

BEARING WITNESS TO FEMALE TRAUMA IN COMICS:
AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN IN REFRIGERATORS

By

Lauren C. Watson, B.A.

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
with a Major in Literature
May 2018

Committee Members:

Rebecca Bell-Metereau, Chair

Rachel Romero

Kathleen McClancy

COPYRIGHT

by

Lauren C. Watson

2018

FAIR USE AND AUTHOR'S PERMISSION STATEMENT

Fair Use

This work is protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States (Public Law 94-553, section 107). Consistent with fair use as defined in the Copyright Laws, brief quotations from this material are allowed with proper acknowledgement. Use of this material for financial gain without the author's express written permission is not allowed.

Duplication Permission

As the copyright holder of this work I, Lauren C. Watson, refuse permission to copy in excess of the "Fair Use" exemption without my written permission.

DEDICATION

For my Great Aunt Vida, an artist and teacher, who was the star of her own story in an age when women were supporting characters. She was tough and kind, stingy and giving in equal measures. Vida Esta gave herself a middle name, because she could and always wanted one. Ms. Light was my first superheroine and she didn't need super powers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Three years ago, I woke up in the middle of the night with an idea for research that was daunting. This thesis is the beginning of bringing that idea to life. So many people helped me along the way.

First, I have to thank my husband for all the dinners I missed, and late nights doing bedtime alone because I was writing. I couldn't have done this without your unwavering support. Come alien invasion or zombie apocalypse, you are my love.

My two amazing kids are a big part of why I can't give up on this work. I want the world they live in and the media they consume to continue getting better and better. To my mom, it is impossible to put into words how much you mean to me. Thank you for always encouraging me to pursue whatever my passions are and being there to cheer me on from the sidelines.

I owe a big thank you to Dr. Illysa Foster. I wouldn't have made it through the past three years of academia or motherhood without your guidance. Dr. Rachel Romero took me on as an independent study my first semester. Our work is what this thesis grew into, and I'm so glad you took a chance on me. A huge thank you to the rest of my committee: my chair, Dr. Rebecca Bell-Metereau, for your guidance; and Dr. Kathleen McClancy, for sharing your valuable insights and comic studies wisdom.

Lastly, I want to thank my very own Fortress of Solitude and superhero team, Shelley, Laurie, and Alex, at Orange Coworking. Without your friendship, words of encouragement, and advice, I could not have made it to the finish line.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. CAPT CAROL DANVERS IN THE FALL OF THE FEMINIST HERO	16
III. SUSAN STORM-RICHARDS IN THE THREAT OF THE SUPERMOM ..	31
IV. BARBARA GORDON AS COLLATERAL DAMAGE IN THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THE SUPERHERO	39
V. SUE DIBNY IN THE MASCULINITY CRISIS	57
VI. CONCLUSION	73
WORKS CITED	79

I. INTRODUCTION

The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess` . (5)

-Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*

Before #MeToo and #TimesUp brought attention to the real-life victims of sexual harassment and assault in male-dominated industries, a 1999 website called *Women in Refrigerators* sent shockwaves throughout the comics world. The name came from *Green Lantern* #54, a 1994 issue of the comic in which Alexa DeWitt, photojournalist and girlfriend, was brutally murdered, then left in the refrigerator to be found by Kyle Rayner (Green Lantern). Before it was later published as the site *Women in Refrigerators*, a concerned fan named Gail Simone compiled a list of over 100 female characters in comics who had been "either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator." She sent this list to industry professionals along with a letter that ended simply: "I'm just curious to find out what you guys think it means, if anything" ("Women in Refrigerators"). Now, within the comics community, "fridging" has come to describe a narrative pattern in popular media of using violence against women to motivate a man's storyline. But this phrase first arose from the website published by Simone and a group of fellow comic book fans who were disturbed by this trend. In this study, I look in depth at four of the most talked about Women in Refrigerator moments: Carol Danvers' rape, Susan Storm-Richards' miscarriage, Barbara Gordon's assault, and Sue Dibny's death.

Simone, the originator of the list, is now a well-known comics writer in her own right. But in 1999, she was simply a fan who added up the bodies and "realized that it was actually harder to list major female heroes who HADN'T been sliced up somehow"

(“WiR - Fan Gail Simone responds”). *Women in Refrigerators* was the start of a conversation that has been reduced to a cliché. This study started with the realization that, while the list is frequently cited by fans, scholars, and comics journalists as a symptom of the industry’s sexism, no deep critical analysis of the events which have resonated most within the community has been published. Moreover, within the three years since this project started, real-life events have made it more important to bring a depth of analysis previously lacking to the trauma suffered by women in comics.

In an expose of *Ren & Stimpy* creator John Kricfalusi’s history of underage sexual abuse, reporter Ariane Lange writes: “#MeToo can’t move forward without reexamining the past.” Events listed on *Women in Refrigerators* and the stories of the #MeToo movement are symptoms of America’s misogynist history. According to Cathy Caruth: “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). These past events must be brought into the light and examined before healing and change can take place. As Caruth states in “Trauma and Experience: An Introduction”: “The final import of the psychoanalytic and historical analysis of trauma is to suggest that the inherent departure, within trauma, from the moment of its first occurrence, is also a means of passing out of the isolation imposed by the event: that the history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another” (10-11).

Sharing the stories of victims, who carry the “impossible history” with them, returns their power (Caruth 5). What follows is a critical analysis of four major fridging moments and an answer to Simone’s original question: what does the proclivity for violent narratives against women in comics mean?

During this research, I have found that the Women in Refrigerators is only effective as a trope, not as a narrative theory. Therefore, I propose in this thesis that comics, after the Bronze Age (post 1970), operate under the rules of a Superheroine Mystique, in which female characters are naturally fulfilled by supporting men. Their roles can be either as window dressing, objects of sexual fantasy (the Sexy Lamp), or as plot points, to further a male-dominated storyline (as outlined in the Bechdel-Wallace test and evident in the Women in Refrigerators trope). If the female characters step out of this role for any reason, the narrative corrects itself, often in violent ways that support the patriarchal nature of comics.

