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# With Great Power: Examining the Representation and Empowerment of Women in DC and Marvel Comics

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WITH GREAT POWER:  
EXAMINING THE REPRESENTATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN  
IN DC AND MARVEL COMICS

by

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An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout history, comic books and the media they inspire have reflected modern society as it changes and grows. But women's roles in comics have often been diminished as they become victims, damsels in distress, and sidekicks. This thesis explores the problems that female characters often face in comic books, but it also shows the positive representation that new creators have introduced over the years. This project is a genealogy, in which the development of the empowered superwoman is traced in modern age comic books. This discussion includes the characters of Kamala Khan, Harley Quinn, Gwen Stacy, and Barbara Gordon and charts how these four women have been empowered and disempowered throughout their comic canon. It rejects the lens of postfeminism and suggests that an intersectional feminism is still needed in today's ever-evolving and diversifying world. Popular culture must be representative of everyone, and today's women authors will be the driving force of diversity in comic books.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

In June 1938, just a year before World War II, Superman leapt out of the imaginations of writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster onto the pages of *Action Comics* #1. Superman quickly became an American cultural icon and ushered in a new archetype in popular literature – the superhero. This superhero archetype, like Joseph Campbell’s mythological hero, represented the ideations of Americans during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his blue tights and red cape, Superman became a symbol for strength and bravery, an American Hercules.

Following on the heels of Superman’s truth, justice, and the American Way came heroes like Batman, Captain America, the Flash, and Captain Marvel. These heroes were the ultimate role models – preventing crime, protecting the innocent, and fighting the injustices of the world – a *perfect* escapist fantasy for America during the Great Depression and World War II. Yet Psychologist Dr. William Moulton Marston noticed something wrong with this faultless world of popular super heroics: the overwhelming amount of overt masculinity and no real role model of empowerment for female-identifying readers.

In his 1943 essay for *The American Scholar*, “Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics,” Dr. Marston writes:

It's smart to be strong. It's big to be generous, but it's sissified, according to exclusively male rules, to be tender, loving, affectionate, and alluring. "Aw, that's girl stuff!" snorts our young comics reader, "Who wants to be a girl?" And that's the point: not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength (Marston 42).

In the wake of masculine heroes like Superman and Captain America, Marston introduced another American cultural icon – *Wonder Woman* – “a lasting symbol of female power, independence, and sisterhood” according to Jennifer K. Stuller in her book, *Ink-stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology* (Stuller 13). Stuller argues, “There were already women in both comic books and news strips by the time *Wonder Woman* debuted in late 1941, but the liberatory power of most of them was contained, even diminished, by the secondary status of their roles” (Stuller 13). Like Lois Lane or Batgirl (who appeared later in *Detective Comics* in 1961), many of the women in comics by 1941 were relegated to girl sidekicks, girl sleuths, girl reporters, and romance-story girls. Stuller remarks, “‘Girl,’ meaning not yet woman, not quite mature, not entirely whole” (Stuller 13). Marston, who was inspired by the suffragettes of the 1910s, created *Wonder Woman* as a symbol of feminism and American patriotism. As revealed in *Ink-stained Amazons*, Stuller writes that Marston believed “any young girl could become a *Wonder Woman* if only she took the time and energy to properly train herself; if only she had an example to guide her” (Stuller 15). *Wonder Woman* was to be that example. In December 1941, written by Dr. William Moulton Marston under the pseudonym “Charles Moulton,” *Wonder Woman* – the feminist, Amazonian warrior princess – arrived on newsstands in issue #8 of *All Star Comics*.

Comic books and other comic media (movies, television, comic strips, video games, and books inspired by comics) in the modern world seem to lack a sense of empowerment of female-identifying characters and their audience. These characters are often hyper-sexualized, poorly written, and portrayed as love interests, sidekicks, and damsels in distress – a way to progress a male character’s story. Yet, it is difficult to critique comic books with prevalent concerns of inaccurate – or the *absence of* – representation because critics are often accused of interfering

with an artist's freedom of expression. In his thesis "Postfeminism in Female Team Superhero Comic Books," Elliott A. Sawyer explains, "without critical intervention, however, problematic portrayals or other issues in comics may go unexamined. In due course, the ideologies portrayed in comics can negatively affect a multitude of avenues from the dominant culture to the reader's own sense of self" (Sawyer). In this thesis, Sawyer's research explores the concept of postfeminism and its effect on the representation of women in superhero teams consisting of all female characters, such as DC Comics' *Birds of Prey* and *Gotham City Sirens* and Marvel's *Divas*.

In Sawyer's paper, postfeminism is explained to be the period after the first and second "waves" or eras of feminism. It mainly encompasses those women (usually white, upper-middle class women) who have benefitted from the successes of the older generations (access to the right to vote, birth control and abortion, maternity leave, military service, etc.) and many often use the term to refer to the "irrelevance" of feminism in today's world, a *post-feminist* culture. Sawyer explains, "Postfeminism attempts to remove politics from women's representations by either ignoring them or making those representations a non-issue. [...] When media makers or others are accused of misrepresenting women, they can argue that there was no negative intent behind the representations" (Sawyer). Postfeminism creates a kind of pseudo-personal empowerment for women, often resulting in no personal agency or belonging to oneself. Sawyer's thesis argues that the misrepresentation of women in comic books can negatively affect readers and change the way women are viewed in society. I agree with Sawyer's thesis and argue that we are not living in post-feminist world, wherein feminism is no longer relevant. Comic books and their representation of women directly impact readers, because comics are a reflection



of society at particular moments in time. Therefore, a feminist and empowering representation of women-heroes is important because it reflects an evolving and diversifying world.

### **The Power Journey**

Comic books have become ingrained in American society since Superman and Captain America first appeared in the 1930s and 40s. Comic book movies continue to see success in the box office and both Marvel and DC have lists of planned films that stretch five to ten years into the future. Superhero media, in particular, is a very important aspect of American society. Therefore, it is important to examine this prominent media for negative influences. For my thesis, I will be examining popular female DC and Marvel characters, heroines, villains, and anti-heroes from the modern age of comics: an era of comics that follows the strict enforcement of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) of 1950s and what is known as the silver age of comics. The Comics Code Authority was an agency that regulated and censored comics but was abandoned in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The modern age encompasses comics from the mid-1980s to the 2010s and includes darker stories like DC Comics' *The Watchmen* and *Batman: The Killing Joke*. This era rebels from the influences of the CCA and allows for more explicit and diverse content.

