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"Something to Offend Everyone": Situating Feminist Comics of the 1970s and '80s in the Second-Wave Feminist Movement

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Abstract

In the 1970s and '80s, a number of feminist underground comics, including *Wimmen's Comix, Dynamite Damsels* and more, were created concurrently with the American second-wave feminist movement. This thesis closely examines the reactions of feminist readers of the time period to the comics, arguing that feminists accepted them as part of the feminist discourse and that the comics are important to the history of feminist media. The primary sources utilized include contemporary reviews and articles about the comics from feminist media, correspondence to and from the authors of the comics, and published and unpublished interviews with the comics' authors. As these comics have barely been studied to date by historians, this thesis breaks new ground by examining the ways in which comics were seen to fit into the feminist culture, and crucially contextualizes their creation in history.

1. Body of Paper

Little Lulu walks down the street behind the boys. They shout, "No girls allowed!" and Lulu responds with "Fuck this shit!" Petunia Pig tells Porky to "Cook your own dinner[!]" Betty and Veronica protest in front of their high school to get karate and women's history classes. These are but a few of the scenes from the satirical short comic "Breaking Out," a centerpiece of the world's first comics anthology written solely by women: *It Aint* [*sic*] *Me Babe Comix,* published in 1970 by the feminist newspaper *It Aint Me Babe* and the newly minted underground comix publishing company Last Gasp.[1] This book helped initiate a vibrant and boisterous feminist comics movement that was active throughout the 1970s and '80s.

American feminist comics of the 1970s and '80s are an important yet oft-overlooked part of the historical landscape of feminist media production. Created by a large contingent of women with diverse and sometimes opposing approaches and goals, these comics in many ways helped set the stage for the literary comics revolution in decades to come.[2] The comics grew out of the subversive, adult underground comix scene and included such anthology titles as *Wimmen's Comix, Tits & Clits,* and *Wet Satin: Women's Erotic Fantasies* and solo books like Lee Marrs' *Pudge, Girl Blimp*, Roberta Gregory's *Dynamite Damsels*, and Melinda Gebbie's *Fresca Zizis.*[3] Since most of the authors identified—at least to some degree—with the second-wave feminist movement, it is important to investigate whether and to what degree their work was accepted by the feminist movement at large.

These comics were explosive, frequently raunchy, and often bitingly satirical—the polar opposite of much of the other feminist media and literature of the time.[4] Nonetheless, feminist comics found a middling acceptance by feminists, both for their content and their medium, and were largely considered to be a valid form of feminist expression during the time period in which they were created. Through an examination of this wrongly overlooked material, researchers can gain a better understanding of how comics have been historically viewed, and how the comics and their reactions are an essential component of the history of feminist media. This project does contextual work that will no doubt be foundational for future studies of feminist comics and feminist media of the time period. The various

reactions to feminist comics of the 1970s and '80s demonstrate their essentiality as a part of second-wave feminist media and discourse and show the diversity of opinion within the feminist movement and the significance of the comics in context.

Because feminist comics were produced at the intersection of two countercultural movements, two avenues of secondary sources are profiled in the historiographical section: those dealing with the history of second-wave feminism and feminist media, and those addressing comics and their intersection with feminism. It should be noted that only one of the sources on general feminism has mentioned feminist comics at all, a glaring oversight that scholars are only now beginning to rectify. One of the best general sources on second-wave feminism is Ruth Rosen's narrative history *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (2000). Rosen's primary focus in this book is on the culture of the women's movement in the time period, and her overarching thesis is that the women's movement changed the overall culture of the United States. Disappointingly, Rosen only barely surveys the vast amount of feminist print media of the time period. Feminist media was vastly important to the function and operation of the feminist movement, as women created books, newspapers, pamphlets and other printed works that addressed their specific concerns as women and feminists in the world. However, this essential part of feminist culture has been somewhat neglected in the scholarly conversation, with more authors focusing on various facets of feminist actions than feminist writing.[5]

There are some historians who have discussed feminist media, notably the contributors to *This Book is An Action*: *Feminist Print Culture and Activist Aesthetics* (2016), an essay collection edited by Jaime Harker and Cecilia Conchar Farr, which was published as a way of explicitly connecting the vast array of feminist writing and publishing with the activism of the rest of the movement. The authors argue that printed works and writings were not merely a comparatively inconsequential part of American second-wave feminism, but instead were essential to the way the feminist movement operated. Although their assertions are correct, again, none of *This Book is an Action*'s contributors mentioned any comics.[6]