This Superheroine Mystique explains the misogyny *Women in Refrigerators* brought to the attention of other comic book fans. While women in the real world suffer every day from violence in the form of physical assault, rape, and even abduction or murder (one in three according to the CDC), they also suffer similar abuse in the fantasy world of comics, and that fictional violence helps legitimize real-world violence. In their criminology study of comic books involving focus groups as well as narrative analysis, Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl found that comic books “[do] not cause aggression so much as provide a script or narrative which suggests when violence is appropriate, against women, for what reasons and with what effects, together with images of those against whom violence is permitted and prohibited” (6).

These fictional representations of violence against women thus can have a significant harmful impact on the cultural psyche. Simone, who would later become a patriarchy-challenging comic book writer herself, claims: “My simple point has always been: if you demolish most of the characters girls like, then girls won't read comics.

That's it!" ("WiR – Email as of 4/28/99). Superheroines can be powerful symbols for progressive change, but if they are constantly under attack, their fight is undermined by these misogynist narratives.

Female superheroes can fly, read minds, turn invisible, and perform many other amazing feats. They all have the ultimate power to transcend traditional gender roles by using these powers in the male-dominated public sphere. This ability makes superheroines models for their mortal sisters struggling against society's strict norms. Even women who have never picked up a comic recognize the iconic Wonder Woman, who graced the cover of *Ms.* magazine as a feminist symbol of power and progress. All superheroines have a secret identity that helps civilian readers relate to them as much as to the wives and girlfriends of super-powered men. Superwoman and Supermom are both phrases employed by feminist media that firmly cement the symbolic bonds between women on the panel and holding the page. Why, then, are female superheroes in the comics themselves not as progressive as they have the potential to be?

In this thesis, I investigate and further develop the Women in Refrigerators list beyond a simple trope or industry buzzword. Using critical theory from fields including gender, trauma, and media studies, I analyze case studies of some of the major fridging moments in comics that include four characters: Carol Danvers (Ms. Marvel), Susan Storm-Richards (the Invisible Girl), Barbara Gordon (Batgirl), and Sue Dibny (wife of the Elongated Man).

The most egregious examples of trauma suffered by women in comics reveal a history of institutionalized misogyny in American superhero comics. The Superheroine Mystique theory, combined with the critical examination of the Women in Refrigerators

trope, provides a way to recognize and go beyond stereotypes toward wider, more nuanced, and empowering representation of women in the comic book medium.

Women as objects and sites of social conflict

As this study seeks to apply critical theory to the Women in Refrigerators trope, an overview of work that informs this analysis lays a groundwork for the following chapters. The critical intersections of violence against women in comics are numerous. Feminist theory, pop culture studies, criminology, and trauma philosophy are just a few. For brevity's sake, this review does not include a history of feminism or the different waves of the women's movement. Rather, I highlight the points where the portrayal of women in comics and pertinent historical movements overlap.

Superhero comics are broken into time periods based on industry trends and significant events. A pattern exists between the changes in female characters' portrayal, women's history, and the different ages of comics. Other scholars, such as Mike Madrid and Carolyn Cocca, support the idea that every time women in society suffered a backlash against progress, women in comics came under fire too. As Cocca explains: "Portrayals of female superheroes are embedded in particular moments in history and the struggles over women's roles and women's power at particular times" (*Superwomen* 7).

There is much debate in the comics community over whether comics affect society or simply reflect, as well as whether they *should* aspire to better society. This study assumes that comics can and have both been a part of progress as well as served as a cultural archive and that, at the very least, they should not seek to perpetuate a harmful

social dynamic like misogyny. The following is an outline of historical events in comics and society that intersect with the characters studied in this thesis.

In the comics' Golden Age (1938-early 1950s), fictional women were just as independent as their real-life counterparts during World War II. After WWII ended in 1945, women were encouraged to go back to traditional gender roles as mothers and housewives.

A growing moral panic over comics came to a fever pitch with the publication of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, a condemnation of comics as the root cause of juvenile delinquency. That same year, publishers created the Comics Code Authority (CCA) as a self-imposed censor to police the material of comic books. In keeping with the 1950s focus on the heterosexual nuclear family, an entire section of the CCA was devoted to the subjects of marriage and sex. One of the major superhero publishers, DC Comics, issued an internal editorial policy that stated: "The inclusion of females in stories is specifically discouraged. Women, when used in plot structure, should be secondary in importance, and should be drawn realistically, without exaggeration of feminine physical qualities" (Uslan 5). The creation of the CCA, combined with the cultural backlash to First Wave Feminism, and the decline in comics sales as they competed with television, led to women being relegated to supporting characters, if they appeared at all.

Superhero comics of the Silver Age (late 1950s-1970) were restricted by the CCA if they wanted to be published by newsstands. Comics of this time promoted conservative values and female characters were moved to the margins. Susan Storm (later Storm-Richards), the Invisible Girl, was created by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee in 1961 as a token

female member of the Fantastic Four. Her role as a wife and mother to the team was metaphorical at first, but would be cemented in 1963 with her marriage to team leader Reed Richards (Mister Fantastic).

The Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Civil Rights Act of 1964 brought with them more socially-aware comics that attempted to address issues of their time. Comics made the lateral move into a new medium, television, with the 1960s *Batman* series. As interest waned in later seasons, a new character, Barbara Gordon as Batgirl, would make her debut on the silver screen just before her first appearance in *Detective Comics* #359. She would be the first female character created simultaneously for both formats. In 1972, Wonder Woman appeared on the cover of *Ms.* magazine ushering in Second Wave Feminism, and with it, a rise of new female superheroes.

The Bronze Age of comics (1970-mid 1980s) is marked by a change in distribution from newsstands to stand-alone comic book shops. This move allowed the major publishers, like Marvel and DC, to not only reach new audiences and increase profits, but, as a byproduct, to circumvent the censorship of the CCA. With more captive audiences, publishers developed longer storylines that intersected with each other in shared fictional universes (called continuity).

The rising popularity of DC's Wonder Woman, both on the comic pages and on the TV screen, led to Marvel creating their own female superheroes, including Carol Danvers in *Ms. Marvel* #1 (1977). But this superheroine renaissance would be short-lived, as Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America" re-election campaign in 1984 signaled a return to conservative social norms. As the chapters of this study seek to prove, this moment in history is when traumatic narratives against women increased. In the Golden

Age, female characters were varied and independent; during the Silver Age they were pushed to the background; and in the Bronze Age, female characters returned.

