SUPERGIRLS AND WONDER WOMEN: FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN WARTIME COMIC BOOKS

by

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A Master's paper submitted to the faculty of the School of Information and Library Science of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Library Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

May, 2017

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This paper analyzes the representation of women in wartime era comics during World War Two (1941-1945) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (2001-2010). The questions addressed are: In what ways are women represented in WWII era comic books? What ways are they represented in Post 9/11 comic books? How are the representations similar or different? In what ways did the outside war environment influence the depiction of women in these comic books? In what ways did the comic books influence the women in the war outside the comic pages?

This research will closely examine two vital periods in the publications of comic books. The World War II era includes the genesis and development to the first war-themed comics. In addition many classic comic characters were introduced during this time period. In the post-9/11 and Operation Iraqi Freedom time period war-themed comics reemerged as the dominant format of comics.

Headings:

women in popular culture-- United States-- History-- 20th Century

Superhero comic books, strips, etc.-- History and criticism

World War, 1939-1945-- Women-- United States

Iraq war (2003-2011)-- Women-- United States
I. Introduction:

The comic book industry has a representation problem. In comic book specialty stores and at comic conventions, consumers are overwhelmed with life size posters of male superheroes like Superman, Batman, and Iron Man; and more than likely greeted by a middle-aged male in a Captain America t-shirt behind the store checkout counter. In recent years, comic book characters have come to dominate the popular culture landscape in record numbers, and as a result, their fan base is growing more diverse.

The industry demographic has failed to change with the fan base that they are trying to market to, and while there are many white, male superheroes and creators, only a small percentage of comic book superheroes are women, and an even smaller number of content creators are women or people of color. The term comic book is most often associated with the adolescent male, but the comic book industry has a unique opportunity to reach women, and allow them to connect with complex and powerful female characters.

The military is a centuries old institution that is also dominated by men. Take a cursory glance around any local military recruiting station, and it is easy enough to see the domineering masculinity that pervades the institution. Women represent a
small number of leadership roles in the military, but they make up almost half of the overall force in the United States. But recruiting posters blatantly declare that the military is looking for a few good men while television pundits openly debate the merits of gender mixing in military boot camps, and argue about the effectiveness of women in combatant roles in today's military. In recent years especially, the role of women in the military has come to the forefront of the national conscious.

Comic book scholarship is becoming increasingly widespread among academics. Even so, few researchers have examined the intersection of the military and comic books, and even fewer have looked at the representation of women within that intersection. My paper discusses the general background of women in the military and in comic books, and examines how the changing roles of women throughout the years have been reflected in the pages of comic books.

This paper explores two specific periods of time: the World War II Era (1941-1945) and the Post 9/11 Operation Iraqi Freedom Era (2001-2011), the former was chosen because it serves as the genesis for both the comic book industry, and for the serious participation of women in the armed forces. The latter was chosen due to the resurgence of comic books that occurred during that time, and the growing presence of women in all roles in the armed forces.
Just as World War II was gripping the country over seventy-five years ago, women were invading both comic books, and the war department in record numbers. The dawn of World War II, and the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, brought America into a global conflict in which much of its male population was shipped overseas to fight the threat of fascism and the Axis powers of Germany, Japan, and Italy. In their absence, the United States government relied upon women to fill the wartime production jobs that men left behind.

At the same time a boom in comic books, referred to by many historians as the Golden Age of Comics, was in full swing. The early predecessors of Marvel and DC Comics, currently the two most well known publishers of comic books in the United States, churned out unparalleled amounts of comic book material, whose heroes fought the Axis powers on the page, just as their male counterparts did in real life. Iconic characters such as Superman, Batman, and Captain America were depicted fighting saboteurs, spies, and even taking swings at Adolf Hitler himself in the full color pages of comics that were regularly shipped overseas to Allied military troops.

These comic books served a dual purpose for the newly formed Office of War Information: light hearted entertainment to boost morale, and propaganda to educate Allied troops abroad. The majority of these comic books, which
were almost exclusively marketed towards men, frequently showcased pinup-style women who were daringly rescued from the uncivilized clutches of the Axis powers by brave Allied heroes. The women in these propaganda comics were depicted as figures who were unable to look after themselves and who longed for their soldiers to end the war and return safely home to domestic bliss.

However, Allied troops abroad were not the only demographic the OWI was targeting. One of the most famous propaganda images to emerge from World War II was not of a gun-carrying infantryman, but of a woman nicknamed Rosie the Riveter. This strong willed woman proudly proclaimed *We can do it!* across her posters and became the archetype for the stronger, more independent women who began filling the pages of comic books, and at the same time urged women to leave the home in order to help the war effort. The most enduring of these new female characters was a super heroine named Wonder Woman who fought both Nazis and sexism with equal ferocity, and encouraged real women to do the same.

Wonder Woman has a long and storied comic book history. After her successful debut in 1941, she has headlined a comic book title in her own right, served as a pivotal member of the superhero team the Justice League, and has become the longest continually published female superhero of all time. She
survived the decline of war comics after the end of World War II, and was adapted to reflect the new style of woman emerging in 1950s popular culture. As the decades passed and war comics fell out of style, she continued to reflect and inspire the real women and events of her time.

The attacks on the World Trade Center in September of 2001 drew immediate comparisons to the attack on Pearl Harbor 60 years earlier. In the wake of both of these devastating attacks, comic book heroes rose to unite the American people with patriotic sentiment, and to help explain the attacks to a frightened and confused audience. The aftermath of 9/11 provided a resurgence of 1940s-style patriotism and the reemergence of the war comic as a popular genre, as Americans came to terms with their emotions following the attack, and looked to American leadership for answers.

Since the end of World War II women’s participation in the armed forces has steadily climbed, and in the aftermath of 9/11 more American women clamored to serve in the armed forces than ever before. The comic book page has reflected this steady change in women’s fortunes and societal attitudes; and comic books and their heroines have adapted to represent the new, modern women filling the ranks of the armed forces. While these women have their own set of challenges to face, they have only to look in the pages of their
comic books to be inspired by the superheroines that fill them, just as they
inspired their sisters nearly seventy-five years before.
II. Background & Literature Review

War and comic books are both areas in which men traditionally maintain a heavy sphere of influence. From the famed single combat warriors of the ancient Greeks to the current United States armed forces, men have universally striven to keep women from combat. There are various reasons for this, and most traditional arguments propose that women are both physically and mentally unsuited for the rigors of battle. Only recently have women been allowed into the military occupation specialties of combat roles, including jobs like infantry, artillery, and combat engineering. (Ritchie, vx) Both historical and current graphic media reflects this bias, as most popular images and depictions of war, such as the flag raising at Iwo Jima or photos of combat during the Vietnam War, are largely dominated by men.

In the same way, since their inception into the brain of popular culture America, men have dominated the creation and production of comic books. There are many reasons for this; a large one being that one of the first widely successful comic books featured a male hero, Superman. He debuted on the cover of *Action Comics no.1* in 1938 and was a massive hit with his Depression era audience for a number of reasons. Superman was distinctly American, a result of being created by New York based Jewish immigrants Jerry Simon and Joe Shuster. He was also famously strong and masculine, giving hope to readers
at a time in which the average male was jobless and broke as a result of the worldwide economic depression. He was a great commercial success, and in response to this success, many early comic book creators followed Superman's lucrative narrative formula, including the heavy depictions of masculinity.

(DiPaolo, 14)

Superheroes themselves are widely regarded as a quintessentially American concept. They depict ordinary people reacting to extraordinary circumstances and rising to greatness. In the same way, the American Dream promises that ordinary people can have an extraordinary life in the United States, or that any American child can one day become president. (Madrid, vi)

However, it is important to consider the complete America that these superhero comics are said to be representing. In his book Champions of the Oppressed: Superhero Comics, Popular Culture, and Propaganda in America During World War II, Christopher Murray argues that the America in early superhero comics was not representative for women, or African Americans, or any other minority group. He states that, “Far from representing America as it was, superhero comics represented a view of America that was constructed by and within the ideology of the dominant power structures and institutions. If superhero comics represent anything about America it has to be understood not only what was represented, but also what was excluded and why.”
(Murray, 143) It is important to understand why women, and other groups were not equally represented in these comics.

