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**“Girls Don’t ‘Do’ Comics”:
Wimmen’s Comix and Women’s Collaboration**

Girls don’t ‘do’ comics. While this statement may be an exaggeration, statistics support the claim that female participation in comic readership is slim, and that female participation in comic authorship is even more so (Robbins 2). However, this is not to say that the history of females-in-comics is not a storied and influential one. In the 1970s, *Wimmen’s Comix*, the first all-women’s comic collective was founded. Emerging during a period of prominent feminist activism and advocacy, *Wimmen’s Comix* was an underground comic anthology that dealt with various feminine and feminist issues. From female superheroes to romance comics, to comics dealing with abortion, AIDS, menstruation, child abuse and lesbianism, *Wimmen’s Comix* became a forum for female comic contributors, whether they were editors, writers, artists, inkers or colourists, to come together and express themselves in a way that was often dismissed in the mainstream comic industry. *Wimmen’s Comix* spawned numerous influential female comic contributors, many who are now established and respected names in other comic venues. Although it disbanded in 1992, *Wimmen’s Comix* raises a lot of questions about the relationship of female comic production to other types of female collaboration and its correlated theories. I had two goals in writing this paper: first, to demonstrate how the production of comics is a form of collaboration and determine to whom authorship should be ascribed to in comic production, given the multiple positions that exist within comic production, and the historically changing emphasis placed on these positions; and

second, to use Lorraine York's *Rethinking Women's Collaborative Writing* and Charlotte Canning's *Feminist Theaters in the U.S.A.* to frame and complicate an examination of *Wimmen's Comix* as a collaborative text. *Wimmen's Comix* is of particular interest because the internal and external social and political tensions create a complicated site from which to derive theories about female collaboration and feminist collaboration. The feminist-driven emergence, the collaborative structure and the sexually-explicit, often parodical, satirical and empowering content of *Wimmen's Comix* mirrors the literary case studies of York and theater case studies of Canning and that their theories of female collaboration can be extended beyond their specific sites of interest.

David Kunzle, a comic historian, outlines the criteria required for a work to be considered a comic: "(1) There must be a sequence of separate images; (2) There must be a preponderance of image over text; (3) The medium.....must be.....a mass medium; (4) The sequence must tell a story which is both moral and topical" (Kunzle 2-3). *The Comics Journal*, the first peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the study of comics, declares the comic to be "a space for cultural expression that absorbs these societal dramas and re-writes and re-interprets them, as do both literature and movies" (Merino). Comics act as an alternative venue for exploring social and political events and ideologies in a representative and relatable format that has greater flexibility than other visual forms, due to its lack of 'real world' restraints. Comic theorist Scott McCloud argues that "a huge range of human experiences can be portrayed in comics, through either words or pictures. / As a result — despite its many other potential uses — comics have become firmly identified with the art of storytelling" (152)¹. This "art of story-telling" is the contemporary and predominant function for comics, it is important to note that different

types of comics exist, and thus there are different ways to tell a story within the comic genre. While they all fall under the overarching category of 'comic', there are three distinct formats, and interestingly, these three genres all have different histories and all evoke different social reactions. There is the 'cartoon' or 'comic strip', a single self-contained sequential panel, which is most often found in local newspapers, and is rarely a site of political and social upheaval. Rarely, as it is important to note, does not denote never. These are often an individual endeavour, with *Six Chix* being a notable exception. Second, there is recent phenomenon the graphic novel, which are full length single-story books written and produced in the traditional sequential art form Kunzle declares essential to defining such work as a 'comic'. Finally, there is the 'comic book', the flimsy 32- page anthologies comprised of several stories in a single issue and are found in comic-book stores and grocery stores. These are more often a collaborative effort than the other formats, and *Wimmin's Comix*, among many others, fall into this category. My focus will be on the traditional comic book and all subsequent references to comics (unless specified) will be to works of this nature.²

Defining the author of the comic is a difficult task, for author is a term that can vary in scope and definition; and for the fact that comics can have several contributors of varying and changing importance. Before the 1940s, comic writing was a truly collaborative and non-hierarchical process. The traditional titles of positions and divisions of labour existed, but the rigid creative divisions currently associated with each position did not (Raviv 14). The writer wrote the story for the comic in paragraphs, *not the dialogue*. The artist then chose the scenes to depict and the dialogue to use, and thus began a collaborative and cyclical dialogue between contributors. This went on, with

continuous input from the other contributors, editorial staff, administrative staff and even the publishers (comic production houses, such as Marvel Comics, were not as large operations then as they are today) until everyone contributing was satisfied with the final product. In the 1940s, when comics were becoming more popular and produced at a higher frequency, this collaborative process slowly became more linear and hierarchal (Raviv 16). The writer began producing script-like stories, describing each panel and writing the exact dialogue. The artist drew what was expected from the writer, and gave explicit instructions to the inker and the colorist. While it is still technically collaborative, the non-hierarchal dialogue of previous comic production was diminished. The work of the writer and the work of the artist became separate and distinct, despite their existence in a single text.

