). The last comic on that list, *Watchmen*, is a superhero comic, but it is a complete deconstruction of the superhero genre. Regular superhero comics are not taken as seriously in the academy with most critical eyes going to memoirs or other genres. The superhero genre – the one that made comic books popular – is not written about as often by the academy because "it is either taken for granted or dismissed as a genre" (Coogan, 2006, p. 23). Superheroes must be studied not only because of their prevalence as a genre in comic books but also because of their ability to tap into and represent popular culture.

There is a wide array of ways to study superheroes because of their multiple layers as cultural symbols. Cates (2011) claimed that superheroes are "allegorically charged characters [that] can be placed in combination or conflict in order to act out psychological, moral, or political claims" (p. 832). Furthermore, superhero comics can "become vehicles for examining and deconstructing humanity's efforts to balance good and evil" (Romagnoli & Pagnucci, 2013, p. 8). Some scholars, like Fawaz (2011), are hopeful that even more scholars will consider representations of superheroes, and more people are answering the call with new publications on a yearly basis. What is also important is that superheroes are looked at from an assortment of perspectives like

Reaganism and economics (Dubose, 2007), nostalgia and myth (Gordon, 2001), philosophy (McLaughlin, 2012), propaganda (Murray, 2012), queer identity (Shyminsky, 2011), and race (Scott, 2006; Singer, 2002). Overall, then, there is a foundation of superhero scholarship, but much remains to be considered, particularly in relationship to issues such as intersectionality and the crossing of different identities. The groundwork must be laid on superheroes before putting theories of postfeminism to practice in the subsequent case studies. What follows is a brief description and history of superhero comics and how they typically represent women.

Superhero Comics' History and Current Identity

Superhero comics sprung into being with the release of *Action Comics #1* in 1938. This comic introduced Superman prominently on the cover holding a car above his head while people ran away in terror and disbelief. The comic featured a young Clark Kent and his superhero alter ego, Superman, fighting for the rights of the disenfranchised. From the outset, Superman became a metaphorical symbol of power, freedom, and the American Way that was quickly consumed by young readers (Wright, 2003). This caused many publishers to start making their own superheroes, and thus created the superhero comic book genre that is still around today.

Superhero comics create imaginary worlds that matter within the real life experiences of people, and they can convey morals and ideologies to affect readers. Romagnoli and Pagnucci (2013) described superheroes as "blatant personifications of society's morals" which includes embodying "American culture's dichotomy of good and evil" (p. 8). At their most basic, superheroes are often a reflection of American society,

whether or not they are from their birth place in America or somewhere else globally.

Not only are they created from society, superheroes show the power of American and

international values as a reminder of what everyone should embody. Unfortunately,

some of these suggestions are negative. A suggestion by a comic for a male character to

hit a woman without any provocation may influence a reader to find it more acceptable to

hurt women. Society's morals, from Romagnoli and Pagnucci's perspective, could be

sexism and objectification, which are reinforced throughout the comic books I intend to

study. The comics "reduce individual [superhero] characters into representations of

cultural ideas" (Chambliss, 2012, p. 145). Society's values are imprinted onto the page in

order to be distributed to thousands of eager readers young and old. There is an attraction

to the fanciful world of superheroes because readers can emulate those cultural values.

The fantasy lies in that "superhero cartoonists can present narratives whose images and

incidents are unlike our own sensory experience of the world (and totally cool-looking)

but can still be understood as a metaphorical representation of our world" (Wolk, 2007, p.

92). I would modify Wolk's claim by stating that in many superhero comics the world

can be idealized but still reflect directly – not just metaphorically – upon our world.

Superheroes show their world with conflict, capes, and tights while still embodying a

sense of reality.

Creating a definition of superheroes and understanding their appeal is important

in order to examine the definitions of the genre. Additionally, investigating superheroes

can uncover how the comic books may be interpreted by regular readers and how readers

later reflect on or emulate the lessons in comic books. Specifically, outlining the

characteristics of a superhero will allow me to contrast the superheroes that will be

studied later in this paper. My definition of a superhero is not a catch-all version because there will always be exceptions and modifications to the rules to account for the hybridity between genres, but it tries to address a variety of different superhero types. My definition is mostly informed by Reynolds (1992) and Romagnoli and Pagnucci's (2013) listing of traits behind individual superheroes. To mimic these authors, I will provide a list that is much more general compared to theirs. Superheroes will often embody these notions:

1. Motivation to effect change and do good for people

2. Never reach satisfaction in making change

3. Possess super powers or super abilities whether these are flight or increased intelligence

4. Possess a weakness to their powers or to their being – are flawed in some way

5. Respect the law but often break it in order to do things that they believe the law cannot carry out to its best ability

6. Maintain a secret identity that often causes conflict with their superhero identity

This list is not exhaustive, but I contend it is general enough to capture most superheroes. All three authors above include a point on the superheroes facing some tragedy in their lives that inspires them to become superheroes a la Batman's parents dying in Crime Alley with him watching. However, while many superheroes face early hardship that inspires them to become who they are later in life, there are other comic superheroes that take up superheroics because of a desire to help humanity. If I was to include a seventh point, it would be a take on this idea of tragedy in that superheroes will face hardship in

their lives *because* of their decision to be a superhero. Most superheroes face higher

stakes because of their profession and thus experience a greater likelihood of despair.

Many of the superheroes in comic books are encapsulated in these six points with a fair

amount also satisfying this seventh characteristic. To describe my ideal of a superhero

definition, it is best to provide a figurehead.

I will give a brief example of these characterizations at work in theme with the

original superhero, Superman. Despite the thesis' attention towards representations of

women in superhero comics, it is necessary to consider the character that was created

first. Indeed, Superman *is* the archetype of the superhero. Superman's life is informed

by tragedy in that he is the one sole survivor (with a few exceptions) of the doomed

planet, Krypton. Upon landing in a spaceship on Earth as a baby, he is rescued by a

kindly couple who raise him as their son. Given the name Clark Kent, he grows up

learning how to help those in need with his American values like hard work, honesty, and

friendliness (Coogan, 2006). As he grows up, he discovers that he embodies spectacular

powers like flight and laser vision.

Superman's values and powers lead him to live a second life as the first superhero

helping people in need. Clark believes so much in helping people that his secret identity

is as a reporter where he can learn where he is needed all of the time. He is a patriot that

wants to help the law by doing the things it cannot. His primary weakness is a violent

reminder that he is not from Earth – when he is exposed to pieces of his home planet, his

energy is drained and he experiences immense pain. Superman fights evil for the benefit

of all people as a symbol of hope. He is the superhero all others look to for inspiration.

Indeed, he is the one that all of the superheroes examined in the thesis are contrasted to

because he was written first and functions as the archetype. It is now necessary to turn to how female superheroes take up Superman's lineage, at least in theory. However, as we will see in practice, comics creators have treated and still treat female superheroes much differently than they do male superheroes.

<center>**Women in Capes, Tights, and Little Else**</center>

Female superheroes are presented across a highly gendered line like their male superhero peers. While male superheroes' bodies typically bulge with muscles and power, the bodies of female superheroes are often sexualized (Taylor, 2007). Both of these types of gendering can affect the real world because men may feel the pressure of hyper-masculinity and women might police their own bodies to be sexualized. However, comic books objectify men through emphasizing their power and strength, whereas women are objectified as sexual bodies. Although not directly referenced in comics frequently, the issue of controlling women's bodies figures into comic books' representations.

The regulating of women may go to such an extent as, for example, suggesting to readers to limit women's ability to get an abortion. Or, they may advocate for fewer positive roles in action movies because certain types of women are not, what the viewer might consider, sexy. With less positive female role models, children face a limited amount of people or characters to look up to. This may contribute to issues like the unequal numbers of women in the United States Congress or the low number of high-ranking women CEOs. Comic books do not directly relate to or cause these problems frequently, but the lessons learned by a comic book reader may impact their political,

social, and economic choices. I will further my analysis of women in superhero comic

books by describing the difference in primarily visual as well as textual representations.

Madrid (2009) captured the differences between the visual representations of

female and male superheroes perfectly when he explained that:

> Male heroes are usually presented as being unquestionably more powerful than
> women. Yet, they wear costumes that cover and protect most of their bodies.
> Women on the other hand, are written as weaker, and presumably less able to
> protect themselves. Yet they charge into battle with most of their bodies exposed.
> (p. 290)

The representation of women is unrealistic – even in this fantastic context – both because

of their visual presentation of weakness and lack of practical clothing. Madrid described

that the highly sexual nature of female superheroes goes counter to what the comic says

of their honest, pristine, virginal nature. Female superheroes are objectified by the visual

presentation of "long stick legs and huge breasts" to the point of anatomical impossibility

(Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 236). In addition, the comic books often focus on the pieces

of women's bodies rather than the whole so that their breasts or butt take up more, if not

all, of the camera angle rather than their faces (Stuller, 2012). Parts of women are shown

rather than the whole in order to objectify certain sections. For example, the angle for a

woman in the foreground talking to someone in the background is often shown in a

"beside-the-butt" shot that emphasizes their spandexed, perfectly fit behinds. Indeed, this

shot is uncommon for male superheroes. Male superheroes are rarely portrayed with

their crotches or butts highlighted while female superheroes are almost never not featured

without emphasis on their breasts or backsides. The sexualization of women in superhero

comics matches the magazine advertising industry by showcasing erotic images of

women (Reichert & Carpenter, 2004). This leads to multiple mediums continuing to

"sell" women's bodies. The sexualization of female superheroes, like the sexualization of women in ads, allows for a dehumanization of the characters.

Gail Simone (the writer of *Birds of Prey*, which is a case study later in this thesis) created a website in 1999 called "Women in Refrigerators." The website was inspired by a *Green Lantern* comic book where the lead character comes home to find his girlfriend's dead body shoved into a refrigerator. The death was used as a character moment for Green Lantern and robbed the girlfriend from any meaning other than to suit a plot point. Simone recognized the problem of objectification of women in comics and created a list claiming that, "not every woman in comics has been killed, raped, depowered, crippled, turned evil, maimed, tortured, contracted a disease or had other life-derailing tragedies befall her, but given the following list… it's hard to think up exceptions" ("Women in Refrigerators," n.d., par. 1). It is upsetting that someone must compile an extensive list of over 100 characters (at that time, which has only increased since then), but it displays the comic book industry's attitude towards women. The female characters seem to be considered more expendable than the male characters. The problem of objectification, sexualization, and violence against female characters is not limited to the comic world where they are meant to be powerful, but is a product of the writers', artists', readers', and critics' choices. Furthermore, these problems may affect the real world where the values or ideologies can be embodied by readers living their lives. If these beliefs are constantly reinforced, then it is difficult to achieve a gender equality and to create an environment wherein girls and women can flourish (Gerhard, 2005).

Female characters are often shown as less powerful than male characters because they are systemically devalued in popular culture. Romagnoli and Pagnucci (2013)

argued that the representation of women in comic books "has been historically determined by audiences and creators who are overwhelmingly male" (p. 95). Many scholars agree that one of the main reasons female superheroes are constantly objectified is for the imagined male consumer, which the industry caters to (Danziger-Russel, 2013; Madrid, 2009; Stuller, 2012). Part of the reason for the constant misrepresentation of women is the fear by large comic companies of losing a significant percentage of the market. Women's objectification is so embedded in the industry that it is difficult for the companies to let go and try positive, powerful representations because they believe it does not sell. As we will see later, the response by some companies is to gather together a team of female superheroes, but this action contains little rewards because the representations of women in these teams normally remain the same. In addition, this is not just in the industry, but also endemic to how many scholars discuss women.

More scholarship of superheroes is needed, and scholars are beginning to answer the call albeit some better than others. For many of the books, however, a gaping hole remains as one might legitimately ask: where are the women? Despite their definitive work with their impressive *The Power of Comics* book, Duncan and Smith (2009) reserved only a small, dedicated space to female superheroes that merely conveys – like many other books and articles devoted to the subject – that representations of women in comics are bad. Other scholars like Reynolds (1992) or Wolk (2007) ignored the issue of gender representations. One of the most glaring examples is Coogan's (2006) book, aptly titled *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. In his massive book detailing superheroes, Coogan barely mentioned female superheroes. Whereas male superheroes earn over 200 entries in the index, female superheroes earn a little under 40. While he

romantically talked about male superheroes for pages at a time, most of the female superhero entries are brief. For example, Wonder Woman is mentioned three times in a list and once as the subject for the first half of a sentence. Coogan's book is not the only example of the lack of female superhero scholarship, but it is a stark example of scholars purporting to represent all superheroes with hardly a section focused on women. Concentrating on some of this scholarship is not meant to imply a complete vacancy of scholarship on female superheroes, however. Madrid (2009) and Danziger-Russell (2013) dedicated their entire books to the study of women, but these are the few amongst the many. Although scholars are talking more about superheroes, the problem remains that female characters and women are getting left behind. Scholars must allocate more time to describing and analyzing how female superheroes are depicted.

I take up this challenge in my analysis of the first female superhero team comic book, *Femforce*. A company takes a risk, at least in terms of the history of the industry, to create a female-centered superhero comic. I am interested in when companies go a step further and present female superhero teams and how these characters portray agency and power. The comic book *Femforce*, for instance, does not come from a major publisher and thus reaches a smaller number of people. Nevertheless, it is important as an example of the first female superhero team, and it sets the stage for all of the other representations of female superhero teams to follow. Additionally, this comic book was published right after the second wave of feminism and the beginning of postfeminism, or the backlash to feminism. Therefore, *Femforce* rests at a pivotal moment in representations of women in popular culture. I will utilize *Femforce* as a minicase study to showcase some of the themes that will continue to arise in the other female superhero

team comic books I focus on in this thesis. Furthermore, my minicase study of *Femforce* will provide examples of my imagetext method of criticism. *Femforce* displays a form of backlash feminism and a precursor to the postfeminism analyzed throughout the rest of the thesis.

Femforce

Femforce features aspects of postfeminism and backlash feminism as they were developing. Its release in the early 1980s marked a shift from the second-wave feminist movement to the beginnings of the postfeminism currently apparent. In my brief study of *Femforce*, I hope to show its historical and heuristic value as an initial example of postfeminism. I chose *Femforce* as my artifact to study because of its history in comics as the first ongoing female superhero team comic book. My thesis is built upon the progression through time of representations of female teams in comic books, and I decided to go with the first. Before *Femforce*, there were stories, like Madrid (2009) described, that were focused on the women in comic teams, but these would often only last for a single issue or two. Overall, there was nothing remarkable, but then *Femforce* appeared with its all-female team cast to challenge the predominately male-centered teams. Unfortunately, the comic book still illustrated many of the problems with the other books that were mostly male characters.

Through its use of all-female characters, *Femforce* represents postfeminism and backlash feminism's initial morphing away from second-wave feminism. Primarily, the character Nightveil showcases this best with her conflicting identities. She shows that, in a team setting, women are plagued by doubts. This undermines the, at best, mediocre

presentation of the rest of the team members of Femforce and the narrative possibility of positive representation. Nightveil works as a premiere character to study in the team setting because her representation shows how the positive possibility for *Femforce* to promote change is sabotaged through her representation. I will begin my analysis of *Femforce* with a critique of the creator's foreword to a collection of *Femforce* comics, then I will provide an overview of Nightveil's story in the first issue, and finally I will analyze examples of backlash and postfeminism in the comic book. My goal is to show that the first ongoing female superhero team comic book was fraught with problems from its inception even as it tried to be progressive.

The creator behind *Femforce*, Bill Black, still prides himself on introducing an all-female team, and he responds to a lot of criticism of his sexualized depictions of women. In the 25 year celebration *Femforce Omnibus 1*, Black (2009) described that:

> Most men equate a beautiful, busty woman with being stupid, or, at best, being sex objects. That is not the intent of *Femforce*. True, the women portrayed in *Femforce* are both beautiful and busty but they are also intelligent, strong, capable, wise and exciting. (p. 1)

Although I am not trying to get inside Black's head, I think it is a compelling point to begin an analysis where I will forward some of that same criticism Black is responding to. I would like to show how Nightveil's representation undermines the other characters' representations. Granted, not all of the characters are completely positive mostly because of the visuals, but Nightveil's character takes away the promising feminist potential of the series.

I will critique the first issue of *Femforce*, but, to be fair, positive representations of women increase over time through the writing, despite the sexualized artwork. The reason for only choosing the first issue is because that is when the character Nightveil

most prominently shows her postfeminist crisis. Another reason for only choosing the first issue and keeping *Femforce* in the sample analysis section is because the comic book is from an independent publisher. The other case studies are from the "Big Two," Marvel and DC Comics. AC Comics, on the other hand, does not have the same name recognition or exposure that the more popular companies possess. Nevertheless, *Femforce* serves as an interesting first look at the representation of female superhero characters in all-women teams.

Nightveil's character often second guesses herself and displays a troubling assertion of femininity as always in distress. By showing a character that is not confident in her abilities, the comic book further invokes the role of women as less powerful. I will draw upon backlash feminism to show Nightveil choosing to embody less agency because possessing so many powers is undesired. Nightveil is surrounded by supportive teammates, but her doubt functions as the metaphorical doubt facing many women of achieving a higher status and fairer representation in society.

Nightveil represents backlash feminism through her crisis of identity between multiple personas with different levels of agency. Not much is known about Nightveil when she is initially introduced in the first issue of *Femforce*. It is acknowledged that she was once a human fighting with Ms. Victory during World War II, but was eventually given mystical superpowers. The intriguing thing about Nightveil is that she is primarily two personas: Nightveil, and The Blue Bulleteer/Laura Wright from WWII. As Nightveil, she is a mystical character and probably the most powerful on the Femforce team. Despite this, she constantly craves to be human again. Her human superhero identity is The Blue Bulleteer where she possesses no super powers but carries two guns.