Many nationalistic superheroes, such as Captain America, the Shield, and Union Jack can directly trace their roots to the early days of comic book publishing during World War II. These heroes are prime examples of the concept of *body politic* which takes the notion of a complex nation and packages it into a smaller experience: the human body. (Dittmer, 25) However, in his book *Captain America and the nationalist superhero: metaphors, narratives, and geopolitics*, Jason Dittmer points out that it is impossible for this body to be a universal representation of the nation. As a result, a majority of the time the body used to depict the nation was and is a white male. (Dittmer, 22)

He goes on to point out that at times, the nation can have many different bodies, depending on its needs. (Dittmer, 25) For example, the United States is historically depicted as Lady Liberty, a woman, when it needs to be defended. Conversely it is depicted by Uncle Sam, a male, when it is on the attack, or at war. These are important distinctions to make because it is this strong masculine imagery and history of male dominance that becomes the societal norm touted by comics throughout the Depression and into the early days of World War II.
The dawn of World War II drew America into a global conflict of unprecedented scale, in which a large number of its male population was drawn overseas to fight. This war, more than any other in American history affected women in unparalleled ways, due to what historians describe as the notion of total war; that is the notion that every citizen is responsible for the support and defense of the nation. (Brock, xii)

On March 11, 1941 Franklin D. Roosevelt signed "An Act to Further Promote the Defense of the United States" colloquially known as the Lend-Lease Act. (Brock, xiv) This act mobilized the American workforce and began war production in order to aid Allied nations in Europe and Asia by sending them material, ships, and guns. Factories that had shut down and ceased to function in the Depression came roaring back to life with new purpose. In a radio broadcast delivered on December 9, 1941, just days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt rallied the American people, telling them that, “Every single man, woman, and child is a partner in the most tremendous undertaking of our American history.” Referring to the large-scale mobilization and production of the American workforce.

At the same time, the comic book industry was also experiencing a historic production boom. Originally, the downtrodden American public used many comics during the Depression era as escapist literature. The fact that
they were cheap, most were around 10 cents, and the storylines were wildly imaginative, featuring everything from time travel to jungle adventures, made them one of the most popular forms of entertainment at the time. (DiPaolo, 7)

The introduction of the comic to the American public was facilitated by the fact that the years prior to World War II had seen the tremendous growth of mass culture. This was largely an effect of the growth of technology and the press, in conjunction with the rising popularity of radio and cinema as forms of entertainment. (Murray, 41) Communication growth and widespread availability meant that a large percentage of the American public was reading comics.

Just how many was that? During the war years around 70 million Americans read daily comics. In 1942 monthly sales of comics hovered around 12 million. In 1946 the number grew to around 60 million. Additionally, over 80 percent of boys and girls aged 12-17 read comic books regularly. (Knaff, 13) However, comics were being consumed just as vicariously by the adults of the time as they were by children. In her book, Beyond Rosie the Riveter: Women of World War II in Popular Graphic Art, Donna Knaff argues that, “The notion that comics and cartoons were produced exclusively for, or read only by children is patently disproven by the thousands of images consumed by adults during the war.” (Knaff, 15)
Though these comics had many different types of characters, by the 1940s superheroes were clearly the most popular with American audiences. Around 80 percent of the 109 titles published in 1940 featured them. (Gabilliet, 20) Sales of comic books were boosted by the fact that due to strict rationing those at home during the war, mainly women and children had little else to spend their money on, as most industrial production was geared towards the war effort. (Gabilliet, 23)

It was the widespread readership, and perennial popularity of the comic book that first attracted the newly formed Office of War Information (OWI) to the medium. Murray points out that, “Roosevelt thought that propaganda should tell the American public the truth, and popular culture was seen as inherently democratic as it was mainly produced ‘for the people, by the people.’” (Murray, 142) Propaganda existed long before World War II, but it was the previously discussed communications boom that allowed the medium to reach its full potential. “Advertisements, Hollywood films, animated cartoons, comics, and so forth, all carried messages that supported the war effort. In this way the distinction between what was official discourse and what was popular entertainment became blurred during wartime.” (Murray, 141)

In the introduction to the 2016 book *The Ten Cent War: Comic Books, Propaganda, and World War II*, Trischa Goodnow points out that the OWI was
also drawn to the comic book medium specifically due to its ability to depict any scenario. “…the new genre and its potent features made possible the depiction of almost anything imaginable, from dauntless American heroes to crafty spies, to inhuman enemies.” (Goodnow, 9) She goes on to say that, “…radio was limited to what it could depict audibly, while motion pictures were generally constrained by budgets that limited what they could portray in an affordable manner. Comic books however, had no such restrictions.” (Goodnow, 9-10)

It is important to note here that many creators of popular entertainment including radio, cinema, and comic books were immigrants of Jewish descent, most of which were tracking the developing war in Europe with a wary eye. In his book, War, Politics, and Superheroes, Marc DiPaolo contends that, “…the seemingly simple-minded medium of the superhero story raises questions that few products generated for mass consumption have dared ask… comic books inspire us to meditate on the tense and controversial issues of our day and inspire us to think in unconventional terms.” (Dipalo, 10)

Knaff concurs, stating that, “The satirical sketch style of cartoons was used, much as it had been for political cartoons, to convey not only humor but also deadly serious ideas, information, and emotion.” (Knaff, 14) Consuming popular entertainment, including comic books, shaped the perception of the American people about a number of subjects during the war years.
By and large, the greatest institutional customer of comic book publishers was the U.S. Army. (Gab, 22-23) Comic books were passed out to troops abroad the same way that Hershey bars and condoms were distributed, often and in great numbers. The war ushered in a new sense of sexual liberation, and with it an increase of sexual images used as propaganda, marketed towards men. (Murray, 137)

The women most often depicted in comics and on pin-up posters echoed this trend. They were always beautiful, weak-minded, and in constant need of rescue by the headlining male hero. (Murray, 103) In his book, *Comics and Conflict: Patriotism and Propaganda from WWII through Operation Iraqi Freedom*, Cord A. Scott describes one such woman, and her reasons for appearing in the comic saying, “If the destruction of his friends and family...did not provide enough motivation for the superhero to destroy his nemesis, the presence of the obligatory blonde nurse did. This unnamed English maiden introduced another time-honored motive for fighting to the war comic: preserving a woman's honor.” He goes on to add that, “In typical fashion, the girls were once again left behind as the men go forth to fight for them and the free world...” (Scott, 27) It was imperative that comic creators remind U.S. troops exactly what, and who, they were fighting for.
Many of these male-centric comics also featured women in a military capacity. They showed the same beautiful dames, usually looking for a man, or getting in trouble for some misunderstanding of military regulations. (Murray, 136) Murray argues that, “These attempts to make light of women’s participation [in the military] were usually seen as harmless fun, alleviating the tensions and deprivations of war, but also telling about the predominant attitude toward their role in the military.” He adds that, “As with many representations of women in the industry, these images suggested that women had a role to play, but stressed that they were not naturally equipped for it and that such duties were only ‘for the duration.’” (Murray, 136)

Comic creators were careful to address specifically men with these types of images. In reality, the messages that propaganda was delivering on the home front were more mixed depending on the audience that it was targeted for.

On the home front, large production quotas and development of new war industries created labor shortages that were exacerbated by the millions of American men leaving to join the armed forces beginning in 1942. (Brock, xiv) In reply, the United States war machine was forced to turn to other viable sources of labor in order to maintain production goals, including older Americans and women.
The Office of War Information knew that comics defined and reflected how many Americans perceived the war through the lens of pop culture.

(Murray, 36) They also knew that women needed to see and hear messages about their role in helping to solve the current ‘labor problems.’ (McEllen, 179) This representation of a feminine call to action represented a shift from the propaganda distributed for women in World War I, which largely showed women waving men into battle and waiting, perfectly coiffed, for their safe return. (Murray, 131)

In order to attract women into the workforce, the Office of War Information needed to depict workingwomen as tough, reliable, competent, and patriotic. (Murray, 133) Because propaganda equated the work that women would be doing with their patriotic duty, anybody that publicly criticized women in the workforce could be painted as unpatriotic. In her book Creating Rosie the Riveter: class, gender, and propaganda during World War II, Maureen Honey states that, “...images could expand and contract public conceptions of women's place within such a short period of time without confusing or alienating the population and without more seriously challenging the conservative ideology behind the sexual division of labor.” (Honey)

Though women were being called into traditionally masculine fields of labor, they were expected to maintain whatever made them quintessentially
feminine. (Knaff, 10) The message being sent by all quarters to women on the home front was crystal clear: the war would be won or lost based on their attitudes. (McEllen, 179) After the large mobilization of women of the home front, the American workforce would never be the same again.