The final relevant source relating to second-wave feminism is a 2016 journal article entitled "When Politics Were Fun: Recovering a History of Humour in U.S. Feminism" by Kirsten Leng. Leng's main aim in this article is to spark more historical attention to the longstanding use of humor in various feminist venues, including protests, music, and—finally—comics. While this piece provides an excellent overview and backdrop for the creation of feminist comics, Leng's analysis is somewhat inaccurate and limiting because she lumps in all feminist comics with humor alone. Indeed, a large amount of feminist comics were rooted in satire, but a substantial portion of them were greatly serious in nature. Leng also fails to place feminist comics within the underground comix milieu, within which most of them were created.[7]

As for works specifically about underground comix, no fully scholarly histories of the scene have been published to date, leaving one to rely on what may be termed "fan-historians." The existing books are inherently flawed by their lack of a peer-review system and an abundance of adulatory rhetoric. However, two works do give the reader a relatively accurate idea of the comics' history: Patrick Rosenkranz's *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution, 1963-1975* (2002) and *A History of Underground Comics* [*sic*] (1974) by Mark James Estren. Although *A History of Underground Comics* was published while the underground comix boom was still occurring, it still offers a valuable and critical perspective on the origins and landscape of underground comix at large, based on interviews with many different authors and publishers. Notably, Estren's book examines a much wider variety of comics authors (including many feminist ones) than does Rosenkranz's more recent *Rebel Visions*, perhaps speaking to the reductive nature of fandom over time. In addition, while both authors seriously underestimate and overlook the contributions of women to the underground comix scene, Estren shows much more awareness of female authors and sexism in underground comix throughout his book than did Rosenkranz. Therefore, *A History of Underground Comics* is a much better source for a scholar wishing to study feminist comics in their underground comix context.[8]

Feminist comics of the 1970s and '80s have only begun to get any serious scholarly attention within the last ten years, and thus comparatively few major sources have been written specifically about them. Also, a fairly large amount of the existing scholarship on feminist comics has not fallen into the historical field, instead analyzing the content and literary aspects of the comics. The single most important historically scholarly work on feminist comics to date remains unpublished: Sam Meier's 2012 Harvard University undergraduate sociology thesis "Twisted Sisters: Women's Comix and Cultural Action." Meier, basing her 150-page thesis on extensive interviews with 23 contributors to the long-running comics anthologies *Wimmen's Comix* and *Tits & Clits*, examines to what degree these authors considered and consider their work to be political and feminist in nature. She conclusively determines the thought and feminism behind the work. This thesis established a credible baseline by which to analyze the creation of these comics for the foreseeable future.[9] What Meier did not do in her thesis, however, was address how feminists thought about the comics after their publication.

The one scholar who has written extensively about comics by women from the 1970s and '80s is Margaret Galvan. Even though most of Galvan's work to date has been literarily directed, some of it has brought in a historical consideration, particularly her 2016 dissertation "Archiving the '80s: Feminism, Queer Theory, & Visual Culture." Galvan's main point in "Archiving the '80s" is to prove that visual works (especially image-text) affected and were used as a way of expressing feminism. Although Galvan emphasizes only a small number of authors, and only incompletely discusses the history of the movement, she establishes a cohesive timeline of comics for the years in which the *Wimmen's Comix* was inactive (1977-1982) and how that affected future work by authors involved with the scene. However, Galvan still only superficially tackles the question of reaction.[10]

Finally, a quite basic and preliminary essay entitled "'A Word to You Feminist Women': The Parallel Legacies of Feminism and Underground Comics" by Susan Kirtley was published in *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel* (2018). Kirtley offers none of the nuanced analysis of Meier or Galvan, instead going for a light outline of the straightforward connections, as previously documented in other sources, between feminism and underground comix.[11] Nonetheless, this essay is notable for its sheer visibility. Published by one of the major university presses in a book intended to serve as a reference work, this is the easiest work about feminism and comics to find, and likely the one that will be cited the most in the future. The more obscure nature of the other scholarship outlined above—particularly Meier's unpublished thesis—make it vital for scholars to do much more historical work in this area of comics.

The existing secondary sources on this subject, while they ably outline the atmosphere of feminism at the time and some aspects of the creation of feminist comics, have failed to satisfactorily address the reception of the comics. This thesis concentrates on remedying these omissions from the historical record. It closely examines feminists' reaction to the comics and how they thought about the comics during the time period. These are enormously important and worthy comics and should be given the great amount of serious scholarly attention that they truly deserve. This project initiates a move toward that level of scholarly attention.