The changes from a newsstand distribution model to direct markets through local comic shops led to comics publishers focusing on the adult white male target demographic. Without the CCA to give the industry a convenient excuse to push women into the background to satisfy social norms, narratives themselves, rather than editorial policy, would begin to enforce the Superheroine Mystique, and the corrections against women who stepped outside their culturally-prescribed role would grow increasingly violent.

Western society is historically patriarchal and women's bodies are a major site of struggle over gender power dynamics. Superhero comics, symbolizing fantastic versions of everyday society, are a window into how those politics ebb and flow over time. As this overview shows, they have the power to either subvert or support restrictive social norms.

It is well established that men are considered dominant in Western society and women secondary or othered. This dynamic results in the prevailing stereotype that, by default, men are active subjects and women passive objects.

Although originally conceived in the area of film studies, Laura Mulvey's theories of the male gaze as the default in popular visual media have often been applied to comics. As a visual medium dominated by men, as creators and executives as well as their target audience, the male gaze theory is extremely appropriate for comics studies. The theory perfectly describes the over-sexualization of art, such as depicting the female form in the pose known as "Broke Back" style, as Carolynocca proves empirically in her landmark comparative study of the visual representation of women in comics since the 1990s She

identifies at least one form of sexual objectification of women in 94.4 percent of the 144 issues she examined (“Brokeback Test” 415).

Women have historically made up less than 20 percent (although usually closer to 15 percent on average) of those who create comics, according to the quarterly *Gendercrunching* blog by historian Tim Hanley. Therefore, Mulvey’s ideas of phallocentrism and the resulting male gaze, where women are valued for their “to-be-looked-at-ness,” are very useful for a feminist analysis of comics.

Sexual violence and the superheroine in popular culture

Rape is the result of power struggles between genders. In 1975, Susan Brownmiller published the major feminist text *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, which concludes: “Rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear.” This book helped spark the effort during second-wave feminism to lift the cultural silence on rape and resulted in swift changes to laws around sexual assault. Considering how often harassment of outspoken women online turns to threats of rape, it is easy to see a major truth in her statement.

More recently, scholars have expanded on these ideas of a rape culture in America. According to Sabine Sielke’s historical overview of cultural representations of rape in the late twentieth century, rape cannot be separated from historical issues such as race, class, and ethnicity, but rather “turns into a rhetorical device, an insistent figure for other social, political, and economic concerns and conflicts” (*Reading Rape* 11). This idea informed my analysis of the sexual assaults appearing in three out of the five case

studies. By the same token, the narratives of these texts strengthen Sielke's argument that rape in cultural texts is often a symbol for other political and social struggles.

In her book, *Public Rape*, Tanya Horeck examines what happened to discussions of rape after second-wave feminism lifted the veil on the serious problem of sexual assault and its suppression of women. Now, supporting Sielke's work, Horeck proposes that instances of rape imagery have become "public fantasies," bringing to life cultural anxieties and fascinations (vi). I contend that Women in Refrigerator events that fall into the rape/sexual assault category are the result of the clash between fetishized female bodies and the sociopolitical conflicts that superheroes represent.

The representation over time of strong female characters in pop culture forms the central focus of several critical studies, such as Jeffrey Brown's *Dangerous Curves* (2011) and Cocca's *Superwomen* (2016). Brown focuses his study on the rise of female action heroes since the 1980s, while Cocca adopts a broader perspective to look at specific franchises, from their creation to modern representations.

In particular, Cocca's approach, which includes fan reactions and identifies industry trends, signals a growing appreciation for the interdisciplinary nature of comics studies. A number of collections detailing profiles of female heroes, both in comics and through other media, have been published in recent years, including *Wonder Women* (2004) by Lillian Robinson, *Supergirls* (2009) by Mike Madrid, *Female Action Heroes* (2010) by Gladys Knight, *Ink-stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors* (2010) by Jennifer K. Stuller, and *The Spectacular Sisterhood of Superwomen* (2017) by Hope Nicholson. Together, this rise in books on the subject of women in comics indicates an increased public awareness and interest, a hopeful sign for future research.

Robinson's work is most specific and points a feminist lens at comics themselves. The other three studies take a more celebratory or historical approach solely intended to inform, rather than the in-depth narrative analysis incorporated into this thesis.

For many years, the study of women and female characters was underrepresented in critical work, due to both the decline of female characters in comics after the CCA, and the industry's growing focus on a male audience. One early critical pioneer is Trina Robbins, the first woman to draw Wonder Woman, and author of numerous non-fiction works on the intersections of women and comics, including *Women and the Comics* with Cat Yronwode (1985), *From Girls to Grrlz* (1999), and *Pretty in Ink: North American Women Cartoonists, 1896-2013* (2013).

Robbins was the co-founder of Friends of Lulu, a non-profit started in 1994 to promote comics and women's participation in the industry. When the comics' "boys club" told her that women did not make or read comics, Robbins questioned this supposed truism, based on her own experiences, and disproved it by going on to publish her extensive research on the history of women cartoonists. My study, and the other works mentioned in this section, owe their existence to the uphill battle she faced against the patriarchy in comics, much like the characters examined in this thesis.

Whether they are called superheroes, supergirls, superwomen, female action heroes, or Amazons, these texts focus on the strong female character, or a positive female role model created in our popular media. But this idea, like Women in Refrigerators, has become a cliché reduced to stereotypical depictions of women, and often perpetuates the very gender norms it is trying to fight. Women need more, and more diverse, representation in popular media, which is one thing agreed upon by all these writers. Not

just the strong and positive representations, but also the darker ones that *Women in Refrigerators* brought attention to.

Defridging and trends of female trauma in comics

Since Simone's first email to publishers, "fridging" has become a common term in comics, and other genre media, designating when violence is used against women merely to motivate a male character. "Defridging," the reverse term, is when a female character regains her agency through a storyline of her own and thereby overcomes her previously marginalized position in a male-dominated story.

"Defrosting" describes when male characters, who at first seem to be serving the same purpose as refrigerated females, are instead portrayed as heroic rather than victimized, and are often either revived quickly or supplanted by another male character, who takes up their mantle. The phrase "dead men defrosting" stems from a response to the *Women in Refrigerators* site that pointed out that men also die in comics. Simone notes that she "cannot quite shake the feeling that male characters tend to die differently than female ones." Additionally, she points out that, because there are fewer female characters to begin with, their deaths are more significant; such scholars as Cocca have proven empirically that there are fewer female characters in comics than there are male characters.