My thesis is a genealogy of the superwoman, and the following paper will discuss the development of the superwoman and trace her empowerment and disempowerment. As I journey through the modern age, I will focus on female empowerment and disempowerment through three particular aspects: autonomy in the case of Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel, woman-to-woman empowerment as found between Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn, and disempowerment/re-empowerment as discussed with Barbara Gordon and the creation of Oracle in *Suicide Squad* as

well as the original Gwen Stacy and her alternate universe counter-part Spider-Woman in *Spider-Gwen*.

In chapter two, I will be searching for instances of Ms. Marvel following her own path and becoming a hero through her own intellect and understanding. I will chart the heroine's progress through her call to adventure and her hero's journey using Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. I will examine Ms. Marvel's discovery of the self and how the *Ms. Marvel* title deals with teenage objectification.

In chapter three, I will cite examples of female to female encouragement and empowerment. I will be examining the dynamic between two of DC Comics' most popular female villainesses, Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy and their recent reboots in the *New 52*. Has the Harley/Ivy bond changed since their first encounter in the television series *Batman: The Animated Series*? Do they have a positive, supportive relationship? I will be searching for moments of supportive friendship and how support encourages empowerment.

In chapter four, I will be investigating the concepts of disempowerment and re-empowerment. I will be looking for moments when female protagonists lose their autonomy and are relegated to moving a male character's story forward like Gwen Stacy – known as Spider-Man's dead love interest – and Barbara Gordon as Batgirl and Oracle. I will be examining the "Women in Refrigerators" trope. How do these characters regain their empowerment and autonomy and separate themselves from their male "lovers?" Do they ever fully regain their power and control? I will explore all of these questions and more as I set out to discuss the issue of female representation and empowerment in comic books and related media.

Comic book critics and historians have discussed female representation in comics throughout the years. In *Ink-Stained Amazons*, Jennifer K. Stuller writes that superheroes are

America's modern mythology. But the treatment of women in comics is troubling, because "modern hero stories, like those of classic world myth, continue to focus on male experience and fantasy. [...] Additionally, because heroism is often confined to power fantasies, there is little room for female experiences to be considered heroic" (Stuller 4). Stuller believes that "no matter our gender, race, sexual preference, or physical challenges, we can be heroes" (Stuller 4). Mike Madrid, author of *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* adds his take on this conversation, stating that women are important to comics because they show a different side to crime-fighting and are "more interested in making the world a better place, and not just beating their foes into submission" unlike violence-driven male heroes (Madrid v). Sherrie A. Inness, editor of *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* proposes that second-wave feminism allowed for the emergence of tougher women in popular culture. She suggests that popular media's representation of tough women heroes is "teaching real women dramatically different ideas about what it means to be female" (Inness 15). I hope to add to the conversation of female representation in comics that authors like Stuller, Madrid, and Inness have focused on with my discussion of empowerment.

As Dr. Marston discusses in "Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics," humankind has communicated ideas through picture story-telling for centuries and is an important part of showing and understanding human thoughts and emotions (Marston 37-39). I believe this kind of research is important in modern America because unlike the ideas of postfeminism, popular media still lacks diversity and intersectionality for all. I hope this thesis is an informative work that shows that feminism in comics is not irrelevant. Anyone who identifies as a woman is affected by the inaccurate, negative, or missing representation in our popular media. I not only wish to show the importance of feminism, but also the importance of comic books and their

effects on our society. This thesis will not advocate the discarding of comics but rather asks current and new generations of writers and artists to consider the impact of their work on prevalent social issues such as sexism, racism, ableism, and homophobia.

## CHAPTER 2

### ACCEPTANCE, ADVENTURE, AND AUTONOMY

In Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the author describes the call to adventure as the first step to any heroic story. The call begins when a "blunder – apparently the merest chance – reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood" (Campbell 42). This blunder, as Campbell explains is "the result of suppressed desires and conflicts" and "whether small or great," the call to adventure awakens a rite of spiritual passage for the hero (Campbell 42-43). Superheroes often follow this mythological pattern set forth by Campbell. In Marvel's *X-Men* comics, the mutants discover their powers accidentally, most often through adrenaline rushes. In DC's *Green Lantern*, a Lantern is chosen by a power ring to be its owner's successor and tends to place itself on the hand of an inexperienced person like Hal Jordon. Mythology, as Jennifer K. Stuller criticizes, often focuses on the male experience with power. And women continue to fill supporting roles for these heroes as "mothers, wives, temptresses, and goddesses" (Stuller 4). But in 2013, Marvel Comics writer G. Willow Wilson rewrote the call to adventure with her new Ms. Marvel – a Muslim Pakistani teenage girl named Kamala Khan – who shows that empowerment and autonomy through the call to adventure is no longer just for male heroes.

In issue 17 of 2013 *Earth's Mightiest Hero: Captain Marvel*, the citizens of New York City chant, "I am Captain Marvel!" to confuse a convoy of drones and save their beloved blonde heroine (DeConnick 28-30). Figure 1, the cover of this issue, shows a background of diverse people: male, female, gender fluid, young, old, different body types, and various races and ethnicities. Everyone is dressed like Captain Marvel, because they each embody a hero's strength. This image challenges the mythological trope explained by Campbell because it shows many different types of people embracing their inner hero. In figure 2, a young girl in Jersey City tapes up a picture of Captain Marvel and lifts her arm to show her Rosie the Riveter muscle swell and rip her sleeve. This young girl also seems to be embodying the spirit of Captain Marvel along with the whole of New York City. The reader never encounters this new character's face – only her backdrop, which signals the arrival of a new force.



Figure 1: The cover of *Captain Marvel* vol. 7, #17 by Joe Quinones.

Figure 2: Picture of Kamala Khan in *Captain Marvel* vol.7, #17 (DeConnick 34).

Sixteen, Pakistani American, female – Kamala Khan is not the typical superhero. In a world where superheroes, and any mythological hero for that matter, are almost always portrayed as tall, strong, brave, confident, and *male* (*i.e. Iron Man, Thor, Captain America*) – what happens when the innocents’ protector is not the stereotypical hero? Appearing on newsstands and in comic shops in 2014 in the *All New Marvel Now Ms. Marvel* comic series, Kamala Khan answers the call to adventure. She longs to be the perfect, clichéd hero – tights, cape, boots, and blonde hair – but soon learns that a hero’s journey is one of self-discovery and helping others.