Additionally, this format further polarized individuals in comic production as well as the types of production that existed. In the late 1980s, when collector's editions were very popular and drove the majority of comic sales (Raviv 24), comics were the artists' genre and who wrote the comic was merely a minor role. After Marvel Comics, the world's largest and most influential comic production company, nearly went bankrupt and lost all its artists to ImagX, a jump-start comic production house,³ two major events that changed the comic landscape occurred happened. First, an avenue for smaller comics emerged, and the underground and alternative comic industries were increasing in audience, in scope, and in credibility (Raviv 147). (This accelerated again when comics became increasingly available on the internet). Second, with comic publicity largely negative and with sales rapidly declining, Marvel turned outward for inspiration. Comics became a writers' genre, as famous and renowned writers from other disciplines crossed

over to write comics for Marvel. Most notably, Kevin Smith (writer of movies, including *Dogma*, *Clerks*, and *Bottle Rocket*) and Joss Whedon (writer of television shows, including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *FireFly*) wrote several popular series for Marvel and still occasionally write comic stories for them (Raviv 154).

Resistance to this new structure, and to the celebrification of individual comic contributors, can be seen in the alternative and underground comic movements, including women's comics and *Wimmen's Comix*. (This will be explored later in this paper). However, I maintain that comic production remained distinctly collaborative despite the changing production landscape. This division is comparable to Lorraine York's discussion of the collaborative prose text *A Celibate Season*. In this work, one author, Blanche Howard was overly submissive to the second, Carol Shields, because of Shields' stature in the literary world (York 100). This is not unlike in comics when one collaborator is more revered than the others and their name is often larger and bolder on covers, or referred to as their work in reviews or advertising campaigns. Largely touted and reviewed as primarily Shields' piece, the work was not helped by the easily divisible structure of the text. It was formatted into letters to and from a geographically separated couple, with Howard penning the letters from the wife, and Shields penning letters from the husband. This division of labour mirrors the comic world, for example with the 1970s *Twisted Sister* comic anthologies, in which Lynn Chevely and Joyce Farmer traded off writing and drawing with each story, or with *Six Chix*, as previously mentioned, which is a uniquely collaborative weekly comic strip where "six different women cartoonists.....all share the same space on the comics page. In a comic strip version of job sharing, each cartoonist's strip appears one day a week and they take turns on

Sundays” (Robbins 141-2). *Six Chix* and *Twisted Sisters* mirror the structural and production methods of *A Celibate Season* and other literary epistolary texts with multiple authors, and York’s supposition that *A Celibate Season* and the work of Howard and Shields is a true collaboration supports the notion of comics-as-collaboration, even in instances where production processes are divided in labour and hierarchal in structure. York argues that while the intra-textual work of *A Celibate Season* is divisible by contributor, it remains a collaborative text, for Shields and Howard “were not inhabiting entirely separate artistic spheres” (102). York continues this argument by elaborating on Shields’ and Howard’s editorial and critical exchanges, which significantly enhanced the other’s contributions:

When they did find time to work on the manuscript, they would scrupulously read each other’s drafts, make marginal notes about word choice, logic, sequencing, and send the letter or letters back, with a cover letter summarizing and elaborating upon the changes they felt were necessary. The collaborator receiving the marked-up copy would then make changes in the margins, sometimes adding comments on the comment, and then would incorporate and changes she saw fit to make light of the suggestions. There was, then, give-and-take in all portions of the novel (103).

Shields’ and Howard’s ideas and words merged together artistically, regardless of where they were textually. Their process was not unlike the original comic production process I discussed previously. It is not the double author on the cover that makes a text *truly* collaborative, but this exchange within the same creative space.