The *Women in Refrigerators* website was hardly the first time someone on the internet tried to bring attention to the plight of women in comics. However, its appearance was a turning point, when people seemed to start listening, and the concept

has endured in the industry vocabulary for many years as a result. At a basic level, the site is a set of data and a question.

My inspiration for this thesis came from the realization that, although the website is cited often, and de/fridging is now a common phrase, there has been little examination of the list itself. As neither Simone nor the other collaborators were scholars, the next step in their research question (data analysis) was incomplete. I hope this study does for comics narratives what Cocca's "Brokeback Test" has done for comics' art: proving that the rampant sexism and misogyny in comics is not imagined. By understanding how these tropes work to support a patriarchal system, the industry can move past perpetuating outdated stereotypes and can thrive with new audiences. According to Robbins, comics have been stuck in a self-defeatist cycle for decades because, "as long as female comic characters are insulting to the average woman, she won't read comics" (166).

To begin my study of the fridging trope, I took the original list of 114 characters from 1999 and looked for trends. Most of the events fall into five categories: (1) Death, which is self-explanatory; (2) Child Loss, including miscarriage, kidnapping, and/or infertility issues, all of which point to the maternal (or lack thereof) aspect of female heroes; (3) Rape, including mental, physical, or even other-dimensional violation of a woman's body or mind by an outside entity; (4) Mental illness, which seems to go hand in hand with a previously sane character losing her mind and turning against her own team; and (5) Assault and other violent/traumatic events, which is a catch-all for the weirder events that are definitely horrific (like having wings pulled off) but not necessarily sexual, or include extra violence beyond a sexual assault (as in Barbara

Gordon's shooting). I was not surprised to find death and rape on the list, but the frequent occurrence of child loss or infertility, as well as mental illness, was unexpected.

In choosing which characters to examine more closely, I chose incidents that have captured the attention of the comics industry multiple times, looking closely at the original texts to gain more insight into how the narrative constituted a fridging and what could be gleaned from a close reading of the treatment of these narratives. Conveniently, two of the events are from the early 1980s, one from the late 1980s/early 1990s, and one from the early 2000s, illustrating the tenacity, during this post-Reagan period, of the idea that women are objects who exist solely to prop up male characters or be used by them.

In the first incident, Carol Danvers, the "militant Ms. Marvel," needs to be tamed in order to prove that all women just want to be wives and/or mothers; in her case, she is miraculously both wife and mother to one man, as she gives birth to her rapist and then leaves to be his companion in another dimension.

The second example, from *The Fantastic Four*, suggests that superheroines cannot have it all, as Susan Storm's miscarriage proves. Actual superwomen threaten the patriarchy, and super-moms even more so; therefore, the focus on her husband during this story, rather than on Susan herself, centers the narrative in heroic paternity rather than the monstrous maternal.

In *The Killing Joke*, Barbara Gordon, sometime Batgirl, becomes just like Sue Dibny: an object for the heroes and villains to fight over or through. In fact, the character's own experience is so unimportant that her sexual assault in the story is either swept under the table by fans or believed not to have happened in the first place.

Finally, the dangerous underside of female domesticity leads to *Identity Crisis*, my third test case, in which villain Jean Loring, ex-wife of the Atom, murders another superhero's wife, Sue Dibny, in a convoluted attempt to restore her picture-perfect marriage. Sue, the actual murder victim, functions narratively merely as the lump of meat that sets the Justice League pack fighting amongst themselves.

My aim in this thesis is to examine how fridging narratives function to represent dominant political views of women at the time they are produced. My intention is to examine how historical context influences superhero comics, a pop culture medium often politicized. The issue of how women are portrayed in the media has grown in importance with the recent exposure of the misogynist ideas perpetuated by entertainment media, both in their stories and in the behavior and views of the men who produce these narratives behind the scenes.

II. CAPT CAROL DANVERS IN THE FALL OF THE FEMINIST HERO

This chapter considers the story, “*The Child is Father To?*” in *Avengers* #200, published in 1980. In her now famous expose, “*The Rape of Ms. Marvel*,” Carol Strickland outlines how what happens to Carol Danvers in the narrative of that issue constitutes a rape. She questions not only how problematic it is that Ms. Marvel’s sexual assault drives the plot of this issue, but also the fact that her rape goes unquestioned by the characters or readers. Strickland says the writers, “slaughtered Marvel’s symbol of modern women, Ms. Marvel” in a single issue; and, while maybe in the 1950s the idea of women enjoying rape was accepted, in the 1980s, “to present such a storyline today shows a collection of medieval minds at work. Or at vicious play.”

This essay was an important calling out of comics’ systemic misogyny, but it does not incorporate critical theory, nor does it further develop the connection between this event and more prevalent general social ideas about the role of women during the 1980s.

Carolyn Cocca, in her 2016 Eisner award-winning book, *Superwomen: Gender, Power and Representation*, found that, “the number of misogynistic tropes in this one issue is quite startling” (192). She gives a brief summary of *Avengers* #199 and #200, and situates Carol’s mystical pregnancy, and the assault which caused it, within a larger examination of the representation of Ms. Marvel from 1980-1990. However, she does not give a detailed analysis of the event. As with Strickland’s essay, Cocca’s assessment lacks critical theory to support a reading that identifies the underlying misogyny of the text. As with many of the fridging moments, this incident is simply mentioned as part of the growing evidence of gender bias in comics, but the event is not examined in detail to tease out the themes at play.

Here, I use existing research on the portrayal of female superheroes combined with critical theory on rape and misogyny to perform a deep analysis of *Avengers* #200, grounded in Carol's feminist origins. Her history as a progressive symbol for strong independent women stands in stark contrast to the regressive political climate of the Reagan era. This tension explains why this trauma occurs as a form of punishment for Ms. Marvel, as a warning to women who challenge the patriarchy. The dominant visual and narrative themes of *Avengers* #200 support stereotypical ideas of womanhood, perpetuate rape myths, and present men's needs as dominant. These findings support the pattern of systemic misogyny brought to the attention of the comics industry by *Women in Refrigerators*.