Kamala Khan, a Muslim teen raised in New Jersey, lives a somewhat normal teenage life writing fanfiction about the Avengers and Captain Marvel (the beautifully pale and blonde superheroine of New York) and dealing with high school drama – until she is exposed to a mysterious mist that covers all of New Jersey. Kamala is left with the face and outfit of Carol Danvers’ former Ms. Marvel and the ability to morph her body. This is her call to adventure and the mysterious mist is the blunder that opens up an unsuspected world. Kamala, a superhero fanatic, is thrust into this new world of super heroics without a complete understanding of what that entails.

When she passes out from the mists that suddenly envelop New Jersey, Kamala has a vision. This vision is her spiritual awakening; her Muslim Faith takes the form of her favorite heroes: Captain Marvel, Iron Man, and Captain America. Kamala has turned her back on her religion and her family to be accepted by the kids at her school. This vision of Faith in the form of Captain America brings that rejection into question: ““You thought that if you disobeyed your parents – your culture, your religion – your classmates would accept you. What happened instead?”” (Wilson 16). To which Kamala replies, ““They laughed at me”” (Wilson 16). In figure

3, Kamala tells her super-powered guides that she does not know what she wants in life. She has rejected her religion and her family, and now all she wants is to be beautiful and strong like Captain Marvel. Wishing to be a hero, Kamala is granted her desire – but as Captain Marvel states, ““It is *not* going to turn out the way you think”” (Wilson 18). Kamala wakes from her vision with Captain Marvel’s younger face and uniform and the ability to shapeshift her body in every way possible.



Figure 3: Panel from *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* (Wilson 19).

After several blunders with her powers, this plucky Ms. Marvel begins to realize that what makes a hero is not the tights and the fame, but the ability to be in a position to help others. In issue 2, Kamala remarks, ““There’s this Ayah from the Quran that my dad always quotes when he sees something bad on TV...Whoever kills one person, it is as if he has killed all of mankind – and whoever saves one person, it is as if he has saved all of mankind...Because no



matter how bad things get, there are always people who rush in to help” (Wilson 30, 31). What is unique to the *Ms. Marvel* comics is the idea that being a hero is accepting one’s self and using that acceptance to better the lives of others.

Kamala soon learns to stop hiding behind the appearance of Carol Danvers and dons her own face and super suit. She discovers that she can heal instantly in her own body, which shows that accepting oneself is a healing and empowering experience. Campbell states, “The modern hero deed must be that of questing to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the co-ordinated soul,” (Campbell 334). Kamala begins to appreciate her heritage and her family, as well as the duty of being able to help others.

*Ms. Marvel* focuses solely on self-discovery and using that knowledge to help others in need. Her empowerment comes from her own autonomy and that autonomy drives the stories. The comic quickly strikes down the typical tropes of objectification and sexuality. In his book *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines*, Mike Madrid comments on this objectification trope when he asks, “Is power pretty?” (Madrid 291). He writes:

Females in comic books have historically been given weaker powers. This is presumably meant to be a reflection of the status quo between the sexes in the real world, and a hierarchy that male readers will be comfortable with. Female superheroes are also granted powers that make them look good (Madrid 291).

Kamala’s powers could be sexualized if written with that goal in mind. Her powers of transformation allow her body to move similarly to Mr. Fantastic’s – to stretch and contort her body in different ways, to cause her muscles to bulge or to grow her fist. But she can also shrink to the size of an ant like Ant-Man and change appearances like Mystique. Fortunately, G. Willow

Wilson writes Kamala as a sixteen-year-old girl and does not sexualize her powers. As shown in figure 4, Kamala's powers allow her body to shift in unnatural ways; these powers do not make her "look good" but she is still a powerful heroine who should not look like a supermodel. Madrid states that women heroes like the powerful Storm are still upheld to supermodel standards to attract male readers. Storm simply has to strike a pose and point to use her powers: "For as mighty as X-Men's Storm is, she strikes a pose, extends a hand, unleashes a lightning bolt, and looks great. Just like posing for a picture in *Vogue*" (Madrid 292). Kamala is obviously not a pose and point character like Storm, as many panels in her series suggest.



Figure 4: Ms. Marvel from *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* (Wilson 88).

But Madrid's observations of Marvel's past with adolescent heroines and their unconventional looks sheds a bleak light on Kamala Khan's future:

Throughout the 80s and 90s, Marvel's *X-Men* tried to mix unconventional looking women into their ranks of beauties to perpetuate their edgy outcast status. Kitty Pryde

was a gangly and gawky 13 year-old when she joined the team in 1980. Within a few years she was a svelte and pretty teen. Marrow was a mutant terrorist who could grow bones out of her skin that she could pluck and use as knives. When she was inducted into the X-Men in 1997, she was a dreadful creature with horns. Two years later she was a pretty girl in a bony bra. (Madrid 297).

This pattern followed with the insect-formed Wasp from the Avengers and the waifish Songbird from Thunderbolts, as the artists shaped these characters' bodies to be more appealing to a male centric audience. Madrid marks this trend in the comic book industry and states that "readers like their heroines drawn pretty" with youthful faces and bombshell bodies (Madrid 296-97).

Immediately in her series, Kamala Khan learns that the outfit does not make the hero. In the first issue, Kamala does ask to look just like Captain Marvel. Looking at her vision of Captain Marvel, Kamala states, "I want to be beautiful and awesome and butt-kicking and less complicated. I want to be you. Except I would wear the classic, politically incorrect costume and kick butt in giant wedge heels" (Wilson 18). Kamala chooses to wear this costume because she likes it and this signals autonomy. Yet, it is also disempowering because Kamala is choosing a costume that is not her own. She is sporting the face and outfit of someone who is known for being blonde, white, and pretty. At this point in the story, Kamala is struggling with her heritage and religion and wants to be something she is not – blonde and white – because she believes it will lead to acceptance. When Kamala is injured, she learns that she can heal faster by switching back to her own original face (Wilson 69). Kamala's friend Bruno even questions her choice to hide behind someone else's face: "But why hide? ... Why do it all behind someone else's face?" (Wilson 68). He goes on to say, "Who cares what people expect? Maybe they expect some perfect blonde, what I need – I mean, what we need – is you" (Wilson 68). Encouraged by her

friend's words, Kamala and Bruno come together to make a costume that works with Kamala's powers and carves her own identity –

I have tools now. Tools I didn't have before. It's a matter of learning how to use them. Learning my *strengths*. Learning my *limitations*. Learning how to *work* with this new body, instead of against it. *Good* is not a thing you are. It's a thing you *do* (Wilson 93-94).