Her yearning to be human again causes her to use a spell as Nightveil to take away her superpowers, which represents a form of backlash feminism. Whelehan (2000) claimed that, "the most obvious feature of backlash rhetoric is its wish to personalise [sic] the political agendas of feminism" (p. 35). Additionally, "backlashers seek those issues which most closely affect their personal life or those of their peers and propagate a mood of anxiety if not to say moral panic around them" (Whelehan, 2000, p. 35). The character's Nightveil personality represents her powerful, spiritual self as an empowered, second-wave woman. Nightveil explains, "As my power grows, I feel my humanity slipping away from me…I've decided to reclaim that part of my life – to become Laura Wright again…I must remove this cloak of darkness before it becomes my prison" (Black & Heike, 1985, p. 8). Instead of embracing these powers, she wishes to go back to the way things used to be. Nightveil takes her personal dilemma of superpowers that she craves to no longer possess and develops anxiety around them to mirror the backlash of feminism.

In Nightveil's wish to be human with no powers, she wants to rid herself of much of her agency to take up a different life. Her spiritual and magical powers are her personally perceived limitations at obtaining normalcy. Therefore, the very things that would make her powerful and a strong representation for women are actually, for Nightveil, her weakness. She believes that becoming human with no superpowers is more powerful than the ability to "command the earth to split asunder" and "tread the ethereal dimensions as easily as you traverse a country lane." Her powers are a hindrance to being human, and they show what happens to women when they go too far and gain too much. Channeling Faludi, Gill and Scharff (2011) explained feminist backlash

discourses: "they often work by attributing all women's unhappiness to feminism" (p. 3). Nightveil's unhappiness is because she wields too much power as a woman when she wants to return to being a human without power and with less responsibility.

What plays into the visuals of the comic book is vital, too. As Nightveil, her costume is a cloak and almost a full body suit without sleeves. There are some patches taken out of the suit to expose skin, but, compared to the other members of Femforce, she is the most covered up. However, once she changes into The Blue Bulleteer, she wears a short dress with her breasts almost falling out as well as nearly exposing her pelvis. Aside from her teammate Tara who is in a bikini, The Blue Bulleteer is the most physically exposed member of the team. Nightveil changes from a powerful sorcerer who is almost fully covered to a regular woman who is nearly fully exposed. This represents the wishful thinking of no longer dealing with feminism: women can be whatever they want but preferably with less power and less privacy. The real world implication of this sentiment is for women to eliminate feminism in their life and become more submissive with sexualized bodies fully available. She is in a superhero team with other women who fight evil, but her preferred method is as a human wielding nothing more than two guns, which pales in comparison to cracking the ground open with a spell. The situation is a paradox: Nightveil is the most powerful when she thinks she is the weakest and The Blue Bulleteer is the weakest when she thinks she is more powerful. Additionally, The Blue Bulleteer constantly second guesses herself and feels embarrassed about her inability to keep up with the team. Overall, Nightveil faces a crisis of identity and decides to become the less powerful The Blue Bulleteer because she wants to reclaim her sexualized, human being.

At certain points, the comic book provides indications of The Blue Bulleteer's thought processes. For example, during a flight to the Amazon rainforest, the comic gives readers a window into all of the characters' thoughts with thought bubbles. In a close up on her eyes, The Blue Bulleteer thinks, "I'm excited. My pulse is racing. I'm thrilled and frightened… but I'll come through it… with my friends." In this moment, she is hesitant. The positive thing is that she relies upon her friends in order to help her through these troubled times, and that is an uplifting claim about women's solidarity. However, in the panel before, her presumed friend She-Cat calls her a "smug bitch," who is "condescending to hang out with us mere humans." The Blue Bulleteer later slips on a dinosaur tail and Ms. Victory must catch her. She thinks to herself, "I'll never live this down!" By the second issue, The Blue Bulleteer is a bit more confident, but she does not wield the same amount of powers as when she was Nightveil. In this way, the feminist backlash works against her character to provide an example of women with less agential strength.

Femforce acts as a template for future representations of female superhero teams, and Nightveil/The Blue Bulleteer begins the trend of removing agency from the female characters. In *Femforce*, The Blue Bulleteer is written and drawn to promote the backlash against feminism by making her sexualized, weak, and self-defeating. The trait of consumerism is not present in the backlash or postfeminism inherent in the piece, but the comic does emphasize the objectification of women's bodies. Therefore, *Femforce* as the first female superhero team is fraught with problems. It also foretells how later female superhero teams under my analysis will face similar issues of representation.

The Chapters to Come

This thesis is divided into three main case studies with a conclusion following. As mentioned earlier, I organized the chapters chronologically to show the progression of female superhero team comic books. What I discovered is that "progression" is an overstatement because the issues that affected *Femforce* are still present in the most recent comics in the thesis.

My first case study is of the 2004 "Between Dark & Dawn" story in *Birds of Prey* written by Gail Simone and drawn by a handful of artists. I argue that Gail Simone's writing attempted to be progressive by fairly representing the female characters through their friendship and strength, but the objectifying and sexist art undermines any efforts on Simone's part. Additionally, Simone and the artists presented a Black character that, at times, is completely feral when her animal powers go out of control. In the story, there is also a character in a wheelchair, which allows for a study of disability. Ultimately, I argue that *Birds of Prey* provides many opportunities for a feminist text, but the art and writing are at odds. The text is postfeminist because of its highly sexualized nature and the attempted ignoring of race.

The second case study focuses on the miniseries *Marvel Divas* (2009). I argue that it is the *Sex and the City* of comics, and falls under many of the same postfeminist issues of the television show. These issues include an emphasis on consumerism and pseudo-sexual freedom. Additionally, the comic attempts to ignore race by acknowledging a Black character and then quickly dismissing her bBlack identity. The comic is an opposite to *Birds of Prey* because it features postfeminist writing paired with art that does not objectify the women. *Marvel Divas* forwards a postfeminist identity by

heavily relying on consumerism while the characters engage in "girl power" and pseudo sexual freedom.

My last case study is on the first storyline of *Gotham City Sirens* (2009-2010). The comic functions as an excellent bookend to the case studies because it presents both postfeminist writing and objectifying, sexist artwork. I argue that the comic exudes sexuality while lightly emphasizing consumerism. My goal in this chapter is to show that female team superhero comic books are often postfeminist by drawing attention to the power of women working in a group but then objectifying them. Also, *Gotham City Sirens* showcases a twist on the format of female team superhero comic books because the characters have sometimes been villains. My aim is to uncover the differences between strictly female superheroes in the previous two case studies and the occasionally villainous characters in *Gotham City Sirens*. I conclude that, whether villainous or not, the characters are objectified sexually in the artwork and are emphasized as postfeminist in the writing.

Finally, I end the thesis with an overview of the postfeminism presented in the case studies. I argue that many female superhero team comic books pander to the audience by claiming that there is finally an all-female team and that must be progressive. However, the comics still represent the female characters with postfeminist writing and usually objectifying artwork. There are moments of hope for fair representations of women in female team superhero comic books that are coming out currently, but the comic book industry continues to struggle in fairly representing female superheroes whether in teams or not.

CHAPTER 2

THE FERAL BLACK WOMAN, DISABILITY, AND OBJECTIFICATION

IN *BIRDS OF PREY*

Introduction

The writing in *Birds of Prey* supports female agency while the artwork denies it, and, through this balance of agency and denial, creates a postfeminist imagetext. Yet, the writing, in combination with the artwork, utilizes some postfeminist traits like self-surveillance, consumerism, and sexual freedom, while portraying racism both textually and visually. The text is postfeminist because the comic book attempts to present powerful women but still objectifies the characters through its artwork. Unfortunately, the text also presents the Black female character as savage and unhinged with her animal-based powers. The comic must be seen as an imagetext so that, whether or not the writing and artwork agree with one another, the two forms of image and text are read together. Therefore, the overall argument of the comic book is that women can work as a team to achieve great things, but they are still sexual objects, even in a team setting.

Birds of Prey differs from *Marvel Divas* and *Gotham City Sirens* because it is the one text that pushes back against postfeminism in its writing. *Marvel Divas* attempts to work against postfeminism with its artwork but not its writing while *Gotham City Sirens* embraces postfeminist traits through both its writing and artwork. I situate *Birds of Prey* as the first core case study because it is the most notable female team superhero comic

book after *Femforce*. *Birds of Prey* represents one of the first major female team superhero comic books even after a nearly 20 year dry spell that saw the publication of no mainstream feminist superhero team comics, and it warrants study because most other female team comic books are compared to it. *Birds of Prey* is still published today, albeit in a different volume with different characters and in DC Comics' The New 52 universe (which, unfortunately for varied representations of characters, portrays an able-bodied Barbara Gordon as Batgirl). Its cultural significance in comic books is long lasting because of its prominence as a high-profile female team superhero comic book and its moderately feminist agenda.

Within this case study, I will approach the comic book with a postfeminist framework and investigate how the writing and art contrast while still being read as a whole. I will first introduce the general plot of the comic book to provide some context for the rest of the chapter. Then, I will discuss some popular reviews of the comic book to layout the basic critical reaction to the collection of the *Between Dark & Dawn* volume. Afterwards, I will separate my analysis into three parts with a discussion at the end. The first section of the analysis will look at the strengths of the comic's writing with its portrayal of disability. Secondly, I will focus on the representation of the Black female character as feral and savage. My third section will critique the sexually objectifying artwork with camera shots that expose the characters in demeaning positions. Lastly, I will discuss how the mostly female-positive writing is at odds with the artwork. I argue that the writing attempts to represent women fairly, but the text ends up supporting postfeminism as a whole by arguing that women possess agency while turning the characters into sexual representations visually.

Plot

Between Dark & Dawn collects issues 69 to 75 of the first volume of *Birds of Prey*. All of the issues were written by Gail Simone and the artwork was created by a handful of male artists. The specific storyline I will focus on is from issues 69 to 73 because this is a definitive storyline from the other two issues. Some of what occurs within the storyline I am examining carries on throughout the rest of the series, but these five issues cohesively present a briefer story in the overall narrative. I am interested in these issues because of how they represent disability and race while relying upon objectifying artwork. The postfeminism is at work as these issues pair mostly female-positive writing with exploitative art.

The collection begins with teens committing suicide wearing the costumes of deceased superheroes to set in motion the larger narrative of a cult for children. These initial events spawn two narratives with four primary female characters: Barbara Gordon, Black Canary, Huntress, and Vixen. Initially, Barbara Gordon, also known as Oracle, sends Huntress out on a mission to explore the recent teen suicides. Huntress is a superhero without powers, which is common in Batman's Gotham City. She excels at hand-to-hand combat and also carries a crossbow. Barbara and Black Canary remain at their headquarters, with Huntress's mission serving as a trial run for her to join the team. Barbara provides guidance through a transmitter to Huntress as Huntress uncovers a cult-like farm for children and teens with a charismatic adult leader. After Huntress loses contact with Barbara, the narrative sections off into Huntress's story and Barbara's story.

Huntress finds herself in a compromising situation when she discovers that Barbara's mole in the organization, the Black female superhero Vixen, is being mind-

controlled by the leader of the cult. Huntress must stop Vixen from being controlled while carrying out her mission to find out why the kids are committing suicide. The difficult part of Huntress's mission is that she does not have superpowers, while Vixen has animal-based superpowers. Once Huntress releases Vixen from her mind-control, the two investigate the area to find unconscious superheroes thought to be dead. The two must fight these other mind-controlled superheroes in order to save the children. Eventually Vixen and Huntress save everyone and the comic ends with Huntress's first successful mission for the team.

The other storyline involves the wheelchair-bound Barbara Gordon uncovering why the cult leader is controlling the kids. Black Canary serves as emotional and physical support to Barbara, while Barbara hacks into the computer system run by the cult. She discovers that the sentient alien computer, Brainiac, is governing the leader of the cult because he is searching for an appropriate physical body to control. Barbara undergoes torment from Brainiac in cyberspace as Brainiac reminds her of the debilitating gunshot from The Joker that left her in a wheelchair. Barbara accepts her differently-abled body and turns it into a source of agency by literally fighting and defeating Brainiac in the digital world. However, the whole storyline ends with Barbara acknowledging that Brainiac nonetheless left his wounds as it turned part of her skin into an electronic motherboard.

Overall, both storylines in *Between Dark & Dawn* focus on two separate pairings of female characters. The first features Huntress and Vixen as they physically fight the cult leader in Oregon. The second shows Barbara Gordon digitally attacking Brainiac as Black Canary tries to help her in the real world. The two pairs showcase different types

of relationships between women. The storyline focuses on the seemingly feral Vixen in one narrative and the differently-abled Barbara in the other. Overall, the story attempts to showcase the solidarity of women in the separate narratives, but the artwork undermines any progress that could be shown. To get a good understanding of how critical audiences reacted to the storyline, I will look at reviews of the comic book. Specifically, I want to focus on how the reviewers separated their critiques of the writing and art to inform my argument of how the writing is mostly positive, while the artwork is sexually exploitative.

Popular Reviews

Understanding how comic books and other media forms are received by readers is an important variable when analyzing their content because the reviews provide contextualization for critical audience reception. Additionally, reviews function as recommendations for others in determining whether they should see a movie or purchase a book, for example. Reviews can also overlook aspects of the media text in order to provide a basic understanding to readers. Reviewers normally break down comic books in basic terms by focusing on the writing and the art separately. The writing and the art tend to be divided into the "good/mediocre/bad" camps with some insights and comparisons. There is nothing inherently deep in some reviews, so issues of ideology and postfeminism can pass unnoticed.

Birds of Prey: Between Dark & Dawn, collected in 2004, is the second oldest of my examples of postfeminism in female team superhero comic books. Because of this, very few reviews of either the individual issues or the collected edition exist.

Professional reviews of comic books were not as common around this time period as

shown by one of the main comic book websites, Comic Book Resources', limited amount

of reviews in 2004. I found two reviews of the collected edition, and both of the reviews

were from blogs rather than established websites. Therefore, I decided to find further

audience reaction through Amazon.com's user-generated reviews of the collected edition.

There are some benefits and drawbacks to this approach which was Amazon.com and

blogs: I can access a small audience reaction to the series, but the reviews are for other

users and from a less professional source. By utilizing reviews from less professional

sources, I can get at the reactions of regular readers and not just critics. I argue that these

reviews provide some valuable insight into how the comic has been interpreted by

readers. I found that the user-generated reviews touch on many of the same aspects of

the comic book that I intend to critique such as the mostly female-positive writing and the

exploitative artwork.

All four of the reviews I utilize celebrated Gail Simone's writing in *Birds of Prey*

for being creative, fun, and female-positive. Minners (n.d.) stated that Simone's "stories

are always action-packed, with surprising twists and turns that leave you on the edge of

your seat from first page to last" (para. 4). Minners continued to add that Simone's

writing makes the team "a formidable force to oppose," and she suggested that Simone

crafts powerful women. Odom (2006) added that "if you're wanting deep emotion and

women in turmoil, Gail Simone has definitely carved out territory of her own" (para. 5).

One of the blog posts argued that Simone's writing was unique and that the comic book

was "high-quality stuff, and worth checking out if you haven't" ("Review: Birds of

Prey," para. 2). The reviewers found that the writing carried the comic to reach mass

appeal with unique twists and powerful women.

The reviewers were divided on how the artwork presented women with many celebrating the detail of the comic and one reviewer critiquing it. Odom (2006) complimented the art saying that it is "lush and almost pure cheesecake -- except that [the male artist] does action and body language and backgrounds so darn well" (para. 4). The "cheesecake" argument is common to reviewers of comic book art who wish to defend it, and this will be further explored in the *Gotham City Sirens* chapter. Essentially, cheesecake artwork is when women are drawn "in suggestive clothing and poses" (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 257). The artwork resembles classic pin-up paintings and photographs from the 1940s-1960s. Interestingly, the female critic, Minners (n.d.), claimed that the artwork is "beautiful and at times incredibly detailed" to the point that "the cover art is of such artistic caliber that it should be hanging in an art gallery" (para. 5). She did not critique the artwork for its sexual exploitation despite her status as a woman, which shows that some objectifying pieces of art can still appeal to women. People from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities, for example, might also search for these types of images.

The artwork elicited a different response of frustration from the reviewer JD "firestorm." JD drew upon Mulvey's (1975) "male gaze" film theory in order to explain how the camera angles and overall artwork positions the viewer to objectify the female characters. JD argued that the artwork featured in *Birds of Prey* was "certainly aimed at a male audience" (para. 4). The reviewer added that:

> The stories don't depict any of them MERELY as sex objects. It's like, OK, we'll give you depictions of strong and mature female characters -- as long as we can still make them look like pin-up girls while we're doing it. (para. 5. Emphasis in original)

JD argued that comic creators, or companies as a whole, may purposefully present powerful women in writing but objectified women in the artwork. The reviewer ended their argument with a postfeminist critique, whether knowingly or not, when they said that the situation with the writing and art "kind of perpetuates the bias of the media in general that the most important thing about women is to look terrific" (para. 5). JD acknowledged the unstable relationship comic books and the media have with the representation of women and selling their product. For JD, the comic did not portray women in a positive light through the artwork. However, this strong critic of the comic nevertheless recommended it at the end of their review because of the strength of the writing.

Overall, the *Between Dark & Dawn* collection of *Birds of Prey* garnered positive reviews. JD critiqued the artwork for participating in the male gaze and exploiting the female characters. Nevertheless, all of the reviewers recommended reading the comic. I think it is intriguing that the majority of the reviewers enjoyed the artwork, especially in terms of JD's and my later critiques of the comic book as a visually exploitative text. The praise of the writing is not as much of a surprise because the writing is largely female-friendly. However, I contend that the reviewers overlook some of the complexities in the writing such as the animalization of the Black character Vixen, the moments of self-surveillance, and consumerism. The reviewers may have implicitly agreed with postfeminism because they lacked training in recognizing its characteristics. I argue that the writing provides moments of introspection like with disability, but the artwork always counters these moments with objectification.