Ms. Marvel was specifically created with a feminist message in mind, as a counterpart to DC's Wonder Woman, who rose again in popularity after being on the cover of *Ms.* magazine. Trying to capitalize on the new ideas of womanhood brought in by second-wave feminist thought and marked by the publication of Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, Marvel gave Carol superpowers after an explosion causes her to absorb the psyche and abilities of an alien warrior. The editor and first writer of *Ms. Marvel*, Gerry Conway, explicitly states in the back of issue #1 that the "Ms." of her name is evidence that her creation "is influenced, to a great extent, by the move toward women's liberation." Some comics historians, including Mike Madrid, argue that Ms. Marvel was created to give the title company an iconic female headliner, while others, like Sean Howe, claim the implied feminism was just so the company could claim feminine versions of popular heroes' names, like Spider-Woman (Cocca 184). Whether any or all of these motivations are true is unknown, but what followed Carol's origin story

was an often confusing narrative, “enmeshed both in the triumphs of and the backlash to Second-Wave feminism,” by an “all-white male creative team” (Cocca 184). Originally the story focuses on Ms. Marvel, the alien warrior, and Carol Danvers, the human woman, as two separate entities. By the time she becomes a regular member of the Avengers in 1978, her “split personality” has integrated, thanks to new writer Chris Claremont.

While the series may have gained more nuanced storytelling under Claremont’s authorship, *Ms. Marvel* was still cancelled in 1979, right after a costume redesign. Perhaps the rising popularity of Claremont’s other projects, like *Uncanny X-Men*, pulled him away and caused a drop in sales. On the other hand, perhaps, by 1979, a title female character who is “smart, determined, and equal to any man” was becoming more difficult to swallow for increasingly conservative American audiences (Cocca 190). Ms. Marvel was created with a specific association with women’s liberation in mind, whether with good intentions or for simply commercial ones.

In any case, despite a rocky start, Carol would eventually become the kind of multi-dimensional superhero character (who happens to be a woman) needed more often in comics. Perhaps it was a coincidence that the title was cancelled shortly after moving past sexist stereotypes into more realistic storytelling. However, the events that follow in *Avengers* point to the systemic misogyny in superhero comics as the more likely reason for cancellation. Ms. Marvel’s status as a feminist symbol made her a target as the country moved into Reagan’s “Morning in America” era, with a nostalgia for regressive 1950s ideas about family and women’s proper conventional roles in society.

As Reagan's neoconservative nostalgia of the nuclear family was coming into prominence, Ms. Marvel needed to be brought in line, and thus we see the narrative correction represented by her storyline in *Avengers* #200. In fact, ensuring that Carol would not be around to present a threat even after her feminist past is undermined, the author has her leave the team at the end of this issue. Nothing could better exemplify the Reagan era ideals that *Avengers*, and other comics in general, were moving toward than the opening lines of issue #200: "For generations the symbolic root values of the American people have been embodied in the phrase: 'mom, apple pie, and the girl next door.' Wars have been fought for these ideals; presidents have been elected over them" (1). Carol Danvers as Ms. Marvel represents none of these things. Previous to issue #200, she had been characterized as what fan Cindy A. Eager praised in her letter published in the *Avengers Assemble* fan column: the "militant Ms. Marvel" in contrast with the "impulsive Wasp" (#201). Eager's positive fan response supports that Ms. Marvel had been reduced to a feminist stereotype of the aggressive liberate woman in *The Avengers*, in contrast to her once nuanced storytelling.

Furthermore, the positive tone of Eager's letter supports the claim that more conservative storylines had become the norm. Popularized by writers who appealed to Golden Age nostalgia, such as John Byrne, whom Eager mentions by name and calls "the best," ensemble casts like *The Avengers* and *Fantastic Four* were the perfect vehicle for the family-centered nostalgic dominant in neoconservative ideals. According to Bradford Wright, this kind of "back-to-basics approach" of writers like John Byrne "meshed nicely with the cultural politics of President Ronald Reagan and the ascendant New Right" (266).

Ms. Marvel was in trouble as soon as these standards became the new social norms. According to this new political agenda ushered in by Reagan, “the cultural upheavals of the 1960s and early 1970s were unfortunate developments that had hurt American morale, undermined patriotism, left society fragmented, and weakened the nation in the Cold War” (Wright 266). Carol, because of her origin, is outside these conservative American values echoed in opening lines of issue #200, and by the end of the issue, she would be safely contained by the patriarchy.

The opening lines of *Avengers* #200 immediately lay out the three most important qualities for women in this narrative to embody: maternal, consumable, and/or innocent. In the last line of this first narrative text, there is an implied emphasis on the motherly portion of the trifecta as most important: “Obviously motherhood remains a great deal [sic] to most Americans.” By the first few pages, Carol’s actions quickly establish—in contrast to other female Avengers—that Ms. Marvel does not start the story with these qualities. Carol begins the issue in sudden and mysterious childbirth; in the end of the prior issue, she had undergone an entire nine-month gestation period in two days, with no idea how she might have gotten pregnant in the first place. After a disturbing delivery, during which she does not feel her body expelling the baby, Janet van Dyne (the Wasp) catches up to Carol being wheeled back to her room. Carol cuts off her congratulations and exclamations of how lucky the new mom is with the furious claim: “That isn’t *my* baby!” She dismisses Janet as she is wheeled away, saying: “Just leave me alone.” In fact, all three of Carol’s fellow female Avengers respond to the birth in stereotypically feminine ways; Wanda Maximoff (the Scarlet Witch) exclaims “How wonderful!” after the birth, Jocasta (a female robot, originally modeled on Janet’s personality) waxes

philosophical about the wonder of human life, and Janet tries to do the socially accepted thing by checking on and congratulating the new mother, only to be shut down. Carol's own words reinforce the idea that she neither feels like nor wants to be the mother of that baby.

The next page shifts to a romantic scene in a garden, with Wanda and her husband, the android Vision, discussing their future. Wanda explains that she has come to terms with the fact that Vision's inhumanity means they cannot have children, because her love for the Vision is enough. Even though they cannot have children, Wanda's analogy that, "a child is a thing of fragile beauty, something that must be nurtured and protected./Like this rose," proves that she has the necessary maternal instincts.