In *The Author*, Andrew Bennett declares that who the author is lies with the origin of the text (97). He argues that the origin of the text is the idea’s first coherent textual manifestation, when it can first be considered a manuscript, a draft, a story. For Bennett, the text may be edited, translated, co-opted, plagiarised and adapted into other forms, but, he maintains that the author lies within the original creative space — the space which

Shields and Howard cohabited — from which it emerged (98). He argues that *true* collaborative authorship functions the same as single authorship, for the origin and the essence of the text can be prescribed to multiple individuals when they inhabit the same creative space. This construction does not take away from the unique attributes and complications collaboration brings to writing, but rather configures an understanding of collaboration that goes beyond singular or multiple signatures to a specific text. Bennett's construction of collaborative authorship agrees with York's discussion of Shields' and Howard's work as well as supports the construction of the comic and the comic creative space.

With this in mind, we need to construct a definition for what constitutes this creative space for the comic medium through applying York's and Bennett's ideas. How can this process be collaborative in a forum where a single writer or artist can control the process? The complexities of the physical space of the comic further problematize these questions. A comic is collaboration between the verbal and the visual, and between the textual and pictorial. Additionally, this collaboration of mediums makes it impossible to ascribe a creative origin to the comic. Within the comic, the textual and the pictorial negotiate the same space to produce a single narrative. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud argues that

Pictures are received information. We need no formal education to 'get the message'. The message is instantaneous. / Writing is perceived information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language. / When pictures are more abstracted from 'reality', they require greater levels of perception, more like words. / When words are bolder, more direct, they require lower levels of perception and are received faster, more like pictures. / Our need for a unified language sends us towards the center where words and pictures are like two sides of one coin! (49)

This negotiation, unification and (as I argue) collaboration, is the cornerstone of comic theory. Comic historian David Carrier states “what defines narrative in the comic strip is that the picture and the text work together to tell *one* story” (74; author’s emphasis). One component of the comic cannot function without the other. Additionally, Charles Hatfield claims that “word and image approach each other: words can be visually inflected, reading as pictures, while pictures can become as abstract and symbolic as words” (36). The single narratives combined with the intertwined verbal-visual structure constitute comics as a unique story-telling venue.

While there are wordless comics and pictureless comics (McCloud 20), these two components’ interactions are what define the comic itself. Even by their exclusion, they are defining and shaping the comic *by not being there* (McCloud 21). In the comic, the verbal and visual are intertwined and together they create the medium (McCloud 21). Furthermore, McCloud declares

In comics at its best, words and pictures are like partners in a dance and each one takes turns leading. /When both partners try to lead, the competition can subvert the overall goals.../... though a little playful competition can sometimes produce enjoyable results./But when each partner knows their roles —/— and support each other’s strengths —/— comics can match any of the art forms it draws so much strength from (156).

This cohesion of verbal and visual, of textual and pictorial, makes it impossible to ascribe an origin to one aspect of the comic over the other. Thus, it seems hardly fair to ascribe authorship to one contributor over another. Regardless of how disconnected the writer and the artist may be in the production process, they come together creatively to produce this unique medium to tell a single story in a single space. However, how does one negotiate authorship within this collaboration of a collaborative medium, which is unique to comics? Without the artist or the writer, there would not be a comic. Comics may have

a dualistic and occasionally dissociated origin with the writers creating the verbal space for the comic and the artist creating the visual space; however these separate spheres merge in the space of the comic. The medium cannot denote authorship; artists cannot be denied authorship of a comic simply because in their chosen creative space ‘authorship’ is not part of the rhetoric. Thus, for comics, either there is no author, for such declaration would diminish the importance of a contributor to the comic or diminish one of the mediums that constitutes a comic; or, alternatively, that all the partners come together to constitute the author, for as dissociated and hierarchal the comic process may be in some production houses and within some collectives, without the contributions of the artist, the writer, the inker, the colourist and others, the comic would be a truncated and fractional work, through which a complete narrative could not be derived from.

That being said, formal titles may have little to do with the actual quantity or quality of the work contributed by individuals. This is especially true for the comic anthologies that blatantly rejected of the formalized assembly line trend, such as *Wimmen’s Comix* and their alternative and underground contemporaries. *Wimmen’s Comix* was a truly collaborative effort. Each anthology produced by *Wimmen’s Comix* showcased new female contributors, had a new multi-person editorship and each submission received extensive feedback from other collective members. In an interview, Terry Richards, a founding member of *Wimmin’s Comix* states:

...we decided that...we could produce an on-going title of comics by women and that we would function as a collective, a term used rather loosely in those days, to mean there would be no editor or leader, but instead a rotating editorship, with everyone contributing their energy to the paperwork and general supportiveness of the group (Robbins 110).