Just as it had upended the working lives of women, World War II also brought changes to the home lives of women across America. As Jane Leder points out in her book, *Thanks for the Memories: love, sex, and World War II*, for many women, the normal progression of life events—education or work, marriage and children—had been disrupted by the outbreak of war. (Leder, ix) The mass departure of marriageable men from the home front left many a young woman with little else other than war production work to occupy their time. This had ramifications on the expectations and attitudes of women for generations to come. Leder adds, “...few [people] imagined that women’s full participation in both home and work would encourage the depth of self-confidence and independence that would sustain many of these women for the rest of their lives.” (Leder, 93)

At the same time, the growing autonomy of women at home and in the workplace was being carefully monitored with growing concern. Knaff states that, “Though the problem of maintaining proper gender roles paled in comparison to the deaths of millions, the turmoil of war intensified concerns about matters at home... Many worried that the social order would be so
disrupted that America might not be able to un-scramble it.” (Knaff, 2) Honey concurs, adding, “The fact that a woman could step into a man’s shoes and wear them rather comfortably posed an implicit threat to traditional notions about femininity and female limitations.” (Honey, 1)

Women were not only encouraged to go into the workforce. They were also being actively recruited into the armed forces themselves. Every branch of the service had a women’s equivalent by World War II. The Army had the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps/Women’s Army Corps (WAAC/WAC). The Navy had the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), and the Coast Guard and Marines Corps, though smaller branches, also followed suit. Even the Army Air Corps had a women’s division, the Women’s Air Force Service Pilots or WASPs.

Many women were attracted to the increased power available to them in wartime. Others might have seen the acquisition of power as a move toward gender equality. (Knaff, 113) One of the biggest worries about women who held command positions within the military was that they would take this attitude from work into their lives at home. (Knaff, 118) However, this worry did not stop the Office of War Information and mainstream comic publishers from producing material that encouraged women to claim these roles.
During the height of World War II, 6 million women had joined the workforce, and another 350,000 joined military services. (Brock, xvi) Up to 45,000 women served as Army nurses, with an additional 9,000 serving in the Navy. (Skaine, 55) These women were deployed to combat zones and operated in heavy fire tending to wounded men. (Skaine, 53) By the end of the war, the performance and skill of these women was celebrated in pop culture and by various leaders of the Allied military forces. (Brock, xxiv) In addition, images of female war workers became iconic symbols of womanhood in the 1940s that were reproduced and inspired future generations of women. (Brock, xxxiii)

Comic books in particular provided an unparalleled means to alter public opinion concerning women’s wartime activities and roles. (Knaff, 13) The changing role of women in the 1940s allowed many comic creators to experiment with gender values, making superheroes less anti-feminist than other graphic art of the time. (Donaldson, 142) As a result, comic book artists and government agencies frequently portrayed women heroes who were physically strong and who exhibited authority and autonomy—characteristics that artists needed to render unthreatening and acceptable. (Knaff, 112)

In his book, Murray adds that, “In a world where women were being encouraged to leave the home and go into factories or uniform, superheroines showed that they could fight alongside men and were every bit as courageous and capable.” (Murray, 144) The fact that these heroines exited at all was a
testament to the selling power and ironclad formula of the superhero genre as a whole. “These heroines possessed the skills, power, and competence comparable to their male counterparts as the formula of the genre forced creators to present the leading hero, regardless of gender as an able defender of truth, justice, and the American way.” (Donaldson, 142) Comic strips also effectively used many of these heroines to illustrate cultural clashes between perceptions of “feminine” and “military” women. (Knaff, 9)

It is imperative to note that many World War II superheroines were created, written, and drawn by actual women for women readers. This allowed these heroines to be spared some of the pervasive masculinity that accompanied many comic book heroes, both in the World War II era and beyond. (Murray, 148) The draft had pulled men from their factory jobs to fight overseas also affected the comic book publishing industry, affecting famous comic industry creators such as Will Eisner, Joe Simon, and Jack Kirby. This left room for women to step in as creators, writers, and illustrators, and most likely contributed to the rise in female comic characters. (Murray, 148) In addition, war factory jobs had given women more disposable income, and war rationing had given them little to spend this money on. This gave rise to women as a new consumer group, able to be marketed to by the likes of comic book companies. (Murray, 134)
The rise of women at publishing companies, and the availability of women and girls as a legitimate consumer group, spawned more comic content that was marketed specifically towards them. This content featured less of the beautiful, empty-headed damsels that were produced for men, and more of the capable, independent heroines that reflected the growing changes of women's real lives. Many of these characters had been forced into the roles of well-mannered daughters or girlfriends, and a secret life as a masked heroine gave them the chance to be themselves, and at the same time, help make the world a better place. (Madrid, 5)

The success of characters like Miss Fury who debuted in 1941 and was developed by famed female comic artist and writer June Tarpe Mills, and Mary Marvel the sister of popular comic book hero Captain Marvel who debuted in 1942, helped open the floodgates for more female heroes to pour in. (Murray, 147-148) These superheroines most often faced off with domestic threats to American security like Japanese spies, German U-boats, and home front saboteurs; threats that real-life women readers would have been concerned about. They also encouraged women to grow victory gardens, effectively ration goods, and buy war bonds to support that war effort.

These heroines also had a slightly different attitude than their male counterparts when it came to subduing their enemies. As Mike Madrid points
out in his book *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines*, “Male superheroes always seemed consumed by meting out justice through violent means. The female superheroes [were] more interested in making the world a better place, and not just beating their foes into submission.” (Madrid, V)

He raises an important question here, “Did a female superhero always have to think like a man and use force in order to make a difference in the world? Couldn’t she perhaps have more impact by acting like... a woman?” (Madrid, 303) Could these characters inspire women to work for the war effort with strength and dignity, and at the same time, show them that just being a woman could change their world for the better?

In a sort of circular dynamic, by modeling ways in which women could serve, comic book characters became themselves behavioral icons for women’s new roles. And one female character towered over all the rest in terms of popularity and longevity. (Knaff, 16)

Wonder Woman, easily the most identifiable female superhero of all time, made her debut in December 1941 in *All-Star Comics #8*, and has since appeared in over 5,000 comic book issues. She was created by Harvard Psychologist William Moulton Marston and partially based off his equally impressive wife, Elizabeth Holloway Marston, also a psychologist. In an article
written by Marston for American Scholar in January of 1944, he describes the genesis for the character saying, “Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength and power... Women’s strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a female character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman.” (Marston, 42)

Wonder Woman turned out to be a hit with both male and female audiences. She sold around 2.5 million comics as a solo headliner (Knaff, 123), and was one of the only comic book heroes published in the 1940s that was continuously published throughout the 1950s as well, successfully bridging the Golden and Silver age of comics. (Knaff, 170)

The continued success of Wonder Woman stands as an anomaly among female heroes because, as Madrid points out, female superheroes are often not allowed to reach their full potential. They are given powers that are weaker than their male compatriots, and positions of lesser importance. (Madrid, vi) He points out that even Wonder Woman’s superhero name sets her apart from other female heroes. “There are a lot of men in comic books.” He says, “Besides Wonder Woman there are not that many ‘women’ and even fewer ‘ladies.’ But there are lots of ‘girls.’” (Madrid, vi)

DiPaolo also points out this double-standard when it comes to female heroes saying, “There appear to be two major choices of female lead character:
the damsel in distress and the emotionless, voluptuous vixen in painted-on clothing who never has sex but is great at karate.” (DiPaolo, 42) Wonder Woman eschewed these binary depictions of women characters and emerged as “...progressive popular propaganda that sought to transform American conceptions of identity by providing a new icon of mythic idealism.” (Murray, 142) Indeed, she modeled an entirely new type of female character, one that would have lasting impact on many women.