The beginnings of feminist comics were closely connected with the extant sexism in the countercultural underground comix movement. Feminist comics were initially viewed wholly as a response to this sexism. Many of the authors of underground comix wrote stories that were undeniably sexist and were called out as such by feminists, beginning in the 1960s and continuing into the '70s. For instance, a revolted letter from a Barbara [redacted] (likely Barbara Gittings) who was involved in the California Gay Liberation Front in the early 1970s called for a boycott of Spain Rodriguez's popular *Trashman* stories, which she mistakenly credited to S. Clay Wilson. Barbara explained her disgust with Rodriguez's treatment of LGBTQ+ people and women and concluded that she had "been able to rouse Woman's [*sic*] liberation on this matter for it is obvious that Trashman is also anti-woman."[12] This projected boycott was typical of the tactics of feminists during this time period: resist, protest, and shut down media representations of women that they considered unacceptable.[13]

The next step after a boycott would have been attempting to actively change the paradigm. Gretchen (no last name given), writing in the Chicago underground college newspaper *The Seed* in 1970, provided a more measured approach when she[14] examined why and how underground comix authors justified their misogyny, noting that their stories were fantasies influenced by inherent sexism.[15] Gretchen reasoned that "what the comix presently depict is the sickness and hung-upness inside most of us" and proposed that women should "get into more comix work" so as to change the overall consciousness of the field.[16] Gretchen mentioned finding out about the existence of *It Aint Me Babe Comix* at the end of the article, so she seems prescient in her initial proposal. *Wimmen's Comix* would espouse a similar idea two years later. The editorial for the second issue of *Wimmen's Comix* read, in part, "we…hope that publication of high quality beginning work will give our wimmen [*sic*] artists a chance to be seen, and a foothold in 'the industry' based on their talents."[17] Accordingly, the original context for these comics is well-documented, but their reception is not. The comics themselves do not indicate it. Virtually none of the important comics of the time period contained letter columns.[18] The researcher must then rely mainly on reviews, interviews, and other comparable sources.

During the late 20th century, comics were often stigmatized and thought of as a juvenile medium in the popular mind, but surprisingly few reactions specifically addressed the medium in their discussions of feminist comics. Those that did address it concentrated on comics' usefulness as a communication tool and to change the underground comix zeitgeist. One of the most important reviews that emphasized the comics medium was Tea Schook's 1977 review of Barba Kutzner's *Pricella Pumps/Star Buckwheat Comic Book* (1976) in Denver, Colorado's feminist newspaper *Big Mama Rag*. Schook began her review by asserting that "[c]omics have revolutionary potential. The artwork for a comic book need not be polished nor the dialogue brilliant. Most important is the Message. Comix are, or should be, a people's mediumm [*sic*]."[19] Since the original, male-dominated underground comix were considered revolutionary in comparison to mainstream comics, Schook's point here was that comics by women seemed to be the truest expression of that countercultural revolution ten years on. This was by no means a new sentiment—women had been challenging patriarchal conceptions of counterculture since its early days, including actions such as taking over the

underground newspaper *RAT* and making it into a feminist newspaper in 1970, along with members of local radical feminist groups.[20]

There is evidence that women viewed the publication of *It Aint Me Babe Comix* and other early feminist comics as a turn for the better in the underground comix industry. For example, the well-known journalist Claudia Dreifus, then a columnist with the underground newspaper *The East Village Other*, wrote an enthusiastic article about *It Aint Me Babe Comix* that called it "one of the most beautiful things to come out of the women's liberation movement. Aside from being funny and clever and well-drawn, the comic book opens a whole new world for women…let's hope that this book is just the beginning."[21] Similarly, in 1973 Celeste West expressed great excitement that "[a]t last women artists are really getting into the head comix scene—where formerly *It Ain't* [*sic*]*Me Babe* and *All Girl Thrills* [a 1971 collaborative anthology by Trina Robbins, Barbara Mendes and Jewel Wood (?)] alone against the tide of hip piggery," going on to recommend several comics including Trina Robbins' *Girl Fight Comics #1* (1972) and Lyn Chevli and Joyce Farmer's *Tits & Clits #1* (1972) with gusto.[22] All of these reviews accentuated the status of their reviewed books specifically as comics, leading one to believe that comics—at least for some in the early 1970s—were viewed as a valid form of feminist rhetoric within the community.