Even *Wimmen's Comix* decision to be collaborative and non-hierarchical was a collaborative decision. This structure remained until *Wimmen's Comix* permanently disbanded in 1992. While this collective was not without struggles and conflicts, as Diane Noomin recognizes in an interview: "I think maybe the *Wimmen's Comix* Collective took the path that many women's or political collectives do over the years and became a hotbed of bickering and power plays. Aline [Klominsky] and I found ourselves on one side of a power play and we decided 'Well, fuck you, we'll do our own comic!'" (Noomin, as quoted in Merino), it pioneered and shaped the women-in-comics landscape and influenced how future women comic collectives would be structured and how they would function. While the list of participants in *Wimmen's Comix* over its twenty years and nineteen issues is extensive⁴, the various articles, interviews and academic work surrounding the collective refuses to — or perhaps cannot — differentiate between who did what and when. Instead, an interested person must pour over the individual issues and read each credit to understand each contributor's specific role for each issue.⁵ To further complicate this research, the contributors and the roles they played varied from issue-to-issue and comic-to-comic. Members took turns editing, writing, and sketching, often with multiple members working collaboratively on a single submission. This makes it nearly impossible to differentiate the writer and the artist even within a specific text due to the lack of distinctive style and the multiple signatures on pieces (Robbins 114-5). *Wimmen's Comix* was not about promoting individual contributors, but celebrating female comic artists and writers, while providing them with a unique and supportive forum to showcase their work. Thus, it can easily be said that the work that arose from the *Wimmen's Comix* collective did so from the same *collaborative* creative place.

However, collaboration, especially female collaboration, is not without a surrounding critical and academic dialogue. In her introduction to *Rethinking Women's Collaborative Writing*, York reframes literary critics and collaborators Carey Kaplan's and Ellen Cronan Rose's question "can there be a coherent theory of *feminist* collaboration?" as "can there be a coherent theory of *women's* collaboration?" (3). York insists that female authorship does not and should not be automatically equated to feminist authorship. She also argues that there is "a strong tendency to celebrate women's collaborations unproblematically and idealistically" (6) regardless of the type and quality of the texts. Additionally, Charlotte Canning argues that theatre "collectives challenged not only the specialization and fragmentation of conventional theatres, but also the results of diversification, especially passivity and disempowerment. The belief was that collectives would give everyone an equal chance to create the future" (66). It is here that I turn to an academic debate about the female collaboration of *Wimmen's Comix*, and ask: can similar criticisms and praises be offered about *Wimmen's Comix* given the political and historical context that female comic production arose from?

Wimmen's Comix emerged during a time when the American underground comic movement was flourishing (Robbins 14), engineered by "self-styled hipsters and iconoclasts who both rejected and built on prior traditions; they too harbored subversive, in some cases, revolutionary, political ideas . . ." (Hatfield 18). Underground and alternative comics were independent and reactionary comic collectives

Which jolted to life by the larger social upheavals of the era, departed from the familiar, anodyne conventions of the commercial comics mainstream and provided the initial impetus, the spark of possibility, for a new comics creation. The countercultural comix movement- scurrilous, wild and liberating, innovative, radical, and yet in some ways narrowly circumscribed- gave rise to the idea of

comics as an acutely personal means of artistic exploitation and self-expression (Hatfield ix).

Despite this counterculture comic movement, there remained little space in the comix and comics industries for women. While *Wimmen's Comix* emerged as a reaction to the hierarchal and industrial nature of mainstream comics, it also arose from its patriarchal nature and the lack of representation of women across the comic industry, mainstream, underground, alternative or otherwise.

Founding *Wimmen's Comix* was a direct reaction to the 'boy's club' nature of the comic world. There existed a single criterion for participation in *Wimmen's Comix*: contributors had to be female (Robbins 107). In an interview with Trina Robbins, one of *Wimmen's Comix* founding members and prolific contributors, Robbins states

Maybe it was because the underground was so small, it was like a select club of a whole bunch of men who hung out with each other and drank together and stuff. For a while a lot of them lived in the lower east side and then San Francisco, and they all knew each other. And it was simply a club that I was not allowed into: it was like a boy's club. It was like Little Lulu's clubhouse — not Little Lulu, Tubby's clubhouse that says no girls allowed — and I was never told, never literally told, 'I'm sorry we don't want to consider you because you're a female.' I was simply ignored (Robbins as quoted in Witek 26).

