

FROM AUDIENCE TO PUBLIC: COMIC BOOK FANZINES IN THE
SEVENTIES AND EIGHTIES

By

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ABSTRACT

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This paper examines comic book fanzines published between 1974 and 1986, and argues that the theoretical model of the public, as defined by Jürgen Habermas and adapted by Michael Warner, is useful for understanding how fandom functions as a social construct. It explores the mechanisms of production and distribution of fanzines and how they contributed to the creation and maintenance of this public. The comic book public was engaged in a conversation with the power of capitalist producers and consciously resisted reproducing the comic book industry's relationship between producer and consumer. To illustrate this, the paper investigates discussions about gender and religion found within the public and explores the complexity of those discussions. Comic book fans saw problems with the comic book industry, such as its representation of women, and sought to illuminate and address those problems, while at the same time demanding that comic book fanzines keep discussions related to the content of, as opposed to the social issues raised by, comic books. It concludes by tracing the transformation of comic book fans into comic book professionals and offers insights into the value of studying fandom as a public in order to better understand contemporary capitalism and the relationship between producers and consumers.

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Introduction

In the summer of 1981, Fred Gorham wrote a short piece for the Des Moines, Iowa based comic book fanzine, *It's a Fanzine*. Called "Confessions of a Comic Club Member," the piece told the tale of how Gorham had first become interested in comic books. He was in the third grade when a friend of a friend, who was apparently preparing for a fight on the playground, asked Gorham to hold his comic books. Not knowing what to do when the bell rang, Gorham took the comics with him and ended up reading some of them in class. He was hooked. He read comics whenever he could, but eventually his family moved to a smaller town where comics were harder to come by and far fewer people read them. As Gorham was entering high school, he decided to get back into comics, but kept that information largely to himself. He was embarrassed to admit his fandom to just anyone. Eventually, Gorham started making his way back to Des Moines to buy comics and on one such trip he met Mark Metz, the president of the Des Moines Comic Club. They started talking, and Gorham decided to join the club, having found a group of like-minded people with whom he could share his love of comics.¹ What's more, the group published *It's a Fanzine (IAF)*, which, as a member, Gorham would receive in the mail every month or so. By reading and contributing to *IAF*, Gorham was able to participate in a public discourse about comic books, a discourse created by comic book fans. Knowing that many comic fans were "in the closet" about their hobby and felt isolated because they didn't have local fans to interact with, members of the Des Moines Comic Club started *IAF* "to reach out and touch the fan near and far, bringing comic fans together in a common meeting place."

¹ Fred Gorham, "Confessions of a Comic Club Member," *It's a Fanzine (IAF)* #12 (August/September 1981), 24.

Fanzines—a portmanteau of “fan” and “magazine” used to describe self-published magazines made and distributed by and for fans—stand as a historical record of what fans were talking about, both as consumers of comic books and producers of fanzines. They gave fans the opportunity to express themselves in writing, to talk about what they liked or didn’t like about comics or the culture surrounding comics, to show off their knowledge about comic characters or their history, or to have questions answered about the same. Most importantly, fanzines provided a virtual “meeting place” where fans in different locations could carry on a conversation they might not have been able to have in person. Fanzines connected people in different physical communities across the United States, allowing them to build virtual communities based on shared interest. Fred Gorham’s experience with the Des Moines Comic Club was a common one, and it allowed him to occupy a space—the club, its fanzine, and the fandom it represented—in which he felt he belonged. Publications like *It’s a Fanzine* allowed countless fans to connect with one another and build communities based on shared tastes. For historians, exploring comic book fanzines from the 1970s and 1980s can illuminate the culture of comic book fans, including the content and organization of that culture. Fanzines were not the exclusive products of comic book fans, as they were used by a wide variety of other fan groups, but fanzines shared forms and functions across these groups, allowing these findings to inform explorations of other fan cultures.

Fandom was a critical space in which fans were able to address the comic book industry, point out its flaws, and make suggestions for improvement. Fans used the public space of fanzines to work through problems they had with the content of comic books or with the industry in general. Here they could air criticisms or complaints in order to better make sense of the

media they were so obviously devoted to and, in some cases, to justify their love of it despite problematic characters, plots, or business decisions. Fans understood that comics were not perfect, and they were conscious of the reasons for this, but they also took steps to correct those problems by discussing them and, when possible, bringing them to the attentions of comic book producers.

Because comic book fanzines are still largely unexplored by scholars, there is neither a large secondary literature about them, nor are there many archives which collect them. The Comic Art Collection, part of the Michigan State University Library's Special Collections, collects about 430 different comic book fanzine titles from the 1960s to today, but this collection does not contain anywhere near every title ever produced. Any selection of comic book fanzines then cannot hope to represent the entire output of this fandom, but this is a common challenge faced by cultural historians.

In the pages that follow I will argue that fans used fanzines to create a public composed of members with whom they could explore, discuss, and try to affect the comic books they read. I will begin with an explanation of the public as a theoretical model useful in exploring fandom, and then I will provide background on fanzines as a form of cultural production. I will next explore the mechanisms of how fans communicated across geographic spaces and how fanzines were produced, paid for, and kept as non-profit spaces. Comic book fanzines contained discussions on a variety of topics, and I have decided to focus on two which appeared within the sources read: the discourse surrounding gender in comic books, and the topic of religion within fanzines. I will then illustrate how fans used this public, its mechanisms, rules, and discursive space, to affect change within the comic book industry itself, principally by making the transition

from fan to professional. I will conclude with suggestions for how this information can be applied to the wider field of fan studies and comment on the broader value of studying fandom.

From Audience to Public

Fanzines provide a written record of the thoughts, opinions, attitudes, and concerns of the fans who made them. Their existence as texts allow historians and other scholars insight into comic fandom's past, but they also point towards a theoretical model that can help scholars understand how fandoms work: the public. The textual nature of fanzines allowed them to be circulated among fans, which in turn allowed fans to engage in a conversation beyond the personal spaces of their homes, or the public spaces of comic book stores and comic book conventions. In doing this, comic book fans created a public sphere centered around comic books, to which they could contribute their thoughts and ideas, and which provided a forum for their debates and discussions about comic books and the industry which produced them.

Jürgen Habermas has written that the public sphere is “a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed,” which is “constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public.” These citizens “act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest” to that public.² In this model, when comic book fans come together to discuss comic books, via personal letters, letters written to comic book editors, or conversations in person at stores or conventions, they are forming a public sphere, and acting as a public, what might be called the comic book public. Habermas also argued that on a large enough scale, publics require some means to disseminate the conversation to people across large or geographically dispersed publics.³ In the comic book public, this role was filled by fanzines, which were created and printed around the country, and could be mailed to readers elsewhere.

² Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere,” in *Jürgen Habermas on Society and Politics: A Reader*, edited by S. Seidman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 92.

³ Ibid.

Habermas was focused on what he referred to as the political public sphere, wherein members of the public discussed matters “connected with the practice of the state,” but he acknowledged that other publics, such as a literary public, also existed.⁴ This idea of multiple publics is what allows the public to be applied as a theoretical model to a group like comic book fans, and has been expanded upon in recent years by Michael Warner. Warner holds that publics “presuppose a contingent history, varying in subtle but significant ways from one context to another,” while at the same time retaining “a functional intelligibility across a wide range of contexts.”⁵ Each public is unique, steeped in certain kinds of texts, certain concerns, and certain subjects of discussion, but publics also follow similar patterns of people coming together to discuss a subject and to disseminate that discussion among the members of the public. Especially important for Warner, and for the comic book public, is the dissemination of the public’s discourse via texts. These texts, such as fanzines, are circulated “among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity.”⁶ Comic book fans create a social entity, the comic book public, by producing, distributing, reading, and responding to fanzines which contain their thoughts and ideas about comic books. Fanzines reproduce the public, which made it possible for fans in the 1970s and 1980s to engage in the public from around the country, and which make it possible now to explore what those fans were thinking about.

In addition to defining the public as a theoretical model, Habermas also made an argument of declension. Habermas saw the public as disappearing, if it not vanished, in the face

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 9.

⁶ Ibid. 11-12.

of mass culture. He saw society as having slipped from the lofty heights of cultural debate, into the morass of cultural consumption. Instead of discussing culture, citizens simply consumed it. Consumer culture, Habermas wrote, was devoid of “elements whose appreciation required a certain amount of training—whereby the ‘accomplished’ appreciation once again heightened the appreciative ability itself.” What made Habermas see mass culture such as comic books as so uncomplicated was the “special preparation [which] made them consumption-ready, which is to say, guaranteed an enjoyment without being tied to stringent presuppositions. Of course, such enjoyment is also entirely inconsequential. Serious involvement with culture produced facility, while the consumption of mass culture leaves no lasting trace; it affords a kind of experience which is not cumulative.”⁷ Habermas assumed that mass produced culture had no lasting value, that after reading a comic the reader immediately forgot about the comic and went about their day, that the story or any social commentary contained therein did not stay with the reader. That such culture could be easily forgotten was intentional: producers created easily dismissed content so that readers would be left unfulfilled by one issue of a comic, and be drawn to the newsstands to buy the next issue, or other titles. Since mass culture says nothing of value, people reading, watching, or listening to the products of mass culture gain nothing from it, and have no reason to talk or write about it afterward.

In this view of mass culture, comic books could not generate a public because there would be nothing for that public to discuss, and thus no reason to form a public. But the existence of comic book fanzines, which were first appearing around the time that Habermas was writing, challenge his assumptions about mass culture and the ability of consumers to think

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1962, 2000), 166.

critically about it. Reading comic books did generate facility, at the very least a facility in understanding the medium of comic books, and they did give readers a sense of accomplishment. The consumption of these objects stayed with readers, and they thought about the comics they read after they read them, both privately and within the public they constructed to talk about comic books. Fanzines had a similar impact on fans, generating discussion and writing just as the comic books themselves did. At the most basic level, each new issue of a comic book such as *The Savage She-Hulk* built upon characterizations and stories from previous issues. The discussions fans had about them required the accumulation of knowledge about a given character or title, which was increased with each issue. The great irony is that at the same time that Habermas was writing about mass culture destroying the public, publics were developing out of the reception of mass culture.

Habermas has viewed the consumption of mass culture as a breakdown of the public, but a better way to view it would be as a different mode of cultural interaction. All cultural consumption is active: readers choose which books to read, viewers which shows to watch. At the very least, utilizing one's own interests to decide which media with which to engage is active, but there is a difference between choosing to read a comic book and then writing an article about that comic book for a fanzine. The difference here is between the audience and the public. Members of the audience are not inherently engaged in discourse or textual production centered around the media they enjoy. A comic book reader acts as a member of the audience whenever they read a comic book, and they act as a member of the public when they engage in conversation about that comic book. Membership in the audience and the public are not mutually

exclusive, and while not every member of the audience is a member of the public, every member of the public *is* a member of the audience.