In her book, *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes* Lillian S. Robinson boldly declares, “In the beginning, there was Wonder Woman, and in the beginning of Wonder Woman, there was feminism.” (Robinson, 27) In her comic books, the female character was treading on untouched territory, where male and female heroes were portrayed as equals. She was entering a formerly male arena, comic books, and as a character she exhibited a previously unexplored combination of feminine and masculine characteristics. (Knaff, 111).

As a hero, she possessed the speed and flight of Mercury and the strength of Hercules. But also the beauty and loving heart of Aphrodite and the wisdom of Athena. More than any other character, Wonder Woman showed that, “Women could be tender and strong, loving and swift, and alluring and
forceful. She did not prevail because of masculine or feminine qualities alone, but because of the integration of both sets of behaviors.” (Knaff, 125)

Robinson also notes Wonder Woman’s portrayal of equality, claiming that, “Wonder Woman did pioneer a kind of feminist questioning, however commercially packaged and conceptually limited, at a time when few other voices in American society were raising such questions.” (Robinson, 23)

Compared with other media marketed towards women at that time, Wonder Woman found herself to be tremendously ahead of the curve.

As a comic book character and propaganda darling, Wonder Woman zoomed to popularity as a symbol of the qualities that real women were expected to display during wartime. She reflected and affected changing impressions, behavioral norms, expectations- and other images of women from the OWI and civilian publications. (Knaff, 111) She was relatable to real women because she displayed the ability to make the powerful, personally possible. (Knaff, 131) This message made a lasting impression on women who, under the strict directives of wartime rationing, had little power over even the smallest aspects of their lives.

Wonder Woman’s brand had both a personal, and civic dimension. Her speeches, as well as her own example, were about how women could do anything men could do, whether that anything was the work of brain or brawn.
“She merely leads the way,” Robinson argues, “...for all women, since all have within them the requisite power to conquer the forces that would restrict female life and responsibility.” (Robinson, 58)

Throughout the years Wonder Woman’s origin has gone through several retellings, however in the original Marston penned comics, she is the daughter of Hippolyte the queen of the Amazons and native of Themyscira on Paradise Island. She rescues Steve Trevor, American Army intelligence officer, after he crash lands on Paradise Island and wins a competition among the Amazons to return him to the world of men. In her earliest comics, Wonder Woman is cast as more of a negotiator and women’s rights advocate, than a warrior. (DiPaolo, 71)

Her loyalty to America is apparent from the beginning. Clad in characteristic red, white, and blue, Wonder Woman has always been explicitly representative of America, though she is technically not an American citizen. Her story in Sensation Comics #7 clearly states that she is, “...defending America from the enemies of democracy and fighting fearlessly for downtrodden women and children in a man-made world.” (Sensation Comics, no.7 She allies herself with America, because America fights for women’s rights around the world. (DiPaolo, 74) Wonder Woman is unique in that, she places the right of women to be equal members of society on an even footing with the fight to protect democracy against fascism. (Murray, 154)
Unlike many of her female contemporaries, Wonder Woman fights wherever she is needed. She dupes domestic spies and sells war bonds the same as the others; but she also directly fights Nazis all over the world, often getting into powerful fistfights along the way. Madrid comments, “Just as America emerged as a global peacekeeper, Wonder Woman's adventures took her wherever women were in peril and their freedom was threatened. (Madrid, 42) This is an important distinction, because Wonder Woman's proactive attitude and worldwide adventures also served the dual purpose of inspiring American women, and explicitly critiquing the conservative attitudes that the Nazis promoted against women. (Murray, 143)

Wonder Woman's earliest comics are also unique because they contain notable depictions of female friendship (DiPaolo, 73), most obviously between Wonder Woman, her best friend Etta Candy, and the Holliday College girls. Many 1940s heroines worked alone, or in conjunction with a more established male hero. In the Wonder Woman comics, the women work together to protect each other, and don't fall victim to jealousy and pettiness. Rather, their bonds of sisterhood even inspire some of Wonder Woman's female enemies to reevaluate their allegiances and consider joining their sisters on the side of good. Etta and the Holliday College girls cropped up frequently in the Marston era comics. They even inspired other comic strips to show assertive women
with sufficient courage and resourcefulness to rescue male superheroes.

(Knaff, 124)

By the time Japan surrendered in August of 1945, comic book publishing was at its peak, selling millions of comics every month. However, the end of the war presented many comics with a dilemma. Heroes like Captain America, Superman, and Wonder Woman spent thousands of pages fighting the enemies of America, but now there were none left to fight. American focus shifted to reconstruction, and a return to normalcy. With the detonation of the Atomic bomb, men no longer felt like masters of technology or themselves, so they pushed back against the empowered women that rose up to take their places when they left for war. (Donaldson, 139) In the military, hostility existed from men at all levels towards women in roles other than nursing. And the attitude at this time had a damaging effect on military policy for years to come. (Skaine, 57)

The post-war industry degradation of female superheroes arose in direct response to this specific masculine anxiety. (Donaldson, 139) Comic book companies were forced to adjust and mirror the attitude from the American public. Creators could no longer show women as decisive and able, and as people who could act for the public good independently of male assistance. (Donaldson, 140) Many superheroes, male and female, saw their
titles cancelled due to poor sales. After years of newfound independence, many women were laid off from their wartime jobs and expected to return to raising families. (Brock)

Wonder Woman, for all of her comic’s exceptional attributes, has a unique cultural value, because she continued to be printed throughout this change in circumstances for female heroes. Her comics show women’s place in society, their growth during the era, and the expansion of permissible behaviors at the time. (Knaff, 123) She is one of the only female heroes to weather the post-war changes and even the death of her progressive creator in 1947. As a result of Marston’s death, her comic drastically changes during the 1950s in which her priorities were shifted and her powers were greatly softened. This is one of the reasons why, as Marc DiPaolo points out, “...even though Wonder Woman has made a career of fighting Nazis her greatest enemies have consistently been those in the real world who would censor her comic books and marginalize her significance.” (Di Paolo, 71)

The nature of comic books themselves began to change after World War II, moving from war-based storylines to other styles such as western, horror, and science fiction. And though America engaged in many other wars over the years from Korea to Desert Storm, war comics as a format would not become
overwhelmingly popular with the masses again until the early 2000s and beyond.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 were immediately compared to another attack which took place on American soil: Pearl Harbor in 1941, and like their 1940s compatriots, comic book publishers felt obligated to respond to these attacks. There were many reasons for this: They felt an obligation to explain the attacks and the events surrounding them to their younger readers, many of the creators and publishers lived in New York city, and had seen the attacks and their aftermath with their own eyes, and their own superheroes should have been able to stop the attacks. (Scott, 100-101)

In previous wars, many comic creators for the most part, avoided having their heroes combat real-life enemies and situations, which they thought would marginalize the actual men and women on the frontlines. (Scott, 101) However, the 9/11 attacks had brought the battle lines to the home front in an unprecedented way. As a result, creators acknowledged this by having their heroes directly respond to the attacks. Many Americans at the time were confused that this most recent enemy of the United States wasn't highly industrialized or traditionally powerful- like Japan and Germany during World War II, or the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Instead, they were unnamed terrorists, who could have been anyone. (Scott, 101)
The aftermath of the September 11th attacks brought with it a renewed sense of 1940s-style patriotism, where Murray argues, “Unity, strength, and moral authority [were] politically expedient.” (Murray, 256) Artists and creators regularly re-harnessed imagery from the 1940s for a new purpose. This imagery helped America to come to terms with the attacks by placing them into the context of an earlier, simpler conflict, like they saw in the comics. (Murray, 254) For some comic book creators after the attacks and into the Iraq War, it was much more attractive to return to the familiar battlefields of their grandparents’ “good war.” (Scott, 118)

Many comics at this time emulated World War II comics in that they sought justice against those who attacked American values and way of life. The difference is that these comics did not blindly attack anyone “different.” (Scott, 137) In a more aware and politically conscious way enemies of the United States weren’t lumped together, but examined as individuals, perhaps because creators wished to avoid the mistakes of those before them, who vilified whole groups of people, and placed others in Internment Camps on American soil. Instead of focusing solely on defeating the “enemy,” post 9/11 comics delved into subjects like the futility of war, and meaning of the human condition. (Scott, 109)
Another significant way this new brand of war comics differed from those in the 1940s, is that they were openly critical of war in general, reflecting the mood of the country at the time. In his book, *In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq*, Adam Berinsky states that, “Support for war depends on citizens’ beliefs about the correctness of the war, and its likelihood of success.” (Berinsky, 1) He goes on to say about public opinion on the war in Iraq that, “Not since March of 2004 had a majority of Americans agreed that the United States did the right thing in taking military action against Iraq.” (Berinsky, 1)