Robbins argues that a masculinised mentality prevailed in the comic industry in the early 1970s. This was a period in which female cartoonists had two options. They could adhere to these practices and norms and become one of the boys, which resulted in women comic contributors, often reluctantly, producing masculinised comics or they could attempt to carve out a unique niche for themselves (Merino). Interestingly, the underground comic community of the 1970s was not unlike the underground theater community of the same time period. Canning observes that “the situation was perceived by many women as a demonstration that those who denied a voice to women did not

really believe in their visions and goals for a new society, but instead wanted to maintain traditional power relations at least as far as gender is concerned” (63). Canning surmises that it is this deliberate exclusion that led to the development of feminist theater troupes and feminist collaborative theater. *Wimmen’s Comix* was a parallel creation. It was even named such to reflect the feminist movement and political landscape at the time of its inception (Robbins 107). Additionally, several collaborators from *Wimmen’s Comix* went on to produce anthologies titled *Tits and Clits*, *Twisted Sisters*, *Dyke Shorts*, *Dyke Strippers* and *Come Out Comics* (Robbins 109). How can one avoid the feminist connotation when the very titles of the works insinuate feminist politics, lesbian identities and several other political issues associated with gender? It is this strong feminist association that has propelled *Wimmen’s Comix* to the forefront of comic historians’ attempts at conceiving a cohesive and inclusive, feminist and female comic production theory.

Comic historian Charles Hatfield argues that *Wimmen’s Comix* arose out of a direct response “to the masculinised ethos of the comix scene” (16)⁶. He bases this argument on the fact that several *Wimmen’s Comix’s* stories often parodied more traditional female-oriented comics such as romance stories and paper-doll comics. For example, In *Wimmen’s Comix #1*, “A Teenage Abortion” by Lora Fountain tells the story of a teenage pregnancy and dealing with the subsequent abortion in the traditional first-person narrative style, and visual structure of romance comics. Another example is Lyn Chevely’s premiere “Peters Sisters” short, which depicts Wanda Peters dancing and romancing with her new boyfriend, Grantly Dick. Complications with her I.U.D. temporarily rip them apart emotionally, but they come together in the end as couples do

in most romances, after Wanda learns about the birth control pill (*Wimmen's Comix #1*). In *Wimmen's Comix #7*, “Donna Dominatrix” premiered. “Donna” is a paper doll that comes with a leather cat-suit, thigh-high go-go boots, whips and chains. While Fountain and Chevely are parodying romance comics, one of the few acceptance venues for female readers and female comics producers to engage in mainstream comics, “Donna” mocks not only the Barbie Doll style paper doll norms, that were often sold to young girls in lieu of — or supplement to (often romance comics came with paper doll cut-outs of the heroine) — comics, but “Donna” also parodied the hyper-sexualized nature of women-in-comics as depicted by men or in superhero, detective and other traditionally masculinised comic forms. Hatfield claims that *Wimmen's Comix* was “feminist commentary” that was “volatile and subversive” (20). Since *Wimmen's Comix's* stories were not only mocking the masculinised norms of comics, but also the few feminine conventions that existed in mainstream comics, it should be considered feminist work and its contributors advocates of feminism (13).

In agreement with Hatfield, comic theorist Joseph Witek argues that *Wimmen's Comix's* candid representations of the plight of the female and female issues in America during this time period means the anthology cannot escape feminist connotations — nor should it (27). Witek uses the example of issue #4, in which every story “deals with the experiences of middle-class white women, and explores both the pleasures of the female body and the despair and anger of life in the home and in the workplace” (27). The cover of the issue Witek is discussing depicts a 1950s housewife organizing her pantry. However, instead of the random assortment of baking ingredients and spices one would expect, this housewife's cupboard has “Creative Genius”, “Macho Man”, “Super Dad”,

“Fist Fulla Dollars”, and “World’s Greatest Lover” among others, attempting to demonstrate what a woman truly needs and desires.

While I applaud these male comic historians for attempting to discuss the history and importance of female comic production, their discussions and conclusions come across as the idealistic celebration York and others are wary of. They simplistically interpret several *Wimmen’s Comix* pieces as feminist, and do not attempt to explore what it means to be a feminist, nor what it means to be a feminist comic. Nor do Hatfield and Witek explore the non-explicitly feminist pieces produced by the *Wimmen’s Comix* collective. Their analysis recalls Lisa Ede’s and Andrea Lunsford’s *Singular Texts/Plural Authors* and their simplistic interpretation of female collaboration that York derides as evoking an “Edenic world where women, by definition, necessarily and essentially critique forms of power characterized as male” (18). York believes that the role of female collaboration is far more complicated and diverse than this. However, the extent to which her claim encompasses the contested political landscape surrounding *Wimmen’s Comix* is still troubled.