The audience has been the default model in what has become known as fan studies. The audience model has focused on the reception of media, how members of the audience receive and interpret that media message for themselves. For example, in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, American studies scholar Janice A. Radway explored how and why women read romance novels. She was interested in what readers got out of the books, not necessarily in how those readers discussed those books. She admits that “the theorization of ‘community’ in *Reading the Romance* is itself somewhat anemic in that it fails to specify how membership in the romance-reading community is constituted.”⁸ Radway acknowledges that her subjects did not make much of an effort to create a community based on their shared interests, and that the extent of their community was “a huge, ill-defined network composed of readers on the one hand and the authors on the other.”⁹ Although Radway’s work is excellent, it does show the limitations of the audience model as applied to comic book fans. Exploring the reception of comic books by their readers does not reveal much about the community to which those readers contributed.

Media theorist Henry Jenkins has come closer to addressing the public as a theoretical model in his *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Jenkins focused not on fans’ reception of texts such as television shows, but on their *re*interpretation of those texts in the form of fan created fiction, art, and music. Jenkins argues that fans rewrite narratives from

⁸ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984, 1991), 8.

⁹ Ibid. 97

the media they enjoy in order to make that media more personal.¹⁰ While Jenkins mentions fanzines, he does so only as vehicles for the dissemination of fan made content. While comic book fanzines of the 1970s and 1980s can certainly be seen this way, looking at them only as vehicles for disseminating media is incomplete, and does not address the value of the fanzines themselves. Fans created fanzines not simply to share their ideas or stories, but instead to enter into a discussion with other fans, to consciously enter into a public. It is this conscious desire to interact with other fans and discuss comic books that allowed some comic book fans to move from the audience to the public. While Jenkins' subjects certainly created publics, his use of the audience model keeps the focus on reception, and does not explore how those publics were constructed or how they functioned.

Sociologist Richard Butsch has written that records of audiences are most often "compiled by and filtered through bystanders."¹¹ This is because, while acting as an audience, members of that audience rarely leave textual evidence. Publics, on the other hand, are often predicated specifically upon the creation and circulation of texts, which allows members of the audience to leave a lasting record in their own words. Butsch conceptualizes the public as a form of the audience, in general the preferred form of the audience, as it was one engaged in improving itself through learning and discussion. But he cautions that many of the scholars, critics, politicians and the like who have written about the audience in any form have been members of the bourgeoisie and that their writings have carried a hierarchical message: some

¹⁰ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 1-2, 22-23.

¹¹ Richard Butsch, *The Citizen Audience: Crowds, Publics, and Individuals*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 3.

kinds of audiences, and some kinds of media, are better or worse than others.¹² Such hierarchical messages can be challenged by utilizing the voices of the comic book audience itself in the form of fanzines. That comic book fans created a public in which they seriously discussed comic books shows that assumptions by Habermas and others—that the products of mass culture cannot generate worthwhile discussion—must be reevaluated.

The value of the fanzine as a cultural product lies in what James W. Carey has called the ritualistic mode of communication. In his essay “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” Carey defined the dominant view of communication as one of “transmission,” in which information is moved from speaker to the audience. Carey called for a different view of communication, one of “ritual,” in which communication is directed from peer to peer, “toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs.”¹³ The goal of the fanzine wasn’t to transmit information, but to maintain a community of comic book fans, and the relationship between fanzine editors and their fellow fans was much more equal than the relationship between comic book publishers and their audience.

The value of the fanzine as a historical source is that it provides a record of how such audiences received, interpreted, and reinterpreted the media messages with which they chose to engage. The ephemeral nature of the audience is not perfectly preserved though: fanzines rarely record the initial reception of those messages, but the thoughts and feelings generated in response to the messages. Further, since fanzines required much time and effort to produce, by

¹² Ibid. 2-4.

¹³ James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 18.

the time an article was written or published, the author could have been influenced by any number of other messages. By studying fanzines, scholars can not only find the voices of fans themselves, but can see the mechanics of how those fans interacted with each other, and how they maintained the comic book audience, and the comic book public within it. The public is not the only theoretical model that can, or should, be applied to the study of comic book fans, but it is a useful model for studying comic book fanzines and the discussions they produced and reproduced.

Defining Fans and Fanzines

Fans occupy a unique space and fanzines perform a unique role within popular culture, and it is important to define those terms in order to avoid confusion with their use. The term “fan” has a complicated history. Henry Jenkins has written that the word fan is an abbreviation of “fanatic,” itself rooted in the Latin word “fanaticus.” Although initially “fanaticus” simply implied membership in or devotion to a temple, it eventually took on the more sinister meaning of someone driven to extremes of worship. The English word not only inherited this meaning but also came to be associated with any kind of enthusiasm deemed excessive. “Fan” was first used by 19th century American journalists to describe the devotees of certain baseball clubs, and was quickly attached to women theater patrons, known as “Matinee Girls” who, it was claimed, attended the theater to swoon over male actors instead of going for the performance itself.¹⁴ Popular media has, since then, often portrayed fans as either unhinged psychotics, or as comic relief, and in either case, usually as men. Jenkins makes use of the example of *Star Trek* fans from a sketch on *Saturday Night Live*. In the sketch, William Shatner attends a *Star Trek* convention and, pushed over the edge by the constant, petty questions of the fans, loses his temper and insults them. As Jenkins point out, this sketch “distills many popular stereotypes about fans.” They are “brainless consumers” who “devote their lives to the cultivation of meaningless knowledge,” “place inappropriate importance on devalued cultural material,” become so obsessed with their fandom that it “forecloses other types of social experience,” and so forth.¹⁵

¹⁴ Henry Jenkins, 12.

¹⁵ Ibid., 9-10.

Jenkins and others scholars in fan studies have worked diligently to undo this image of the fan, and by the 21st century fans are taken more seriously by scholars and, instead of being objects of scorn, they are courted by producers. Although fan studies scholars have successfully illustrated that fans are conscious and active consumers who think about and analyze the objects of their fandom, some producers see them as consumers who will buy anything marketed to them. Media companies expect fans to purchase every trinket that is even tangentially related to media products they enjoy, in order to maximize profits across various markets.¹⁶ This is why Marvel Comics' online store doesn't actually sell comic books but rather things like clothing and mugs. Pushing superheroes, which have a great deal of cultural capital beyond their home medium of comic books, as a sort of decorative style also allows companies to sell items to customers who do not even read comic books.

Comic book fans were active and participatory consumers. Comic fans did not simply buy any comic that came along. They had strong opinions about comics and the industry that made them and were not afraid to express those opinions to each other and to comic creators. For example, after fan efforts resulted in the addition of a super heroine to the cast of Charlton Comics' *E-Man*, Bob Rodi started a column in *The Heroine Addict (THA)* called "Operation: Deluge." His goal was to rally fans to write to other companies in support of heroines, "to concentrate [their] aim and strengthen [the] effect" of letter campaigns.¹⁷ Fans were also rational actors using print media to express these ideas. In fact, they went beyond using existing print media and created their own media in order to give themselves a proper vehicle for expression.

¹⁶ Henry Jenkins, 12-15; Mel Stanfill, "They're Losers, but I Know Better: Intra-Fandom Stereotyping and the Normalization of the Fan Subject," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 30, no. 2 (June 2013), 118-119.

¹⁷ Bob Rodi, "Operation: Deluge," *The Heroine Addict (THA)* #5 (June 1975), 18.

For comic fans, “fandom”—a term used to identify fan culture as distinct from the larger culture—described a textual and above all discursive public.

Demographic information about fans is scant, but a few things are obvious. The majority of comic book fans were, and still are today, male. Many of the fans who created or contributed to fanzines in the 1970s and 1980s were adults, usually past high school, sometimes middle aged. Few of these fans expressed their age in exact numbers, although references to college, either as students or recent graduates, are common. No mention is made of the race or sexual orientation of fans, and while no specific class identity is expressed, many fans did lament living with financial straits, and many seem to have been perpetually broke.

Fanzines have their roots in science fiction fandom. When Hugo Gernsback was editing *Amazing Stories* in the 1930s, he would print letters from fans, often including the full address of the writer. Some fans began writing directly to each other, and some founded local clubs. Before long fans were exchanging club newsletters and then self-published magazines featuring interviews, critiques, and new fiction. Titles such as *The Comet*, dating back to 1930, *The Time Traveller*, edited by future DC Comics editor Julius “Julie” Schwartz, and *Science Fiction*, published by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the creators of Superman, would become foundational texts.¹⁸

Comic books debuted later in the 1930s, with *Action Comics* #1, the first appearance of Superman, published in June, 1938. The comic book industry exploded soon after, and Superman inspired countless other superheroes over the following decades. The popularity of superheroes

¹⁸ Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, (London: Verso, 1997), 6-7; Fredric Wertham, *The World of Fanzines: A Special Form of Communication* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 38-40; Daryl Herrick, “Julie’s Roots as a Fan Back When it All Began,” in *AFTA* #2 vol. 1, 7; Julius Schwartz and Brian M. Thomsen, *Man of Two Worlds: My Life in Science Fiction and Comics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 8-16.

peaked during World War II, but dropped through the second half of the 1940s, and comic publishers turned to other genres, like science fiction, westerns, and crime stories. By the early 1950s, the “Golden Age” of comic books, and the initial reign of superheroes, was over.

While there were certainly comic book fans and many, many comic book readers in the early decades, there was little in the way of an organized fandom until the early 1960s, when the first comic book fanzines debuted. In the late 1950s, Julie Schwartz helped to reintroduce the Flash, a DC superhero who had been a failure on the newsstands only a few years earlier. His success spawned a number of relaunched superheroes at DC, and would later inspire Marvel Comics to focus more on superhero comics as well. This effectively began the “Silver Age” of comic books and cemented superheroes as the default genre of the medium.¹⁹

At the same time, Julie Schwartz, who had himself moved from science fiction fan editor (or “fanned”)²⁰ to professional editor, decided to print letters in the back of the comics he edited and, starting with *The Brave and the Bold* #34 in 1961, included the full addresses of the writers. This new addition to comic books, and conscious effort on the part of Schwartz to forge a community of comic fans, spread to books under other editors at DC and eventually to Marvel. The result was similar to what occurred in science fiction fandom in the 1930s: fans started contacting each other and, eventually, started publishing fanzines.

¹⁹ Schwartz and Thomsen, 87-88. The term Golden Age is widely used by comic fans and professionals to describe the period from 1938 to about 1950. The Golden Age was followed by the Silver Age, starting at the end of the 1960s and running to the mid-1970s or so. Then followed the Bronze Age, Iron Age, and the Modern Age. See also Benjamin Woo, “An Age-Old Problem: Problematics of Comic Book Historiography,” *International Journal of Comic Art*, 10, vol. 1 (Spring 2008), 268-279.