For the most part, comic book creators at major publishers avoided taking openly political stances. However, along with many Americans, creators almost universally opposed the invasion of Iraq by United States forces. (Scott, 108) The wide range of comic books produced at the time offered a wide range of perspectives, which accurately reflected the cultural tensions and political opposition surrounding the war at the time. (Scott, 115)

While comic book publishers avoided taking overt stances on the foreign policy decisions of the time, they directly confronted other decisions made by the United States government. Berinsky notes that, “9/11 changed the way that they country as a whole thought about civil liberties. Backing for restrictions- both in the abstract and in particular instances- rose in the wake
of the attacks, relative to support during peaceful times.” (Berinsky, 164) Many people in the news media expressed concern with aspects of the Patriot Act, as well as with the crackdown on anti-war protests, and comic books reflected many of those concerns in their storylines. (Scott, 126)

In a similar way, when new media released graphic images of captured Iraqi soldiers who had been tortured by United States forces, critics openly doubted the integrity and morality of the United States forces; a fact even critics of the Iraq War had previously assumed. (Scott, 115) As a result, comic book heroes were shown grappling with similar issues, something that would not have found a cohesive place in the black and white morality of World War II comics.

Since the end of World War II, the numbers of women in the armed forces have increased with each passing decade. (Ritchie, 19) The active recruitment of women into the armed forces resumed after the Vietnam War era, spurred by the end of the draft and the decline of enlistments that followed. (Wise, 1) In 1976, the United States service academies began to admit women for the first time, leading to an increase in female officers and women in positions of power within the military. The events of September 11th dramatically increased the operational tempo for the United States forces. (Ritchie, xxii) This time, unlike in previous wars, women as well as men were
called overseas in large numbers to fight for America. As American forces pushed north into Iraq in the months and years following 9/11, women were positioned within all elements throughout the area of operations. (Wise, 2)

In addition, the very nature of the war in Iraq was different than any the United States forces had been in before. As a result of this “long war” many traditionally non combatant roles, such as military police and truck drivers, were involved in heavy firefights. (Ritchie, vx) Meaning that women in these roles were more integrated than ever before into the male-dominated direct combat areas of war. Even in the face of this new style of warfare, politicians, civilians, and members of the military themselves are still embroiled in heated debates about the role of women in the military. As James E. Wise notes in his book, Women at War: Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Conflicts, “As politicians debate, American servicewomen continue to serve with distinction in harm’s way, in a combat environment without frontlines.” (Wise, 2)

Comic books continue to pioneer the changing roles of women in the military, and in the world at large. The very images that brought women into the service and workforce in the first place still have significance now, and in many instances, workingwomen are still framed as symbols of female power, physical strength, self-sufficiency, and self-determination. (Knaff, 164)
In the immediate aftermath of September 11, some comic creators showed female superheroes in traditionally feminine roles, helping to rescue survivors and clean up New York City of rubble and debris. (Scott, 106)

However, the difference in these current war comics, is that other female superheroes are speaking up and pointing out this double standard. In an issue of *The Justice Society of America* published in 2004, Powergirl pushes back against her critics saying, “If I was Powerman. If I was stubborn and headstrong and brash. If I didn’t take authority well. No one would think anything of it.”

Many storylines in this new brand of more progressive war era comics focus on the female heroes’ platonic relationships with other women, rather than their romantic relationships with men. As Alison Mandeville in her essay, featured in *Wonder Woman: Essays on the Amazon Princess in Changing Times* points out, “Instead of linking women’s narrative worth solely to their relationships with men, [the comics] center women’s relationships with each other.” (Mandeville, 206)

Renowned comic writer Gail Simone is well known for her excellent portrayals of female dynamics in her storylines. She started out as a hairdresser, and die-hard comic fan, who in 1999 created a website called *Women in Refrigerators*. The website, which was named after an event in which
Green Lantern’s girlfriend was killed by a villain and stuffed into a refrigerator for him to find, highlights the number of times female characters are subjected to physical or sexual violence in order to serve as a plot device for a male character’s story arc. The website ignited fierce debate about the role of women in comic books, and brought Simone to the attention of DC, who hired her to write for them.

Simone had a successful run with DC’s *Birds of Prey* series, which features a team of female superheroes lead by former Batgirl, Barbara Gordon, before becoming the first full time female to write for Wonder Woman in 2008. Through women’s relationships with each other in Simone’s storylines, the ‘personal’ and ‘political’ aspects of women’s lives are largely seamless. After all, Amazons are both sisters and citizens. In this more integrated landscape, women’s concerns- about the repercussions of having children, of choosing romantic partners- are not dismissed as private matters, but are depicted as having communal and political implications. (Mandeville, 216)

These stories mirror the lives of current women, for which issues such as the right to control their own bodies often leak into highly politicized battlegrounds. They introduce characters that value themselves, that are independent, and that demand a change in the status quo in the same way that their counterparts are doing in real life.
III. Methodology

The first step in completing research for this paper was narrowing down the questions that this paper was to cover, because the initial topic was very broad. The questions addressed are: In what ways are women represented in WWII era (1939-1945) comic books? What ways are they represented in Post 9/11 (2001-2010) comic books? How are the representations similar or different? In what ways did the outside war environment influence the depiction of women in these comic books? In what ways did the comic books influence the women in the war outside the comic pages?

This paper requires two different types of sources. The first type is secondary sources about topics such as women in wartime, comic books as propaganda, and gender issues in comic books. To find these the UNC catalog and WorldCat was searched using search strings such as: women in popular culture-- United States-- History-- 20th Century; World War, 1939-1945-- Women-- United States; Superhero comic books, strips, etc.-- History and criticism; and Iraq war (2003-2011)-- Women-- United States. If a book or article was not available at UNC, Interlibrary Loan was utilized.

Many primary sources were required for content analysis and discussion in this paper. It is relatively easy to get comic books for the years 2001-2011. Many libraries, including the SILS library have large comic book
collections that include these years, and virtually all of them are available through Interlibrary Loan.

1940s era comics are harder to find. Original copies of these comics were not required for this research and reprinted versions of these comics were utilized when the originals were unavailable for research. A popular character such as Wonder Woman has had her comics reprinted many times, and there are many good bound collections of war comics that are available at many libraries. The Library of Congress also lists an extensive collection of comic book material in their Serial and Government Publication Division, which is browsable through their online catalogue.

This research will closely examine two vital periods in the publications of comic books. The first is the World War II era, ranging from 1939-1945. This era includes the genesis and development to the first war-themed comics. In addition many classic comic characters were introduced during this time period. The second time period examined is the post-9/11 and Operation Iraqi Freedom time period, from 2001-2011. During this time, war-themed comics reemerged as the dominant format of comics for several reasons, and as such make an excellent point of comparison to their World War II counterparts.

Comics researchers are also notorious for using several terms such as comic, comic book, and comic strip interchangeably. For the purpose of this
paper, the term *comics* is used as a blanket term to refer to all types of comic material. *Comic strip* is used to refer to single lines of comic material published in weekly newspapers. *Comic book* refers to collections of comic strips that are bound into a single volume containing only comic material. In addition, for the parameters of this paper *superhero* refers to any character that dons a uniform for the expressed purposes of fighting crime. These characters do not necessarily have to possess supernatural powers to be considered a superhero.
IV. Analysis and Discussion

During the World War II era women were depicted in a number of different types of comics. After the United States became openly involved in the war, depictions of women shifted to align with the image of women that the Office of War Information was trying to project to the masses. They were often shown in military roles in order to encourage women to enlist in the various women's branches, which were still suffering from a bout of negative public opinion at the time. As a result, several comics featuring female military protagonists were commissioned around this time, including *Winnie the WAC*, *Up Came a Ripple*, and *Molly Marine*.