Ana Merino concurs with York in her essay “Women in Comics,” claiming that while the comic industry was indeed a masculinised space, it is simplistic to automatically equate comics produced by females to be feminist comics. She asks “What implication has the efforts of these female pioneers to integrate women into the field of comics really had? Can the resultant feminine representative space in comics be called ‘feminism?’” Yet, in her attempt at being inclusive and conservative, she fails to form a concrete and definitive answer. Merino is far more reluctant than their male comic and comic theorist counterparts, as is *Wimmen’s Comix* contributor Trina Robbins, to laud

Wimmen's Comix and its contributors as merely reactive and explicitly and collectively feminist. When Merino claims that “women's comics have proclaimed for themselves an active and conscious space of self-representation since the middle of the 1970s, offering previously unknown themes for readers who were used to seeing women as comic-strip characters, but not as creative graphical and narrative voices” one cannot help but wonder if Merino is indeed implicitly claiming this “active and conscious space” as a feminist one, despite her explicit reservations to do such. Is feminist always a label we must actively inscribe on ourselves? Or do the consequences of our actions imply feminism regardless of intent?

At the time of *Wimmen's Comix* inception, female comic production was rare and was very limited in scope and exposure. If the original *Wimmen's Comix* contributors stood up and declared “We are feminists!” and “This work — our work — is feminist!”, the female comic landscape could potentially have been one of a narrow political agenda and limited social understanding. Robbins counters that *Wimmen's Comix* celebrated all female comics, regardless of the political or non-political nature of their work (109), leaving the door open for individual political choices and public declarations. The feminist messages varied and the self-declarations of feminism were not a collective effort, but an individual choice. However, is avoiding the feminist label an effective mechanism to purport a space for females in a masculinised space? Without a unified declaration of such, comic historians, namely Hatfield and Witek, took it upon themselves to define *Wimmen's Comix* as a progressive, feminist organization and its work to be political and social statements of such. However, by doing so, that is, by actively ascribing themselves as feminist and their work as feminist, Robbins and others

could potentially be limiting to the work done by female comic contributors. Additionally, by declaring the *Wimmen's Comix* collective as a feminist collective, and thus declaring the work produced by *Wimmen's Comix* contributors as feminist, they would be ascribing the same simplistic, celebratory and Edenic label of Hatfield and Witek.

Canning argues that “theatres were cast as microcosms of society that did and could play out the individual’s relation to society both actual, as in mainstream and conventional theatres, and potential, as in alternative and political theatres.” (Canning 63) Cannot the same thing be said about comics and *Wimmen's Comix*? The differences in the mediums do not change the surrounding social and political situation. Additionally, Bette London argued in *Writing Double* that female collaboration “cannot be apparently talked about without invoking lesbianism” (64), and, when discussing Edith Sommerville’s and Martin Ross’ collaboration that “positing a form of women’s writing that privileges the interactive features of orality.....collaboration could even be seen to open up the possibility for a model of literary production explicitly feminist in orientation” (76). The non-acknowledging — for there was never an outright denial of such correlations — of these associations of feminism and lesbianism potentially creates an unmediated tension between collaborators, within the text and for readers. For example, Lyn Chevely states in an interview that

The decision to be vulgar rather than high class rose out of sheer ignorance. At the time we started, I owned a bookstore, sold u.g.s. [undergrounds], and was impressed by their honesty but loathed their macho depiction of sex. Our work, originally was a reaction to the glut of testosterone in comics.....As most of us know, sex is a very political business. *All we want to do is equalize that by telling our side...* (Chevely quoted in Robbins 110; my emphasis).

Chevely is a single example of a female artist who drew comics about sex, feminism and politics. However, the extent to which these issues were covered varied from artist-to-artist, issue-to-issue, and collaboration-to-collaboration. Some were explicitly feminist in content. For example is Joyce Farmer's *Wimmen's Comix* cover (#7) showed three women at a rally in Washington, holding vibrators in the air singing "We Shall Overcome!" Another example is Roberta Gregory's "Dynamite Damsels" a short that became its own comic series, which explored the relationship of lesbianism and politics through female superheroes and anti-heroines. The cover of her first individual book asked "Is the Women's Movement Really a Lesbian Plot?" (Robbins 117). However, the non-acknowledgement of the social and political orientation of *Wimmen's Comix* left Gregory feeling isolated and confused. In an interview, she states:

The thing that got my first story in print was seeing the virtually straight *Wimmen's Comix* No. 1....and I thought, hey, what's going on? So I wrote a lesbian story....it didn't turn out quite like I wanted to, but at least it was a valid place to be coming from (Gregory as quoted in Robbins, 111)