However, not all feminists were supportive of the comics medium. Tea Schook was a fan and collector of many feminist comics during the 1970s, and deeply involved in the local feminist and gay community of Denver, Colorado. She also published a few comics herself in the feminist satire zine *Albatross: the Lesbianfeminist Satire Magazene* [*sic*].[23] Schook said that she "loved the comix and collected them despite the scorn of my more political sisters" and characterized the attitude of her colleagues as "literary snobbishness" based on a perception of the comics medium in general as juvenile and as demeaning toward women.[24] She wrote several reviews of feminist comics in *Big Mama Rag* and noted that there was an idea from her colleagues and readers that comics did not properly fit into *Big Mama Rag*'s content: "I think people were like, 'Wow, this terribly serious, right-on, sisterhood-is-powerful *Big Mama Rag* newspaper is reviewing comic books. What's that about?'"[25] Clearly, then, comics were viewed as out of place in *Big Mama Rag,* and presumably some other "serious" feminist publications.

As prevalent as such anti-comics discrimination may have been in some areas, it was emphatically not ubiquitous for all feminists. As we shall see, there are a great amount of reviews and other mentions of feminist comics in feminist publications which do *not* reference or focus upon their status as comics. There were also some serious feminist publications in which comics did find a home, with no evident resistance. For example, the long-running and respected feminist journal *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*—while it never directly reviewed or discussed any of the existing feminist comics—did in fact earnestly publish several comics sporadically throughout its 16-year run, including a sarcastic and thought-provoking comics essay on rape and sexual harassment entitled "The Evolution of a Violent Act" and written by Paula Gray, who contributed to *Tits & Clits #4.*[26]

In addition, in *Heresies'* "Sexuality Issue," a thoughtful and analytical article about appropriate contexts for pornography and sex positivity in feminism was illustrated by excerpts from two erotic comics first published in two different anthologies: Shelby Sampson's "Nosefuck" from *Wet Satin: Women's Erotic Fantasies* (1976) and "The Adventures of Cindy Shark, Sexual Gourmet" by Cory (actually Tee Corinne), first published in *Tits & Clits #4* (1977).[27] These comics were the sole illustrations for the article—and therefore the only positive representations of feminist pornography given to readers (inaccurate as the pigeonholing of *Tits & Clits* and *Wet Satin* into the "porn" category may be). These cases demonstrate that the placement of comics in *Heresies* was not simply one of novelty based on medium, but rather an equal status alongside the other artworks and writings in the journal. They were presented as valid artistic and literary expressions in *Heresies'* pages. This begins to show that at least some feminists were willing to engage with comics on an intellectual level beyond their perceived origins, as shall be further proved below. Even Tea Schook, later to write so cogently on the importance of the "Message" of comics, asserted that she began "reading them because I thought comics could tell a great story. Not because, 'gee, I fell into this and, oh…it's a comic book about women, so maybe we can do something with this."[28] In order to better determine how feminists felt about the comics, and whether they felt similarly, we need to examine reviews of the comics in feminist publications.

Most of the reviews of comics that were unearthed via research were positive. This is logical: since publications only sporadically reviewed feminist comics, it is much less likely that they would specifically write a negative review of any comic. Certainly, there are no known articles expressly for the purpose of attacking any feminist comics like there were for male-authored underground comix (i.e., Gretchen's article). In addition, numerous important works seem to have never been reviewed by feminist publications, including Melinda Gebbie's *Fresca Zizis* (1977), Aline Kominsky-Crumb's *The Bunch's Power Pak Comics #1* and *#2* (1979, 1981), or Sharon Rudahl's *The Adventures of Crystal Night* (1980).

An interesting and sensical phenomenon emerged in the research: feminist publications were much more likely to review or include comics that were either self-published or published by women's presses, likely because of the

underground comix presses' existence in an almost completely separate countercultural realm than that of women's presses.[29] It would have been much easier for women's presses to publicize their material to feminist collectives than the almost solely male-run underground comix presses.[30] For example, the feminist journal *Black Maria* included Mary Wings' *Come Out Comix* (1974), Kate Thompson's *Grand Jury Comix* (1975), and Kutzner's *Pricella Pumps* in its "Publications Received" section under the heading "published and/or printed by women," but ignored the several other notable comics published at the time (1976-77).[31]