Analysis

Disability Pushing Against the Boundaries of Postfeminism

Birds of Prey introduces a positive and powerful representation of the differently-abled. Simone crafts Barbara Gordon's disability in a wheelchair with depth and character development. The comic book argues that differently-abled people should be treated equally, and that they possess many liberatory traits. More specifically, Barbara Gordon is represented as the computer-hacker, Oracle, whose aptness with technology is unmatched. In this light, Barbara enters a digital world where she is a master and possesses just as much agency behind a computer as the other superhero characters on the street. The writing succeeds in showcasing the nuances of disability and how disability is an intrinsic part of a character. Not only that, the comic shows that a differently-abled person can be one of the most important characters in a comic book world. For the comic, disability is both a part of Barbara Gordon's character as well as something that allows her to succeed in other realms of life, like the use of technology.

Popular culture is an aspiring place to view the differently-abled because it can help create different viewpoints on disability. Although, these viewpoints may differ in terms of positive and negative representations. Disability affects many people in a multitude of ways, and *Birds of Prey* showcases Barbara Gordon living with her differently-abled body and eventually fully accepting it. The visual cue of her wheelchair is shown throughout, and, at one point, she is shown lifting herself out of bed into her wheelchair with hanging rings. Scholarship like Wood's (2013) exploration of Japanese manga, Kuppers' (2007) critique of the *X-Men* films, and Kent's (1988) compilation of literature and plays showcase the necessity of investigating disability in popular culture.

The scholarship on disability in popular culture exists, but it can easily be expanded to other texts like *Birds of Prey*.

The various representations of disability in popular culture are necessary to bring positive attention to the differently-abled and celebrate them as equals. Garland-Thomson (2002) claimed that "disability – like gender – is a concept that pervades all aspects of culture: its structuring institutions, social identities, cultural practices, political positions, historical communities, and the shared human experience of embodiment" (p. 4). Disability affects many people and therefore must be represented in popular culture. Reel and Buccierre (2010) explained that positive representations of disability are especially important because "physical or intellectual limitations have been associated with being 'less than' in a society that values perfection and celebrates a narrow definition of beauty" (p. 91). The differently-abled are faced with an American culture that does not fully accept them or integrate them into society. American culture tends to ignore the differently-abled in favor of the able-bodied ideal. This leads to a culture full of ableism or a "bias against persons with disabilities" (Brown, 2008, p. 180). *Birds of Prey* challenges these assumptions with Barbara Gordon and approaches disability from a feminist standpoint.

The goals of feminism and advocating for equal treatment of people with disability often align. However, Hardin (2007), channeling Garland-Thomson (1997), noted that liberal feminism contends that women should focus on autonomy and independence for female empowerment. The differently-abled, however, may still need to rely upon others to help them with the difficulties their disabilities present. Wendell (1989) argued that "If *all* the disabled are to be fully integrated into society without

symbolizing failure, then we have to change social values to recognize the value of depending on others and being depended upon" (p. 119. Emphasis in original). This argument is compelling because it shows that the differently-abled should be included into society and that everyone should embrace their roles of helping each other. Therefore, feminism and supporting the differently-abled should function on the same level to be all-inclusive.

There is also some scholarly work that helps explain Barbara Gordon's role with technology. Ellis and Kent (2011) explored the possibilities that technology provides for those with disabilities. This applies to Barbara Gordon because her identity is interlaced with technology and how she works in the greater DC Comics universe as Oracle. Ellis and Kent argued that, "digital media and online technology hold the promise that people with disability will be included in social life, diminishing the impact their impairment has on their social life" (p. 59). Therefore, the differently-abled can add to and recreate their identity through a digital world. The authors further claimed that "virtual reality creates a context in which people construct and represent their bodies in varied ways" (p. 117). In this instance, Barbara Gordon crafts the identity of computer-hacker Oracle. She utilizes her photographic memory and technological know-how to impact the Birds of Prey and the rest of her comic book universe. Technology provides Barbara Gordon with an identity to affect her society of superheroes, and I contend that the writing in the comic book presents liberatory potential for representations of disability.

Birds of Prey gives insight into Barbara's mind in three key moments spaced across the storyline, and these moments showcase various ways Barbara constructs her identity as differently-abled. Her and Black Canary's storyline is about identity and how

to turn what could be perceived as limitations into strengths. In the beginning, she views

her disability as a constraint, but she then moves to accept her differently-abled body. At

the end, she warily considers her battles with being differently-abled, but the story

implies that Barbara will succeed over every new challenge she faces. The first key

moment occurs after she is exposed to Brainiac and has a seizure. She is recovering in

the hospital as shown in issue 71, and the comic book goes into her memory of when she

was Batgirl and how she adjusted to her disability. The narration boxes act like a

voiceover and explains:

> It was a good life. No, it was better than that. It was the **best** life. Maybe it was
> too good. Because I stumbled badly. It took time, but eventually, I rebuilt. I
> briefly had the most beautiful, most caring and loving man in the world as my
> own. It frightened me. That's the curse of having perfect memory -- you never,
> ever, **ever**… forget your **losses**. (Emphasis in original)

This narration is put against the backdrop of images of her swinging in her Batgirl

costume throughout Gotham City with Robin, being shot by The Joker, lying in bed with

Dick Grayson (Robin), and then crying in the present-day hospital room. The "Because I

stumbled badly" is put against the frame of The Joker shooting her, which is compelling

because it is almost as if she blames herself for the shooting even though she was

innocent. At this moment, Barbara considers her disability a sign of weakness. This

belief later sets up how she triumphs over Brainiac by accepting who she is even after a

traumatic experience. Barbara's lying in bed with Dick Grayson showcases that she felt

more complete when she was with a man in the perfect relationship that eventually scared

her. Although, the frame shows that someone who is differently-abled can still be loved

by another person. She regrets her moment of independence from Dick Grayson and

wishes that they could still be together. The quote shows that Barbara really cherished

her old life and how she believes it was better than where she is now after her disability.

Barbara says that she has rebuilt her life, but clearly her perfect memory makes her regret

that she is now differently-abled, perhaps showcasing a more realistic portrayal of people

who are differently-abled. Overall, this is the first indication of her internal beliefs about

her disability and how it still haunts her.

The second example of Barbara's internal monologue examining her disability is

when she first meets Brainiac in the digital world. The confrontation with Brainiac also

serves as a cipher for Barbara to confront her disability. Barbara later accepts her identity

as differently-abled with the help, support, and love from Black Canary. As teammates

and friends, the women care for each other, showing that friendship can help people

through difficult experiences. However, Barbara is initially hesitant to involve Black

Canary in her personal trials. Barbara forces Black Canary to go out on a mission so she

can confront Brainiac on her own. Barbara's caption boxes read:

> If [Black Canary] comes back and I'm not alive, it'll break her heart. I know that.
> But if she died protecting me, that would be even worse. I couldn't bear it. And
> she can't help me, anyway. I'm not sure anyone can.

The images during this monologue are intriguing because they direct focus on her

disability and then challenge it. The images are constructed as a four panel sequence

with the first two panels portraying a high-angle shot looking down on Barbara in her

wheelchair against a black background. This angle suggests she does not have power and

is plagued by her doubt about betraying her friend. The third and fourth panels are

against white backgrounds. In the "she can't help me" frame, the camera angle changes

to a medium shot of Barbara looking serious and sitting up straighter in her wheelchair.

The last panel showcases Barbara triumphantly standing with her wheelchair put to the

side. The switch to a white background in the third and fourth shots draws more immediate focus to Barbara standing up, and it is a foreshadowing that she has entered into the digital world. Her standing up shows her independence as she begins to face Brainiac, and it showcases her agency in the made-literal digital world. Overall, the image and the text work together in this case to convey that Barbara can leave her disability behind and fight a foe that even Superman has trouble defeating.

The last internal monologue by Barbara showcases her friendship with Black Canary, but also her battle wounds from Brainiac. This monologue occurs after she defeats Brainiac and finally embraces being differently-abled, but there is still some hesitation to fully allow Black Canary and her other teammates into her life. She explains, "It's… It's good to have allies. But some battles leave scars -- wounds you have to face alone. Brainiac left his mark on me. And dear Lord, I think it's **growing**" (Emphasis in original). This final insight into Barbara's mind acknowledges both the battle with Brainiac and her acceptance of her disability. She believes that she must face her battles alone, but she was also able to defeat Brainiac with Black Canary's help. Barbara is a very private person, and she struggles with acknowledging her problems to others. Her last sentence is over a panel of a digital motherboard imprinted onto her skin, and the next three panels are wide-angled and thin as they fade to black. Overall, Barbara believes she can face her trials alone, but she does accept some help along the way. Her acceptance of help and relying upon others is reminiscent of Wendell's (1989) argument that everyone, regardless of ability, should support each other. Without the help and support of Black Canary, Barbara would not have defeated Brainiac alone.

Black Canary saves Barbara from becoming Brainiac's vessel in the real world by

reminding her about the special and important things in her life. In this way, Black

Canary symbolizes the power of women working together. The friendship between the

two characters is what helps Barbara defeat Brainiac and accept her differently-abled

body. The comic emphasizes that care and friendship between women can help them

achieve powerful things. During a climactic scene, Black Canary holds up symbols of

Barbara's past like her Batgirl costume, and she asserts that Barbara must stay strong for

her father. Black Canary stresses to Barbara that her identity is unique, and this makes

Barbara accept who she is including her differently-abled body. Barbara proclaims to

Brainiac in the digital world, "You'll **never** be able to make me forget who I am. I'm

incapable of it. I'm **Barbara Gordon**, Brainiac. And I don't want you in my mind

anymore" (Emphasis in original). During this brief speech, Barbara is clad in a digital

avatar looking bravely upwards and almost smiling, knowing she has defeated Brainiac.

Barbara then creates a digital sword and slices Brainiac apart claiming that Black Canary

"gave me the compass to regaining my sense of self." Therefore, female friendship saved

Barbara from Brainiac. Barbara accepts who she is with the help of her friend, and the

story asserts that Barbara can succeed against any challenge even if that means she has to

do it without the use of her legs. The challenges and methods of success that Barbara

faces may be different than the ones able-bodied people must confront, but she still

succeeds against any obstacle.

In my analysis of disability in *Birds of Prey*, I argue that Barbara Gordon is given

liberatory potential to change the world around her and accept her identity. Simone's

writing presents a character that is beautiful, caring, and creative.   Barbara crafts a new

identity as a technological wizard to accept and convert her differently-abled body into a

strength. However, there is one worry that Wendell (1989) presented for the representation of the differently-abled:

> Some disabled people also become symbols of heroic control against all odds; these are the "disabled heroes," who are comforting to the able-bodied because they re-affirm the possibility of overcoming the body. Disabled heroes are people with visible disabilities who receive public attention because they accomplish things that are unusual even for the able-bodied. (p. 116)

This "disabled hero" functions as a token that differently-abled people may not be able to aspire to and the abled-bodied may expect them to be. Barbara Gordon is beautiful, physically fit, White, financially independent, incredibly intelligent, and surrounded by a supportive group of friends and family. Many other real-life differently-abled people may not be so lucky, and they could also face differing challenges that a fictional character does not experience. Indeed, referring to everyone with various differently-abled bodies as a whole is problematic because there are varying degrees and types of disability. Barbara represents a small segment of the differently-abled community. The comic does not represent other differently-abled people like those with other physical handicaps or those with mental special needs. Instead, it presents a character that is in a wheelchair and is affected in mobility rather than in other faculties. Barbara faces other obstacles like psychological trauma from her tragic shooting and implied rape by The Joker. This experience marked her as a victim with her disability a "lingering reminder of some hideous accident or vicious act of violence" (Kent, 1988, p. 93). Nevertheless, she still accepts her body and works as a powerful representation for other differently-abled people.

     Barbara stands as an important figure in fiction and comic books because she is in a small minority but portrayed powerfully. Barbara showed in her defeating Brainiac that

she has embraced her differently-abled body. Her character is not completely free from a complicated life because she must still surpass some obstacles created by her disability. Nevertheless, Barbara's life is limited in terms of the difficulties that other differently-abled people may face. The writing succeeds with Barbara because she is one of the few mainstream comic book characters that lives with a disability, and she provides an example to real-life differently-abled people of overcoming adversity. In this case, some positive representation, even in a very specific situation, of the differently-abled is better than no representation. Barbara's portrayal as differently-abled may also affect other readers with unique differently-abled bodies, like a person who is quadriplegic, merely because she represents the entire community. In addition to representing the differently-abled community, she also shows that women should be portrayed just as much as men in popular culture.

Feral Blackness

In *Birds of Prey*, the one Black female character, Vixen, is portrayed as feral and savage. Although not an official member of the team, Vixen is given a premier status in the collected edition's storyline as one of the four main female characters. Her representation is inherently flawed and troublesome because she is mostly portrayed as erratic. Granted, her mind is being controlled by one of the villains for a significant portion of the story, but the comic still paints her as animalistic. Vixen is tied to the primal, animal-like representation because it goes back to her superpowers and creation as a character; her name is a sexualized reference to foxes, and she can tap into the natural world to draw upon the powers and traits of animals. In the storyline, for

example, she regenerates and heals herself like an earthworm and spits acid like a cobra. She is written and drawn in a way that recalls stereotypes of Black people from early paintings, comic strips, and animation. Vixen's portrayal is primarily negative because it relies upon racist attitudes about Black women as primal, and it perpetuates those attitudes in a postfeminist text. Perhaps the greatest indication of this racist attitude and its effect on the audience is when Minners (n.d.) celebrates the "feral Vixen" as strong characterization (para. 5). In a text that claims to positively portray women, at least in the writing, readers may embody the racism as shown through Vixen.

Going back through history to uncover the racist stereotypes of Black characters as savages and feral beasts is a worthy endeavor because it showcases how the representation of Vixen continues the tradition. Fredrik Strömberg (2012) traces the visual history of the representations of Black people in his book *Black Images in the Comics*. The book showcases how racist stereotypes of Black people were disseminated across cultures and throughout time. The book finds examples of Black stereotypes from Europe, Japan, the Middle East, and America, and it looks at how prevalent some of these stereotypes were, especially around the first few decades of the 20th century. For example, the Austrian/American comic strip *Happy Hooligan* from 1903 showcased African "savages" who want to either eat or make king the title character (p. 57). There is a similar example in a 1930 *Mickey Mouse* strip of all-black savages with nose rings and bones in their hair wanting to eat Mickey (p. 75). Returning to the *Tintin* comic mentioned in the introduction, the African tribespeople were portrayed as foolish and animalistic. The idea of a savage and feral Black character in a comic book or a comic strip traces itself far into the past. Indeed, the artwork of Vixen at one point in issue 70

showcases her jumping through the dark with wide eyes and mouth akin to Sambo imagery. This history informs the writing and artwork of Vixen to make her seem deranged and primal.

The representation of Vixen is informed by other examples outside of comic books, as well as more contemporary examples. The jungle film genre of the 1930s argued that Black people were savage and "conflated with a dark animal: the gorilla" (Berenstein, 1994, p. 316). Other, more modern, examples can be seen in Weekes' (2004) argument that rap music videos showcase Black women who are animalistic and crave sex. Additionally, Holland (2009) argued that Janet Jackson's Super Bowl breast incident crafted her as a jezebel figure. The jezebel stereotype makes Black women appear sexually dangerous and animal-like. Although Vixen is not portrayed craving sex, she is visually shown in sexually explicit poses. These examples from film, modern music videos, and events show that the feral, animalistic stereotype for Black women has long been prevalent across various media texts.

The savage stereotype for Black people continues further in arguing that they can transgress the divide between humans and animals. This plays out heavily in Vixen's characterization and animal-based superpowers. Black people were more closely identified as animalistic than other races as Berenstein noted, "according to a range of racist discourses that endured well into the twentieth century, the darker races are interstitial, able to cross and bridge the distance between species with little effort" (p. 316). Vixen's animal power source is explicitly a sign of this because she is Black and can switch between different species of animals for her superpower. She has a closer bond with the animal kingdom than other humans, which can be tied to her Black,

African identity. When Vixen is under mind control, her viciousness and feral behaviors make her almost more animal than human. Vixen is raw and unhinged, making her the feral Black woman.

The introduction of Vixen crafts a character that is both sexually objectified and vicious. On a splash page (where one image takes up the entire page) at the end of the first issue, Vixen holds Huntress up into the air around her neck. Vixen is in a purple latex body suit with hoop earrings, a fox necklace, and long, pointed fingernails. She is built like a buxom, yet, skinny model (indeed, she was a professional model). Aside from her skin being colored brown and the narrow dreadlocks, she could probably pass as another White character. Overall, Vixen is crafted as both wild and sexual in her first appearance.

In the ensuing fights between Vixen and Huntress, Vixen is constantly portrayed as animal-like. In most panels, she is drawn grimacing with her sharp, pointed teeth displayed. Additionally, her eyes are either all-white or drawn as if they were cat's eyes with narrow pupil slits. During the fight, Huntress even describes Vixen in a caption box as "feral." As the fight draws near an end, Huntress aims a gun at Vixen and claims that she knows Vixen can smell how serious she is. After the two characters fight each other for a second time, Huntress breaks the control the cult leader has over Vixen. The two then team up to defeat the cult leader and stop him from willing children to kill themselves. Vixen essentially becomes one with the animals in order to benefit herself and Huntress.