Meanwhile, Jocasta watches them from a window with childlike curiosity and tells Janet that, even though she was patterned after a human personality (Janet's, in fact), there are "human emotions that I don't understand." In a way, because her personality is patterned after Janet's and they have a mentoring relationship, Jocasta is like a daughter to Wasp. Although Jocasta is not human and does not understand the romantic "human emotions" exhibited by Wanda and Vision, her relationship to Janet points to her as form of the juvenile feminine, girl next door. Later, it is Janet who convinces Carol to finally go look at the child.

While the female Avengers' reactions embody American womanly ideals, the men's reactions embody anxieties over maternal bodies. The very next block of text, after the "mom, apple pie, girl next door" trifecta is introduced on the first page reads: "So, why then, do these five heroes, these Avengers, seem upset that one of their own—is about to give birth? Why is there excitement tinged with a subtle, subconscious

shadow—of fear?” The name of the issue, “*The Child is Father To?*” is in big letters at the top of this full-page panel of five costumed male superheroes standing or walking in front of a “Medical Examination Laboratory,” according to the text on the door. The composition of this page, title at the top (typically the first thing people read) with the words “Child” and “Father To” twice as big as the rest, then the narrator’s introduction about motherhood underneath, contribute to the idea that this first image is reminiscent of fathers waiting outside a hospital delivery room. Their dialogue conforms to this stereotypical paternal scenario. Captain America asks with concern, “Isn’t there something *we* could do?” and a playful Hawkeye retorts, “Easy, Cap. You’re starting to sound like it’s *you* who’s the proud pappy-to-be!” The focus of this first full page is of men waiting anxiously, not of women delivering. Overall, the mise-en-scene of this first page sets up perfectly the major dilemma of this story, as well as the problems inherent in the situation.

An immediate emphasis is placed on women, in particular motherhood, by the introductory narration, yet the only female pictured on this page is in the background, behind glass and shown from the waist up, round breasts clearly in view. She faces the reader instead of having her back to door, like the male doctor. She is, in fact, Jocasta: not a biological woman at all but rather an android with a body of a female. Captain America’s first statement, and the first dialogue of the page, brings attention to this fact: “Jocasta’s the right one to assist Dr. Blake; her actions have the precision of a computer.” The reader now knows two things: a) the only pictured female body is not the mother, so glorified in the first narration; and b) she is assisting because she is a computer, not because she is a female. Hence, even though this story starts with feminized American

ideals, it is really about men and their helplessness in the face of female biological truths, like birth or later rape. Hawkeye cracks a joke about the unknown identity of the father, this brings attention to Carol's deviant pregnancy, as she does not know the father. Carol is therefore an unstable element that must be kept behind laboratory glass. The significance of the similarities between the lab door and a refrigerator door cannot be ignored. Even though this event happened well before the *Women in Refrigerators* publication, the imagery of this first page supports the same underlying idea, that women are an unstable element that need to be contained. One way to contain women is by keeping the narrative focus on men, which we see here, and extolling the virtues of contained women, as evidenced in the previous paragraph.

The following first few pages of *Avengers* #200 set Carol up as an independent woman who will not conform to the ideas of traditional femininity that make up the "symbolic root values" of America. Therefore, she is not only a danger to the patriarchy of the Avengers, but to the very country itself. Over the remainder of the issue, the power of the male Avengers as protectors will reassert itself, contain Carol with a masculine force, and ultimately lead to her being removed from the planet altogether. This solution resolves the gendered anxiety problem set up in the first half of the issue.

Male contributions are highlighted throughout the rest of the issue. Dr. Blake not only delivers Carol's baby, with no help from her, and uses his PhD smarts to study the miracle child, but he then secretly transforms into the super-strong Thor and helps Iron Man in an action-packed fight with time-displaced monsters. Iron Man gets to punch a dinosaur, promoting the idea that there may be no greater image of male power than that of modern man dominating a prehistoric beast. Vision discovers what is causing Carol'

child, Marcus, to grow uncannily fast—Marcus ages from a newborn to an adult in mere hours—before he flies off to join the other Avengers in battle. By contrast, Wanda is left behind to puzzle over Vision’s findings, and is surprised in her research by none other than a medieval knight, whose misogyny is supposedly attributable to historical accuracy. Although Wanda holds her own in the ensuing fight, only the combination of Wanda and Jocasta can bring down the knight. Unlike her husband, Wanda does not aggressively go off to battle, but only defends herself.

Later in the issue, when Marcus’ intentions are still unclear, Hawkeye nobly defends Carol, as he sees a strange man knock her unconscious. This incident is yet another violation of Carol’ consent (not mentioned by previous scholars), but because Marcus is only trying to take her to safety from his machine which is about to blow up, his violence is depicted as acceptable. Later, after it is revealed that man is the boy Marcus grown up and he explains himself, Hawkeye’s previous paternal concern for Carol disappears, and he is immediately guilt-stricken over destroying another man’s creation, in deference to patriarchal standards. All these images together paint a picture of paternal power and superiority, one that alleviates some of the masculine anxiety engendered by the first page, giving the macho men a healthy outlet for their frustrations.

Carol, the source of the Avengers’ anxiety, will be contained by the new masculine force that asserts itself in the second half of the issue. What happens after Janet convinces Carol to go see the baby is, as Strickland describes it, “a struttingly macho, misogynist storyline that shreds the female image apart with a smirk—and rewards the one who did the shredding” (“The Rape of Ms. Marvel”). It turns out that the big answer to the question asked in the issue title, “*The Child is Father to?*”, is that somehow,

Marcus is his own father. The baby has grown up supernaturally fast and upon their first meeting is already a grown man who greets Carol as “Mother”. His story is eventually unraveled; he impregnated Carol so he could come to Earth with the benevolent purpose of using his “knowledge of time and history to better the human race.” No one questions that his birth rips a hole in the time-space continuum, and now dinosaurs are threatening modern society, or that he kidnaps a woman and commits incest to achieve his purpose. Rather than question the morality of his actions, the Avengers accept Marcus as the masculine force that will remove their “militant Ms. Marvel” problem. Carol’s mysterious childbirth and her lack of maternal instincts cause the Avengers no little anxiety. Once it is clear that a containing male force has taken control of her, all their suspicions of Marcus and defending of Carol cease. No one but Carol Strickland called out Marcus’ wooing with a “subtle boost of Immortus’ machines” as a rape at the time, because in the narrative, Carol feels “an immediate and undeniable attraction” to Marcus and she decides of her own volition to go with him—a very suspicious change of heart, given that Marcus had previously used a mind-control machine on Carol to erase her knowledge of her impregnation. She tells Iron Man, “I’ve been denying my feelings for quite a while. Maybe it’s time I started following them.” She must be shown as being willing to go with Marcus because that narrative supports the patriarchy. Carol’s words and actions confirm conservative ideals, because secretly, all feminists want a man to take care of them and to care for.