Some of the reviews focus on the comics as humor alone—a misguided but pervasive category into which many comics have been forced throughout their history. Fascinatingly, the most serious and academic contemporary article about feminist comics covered them mainly as interesting and innovative humor. Dolores Mitchel, writing in the fledgling *Journal of Popular Culture*, made some mention of autobiography and serious subject matter early on in her article, but spent much of her space cogently considering about how many of the artists used self-deprecation, and noted that "much humor in these books is based on the contrast between ideal, socially conditioned expectations and the disillusioning reality characters encounter."[32] While her definition was limiting, Mitchel took the comics seriously. Conversely, reviewers sometimes wrote about the comics dismissively because of their humorous, satirical content. Take, for example, a brief from the feminist newsjournal *Off Our Backs* that called the 1981 anthology *After/Shock* "punk comics…chock full of hetero sex and cynical jokes…(Don't give it to your mother and I'm not sure you'll like it either.)"[33] On the other hand, when women's bookstores stocked feminist comics, they often shelved them in the "humor" section and supportively advertised them. The Detroit, Michigan "gay-lesbian and feminist" bookstore Chosen Books called *Wimmen's Comix #8* (1983) "[c]lever, entertaining, fun to read" in its 1985 catalog and Womansplace Bookstore in Phoenix, Arizona called *The Best of Wimmen's Comix* (1979) "full of surprises, shocks and bizarre scenarios in which the losers often come out on top; angry, sardonic humor" in its Fall 1980 catalog.[34]

Still others viewed the comics as pure escapism and appropriate fun for feminists. An enthusiastic review of Trina Robbins' *Girl Fight Comics #1* and *Girl Fight Comics #2* (1974) in *Albatross* proselytized that their contents were "what I knew a comic book story could always be." *Albatross* reviewer Stacey Franchild summarized the melodramatic stories in the two books, accentuating their feminist consciousness and saying they "prove sisterhood is indeed powerful."[35] Similarly, quite a few reviews focused on the message of the comics regardless of their literary merit. An early review of Chevli and Farmer's *Tits & Clits #1* in *Off Our Backs,* published with the telling heading "A Redeeming Social Comic Book," ignored the potential satirical and literary aspects of the book, acknowledging that "Although 'Tits & Clits' might be considered pornographic even by the most liberal standards, it explores sexuality from woman's perspective; unique since women are notoriously hesitant about revealing their scatological personalities to the world."[36] Likewise, although much more positively, Valerie Wheat in a pamphlet about menstruation in media highly recommended "The Menses is the Massage!," a short story also in *Tits & Clits #1,* as a good inclusion in a feminist collective's program about menstruation, describing the story's heroine as "my favorite menstruant, Mary Multipary."[37] These reviews, while more perceptive than the pure "humor" categorizations, still show a tendency to write off the comics as unimportant lowbrow entertainment and not necessarily as literature.

This constrictive view was perhaps most clearly expressed in poet and journalist Marsha Shelley's 1979 review of several books distributed by Nanny Goat Productions, the publishing/distribution house that Chevli and Farmer ran in the mid-1970s. Shelley wrote that "the political content of Nanny Goat's wares ranges from Correct in Every Respect to racist, jingoist and anti-feminist," singling out Aline Kominsky-Crumb's work as "filled with self-doubt and self-disgust" and Lee Marrs' *Pudge, Girl Blimp* (1973, 1975, 1977) as portraying "self-hate." She highly recommended several other comics, however, including the anthology *Mama! Dramas* (1978) and Mary Wings' work, underscoring their humor and relatability to lesbians and feminists.[38]

Still other reviewers emphasized the less widely accepted aspects of the comics, such as explicit sexuality, bodily functions, and body image. The comics' authors, in keeping with the frank modus espoused by underground comix in general, were distinctly sex-positive in their work at a time when that was very controversial in the feminist movement.[39] Many reviewers praised these qualities. Ronnie Alzheimer in *Albatross* characterized *Pudge* as "amazing" and recognized its satirical intent by writing sarcastically that its main character "comes to San Francisco in search of a fuck – the only thing that can remove her horrendous social stigma – shes [*sic*] still a VIRGIN! This will both delight and frustrate the reader." Alzheimer also relished the radicalism of the comics, calling the anthology *Manhunt Comix #2* (1974) "a truly provocative and trashy comic" and touting Chevli and Farmer's "Vaginal Drip" as "a truly fine cartoon about the common, ordinary every day yeast infection."[40] Likewise, Womansplace Bookstore facetiously recognized the controversiality of the comics, saying in 1983 that *Wimmen's Comix #8* contained "something to offend everyone."[41] In 1974, Mecca Reliance praised Aline Kominsky-Crumb in a bulk review of several comics in *Off Our Backs,* describing her early story "Goldie, A Neurotic Woman" from *Wimmen's Comix #1* (1972) as "especially good…probably an auto-caricature of what it's like to be guilty, unloved, overweight and Jewish."[42] These were contentious subjects to write about in the 1970s and '80s, but the critics praised the authors for

their subject matter. Their keenness to tell readers about the raciness of the comics indicates that second-wave feminists were sometimes more accepting of sex positivity than is popularly thought. Despite this, there was some pushback against the reviewers' zeal, such as an angry letter to the editor of *Off Our Backs* that railed against Reliance's article as "entirely devoted to sex comics. More crap!"[43]