Vixen's portrayal in *Birds of Prey* showcases a Black woman who is feral and animal-like. This representation is troubling because the text tries hard to celebrate the

power of women, but it relies upon racist stereotypes. Vixen's creation as a Black woman with animal powers was troubling to begin with. Nonetheless, Gail Simone's writing and the artwork recasts Vixen as the crazy Black woman. At one point, the villain even keeps Vixen in chains reminiscent of slavery, which suggests the taming of the beast. She is one with animals and the earth drawing upon them to be ferocious and unhinged. The comic argues that the one Black character is relegated to the animal world while remaining a sexually objectified woman.

The teamwork involved between Huntress and Vixen revolves around Huntress "saving" Vixen and stopping her from becoming even more animalistic. Once Vixen is "saved," the two characters team up to take down the villain. The idea of saving someone from becoming animalistic is reversed when Vixen acts as Huntress's moral compass to stop her from killing the cult leader. The saving is reciprocal, but the two characters mostly rely upon each other to physically fight their way out of the situation than the friendship and caring-based relationship between Barbara Gordon and Black Canary. The relationship between Huntress and Vixen is more business-like where they must complete the mission of stopping the cult leader; there is no extensive exploration of the characters relying upon each other in differing ways. Indeed, the relationship between the two characters is almost completely opposite of Barbara Gordon and Black Canary by never digging deep into their interactions aside from the occasionally humorous quip between the two. The teamwork between Huntress and Vixen is minimal in terms of relationship-building because it relies so heavily on physicality and actually fighting people. Ultimately, the narrative of Huntress and Vixen is fraught with racist depictions rather than a focus on women working together to overcome evil.

Additionally, the White Huntress overcomes the Black Vixen to show that, no matter the extremity of Black women's representations, Whiteness will prevail.

Moments of Postfeminism in the Writing

In *Birds of Prey*, there are brief asides that could be considered postfeminist because they either support self-surveillance, beauty products, the importance of appearance, or the need for men. I already mentioned earlier that Barbara Gordon claims that Dick Grayson made her more complete. There are a few other moments in the writing that showed postfeminism at work, even in a writing trajectory that is meant to emphasize the strengths of women and their relationships to each other.

The little moments of postfeminism in the writing normally occur around banter about beauty. The first instance is when Barbara is in the hospital and crying after her seizure. Black Canary approaches Barbara with a Kleenex and says, "Sweetie… your **mascara**" (Emphasis in original). This moment suggests that, in this time of pain, Black Canary still cares about Barbara's appearance or, at least believes Barbara would want her to help maintain her appearance. Black Canary surveys Barbara to keep her exterior in check and up to the standard beauty codes. For the comic, Barbara must commit to the beauty industry even when she is in the hospital. In a time of vulnerability and pain, Barbara is required to sexually appeal to the reader.

Another moment of maintaining and surveying an appearance occurs during Huntress and Vixen's second fight. As Huntress kicks Vixen in the face a caption box reads, "Come on… you're a **model**, Mari. You **can't** like getting your **nose** broken" (Emphasis in original). Even during a fight, Huntress aims to snap Vixen back into

reality by attacking her superficial features. A broken nose, to Huntress, may have a greater effect on a model who cares about her appearance than some other sort of brute force. In a fight scene, one would expect the characters to focus on surviving rather than how they look, and yet Huntress targets Vixen's superficial beauty. Huntress' aiming at Vixen's nose shows that the way for a woman to truly feel pain is by attacking her physical appearance, specifically her face. Additionally, Vixen later heals her broken nose and other wounds by channeling earth worms thus restoring her body up to beauty standard codes. The postfeminism works to reify the notion that women's utmost care should be put towards their appearance and their face.

The last moment of emphasis on a postfeminist concept like beauty and consumption is when Huntress criticizes Vixen's perfume saying, "Speaking of odious smells… I bought a bottle of your personal scent. I figure you owe me $120 plus tax." Vixen replies, "Glamour slides right off some people, I've found." This exchange suggests that Vixen's beauty product failed for Huntress, but she still spent the $120 on it. Vixen's response emphasizes that not all people can be beautiful, thus suggesting that not all of the readers can either. For the comic book, there is a golden standard of beauty and many women cannot achieve it. Additionally, the comic naturalizes spending $120 on a beauty product even if it did not initially work. Postfeminism is emphasized through this example of consumerism. The comic utilizes the ideal of superheroes as role models and suggests that, if they buy expensive beauty products, the reader should too. The characters are beautiful to begin with, and they invest in beauty products, which suggests to the reader that they must invest in those products to be even marginally beautiful. The retort by Vixen could be meant as a snarky remark, but it actually emphasizes the notion

that not everyone can be models, even though they should still try to be. There is a standard of beauty set for women and readers that cannot be reached, and *Birds of Prey* further perpetuates that unachievable standard.

Rather than encompassing the message that everyone can be beautiful in their own way, the comic book emphasizes self-surveillance, beauty products, and caring about appearance. The writing continually reinforces the idea that women must aspire to but never reach the ideal perfection embodied by these female characters. The postfeminism found in self-surveillance suggests that women cannot be beautiful without committing to a culture of constantly criticizing their bodies and buying superficial beauty products. For the writing in *Birds of Prey*, maintaining one's image is an important aspect of being a woman inside and outside the costume. The art further reinforces the standard of beauty set by the writing by presenting unrealistic bodies for women to achieve and men to desire.

Sexual Exploitation and Objectification in the Artwork

The artwork in *Birds of Prey* is problematic for its sexualizing of women, visual exploitation, and eroticism. For a text that attempts to emphasize the power of women and overcoming disability through the writing, the artwork runs counter to any goals that could arise in treating women fairly. Indeed, the comic book relies upon the pornographic representation of women common in many modern comics (Taylor, 2007). In my introduction to the thesis, I argued that superhero comic books have a tendency to represent women in visually objectifying ways by portraying them with unrealistically small waists, big hips, and large breasts. *Birds of Prey* follows up on these stereotypes

and also emphasizes impractical clothing or things that do not serve much purpose. Ultimately, the characters in *Birds of Prey* are objectified through the artwork, and this objectification functions to remove any sort of power or agency the writing provides. Indeed, how the characters are dressed seems left entirely up to the male artist's whimsy.

Female superhero costumes are problematic for emphasizing the sexual body parts of the wearer. However, *Birds of Prey*'s superhero costumes do not necessarily emphasize the characters' breasts or butts, but they do try to expose skin in impractical places. The only practical costume is Vixen's because it covers up the majority of her body, but its skin tight fit does show off her shapely figure. Vixen's costume may serve another purpose in covering up and hiding the majority of her Black body to remove most racial signifiers. Huntress's costume is interesting because she is basically wearing a one piece swimsuit with a cut to show her midriff and thigh-length boots. The artwork does not give her pants or something similarly practical. Lastly, Black Canary is shown in costume a few brief times, and it consists of a black, leather swimsuit with fishnet stockings. Her costume appears to be a bit more realistic than Huntress', but the stockings suggest a sort of coquette allure. The costumes in *Birds of Prey* are not conducive for physical activity as is common with all superheroes. However, the costumes emphasize the body in different ways than the typical fare, like through the character's legs and midriff. These new forms of body exposure work to vary the costuming of the characters rather than make any statement about the status of female superhero costumes. The characters are still sexualized, running counter to the female power argument attempting to be made through the writing.

The everyday wear of the superheroes is more up to the artist than the established

superhero costumes, and some of these choices are strange. The first example occurs early in the first issue when Huntress arrives in Oregon. She walks into a small store, soaking wet, wearing what appears to be a black corset over a white shirt with a mini skirt and high-heeled dominatrix boots. Her clothing choice seems to be counter to her fake identity as a reporter because how she is dressed makes no logical sense other than titillating the reader of the comic. The second example of sexualized, unpractical clothing choices occurs when Black Canary and Barbara Gordon are at the hospital. Black Canary is shown in tight pants and a flowing purple blouse. This blouse cuts down low on her cleavage and then opens beneath Black Canary's breasts to fully expose her midriff. The choice of blouse seems unreasonable for someone visiting a friend in the hospital when it might serve a better purpose in a club. Overall, the everyday clothing of the superheroes drawn by the artists is unfeasible because its sole purpose seems to be appealing to the presumably male audience. Even when the characters are out of costume, the goal is to objectify their bodies.

One of the major common shots or angles in comic frames is what I like to call the beside-the-butt shot. This shot is similar to the old Western framing where a cowboy or outlaw's rear end would take up most of the shot with their opponent far in the background. The butt works to frame the shot and draw the viewer's focus. However, this shot often included the character holding their gun at its holster ready to fire. This focus is not apparent in *Birds of Prey*. Instead, the comic presents butts in the foreground for no specific purpose when the shot could have just as easily focused on the person actually speaking. The shot works to sexualize the female body and break it up into pieces so that it takes up the majority of the space in a frame. This technique is

especially common in *Gotham City Sirens*, as I will describe later in this thesis. The beside-the-butt shot occurs about four times in the selected issues of *Birds of Prey*. It is sexually alluring and frames the shot against a segmented section of the female body. *Birds of Prey* employs this shot in order to sexualize the characters and add unnecessary moments of objectification to the artwork. Ultimately, how the characters are dressed in and out of costume and how the beside-the-butt shot is employed negates all of the attempts by the writing to represent women positively. If the women are continually portrayed sexually in the artwork, then the writing suffers because they function together as an imagetext.

Conclusion

Try as the comic might to present powerful female characters, *Birds of Prey* suffers from sexually exploitative artwork and questionable writing. With costumes and daywear that are not practical because they emphasize sexuality rather than power, the comic falters in presenting women with agency visually. The clothing the characters are shown wearing cannot realistically work for what the comics portray them as doing. For example, Vixen's skin tight suit could not fluidly move without creating creases and folds and preventing some mobility. The writing argues for accepting a differently-abled body and joining a female community built on caring and friendship, and yet it still perpetuates the disturbing stereotype of Black women as feral and animal-like. Additionally, the writing is not without its problems in terms of arguing for self-surveillance and upholding traditional, sexualized beauty standards. The comic possesses powerful potential of overcoming the long drought between female superhero teams since *Femforce*, and yet it

still fails to completely uproot sexual objectification and racism. Indeed, it even heavily focuses on two pairs of women and how they interact and overcome obstacles together. Ultimately, the text is postfeminist because it argues that female superhero teams are powerful and complex in its writing, but the artwork undermines any liberatory potential the writing might have. Viewed as an imagetext, the comic's writing and artwork are in conflict and, in this way, tip the scales to advocate for postfeminism. *Birds of Prey* attempts to pull a trick by Gail Simone and the male artists by advocating for fair representations of women but still propagates negative portrayals in the superhero comic book genre.

CHAPTER 3

BEING A POSTFEMINIST DIVA IN *MARVEL DIVAS*

Introduction

The limited series *Marvel Divas* (2009/2010) from Marvel Comics is grounded in

a postfeminist framework with the core characters making up a loose team of female

superheroes. The series focuses primarily on the lives of the characters outside their

costumes as they go out for drinks, chat about sex, and shop for new clothes. Essentially,

Marvel Divas is the *Sex and the City* of comic books, and it parallels many of the

stylistics, humor, and drama of the television series. The comic can be considered the

natural continuation of *Sex and the City* because it was released 5 years after the

television show's conclusion. *Marvel Divas* adds to my overall examination of

postfeminism in female team superhero comic books by showing the opposite of the

art/writing dichotomy in *Birds of Prey*, as well as a different approach than what is

featured in *Gotham City Sirens*. *Birds of Prey* contains moderately liberal feminist

writing with sexist art, and *Gotham City Sirens* pairs postfeminist writing with sexist art.

By contrast, *Marvel Divas* displays postfeminist writing with strong and nonexploitive

art. The art does not sexually exploit the female characters, and it represents the women

fairly. The comic covertly utilizes its approachable artwork to carefully and quietly

appeal to readers with its postfeminist agenda. The artwork naturalizes the arguments in

the writing to carefully persuade the readers to enjoy and embody the ideology of the

text. Most importantly, the artwork allows the text's showcasing of a Black female

character to seem unexceptional. Overall, I argue that *Marvel Divas* effectively displays

postfeminism textually and thereby limits the potential of showing a powerful portrayal

of the solidarity between women.

In this piece, I will draw upon my earlier analysis of scholarship on postfeminism

focusing specifically on the interaction of race with gender in a postfeminist framework.

A brief summary of *Sex and the City* scholarship is included in order to indicate how

similar *Marvel Divas* is to the television series. Next, I will include an examination of

popular reviews of the comic book to provide some audience reception. I will then

analyze the text based upon the central tenants of sexual freedom and consumption in

postfeminism by going through the characters' pseudo-independence from men and their

shopping and drinking habits. I will end with a discussion about how the postfeminism in

Marvel Divas persuades readers to accept its emphasis on agency through consumerism

and sexual freedom.

Sex and the City

I would like to begin by providing an overview of the television and movie series

Sex and the City because it is a commonly examined postfeminist text. I contend that

Marvel Divas strongly resembles the television show as do all of the reviewers featured

later in this case study. *Sex and the City* has been widely analyzed by postfeminist

scholars because of its popularity and cultural impact (Busch, 2009; Gerhard, 2005; Gill

and Scharff, 2011; Kim, 2001; Negra, 2009; Stillion Southard, 2008). The television

series depicted a female identity that strongly centered on fashion and sex. I argue that the television series follows up many of the claims of postfeminism while also forwarding some new problems inherent to postfeminism.

Sex and the City premiered on HBO in 1998 and ran for 6 years until 2004 with two more movies appearing after the initial television run. Hermes (2006) provided a fair amount of contextualization in describing the series as about four female friends (Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha). They talk frankly about sex, go shopping, and dine at various high-profile restaurants. The show is foregrounded with Carrie's occupation as a writer and her various voiceovers depicting her musings on relationships, dating, and sex. The characters seem to possess a near limitless income, as well as near limitless time for one another. The income characteristic is interesting because postfeminism typically focuses on middle-class women, but the television show subverts this trope by highlighting characters leading an upper-class lifestyle. I contend that the more extravagant lifestyle is meant to open the narrative possibilities and situations for the show to explore and give viewers an idea of something to aspire to. The difference in class is an interesting twist to the normal structure of postfeminist texts, but, for the most part, it is the only way the show differs from the common characteristics of postfeminism found in other texts like the television series *Murphy Brown* (Dow, 1996). I contend that many of the arguments from *Sex and the City* are parallel to *Marvel Divas*, which allows me to apply criticism from the television show to the comic.

The four main characters of *Sex and the City* are deeply involved in each other's lives to the point that they are practically family. Gerhard (2005) claimed that, "these women's girlfriends are the most valued people in their lives. And indeed, the show

insists that these relationships are more lasting and trustworthy than those with men or potential husbands" (p. 43). Gerhard furthered that the friends "rely on each other to pay attention to their worries, to care about their latest $400 shoes, to be there when their mother dies, when a boyfriend dumps them, or when they dump a boyfriend" (p. 44). Similar to *Marvel Divas*, the friends in *Sex and the City* must help one character, Samantha, emotionally as she goes through a battle with breast cancer. There is a very close bond among all of the characters as they encounter trials and need support. The women are a meaningful and powerful collective, but it is against a backdrop of pseudo-independence and consumption.

There are some objectionable elements of the show since it established a postfeminist stance on women's relationships. The four characters' lives revolve around consumption. They "consume" men as much as they do the latest fashions. Furthermore, *Sex and the City* shows, "unrealistic images of women" who are "young, thin, white, economically successful, and attractive" (Stillion Southard, 2008, p. 150). The images presented do not align with the general populace nor depict much diversity. The representations of the characters correspond with the dominant culture's habit of excluding women who do not fit neatly into predetermined, esteemed categories.

To say that *Marvel Divas* follows the structure of *Sex and the City* is a bit of an understatement. The characters are four close-knit friends, they consume various high-class products, live an extravagant lifestyle, and have lots of sex with men. The main character followed throughout the story is a writer and the comic displays caption boxes of her thoughts like the voiceover in the television show by Carrie. Finally, the comic highlights the "real issue," as I see it, of breast cancer. Perhaps the clearest indication of

the crossover in the series is when Angelica "Firestar" gets a makeover after undergoing

chemo. The hairstylist presents four wigs labeled "The Carrie… The Miranda… The

Charlotte… And the Samantha." The reference to *Sex and the City* further reinforces the

argument that *Marvel Diva*s is trying to emulate the television program. The one

difference between the show and comic is that one of the characters in *Marvel Divas* is

Black. I argue that *Marvel Divas* follows the script of postfeminism with its imitation of

Sex and the City despite this key difference. Therefore, many of the same critiques of *Sex

and the City* guide a reading of the comic book and apply to a variety of circumstances.

Sex and the City foregrounds *Marvel Divas* by providing the narrative format and style of

the comic book, and I maintain that the comic falls into many of the same pitfalls as the

television show. In order to preview the comic book even further, I contend that

examining some of the popular responses and reviews of the comic is in order. I am

interested in how the comic book is interpreted in terms of the backdrop of *Sex and the

City* and on its own merits. Almost all of the reviewers ignore the postfeminism at work

in the book, and I argue that it is a fundamental oversight that displays postfeminism's

behind-the-scenes work in influencing readers.

Critical Reception

As I have shown with *Birds of Prey*, critical reception and reviews tend to

overlook some of the ideology portrayed by the texts. My assessment of the critical

reception to the first couple issues of *Marvel Divas* will allow me to showcase how

reviewers can unknowingly recommend a text filled with postfeminist messages. Indeed,

some reviewers celebrate aspects of postfeminism without seeming to realize it. I will

break apart my analysis of the critical reception into the original solicitation of the comic

book by Marvel Comics, the reviewers with positive appraisal, and the one reviewer who

challenged the comic for its postfeminist characteristics. Through this, I hope to show

that postfeminism works in the backdrop even for people whose job it is to review

comics. Therefore, the postfeminist ideals of consumption, pseudo-sexual freedom, and

the near erasure of race can be passed along and reify postfeminist culture.