²⁰ From here onward I will use the term fanned to refer to fans who created their own fanzines, as this word was commonly used by fans themselves, and is a useful distinction from contributors, who submitted work to be published in other people’s fanzines.

United through the letters column of *The Brave and the Bold*, DC fans Jerry Bails and Roy Thomas decided in 1961 to start a fanzine called *Alter-Ego*, dedicated to their favorite Golden Age heroes. Around the same time, Don and Maggie Thomsen founded a fanzine called *Comic Art*, leaving science fiction fandom in order to focus on comics. A third title, a science fiction fanzine published by Dick and Pat Lupoff called *Xero*, featured a column about superheroes called “All in Color for a Dime.” Although the Lupoffs never transitioned from science fiction to comic fandom, and Dick Lupoff would, in 1965, denounce comics as unworthy of fannish attention, *Xero* is still, alongside *Alter-Ego*, and *Comic Art*, considered one of the first comic book fanzines.²¹

Comic book fanzines proliferated through the 1960s. In 1962 Ron Foss noted in *Alter-Ego* #5 that there were 13 total comic book fanzines, two of which were not specifically dedicated to superheroes. By 1970 there were far more, covering a wide variety of topics related to comic books, and although many only ran one issue, they represented “a few hundred people publishing for an audience of a few thousand.”²² By the late 1980s however, fanzines were losing ground in a changing fandom, and with the spread of the Internet in the 1990s, comic book fanzines would largely (though not completely) cease to exist in physical forms.

In the mid-1970s comic book fanzines had developed standards of production and distribution which allowed fans to discuss the mechanics of the public within the public itself. They were well enough established that fans could utilize this space to discuss things other than

²¹ Peter M. Coogan, “From Love to Money: The First Decade of Comic Book Fandom,” *International Journal of Comic Art*, 12, no. 1 (Spring 2010), 51-57; Schwartz and Thomsen, 105-107; Wertham, 57.

²² Coogan, 58-59.

comic books, such as the representation of women in comics, or the changing nature of religion in America.

In the 1970s and 1980s, American culture changed to reflect an increasingly conservative trend. This conservative movement was steeped in the changing nature of American religion at the time. Since the mid-1960s, liberal protestant denominations, such as Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians had lost about 20-30% of their membership. Conservative denominations, such as Southern Baptists, the Willow Creek congregation or the Cavalry Chapel movement increased their membership by as much as 50-100%. The growth of conservative Christianity brought with it an increasing belief in biblical literalism and creationism, and increasing challenges to secular and liberal society. Especially troubling to these groups were liberal “attacks on traditional family and gender roles” and the “advocacy of abortion and homosexuality.”²³

America was also deeply conflicted about the changing nature of gender roles. One manifestation of this conflict was the STOP ERA campaign launched by Phyllis Schlafly which managed, over the course of ten years, to prevent the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. That an amendment which promised that “equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex” ended up not being passed illustrates how embattled feminism had become despite earlier successes. The amendment was decried by conservatives as providing a constitutional basis for abortion, homosexual rights, and the military conscription of women.²⁴ STOP ERA was not the only challenge faced by women

²³ Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford; London: Oxford University Press, 2006), 83-85. Quote from page 85.

²⁴ Philip Jenkins, 85-86.

during this time. In 1973 George Gilder launched an assault on feminism with his book *Sexual Suicide*, which would come to influence the conservative backlash against feminism and gender equality. Roman Catholic opposition to the *Roe v. Wade* decision prompted Catholics and evangelicals to join forces in the battle against abortion.²⁵

Comic book fanzines in the period between 1972 and 1983 were home to discussions about gender, but these conversations were not overtly political. Fans did not mention the Equal Rights Amendment or STOP ERA for example, but they did make arguments that seem to place them on the liberal side of this issue. They would argue for more and better female characters in comics, and more women writing and drawing comics, arguments which seem based in the kind of feminist action which created the Equal Rights Movement, and shows that at least some feminist ideas had taken root among the American people, even as they were constrained on the national stage.

²⁵ Ibid, 87.

The Mechanics of the Public

Fandom exists alongside the “mundane” world of non-fan activity. No matter how dedicated a fan might be, they still have to navigate the mundane world, going to school or work, taking care of their children, and so forth. Fanzines required a great deal of effort and demanded a huge time investment, which sometimes conflicted with mundane activities. These outside pressures sometimes forced faneds to cancel zines, fold multiple projects into each other, give control of projects to others, or sometimes even leave fandom. Al Tanner left *THA* after #10 in order to pursue other interests in publishing.²⁶ *Tetragrammaton Fragments* #70 was late because Bill Mutschler was too caught up with midterms and other mundane issues to publish it. In the same issue, he announced that he was stepping down from the position of chairman of the United Fanzine Organization (UFO)—a group dedicated to improving the circulation of fanzines—after only five months because it was taking up too much of his time.²⁷ In 1980 Rich Bruning, who had been working as an artist part-time, started a full-time job as well, and stopped publishing because he was too busy.²⁸ Chris Rock occasionally had to delay his fanzine, *Xerox*, because of family and work commitments.²⁹ Wayne Busby had to fold his fanzine *Everything* into his other zine, *Brigade*, after only three issues because he was too busy with his coursework at Seattle Central Community College to manage both.³⁰ Kirk Chritton gave up his work as a faned in order to take a job with a publishing company called Supergraphics, but Jeff Wood stepped in to

²⁶ Stephen R. Johnson, “Club News,” *THA* #11 (Summer 1977), 8.

²⁷ Bill Mutschler, *Tetragrammaton Fragments* (TF) #70 (March 1979), 1.

²⁸ Chris Rock, *Edifice Rox* #19 in *TF* #79 (February 1980), 5.

²⁹ Chris Rock, *LOX/Letter From Rox* #2, in *TF* #86 (January 1985), 6.

³⁰ Wayne Busby, *What Am I Gonna Call this Column?* #1, in *TF* #91 (1985), 8-9. The term “stripzine” refers to fanzines that consisted largely, or entirely, of comic strips instead of articles.

take over as editor of Chritton's zine, *Plasma*.³¹ In 1986 Ross Raihala, publisher of *Moon Stone*, not only took a break from publishing, but considered giving it up, though he decided instead to simplify his zine in order to reduce the work load.³² Starting a fanzine, much less keeping it going, required a great deal of dedication to sustaining the public.

Faneds were dedicated because they were maintaining the discourse of the comic book public and providing fans with access to that discourse regardless of where they lived. The most common reasons to read, contribute to, or edit a fanzine was the ability to interact with other fans and to be part of a discourse based on mutual interest. This discourse took place in comic book shops, at conventions, and in homes, schools, and anywhere else comic fans might run into each other. As we have already seen in Fred Gorham's piece in *IAF* though, not every fan had ready personal access to other comic book fans. Beverly Thon wrote to *Hola!*, a fanzine dedicated to Wonder Woman, to say that it was the first fanzine she'd ever read and that she didn't personally know anyone else that liked comics, much less would be willing to go to a convention.³³ For fans without stores, conventions, or even other nearby comic fans, fanzines were the only way to stay abreast of what was going on within comic book fandom.

Fans didn't just read fanzines though. They also wrote letters to the fanzines they read. Referred to as LOCs (short for letter of comment) faneds took letters seriously, and many fanzines feature responses to most if not all the letters they published. Carol Strickland went so far as to call LOCs "the heart of fandom."³⁴ They were so important that faneds would beg for

³¹ Jim Main, *TF* #90 (September 1985), 2.

³² Ross Raihala, *Number Two*, in *TF* #93 (March 1986), 1.

³³ Beverly Thon, *Hola!* #2 (June 1978), 15.

³⁴ Carol Strickland, *Hola!* #2 (June 1978), 19.

them when they didn't have enough to publish.³⁵ Bill-Dale Marcinko even went so far as to solicit letters ahead of time, using existing relationships with other fans so that he could have letters to publish in *AFTA* #1.³⁶ Letters were the primary way in which fans could communicate with each other in the pages of fanzines and comics, and fans intended for their letters to contribute to the larger discourse within fanzines. Letters were even seen as an indicator of the health of fandom. In *IAF* #15 Greg Robertson wrote in to complain about his peers for it seems that, by 1982, fans weren't writing enough letters, and when they were, those letters weren't as high caliber as they had been in years past. Kehoe, responding to the letter, added that this might also be why Marvel and DC had such boring letter columns at the time.³⁷

Writing and responding to letters allowed fans to publicize their opinions while engaging in the discursive aspect of the public. Even for fans who had access to physical spaces in which they could communicate with other fans, such as Marilyn Bethke, who owned a comic shop in New Jersey, fanzines and letters were important: Bethke published two different fanzines, *Seduction of the Innocent* and *Instant Gratification*.³⁸ Some fans seem to have preferred the written word, or they may have wanted to engage in conversation with fans from other area, despite being able to interact with other local fans. Conversing with someone from across the country may have elicited different conversations than the same handful of people who live

³⁵ Gene Kehoe, *IAF* #1 (August 1980), 2; and Mark Metz, *IAF* #15 (April, 1982), 2.

³⁶ *AFTA* technically stood for *Arise From the Ashes*, but is never referred to by that title within the fanzine, by its faned or anyone else. Instead, it was known almost exclusively as *AFTA*, which is how I shall refer to it here.

³⁷ Greg Robertson and Gene Kehoe, *IAF* #15 (April, 1982), 22.

³⁸ *Seduction of the Innocent*, also the name of Bethke's store, was named after the book of the same title by Dr. Frederic Wertham. Dr. Wertham argued that comic books were behind most of America's youth problems in the 1950s. It was a frequent target of mockery in comic book fandom.

down the street. The creation of a national comic reading public was not just a matter of necessity, it was also a goal in and of itself for some fans.

Letters were a common feature in many fanzines, and many came from fans who wished to express some opinion about fandom, the fanzine in question, the comic book industry, or its products. Different fanzines prompted different kinds of letters. Some fans wrote to show their support for the fanzine in question. Rich Morrissey, editor of *Batmania*, wrote to *THA* to say that he felt “the original spirit of fandom ha[d] been vanishing - as a cooperative venture between fans... ‘zines like *THA* are really what fandom’s about!”³⁹ Carlotta Von Acht wrote to *IAF* to say that she enjoyed the fanzine “because it tend[ed] to be (like most comic fans) liberal, irreverent, atheistic, lewd, and most of all, fun.” Although in his reply Kehoe wondered at “atheistic and lewd,” he still took it as a compliment.⁴⁰

Other letters were less positive. *The Heroine Showcase (THS)* #18 featured a letter from Glenn Lemonds, received just after #9 had shipped. Lemonds criticized how slow *THA* had become, as there had been several months between issues 8 and 9 as the fanzine switched from a bimonthly to a quarterly schedule going into 1976. Lemonds asked for the next issue when it was ready, or for back issues starting with #1 or for his money back, stating that “if you don’t have time to waste on me neither do I have time to waste on you.”⁴¹ The willingness to print letters that openly criticized faneds and their fanzines shows a dedication to the discursive aspects of the public that would be hard to find in mainstream media at the time. Instead of just printing

³⁹ Rich Morrissey, letter, *THA* #2 (December 1974), 34 Underlining and ellipses in original.