Despite the marked lack of restrictedness in subject matter, there were some themes that many feminist comics did not adequately address, most conspicuously lesbianism. Like Martha Shelley, Mecca Reliance extolled the relatability and frankness of the comics she reviewed, but also noted the lack of lesbian themes in the stories.[44] Dorothy the Dyke went a step further in her spirited review of Mary Wings' *Come Out Comix*, pointedly closing her discussion by writing that "[t]his comic is such a change from comics in general, and even the usually sexist smatterings of, say, Last Gasp's Wimmen's Comix or the women's comics, Tits and Clits."[45] Dorothy did not expand on this damning verdict, but it was likely due to the initial lack of lesbian contributors to these two anthologies (through no fault of the editors), which created some tension at the time.[46]

When they saw themselves in the stories, reviewers acclaimed and deeply analyzed the comics. Dorothy the Dyke explicitly hailed *Come Out Comix* as part of the lesbian literary canon. She began her review with a description of how writings like the chapter on lesbianism in *Our Bodies, Ourselves* did not show power around lesbianism and contrasted that with the agency and joy shown in *Come Out Comix.* Dorothy reported "nodding my head in recognition of reality on every page" and asserted eloquently that "Come Out Comix[…] is a comic book about FEELINGS, and yer's and my's feelings at that; it deals with process, not magic."[47] This "process" was exceedingly appealing to some reviewers. In a glowing pre-publication review of Barba Kutzner's *Pricella Pumps* in Milwaukee, Wisconsin's *Amazon: A Feminist Journal*, Barb Behm identified similar transcendent themes. During a profile of Kutzner as a "multi-faceted artist," Behm offered this analysis of *Pricella Pumps*:

> The book is a mockery on our culture's accepted values. It is a revelation to women who are running--or rather ruining--their lives according to society's norms. Society conditions us to believe that if we are born as women, we are naturally limited in modes of self-expression and are basically inferior. Feeling that you are a deviate [*sic*] because you fail to conform to the established American way of thinking is insanity at its ultimate. Star Buckwheat [the countercultural rebel "dyke" character in *Pricella Pumps*] helps us learn to find our real potential--she wants us to realize that if we would only believe in our real strengths ascribing to society's norms, we would find an inner freedom to achieve.[48]

We thus can identify two consistent literary viewpoints in Behm's and Dorothy's analyses: firstly, the sense of the comics providing a true representation of feminist's minds, and secondly, the idea that they implicitly critiqued and provided an alternative to conventional American society.

Within American society, the media is only one indication of the reception of art. Feminists also responded to the comics in person and through the mail, and the results were not always quite as enthusiastic. Trina Robbins expressed cynicism about the reception of her work in a 1980 interview, grumbling "It's really weird the way leftists and militant feminists don't seem to like comix. I think they're so hung up on their own intellect that somehow it isn't any good to them unless it's a sixteen-page tract of gray words."[49] This is something of a comparable attitude to the "literary snobbishness" of Tea Schook's colleagues. We have already seen the untruth of a comprehensive statement like this, but there seems to have been substantial early resistance to the introduction of feminist comics into real-world feminist culture. Lee Marrs, a founding member of *Wimmen's Comix,* related how in the early days of the anthology, the editors "collected names of various bookstores or magazine stores throughout the United States" and sent sample copies of *Wimmen's Comix* to them. Initially, she noted, "the response was almost completely negative," with a significant amount of bookstores sending rejection letters back and many taking issue "with the presence of men or men's activities…in the books as one of the reasons they rejected them." However, she recalled that "once several years passed…they began to sell in women's bookstores and throughout the country."[50] According to Marrs, it merely took a little while for feminists to accept the comics as part of their domain. That could be because feminists actually began to read the comics objectively—or perhaps they just saw that the comics were not going away and eventually acceded to their existence.