Through a twist of supernatural fate, Carol has embodied mom by giving birth, apple pie when she became one with Marcus, and girl next door when she leaves with him, all at the same time. To support this dominant conservative reading of the issue,

some letter writers even commented they were so happy “Ms. M” found a good man (“Rape of Ms. Marvel”). Thus, Ms. Marvel leaves to be a bizarre form of companion to Marcus, so he will not be alone any more.

Just as the appropriateness of the opening lines perfectly fit the idea of systemic misogyny, so do the closing lines. Hawkeye again expresses his guilt over ruining Marcus’ machine, especially since the result is that Ms. Marvel has to leave the team to be with Marcus, but Iron Man consoles him, “We’ve just got to believe it will all work out for the best.” Hawkeye seems more concerned with the damage to Marcus’ technology, damage resolved by one object, the machine, being replaced by another, Carol. The last panels show Hawkeye looking down at Ms. Marvel’s discarded mask, then a closeup of the mask as Hawkeye agrees all they could do was “hope that Ms. Marvel lives happily ever after.” These final words provide the perfect solution to the dilemma of the opening lines, and their message is clear: unstable women will get a “happily ever after,” whether they want it or not.

As Cocca points out, there are so many elements of misogyny here that it should be shocking. However, the writing of Carol’ very thin consent somehow is supposed to excuse it all, as evidenced by the Avengers’ reactions. Even though, by his own admission, Marcus does ultimately use the mind control machines of his father Immortus, he first set out to romance Carol. He says, “While I knew Immortus’ devices could bend your will to mine, I didn’t want you that way. And so I set about winning you.” Marcus himself was the product of rape and seems to be setting himself up to break that cycle, but ultimately, he must use the same methods.

By some social standards during the 1980s (and even today), this coercion is forgivable because he starts with the best intentions. Also, as we know from Carol's previous characterization, she is a stubborn liberated woman. In fact, it is Carol's very strength that makes Marcus identify her as the "perfect vessel" in the first place. This particularly disturbing manifestation of misogyny, that her choice to be feminist made her a target, is easily overlooked because "that is how social control generally works: via incentives and disincentives, positive and negative reinforcement mechanisms" (Manne 19). The closeup of Carol's face during the panel in which she and Marcus "become one" is of pleasure, even possibly ecstasy. This perpetuates the rape myth that, if the woman enjoys or responds to the sex, it does not constitute a violation. Despite not remembering any of this trauma—the kidnapping, winning, becoming one, and impregnation—Carol says, after Marcus's story, that she "feel[s] closer to you than I've felt to anyone in a long, long time./And I think that's a relationship worth giving a chance." Multiple times throughout the issue, the narrative bends over backward to explicitly say this is not a rape, ending with the woman giving up her career and returning to her abuser. While Carol is in labor, Dr. Blake says "there seems to be no trauma occurring at all," another sign that Carol is out of touch with her feminine nature because of her independence.

It is so important that the writers clearly relieve Marcus of any guilt, that this event is even brought up again in the next issue. In *Avengers* #201, Thor, Iron Man, and Wonder Man discuss what happened with Ms. Marvel as they clean up the wreckage of their mansion left in the wake of Marcus's time-space disruption. Not only is Marcus relieved of any guilt over what he did to Ms. Marvel, but also of the damage his plan caused when Thor states, "Verily the boy intended no harm." Wonder Man and Iron Man

discuss what happened to Ms. Marvel, rather than their mansion, but Thor puts a stop to their brief admission that Carol's leaving bothers them, with a declaration, "Fie! Our comrade but did a noble thing. And I for one doth admire the woman's courage... and her compassion."

The pronouncement that Carol leaving with her rapist was noble is disturbing. Ultimately, this incident illustrates a pattern of systemic misogyny underlying American superhero comics. Carol stands outside the feminine trifecta of mom, apple pie, and girl-next-door, and, to preserve the patriarchy, any violation of gender norms will be corrected. She is chosen by Marcus specifically because of her strength, and her consent must be made clear through the narrative to make his actions appear palatable.

While this issue was published decades ago, an analysis of these themes is still valuable. This study integrates critical theory and close analysis to look at the blatant furthering of political social norms and ignorance of rape myths, rather than an off-the-cuff blog or quick summary. The themes of this issue are part of a larger conversation over the danger women can pose in a patriarchal society if they are not contained, especially superwomen, who might give mortal women inspiration.

Ms. Marvel's trauma in *Avengers* #200 perfectly exemplifies what Sielke calls the rhetoric of rape, as previously mentioned, where the assault becomes "a rhetorical device, an insistent figure for other social, political, and economic concerns and conflicts" (11). The story of this issue, both in visual and narrative terms, eases anxieties over gender roles and establishes men as powerful, their needs as rightfully dominant over women, in keeping with Reagan era neoconservative ideals. According to Sielke: "In the United States—as anywhere else—these narratives are inextricably intertwined with

constructions of sexuality and gender” (11). Ms. Marvel begins as a strong and uncompromising figure, lacking in maternal instincts, but ultimately embodies the three feminine traits laid out in the opening lines. Her assault is not questioned or viewed as an assault at all, because “the very discourse that establishes gender differences as differences in sexuality also constructs female sexuality as victimization” (Sielke 11). Her “negative” quality of strength makes her a target for Marcus, but when she gives in to her sexuality (the apple pie), she accepts her place as victim. Carol could also easily be read as a kind of conservative fantasy for women who have unwanted pregnancies but then decide to fulfill the maternal role expected by society.