⁴⁰ Carlotta Von Acht and Gene Kehoe, letter, *IAF* #11 (June/July 1981), 10.

⁴¹ Glenn Lemonds, letter, *The Heroine Showcase (THS)* #18 (Summer 1980), 29. *The Heroine Addict* and *The Heroine Showcase* were the same fanzine, the name changed starting with #12.

positive letters, or letters that simply address issues other than the zine itself, faneds chose to print the grievances of fans as well as their praise. This editorial openness made fanzines a better platform for honest discussion, as well as discussion of topics far afield from comics, than the letter columns of a comic book could ever be.

Letter writers also wrote in to talk about subjects other than the zines themselves. Terry Amos wrote to *THA* to lament the disappearance of Emma Peel from the British television series *The Avengers*, and wondered why no “bright comic author and artist” had done any stories about her yet.⁴² Warren Storob wrote to *AFTA* #2 and mentioned his experiences using *Fantastic Four* comics to get inner-city school children more interested in reading.⁴³ Jason Sacks wrote to *IAF* to state that he was the token She-Hulk fan in the fanzine’s readership and to lament that her comic had been canceled after only 25 issues.⁴⁴

Letters were usually collected into a letters column, often towards the end of an issue, and most letters received some kind of response from the faned who published them. Bill-Dale Marcinko responded to letters in *AFTA*, and made extensive use of inserted comments, sometimes breaking up a letter to print a lengthy response to one section of it. Printing a letter followed by a response was more common though. Al Tanner and later Steven Chinn did this in letters in *THA* and *THS* respectively, and Gene Kehoe did so in *IAF*. As in the comic book letter columns that spawned comic fandom in the first place, some fanzines printed contact information at the end of letters, allowing fans to write to each other directly. While under Al Tanner *The Heroine Addict* didn’t print addresses with letters, after it became *The Heroine Showcase* with

⁴² Terry Amos, letter, *THA* #4 (April 1975), 38.

⁴³ Warren Storob, letter, *AFTA* #2 vol. 1 (July 1978), 102.

⁴⁴ Jason Sacks, letter, *IAF* #13 (December 1981), 18-19.

issue #12, the new editor, Steven Chinn, chose print them. Gene Kehoe didn't include contact info in *IAF* until #15 when he printed a letter from Jason Sacks asking for addresses alongside LOCs.⁴⁵

Beyond letters, another way in which faneds helped to sustain the discursive nature of fanzines was by publishing content from other fans. In addition to LOCs, most fanzines welcomed articles and art from contributors outside of the editorial staff. Gene Kehoe used the editorial space of several issues of *IAF* to ask for contributions. Initially a monthly zine, *IAF* did not have the longest issues on the scene, but they did go through a lot of content.⁴⁶ He specifically framed this need for content as a way to keep the zine from having to switch to a bimonthly schedule.⁴⁷ Kehoe and the rest of the *IAF* staff could have monopolized the information and opinions they delivered to readers, but instead chose to embrace their fellow fans and encouraged them to share their opinions. They even went so far as to air a long running argument between several contributors about the merits of Marvel and DC comics, and the relative intelligence of each company's fans.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Jason Sacks, letter, *IAF* #15 (April 1982), 23.

⁴⁶ Gene Kehoe, editorial, *IAF* #7 (February 1981), 2.

⁴⁷ Gene Kehoe, editorial, *IAF* #8 (March 1981), 2; and Gene Kehoe, editorial, *IAF* #9 (April 1981), 2. *IAF* did move to a bimonthly schedule starting with #11 (June/July 1981), but increased the number of pages per issue to offset the reduced publication rate.

⁴⁸ This is best seen in the letters sections of issues 7, 8, 9, and 11, although the issue comes up in some articles as well. The Marvel vs. DC battle had been raging throughout fandom since the 1960s, flaring up periodically as fans of one company insulted the other, or more neutral fans tried to point out the merits and flaws of both companies.

Producing Fanzines

The roots of comic book fanzines lie, as we have seen, in the letter columns of comic books, most notably *The Brave and the Bold*. The fans who wrote letters to these comics, especially before the inclusion of contact information, were an atomized audience, aware of the existence of likeminded fans, but practically incapable of forming a connection with fans they didn't know in real life. The inclusion of contact information allowed these fans to begin the process of connecting to and interacting with one another, and in many cases these interactions quickly outgrew the bounds of the comic book letters column. Moving these conversations from comic book letter columns to fanzines was a move away from the commercialized space of the comic book to the non-commercial space of fandom. Letter columns were mediated by editors whose goal was to put out and promote a new issue of a given title every month or so. The concerns of editors within the comic book industry meant that fans who were interacting within the letter columns did not have the freedom to fully express themselves, as they were always beholden to the decisions of editors, who chose letters for publication which best reflected the goals of the industry. Moving to the fanzine model allowed fans to discuss comic books on their own terms.

Habermas defined the public as a group of private citizens who came together to communicate society's needs to the state.⁴⁹ Habermas's public had a specifically political bent, and his narrative of the decline of a "culture-debating public" into a "culture-consuming public" is predicated on the idea that consumer culture eradicated the public as a political force.⁵⁰ Comic

⁴⁹ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 176-177.

⁵⁰ Habermas, *Structural Transformation* 162-164.

book fans were, of course, a culture-debating public and, although they did not often explicitly address politics, they were engaged in a conversation with power. As Habermas's subjects were using their public as a space to negotiate with political power, comic book fans used their public in an attempt to negotiate with media producers. Seen as acts of resistance, the fanzines and the public they reproduced become valuable tools in exploring how fans understood media production and resisted the homogenizing effects of mass culture.

Fans were not only conscious of their role as consumers of comic books and their relationships to producers but were also uneasy about that role. They did not wish to replicate that relationship between themselves and other fans. Publishing the thoughts and opinions of other fans was one way in which faneds supported the public, but another was by respecting their readers, and conceptualizing them as fellow "citizens" instead of simply as customers. Paul Starr, in writing about the history of newspapers, has noted that by the early 19th century there was a trend away from viewing newspaper readers as fellow citizens who were members of a public engaged in discussions of politics and towards viewing them as customers who were being sold the news, and the ads that came with it.⁵¹ This trend would continue through the 19th and 20th centuries, helping to create the consumer culture that Habermas credits with destroying the public. Book publishers in the 1940s were concerned with finding audiences and providing them with appealing books in order to sell a product, not to generate a public.⁵² The comic book industry in the 1960s also held this view of readers as customers, not citizens. This knowledge

⁵¹ Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media Political Origins of Modern Communication* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 146.

⁵² Radway, 20-26.

was not lost upon comic book fans who acknowledged that the medium they so loved was simply a way for Marvel and DC to make money.⁵³

Although fans understood that they were seen primarily as customers by the comic book industry, they rejected this idea within fandom itself. Most faneds did not think of their readers as customers, or of their fanzines as vehicles for profit. Some faneds, like Bill-Dale Marcinko, made a conscious effort to rebel against publishing norms by embracing the ethos of the 1960s alternative press. Marcinko wrote that *AFTA* was his “last 60’s crusade,” and that he wanted his fanzine “to be what *Rolling Stone* was in 1967,” before it became a slick, professionally published magazine.⁵⁴ Marcinko, only 19 when he produced *AFTA*, was fascinated by the alternative press he remembered from earlier in this youth. Cultural historian John McMillian has described the alternative press as imbued with the spirit of the New Left, which “fostered a spirit of mutuality among [readers], and raised their democratic expectations.” The alternative press was wildly successful in that it reached a wide readership, but had very little commercial success.⁵⁵ The world of the alternative press and the world of comic book fanzines were not the same. Most faneds offered no political motivation for their work; neither their fanzines nor the comics they discussed were explicitly counter-cultural. They had no intentions, as Marcinko did,

⁵³ Jim Hogan and Bill-Dale Marcinko, “The Truth About Comic Fans,” *AFTA* #1 (February 1978), 47-48; and Bob Jennings, *AFTA* #2, vol. 1 (July 1978), 87-88.

⁵⁴ Bill-Dale Marcinko, “*AFTA* had to present... the Bill-Dale Marcinko Interview,” *AFTA* #2 vol. 2 (August 1978), 109.

⁵⁵ John McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4-5.

⁵⁶ Bill-Dale Marcinko, “*AFTA* had to present... the Bill-Dale Marcinko Interview,” *AFTA* #2 vol. 2 (August 1978), 108.

of “ushering in a new era of fanzines and [a] way of thinking in fandom.”⁵⁶ Most faneds simply thought about their readers as peers, and strove to keep down the cover price of their zines.

Fanzines carried a cover price because they had to be printed and they had to be shipped out to readers and these things could be expensive. In the early years of fanzine production, many were printed at home on mimeographs or spirit duplicators. These machines made use of hand-made stencils and ink or carbon paper in order to create copies. They had been available since the 1930s, and production was relatively cheap after the initial investment in the machine. The readability of zines printed with these methods could vary a great deal over the course of one printing, depending on how many copies were printed, and how worn out the master copies had become by that point. In both cases, the final result tended to have a blue or purple tinge to the ink and often the rest of the paper as well. By the mid-1970s these methods had lost their charm, and fans were looking for something more professional. Marilyn Bethke was an outspoken critic of these older printing methods, claiming that they couldn’t produce good zines, and were holding fandom back.⁵⁷ Although Bethke took a rather extreme stance on older printing formats, by that time fans preferred offset printing for their zines.

Offset presses allowed fanzines to be printed in much larger quantities, using black ink on white or off-white paper, and allowed for colored paper or card stock for covers. The problem with offset printing was that the machines required were much too large and expensive for fans to own at home, and so they were forced to turn to professional printing shops. Printing shops could take master copies created by faneds and make them into high quality fanzines, for a price.

⁵⁷ Bob Jennings, *ALABOK* #13, in *TF* #70 (March 1979), 8, 12; and Chris Rock, *Edifice ROX* #12, in *TF* #71 (May 1979), 3-4.

Although every fanzine was different, most were printed on letter-sized paper and folded in half to make a booklet which was then stapled along the spine to hold the pages together. Fanzines that utilized this booklet model were limited in how many pages they could include before those pages would begin to noticeably stick out past the cover. In order to maintain a professional appearance, these pages would have to be trimmed so that the pages were flush and uniform. While printers could fold, staple, and trim fanzines, many faneds did these things themselves, or with the help of friends, in order to reduce costs. Doing these things by hand was one way that *THS* managed to keep down the cover price of the zine.⁵⁸ With the rise of photocopiers in the 1980s, many faneds would turn to printers who offered the use of these machines at lower prices than offset printing, or simply make copies themselves if they had access to the machines at work or school.