Comics run an interesting system in which comic book store owners and those

interested online are given solicitations by the major companies for comic books months

in advance. This allows the retailers to plan and order how many comic books they think

they will need. Every month, new solicitations come out for comic books usually 3-4

months in advance. The comic book companies advertise and try to convince shop

owners to preorder their comics. Also, the solicitations released online try to get

potential readers interested in their upcoming comics. Overall, the companies control

what is said about their comics before reviewers can read them. Looking at solicitations

is important because it offers insight into the initial way comic books are advertised and

scripted. In the case of *Marvel Divas*, the comic book solicitation goes against the

perceived content of the comic book while still celebrating postfeminism.

The cover of the comic in the solicitation is highly sexualized, and the description

does not really do the comic any favors either. In full, the solicitation (2009) says:

> Diva (dee-vah), noun: An unusually glamorous and powerful woman. See: Patsy
> "Hellcat" Walker; Felicia "Black Cat" Hardy; Angelica "Firestar" Jones; and
> Monica "Photon" Rambeau. What happens when you take four of the Marvel
> Universe's most fabulous single girls and throw them together, adding liberal
> amounts of suds and drama? You get the sassiest, sexiest, soapiest series to come
> out of the House of Ideas since Millie the Model! Romance, action, ex-
> boyfriends, and a last page that changes everything! Let your inner divas out with
> this one, fellas, you won't regret it! Parental Advisory …$3.99. (para. 1)

The description does multiple interesting things that scripts the comic before it even hits the stands. First, Marvel Comics decided to provide their own definition of "Diva," which is a choice that both explains the "Divas" in the comic's title and implies that this comic is going to be female-centered and full of character and "glamour." Then the description went on to say that the comic will have "suds and drama," suggesting that this comic book is separated from the fast-pace action of typical superhero tales. Further, the solicitation claimed that the comic will give readers a sassy, sexy, and soapy series. It also compared itself to *Millie the Model*, which was a famous romance and humor comic book from the mid-1940s to early 1970s. The description means that the comic will be emotionally charged and different from the typical superhero fare, but it also suggests, with positive connotation, that it is a celebration of postfeminist ideals. Lastly, the description claimed that "fellas" should let their inner divas out. This, as Thompson (2009) will later point out, confuses what audience the comic is meant for. Is it for female readers who want to see a sassy collection of women? Or is it for male readers to view another side of the lives of female superheroes? The solicitation scripted the comic book for interested readers months before it came out. The description of the comic book suggests that it will focus on an upper-class and consumerist lifestyle while directly tying itself to the romance genre.

Reviewers responded to this solicitation, as well as the first and/or second issue of the series, in order to recommend the comic. Most of the reviewers found that the comic book was different than what they were expecting from the solicitation. They also favorably reacted to the first or second issue even when the comic book actually does exactly what the solicitation claims, which is presenting exaggerated forms of femininity

through consumption. The solicitation is meant to celebrate an embellished form of liberal feminism which initially turned off the reviewers. However, I argue that the aspects of the solicitation the reviewers initially disagreed with are what they later support in their reviews, but with different terminology. Therefore, most of the reviewers end up endorsing postfeminism while thinking they are supporting aspects of feminism typically not shown in comic books.

Most of the reviewers celebrated the comic for depicting the characters talking about their daily lives or, specifically, highlighting "girl talk." The conversations in the comic book that the reviewers praise actually support postfeminism with topics like consumerism and sexual freedom. Posluszny (2009) stated that the women "talk about, well, girl stuff (guys, the social scene, sex, relationships, etc.)" (para. 2). His use of "girl" suggests McRobbie's (2007) idea of "girl culture" where women are described as girls or attempt to reclaim a girl-like state. Posluszny later said that "there's very little superhero stuff and a whole lot of girl talk, girl power, and clever banter," thus further emphasizing the idea of the characters featured as girls, not women (para. 5). "Girl power" is an attempt by postfeminist adherents to create a pseudo-feminist message in order to further its consumption and sexual freedom messages. Naturally, "girl talk" is an extension of "girl power" by effectively channeling aspects of "girl power" culture.

Hargro (2009) furthered the "girl talk" terminology when he said that the comic "depicted a ton of 'girl talk' scenes, but it was nice to see superheroes having conversations – especially ones about emotions and relationships – instead of just punching or shooting" (para. 4). I would like to agree with Hargro that it is nice to see superheroes talk about mundane topics for the sake of variety, but in *Marvel Divas* they

still revolve around postfeminist conceptions of sexual freedom and consumption. For the characters, there is the fighting side and the "girly" side, but the fighting side is downplayed and ignored. Additionally, comic book companies are likely to publish stories of women superheroes talking about normal things, but we will never see Batman talking to Green Lantern about their relationship status, favorite alcoholic beverages, or ex-girlfriends (incidentally, most of them are dead). Female superheroes are relegated and put aside for the times they can talk about shopping or gossip about sex. These conversations will almost never be presented for male superheroes. For female superheroes, they are either shown talking or sexily fighting. *Marvel Divas* prefers the former over the latter.

Johanna (2009) provided an interesting counterpoint to the "girl talk" in *Marvel Divas* by looking at their discussion of cancer. Johanna claimed that "it's rare to see women talk to each other about anything but men, let alone exploring life-and-death issues that don't involve punching something" (para. 5). I can see Johanna's point because the characters do talk about cancer, but the cancer is still related to consumption inside the comic book with things like "retail therapy" and a makeover. Ultimately, "girl talk" and "girl power" are forwarded by postfeminism rather than more empowering forms of second- and third-wave feminism. The reviewers believe that "girl talk" and "girl power" are strengths of the comic, but the comic actually limits the roles and agency of women in a postfeminist framework. The positive things that the reviewers think about the comic are actually forwarding the negative ideals of postfeminism. Thus, postfeminism cleverly hides itself behind a pseudo-feminist veil.

The one sole reviewer that saw through the veneer of postfeminism is

Thompson's (2009) blog review of *Marvel Divas*. The only good part of the comic for

her was the artwork, a point that is also echoed in Hunt's (2009) and McElhatton's (2009)

reviews. She deconstructed the first issue by stating that it "is not only a bad episode of

Sex & The City [sic] in the pages of a comic book, but it is plotline for plotline actually

taken from Sex & The City" (para. 4). Similar to my criticisms, Thompson compared the

comic to the television show with characters from both having breast cancer, being

authors, having intimacy problems, and having boyfriends that offer money to them,

which they refuse out of "feminist" empowerment. Thompson further explained that

Marvel Divas was probably not going to win her over unless it was "the equivalent of

Maus [the award-winning holocaust memoir graphic novel] for female rights" (para. 15).

Thompson finally claimed that the artwork was meant for a story that:

> REALLY tackled the complexities of women, rather than the stereotype of
> women, that we are all hanging out talking obsessively about our boyfriends and
> ex-boyfriends… because we are of course not whole people without men. (para.
> 20. Emphasis in original)

Overall, Thompson described the inherent problems with the postfeminism at work in the

comic book, without directly referencing postfeminism by name. She believed that the

comic's reliance on *Sex and the City* and postfeminist characteristics harms the narrative

and ultimately hurts the comic book culture and culture at large. While the other

reviewers found positive things in the comic book for themselves, Thompson called out

those same things as actually working against women.

On the whole, the majority of the reviewers responded favorably to the comic

book even after agreeing that its questionable solicitation and cover detracted from the

pages inside. Looking at popular reviews of comics and other media is necessary

because it serves as an initial audience response test. Examining them also allows the

critic different viewpoints on the same text to discover different trends. I found that the

things those reviewers found as positives for the comic book are actually aspects of

postfeminist culture. Willingly or not, most of the reviewers forwarded aspects of

postfeminism by supporting *Marvel Divas*. They all agreed that the comic is just like *Sex*

and the City and that the artwork is the strongest part of the comic. However, most of

them did not realize that the text they constantly compare the comic book to is

postfeminist. The tropes and characteristics of *Sex and the City* carry over to *Marvel*

Divas to forward a postfeminist agenda that limits the roles and agency of women.

Thompson recognized this relationship and delivered the one negative review, but a blog

post rather than an official review (Thompson now writes for the most popular comic

book website, Comic Book Resources) does not hold the same weight in that it is not

seen by the same amount of people. Ultimately, the mainstream reviews may have

encouraged new readers to seek out *Marvel Divas* and its ideology of postfeminism.

Marvel Divas

In my analysis of *Marvel Divas*, I plan to focus on two main topics. I will begin

with a brief overview of the storyline, and then provide examples of the general canons of

postfeminism represented in the text by focusing on consumption and independence from

men/sexual freedom. Subsequently, I shall show how race interacts with postfeminism as

a marginalization rather than elimination of diversity. I approach my analysis from the

framework of postfeminist studies by investigating how the text responds to second-wave

and third-wave feminist ideals. I argue that the comic embraces postfeminism and

creates a narrative claiming female independence from men at the expense of true

agency. The empowerment occurs through the narrative's focus on the female

characters' establishment of identity through their consumption and sexual freedom. One

wrinkle in my argument is the fact that most of the characters have superpowers and thus

possess power and agency from their ability to (supernaturally) manipulate the world.

However, the text spends little time with the characters in costume using their powers and

instead focuses on their regular lives. The potential for their superpowers rests inside

their bodies, but those powers are hardly shown or utilized. Indeed, the reason why

Angelica gets cancer is because her own superpowers are poisoning her body, thus

showing the agency of possessing superpowers may contain negative effects. The comic

neglects to argue that these women are special outside of their consumption and sexual

freedom lifestyles. I will demonstrate, from a postfeminist perspective, how the

characters' agency fluctuates within those guidelines and limits.

Marvel Divas follows four primary female characters: the writer Patsy "Hellcat,"

the former thief Felicia "Black Cat," the former leader of a superhero group and Black

woman Monica "Photon," and the young Angelica "Firestar" who finds out she has breast

cancer. The story begins with Patsy releasing her new, tell-all book about her life as a

superhero. Then the comic describes how the women met at a speed dating event for

superheroes. The characters talk of their recent romantic partnerships at a bar when

Angelica shows up and tells her friends that she has breast cancer. From there, the story

deals with Angelica's cancer while following the other characters' (but not Angelica's)

romantic entanglements with men. At the end, Angelica's cancer is cured and they

celebrate with a $20,000 bottle of champagne. The story finishes *and* begins with

consumption; a general descriptor of postfeminism.

Consumption

Consumption is more prominent in the first half of the story than the second half, but it still plays a vital role in creating the comic as a postfeminist text. After Patsy, Felicia, and Monica escape Patsy's book release party, Patsy's "voiceover" in narration boxes recants the times the characters have spent together. The comic presents five frames over two pages in the first issue showing the characters at the pool objectifying men, at the movies, getting mani-pedis at the spa while talking about how it is better than sex, visiting a modern art exhibit, and then finally battling. Of all five of these panels, the final one takes the most prominent page space and is the only frame that attempts to rupture the postfeminism inherent in the text. The women are shown utilizing their superpowers to fight evil, therefore providing a brief glimpse at the characters acting as actual superheroes. Nevertheless, the comic book resists continuing the narrative of their strong role as superheroes and instead focuses on their role as consumers.

The characters are shown a few times in settings that mirror *Sex and the City*, such as bars and restaurants. A primary scene is when they go to a bar to drink alcohol and gossip. When they walk in, they proclaim their orders as the bartender turns away whispering "Oh, god. Not them again." The bartender's reaction suggests that the women are regulars, disruptive, and demanding. The bar is noticeably upper class with modern lights and furnishings like bonsai trees, and the women drink multiple beverages out of martini glasses. The setting displays their high-class and privileged status as people who can afford fancy drinks at glitzy bars. Later on, some of the characters are shown eating salads and drinking wine outside of a café (p. 54). Because the characters seemingly do not have typical day jobs other than superhero-ing, it is unknown how they

get their money to afford these expenses. Their privileged status as consumers in the construction of postfeminism prevents them from establishing their own identities. Therefore, the characters' unique traits such as superpowers or their personalities are marginalized throughout the story. This is reified continually when they go to bars or shop.

Monetary power is further shown when the characters go clothes shopping as a way to cheer Angelica up from her breast cancer diagnosis. A frame depicts Patsy sitting outside a dressing room at Saks Fifth Avenue with her back towards the camera as she types on her computer. Thus, it suggests that she is about to view Angelica and Monica trying on clothes as we view them; the camera positions the audience like they were Patsy even if the couch serves as a bit of a divider. In a narration box, Patsy describes that, "Monica and I took Angelica out for lunch and some retail therapy… Once a model, always a model, I guess." The "retail therapy" part of the quote suggests that these women shop in order to make themselves feel better. The postfeminist woman asserts herself through her monetary power. In this instance, consumption limits and subverts any sort of meaningful relationship the characters might have with each other. By promoting consumerism rather than celebrating the friendships of women, particularly in a cancer diagnosis, the comic constructs a negative viewpoint on women's relationships. Instead, the characters are under the notion that they can buy their way to happiness. An independent woman utilizes consumption as a form of "therapy" resulting in a lack of agential strength. The happiness consumption provides also cannot come from men who the female characters use to assert their pseudo-independent womanhood.

Independent Women

In the construction of the comic book, the female characters proclaim themselves as separate from men. The men they associate with are used mostly as cannon fodder to reinstate their freedom. When the male characters get too close, needy, and/or fatherly, the female characters instantly take charge and block the men from their lives. They sexually objectify some of the men, like men do to women in most forms of the media. Ultimately, men are disposable in the construction of the comic in order to emphasize female empowerment. However, this empowerment is negligible because the women still rely upon men to satisfy their sexual interests and needs. The women often banter about current and ex-partners, which takes up the majority of their conversations with one another. In the context of the comic, women must assert their own identity by becoming independent despite the reality of still relying upon men.

Near the beginning of the comic collection is when the characters primarily objectify men. Monica and Felicia go back and forth about who they would have sex with at a party:

> Felicia: The guy in the red? By the chocolate fountain?
> Monica: Without a doubt. The guy in the sprayed-on jeans by the scary topiary?"
> Felicia (leaning in): Absolutely I would. In fact, I believe I already have.

As shown in this exchange, the women are empowering themselves through sexually objectifying men and their freedom to choose sexual partners. Although it seems like a role reversal for the women in objectifying men, there are not any nuances or deep explorations of their characters. Instead, they shape themselves as sexual beings even when they are the ones objectifying rather than being objectified. This twist of representation in how female characters assert their independent sexuality actually

reflects the characters' limited representations and agency. The characters do reject their lovers in order to focus on their friendships and independence, but this rejection emphasizes their sexual freedom and implies that they will always find a new lover. In the context of the comic, rejecting their lovers and asserting their independence is a powerful and liberating tool, but, when the women are not together, the characters revolve their lives around men. Normally the assertion of independence would be a positive aspect of the comic book, but the women do not engage in a full separation from men because they still focus a large part of their lives on them. In this respect, the female characters' identities are not developed in any meaningful way outside of their relationships with men.

Felicia's dismissal of Thomas Fireheart within the comic is meant to be a poignant effort to show her independence from men. Throughout the series, Felicia is intending to open up Cat's Eye Private Investigations, but she does not possess the funds to do so, which is antithetical to the lifestyle she leads with expensive clothing and bar tabs. Thomas follows Felicia, continually offering his money in a fatherly role to help her afford a rental space for the business. At one point he calls her "baby" with her response being, "**Don't** call me 'Baby'! I'm not your baby, I'm not **anyone's** baby!" Furthermore, she claims, "I'm **not** a charity case, Thomas! I don't want or **need** your money!" (Emphasis in original). This last frame is intriguing because it shows Thomas trying to hold Felicia to comfort her, but she is pulling away from him. Therefore, the comic leaves the audience with a frame out of context as Thomas looks like he is attacking Felicia or asserting his dominance over her. The frame portrays Thomas as an aggressor, and makes Felicia standing up to him a strong moment of feminist assertion.

Yet, the comic soils this feminist moment later in the series. By the end of the comic, Felicia calls off the relationship because he is trying to enforce his patriarchal agenda. Still, this early rejection of patriarchy is veiled by postfeminist appeals. Her response of accepting a bottle of $20,000 champagne from Thomas at the end of the comic embraces consumerism. The women literally consume the symbolic postfeminism and refusal of independence outside of men.

Daimon Hellstrom plays a recurring role in Patsy's life because he bargains a cure for Angelica's cancer for one night with Patsy. Being the son of Satan, Daimon embodies unbelievable power and manipulation. The comic book constructs Daimon as petty and vain to emphasize the importance of the women sticking together against him. Eventually, Patsy takes up the deal of staying a night with Daimon to save Angelica. She discovers that Daimon is upset about barely being mentioned in Patsy's popular book "Cat Outta Hell." Patsy agrees to write two more chapters about Daimon for him to release her and her friends, who came to Hell to rescue her. However, this is at the expense of no longer knowing whether or not Angelica's cancer is cured. The whole ordeal with Daimon seems like a sidetrack to fill more pages, but I maintain that it parodies the vanity of men. While Thomas tried to be fatherly, Daimon wants notoriety and validation of his importance. These men in the comic are portrayed as one-dimensional in order to emphasize the women's power. However, the emphasis of the female character's power is only because of the rejection of men: their agency comes from no other source. I would like to now turn towards how Monica, the Black character, is represented. By exploring Monica's representation, I argue that the comic book further reinforces the lack of agency for women common in postfeminist texts.