*Winnie the WAC* was written and drawn by former advertising illustrator Cpl. Vic Herman, starting in 1943. The comic was published in the army base newspaper and in *Life* and *Look* magazine, and was so popular that a bound copy of Winnie comics was released in 1945, with a forward written by actress Carol Landis. *Up Came a Ripple*, was written and drawn by Yeoman 3rd Class Dorothea Byerly and was based on her wartime experience as a WAVE. It was released in 1945, and dedicated to the many women who served in the women's branches of the armed services during World War II.
These comics were meant to be lighthearted morale-boosters, and many of them relied on stereotypes about women service members for their humor. One common stereotype was that women in the service were sexually promiscuous. This is shown in *Winnie the WAC* when in one panel Winnie asks a WAVE if she has a man in every port, and in another when Winnie must strip off her clothes in order to flag down a rescue plane. In *Ripple* women are frequently shown ‘checking out’ officers as they stop to salute them.

The comics also relied on the stereotype that women’s newfound power and independence in the military would disrupt the natural social order. Winnie’s sergeant is shown as a matronly, grumpy, older woman—most likely as a warning to women about assuming too much responsibility, and in one panel Winnie shows off a sweater that her boyfriend knitted her. In another, the mother of a boy Winnie is going out with tells her not to keep her son out too late.

There are also several panels that try to show that women are incompetent, or not cut out for military work. In one *Winnie* panel, Winnie places an entire armored division on the wrong continent on the map, while in a *Ripple* panel, Ripple is shown breaking an entire set of dishes while on mess duty. In one particular Winnie panel, she and a fellow WAC are shown in clothes that are far too large for them, indicating that the military was not
exactly prepared to incorporate women, either. This same theme is revisited in a later panel, when an officer is having trouble deciding where to pin a medal on Winnie’s curvy chest.

Another common stereotype shown in military comics depicting women is that women only joined the service in order to please or meet men. Winnie and her friends are almost always looking for men, as shown in one panel when they look down the barrel of a tank gun in order to see the gunner inside, or in a panel showing Winnie’s locker, which is full of photos of servicemen.

Despite this reliance on stereotypes, the strips also show a bit of the day-to-day changes in the lives of women in the service. They show that they worked hard, long hours. They showed that they were independent and self-reliant. And they showed that they were proud of their accomplishments in the service. This last point is addressed in both Ripple and Winnie, which feature Winnie and Ripple excitedly changing the insignia on their uniforms after a promotion, with Winnie going so far as to sew chevrons on her brassiere.

In both Winnie and Ripple there is a similar panel in which the titular character of each strip is going to a movie. In both panels there is a sign advertising a service member discount, 25 cents a ticket. Winnie excitedly waves a dollar in the air and says she’ll take four, servicemen- not tickets. In
the *Ripple* panel, Ripple sees a similar discount sign and proudly announces to the ticket seller that she needs a *service member* ticket. I mention this because shows the explicit difference in attitude between Winnie, a character who was written by a man, and Ripple, a character written by a woman in a similar context.

Several scholars criticize the fact that these comics relied so heavily on female stereotypes. However, Christina Knopf argues in her essay, “Hey Soldier- Your Slip is Showing! Militarism vs. Femininity in World War II Comic Pages and Books” that these stereotypes actually reframed gender norms by showing them as strengths, rather than weaknesses. (Knopf, 27) She says in her essay, “Quite often, the stereotypes of womanhood were translated into the requirements for soldiering- two concepts that were culturally at odds with each other.” (Knopf, 33) Women in comics like *Winnie* and *Ripple* were shown as hard workers, and efficient multi-taskers, both positive qualities in the military.

She goes on to point out that, “...female military personnel in World War II comics may have been cast as capricious and comely coquettes, but they were competent. As such, they taught their generation, and those of their descendants about women’s service in times of trial, and that acting like a girl can be an asset to any task.” (Knopf, 42-43) She fundamentally disagrees that
women’s wartime progress was limited at best arguing that, “...inroads for
women were made by demonstrating possibilities: people got to see what
women were capable of accomplishing without society crumbling as a result;
that even if women had a different work approach or style, it was not
necessarily inferior; and that femininity and hard work were not incompatible.
(Knopf, 42)

In the earliest days of comic book publishing, there weren’t as many
established rules about how female characters could or couldn’t act. This was
especially true for women in adventure comics, and comics that featured
female superheroes. In the 1940s, there was a deluge of new superheroes
every week, many of which only appeared for a short period of time, or even
only once.

In his book Divas, Dames, & Daredevils: Lost Heroines of Golden Age
Comics, Mike Madrid says that many of these new heroines feel bold and
modern as they are read today, exactly because of the lack of established norms
for female action characters. (Madrid, 15) He says, “The [Superheroines] are
presented as fearless and unapologetic about their strength...They are the
heroic centerpieces of their story.” (Madrid, 15-16) And that, “These women
could crack a joke one minute, and a crook’s jaw the next.” (Madrid, 19) Comic
book publishing in general had a different feel to it in the 1940s. It was less
corporate. There were no marketing plans or toy lines or big summer blockbusters dictating what stories creators could or couldn’t tell. (Madrid, 19) This gave superhero comics in general a slightly more egalitarian feel than other comics from the same time period.

He also addresses a concern that many longtime comic fans often debate when talking about female characters saying, “Many modern day readers feel that superheroines have always been the second class citizens of the comic book world. But the portrayal of women as less powerful, less capable, and less heroic than men didn't become widespread until the 1950s.” (Madrid, 16) This mirrors the treatment that many real life women experienced going into the 1950s, as the war ended and male Americans came home in droves to claim the jobs they left behind years before.

As previously discussed, many of these superheroines were explicitly conceived as smart, strong, and capable because as men got drafted, women began to fill unoccupied spots at many comic book companies and took on creator duties. Renowned American cartoonist and writer, Trina Robbins, talks extensively about this in her book Pretty in Ink: North American Women Cartoonists: 1896-2013. In 1942 females in the comic industry tripled and remained high until the end of the war. Women were frequently assigned to draw both female and male characters, because they excelled at drawing the
female form. As opposed to male creators, who usually drew women to be too curvy. (Robbins, 73)

It was a woman who was responsible for writing and drawing the first female costumed hero in comics. Miss Fury debuted in April 1941, 8 months before Wonder Woman. June Mills, who was professionally known by the more gender-neutral sounding Tarpe Mills, drew the comics. Miss Fury's alter ego was Marla Drake, a socialite who became a costumed heroine after donning a black catsuit for a costumed ball, after another girl wore the same dress as her. Miss Fury never fought bad guys on the warfront, but she did fight Nazis in other exotic locales, like Brazil. Her main villain was a Nazi woman named Baroness Elsa von Kampf, who had a two-year old son that Marla adopted when the Baroness is defeated at the end of the war. Miss Fury served as the inspiration for the Marvel hero Hellcat, who was created in 1944 by Ruth Atkinson.

Another popular female superhero was Pat Parker and her alter ego, War Nurse. Pat was a British nurse turned superheroine whose comics were drawn by both Jill Elgin and Barbara Hall during the war. She was introduced to comic readers in Speed Comics #17 published in 1942, where the tagline of her origin story proudly boasted, "Determined to help her country fight Nazi aggression in her own way, Pat Parker British war nurse becomes the
legendary War Nurse. Terror of Gestapo Agents and saboteurs, and savior of the helpless.”

Pat Parker was also a leading member of the Girl Commandos, a multinational team of superheroines consisting of British members Pat Parker, Ellen Billings, and Penny, Russian member Tanya, and Chinese member Mei-Ling. The Girl Commandos defied traditional comic book convention in several ways: they were an all-female team, none of the team members had superpowers, all members were equal participants of the team regardless of ethnic background, they travelled all over the frontlines to fight enemies, and unlike their Boy Commando counterparts- who were lead by Captain America’s sidekick Bucky Barnes and Human Torch’s sidekick, Toro- none of them were connected to a major costumed hero. Pat Parker and the Girl Commandos ran until 1947, when publisher Harvey Comics stopped producing Speed Comics.