While several of *Wimmen's Comix* identified themselves as lesbian and bisexual, Gregory never felt comfortable exploring this aspect of her identity in this space. However, the contradictions that exist with *Wimmen's Comix's* lack of self-identification are evident with Gregory's interview. While she was not comfortable with the 'straightness' of *Wimmen's Comix*, she felt it was the appropriate place to premiere her lesbian comic stories. While the *Wimmen's Comix* space changed and adapted to the current collaborators, the space was never self-identified. These stories depicting female sexuality whose writers or artists were political activists and active feminists were featured side by side with regulars featuring dominatrix girls in hot pink spandex and large breasts, excerpts of "Brenda Starr," a ditzy female detective who is perhaps the

antithesis of “Donna the Dominatrix”. More examples of these comics include Elizabeth Watasin’s “Action Girl”, about a traditional hyper-sexualised female super hero, and Shannon Rudhal’s “Adventures of Crystal Night,” about a traditional, hyper-sexualised detective. This type of female comics *can* be considered expressions of female empowerment through Hatfield’s for-women-by-women mentality (82), but were not considered explicitly political or feminist in nature (Robbins 113). This inconsistency is what made Gregory, Farmer and Chevely uncomfortable, for they publicly identified their work as feminist through interviews and articles (Robbins 110). Eventually, all three left *Wimmen’s Comix* and started their own series: Gregory turned *Dynamite Damsels* into a full-fledged comic series, and Chevely and Farmer started *Tits & Clits* (Robbins 110).

Additionally, there existed tensions in what constituted feminist comics within *Wimmen’s Comix* itself. In an interview, contributor Diane Noomin states

Basically, [Farmer, Gregory, Klominsky, Chevely and I] felt that our type of humor was self-deprecating and ironic and that what they were pushing for in the name of feminism and political correctness was a sort of self-aggrandizing and idealistic view of women as a super-race. We preferred to have our flaws and show them (Noomin as quoted in Merino).

If one considers Noomin’s quote, then feminism was a strong and vivacious internal conversation within *Wimmen’s Comix* and between its contributors, regardless of, or lack of, public dialogue. The personal interpretations of what was feminism, what was a feminist comic, and if *Wimmen’s Comix* was a feminist collective collided with the public assertions of such affiliations and with the public reservations that such affiliations were over-eager and simplistic.

These tensions within and between self-identification and other-identification also occurred in the theatre community. Canning explains that

‘The personal is political’ is a phrase that has enormous resonance for any feminist; indeed for many it summarizes feminism. It had come to have a number of different, even contradictory, meanings. One of the interpretations feminists have of the phrase is that what is done to accomplish something profoundly shapes the accomplishment itself. Thus, contradictions between public declarations and private actions can undermine the public declaration. It was a tenet of oppositional politics of the 1960s and 1970s that one had to live one’s beliefs to their fullest extent (63).

Canning argues that feminists believed that one’s personal lives and public declarations had to cohere. Thus, when Farmer, Gregory, Chevely, Klominsky, Noomin and others were creating comic shorts that were lesbian and feminist themed, they had little choice but to declare that their political beliefs, their personal lives and their public work all aligned. However, the fact their work existed side-by-side with work that was not as similarly themed, and they worked with female comic contributors who did not make similar public assertions, undermined their own declarations. The debate as to whether a necessity exists of self-ascribing one as feminist fragmented the *Wimmen’s Comix* collective, both on the collaborator and individual scale and the textual work itself.

Merino partially concurs with Hatfield and Witek when she concludes that *Wimmen’s Comix* and its successors were successful in carving out a space for females and that is a feminist act, regardless of the textual message. She maintains there is a difference between being a feminist, producing feminist work and doing a feminist act. An act cannot be considered without accounting for the social and political context from which it arose. Canning elaborates that “a theater could not present a production without that was supposed to emerge from alternative politics and not be conscious of it as a product of a specific way of thinking and acting” (Canning 63). These intersections

between reality, potentiality and contextuality Canning surmises from the plight of female theater can be applied to the plight of female comic production. These divisions are all interrelated and all influence the work that emerges from the collective that produces them. Who is to say that it *Wimmen's Comix* was *not* feminist in nature? Merino believes that these women persevered so that contemporary female comics can flourish.

She states

The inner world of women might have an opportunity to form a dialogue with a more just and respectful society, one I believe remains to be built. Perhaps the reality of these new women will be less painful and female artists of the future will feel no special need to express themselves using this personal space that they evoke to save themselves from the repressive world that surrounds them. But shouldn't it be the women, the creators, who decide this?