Race in *Marvel Divas*

Monica Rambeau is the character that is most explicitly shown embracing her sexuality in *Marvel Divas*; this is important because Monica is a Black woman. Since early in the representation of Black women stemming from Saartjie Baartman in the 1810s (Osha, 2008) to modern-day Janet Jackson (Holland, 2009) and Tyra Banks (Joseph, 2009), the media has traditionally presented black women as highly sexual. Although Monica's Black sexuality seems troublesome at first, I argue that Monica's race is marginalized, as can be understood through Gray's (1995/2004) assimilationist theory. Gray's belief was that Black characters on television are assimilated to remove many of the signifiers of Black identity and made them almost-White. However, through assimilation Black characters were still marginalized because they never could be completely White. Monica's race is not totally eliminated, but it instead functions to further support the goals of postfeminism. In that regard, Monica's sexuality is under the same guidelines as that of the other women. There are some racial signifiers that do stand out and push along the boundaries of assimilation. A genuinely positive depiction of race is stunted, however, when sexuality is continually emphasized. Monica's characterization is absorbed back into the postfeminist framework even when it attempts to challenge some aspects of the representations of race.

The first textually explicit indicator of Monica's race is during the initial formation of the group of friends. As the women complain about not knowing many other people outside of capes and tights, Monica states, "Please. You want to talk isolation? Try being a black woman in this business." This statement draws attention to Monica's racial difference and is almost a metacommentary on the superhero genre's lack

of people of color as a whole. The framing of the panel is also fairly interesting with Patsy in the foreground smiling as Monica speaks in the background. The speech bubble does cover up parts of Patsy, but she still takes up about one-third of the frame. Therefore, some of the focus is put on the White Patsy while Monica makes this challenging statement about race. Monica is portrayed as an angry Black woman, while Patsy smiles and is happy in the foreground. The next frame erases this focus on providing a racial commentary on comic portrayals when it depicts the women at the pool objectifying men. As soon as racial difference is mentioned, the comic does not explore the idea behind the declaration but instead tries to divert the readers' focus. The two sentences draw attention to racial difference, and that may be why it is so quickly dismissed.

Only one other time is the descriptor "black" mentioned, which is when Monica explains her trip to New Orleans for "cleaning up the mess you white people left behind" from Hurricane Katrina. The character Brother Voodoo appears, but the comic continues to remind readers of Voodoo's new title of Doctor Voodoo, as if to distance itself away from the "Brother" in his former title. His racial signifier is mentioned in title only with "Brother" suggesting Black people's vernacular of familiarity. Otherwise, he is similar to all of the other men in the book. Overall, "blackness" is mentioned and then forgotten. Monica and Voodoo are assimilated into the comic once their Blackness is stated but not explored.

Monica and Voodoo's race is made nonessential to their characters through assimilation. Later in the story, Monica and Voodoo are shown in silhouette kissing on a bed and then in sheets afterwards, but the situation could be easily swapped for White

characters because there is no attention drawn to their Blackness. The only signifier left of their Blackness is their light brown skin. Monica's sexual forays with Voodoo showcase her as more explicitly sexual than the other characters in the comic, but her Blackness does not emerge as a specific point of discussion. The comic appropriates her Blackness and makes it supplementary to her character. Monica's Blackness is marginalized and assimilated into the comic book to make it unimportant to the narrative and her characterization as a whole. However, it stands that the one explicitly sexual character in the book is the Black woman, and this means that the book is reifying the sexualization of all Black women in the media (hooks, 1996). One point to also note is that Monica is paired with another Black man rather than someone of another race. This also sexualizes Voodoo rather than the other men. Yet, Thomas Fireheart, who is attached to Felicia, is Native American, so the comic does not exclusively pair the female characters with male characters of the same race. Nevertheless, the comic attempts to remove any further mentions of Monica's Blackness after the first few remarks in the beginning of the story. The initial portrayal of Monica's challenge may function as a form of pandering to the critics and audience to cover any claims of racism. By drawing attention to race, the comic covertly pushes it aside.

Monica, once her Blackness is ignored, acts almost exactly like Felicia and Patsy when they reject the men in their lives. She reacts to Voodoo inviting her to stay with him by fleeing into the night. A close-up shot of her eyes and furled brows as she retells the story leads to her saying, "I know what I want, ladies, and what I **want** is to move at my pace…not at some **man's** pace" (Emphasis in original). This mimics almost exactly Felicia's response to Thomas. While Voodoo is both caring and casual with Monica

compared to Thomas, he is still seen as an obstacle for the relationship between the women. Monica meets up with Voodoo for a second time when he is in New York, which ends in another night of sex. Yet again, the relationship is merely sexual, and not emotional, and seems designed to show Monica's independence and sexual freedom as a postfeminist woman. However, unlike her friend's romantic relationships, the comic suggests Monica's sexual forays with Voodoo continue after the comic is over. Perhaps the comic suggests that Monica and Voodoo's relationship is casual enough to continue or perhaps only the Black character gets to definitively remain sexual after the pages end.

Ultimately, Monica is portrayed as the most explicitly sexual of the four women, but her representation functions merely as an example of a postfeminist woman asserting her sexual independence. The representation and sexualization of Monica and Voodoo could be an example of the comic book accepting and reifying race, but her Blackness is so marginalized as to make her function almost exactly like her White companions. Her Blackness is signified through her skin color and a few direct messages in the text. However, this works to recognize difference but not interrogate it. Her role is an incredibly loose commentary on Black women's representation that is swept away by the assimilation at work. The idea of her representation is similar to that of color-blind casting in movies where racial indicators are ignored. Monica does mention she is Black and she is the most sexual out of the group, but her character works as an example of postfeminism's powerful force that captures both White women and women of color. The most challenging moment she presents to readers is when she makes the brief commentary on Black women in the profession of superhero-ing. This moment is soon lost once the comic fires on all cylinders to make sure the female characters do not

possess power because their twisted pseudo-power is through consumption and an alleged sexual freedom.

Monica's representation is unlike Vixen's in *Birds of Prey* because her powers do not revolve around her race nor is she deranged. While Vixen's powers are animalistic and she becomes feral in the comic, Monica's are based on waves (like light waves, infrared, or microwaves). Monica's representation is postfeminist because her race is acknowledged and then forgotten. Her sexualization reiterates racist stereotypes about Black women's inherently sexual natures, but her choice as the most sexual seems almost circumstantial at times. Ultimately, Monica exists to emphasize sexual freedom and, to a smaller extent, consumption.

Conclusion

Marvel Divas is a primary illustration of *Sex and the City* interpreted into comic books with a reference even directly thrown in. The comic suffers from many of the same problems of the television show with its postfeminist emphasis on consumption and sexual freedom. This comic is an example of bad writing paired with nonsexually objectifying art unlike the other case studies in this thesis. *Marvel Divas* presents a fairly skinny and simple depiction of its women, which is contrasting the usual superhero styles of women with large breasts, thin waists, and wide hips. However, it is equally unrealistic, especially in a yoga scene where a handful of women superhero's bodies look the same. Although it does not visually objectify women to the same extent that other comics do, the comic book propagandizes consumption and an imagined sexual freedom through the framework of postfeminism. Despite a Black female character separating *Sex*

and the City from the comic, she is assimilated into the postfeminist agenda to be just like the White characters. What we can learn from fiction is that it is difficult to showcase powerful and fair representations of women when postfeminism interjects itself in so many places.

Perhaps the definition of what *Marvel Divas* really is boils down to the very last page. A large, open panel showcases the four characters as they lounge around on fancy sofas and drink champagne in fashionable clothes. Felicia asks Patsy what their group will be called in her new book, and Patsy responds with, "I dunno, I'm playing around with a few things… 'Super Vixens'? 'The Femtastic Four'?" The next frame zooms in on Patsy's smiling face with speed lines and a radial, orange gradient surrounding her head. The effect suggests a moment of introspection and focus while the caption box reads, "I've said it before and I'll say it again: I love my gal-pals… Who cares what we're called?" The comic book ends with an example of naming and what naming means. Her suggestions of the other superhero team names are equally demeaning as "Marvel Divas," but she embraces both of the ideas. The importance of the characters sticking together is emphasized with "who cares what we're called," but the comic continues to force the reader to put a label on them. Perhaps the "gal-pals" are merely that: female friends who get together to finish the comic by consuming a $20,000 bottle of champagne, celebrating their "freedom" from men, and overcoming a breast cancer diagnosis that loosely guides the narrative. Patsy is about to publish a book to make even more money. Felicia has opened her business by establishing her separation from men but accepts expensive champagne from her ex. Angelica's sole role is to overcome cancer and serve as a vehicle for consumption, and her character shows that someone

with cancer cannot be sexual. Monica's Blackness is mostly ignored despite being the most sexually active on the team. The comic ends with possible names for the team while reestablishing the central tenants of postfeminism: consumption, idealized sexual freedom, and near erasure of race.

Marvel Divas serves as another example of postfeminism in female team superhero comic books. Additionally, the comic opens a doorway to further study the representation of Blackness in postfeminism. The idea of erasing race continues, but the comic adds an interesting nuance to the formula by Monica's emphasized sexuality. Most of the reviewers believed that *Marvel Divas* broke new ground for superhero comics by showing women outside of their costumes and partaking in conversations that mirror the real world. The comic book is approachable in its artwork and in its focus on the characters' everyday lives and friendships. However, those lives revolve around shopping and sexual freedom with men. Additionally, Marvel's intended audience for the comic is unclear because male readers may not enjoy the *Sex and the City* style of the comic while the women who might read *Marvel Divas* probably do not read comics in general (Thompson, 2009). *Marvel Divas* continues the tradition of limiting the roles of women and removing their agency by faking empowerment. Without critical examination, the ideology of *Marvel Divas* and other postfeminist texts can pass by unnoticed.

CHAPTER 4

FEMME FATALES, EROTICA, AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

IN *GOTHAM CITY SIRENS*

Introduction

Gotham City Sirens by Paul Dini and Guillem March fully embraces the sexual

objectification of its female characters in both the writing and art. It attempts a unique

trick in which it half-handedly argues that a group of women can be both sexy and

empowering. However, the "sexy" aspects of the comic are repetitive, while the

empowering moments are left by the wayside. Perhaps it is because the three main

characters, Catwoman, Poison Ivy, and Harley Quinn, are all villains and femme fatales

that the readers and some critics allow the sexual objectification to get a free pass. Either

way, the comic book celebrates its outright sexism in both writing and art. Because the

comic continually states that the characters are a team, it tries to argue that women are

powerful in groups. Yet members of the team are constantly shown in compromising,

sexualizing poses without any logical purpose to their group dynamics. What is poignant

to my study of *Gotham City Sirens* is that the series lasted 26 issues and was only

cancelled for a reboot of the entire DC Universe that cancelled every other series.

Gotham City Sirens lasted over 2 years providing it with a multitude of opportunities to

convey its sexual objectification to established and new readers.

I contend that *Gotham City Sirens* is an example of postfeminism in female team superhero comic books because it gathers a handful of women and calls that empowerment. However, the characters' interrelationships are troubled by suspicion and even acts of torture. Of utmost importance to my argument is that the series visually objectifies the characters whenever they are together or apart. The characters cannot fully escape their status as sex symbols, and it sullies whatever words they say or actions they do. The characters stand as villains who can be selfish, but that is no excuse for them to distrust each other or purposefully put each other in bondage. Additionally, the comic serves as a postfeminist text because of its emphasis on shopping (similar to *Marvel Diva*'s "retail therapy"), and the character Harley Quinn's unhealthy obsession over a relationship with a male character. Harley Quinn's obsession with The Joker also leads the comic book to argue that domestic abuse is not a serious problem, and women should return to their abuser even if that abuser is a psychopathic killer. *Gotham City Sirens* is an extreme example of words and images working together to devalue female characters. As an imagetext, *Gotham City Sirens* is poisonous in its treatment of women because the scenes are written and drawn to devalue all women.

The issues under analysis for this case study will be numbers 1, 2, and 4 through 6. Issue number 3 is not included because it focuses primarily on the male character, The Riddler, and does not tie into the other issues fluidly. I will first provide a plot synopsis followed by a description of cheesecake imagery as a historical element of many comic books. I preface a critical reception overview with this discussion of cheesecake because almost all of the reviews mention the term. I will then focus on examinations of villainy and the femme fatale in pop culture. After a description of some key ways that female

characters are objectified in cheesecake, I will end the case study with my analysis. Ultimately, the issues examined focus on setting up the characters as a team, showing their interactions with each other, and degrading them as characters.

Plot

Gotham City Sirens jumps around with the plot in the issues examined to a large degree. The story involves the three women, Catwoman, Poison Ivy, and Harley Quinn meeting and joining together as a team. The first two issues provide a loose explanation as to how the team meets and issues 4 through 6 focus on Harley Quinn, although they heavily involve the other characters as well. Catwoman is an on-again-off-again villain and thief, with a free pass from Batman to do whatever she wants within reason. Poison Ivy is a former botanist who can now control plants, and she is an idealistic villain who attacks humans because they do not respect the environment. Harley Quinn was a gifted psychiatrist at Arkham Asylum before falling in love with The Joker and turning toward a life of crime. Ultimately, the comics attempt to justify why these characters should be considered a team while working to explicate a convincing purpose or goal for them to achieve.

The justification for why the women join together is fairly simple, although it lacks any clear reasoning. The beginning of the series finds Catwoman fighting a Z-list villain in an alley when Poison Ivy comes to save her. They eventually meet with Harley Quinn and decide to stick together as a team. The character motivations are vague considering that after Poison Ivy and Harley bind and interrogate Catwoman to find out Batman's identity, Catwoman invites them to stay with her. The characters mostly face

off against other villains, which creates a compelling conflict of interest for the reader. The series tries to join the characters together and showcase female solidarity, but it does so by relying upon contrived plot devices, consumerism, and sexual objectification.

Cheesecake

Before moving into the popular reception of the series, it is necessary to define what "cheesecake" is in the realm of comic books because many of the reviewers mention how the artwork is some form of cheesecake. I have mentioned cheesecake throughout this thesis, but *Gotham City Sirens* acts as a premiere example of cheesecake, even overshadowing *Birds of Prey's* level of compromising artwork. According to Duncan and Smith (2009), cheesecake is the "depiction of females in suggestive clothing and poses," which can reach the "level of anatomical impossibility" (p. 257). What this means is that cheesecake consists of incredibly sexualized images (and the writing that leads to those images) that serve almost no purpose aside from sexualizing female characters.

Depending on the circumstance, there may be acceptable forms of cheesecake. Dan DeCarlo and Jack Cole were masters at presenting sexually suggestive comics (usually a single frame), but utilizing those comics as a tease for the reader (Berlatsky, 2009). For example, Jack Cole's cartoon features a visually attractive woman with an unattractive man as she points him out the door. The cartoon is playful with the powerful woman taking control of the man and sending him away. The man's facial expression implies a possible story to the cartoon such as the wife kicking the husband out of the house. Overall, the one panel comic is meant for humor while still showing off a buxom

woman. Jack Cole's cartoon and other cheesecake examples are still products of the time

period of the 1950s to 1960s by drawing upon and adding to common pin-up images, but

they showcase where modern cheesecake originates. Cheesecake can be light-hearted

and teasing without degrading its subjects, and it is not entirely limited to images of

women. For example, some gay comics utilize cheesecake for men (Sewell, 2001).

Berlatsky (2009) wrote a compelling online post where he defended some forms of

cheesecake. However, he soon discovered that cheesecake found in superhero comic

books does not serve much of a purpose. He established that the real crime behind

cheesecake in superhero comic books is when the companies try to cover up that the

cheesecake is meant to sell books. Berlatsky argued:

> Once you start pretending that you're talking about a smart, motivated, principled
> adventurer, on the other hand, you end up implying that said smart, motivated,
> principled, adventurer has an uncontrollable compulsion to dress like a space-tart
> on crack. Which is, it seems to me, insulting. (Para. 4)

Berlatsky's point is that superhero cheesecake does not make much logical sense

because, unlike Dan DeCarlo or Jack Cole, there is no justified reasoning. Cheesecake

can become the central focus of a comic book as a whole and thereby replace the

narrative or other arguments when it is unnecessarily added on.

The companies that publish superhero comic books act as though they are

innocent in propagating cheesecake because they argue that their characters are both sexy

and strong. When cheesecake is prevalent page after page, sexism and sexual

objectification become institutionalized and without any story-related purpose. Once that

has happened, the characters are less likely to be considered strong, only sexy. Berlatsky

(2009) later stated that "super-heroine cheesecake is often offensive just because it's so

thoroughly incompetent" (para.7). Additionally, there is little to no artistic quality to

superhero cheesecake as Berlatsky argued, "you look at super-heroine cheesecake, and you get a sense of a boys' locker-room cluelessness so intense that it is indistinguishable from disdain" (para. 9). Cheesecake has reached a point in superhero comics where there is no artistic reasoning for its portrayal, and it argues for the sexual objectification of women. Yet, some of the reviewers still celebrated the cheesecake found in *Gotham City Sirens*.

Critical Reception

I argue that investigating the popular reception of texts can forecast the different ways the same artifact can be interpreted by diverse readers. My study of *Gotham City Sirens* in this thesis is unique because the first conference I went to involved a paper comparing *Gotham City Sirens* to the then-current volume of *Batgirl*. During the question and answer section, a young woman raised her hand and explained that she thought *Gotham City Sirens* was a powerful representation for women. In that moment, I could not get into an ideological debate about the short fallings of *Gotham City Sirens*, so I spoke with her after the panel concluded. Her opinion stemmed from her love of all three central characters and how happy she was to see them in the same comic. Because of that love, she overlooked what I considered (and still consider) to be the sexually exploitative artwork. I explained to her that I thought the writing and artwork took away from what liberatory potential the comic might have had. Ultimately, we ended on a stalemate, but I learned that, from completely different perspectives, opinions can differ. Thus, organizing popular reception reviews allows for me to get a foundation for critique and consider those varying perspectives. I can then channel or at least account for the

opinions of others in order to inform the rest of my work. Other scholars can draw upon similar experiences to understand the polysemy of interpretations of texts.