Within just five issues of her series, Kamala Khan has grown from an *Avengers* fangirl just wishing to be accepted by her peers to a superheroine who is beginning to discover and accept her own self.

## CHAPTER 3

### ORIGINS OF A CRIME QUEEN

Throughout history and literature, women have been demonized and criminalized under the patriarchy. During the Salem witch trials, women on the fringes of society were accused of witchcraft and hanged. In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier is shamed for her monstrous desires for independence and decides to commit suicide to find her freedom. Even in traditional fairy tales, women are transformed into evil stepmothers and pitted against their stepdaughters for the affection of men. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar write in their essay, "Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother," "female bonding is extraordinarily difficult in patriarchy: women almost inevitably turn against women because the voice of the looking glass sets them against each other" (Gilbert and Gubar, "Snow White" 293). In popular media, villainous women are portrayed as femme fatales like DC's Catwoman and Marvel's Black Cat. They are bad girls who work alone, clawing and stealing their way to the top. They are often pitted against each other – especially for the affections of men, as shown in *Batman Rebirth* issue 35 where Catwoman and Talia al Ghul fight each other for Batman. But with the introduction of DC Comics' Harley Quinn, the narrative of solo female villains changed.

In 1992, Paul Dini and Bruce Timm created a walk-on character named Harley Quinn for their highly successful show, *Batman: The Animated Series*. Harley Quinn first appeared in the episode "Joker's Favor" as the supervillain Joker's dimwitted sidekick. It was later revealed in Dini and Timm's 1994 graphic novel *Mad Love* that Harley had been a psychiatrist – Dr. Harleen Frances Quinzel, M.D. – at Arkham Asylum who fell madly in love with her patient, the Joker, and helped him escape on several occasions. After the Joker is returned to Arkham beaten and

bruised from a battle with Batman, Harleen quits her job as a psychiatrist to start her life of crime as Harley Quinn. Figure 5 shows Harley Quinn during *Mad Love*, donning her new jester suit to impress the Joker. This panel marks the beginning of her life as the crime queen Harley Quinn.



Figure 5: Harley Quinn's appears in her new jester suit from *The Batman Adventures: Mad Love* (Dini 34).

At the end of *Mad Love*, Harley is back at Arkham – this time as a patient herself – and the Joker is assumed dead by the media. *Batman: Harley Quinn* was published in 1999 and is a variation of the *Mad Love* story – Harleen is locked away in Arkham Asylum due to her dangerous fascination with the Joker. But after an earthquake demolishes Arkham, Harleen escapes to join the Joker as the red and black jester Harley Quinn.

Though Harley was purposefully written as a victim of domestic abuse, there are some redeeming qualities in her early publications that show a character willing and trying to break

free from her abuser. In the beginning panels of *Batman: Harley Quinn*, the reader encounters Dr. Pamela Isley (who goes by the alias Poison Ivy). Ivy is a major villainess of Gotham City and an expert chemist who can control plant life. As punishment for her crimes, Ivy is tasked by Batman with delivering produce to the starving people of Gotham. It is during one of these deliveries that Ivy comes across debris and a wounded Harley Quinn. In later panels of the story, the reader discovers that Harley Quinn was tricked by the Joker and sent rocketing over Gotham. Poison Ivy takes Harley to her lab where she gives her an antitoxin. This antitoxin allows Harley to be around Ivy: “I’m not called Poison Ivy for nothing. Anyone who spends a lot of time around me will pick up something nasty if they’re not properly immunized” (Dini 25). As Harley’s immune system changes, so does her physical strength and agility.



Figure 6: Harley has new powers from *Batman: Harley Quinn* (Dini 27).

In figure 6, Harley jumps around the lab and exclaims, “I’ve got me some powers, baby!” Ivy shushes her and explains, “Now calm down, cupcake. You’re not going to be giving Superman

any sleepless nights. All I've done is given you a little edge" (Dini 27). Because the Joker has bruised and abused poor Harley, Ivy has given her the means to fight back – "...I sympathize with you. You've given your all to a man who used and betrayed you. Now I've enabled you with the means to strike back, not only at Joker, but at Batman, too" (Dini 27). Harley's new friendship with Ivy has *literally* empowered her with superpowers that make her a match for any caped crusader or clown prince that dares throw a punch her way. It is Harley and Ivy's friendship that gives Harley's origin story a dose of female empowerment and autonomy that is missing in Timm and Dini's *Mad Love* one shot from *The Batman Adventures* (1994) and the adapted episode of *The New Batman Adventures* (1999).

Though marked as the first canon appearance of Harley in current comics, *Batman: Harley Quinn* is not the first appearance of Harley and Ivy's empowering friendship. "Harley and Ivy" was episode forty-seven of *Batman: The Animated Series* that aired on January 18, 1993 and marks the introduction of Harley and Ivy's first acquaintance. In this episode, Harley encounters Ivy during a robbery after she has been thrown out by the Joker. The *Batman: Harley Quinn* one-shot reintroduces the scene where Ivy, enraged by the Joker's mistreatment of her new friend, injects Harley with the anti-toxin that gives her immunity to all gases and poisons. The one-shot comic takes this further by also enhancing Harley's natural strength and agility. After this scene, Harley and Ivy embark on a girls' only crime spree, becoming Gotham's "New Queens of Crime." "Harley and Ivy" comes sometime after Harley and the Joker's first team up and is not considered part of Harley's origin story in the cartoon, leaving any direct woman to woman empowerment for later in the series. The *Batman: Harley Quinn* story pushes this empowerment to the forefront and incorporates it into Harley's origins.