Many female heroines, including Miss America, Liberty Belle, and the Spirit of ’76 saw their runs come to an end in a similar fashion. And although their runs were cancelled, it is important to show that these characters existed at all. As Mike Madrid states in his book about the lost heroines of World War II, “Some [heroines] didn’t last for more than one issue, and hardly any survived the war, often because the books that they ran in didn’t survive the war either...But for four glorious years, young girls could open a comic book
and read that it was possible for women, too, to help defeat fascism.” (Madrid, 50)

One superheroine that did survive the transition from the 1940s to the 1950s was Wonder Woman. There are a number a reasons for this: She had her own solo series- unlike most other female heroes, she was a member of the Justice Society of America- the precursor to the Justice League, and she had a steady fan base of both male and female readers. Her consistent presence in the comic book world has had an undeniable influence on the girls who have grown up with her. Notable feminist and activist Gloria Steinem even used Wonder Woman’s image on the first issue of her publication, MS Magazine.

In the introduction to the first Wonder Woman Archive volume published in 1998, singer and social activist Judy Collins reflects on the impact Wonder Woman has had on young girls, herself included saying, “She arrived at the right moment, during a time when women were finding their own strength and courage...She gave young girls a role model and young boys who read comics a different way to look at girls.” She concludes with, “I am sure that the energy and certainty of women that they can do anything is due in part to Wonder Woman’s great example.” (Collins, intro.)

Steinem also wrote an introduction to a series of Golden Age Wonder Woman comics released in 1972. In her introduction she says about Wonder Woman, “The message of the strips is sometimes inconsistent and always
oversimplified... but it is still a passable version of the truisms that women are rediscovering today: that women are full human beings; that we cannot love others until we love ourselves; that love and respect can only exist between equals.” (Steinem, intro.) Wonder Woman, especially in the early stories that were written by William Marston, symbolizes many values that society culturally links with women. They showcase sisterhood and the importance of mutual support. They celebrate peacefulness and esteem for human life, while diminishing masculine aggression and the belief that violence is the only way of solving conflicts. And they promote strength and self-reliance for women.

From her very first appearance, Wonder Woman’s identity as a woman, and her mission of peace are clearly spelled out for the reader with lines in the introduction and conclusion of the first strip stating, “...at last, in a world torn by the hatreds and wars of men, appears a woman to whom the problems and feats of men are mere child’s play... with one hundred times the agility and strength of our best male athletes and strongest wrestlers.” (Marston, 1) and, “follow her as she beats the world’s most villainous men at their own game each month.” (Marston, 15) Even in these first few lines it is clear that Wonder Woman is going to take a different approach to crime fighting than her male contemporaries. Marston also sets America up as, “...the last citadel of democracy and equal rights for women” (Marston, 15) setting defeating fascism and women’s rights on equal footing with one another.
Early Wonder Woman comics were also unique among female-helmed comics, in that there was a direct emphasis on sisterhood and the self-reliance of women. Gloria Steinem addresses this very point in her introduction, saying, “The idea of such cooperation may not seem particularly revolutionary to the male reader: men are routinely depicted as working well together. But women know how rare, and therefore exhilarating the idea of sisterhood really is.” (Steinem, intro.) It is true that women in comics often work solo, like Catwoman or Supergirl, or in teams where they are the sole female hero like Sue Storm in the Fantastic Four, or Batgirl in the Batman comic books. When two women do end up working together, they are usually thrown into a love triangle plotline, or put into direct competition another way.

However, Wonder Woman’s best friend Etta Candy and the Holliday College girls crop up frequently in her 1940s stories, and play an active role in the adventures. They often help Wonder Woman rescue the captured Steve Trevor, or handle reconnaissance work scouting enemies while Wonder Woman is stuck playing Diana Prince the Army secretary.

In the Marston penned stories, Wonder Woman’s message to women always came back to one moral: self-reliance. Never depend on any force outside yourself. In *Wonder Woman #13* after she inspires the Amazon-like
women of Eveland to fight for themselves, they carry her on their shoulders as she says, “You saved yourselves, I only showed you that you could.”

Wonder Woman debuted in an extremely politically active time in American history, and much like other patriotic superheroes of the time, her wardrobe, and her stories are infused with political commentary. While some commentary is subtle, there are three positions that Wonder Woman has explicitly supported throughout her years in print. First, that violence is neither good, nor is it inevitable. Second, that it is necessary to be strong, but only in self-defense. And third, that enemies whether they are male or female, can be re-educated and made to see the errors of their ways. (Steinem, intro)

Many of these lessons are presented in a 1948 Wonder Woman storyline written by Joyce Hummel Murchison Kelly, entitled, “When Treachery Wore a Green Shirt.” In this story, Etta Candy and the Holliday College girls come across a man named Dr. Frenzi whipping up xenophobic sentiment in a small, generic American town. In one panel, he is shown at a rally with the townspeople saying, “...it's time to give America back to the Americans! Don’t let foreigners take your jobs!” This rightfully alarms the Holliday College girls, who immediately contact Wonder Woman. The girls inevitably get captured while looking for more information on Frenzi, and Wonder Woman swoops in and saves them, but not before Frenzi tries to manipulate her into supporting
his views. In the end, Frenzi is stopped, and as Wonder Woman is carried out on the shoulders of the townspeople she gives an important lesson to the people, “...this man's world of yours will never be without pain and suffering until it learns love and respect for human rights.”

Throughout the next decades, Wonder Woman's image was inconsistent at best, and her comic suffered from a revolving door of writers. She enjoyed a brief revival as second wave feminism rose in the United States, and her 1970s TV show starring Lynda Carter was hugely popular. By the 1980s many DC Comics properties suffered from assorted continuity issues and errors, which DC management saw as barriers to new readers. As a result, they re-launched many of their main titles, including Wonder Woman, with new origin stories in a universe-wide event called Crisis on Infinite Earths.

In her new origin, Wonder Woman retained her godly connections, and Paradise Island was renamed Themyscira. Most importantly, she lost her secret identity as Diana Prince and emerged as Diana, Princess of Themyscira and Ambassador to the United States. It was this version of the character that was in print in the years surrounding the September 11th attacks.

In this era of deceptive government officials, and corrupt corporate heads, one of Wonder Woman’s abilities was more terrifying than ever- the power to compel men to tell the truth. (Madrid, 218) Wonder Woman was
more committed than ever to her message of love, and in the post-9/11 world, she was often seen helping women clad in burqas, in unidentified desert countries who were being terrorized by overreaching men.

In Greg Rucka’s initial Wonder Woman run, from 2002-2006, Diana has fully embraced her role as Ambassador to the United States, and her adventures are often grounded in the geopolitical. She runs a fully diverse embassy team, which was a deliberate choice by Rucka, and mimics the multicultural team that Pat Parker lead in the 1940s Girl Commando comics. In this position, “Diana mirrors in her actions and contradictions...the doubts and determinations of a nation which faces the dilemma of answering terror with terror, or attempting a diplomatic response.” (Berns, 195)

Wonder Woman’s main enemy at this time is a woman named Veronica Cale, the head of Cale-Anderson Pharmaceuticals. Cale worked hard and overcame many hardships in her life to form this company, and resents what she sees as Wonder Woman’s privilege and easy acceptance by the world’s patriarchal society.

In *Wonder Woman #196*, Cale seeks to discredit Wonder Woman by using radical ideas from Diana’s recently published book *Reflections: A Collection of Essays and Speeches* which contains some pagan philosophy and ideas. At the end of the issue, Cale succeeds in getting the book banned from
schools, and prohibiting any school clubs that promote Wonder Woman. This situation is reminiscent of the backlash against the Muslim community in the United States after 9/11. Carolyn Cocca in her book *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation* addresses the discrimination Wonder Woman is facing, “...if she just punches things and saves people, that is acceptable...but if she speaks about beliefs that differ from long-standing cultural ideas, she is a threat.” (Cocca, 43)

Rucka also shows Diana dealing with blatant sexism in the wake of the publishing of her new book. When the publishing company is pitching ideas for the book cover, Diana strenuously objects to the cover that shows her in nothing but a red sash, opting instead for a simpler cover, with the book title and her golden lasso. She is also shown promoting her book to fans and news outlets, which ask her a wide range of questions about her appearance and love life, and almost nothing about her actual book.