As I have shown in *Marvel Divas*, popular reviews from when the comic was first published provide an opportunity to get initial opinions of the text. *Gotham City Sirens* is the only one out of the entire series of my case studies to get such vastly different reviews. Although I examine five issues of the series, I decided to limit the selection of reviews to the first two issues because these showcase critics' initial responses. Additionally, reviews at the beginning of a series are more common because that is when consumers are the most interested in the comics. As a whole, the comic did not make much of an impression on many of the reviewers, and Nevett (2009) even claimed that it is "completely forgettable once that final page has been read" (para. 5). My overview of the critical reception will encompass how the reviewers responded to both the writing and art, whether positively or negatively.

There is a general disagreement between three of the reviewers of the first issue that is important to highlight because it shows different interpretations of the comic. In this section, I conceptualize the comic as a text rather than an imagetext because Nevett (2009) and Posluszny (2009) disagreed with McElhatton (2009) on whether the writing or the art is superior in the comic. They did not look at the comic book holistically but instead broke it into two parts. McElhatton argued that Dini's writing is "the stronger of the two halves of #1, but it seems remarkably slow and meandering" (para. 4). McElhatton's response is compelling because he chooses the writing that is, in his opinion, mediocre over the art, which is worse. He continued in his review to state that "I want to like this book, but I feel like no one involved is giving it their all" (para. 5). On

the other hand, Posluszny had an entirely different interpretation of the comic when he stated that "the script for the debut of *Gotham City Sirens* is pretty disappointing" (para. 4). Opposite of McElhatton, Posluszny claimed that "Guillem March's work is the obvious highlight, but nice artwork can only take a series so far" (para. 5). Nevett joined Posluszny when he argued that the art was "rendered in a lush style that uses inventive panel placements and exquisite figures" (para. 1). However, Nevett admitted that the art "sometimes slides into that 'scantily-clad women posing in ways that women tend not to in real life' area" (para. 1). Nevett recognized that even the stronger of the two parts in the comic tended to portray women negatively. The debate between the two sides highlights the differences of interpretation for both the writing and art. By examining these two aspects of comic books, scholars can understand how one side of the textual/artistic divide often outweighs the other.

The three reviewers, among others, separate art from text in a systematic way to critique the comic. They do not, however, consider the comic as an imagetext with each form informing the other and working together. Granted, McElhatton (2009) claimed that a different artist might work better for the script. The three reviewers approached the comic from entirely different viewpoints, and they offered disagreement in their reviews over which form was worse. Nevertheless, all of the reviewers gave the comic a negative rating, thus showing that, no matter which arena, the comic failed to provide a valuable sense of entertainment. All of the other reviewers additionally mentioned that the comic provided cheesecake and sexually exploitative artwork and writing.

Phillips (2009a; 2009b) is perhaps the greatest negative critic of both the first and second issue of *Gotham City Sirens*, and he pointed out the problems in the

representation of women in all of superhero comics. He argued that Dini "never really convinces us these three femme fatales have any legitimate reason to join up" (2009a, para. 2). Phillips further stated, "add in Guillem March's cheesecake art, and it's hard to believe this series has a reason to exist beyond gratuitously showcasing its three sexy leads" (para. 2). Throughout both reviews, Phillips attacked the comic for its objectification of the female characters. The author continued to point out that certain scenes "accomplish very little other than to remind us that March likes drawing women in sexy and often compromising poses" (para. 4). In the review of the second issue, Phillips (2009b) provided descriptions of the comic that involved "paper-thin characterization," it being "truly moronic," and "one-dimensional and sophomoric" (para. 1). He later claimed that the artist "accentuates [the characters'] womanly curves to ridiculous proportions" (para. 2). Lastly, Phillips explained, "whenever I read a comic that looks like *Gotham City Sirens* does, I can't help put [sic] feel a little skeezy – like I'm looking in on the fantasies of an adolescent boy" (para 2). Ultimately, Phillips is the most disappointed with the book because of its sexism and objectification.

The use of the team formula to present more scantily-clad women was considered by Phillips in his review. He conveyed that the comic makes a small attempt at showcasing the power of women in teams, but it ultimately uses the team device to further portray sexism and visual objectification on an even greater level than a single female-lead comic. Phillips ended his second review with a poignant observation about the comic's effort to show a handful of women working together when he said, "It's becoming clearer by the issue that the planning process behind *Gotham City Sirens* started and ended with 'let's put these three hot super-babes in the same book!'" (para.

4). To him, there is no teamwork and there is no justifiable reason for all three characters to be together, other than to exploit their mass sexual appeal. For Phillips and most of the other reviewers, *Gotham City Sirens* functions as a vehicle for cheesecake and sexually exploitative writing and artwork, and Phillips highlights the team, or lack thereof, aspect to the series.

Unlike the previous reviewers, St-Louis (2009) and Robinson (2009) responded favorably to the first issue. Both of them admitted that the art is cheesecake, but they enjoyed it. St-Louis explained that, "any comic book featuring female lead [sic] is forever doomed to have an artist that knows how to highlight the female physique – or draw something that looks like what men idealize about women's bodies" (para. 3). The reviewer acknowledged this observation, but he does not critique it at all. Instead, it is stated matter-of-factly without any explanation. If critics merely point out aspects of comics that are interesting to them without critically examining the comics, then no argument or progress can be made. He then adds to his observation a leading question to end the review, "Did I mention that [March's] women, although over sexualized, have reasonably real proportions?" (para. 3). Additionally, St-Louis believed that these representations are acceptable in comic books without him understanding the representations' consequences. Robinson furthers these sentiments with an observation fit for the general reading audience:

> It's weird for a grown man to admit this but between Dini's writing and Guillem's drawing Harley Quinn is, well really hot. Guillem gives Ivy the pinup look and Catwoman a more fetish vibe while keeping Quinn as that quirky bad girl we all dated, loved and nearly blew our brains out over. (para. 5)

I imagine that these interpretations and reviews of the comic represent more of the opinions of the general reader, seeing as the series lasted 26 issues. They are telling in

that they acknowledged the cheesecake and the sexual objectification in the comic but then celebrated it. With reviews like St-Louis and Robinson's, no real progress can take place in the representation of women in comics.

These reviews provide insight into how the comic was received by critics. The authors either disagreed about whether the art or writing was better in an overall negative critique or they responded positively to the first two issues. The positive reviews recognized and celebrated the very things that the negative ones regarded as problematic. Overall, the varying reviews of the comic book provide nuance and background for my own critique of the comic as a postfeminist text. I agree with the negative critiques that gathering these three characters together appears to be a move to create a positive representation of teamwork among women, but, in actuality, serves as a postfeminist vehicle for rampant sexual objectification in both the writing and art. The comic sexualizes women in teams, titillates with the femme fatale and erotic undertones, emphasizes consumerism, and argues that all women need a relationship with a man no matter how abusive. Perhaps this is made more possible through the use of characters who are considered villains functioning as protagonists of their own book. I wish to ask whether or not the characters' ultra-sexualization communicates a degrading message to how women should be treated inside the comic book world and outside in the real world.

Villainy

In popular fiction and comic books, villains serve as antagonists that heroes must defeat in order to succeed. Different villains provide different challenges to the heroes in order to create a story. *Gotham City Sirens* presents three members of Batman's "Rogues

Gallery" that are considered the villains that Batman most often combats. Forbes (2011)

claimed that, "if good and evil have intrinsic natures that oppose one another, and we

understand that there are compelling reasons to favor good over evil, evil shouldn't seem

so intriguing" (p. 14). Yet, popular culture is fascinated with villains because they

represent unique challenges to heroes. A superhero's goal may ultimately be to do good

in the world while the villain's goal may not necessarily be so clear. However,

superheroes need villains so that they can display their heroism. Villains are absolutely

necessary to bolster the superheroes conquering them. Forbes suggests that our interest

in villains may not necessarily be because we believe in their actions but because "it may

simply be an interest in a different perspective" (p. 13). Interest in the characters of

Gotham City Sirens may be in response to their deviant nature and sexual allure,

particularly because their stories revolve around selfish endeavors. Thus, this team-

oriented representation of female superheroes functions more as voyeurism than it does to

provide depictions of strong, female role models. The audience gets to view these

characters in sexually promiscuous poses, rather than the characters making any

statement about the positive representation of women.

In *Gotham City Sirens*, the characters are not necessarily motivated to do the same

things as heroes. The challenges they face in the issues under examination are mostly

designed for them to focus on self-centered endeavors, rather than heroic ones. As

Buchenberger (2011) explained, heroes' actions are from altruistic motives while "the

villains' actions are almost always selfish and egoistic" (p. 541). *Gotham City Sirens* is

designed to revolve around the individual, largely egoistic problems of the three female

characters. Catwoman must confront the other villain, Hush, who removed her heart, and

Harley fights Gaggy over who is the better sidekick to The Joker. The whole team deals with these endeavors, but they are mostly self-driven. The plots are completely selfish, focusing on revenge and jealousy, because the characters are working to alleviate personal problems rather than making positive change in the world as a whole. The comic attempts to cast the characters as protagonists, but they still hold onto their antagonistic status as villains. This dichotomy affected how they were represented on the page.

Catwoman, Poison Ivy, and Harley Quinn are arguably more easily objectified than heroes because of their status and allure as villains. O'Neill and Seal (2012) argued that "in order to be rescued from abjection, violent women must be recuperated into femininity. This is where the more recognisably feminine aspects of a woman's identity are stressed in order to neutralise her threat to social order" (p. 43). From this perspective, the female characters of *Gotham City Sirens* must be regulated as villains and made to seem overtly feminine to be perceived as protagonists. In order to make their former roles as villains less threatening, the characters are sexualized through both the art and writing. In this way, their villainy and agency are kept in check through sexually objectifying them. The characters edge closer to being protagonists because their characterizations and bodies are used to nullify their agency as villains. Essentially, the characters become the heroes of their stories by their status as sex symbols. Male villains may not be able to carry a similar story to make them protagonists because the effort to sexualize them may discount their validity as villains. Through the female characters' past representations in other comic books, however, they could be considered femme fatales. The femme fatale aspect of their characters represents a sexualized

duplicity between hero and self-serving villain. There is a balancing of their roles as defused villains turned protagonists and femme fatales. The two roles work together to ultimately showcase sexualized images of women with a sort of pseudo-agency derived from their constitution as selfish protagonists.

The Femme Fatale

The femme fatale stems from the film noir period of movies in the early to mid-20th century. Krutnik (1991) explained that the "glamorous noir femme fatales tend to be women who seek to advance themselves by manipulating their sexual allure and controlling its value" (p. 63). Gordon (2009) furthered the description when she claimed that the femme fatale is a "self-serving, narcissistic, and sexually provocative woman" (p. 203). Femme fatales are "active, not static symbols, [and] are intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality" (Place, 1998). The female characters' status as femme fatales in *Gotham City Sirens* is carried over from their interactions with Batman and other male characters in the DC Comics Universe, but it is not explicitly apparent in their own series.

What normally necessitates the femme fatale is a male character to seduce. *Gotham City Sirens* presents no primary male character for the three female characters to interact with. However, I argue that the female characters' roles as femme fatales is not necessarily relegated in the comic. Their sexual allure is not meant for the other characters in the comic book, but for the reader. The appeal to the reader functions more on a metalevel than within the world of the comic. The character's sexual objectification serves no real purpose in the context of the story, and it must therefore be, at least

partially, explained by their implied relationship with the audience.

As St-Louis (2009) and Robinson's (2009) reviews suggest, the sexual objectification of the female characters may primarily be meant to satisfy the reader's expectations of sexy women in a team setting. Catwoman, Poison Ivy, and Harley Quinn are often shown sexualized in other comics, so the objectification and femme fatale characterization follows them into *Gotham City Sirens*. As Bronfen (2004) explained, "the classic femme fatale has enjoyed such popularity because she is not only sexually uninhibited, but also unabashedly independent and ruthlessly ambitious" (p. 106). In the following analysis, I argue that the characters remain popular today and the comic book lasted 26 issues because of their sexuality and pseudo-agency as it appeals to a large audience. In this respect, the femme fatale serves as a dangerous role model because her agency rarely lasts until the end of the story.

Analysis

Brokeback Poses and a Beside-the-Butt Overload

As shown in the cheesecake discussion and the popular reception, the villainous femme fatales in *Gotham City Sirens* do not lose any of their sexual depictions when they are presented in the series as protagonists. The art of the comic book, at every possible moment, attempts to emphasize the sexual features of the female characters. These include a heavy focus on the characters' breasts and butts. Instead, the comic presents a near limitless assortment of panels sexualizing the female body. Indeed, the character representations are even of the same identical body shape dressed up in three different costumes. The art suggests that all women possess or should possess roughly the same

egregious body shape. Overall, the artwork and the prevalence of the beside-the-butt and brokeback shots in *Gotham City Sirens* argue for turning women into mere sex objects. On the face of it, the comics seem like a celebration of women working together with three female characters in the same team, but, when put into practice, the comic can very well be considered sexualized portrayals of women from the cheesecake factory.

The first indication of what will be found in the issue comes from the cover itself. The three female characters, Catwoman, Poison Ivy, and Harley Quinn stand atop a searchlight. The light illuminates Harley Quinn's behind as she stands in a brokeback pose. The "brokeback" is a term commonly used in the internet comic book community to describe when the artist contorts a female character's body to showcase both the breasts and the butt. Poison Ivy's large breasts are given definition by the lighting as her hair flows upward with no explanation aside from her hair defying gravity. Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn's powerful thighs are wider than their waists as they look at the reader. Catwoman is crouched with no immediate focus on her sexual features, but her whip wraps around the three women suggesting a dominatrix control in her skin-tight, latex suit. Additionally, Catwoman's leg is shown going around one of Harley's as if she was involved in an unfortunate game of Twister. The intertwining of the women with their legs and the whip alludes to an erotic relationship between all of the characters. This is emphasized further with all three women wearing heels. The totality of the cover is pornographic with Ivy's messy hair, the emphasis on their sexual body parts, and the whip. The searchlight literally puts the characters' pornographic relationships in the spot light, and encourages the sexualizing male gaze with their enticing looks at the reader (Mulvey, 1975). Overall, the cover gives a strong indication of what will be inside, and it

is the first thing customers see on the stands.

In the first issue alone, there are numerous accounts of the brokeback pose and beside-the-butt shots. For example, in the first three pages of issue 1, there are four examples of the brokeback pose shown through Catwoman. These are all during action scenes where it would be more likely that the character would focus on stopping the villain rather than posing for the male gaze. Granted, the brokeback pose is possible in real life especially when the body is contorted during extreme situations, but the comic draws the focus away from Catwoman actively fighting towards her sexual features. The active body within the comic book world becomes a passive body to be observed and sexualized in the real world.

A similar situation between active and passive representations happens with the beside-the-butt shot. This shot is commonly shown when the characters actively talk in the background, and there is a butt shown in the foreground without any explanation. The butt grounds the shot with perspective, but that perspective is much lower down the torso than a regular shot that could accomplish the same thing (e.g., an over-the-shoulder shot). This is apparent in a conversation between Catwoman and Harley in the first issue. The characters are not shown directly speaking to each other, instead a disembodied voice presumably from Catwoman appears talking to Harley in the background. Their conversation is based upon living their lives on the edge of crime. The beside-the-butt shot seemingly makes the conversation more appealing by objectifying Catwoman and making her body passive. Rather than focus on the character, the reader is given an opportunity to look at someone's rump. Strange enough, the positioning of Harley changes from being on the right of Catwoman to being on her left in the next frame with

no clear explanation. This displays a choice or an error by the artist to place the character on one side of Catwoman exclusively for the shot. Overall, the beside-the-butt shot serves to objectify the characters and to make them even more passive. Their bonding and conversations with each other are irrelevant when the reader can look at their butts instead. The brokeback pose and beside-the-butt shot are not limited to the first issue alone, but it does give a good litmus test of what is to come throughout the issues examined.

Indeed, the brokeback pose occurs a total of about 20 times in the five issues examined, and the beside-the-butt shot occurs about 13 times. With a combination of 33 times of outright objectification in five issues (not including shots of the characters' breasts), the comic revels in exploiting its female characters' sexual features. The poses and shots serve no narrative function, and must therefore be considered sexualizing the female characters through the art. Without a full script at hand describing the panels, it is unclear whether or not the script calls for these shots, but, as an imagetext, the comic holistically works to devalue women. Whether villains, protagonists, or femme fatales, the characters cannot escape sexualization.

Bondage

Unlike Wonder Woman, who is explicitly tied to bondage from her early creation (Smith, 2001), Catwoman, Harley Quinn, and a cameo by Zatanna, are bound and tortured by Poison Ivy for no explicit reason. Even with the bondage, Catwoman and Harley remain teammates with Poison Ivy, though the superhero magician Zatanna never appears again. The bondage also takes on an erotic tone when Zatanna is held captive in

one scene, and Catwoman is bound by Poison Ivy's vines in another. Overall, the story

positions the viewer to enjoy the women being tied up and tortured, despite the bondage

never furthering the story.

  The first explicit example of bondage occurs in the first issue when Poison Ivy

uses her plant powers to attack the nearly nude Zatanna. The scene lasts three pages and

is visually and narratively exploitative in attacking Zatanna as she is about to enter the

bathtub. Although it does not feature the teamwork between the Sirens, it does establish

the comic further as a visually objectifying imagetext, thus ruining any argument that it

features powerful women. As Poison Ivy interrogates Zatanna about Catwoman's current

health, Zatanna is held into place in her bathtub by overgrown roses controlled by Ivy.