Shipping was also a significant cost. Because fanzines were small operations with limited print runs, they did not qualify for the kinds of shipping prices utilized by comic book publishers. Fanzine distribution was built upon networks of personal exchange between fans. Although some faneds might take copies to conventions to sell there, most were mailed directly to readers. While trading fanzines, and including stamps or envelopes with them, was common between faneds, mailing out issues to subscribers incurred its own costs. In 1976, Al Tanner, in his last issue as editor of *The Heroine Addict*, wrote that *THA* might have to switch to third class shipping as first class was becoming too expensive. He didn't relish this idea, as third class shipping took longer and was less reliable, but it was better than second class mailing, which was bogged down in

⁵⁸ Nick Chinn, *THS* #13 (Spring 1978), 9.

“time-consuming regimentation and red tape!”⁵⁹ In 1983, in the last issue of *The Heroine Showcase*, editor Nick Chinn wrote that the issue had been delayed because of production problems and high mailing costs.⁶⁰

There were several ways to offset the cost of zine production. The most common was to generate subscriptions. *THA/THS* made use of a “club dues” model wherein subscribers became members of the Comics Heroine Fan Club and sent in money that was put into their account. The cost of each issue was deducted from that account when it was sent out to the subscriber. Readers got issues until their account ran out of money.⁶¹ When Carol Strickland, possibly because of her experience with *THA*, started her Wonder Woman themed fanzine *Hola!*, she used a similar model.⁶² *It’s a Fanzine* and *The Comics Fandom Examiner (Comics F/X)*, however, utilized a more typical subscription method, where interested readers could just pay a set amount of money up front to receive a set number of issues.⁶³ While subscriptions helped generate the capital needed to produce a fanzine, there was always the threat of a zine folding before a subscriber received all their issues. Upon taking over as editor of *THS*, Nick Chinn reached out to readers for help tracking down subscribers who still had money in their accounts, but weren’t receiving their issues.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Al Tanner, *THA* #10 (Summer 1976), 14-15.

⁶⁰ Nick Chinn, *THS* #19 (Spring 1983), 33. The previous issue had been published in the summer of 1980.

⁶¹ Al Tanner, *THA* #1 (September 1974), 2.

⁶² Carol Strickland, *Hola!* #1 (January 1978), 2.

⁶³ Gene Kehoe, *IAF* #7 (February 1981), 2; Wayne Busby, *The Comics Fandom Examiner (Comics F/X)* #1 (April 1988), 2.

⁶⁴ Nick Chinn, *THS* #13 (Spring 1978), 9.

The Heroine Addict also made use of another tactic to raise capital: starting with *THA* #4, Al Tanner began auctioning off the original artwork featured in the zine. The funds generated by these sales, after paying for the postage to send the artwork to buyers, was split evenly between the artist and the treasury.⁶⁵ In *THA* #10, Al Tanner wrote that the money raised by the art auction, a total of \$483.80 by that point, had been a great help in keeping *THA* solvent.⁶⁶ The auctions continued after the zine's title was changed to *The Heroine Showcase* with #12.⁶⁷

Auctioning art from the zine seems to have been unique to *THA* and *THS*, but subscriptions weren't always enough, so many fanzines turned to advertisements to help make ends meet. Gene Kehoe announced in *IAF* #13 that they would start selling ad space, because doing so would allow them to increase the zine's length from 20 to 24 pages each issue. *IAF* #15 ran 24 pages even though they didn't generate enough ad revenue to justify it.⁶⁸ *THA* offered rates for advertising starting in the first issue, as well as an argument for why advertising in the fanzine was a good idea.⁶⁹ Fans didn't seem to have a problem with the idea of advertisements in their zines, possibly because those ads were being placed by their peers. Fanzines featured ads for other fanzines, for collectors who were looking to buy or sell rare comics, for conventions, small press comics, and artists seeking to sell their work.

These revenue models were fine as long as the money being generated was used to offset the cost of producing and shipping the fanzine, and reducing the cost to individual readers. The

⁶⁵ Al Tanner, *THA* #4 (April 1975), 10-11.

⁶⁶ Al Tanner, *THA* #10 (Summer 1976), 13.

⁶⁷ Nick Chinn, *THS* #13 (Spring 1978), 9.

⁶⁸ Gene Kehoe, *IAF* #13 (December 1981), 2; Gene Kehoe, *IAF* #15 (April 1982), 2.

⁶⁹ Al Tanner, *THA* #1 (September 1974), 14.

perception that a faned was trying to make money off a zine was a negative one, and fans were willing to point the problem out. Under the leadership of Al Tanner, the Adventure Heroines Publishing Association (AHPA), the group of staffers which published *THA*, was involved in several other projects. One was a sister zine called *The Adventuress* which published comic strips and fiction written by fans, usually featuring original characters. *The Adventuress* wasn't the problem, as it was generally well received and often praised in the pages of *THA* and *THS*. But AHPA also floated the idea of side projects, which were detailed in a special catalog-style publication sent to interested parties.⁷⁰ In *THA* #10, Tanner published a letter from a fan named Don Fortier, editor of a zine called *DFCFR*, who wrote in to congratulate Tanner on a well done issue #9, but then criticized him for these side projects, which he had "reservations about both the feasibility and advisability of." Fortier pointed out that offering "special order booklets and custom illustrations" would "no doubt lead to the questioning of your motives for operating AHPA and the challenging of your integrity as a 'fan' of comics heroines." He claims that such publications implied that Tanner was moving away from "the stated goals of the CHFC and into areas of writing and art that will *not* benefit the majority of heroine fans." He understands if this was the only way to keep *THA* operating, but demanded that Tanner explain himself and clear the air.⁷¹

Tanner's response was longer than Fortier's original letter, and in it he stated that his motive was simply that he enjoyed publishing, and wanted to expand what the AHPA was doing, and claimed that other writers, artists, and fans were okay with other projects. He also stated that

⁷⁰ Don Fortier, letter, *THA* #10 (Summer 1976), 32-33. Unfortunately, I do not have access to this catalog.

⁷¹ Don Fortier, letter, *THA* #10 (Summer 1976), 32-33. The Comics Heroine Fan Club was the original group that published *THA*, and was folded into the larger AHPA organization.

Fortier was putting forth the idea that a comic fan “be he editor or any other fan, is somehow lacking in integrity if he *also* has *other* interests and chooses to pursue them in his own style.” Tanner rejected this premise.⁷²

In *AFTA* #2, Bob Jennings accused Marcinko of increasing the price of his zine in order to make money off of dealers who might carry it, thus putting the cost on actual fans who want the zine. Marcinko replied that he wasn’t changing the price of the zine but instead claimed that he offered a discount on bulk orders to promote them in light of shipping costs. He also pointed out that, if comic stores did carry his zine, it would make it easier for him to keep the zine going.⁷³

Three years later in a letter to *IAF*, King Rivera complained that Bob Jennings had taken his subscription money for *Comic World*, but hadn’t published an issue in several years, nor had he returned Rivera’s money. He used this as a justification for ignoring Jennings’ negative review of *IAF*, because the opinion of someone who “doesn’t honor his subscriptions,” wasn’t worth much.⁷⁴ Coincidentally, this letter appeared in the first anniversary issue of *It’s a Fanzine*, wherein Gene Kehoe reminded readers that *IAF* was “a fan’s fanzine—no one in here is paid for what they do. It’s done out of love for comics and the enjoyment of being a part of something.”⁷⁵

Fans do not seem to have applied the same logic to the comic book industry itself. Aware that Marvel and DC could not justify operating at a loss, they seem to have had little problem with the cost of comic books in the first place. Greg Robertson even wrote in *IAF* that he

⁷² Tanner, letter response, *THA* #10 (Summer 1976), 33. Italics in original.

⁷³ Bob Jennings and Bill-Dale Marcinko, letter, *AFTA* #2 vol. 1 (July 1978), 87-88.

⁷⁴ King Rivera, letter, *IAF* #12 (August/September 1981), 27.

⁷⁵ Gene Kehoe, editorial, *IAF* #13 (August/September 1981), 2.

approved of Marvel increasing the cover price of some of their comics, since the alternative was to reduce the number of pages in those titles.⁷⁶

Maintaining fandom through fanzines was not always cheap, and fans were conscious of these costs, which is why they were willing to pay for fanzines and put up with advertisements within them. They were also willing to put up with production delays, and realized that fanzines might suddenly cease publication, with or without warning. These were acceptable risks, the reward being the continued existence of fandom. But there was a fine line between keeping a fanzine solvent and exploiting readers, which fans, well aware of their status as consumers of comic books, were careful to police. This aspect of fandom, of publications “produced NOT FOR PROFIT and professional slickness, but for communication and love,” was not so much a critique of the commercial nature of the comic book industry as it was an attempt to build a public.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Greg Robertson, “Spotlight,” *IAF* #13 (December 1981), 7.

⁷⁷ Bill-Dale Marcinko, “*AFTA* had to present... the Bill-Dale Marcinko Interview,” *AFTA* #2 vol. 2 (August 1978), 108. Capitalization in original.

Discussing Gender

The discursive space created by fanzines allowed fans to discuss their favorite titles or characters, fill in gaps in their knowledge, or track down issues they may have missed, but it also allowed them to make sense of comic books and the industry that made them. The comic book public did not exist simply to allow fans to nitpick the details of a *Batman* comic. More importantly, it served as a space for raising important questions about issues that mattered to them. One issue that came up quite frequently was the problematic nature of gender in comic books. Comic book fans used fandom as a space to bring to light issues that feminism was addressing in the larger culture. Fans, both women and men, were aware of the issues and seemed eager to talk about them, making comic fandom, if not an explicitly feminist space, a space that was at least friendly to feminism. Comic fandom was largely male, but this does not seem to have been by design. A number of women contributed to and published fanzines, and do not seem to have had their qualifications to do so questioned by their fellow fans. That there were women comic book fans should not be surprising, nor should be their engagement with feminist critiques of the comic book industry. What may be surprising though is the engagement of male fans with those same feminist critiques. It is possible, as Carlotta Von Acht had written about *IAF*, that most comic fans were liberal minded.⁷⁸ It may also illustrate how deeply feminist ideas had become ingrained in the American consciousness by the late 1970s, when these conversations were featured more prominently in fanzines. Deep enough that feminist critiques of comic books were not only welcomed by male fans, but sought out by them. Either way, the frequency with which men used feminism to critique the comic book industry marks at least

⁷⁸ Carlotta Von Acht, letter, *IAF* #11 (June/July 1981), 10.

some male comic fans as distinct in a time when proponents of the Equal Rights Amendment were fighting a losing battle across the country.