Harley and Ivy's bond is important representation in comic books, because it offers a different perspective to storytelling – in which empathy and communication are at the forefront of problem-solving. There is often a lack of compassion and friendship in male-dominated superhero comics. The hero and villain are lone wolves and though they may have side-kicks or henchmen, the story is usually concerned with the lead male and his authority. When it comes to being a typical male-identifying hero, Sharon Ross writes in “Female Friendship and Heroism in *Xena* and *Buffy*” that “isolationism only proves further how strong he is” (Ross 238). Instead of utilizing communication, the lead males are pitted against one another; Batman and Superman's battle in *The Dark Knight Returns* is a prime example of hero versus hero where each man refuses to compromise his own code of ethics for his “friend.” Batman follows his strong conviction for justice regardless of authority, while Superman stays on the side of the government and the American-way. The eventual clash brings Superman to near-death and results in Batman's faked-death. These supermen rely heavily on independence and reject community under the guise of masculinity. This kind of “lone wolf” storytelling privileges violence and marginalizes those who utilize community. The lone wolf is strong, while those who seek teamwork are weaker.

But as a superwoman who has been abused by a lone wolf super-villain, Harley Quinn learns that community is essential for her survival. Stuller writes, “The modern superwoman deviates from the Lone Wolf model of heroism by being able to be both independent and part of a community” (Stuller 93). Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn save each other multiple times throughout their comic media history. In Karl Kesel's *Harley Quinn: Preludes and Knock-Knock Jokes*, Ivy disguises herself as Harley and takes a bullet from the Joker. When Harley enters the scene and finds Ivy bleeding on the floor, she jumps into action and pummels the Joker and his

henchmen. At the end of the battle, Harley ditches the Joker and patches Ivy's wound. She admits she knew the Joker was trying to kill her and decides to follow Ivy's wishes and try to make it on her own. This pattern is repeated in *The New 52 Harley Quinn* (vol. 2) series, where with the help of friends including Ivy, Harley is set out on her own away from the Joker. As Gilbert and Gubar suggest in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, "women themselves have the power to create themselves as characters, even perhaps the power to reach toward the woman trapped on the other side of the mirror/text and help her to climb out" (Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 16). Harley and Ivy's friendship empowers Harley to step away from the Joker. Harley refuses "to be fixed or 'killed' by an author/owner" by staying with the Joker (Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 16). This cycle in her starring series is important because it shows that Harley's character is ever-evolving and that her story does not end at the hands of the Joker.

Harley often reunites with Poison Ivy and Catwoman as the Gotham City Sirens. Nearly every series that features Harley Quinn has her set apart from the abusive Joker and often puts her under the guidance of strong figures like Poison Ivy and Catwoman (*Gotham City Sirens*), Wonder Woman (*Harley's Little Black Book*), and Power Girl (*Harley Quinn* vol. 2, *Harley Quinn and Power Girl*). Harley's bond with her female role models gives her the support she needs to overcome the Joker's abuse. *Harley Quinn* vol. 1, *Gotham City Sirens*, and *Harley Quinn* vol. 2 all feature issues where Harley fights the Joker.

In issue #25 of *Harley Quinn* vol. 2, Ivy returns to Coney Island (where Harley lives) to help Harley with a plan to infiltrate Arkham Asylum and retrieve her boyfriend Mason. But Ivy is concerned for Harley, because the Joker has recently been locked away at the same asylum. Ivy and Harley discuss their feelings about the situation. Ivy says, "I'm *worried* is all. I know you still have feelings for him" (Conner 3). Harley reassures her, "Not all feelings are good ones,

y’know?” (Conner 3). At this point in the canon, Harley and Ivy have been confirmed as non-monogamous lovers. The women communicate the situation both as friends and lovers, and with Ivy’s help and trust, Harley is able to enter Arkham. When Harley finally encounters the Joker, she squares up against him, ready to fight with Ivy’s confidence in her. Issue #25 is especially important for Harley’s canon, because Harley tells the Joker, “I’m not yer toy anymore, unnerstand?” (Conner 23). She makes this declaration, divorcing herself from her abuser and refusing to return again. No longer the Joker’s sidekick, Harley becomes the hero of her own story with help from her friends: “in stories about the female hero, the sidekick – who is traditionally of lesser power than the hero, generally in need of rescue, and often serves the narrative purpose of comic relief – is elevated to the role of hero themselves through collaborative contribution” (Stuller 92). Harley is no longer a subordinate under the Joker; she is an empowered superwoman with support from her friends.

DC Comics’ *New 52* launched in 2011 and retconned the comic canon for many popular characters, including Harley Quinn. Harley’s first solo appearance in this newly launched movement was in *Suicide Squad* #1 (vol. 4). But it is a later issue of *Suicide Squad*, #7 “The Hunt for Harley Quinn: Part 2” that rewrites Harley’s origin and removes the woman-to-woman empowerment of *Batman: Harley Quinn*. Instead of breaking out of Arkham and adopting a jester identity, Harleen Quinzel is brought to the same chemical factory that transformed the Joker. Against her protests, the Joker tosses Harleen into one of the vats and laughs as she emerges a newly birthed *Harley Quinn*. There is no Poison Ivy in this origin and no empowering antidote. Harley never interacts with Poison Ivy in *Suicide Squad* vol. 4. Because of this, Harley is forever pining for the Joker. She even tortures a fellow teammate named Deadshot, pretending he is her clown prince lover. She demands the Joker’s love and asks him to explain why he

abandoned her. This version of Harley is devoid of community and creates a madness that is “trendy” for readers but demeans the character’s history and progress as an abuse survivor. *Harley Quinn* vol. 2 was published a few years after *Suicide Squad* vol. 4 and attempts to bring support back into Harley’s life with Ivy and the Coney Island gang. But the retconned origin still haunts Harley’s current comics and is also the chosen origin for the *Suicide Squad* film from 2016.

Woman-to-woman mentorship and community is often underrepresented in popular culture. But more and more, modern comic media is rising to the occasion. In the CW’s *Supergirl*, magazine mogul Kat Grant mentors Kara Danvers and often serves as Supergirl’s inspiration. In the 2017 hit *Wonder Woman* film, Themyscira is home to the Amazons – a race of warrior women who share a sisterly bond. And a *Gotham City Sirens* movie has been planned for the coming years. With this kind of representation on major screens, Stuller writes, “hopefully...we are seeing the beginning of a progressive female heroic tradition” (133). Bonds like Harley Quinn’s and Poison Ivy’s are important to popular culture, because they reject the lone wolf model of masculine protagonist storytelling. This bond also challenges the trope of the solo femme fatale who is often pitted against another woman for a man’s affections. Woman-to-woman empowerment introduces a world where community and trust encourage others to reach their full potential. It shows that what women can do when they work together is much stronger than what they can do alone.