At every moment, it appears as if Zatanna's body will be exposed when her bathrobe falls

off her body. She is lifted from and dunked into the water continually nearly exposing

her butt, breasts, and pelvic area. The scene functions on a sexual level with the tension

of Poison Ivy nearly removing Zatanna's clothes and violating her. The scene showcases

an implied rape with the sexual violence taking place. The unfortunate aspect of the

scene is that it could have been written and drawn differently to not include a nearly nude

character being water-tortured by plants. However, the creators chose to put Zatanna into

this situation, they chose to make Poison Ivy incredibly dominant and abusively

powerful, and they chose to almost sexually violate Zatanna. In the bathroom, a person is

at their most vulnerable, and the comic book decides to capitalize on this moment to

further sexualize and objectify a character with little agency in the story.

  At the end of Zatanna's torture scene, Poison Ivy says, "I guess it's up to Harley

and me to provide positive female reinforcement [to Catwoman]. Thanks, Zee. Let's do

this again sometime. 'Bye!" This does not make sense for the narrative as Poison Ivy and Harley later bind and torture Catwoman for information on Batman's identity. In a double page spread near the beginning of the second issue, Catwoman is bound to a chair by Poison Ivy's vines. Catwoman's back is arched and her latex bodysuit emphasizes the curvature and sheen of her butt. Harley holds an abnormally large gun facing Catwoman while Poison Ivy lies erotically on a couch with her hair blowing in the wind facing the reader. A few pages later in a three panel sequence, the camera focuses specifically on Poison Ivy interrogating Catwoman. With each word of Poison Ivy's question of "Who… Is… …**Batman?**" (Emphasis in original) Poison Ivy and Catwoman's lips inch closer and closer. It is an erotic sequence, especially since Catwoman is in a submissive position with her neck wrapped in vines. After Poison Ivy releases Catwoman, the two exchange a conversation in which Ivy deflects Catwoman's anger:

> Catwoman: What happened to **trust?**
> Poison Ivy: One time only and never again, I promise. Let me make it up to you… [creates a flowering tree with fruit] Breakfast?
> Catwoman: All right. You and Harley can stay, but **you're** doing the cooking. (Emphasis in original)

The scene changes from an erotic torture sequence to Catwoman forgiving Poison Ivy and Harley under the one stipulation, that they carry out their gendered roles of cooking. Ivy offering food to Catwoman after releasing her from bondage, implies some sort of physical and mental violation has occurred as shown in many other forms of popular culture texts. This violation is quickly forgiven because Catwoman is bribed by food, a meager apology for such an act of violence. Yet the comic argues that Catwoman, and by default all women in a similar situation, can reassert her pseudo-agency by making Ivy cook for her. This exchange ignores the gravity of the mental and physical abuse of

women. The scene takes place over a couple of pages, but it reinforces the sexualization of the female characters for the audience, as well as explicitly mentioning the stereotype of women cooking.

Overall, bondage and torture are utilized in the comic book as a way to show Poison Ivy's mistrust and power over the other characters. Her extremely erotic sequences with Zatanna and Catwoman display her control over other women. These scenes are not so much about teamwork, and more about women sexually interacting with one another in submissive and dominant roles. The scenes sexually appeal to the reader despite their lack of logic and narrative fidelity. In bondage, the comic incorporates postfeminism by establishing and exploiting the sexual freedom and nature of the characters for the reader. The comic does not portray a strong sense of female solidarity because the women torture each other, making the comic more about who is the more dominant woman than how they function together as a team.

Harley Quinn as a Postfeminist Figure

Although the reader's introduction to the other female characters is through Catwoman, the beginning of the series is really focused on Harley Quinn. The comic continually brings postfeminism to the forefront through Harley's shopping habits, sexual nature, and infatuation with a man. She was an intelligent psychiatrist, but now she is portrayed as ditzy and obsessed. Overall, Harley is the truest representation of postfeminism out of all three of the leads because she embodies so many of its characteristics. While she is continually sexualized with the other characters, she furthers postfeminist goals by removing the teamwork and focusing on her selfish desires and

pseudo-independence.

Shopping is presented as intrinsic to Harley's character because she makes herself feel better by procuring items she does not need. In Harley's first introduction in the entire series, she is shown in a beside-the-butt shot carrying a handful of shopping bags. In the following frame, we see her holding up the numerous bags filled with an MP3 player, clothing, and a purse; her very introduction is tied to consumption and shopping. Catwoman criticizes Harley in a conversation about her shopping habits:

> Catwoman: So I'm right in assuming you're **spending** the money I gave you as fast and as foolishly as you can.
> Harley: What's wrong with splurgin' on a few nice things? Besides, I put some away, made some investments…
> Catwoman: Please tell me they didn't involve sending money to a Nigerian prince.
> Harley: You got his e-mail, too?!
> (Emphasis in original)

This exchange showcases both Harley's shopping obsession and her foolishness with her money. She is framed as gullible, stupid, and naïve. In a later scene, we see Harley's consumption habits in even greater detail. She claims, "I'm bored, and when I'm bored I shop. Back soon. 'Bye all!" It appears that Harley's *modus operandi* is to shop to make herself feel better as a postfeminist figure, and it establishes that she shops for her identity. It also leads into how she is obsessive with all things in her life, including her former boyfriend, The Joker.

Harley Quinn desires her sometimes-boyfriend, The Joker, to an extensive degree. Granted, her obsession with The Joker is meant to be humorous, but, in actuality, it demonstrates that she cannot reach full satisfaction in life without a boyfriend. Additionally, it is implied throughout the comic that the relationship is abusive for Harley, and yet she still craves The Joker. The comic book, through Harley, downplays

the topic of domestic violence for the reader. After a scene where The Joker (actually his former sidekick, Gaggy, in disguise) tries to kill her, Harley shows her dependence by exclaiming, "That **proves** he wants me back!" (Emphasis in original). In issue five, Poison Ivy and Catwoman convince Harley that she is an unhealthy relationship with The Joker and that she must join them in stopping him (actually Gaggy). However, the comic discounts this moment of realization by Harley in the next issue. Harley asks her teammates with a sincere face, "Okay, I'm going to ask you something and I want you all to be **honest** with me. Do I really come across that lost and needy when I talk about Mr. J.?" (Emphasis in original). Catwoman and Poison Ivy chime in with an "Absolutely" and "Totally." It would appear that Harley can move on from her abusive relationship with The Joker after this realization and her friends' opinions. Immediately on the same page, however, Harley begins to caress her face while smiling and asks, "And if the real Mr. J. shows up again, who's to say he won't have changed for the **better?**" (Emphasis in original). The scene presents a brief challenge to the patriarchy and men's implied control over women when Harley's asserts that she will stay away from The Joker, but it is quickly brushed to the side when she reminds herself of her feelings for him. Harley cannot be separated from her emotionally and physically abusive relationship with The Joker even after realizing that it is unhealthy. The comic suggests that women should return to their boyfriends and husbands no matter what because the men provide some sort of macabre foundation for them. Overall, a discussion of domestic abuse is nullified when Harley believes that The Joker, a murdering psychopath, still loves her.

When Harley recognizes her abusive relationship with The Joker and decides to move on from him to join her female community, she immediately changes her mind and

fantasizes about their life together. The comic argues, through Harley, that it is important for a woman to be involved with a man even if it is in an abusive relationship. The scenes may be aiming for humor, but they instead reinforce the power of the patriarchy. Harley's obsession and dependence on The Joker is justified as an example of women relying upon, needing, and serving men. The comic offers powerful potential to challenge the patriarchy and postfeminism if Harley separates from The Joker and relies upon her female community, however, the comic instantly disputes and dismantles whatever positive infrastructure was put in place. The comic contends that women must need and desire men no matter if their attention is reciprocated in any meaningful way.

Conclusion

Gotham City Sirens stands as an example of extensive sexism and visual objectification in comic books. It appeals to potential readers by gathering together three well-known female characters, but then it uses the opportunity to devalue women. The comic book promotes not only sexism but postfeminist ideals like consumption and women's need for men. Additionally, it functions as a form of erotica where characters are put into bondage and almost kiss for no apparent reason. Add to that the beside-the-butt shots and brokeback poses, *Gotham City Sirens* is a recipe for disturbing representations of women. Whether or not the characters are femme fatales, villains, or sex symbols, the comic cannot validate how the characters are treated both visually and textually.

I exposed some of the underlying problems with female superhero team comic books in *Birds of Prey* and *Marvel Divas*, but *Gotham City Sirens* outright embraces and

celebrates the sexualization, objectification, and depowering of women. The comic presents itself as a female superhero team book by drawing attention to the three women together. However, this presentation is destroyed within the pages when the women distrust and torture each other. How can women work together in unison and promote societal change when they wear skimpy outfits and attack one another? Additionally, domestic abuse is disturbingly nullified because it argues that women should return to their abusers no matter what the situation is. *Gotham City Sirens* reinforces the objectification of women in the industry and popular culture while hiding behind a flimsy veil of pseudo-empowerment. The comic acts as a scion for postfeminism by believing that putting women in female superhero teams equates positive, groundbreaking representation. In actuality, the comic takes the opportunity of joining women together to sexually objectify them on a larger level, argue for consumerism, and support domestic violence.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Superheroes are distinctly tied to American culture, whether it is Superman's

introduction as a representative of social justice in the late 1930s or modern day

discussions on patriotism and surveillance in *Captain America*. The success of superhero

films at the box office shows that there is an ongoing desire for these costumed crusaders.

As Duncan and Smith (2009) describe, "the generations of children who have tied towels

around their necks, extended their arms, and pretended to fly are testimony to

[superheroes'] fundamental appeal" (p. 227). The popularity of superheroes does not

seem to be waning, and they will likely be with us for a long time. Millions of comic

books are sold each month, meaning they are a viable business and source of

entertainment (Mayo, 2014d). Because of this popularity, readers, critics, and academics

must be vigilant about monitoring and critiquing these representations. Romagnoli and

Pagnucci (2013) argued, "If superheroes are characterized as being nearly physically

perfect and morally incorruptible, then they're worthy of being included in academic and

other discussions of culture and society" (p. 14). This thesis has demonstrated that comic

books represent women in problematic ways and are, indeed, worthy of academic study.

Portrayals of women in comic books are frequently problematic through the lenses of

sexual objectification, racism, and/or consumerism. The comic books examined

showcase different aspects of postfeminism that provide a troublesome outlook on both the industry and culture as a whole.

Comic books and other forms of media in popular culture inform the way people think about the world. Although comic books are a form of entertainment, they can change how people live their lives every day. If a comic continually stresses an ideology and the consumer already ascribes to that ideology, then it may be further reinforced. Additionally, if the ideology is continually stressed in the comic book and someone not as drawn to the ideology continues to encounter the message, then they may begin to embody the messages and ways of thinking.

I argue that *Birds of Prey*, *Marvel Divas*, and *Gotham City Sirens* succeeded financially and culturally by disguising themselves in different ways as liberatory feminist texts. *Birds of Prey* lasted for over a hundred issues, *Gotham City Sirens* was published for over 2 years, and *Marvel Divas* was a well-advertised miniseries. Across the board, they gather a handful of female characters and argued that joining them together counts as feminism. However, I have shown in these case studies that the first step of portraying women often leads to unsuccessful representations. These texts emphasize various aspects of postfeminism. Not every comic utilizes the same characteristics, but they all work to undermine the female characters' agency. Sarikakis and Tsaliki (2011) described postfeminism as an:

> Ideological formation where female empowerment has been assimilated by capital and consumer culture, and, therefore, in this postfeminism not only betrays the political strength of feminism but forecloses the potential for challenging the distribution of gender power. (p. 114)

Additionally, Genz (2009) argued that women ascribing to or being portrayed by postfeminism give up their role as active agents to become sexualized beings.

Postfeminism maintains that the success of feminism shows that it is no longer needed. The comic books at hand argue and assume that feminism has succeeded, and thus they can now feature objectified characters in both writing and art. By doing this, the comics contend that the characters dressing up provocatively or being put in compromising positions are making the personal choice to do so. Unfortunately, many consumers likely do not recognize the postfeminist ideology in female team superhero comic books and continue to celebrate the gathering of various female characters.

The teamwork aspect of the comic books functions as a vehicle to represent postfeminism on a larger scale than just a female-led comic series. On the one hand, a group of women working together towards a common goal contains potential to symbolize equal rights. On the other hand, the group dynamic is leveraged to display the characters' rivalries, mistrust, appearances, consumerism, and racism. As a whole, the female-team superhero comic books examined rarely showed female solidarity, and instead they worked to counteract or co-opt feminist strides towards better representation of women.

Birds of Prey displayed the most potential in challenging the representation of women in comic books, but it still relied upon aspects of racism, consumerism, and sexualization. The comic book showed women working in teams and building friendships between one another. The comic featured Barbara Gordon accepting her differently-abled body and embracing her new role as a technological wizard. Through her story, the comic also showcased her deep friendship with Black Canary. However, the comic book relied upon the Black woman's, Vixen, representation as feral and animalistic. The comic appealed to racist stereotypes of Black people through both the

writing and art. Additionally, the comic showcased brief remarks supporting

consumerism and self-maintenance. There was a superficiality of appearances that was

continually emphasized throughout the comic as all of the women were nearly identical

in their build and physical representation. This led to the sexualization of the female

characters with an emphasis on their sexualized body parts via comic rhetorical strategies

such as the beside-the-butt shot. *Birds of Prey* was the first example of female-team

superhero comic books in the modern age since *Femforce*, and it set the bar for the

representation of women in further female team books.

Marvel Divas is perhaps the most tied to the foundational aspects of

postfeminism's consumption and sexual freedom. Out of the three series under

investigation, *Marvel Divas* was the least visually exploitative. Instead, the comic book

relied upon textually objectifying the characters while the visuals played a lesser role.

The comic drew from the success of *Sex and the City* and basically replicated it through

various characteristics and plot points. The characters lived an upper-class lifestyle filled

with expensive drinks and clothes shopping to make themselves feel better. The

characters enjoyed sexual freedom by objectifying men and sharing their dating

experiences. In addition, the characters emphasized their agency and pseudo-

independence from men, but they always returned to the male characters and, in this way,

highlighted their heteronormativity. Like *Birds of Prey*, the comic also displayed the

lone Black female character, Monica, as the most sexual of the group. Ultimately,

Marvel Divas functioned as a postfeminist text by channeling the tenants of

consumerism, pseudo-independence, and some racism.

Lastly, *Gotham City Sirens* was an openly exploitative text. Whether it was

through the writing or the artwork, the series worked to weaken the positive representation of female characters. The comic utilized both the brokeback pose and the beside-the-butt shot to openly and casually render sexism. The writing further placed the characters as consumers while nullifying their intelligence. Harley Quinn was crafted as a figurehead of consumption, obsession, and reliance upon an abusive relationship with a male character. The comic represented postfeminism through a series of sexualized images and troubling scenes where the writing and artwork worked in tandem to devalue women. The case studies ended with *Gotham City Sirens* because it represents the most sexist writing and artwork. Additionally, *Gotham City Sirens* provides the most troubling portrayals of women in all of the case studies.

This study of postfeminism in female team superhero comic books suggests future research is needed in this area. Effort must be made to investigate superhero comic books for sexism, racism, classism, sexual orientation discrimination, ableism, and more. The postfeminist aspects of superhero comic books infect a wide assortment of the female-led comics and the female-team comics. My research provides questions for future scholars to address such as: How have the representations of female-team superheroes changed since *Gotham City Siren*'s final issue in 2011, if at all? How does the representation of female superheroes differ when they headline a title or when they are in a team? Does the representation of postfeminism in team books differ when there are men in the team with the women? These questions address the issues of women in teams through different scenarios. I contend it would be interesting to compare solo books with team books, specifically if the headlining female character is also in the team. The study would allow for many nuances in the representation of women to arise by

following the same character in different scenarios. The questions above will continue to be important as comic books hopefully evolve towards fairer representation.

Although all three case studies are troublesome in representing women and postfeminism, there are some titles leading the way for fairer representations. Currently, Marvel Comics seems to be making the largest attempt at both female-led superhero comics and all-female team superhero comics. Their roster includes *X-Men*, *Ms. Marvel*, *Captain Marvel*, and more. They are pushing for more female characters and better representations of women and people of color. DC Comics is also putting some effort into better representation of women by publishing the newest volume of *Birds of Prey*, *Batwoman*, *Wonder Woman*, and more. However, some of the artwork and writing in the industry remains the same as it was 6 years ago when *Gotham City Sirens* and *Marvel Divas* were published. As Stuller (2012) claimed, the "focus on female bodies in comics is meant to titillate the presumed male reader, as well as privilege his interests as a consumer and audience" (p. 237). As long as the companies focus heavily on the male consumer and do not widen their target audience, the same postfeminist and sexist material will be published. The industry may never fully separate from its sexist roots, but there is still room for change.

The comic books under my investigation portray women negatively, whether visually, textually, or together as an imagetext. The comics can affect the reader through their postfeminist messages to the point that the male, female, or LGBTQIA reader could start to ascribe to postfeminism. Because postfeminism can initially seem like a good thing to readers because it celebrates pseudo-powerful women, the audience may be drawn towards its negative messages. If we continue to live in a postfeminist society,

then everyone may be convinced that women can be powerful if they have sexual

freedom, consume, or objectify themselves. Comic books can help feed into this society

to either support or challenge it. My findings argue that female-team superhero comic

books, in one way or another, are often faced with postfeminist messages that can change

the way the audience thinks about women. This could affect male readers by allowing

them to justify abusing women, and it could work for female readers to make them feel

like they need to be in a relationship no matter how unhealthy. The new female

superhero teams or solo titles possess the possibility to fight back against postfeminist

ideology, but, at the moment, these are few and far between.

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