In the third issue of *The Heroine Addict*, Al Tanner asked staff artist Joanna Moore to respond to a letter on behalf of *THA*. Naomi Basner had written in to find out the “basic point of view toward the comics heroines” that she might find in *THA*. She had seen an ad in another fanzine, *The Nostalgia Journal*, which was not “very encouraging to liberated persons.” She apologized for sounding suspicious, but she needed to know if *THA* would treat super heroines as people or simply as pin-up material.⁷⁹ Tanner replied that the *THA* staff was made up of a variety of people with numerous points-of-view, and he asked Moore to write a proper reply to the letter. Moore argued that *THA* would treat heroines as people, and that *THA* was neither feminist nor sexist in intent. She did state that, “with all the vulgarity in fandom and elsewhere,” it was a pleasure to read something like *THA*, which she would feel comfortable passing on to her future children. Basner was swayed and decided to subscribe.⁸⁰

THA began with the goal of generating discussion about comic book heroines and, as the letter above shows, the staff was conscious of feminism and its application to comic books. In the first issue, Scott Gibson wrote that Shanna the She-Devil debuted in 1972 in her own title instead of first appearing in a different comic first, which was much a more common practice for introducing new characters at the time. He argued that, for a female character to be presented in so bold a way “would appear as a display of arrogant confidence, an air of calm self-assurance that any male chauvinist would find infuriating.” He also suggested that characters like Shanna

⁷⁹ Naomi Basner, letter, *THA* #3 (February 1975), 27.

⁸⁰ Joanna Moore and Al Tanner, response, *THA* #3 (February 1975), 27.

the She-Devil, The Cat, and Night Nurse were introduced by Marvel in order to attract more female readership.⁸¹ Following the article, Al Tanner printed an editorial comment in which he suggested that these characters weren't introduced to court female readership but to court *male* readership. He suggested that future issues try and tackle the dual questions of "the publisher's *goal* as far as their heroines' appeal to the two sexes," and the "*effect* in this respect."⁸²

THA continued to print articles and letters that discussed gender issues. Lester Boutillier wrote in to complain that there was no middle ground with female characters, every comics heroine was either "a whimpering girlfriend or a sadistic tigress."⁸³ Later in the same issue Bob Rodi acknowledged that Gloria Steinem "wrote a nice, rather heart-warming introduction" to the *Ms. Magazine* annotated Wonder Woman collection, but argued that people would buy the collection more for Wonder Woman than for what she represented.⁸⁴ Scott Gibson lamented Marvel's poor writing of Marvel Girl, a character in *X-Men* who had been developed "in an era that preferred more quiet, feminine heroines with a basically unphysical power." He points out that other characters, like the Invisible Girl (later the Invisible Woman), Scarlet Witch, or the Wasp had survived to become more action oriented characters, but feared this was impossible for Marvel Girl.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Scott Gibson, "The Heroine Revue: Shanna the She-Devil," *THA* #1 (September 1974), 5.

⁸² Al Tanner, comment, *THA* #1 (September 1974), 8.

⁸³ Lester Boutillier and Ted Delorme, "Feedback," *THA* #4 (April 1975), 16-17.

⁸⁴ Bob Rodi, "Do Your Own Research on the Golden Age Wonder Woman," *THA* #4 (April 1975), 18-19.

⁸⁵ Scott Gibson, "The Heroine Revue: Marvel Girl," *THA* #6 (August 1975), 29-30. Underlined in original. Ironically, about a year later Marvel Girl would undergo some significant changes during the Dark Phoenix storyline, which would give the character significantly more staying power. She would also shed the Marvel Girl code name and be known by her secret identity, Jean Grey.

The focus in *THA* was on celebrating female characters, not necessarily on the analysis of their representation in comics. Things changed when Al Tanner left as editor. *THA* #11 opened with an “advertisement” for a super heroine training school in which Carol Strickland satirized the passive, poorly written nature of most comics heroines at the time.⁸⁶ The first issue of *The Heroine Showcase* printed a letter from Valeria Beasley, who wrote to say that the first eleven issues of *THA* were a joke because they weren’t feminist. She noted that Carol Strickland, though she could be a little cynical, was “a feminist in the sense of what *THA* should be: a forum for discussion of femme heroes, past, present, and future. A springboard for discussion on the improvement of the current comic heroines, with tangents including economic feasibility.” Publisher Steven R. Johnson responded by saying that it would be to the detriment of both Valeria and *THS* if she didn’t contribute something to the fanzine, which she would go on to do.⁸⁷

The first issue of *THS* also featured an interview with Frank Thorne, who drew Marvel’s *Red Sonja* at the time.⁸⁸ Red Sonja was a problematic character for many people. On the one hand she was a strong warrior woman, more than capable of handling all sorts of monsters and other challenges on her own. On the other hand, she wore a chain-mail bikini. In *THS* #13, “The Red Sonja Issue,” Jeff Thompson claimed that, although Sonja had “struck effective blows for women’s liberation and female independence, she at the same time ha[d] become a comic book

⁸⁶ Carol Strickland, “Strickland Famous Training Schools,” *THA* #11 (Summer 1977), 4-5.

⁸⁷ Valeria Beasley and Steven R. Johnson, letter, *THS* #12 (Winter 1977), 31-32. *THS* kept the numbering of *THA*, so it started with issue #12. Steven R. Johnson took over as publisher with *THA* #11.

⁸⁸ Margaret O’Connell, “The Great Red Sonja Interview,” *THS* #12 (Winter 1977), 5-8. Red Sonja was both the title of a series, and the name of the main character.

sex objet.”⁸⁹ Frank Thorne maintained that Sonja’s sex appeal was part of her character, and that both men and women found her appealing.⁹⁰ There were numerous women fans of Red Sonja including, presumably, Clara Noto, who wrote the comic at the time. Frank Thorne sometimes hosted “The Wizard and Red Sonja Show,” a stage magic and comedy act that he performed with several different women fans who dressed as Red Sonja at conventions. One of these women was Wendy Pini, who, while being interviewed by O’Connell, made a point to ask if *THS* was a feminist fanzine. O’Connell admitted that, when she first heard of it as *THA* she had assumed it would be, but upon seeing comments from Al Tanner and others in the letter columns of comics and other fanzines, she came to suspect it might be little more than girl watching. After actually reading *THA* she realized that “they [didn’t] just treat heroines as sex object. Some of them [were] more openly feminist; some of them just seem[ed] to think heroines are good characters or something like that, without thinking too much about the feminist aspect, and they just say ‘There aren’t enough of them.’ But not for feminist reasons—just because they happen to like heroines.”⁹¹ In the same issue Deby Duhn, a reader from Whitworth College, wrote in to say that Sonja was a good feminist symbol, and that the movement was not just about being able to get a divorce or earn equal pay, as these were just symptoms of a greater problem, and argued that men laughed at the idea of a warrior woman to disguise their own fear of powerful women.⁹²

⁸⁹ Jeff Thompson, *THS* #13 (Spring 1978), 5.

⁹⁰ Margaret O’Connell, “Red Sonja Interview” *THS* #12 (Winter 1977), 8.

⁹¹ Margaret O’Connell, “The Great Red Sonja Interview Part III” *THS* #13 (Spring 1978), 31-32. Wendy Pini and the other women involved in the “Wizard and Red Sonja Show”—Angelique Trouvere, Wendy Snow, and Dianne DeKalb—were not hired to perform as Red Sonja, but instead got Thorne’s attention by dressing as Red Sonja on their own. They were engaged in what has become known as “cosplay,” in which fans dress up as characters, and which is a big part of convention fandom to this day.

⁹² Deby Duhn, letter, *THS* #13 (Spring 1978), 33.

THA and *THS* were an obvious space for feminist discourse about comic books, but they weren't the only space that allowed for it as such discussions also appeared in *AFTA*. *AFTA* #2, published in July 1978, featured seven pages of letters about the question of whether or not comics were sexist, which Marcinko had posed to some of this regular correspondents. Dan Beck wrote that men and women were both constricted by gender roles, and he claimed that only by members of each gender understanding the oppressions faced by the other could any real progress be made.⁹³ Steven Alan Bennet argued that while writers had gotten better at writing women who were not merely stereotypes, artists still portrayed them as idealized fantasies. Michael Walker agreed, and argued that comics weren't sexist because writers like Chris Claremont were writing better women, and that the only real complaint fans could make was that women were still drawn as sex objects.⁹⁴ Roger Caldwell wrote that Red Sonja was the most sexist character on the market, since she was just a half-dressed, female version of Conan the Barbarian, while Willie Peppers wrote that Sonja wasn't sexist at all, and that anyone who could not look past her appearance had "no concern for human beings" and was unable to see past gender binaries.⁹⁵

Using the public space of fandom in this way allowed concerned fans to express their thoughts and critiques to one another and to other fans who were not already involved in such conversations. Some fanzines had readers among comic book professionals, and a number of fans would become professionals. As such, even when a contributor didn't specifically call for

⁹³ Dan Beck, letter, *AFTA* #2 vol. 1 (July 1978), 59.

⁹⁴ Steven Alan Bennet, letter, *AFTA* #2 vol. 1 (July 1978), 59-60; and Michael Walker, letter, *AFTA* #2 vol. 1 (July 1978), 63-64.

⁹⁵ Roger Caldwell, letter, *AFTA* #2 vol. 1 (July 1978), 60-61; and Willie Peppers, letter, *AFTA* #2 vol. 1 (July 1978), 62. Underlined in original.

action, but merely mentioned the sexist treatment of a character, or the dearth of well written female characters, there was always a chance that article might be read by an existing or future comic book professional who might take it to heart.

By debating comic books and expressing their criticisms in a public, documented space, comic book fans were able to gain influence over the industry, some more successfully than others. Fans did not stop at criticizing comics, but they also suggested ways to address the problems they saw, and some made efforts to impact the industry. Margaret O'Connell wrote in *AFTA* #2 that a number of heroines and villainesses had recently debuted, but that most of their writers only managed to pay lip-service to feminist ideals, and that most of the characters fell flat. She wrote that both Wonder Woman and Ms. Marvel had been conceived, both by pros and fans, as symbols of feminism, but that by that time writers were “mistaking sloganeering for substance,” and were apparently “so overcome with self-consciousness at the thought of writing a female character—and a Significant Female Character, at that—that they lose most of their common sense and frantically throw in some of the most ridiculous plot devices known to comicdom.”⁹⁶

O'Connell was of the opinion that more women writing comics would result in better women being written in comics, and she wasn't alone. In that same issue of *AFTA*, Clay Geerdes wrote that sexism in comics was a result of there being very few women involved in the industry.⁹⁷ Mike White wrote that, while comics were becoming less sexist with time, having even more women getting involved in their production would really help the process.⁹⁸ Rod

⁹⁶ Margaret O'Connell, “Dragonslaying Sayings,” *AFTA* #2, vol. 1 (July 1978), 56.