## CHAPTER 4

### IN THE REFRIGERATOR

On June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1994, the newest issue of *Green Lantern*, #54 titled “Forced Entry” hit store shelves everywhere. Though comics in the 1990s were often cheap filler stories, “Forced Entry” is infamous for the grisly murder it portrays within its pages. After Kyle Rayner – the newest Green Lantern – and his girlfriend Alexandra “Alex” Dewitt return home from a romantic night out, Kyle is called away by bizarre events in L.A. While Kyle is saving the city from an earthquake and an out-of-timeline future, a villain named Major Force pushes his way into Kyle’s apartment with the sole intent to murder Alex. Though Alex manages to pull a knife on Major Force, the knife breaks on his invincible chest. As Major Force demands information about Green Lantern’s whereabouts, he brutally beats and strangles the woman, ultimately killing her. When Kyle returns home, his mission completed, he finds a note that tells him a present is in the fridge. Upon opening the refrigerator, Kyle finds the mutilated body of his beloved inside. Figure 7 shows Alex’s body limp, cold, and lifeless body juxtaposed against Green Lantern’s powerful and fiery presence.



Figure 7: Green Lantern finds Alex Dewitt's body from *Green Lantern* vol. 3 #54 (Marz 16).

Women have often been used as objects to propel a male hero's story further. The pain inflicted on these women – whether through torture, rape, or death – becomes a major storyline that influences the male hero. Jennifer K. Stuller writes, “[The disempowerment of women in comics] is generally used for one of the three narrative purposes: shock value, as the initial motivation for a superheroine's quest and or/vigilantism (i.e., Red Sonja's rape), or more commonly, as the driving force of a *superman's* rage” (Stuller 144). As Stuller points out, women's disempowerment is a longstanding trope that is “abhorrent and persistent” (Stuller 144).

Several women throughout comic book history have become victim to the disempowerment trend. In 1999, comic writer Gail Simone compiled a list of women characters who had fallen victim to the trend and coined the terms “women in refrigerators,” and the act of “fridging,” a reference to Alexandra Dewitt's senseless murder. Simone sent her list to several comic book creators, asking for enlightenment on this trope. Her original letter found on her

website “WiR” reads, “These are superheroines who have been either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator... Some have been revived, even improved -- although the question remains as to why they were thrown in the wood chipper in the first place” (Simone). Simone’s list tends to focus on superwomen like Stephanie Brown (a Robin who was raped and tortured) and Barbara Gordon (paralyzed by the Joker) to show that female heroes – the women who represent power – are especially dehumanized, mutilated, and snuffed out.

Barbara Gordon’s “fridging” is one of the more famous instances of a superheroine’s victimization to torment the men around her. In Alan Moore’s 1988 graphic novel, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, the Joker – Batman’s greatest nemesis – barges into Commissioner Gordon’s apartment and immediately shoots Barbara in the spine, paralyzing her. He then goes on to strip her and take photos of her naked, bloodied body. There is also an implied sexual assault in this scene. Joker’s pictures of Barbara are then used to antagonize Commissioner Gordon. In the 2016 film adaptation by Bruce Timm and Sam Liu, Bruce Timm adds a sexual relationship between Barbara Gordon and Bruce Wayne as a prequel to graphic novel’s original story. Barbara’s eventual wounding becomes a plot point to induce pain and anger in both Batman and Commissioner Gordon in the film. Barbara’s role as Batgirl is significantly diminished and she becomes a prop. Timm and Liu sexually objectify Barbara in their *The Killing Joke* film to continue the objectification that follows in the original story.

Author Alan Moore comments on Barbara’s disempowerment in issue 147 of *Wizard Magazine*:

I asked DC if they had any problem with me crippling Barbara Gordon—who was Batgirl at the time—and if I remember, I spoke to Len Wein, who was our editor on the project, and he said, “Hold on to the phone, I’m just going to walk down

the hall and I'm going to ask [former DC Executive Editorial Director] Dick Giordano if it's alright," and there was a brief period where I was put on hold and then, as I remember it, Len got back onto the phone and said, "Yeah, okay, cripple the bitch" (Cotton 62-64).

In the interview, Moore reveals that he does not see *The Killing Joke* as one of his best stories because, "it seemed to say too little and be too explicit and perhaps gratuitous in its method of saying it" (Cotton 62). In reply to paralyzing Barbara, he remarks that Wein and Giordano "probably...should've reined me in, but they didn't" (Cotton 64). *The Killing Joke* remains controversial as both an influential *Batman* story and for its treatment of Barbara Gordon, in which her role is diminished to a prop.

Just fifteen years before *The Killing Joke* was published by DC, Marvel Comics had already caused controversy with *The Amazing Spider-Man* issue 121 in March of 1973. Though the cover does not reveal the issue's title, it does announce a major and unexpected "turning point" in the web-slinger's life (Lee 106). In this issue, a recovered Norman Osborn dons the Green Goblin costume to take revenge on Peter Parker after his son, Harry Osborn turns to drug-use. Previously in the *Amazing Spider-Man* series, Norman Osborn discovers the identity of Spider-Man as Peter Parker. Though his last fight with Spider-man left him with amnesia, Norman recovers his memories and in his rage toward his son's condition, kidnaps Gwen Stacy, Peter's love interest. During the resulting fight between the Green Goblin and Spider-Man, the Goblin drops Gwen Stacy from the George Washington Bridge. Gwen dies in issue 121, just ninety issues after her first appearance in *The Amazing Spider-Man* issue 31 in December of 1965. It is left ambiguous whether the fall from the bridge or the whiplash from Spider-Man's webbing as he reaches out for her kills her.



It was not Stan Lee's decision to kill Gwen Stacy. From August 1972 to October 1975, Gerry Conway succeeded Stan Lee as script-writer for *The Amazing Spider-Man* series. Conway found Mary Jane Watson, the feisty red-head of the series, to be a more exciting love-interest for Peter Parker. *Back Issue!* #44 (2010) discusses that Conway decided to kill off Gwen, because he wanted to make Mary Jane Peter Parker's main love-interest. Conway states:

[Mary Jane] hadn't lost the edge that made her an interesting character. Gwen didn't have an edge. She was just a nice person. I don't think she had a mean bone in her body, and wasn't likely to do something that was likely to screw things up for Peter, out of some misguided sense of self-aggrandizement, which Mary Jane was quite capable of doing – which makes her a much more interesting character (Walker 21).