Diana also has to deal with issues on her native Themyscira during Rucka’s run. In *Wonder Woman #198* the Amazons are sharing their island with Egyptian-based Amazons, who they do not fully trust. They differ on their opinions of men, because the Greek Amazons do not believe men have a place on their island. They believe that men use the island’s resources in an unequal relationship, and take advantage of their hospitality. This mentality alludes to
the real time examinations about the fears of colonization, and the competition caused by globalization, that were prominent in the news media after 9/11.

This issue of Wonder Woman also addresses other issues that came to characterize the United States’ War on Terror. In the latter part of Wonder Woman #198 Diana is shown fighting her ancient foe, Medousa. The fight is particularly brutal, especially when Diana is forced to temporarily blind herself with Medousa’s venom in order to be free to subdue her. Real time images from the fight are used to show Diana in a brutal light, and to scare the population out of supporting her. This mirrors a trend, starting with the Vietnam War, of graphic news images being used to sway public opinion on foreign policy. References to the United States’ foreign policy only got more explicit during Rucka’s run. In Wonder Woman #208 Themyscira crashes into the ocean, right off the east coast of the United States and the United States offers their protection in exchange for the unlimited use of Amazonian resources.

In 2008, DC Comics hired Gail Simone to write for Wonder Woman. Remarkably, this was the first time in the nearly seventy-five years of continuous publication that the Wonder Woman comic was written by a female, full-time. Simone wrote a Wonder Woman who was kind and courageous, a brilliant and confidant warrior, and a mentor and role model for her fellow superheroines. She was warm, human, and even had an infectious
sense of humor. In Simone’s Wonder Woman the differences weren’t minimized. Her narratives drew on, and even reveled in the differences between men and women, and emphasized the power of the female body.

Despite this, the lessons of the early Wonder Woman comics are still present. In *Wonder Woman: Rise of the Olympian*, Diana must battle Genocide, a raging creature created to destroy her. The monster attacks innocent people, and captures and tortures Diana’s best friend Etta Candy. Regardless of all of this, Diana is depicted as at her strongest when she overcomes blind rage and lets a defeated Genocide live as an act of compassion.

Simone also emphasizes Diana’s relationships with other women, and with her own body. In *Wonder Woman #34*, Simone has Diana team up with Black Canary on an undercover mission. When the two are discussing their new outfits Black Canary tells Diana, the skimpier the outfit the less questions they will be asked, even though the new outfit will expose the superhero community’s “...second most famous bosom.” When Diana seems confused, Canary tells her that Powergirl is number one. “Trust me on this. Those things are like a national treasure.” They find suitable outfits, and Canary is surprised that Diana isn’t more aware of how people view her body, assuming she must have some idea, she wears the American flag on her behind. “Might as well draw a target for nerds on it.” she tells a baffled Diana. This scene is important,
because it acknowledges the blatant objectification of women, especially in the comic book world. However, instead of depowering Black Canary and Wonder Woman, they use it to their advantage, and turn it back on those who would objectify them.

Critics have often praised Gail Simone for her strong storytelling ability, and her powerful narratives that center on women. This is most prominently on display during her acclaimed run of DC’s Birds of Prey series. The series follows former Batgirl, Barbara Gordon who was brutally crippled by the Joker in the controversial 1989 *Killing Joke* storyline by Alan Moore. In the first Birds of Prey storyline by Chuck Dixon in 1996, she gives up the mantle of Batgirl and becomes Oracle: a computer expert and information broker. She teams up with the Black Canary, Dinah Lance who recently split from longtime partner Green Arrow. Using Black Canary quite literally as her legs, Barbara continues to fight crime and protect the innocent.

The series really came into its own when Simone took over writing in 2003. She has a way of linking the women’s relationships to each other, rather than linking their narrative worth solely to their relationships with men, and her characters talk about things that are important to women, without being confined to their femininity. They don’t apologize for being smart, or sexy, or asskickers. They just are. Many situations in Simone’s run rely on humor
directed at women. In one storyline, Black Canary escapes capture because she

tells her male captors that she needs feminine products, and they get

embarrassed and leave to get her some. In another, Oracle tells a bad guy who

gets throttled by Black Canary that he should never mess with a woman that is

confident enough to cut her own hair.

What starts as a female superhero duo, quickly becomes a full-fledged
team under Simone, who wastes no time adding the likes of Huntress, Lady

Blackhawk, and other underused heroines. The ladies on the team are

unapologetic in their interactions with men. In one scene Huntress tells a date,

“They way you present yourself...I’m trying to think of a nice way to put this.

It’s annoying as hell and makes me want to hurl you to your death.” They even

find time to talk about relationships with each other. When it is revealed that

Huntress once slept with Barbara’s former boyfriend Nightwing, Canary jokes

about her previous relationship with Green Arrow saying, “If I stayed mad at

every girl Ollie ever slept with, I’d have to sequester myself from female

contact of any kind, including aliens and robots.” The message is clear,

boyfriends may come and go but your female friends are forever.

The book even brings up relevant questions about privacy vs. security.

Oracle by her very nature deals in information, most of which is illegally

obtained, in order to protect the innocent. While on a mission using this stolen
information, Canary asks Oracle if she ever wonders if the privacy of citizens outweighs their right to know. Simone even paraphrases Benjamin Franklin’s famous quote, “He who would sacrifice a little bit of liberty for a little bit a safety deserves neither.” Later in the story, Canary again reminds Barbara that citizen’s rights should be more important than punishing the guilty. In a time in which support of the Patriot Act was at an all time high, this message served as a subtle reminder to readers about the nature of their own civil liberties.

In 2004, the same year that George W. Bush was re-elected, DC introduced Kate Spencer: Manhunter, to the world. She was a hero that, in the words of her creator, nobody ever thought would get written. She was a female protagonist who smoked. Who was divorced. Who had self-described parenting skills on the level of Mrs. Bates. She had a real, daytime job as a lawyer, but was not afraid to kill criminals. Her preemptive style of justice reflected a world in which the dominant foreign policy directive was shoot first and find weapons of mass destruction later. Perhaps most importantly, she didn’t fight crime in fishnets and high heels, but in a practical and protective suit, and on her own terms.

Kate Spencer was an asskicking lawyer, whose ‘no holds barred’ style was the same whether she was prosecuting superhuman criminals, or killing them in the streets as Manhunter. But she was also a mother, who split her
time between her job, her nighttime hobby, and her child. In this way, she was much more like a modern woman than any other superheroine that came before her. When it is later revealed that Kate is in fact the granddaughter of 1940s heroine the Phantom Lady, she gains a much needed mentor, in life and in crime fighting.
V. Conclusion

Since their introduction to the mainstream American conscious in the late 1930s, superhero comic books have always reflected the pulse of the people. They showcase the real life changes and struggles of American society in a way that is totally different from any other medium. While much research has been done on the nature of comic books, and their impact on other fields of study, little scholarship has addressed the role and representation of women in the field. The term comic book has long been associated with the adolescent male, but comics have the potential to reach female readers as well, and allow them to connect with complex, powerful female characters.

My paper looks at a small cross section of these female characters, ones that were popular during two times of war, when the roles of women were experiencing unprecedented changes. Female characters were used to show women that they could be powerful, and independent. That they weren’t defined by their relationships with men. That female friendships could be empowering. And that they could be heroes too.

These characters, even ones that were created during World War II, are still inspirational and relevant today. Winnie the WAC was republished in 2002.
by Vic Herman’s widow, who wanted Winnie to inspire a new generation of women, and other World War II era characters like, Liberty Belle, Lady Phantom, and Lady Blackhawk, have reappeared in mainstream comics over the years. Of course, Wonder Woman continues to be published to this day. In this way, they continue to inspire woman and girls, even as new female characters begin to fill the pages of comic books.

Representation and diversity in comic books is extremely important, because it shows that anyone can be a hero. As Carolyn Cocca states, “If the constantly repeated story is that women and girls are not leaders, are not working in professional settings, are not agents of their own lives but merely adjuncts to others, and are sometimes not even present at all, it can reinforce or foster societal undervaluing of women and girls.” (Cocca, 5)

As more and more women stand up and speak about the positive impact that reading comic books has had on them, as more women become involved in the editing, writing, and drawing of comic books, and as more men learn to support women in the comic industry, the number and variety of inspiring female characters will only grow. Who knows what they will inspire women to do next?
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