⁹⁷ Clay Geerdes, letter, *AFTA* #2 vol. 1 (July 1978), 62.

⁹⁸ Mike White, letter, *AFTA* #2 vol. 1 (July 1978), 64-65.

Snyder agreed, adding that getting more women and girls to read comics in the first place would motivate companies to include more female characters, and hire more women writers and artists.⁹⁹ Later that year, Cat Yronwood wrote in *THS* that most comic book writers were men, but she didn't feel "as some feminist critics do, that only women are capable of writing heroine titles," but it did give her pause for thought. Although she maintained that a "man at ease with women may write a good heroine yarn," it wouldn't be "until there are more *women* writing comics" that fans would get to see more "internally coherent and emotionally stable heroines."¹⁰⁰

Pointing out that more women being involved in the production of comic books would help to correct the sexism of the industry was a step in the right direction, but many believed that simply pointing out the problem and the solution wasn't enough. Someone actually had to do something about it. One way was to write to editors and publishers about comics that fans enjoyed, something that Bob Rodi would urge fans to do in his irregular *THA* column "Operation: Deluge." In *THA* #10 Rodi congratulated fans who had written to the producers of the television series *The Secrets of Isis*, because they had managed to get Isis to appear in *Shazam* #25, published by DC Comics. He also urged fans to write to Marvel in defense of their character, Tigra, as rumors were circulating that she would be removed from the *Marvel Chillers* series.¹⁰¹ Doing so showed publishers that fans enjoyed heroines, which in turn, it could be hoped, would result in more female characters, attracting the interest of more girls and women who might read and, eventually, create comics.

⁹⁹ Rod Snyder, letter, *AFTA* #2 vol. 1 (July 1978), 63.

¹⁰⁰ Cat Yronwood, "The Evolution of the Enchantress," *THS* #15 (Fall 1978), 11.

¹⁰¹ Bob Rodi, "Operation: Deluge," *THA* #10 (Summer 1976), 11.

Another was to pressure comic book writers directly, such as when Margaret O'Connell interviewed Chris Claremont for *THS*. Claremont admitted that he had little say in how Ms. Marvel was portrayed in the pages of *Ms. Marvel*, which he was writing at the time. He acknowledging that they were under a diktat from the higher ups to make sure she was as sexy as possible at all times, even when it made no sense in the context of the story. Claremont said that, while the editors wanted a character "who is supposed to be 30 years old and mature and responsible and all that," at the same time they "want[ed] it to be 'Charlie's Angels.'"¹⁰² Although Claremont had to work within narrow creative confines, he and other writers could still *try* to write consistent female characters. O'Connell was using the interview to address the problems the industry had in depicting women, and she got to the root of it when Claremont admitted that there was a mentality at Marvel similar to one used in the pulps: that putting a woman in distress and a state of undress on the cover would sell that cover to teenage boys, and that teenage boys were the target demographic for comics at the time.¹⁰³ What she uncovered, namely who was behind the inconsistency or hyper-sexualization of female characters, could also help fans to focus their efforts to change the industry by addressing complaints to those editors and publishers.

Wendy Pini decided to take a more direct approach to the issues both of the representation of women in comics and their employment in the comic book industry. In an interview which appeared in *THS* #13, Pini told Margaret O'Connell that more and more women were getting involved in the comic book industry, and that she herself would be launching her

¹⁰² Margaret O'Connell, "Ms. Marvel: an Interview with Chris Claremont," *THS* #16 (Winter 1978), 6.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 4.

own comic with her husband Richard, called *Elfquest*. Pini described herself as a “people’s-libber” and wanted to tell stories about “how people, both male and female, would react in various situations, and not in any kind of stereotyped mold.”¹⁰⁴ *Elfquest* was an early, influential, and long-running self-published title, and while it may not have overhauled the comic book industry’s treatment of women, it did make a mark. Since 1978, when these conversations were appearing in the pages of *AFTA* and *THS*, a number of women have joined the industry, either working for the “big two,” Marvel and DC or, more frequently, self-publishing their own titles.

¹⁰⁴ Margaret O’Connell, “The Great Red Sonja Interview Part III,” *THS* #13 (Spring 1978), 32.

Discussing Religion

Although fans seemed willing to discuss gender, not every subject was as easily broached. Religion, although the subject did not often appear in comic fanzines, proved more divisive than gender when it did. In *AFTA* #2, Marcinko printed a letter from a fan named Richard Campbell, who attacked him for mocking Christianity in *AFTA* #1.¹⁰⁵ Marcinko had included a comic attacking Anita Bryant, an openly homophobic Christian and spokesperson for Florida oranges, wherein God pelts her with oranges from heaven for her homophobia. He also published a short satirical article to “defend” Bryant from all the “bad people” who had criticized her for her stance on homosexuality. In it he wrote that there aren’t enough laws to protect Americans from gay people, and that the country needed someone like Senator McCarthy to take care of the problem. He ended the article with the assurance to readers that Christ wasn’t gay, despite spending all of his time with twelve men.¹⁰⁶

Although he disagreed with Bryant, Campbell wrote that one should “NEVER but NEVER mention minorities, religion, or criticize real-life people. You are bound to offend someone. And ‘friend,’ you offended me!” He went on to write that criticizing Christianity because of one person’s actions was “WRONG. VERY WRONG. GETTING A BOMB THROUGH YOUR WINDOW WRONG.” Although he claimed he had no problem with

¹⁰⁵ Richard Campbell, letter, *AFTA* #2 vol. 1 (July 1978), 82-83.

¹⁰⁶ Bill-Dale Marcinko, comic panel and commentary, *AFTA* #1, (February 1978), 83, 89. Marcinko also included the end of a comic tract from the notorious (and frequently mocked) Chick Publications, an evangelical company founded by cartoonist Jack T. Chick and perhaps best known for a comic strip about how playing *Dungeons and Dragons* would make teenagers worship Satan and kill themselves.

homosexuality, he was quite upset that Marcinko might insinuate that Christ was gay, and said that making fun of homosexuality would result in legal action.¹⁰⁷

Marcinko took the view that Campbell proved his point, and accused him of not understanding satire. He stated that he himself was a Christian, and thought that people like Anita Bryant, “who use the Bible to make up wild myths (like homosexuality is wrong) are to be exposed for what they are: ignorant, self-serving tyrants.” He greatly disliked Bryant, and agreed with Campbell that her opinions were “outdated,” but he also lamented that they were still all too common and all too present in American culture.¹⁰⁸ Campbell wasn’t the only person to miss the satire Marcinko relied so heavily upon, though his was certainly the most antagonistic letter about it.

Although Richard Campbell’s letter to *AFTA* certainly implies that religion was out-of-bounds for fandom, this wasn’t always the case. A few years later, *IAF* issues #12, #13, and #14 contained between them four references to Jerry Falwell or the Moral Majority, none of them positive.¹⁰⁹ In *IAF* #13 Mark Metz asked what had happened to comics that dealt with real problems instead of the tired battles between hero and villain. He referred to issues of *Howard the Duck* which attacked Anita Bryant for her homophobia and suggested that creators might fear “lunatic right wing idiots” despite the fact that, according to Metz, comic fans were mostly liberal and openminded, and he called for comics to reflect these ideals once again.¹¹⁰ Attacks on

¹⁰⁷ Richard Campbell, letter, *AFTA* #2 vol. 1 (July 1978), 82-83. Capitalization in original. Campbell ended his disjointed letter with a defense of pornographic films as “underrated.”

¹⁰⁸ Bill-Dale Marcinko, response, *AFTA* #2 vol. 1 (July 1978), 84.

¹⁰⁹ Pat Price, “The Gospel According to E.C.,” *IAF* #12 (August/September 1981), 8-9; Gene Kehoe, “Comic News: Dateline 1990,” *IAF* #12, 23; Greg Robertson, “Spotlight,” *IAF* #13 (December 1981), 7; Jason Sacks, letter, *IAF* #14 (February 1982), 23.

¹¹⁰ Mark Metz, editorial, *IAF* #13 (December 1981), 2.

conservative figures like Falwell or Bryant indicate a resistance to the way those figures conceptualized religion in America. As with gender, it supports the liberal image of comic book fans put forth by Mark Metz and Carlotta Van Acht in *IAF*, and by Bill-Dale Marcinko in *AFTA*.

The question of what could be written about in fandom was not easily settled, but if the responses to *AFTA* are any indication, part of the problem stemmed from *how* those opinions were stated. Satire is not readily apparent to every reader, and Marcinko stayed away from religion after his responses in *AFTA* #2, vol. 2, although he kept his satirical bent. Whether he was bowing to convention, dropping unpopular parts of his “act,” or simply had other things on his mind is unclear. He did provide a brief but much clearer defense of homosexuality in *AFTA* #2, vol. 2, and *AFTA* #3 included a letter from a fan trying to deal with being bisexual, to which Marcinko printed a supportive, and sincere, response.¹¹¹ The straightforward presentation in *IAF*, the choice of Falwell (and Bryant) as targets, or the apparently “liberal and openminded” nature of *IAF*’s readership may have worked in the fanzine’s favor, and made discussion of religion in fanzines easier to accept. Perhaps most importantly, when *IAF* took shots at the Moral Majority or Anita Baker, they framed them within a conversation about comic books. The conversations we have seen about gender were framed in the same way, as conversation about gender *in* comic books, not just about gender as a broader, unrelated topic. Marcinko did not do this with his arguments about religion, but instead used his fanzine, ostensibly about comic books, as a platform to address non-comics related topics. While this was well within his rights as a faned—it was his fanzine after all—it didn’t meet with the approval of every fan. While comic fanzines provided a useful space in which fans could discuss such topics as gender and religion, these

¹¹¹ Bill-Dale Marcinko, “*AFTA* had to present... the Bill-Dale Marcinko Interview,” *AFTA* #2, vol. 2 (August 1978), 110; “Bob” and Marcinko, letter and response, *AFTA* #3 (April 1979), 6.

discussions were not without boundaries. Comic fandom was limited to comic books, although the ways in which fans could discuss comics were many and varied.

Affecting the Industry

Wendy Pini is best known as the artist and co-creator of *Elfquest*, one of the longest running independently published comic books the industry has seen, but she was by no means the only comic book fan who became a comic book professional. Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, many professionals retired or quit the industry, so publishers looked to comic fans to replace them. And many of these fans certainly benefited from the experience of writing, editing, or drawing for fanzines.¹¹² Working in fanzines helped these fans establish connections to the industry: interviews with comic book professionals were a common feature, and some professionals even took the time to write letters to fanzines. Frank Thorne, then artist of Marvel's *Red Sonja*, wrote in to compliment fan artist Lela Dowling's work in *THS*.¹¹³

In 1965, Roy Thomas, co-founder of *Alter-Ego*, began working for Marvel as an assistant editor and by 1971 was editor-in-chief. This would eventually become the model for employment in the comic book industry: fans would get their foot in the door at Marvel or DC, then move their way up the corporate ladder. By the 1980s, the industry was largely staffed by people who had been comic book fans in the first place. Many of the creators working in the industry before then were writers, editors, or artists who simply wanted a job; they weren't nearly as dedicated to the industry or its products as the fans would be.