Even though some feminist bookstores did ultimately support feminist comics, their backing was not nationally universal: in 1978, five years after the founding of both *Wimmen's Comix* and *Tits & Clits*, Tee Corinne opened a laudatory article about comics by women with the observation that "most women's bookstores do not carry them because: 'They are too dirty,' 'They are too violent,' 'They do not further the revolution,' 'They don't uplift women's ideals', etc."[51] So the acceptance rate may have been more tenuous than Marrs remembers. Additionally, Trina Robbins said in 1979 that "[women's book s]tores that wouldn't carry *Wimmen's* [*Comix*] are carrying *Mama!*

[*Dramas*]," her themed anthology on motherhood, and in a recent interview disclosed that she remembered getting a great deal of positive feedback for both *Wimmen's Comix* and her solo work specifically from the vicinity of San Francisco and the rest of the Bay Area.[52] Sharon Rudahl, another feminist comics author, remembered the same thing happening.[53]

The postulation of greater local support is borne out by further evidence. For example, in the mid-1970s, a "Women's Speaker's Bureau" was formed in San Francisco to represent female speakers for college and feminist events. In a brochure of its members circa 1976, the Bureau included alongside luminaries such as Phyllis Lyon and Carol Downer no fewer than four women involved in the feminist comics scene: Lyn Chevli, Lora Fountain, Lee Marrs, and Shelby Sampson, all of whom offered presentations on writing, publishing, and using comics as art and as a way to spread messages.[54] Moreover, two of the members of the *Wimmen's Comix* collective were interviewed in San Francisco for a "Videoletter," which was favorably covered by Lynne Shapiro on the opposite coast in the New York Radical Feminists Newsletter. Videoletters were a series of nationally distributed video exchanges between various women's groups.[55] By 1980, more community organizations were beginning to accept the comics, such as a women's community center in East Lansing, Michigan that had a copy of *Tits & Clits #2* (1976) in its library.[56] Hence we see the comics' influence spreading beyond the West Coast, although Sharon Rudahl pointed out that she did not think that feminist comics authors "ever had the contact with, like, rural or Midwest U.S. that we probably should have had."[57] The comics were much more widely read in metropolitan urban settings than they were in smaller-scale environments, and although they received documentable attention in cities, it is much harder to gauge how they were seen elsewhere.

One potential way of determining additional individual feedback is through the examination of fan mail, but there was great difficulty of interaction between fans and authors of the time period, so little evidence is available. Carol Tyler characterized her readers as "the faithful 500 people who read my work," but she was aware of very few more than those.[58] Melinda Gebbie averred that "[f]eedback, per se, was sparse to say the least, in San Francisco Underground Comix of the 70's and early 80's." However, she did get some feedback for her experimental comics, including a letter that "likened [her] sentiments to that of [controversial radical feminist] Valerie Solanis [*sic*]," calling it "'dystopian.'"[59] Trina Robbins, on the other hand, recollected that she "got lots of…fan letters from women all over the country" but that she did not recall them explicitly identifying as feminists in their letters.[60] Likewise, in 1979, Lyn Chevli of *Tits & Clits* said that "[w]ith the exception of about four letters objecting to our health-education book *Abortion Eve* [1973], we have gotten nothing but excellent feedback."[61] Joyce Farmer, Chevli's partner in comics, recalled that she and Chevli did not get "that much" fan mail, but what they did get was mostly positive. She related that they "didn't get a really large volume of criticism. We got more…from people who were already feminists, working as professors and working as students who would say, 'Wow, I found this, and congratulations for thinking of it."[62] A perfect illustration of this was a 1972 letter from a student at the University of Buffalo who was studying women in comics and was very interested in covering *Tits & Clits.*[63] Chevli responded enthusiastically, closing her reply with "Its [*sic*] always good to be engaged in a dialogue with friends."[64] Thus we see that, for the most part, positive reaction through fan mail was present, but the fans only sometimes connected the work to the larger movement. Some looked at the comics as legitimate sources of study, showing that a contingent of feminists viewed the comics authors' ideas as worthy and acceptable with which to engage.

Feedback was not all great, however. Correspondents sometimes criticized aspects of the stories, but the way in which they did so indicated more than mere rejection. Roberta Gregory recalled getting, among the mostly positive feedback for her 1976 solo book *Dynamite Damsels*, a "very negative response for a story…where the characters were talking about non-monogamous relationships...One of the torn out pages was sent back to me with THIS IS TRASH scribbled in crayon on the front." Also, she received a letter "from the editor of a radical lesbian magazine who liked Dynamite Damsels but wanted me to make sure men were not able to buy it. She said males would not be able to appreciate it and they would be drawing a penis on my dykey Doris character, etc."[65] Angry reactions such as these show the specter of the political schisms that strained the feminist movement entering the discourse around feminist comics. This is yet another signal that women viewed the comics as authentically feminist. They were willing to seriously engage with the political and ethical ramifications of the stories, even if they strongly disagreed with them. Correspondingly, even though the magazine editor was reproachful of Gregory for her lack of separatism, the fact that she did not want men to read *Dynamite Damsels* suggests that she, as a feminist, wanted to claim the book and make it her own. For her, it was already part of the feminist movement, and needed to be made even more so.