As Merino's quote — and the evident tensions in Chevely's and Gregory's interviews — demonstrates, there exists a divide between those who automatically equate female work as feminist work and those who refrain from such until a self-declaration of feminism is made. However, one cannot make either claim until the social and political context from which the text arose is considered. Additionally, one cannot deny the potency of the Second Wave feminist movement during the 1970s. It would be impossible to say that the creation of and work by the collaborators of *Wimmen's Comix* were not affected by the surrounding social and political turmoil. Nowhere does Robbins and others deny the feminist associations of the creation of *Wimmen's Comix* and the role it played in the comic industry. Rather, they merely refrained from explicitly packaging their material as such. Given the surrounding social and political environment of *Wimmen's Comix*, and given the mandate of *Wimmen's Comix*, its contributors were not oblivious to the feminist connotations of their work. Rather, they just didn't feel the need to be as publicly assertive about it as their colleagues. While the work of *Wimmen's Comix* itself may not

be explicitly and triumphantly feminist, as Hatfield and Witek claim, its creation and success, its deviance from the norm, its defiance of a patriarchal comic landscape and its successful creation of a female space in the comic industry was indeed a feminist act. If one is to truly consider 'the personal is political', then one actively engaging in forging a public space for women in an industry where there was not one previous, then it is limiting, and in a sense self-defeating to not consider the work being done feminist. However, the internal, external and textual tensions exhibited in *Wimmen's Comix* as to what constitutes feminism and what constitutes a feminist demonstrates that indeed 'the personal is political' and alternatively, 'the political is personal'. To unify a feminist theory and to categorize all the contributors to *Wimmen's Comix* and all the work that came out of *Wimmen's Comix* as feminist is defying a woman's right to self-identify politically, socially and professionally. How can *that* act be considered feminist?

Collaborative female comic production is a little studied site of collaboration that eloquently mirrors the collaborative literary theories of Lorraine York and the collaborative theater theories of Charlotte Canning. However, this lack of academic interest has led to tensions regarding and confusion about the feminist nature of *Wimmen's Comix* and its collective members. Its collaborative nature, its underground origins and its creation of a female niche in a traditionally male field makes *Wimmen's Comix* subject to assertions it being a feminist group. However, the public declarations and non-declarations of its collective members and its inconsistent political and social affirmations leave such assertions feeling inadequate and idealistic. While the nature of the feminine and the feminist in comics is contested by comic historians and theorists alike, it can be said that the nature of the *Wimmen's Comix* collective and how its

collaborators changed the shape of the comic industry by forging a creative space for women in comics, was a progressive, and implicitly feminist act. While the intention of the *Wimmen's Comix* collaborators may not have been to forge a unique and progressive feminine space, it was certainly a consequence of this bold initiative. However, to idealistically ascribe these conclusions to *Wimmen's Comix* as a whole is a limiting and potentially superficial act. The *Wimmen's Comix* anthology and its successors provide a unique case study that can strengthen the theories of women's creative collaboration, in all forms.

Notes

¹ *Understanding Comics* is itself a comic. Thus, all the quotations from the text are derived from the comic dialogue. For the sake of this paper, all stresses and characterized text have been omitted and the division of the speech bubble had been denoted with a slash (/). All punctuation remains as found in the text.

² While this paragraph may seem arbitrary to the comic novice, the history of each of these forms and the historical social reactions to each of these forms is very different, which results in differences in understanding and interpreting each form in social and political contexts. While I do not have the space to explore such a storied and interesting history here, if you are interested, an excellent text is Thomas M. Inge's *Comics as Culture*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990.

³ To read more about the Marvel bankruptcy case, and it's implications on the comic industry, please read *Comic Wars* By Daniel Raviv.

⁴ The magazine was produced and jointly edited by a collective whose original members were Michelle Brand, Lora Fountain, Aline Kominsky, Lee Marrs, Pat Moodian, Trina Robbins, Sharon Rudahl, Shelby Sampson, and Janet Wolfe Stanley. Later members and contributors included Terry Richards Diane Noomin, Caryn Leschen, M.K. Brown, Dot Bucher, Lyn Chevely, Joyce Farmer Mary Fleener, Melinda Gebbie, Phoebe Gloeckner, Krystyne Krittire, Roberta Gregory, Lee Binswanger, Barb Brown Carol Lay, Chris Powers, Carol Tyler, Dori Seda, and Penny Van Horn.

⁵ I know, because I did this.

⁶ Comix is a term that refers to alternative and underground comics. It is often used to denote the origins of a comic serial or collective. This is also why it is included in the title of *Wimmen's Comix*.

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