Helping this process along was the industry's poor treatment of its creative staff. In the late 1960s, a number of aging staff at DC decided to ask for medical and retirement benefits, and management responded by firing them. Needing new talent, DC turned to comics fandom to find

¹¹² Coogan, 50.

¹¹³ Frank Thorne, letter, *THS* #18 (Summer 1980), 28.

people who were not only willing to work in comics, but *wanted* to do so, and were generally young enough not to be worried about things like medical or retirement benefits. By the 1980s however, these fans-turned-pros were able to leverage their popularity and connections to fandom for the support necessary to keep their jobs when they themselves asked for and received benefits.¹¹⁴

This influx of fans didn't take the industry in completely new directions, but instead reinforced superheroes as the primary genre of comic books. Having grown up with and come through a fandom largely dedicated to them, these new professionals wanted to tell more stories about superheroes. What they did do, however, was to better organize the universes occupied by these characters. Continuity became the watchword of the comic book industry. Where once stories had been largely stand-alone with little concern for the narratives of other titles, now the adventures of Marvel or DC characters were made relevant to their peers at their respective companies. Overarching meta-narratives became key, creating a mass of stories and characters "that had no true author, save the corporation that owned the characters."¹¹⁵

This new focus on company wide narrative resulted in big, complicated story-arcs, company-wide crossovers and "events" that drove the narrative of individual titles, making it increasingly difficult for new readers to get into a given character or title.¹¹⁶ Both Marvel and DC

¹¹⁴ Coogan, 60-61.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 61-62.

¹¹⁶ This had a big impact on my own personal experience as a comic fan. In the mid-1990s, when Marvel launched a huge, many-titles spanning story-arc in which Peter Parker, the secret identity of Spider-Man, was killed and replaced by a clone, is when I stopped reading mainstream comic books. Instead, I turned to what were generally called independent comics by that point, and gave up on superheroes until recently. The success of the Marvel films, especially *The Avengers*, and the process of researching for this thesis, rekindled my interest in superhero comics, but the tendency of both Marvel and DC to plan huge, company wide story arcs each year or so makes their titles nearly impenetrable, with the exception of a few "fringe" characters who don't play large roles in these narratives, but also tend to have short runs. The result for me, and I think for a lot of fans, has been to watch movies and cartoons about those characters instead of reading the comics.

also turned to work-for-hire models, which made everything done for one of these companies their property. By the middle of the 1980s, while there were still many fans who wanted to make comics for a living, many were not as excited about the prospects of working for the big two.

Some of these fans decided to publish their own comics, using the same printing and distribution methods utilized by fanzines. Known as the small press, these creators were not constrained by industry standards, and did not have to give up the rights to their own creations. These fans weren't the first to strike upon this idea. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, some artists and writers, unwilling to compromise with mainstream publishers, decided to self-publish their own comics. Usually referred to as "underground comix," these comics left creators free to pursue whatever narratives and artistic styles they wanted. Counter-cultural almost by definition, they never had the kind of following that mainstream comics did, and received little attention in fanzines.¹¹⁷

Although it is hard to pinpoint their beginning, small press comics, sometimes called alternative comics or eventually independent comics, were quite popular by the end of the 1980s. Small press comics were not underground comix though. Michael Dowers, in a column called "Telling It Like It Is" for *The Comics Fandom Examiner (Comics F/X)*, defined small press comics as anything not published by DC or Marvel, which were self-published and creator owned and, unlike underground comix, were not necessarily counter-cultural or controversial. He also noted that they could be hard to distinguish from fanzines at times.¹¹⁸ Ed Vick, in a special introduction to *Comics F/X*, wrote that

¹¹⁷ Aside from the occasional reference in fanzines focused on small press comics, I haven't seen anything about underground comix in any of the fanzines I've read.

¹¹⁸ Michael Dowers, "Telling It Like It Is," in *Comics F/X*#2 (June 1988), 5.

The small press is not an offshoot of comics fandom, science fiction fandom or the literary small press. It's not a spawning ground for Marvel wannabes. It's not the last refuge of the underground comix movement. What small press is is a loose society of self-publishers and the people who enjoy working for and subscribing to their publications. That includes comic fans, sf fanzine fans, literary small pressers, superhero creators and the spiritual descendants of the old pornographic eight-pagers—and many more besides.¹¹⁹

Comics F/X was a newszine—a fanzine dedicated to news instead of discussion—founded in 1988 by Ed Vick, Hal Hargit, Jeff Wood, and Wade Busby and “dedicated to the ideal of creator-controlled artistic expression. The self-publishers of the small press comics market reflect this positive trend in the field by their use of a common comics marketplace to announce and to promote the distribution of their original work.”¹²⁰ The small press had its own fanzines, such as *Comics F/X*—which was founded in part to replace the *Small Press Comics Explosion* which had recently ceased publication—or *Fandom Times* and *The Fandom Journal*, both published by Kevin Collier. Busby, Wood, and Collier had all been members of the UFO at one point or another, and they used the same publishing and distribution methods faneds had used to circulate both their fanzines and their comics.

The creative space of fanzines trained fans in the skills they needed to become producers. It also gave them the skills to publish their own work, when the work they wanted to do would not be published by existing companies. Small press comics may have started out by mimicking the production and distribution models of fanzines, but the most successful mimicked the models established by Marvel and DC. By building upon these models, they were able to make places for themselves in the comic book industry by broadening what “comic book industry” meant.

¹¹⁹ Ed Vick, “What is this Magazine?” in *Comics F/X* #4 (August 1988), 1.

¹²⁰ Wayne Busby, “Statement of Purpose,” *Comics F/X* #1 (April 1988), 2.

While not every small press comic survived, they did provide creators with a certain sense of accomplishment, and some, such as *Cerberus* by Dave Sim, or *Elfquest* by Wendy and Richard Pini, would become huge successes.¹²¹ One result of this has been, since the middle of the 1980s, an explosion of small press and self-published comic books which, while not holding as much market share as Marvel or DC titles, vastly outnumber the output of the big two. Through the early 2000s, these could often be bought in local comic shops and were usually available through mail-order. Today, the digital comics distribution platform Comixology carries titles from 113 different publishers.¹²² In 2013 they launched a service called Comixology Submit, which allows creators to self-publish their comics directly through the website.¹²³

As Internet access became more widespread and less expensive, many creators turned to digital distribution, often in the form of webcomics. Webcomics are, most frequently, free comic strips, akin to what one might find in the newspaper, which in some sense brings comics back around full circle. The first comic books were reprinted collections of newspaper comic strips, and now many creators who grew up reading comic books have returned to that format, if not that publishing model, when launching their own careers.

¹²¹ Personally, I've found self-publishing to be very satisfying. In middle-school, when I was first discovering independent comics, a friend of mine, who now works as a producer in Hollywood, used to make comics all the time, photocopied and stapled down the margin like so many fanzines. I tried my hand at a few titles as well. Although nothing stuck one preview comic I did, called *Boogeyman*, incidentally a very similar concept to Pixar's *Monsters, Inc.*, did get some positive feedback from some professionals I gave copies to at the Motor City Comic Con in the early 2000s. Stan Sakai, writer and artist of *Usagi Yojimbo* (a personal favorite of mine) thought it was charming, which is one of the highest compliments I've ever been paid. Around the same time I also helped my best friend, a much more talented artist named Erik Schoenek, publish his comic, *Spaz Blast-Hammer: Robot Assassin 4 Hire*, which we printed, folded, and stapled on the cheap at the Kinko's where I used to work. Spaz was quite popular in my old high school, but it only ran about three issues before Erik turned to the Internet and I helped him set up his first webcomic, *Loserz*, which had quite a following in its day as well.

¹²² The complete publisher list can be found at http://www.comixology.com/browse-publisher?publisherList_pg=2 accessed February 27, 2014. Although the official list is 115 publishers, DC Comics is listed three times, so I've only counted them as one publisher, since these listings are a matter of distribution and not publication.

¹²³ See <https://submit.comixology.com> accessed February 27, 2014.

Conclusion

Fanzines allowed comic book fans to communicate across physical boundaries and to create a public that has grown and changed alongside the medium it revolves around. Fans have used fanzines as a platform to express themselves, to question the comic book industry, and even to work on changing that industry. They have used fanzines as vehicles to, if not fame and fortune, at least recognition and, in some cases, to careers as comic book writers, editors, or artists. Fanzines provided a space in which fans could create a rational discourse about comic books, to which anyone could gain access if they desired. Fanzines not only provided this space for discussion, but reproduced it, both for posterity and for those at the time who could not contribute directly or did not have the time or inclination to do so.

Fandoms are, as Janice A. Radway pointed out, massive, ill-defined networks of people with some kind of common interest. Today, fandoms perpetuate on the Internet and, while there are websites dedicated to individual fandoms, such as Memory Alpha, a *Star Trek* wiki, there are also many which cater to a variety of fans, such as The Mary Sue, which styles itself as “[a] guide to girl geek culture,” and features articles on anything fannish.¹²⁴ Many of the most successful comic book conventions, such as San Diego Comic-Con, have grown into popular culture conventions, featuring dealers and guests from a variety of medias favored by fannish types. Many fans are part of multiple fandoms, and the ease of communication on the Internet and the prevalence of popular culture conventions have removed many of the boundaries between fandoms. This “big tent” nature of modern fandom, in which fans of Wonder Woman and Doctor Who, *Twilight* and *Lord of the Rings*, can rub elbows and trade ideas, makes studying

¹²⁴ memory-alpha.org and themarysue.com respectively. A wiki is a communally organized database, utilizing the base code of Wikipedia.

fandom both exciting and difficult; exciting because it provides a community of active consumers who are ever engaged in the construction of that community, and difficult because tracing ideological or critical threads within that community requires a variety of specialized knowledges and literacies, not just of social theory, but of specific genres and media products.

In this sense though, studying fans is similar to studying any large, literate community. By utilizing the public as a lens with which to explore fandom, we can begin to see some of the trends, internal logics, and lived experiences of fan culture. By exploring fanzines and their digital descendants, we can trace conversations, arguments, and trends to see how fandoms change over time and to find the voices of fans themselves. The voices of fans can tell us more about the reception of media than the history of the comic book industry, or the results of polls or data collection by media producers. As living, changing communities, fandom can provide insights into the ways that other literate communities construct themselves at various points in history. As producers put ever increasing emphasis on fandom as the desired model of consumption, understanding fandoms as publics—engaged with and criticizing power as Habermas’s public once did—can help to make sense of an ever changing capitalism, and to help consumers protect themselves from media producers who would take advantage of their passion for a product.

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