*Back Issue!*'s Karen Walker writes, "Reader response at the time, particularly to the death of Peter Parker's sweetheart, was generally angry and distraught. Writer Gerry Conway took the brunt of this negative reaction, and was seen by some as having done something almost sacrilegious to the title" (Walker 19). Later, responding to Stan Lee's pleas to bring Gwen Stacy back, Conway revived Gwen's character in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #144 as a clone. But this Gwen is also written out of existence to allow for Peter and Mary Jane's relationship.

Gwen Stacy's death has long-since haunted *Spider-Man* fans and in 2008, Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale published *Spider-Man: Blue*, a proclaimed "love story" that explores Peter Parker's feelings for Gwen before her death in a six-issue miniseries. *Spider-Man: Blue* reduces Gwen's character down even further as an object for Peter's affections and pits Gwen and Mary Jane against each other. The series is narrated by Peter Parker and because the story follows Peter's point of view, it focuses heavily on a girl rivalry as both Gwen and Mary Jane fawn over the photographer. In issue 5, Gwen and Mary Jane play nurse to an injured and exhausted Peter

Parker. Each girl tries to “out-nurse” the other as Mary Jane brings chicken soup and Gwen brings bedtime stories.

The end of the miniseries reveals that Gwen’s death directly influences Mary Jane and Peter’s relationship. Peter says, “The night of your *funeral*. MJ came to see me at the apartment. I was ... putting it mildly...*rude* to her... I think now your death was MJ’s wake-up call – that we weren’t all going to live forever and the party *was* going to end” (Loeb 142). According to Peter, Mary Jane has a revelation the night of Gwen’s funeral and no longer wants to live the party girl life. He continues, “Gwen. I don’t think Mary Jane Watson *could’ve* had a serious relationship with me until she realized how much we all lost with you gone” (Loeb 142). Though Peter has moved on and married Mary Jane, the miniseries does close on an ominous note from the hero: “I long for a time when a girl I knew with an incredible smile and so much good in her heart made me think...Life *can* be great” (Loeb 144). This statement continues the competition between Gwen Stacy and Mary Jane Watson, because it says that perhaps Peter Parker does not see greatness in his life now.

Gwen Stacy and Barbara Gordon nearly met the end of their stories at the hands of writers like Gerry Conway and Alan Moore, who wanted to shock their audiences and sell issues. Luckily, both characters have survived to this day with writers who refused to let them remain victims of violence. Barbara Gordon made her return in 1989, barely a year after *Batman: The Killing Joke* was published, as the technical mastermind Oracle in *Suicide Squad* #23. Reimagined by Kim Yale and John Ostrander, Barbara Gordon resumed crime-fighting as a super-genius computer hacker that uses a wheelchair. In figure 8, Oracle appears on the cover *Suicide Squad* #49, reclaiming the moment when the Joker paralyzes her. Her face is angry and Barbara is ready to fight back. On *ComicBookResources.com*, Brian Cronin quotes John

Ostrander: “There were no plans for [Barbara] in the continuity [after *Batman: The Killing Joke*]. We decided that if that happened, we weren’t just going to make her better magically — we wanted to explore what happened when someone like her was crippled and how she would respond” (Cronin). Oracle became important comic-book representation for people with disabilities, alongside the likes of Dr. Midnight, Daredevil, and Professor Xavier. She has guided many super-powered teams with her genius intellect over the years – including the Suicide Squad, the Bat Family, and her own team, The Birds of Prey. *Batman: The Killing Joke* and Alan Moore nearly destroyed Barbara. Without Yale and Ostrander, Barbara Gordon would have been ignored in modern comics because of her paralysis. Despite her “fridging,” Barbara Gordon and the creators that loved her persisted, showing that the new voices in comics would not allow powerful women to disappear due to shock value.

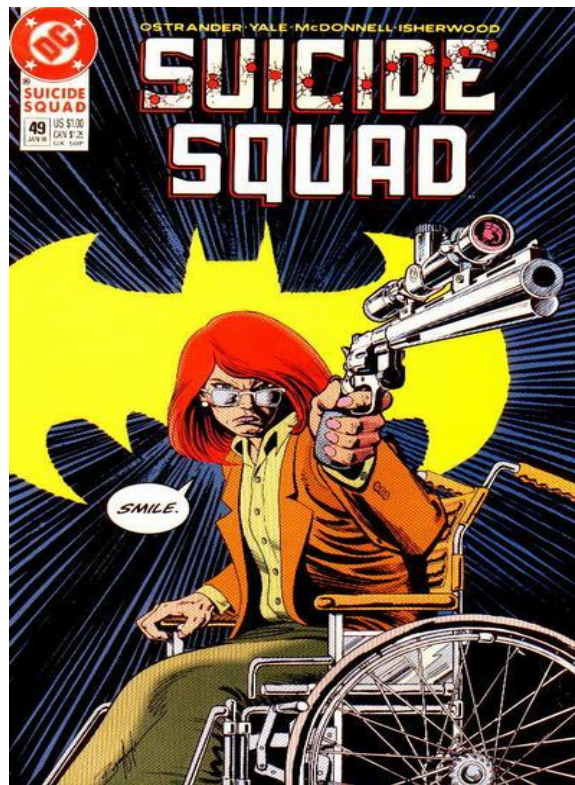


Figure 8: Cover of *Suicide Squad* vol. 1, #49 by Norm Breyfogle.

Gwen Stacy's most important revival came in 2014 with *Edge of Spider-Verse #2* (see figure 9) as Spider-Gwen (also known as Spider-Woman). This radioactive-powered Gwen Stacy from Earth-65 was bitten by the experimental spider that gave Peter Parker his powers on Earth-616. *Edge of Spider-Verse #2* is renowned for flipping the script on the original *Amazing Spider-Man* story arcs. Peter Parker, jealous of Spider-Woman's fame, becomes the Lizard and subsequently dies from the experiment. Spider-Woman is found with Peter Parker's dead body and blamed for his death, just as Spider-Man is blamed for Gwen Stacy's death on Earth-616.