The reaction to feminist comics therefore took a variety of different forms, with no uniformity throughout. Some people recognized the importance of the groundbreaking comics, while others strictly classified the comics based on their medium. Many other writers transcended medium in their comments and recognized the value of the comics beyond their simple novelty. Finally, the fan response that the authors received ranged from delighted to disinterested to disgusted, and was evocative of the many ways the second-wave feminist movement differed nationwide. We can

then say that while no majority of feminists in the whole movement accepted the comics as part of their milieu, those that did typically saw them as valid feminist expressions, even if the stories were not specifically addressing feminism. Feminist comics of the 1970s and '80s, and the reaction to them, were a precursor to the openness of, and thoughts about comics to come, and are an invaluable part of the history of comics, feminism, and literature at large. In today's world, where a staggering variety of comics, including many feminist ones, comprise a vibrant and vital literary realm, it is obvious that comics and feminists merely had to, as the protagonist of Lee Marrs' story "I Wuz a Teenage Intellekshul!" threatens, "wait, grow up, and...RULE THE WORLD!"[66]

2. Acknowledgements

Infinite multitudes of thanks to all the comics authors with whom I spoke for this paper: Joyce Farmer, Melinda Gebbie, Roberta Gregory, Lee Marrs, Trina Robbins, Sharon Rudahl, Tea Schook, and Carol Tyler. Also, thanks to Mary Fleener, whose many wise insights I was sadly not able to utilize for this thesis for lack of space—I promise to use them at some point in the future! You all are awesome, amazing and inspiring people. I am so lucky to have spoken to you and been in the presence of your wisdom, and to have read your work. So much of what you said had to be cut from the final version, and I will try my hardest to disseminate as much of your knowledge as I can in future research. Additional piles of thanks must go to all the amazing archivists and researchers with whom I spoke while figuring out how this essay would work, particularly Kathryn Manis, Sam Meier, Saskia Scheffer, and Kelly Wooten. You are the best! #LibrariesForever! Thank you as well to my advisors, Sarah Judson and Amanda Glenn-Bradley, for telling me when and where I was wrong and being so helpful. Thank you to *Wolf 359* for helping me get through the last week. And—thanks and praise to the Mighty Glow Cloud.
ALL HAIL!

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5. Endnotes

1. For the original comic described here, see: *It Aint Me Babe* Basement Collective and Carole, "Breaking Out," in *It Aint Me Babe Comix*, in *The Complete Wimmen's Comix* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2016), 20-23. Information on publication comes from Trina Robbins, "Babes & Women," in *The Complete Wimmen's Comix,* viii.
2. It is important to note here that not all the women making these comics identified their work as feminist, nor did they all identify as feminists themselves. However, most of them were involved in the same scene and published in many of the same anthologies and venues, and thus can be associated with the feminist comics movement for the purposes of this thesis. For more information on the authors' motivations, see Samantha Meier, "Twisted Sisters: Women's Comix and Cultural Action" (undergraduate thesis, Harvard University, 2012).
3. In this thesis, the term "comics" is used to refer to the medium in which these stories were written, and the word "comix" is used to refer specifically to the underground comix movement, which was named as such in opposition

to the mainstream comics industry. Primary sources in this thesis sometimes use "comix" to refer to the medium in general, but this terminology is not commonly utilized by scholars today.

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14. Throughout this thesis, the gender of a writer is assumed based on the writer's name when there is no available information to concretely verify their gender. Writers in feminist and underground papers often used abbreviated names or pseudonyms, making it difficult or impossible to authenticate their identities. Corrections are welcome to any errors made in this respect.

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27. See illustrations on Paula Webster, “Pornography and Pleasure,” *Heresies* 3, no. 4 (1981), 48-49, 51. http://heresiesfilmproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/heresies12.pdf. According to *Tits & Clits* co-editor Joyce Farmer, Cory was actually the well-known feminist artist Tee Corinne (author of *The Cunt Coloring Book*, among many other works), who wrote “Cindy Shark” under a pseudonym (Joyce Farmer, telephone interview by author, November 4, 2019).

28. Schook, interview.

29. Päivi Arffman, “Comics from the Underground: Publishing Revolutionary Comic Books in the 1960s and Early 1970s,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 52, no. 1 (2019): 177, https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12763.

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