Spider-Gwen's titular series by Jason Latour and Robbi Rodriguez launched in 2015 and continued the story set in *Edge of Spider-Verse*. In a 2014 interview with Andrew Wheeler from *ComicsAlliance*, Jason Latour recalls when he decided to take over Dan Slott's (current *The Amazing Spider-Man* writer) idea for a Gwen Stacy Spider-Woman: "It was really clear that Gwen's re-emergence in other media [*The Amazing Spider-Man 2* film, 2014] had already given her a new life, and that her death and the way it seemed to rub a lot of her newer fans raw was meaningful" (Wheeler). He continues, "It just seemed like there would be a lot of catharsis in Gwen as the hero, instead of the victim" (Wheeler). Spider-Gwen has starred in multiple series since 2014 including the expanded *Spider-Verse* event, *Spider-Gwen*, and *Radioactive Spider-Gwen*. She is currently in the 2017 *Venomverse* event.



Figure 9: Cover of *Edge of Spider-Verse #2* by Robbi Rodriguez.

While Gwen Stacy's Spider-Woman continues to be a bestselling character in comics, Barbara Gordon's Oracle was erased during the 2011 DC Comics *New 52* relaunch. During the relaunch, DC executives made the decision to bring Barbara back as Batgirl with a neural implant that allows her to walk, effectively deleting Oracle from the comics. There was a lot of distress and controversy surrounding the decision to bring back Barbara as Batgirl. Oracle had become important representation for the disabled, and there was public outcry that "fixing" Barbara was an insult to people with disabilities.

In an OP/ED: "ORACLE is Stronger than BATGIRL Will Ever Be" on *Newsarama.com*, Jill Pantozzi writes about her experiences with Muscular Dystrophy and being in a wheelchair. She expresses her disappointment with DC Comics and their decision and states, "...the news of Barbara Gordon no longer being Oracle affects me personally. Oracle is my symbol" (Pantozzi).

Gail Simone, long-time *Birds of Prey* writer and the woman who coined “women in refrigerators” took over as the writer for the *New 52 Batgirl* #1. She offered an interview with Pantozzi to discuss her concerns. Simone tells Pantozzi, “It’s execution. Is the story sincere, is it meaningful and honest, or is it cheap exploitation?” (“Gail, Jill and Babs”). Simone continues, “And I also think that people who know me and my work at all know I would rather quit than do something with these characters that I felt was evil” (“Gail, Jill and Babs”).

Throughout the years, popular women characters in comic have been used as objects to propel a superman’s story forward. With new creators, these “fridged” women were able to come back into the comic spotlight. Marvel Comics’ decision to revive Gwen Stacy and give her superpowers has been well-received and a positive move for the company and its readers. Barbara Gordon as Oracle was a powerful idea that brought real representation to DC Comics for many people with disabilities. But DC Comics’ choice to reboot has had many repercussions and left Barbara Gordon fans with mixed emotions. *The New 52* reintroduced characters at earlier stages in their lives, creating more interest and revenue for DC Comics. But it also took away Oracle, and women like Jill Pantozzi felt the impact of this decision.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Tim Hanley, renowned comic historian and author of *The Many Lives of Catwoman* and *Wonder Woman Unbound*, found that in 2014 both DC and Marvel Comics were overwhelmingly populated with male creators. Of the 68 comics released in June of 2014 by DC Comics, “519 men and 58 women” were credited as creators (Hanley). In that same month, Marvel Comics put out 75 comics with “619 credited creators, 545 men and 74 women” (Hanley). He also found that these comics were made by predominately white men. Turning his focus to “cover artists, writers, and interior artists” dropped the numbers of women to 5.6% (Hanley). In the way of ethnicity from both companies: 11.5% were Hispanic, 6.8% were Asian, and only 1.2% of the creators were Black in 2014 (Hanley). The numbers that Hanley found are incredibly disappointing for the comic industry. In an ever-changing world where popular media is always a Google search away, it is important for comic books to diversify their creators and the media they release. Tim Hanley’s 2014 study is shocking and also does not comment on LGBT+ creators in Marvel and DC.

Women creators like G. Willow Wilson, Kim Yale, and Gail Simone have brought a new voice to an industry dominated by male creators. In their comics *Ms. Marvel*, *Suicide Squad*, and *Birds of Prey*, these women authors have brought diversity and empowerment with strong, complicated, and flawed superwomen.

Comic books have long been a commentary on modern society and will continue to be relevant. They are America’s modern mythology and represent the core of American society. Superman became a symbol of hope after the Great Depression. Captain America punched Hitler

on many occasions, and Wonder Woman was created to give the female-identifying audience a strong feminine hero a decade after women gained the right to vote. Each generation created the hero it needed. As the gender lines of what is masculine and feminine continues to blur in the modern world, it is important to create characters that are representative of the many facets of human beings. It is important to show empowered women in comics, because comics reflect an ever-changing and evolving America. The representation of women in comics directly affects readers and influences their view of women in society. We do not live in a post-feminist society; there is still a need for greater representation and intersectionality of all people. Everyone is affected by the negative, inaccurate, and missing representation of women in popular culture.

Comics must begin to include the experiences of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, the disabled, those outside of the gender binary, those who are not heterosexual, different body types, and the poor. At the conclusion of her book *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors*, Jennifer K. Stuller remarks, “Our stories will continue to evolve as humanity does. Increased acceptance of gay marriage, the first ever campaigns by serious Black and female U.S. presidential candidates, and the presence of more women and other minorities in entertainment industry positions means that we will see an ever-increasing diversity in our heroes” (Stuller 162). The comic industry has great power to transform and diversify their characters. And in the current years, more and more characters who do not fit the usual mold have appeared on shelves: Batwoman, Apollo and Midnighter, Iceman, Moon Girl, Ms. Marvel, and Miss America are characters with varied sexualities and races.

Comics have a torrid history with their treatment of women, as evidenced in the women in refrigerators trope and their habit of stripping meaningful origins away from characters like Harley Quinn and Oracle. But with characters like Kamala Khan’s Ms. Marvel and Gwen



Stacy's Spider-Woman there is a glimmer of hope that comics will continue to change for the better. It is up to new writers and artists like Gail Simone, Kim Yale, and G. Willow Wilson to bring diversity to the forefront of the big companies. As the world continues to change, comics must begin to change too. They must reflect the diversifying society they emerge from. Everyone should have the opportunity to be empowered by comics.

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