One of the problems with the lack of representation of women in comics is that the few women who are there unwittingly become the embodiment all of that is feminine. Carol’ origins as a feminist superheroine make her downfall significant because of the political implications. Men's needs are portrayed as more important and powerful than women’s. By the end, the “militant Ms. Marvel” is contained in a way that supports the patriarchy. Analysis of this event and the surrounding historical context proves the theory that violent things happening against women in comics are connected to society's contemporaneous views on women. Carol’ rape shows a change in the way women were portrayed in comics, which exposes the systemic misogyny of comics. Comics by the 1980s firmly embodied a patriarchal culture, as Manne explains concerning the logic of misogyny, “In this economy of moral goods, women are obligated to give to him, not to ask, and expected to feel indebted and grateful, rather than entitled. This is especially the case with respect to characteristically moral goods: attention, care, sympathy, respect, admiration, and nurturing” (22).

During the previous period of backlash against feminism, the Comics Code Authority gave the mostly male creators a convenient excuse to write women out of stories altogether or keep them subservient to men. However, the rise in female characters during the 1970s meant they could not simply be disempowered or written out of the story, but had to serve as cautionary tales. In the case of Carol, she had to be shown as complicit in the corrective narrative to uphold the patriarchy by participating in the “economy of moral goods” under which misogyny works. Her trauma meant that women would now be punished for stepping outside the mom/girl next door/apple pie trifecta, rather than simply being written out as before.

III. SUSAN STORM-RICHARDS IN THE THREAT OF THE SUPERMOM

Pregnant superheroes transgress the boundary of the sexual and the maternal. In addition, the idea that a supermom could straddle the domestic and public spheres threatens the patriarchy. Therefore, pregnancy, and its logical end result of children, is a problem, because it disrupts the superheroine's role in team dynamics as well as turns her into an object, rather than idealized, female body. When a character steps out of the prescribed role of sexual fantasy, for example by getting pregnant, the transgression will be corrected by the narrative pivoting back to the male perspective. In this chapter, I examine the second pregnancy of Susan Storm, also known as the Invisible Girl, who has long struggled with her place in the power dynamic of the Fantastic Four. In this case, Susan loses the pregnancy, but the main storyline focuses on the reactions of her brother and her husband, fridging or erasing her experience of the miscarriage.

The comics industry is patriarchal, both on the page and behind the scenes. From the early days of the Golden Age of comics, even when women writers or characters made an appearance, they were ignored or excluded. Men were the key players in power. Even Wonder Woman, who had her own title, was the secretary of the Justice League of America. If comics are largely written, drawn, and edited by men, then the narratives enforce this power dynamic. Superhero comics, in particular, are an extreme example of this structure. Characters have extraordinary powers, like strength and speed (traits associated with athleticism and masculinity), allowing them to fight crime, a male-dominated occupation. As such, male protagonists or male-led teams overwhelmingly dominate the superhero landscape.

From her inception, Susan played second fiddle to the men of the Fantastic Four. When the four main characters went into outer space, she was a young collegiate chasing after her crush. However, Susan came back as a super-powered woman struggling to find her place among the boys. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963, just two years after Susan Storm made her first appearance as the Invisible Girl. Jack Kirby and Stan Lee had unknowingly created a superheroine whose super power—to become invisible—was the physical embodiment of Friedan's "the problem with no name." Laura D'Amore said that in 1964, the same year as the Civil Rights Act, Susan became an example of how superhero comics can simultaneously support and subvert current social issues (1226).

As the only female member of a crime fighting team, Susan is an excellent example of how a superheroine can simultaneously challenge gender norms, as well as uphold them. Often, Susan fills the role of mother in the group, and eventually solidifies that role when she marries the head of the team, Reed Richards. This marriage made the Fantastic Four the first superhero family 1965, including her brother Johnny Storm and Reed's best friend Ben Grimm. During this time, the idea of the nuclear family from 1950s America was challenged by the Civil Rights Movement and second-wave feminism. The Invisible Girl as a female in a male-dominated industry (crime-fighting) was challenging the status quo, but because of the domestic role of wife and surrogate mother she often played, her power as an agent of social change was low.

Even fans recognized this disparity of power and complained in letters about Susan's lack of contribution to the team. For example, her superpower of invisibility is incredibly gendered and leads to her weakness on a team of men whose powers are all

literally based in physicality: Reed Richards' body stretches; Johnny Storm, Susan's brother, can light himself on fire; and Ben Grimm, Richards' best friend, has transformed into a super-strong rock monster. In the early comics, Susan either derailed the team's efforts or became a damsel in distress when she fainted from the stress of using her powers. However, when the publishers held a vote among the fans to decide whether to remove her from the team, the results were almost unanimous that she stay. This contradiction helps prove my theory that women in comics are typically held up for their ability to satisfy the male gaze. Although Susan did little to contribute meaningfully to the team's crime fighting mission, she was necessary either as a female token despite their dislike of her weakness or to fill the eye candy quota.

As comics' first super-powered family, the Fantastic Four are the perfect case to examine how gender politics play out in popular culture. According to D'Amore, Susan "represented a dangerous threat to the traditional family" and "was genetically incapable of being a traditional wife, because she was biologically extraordinary" (1231). After the birth of Susan and Richards' son in 1967, Susan struggled with her place on the team. A supermom, the end result of the superheroine pregnancy, threatens the patriarchal structure dominant in comics. Balancing motherhood and work as a vigilante means traversing both the public and private spheres. The maternal act of creating life places the woman as God and therefore powerful in a biological way that men cannot achieve.

Eventually, Susan leaves her husband when he will not respect her place on the team and takes their son with her. Although this action seems progressive, it removes her from the public sphere of superhero crime fighting and proves the double bind of the super mom. In addition, Susan's decision makes room for a new sexy female on the team,

one who does not have proof of woman's dangerous biological nature, hanging around in the form of a child. In her chapter on gendered filth, Susan Morrison analyzes how the bodily functions of women abject them, describing how "female mystics assured their purity, their lack of filth, by not defecating or menstruating" (54). Susan's pregnancy and resulting offspring are evidence that her body has been violated. Removing her from the picture reinforces Jeffrey A. Brown's idea that, "to become good, proper and perhaps even heroic citizens we all must distance ourselves from the fluid and unstable realm of abjection associated with mothers and wholly commit to the rigid and well-controlled level of patriarchal laws" (86). The superheroine represents all the positive aspects of female sexuality without any of the abject biological truths of mortal women. Susan, through her pregnancy, shatters the illusion of purity a superheroine must maintain, and her newfound strength as a supermom threatens the patriarchy; therefore, she is removed from the team.

The history of female characters in superhero comics parallels closely the progression of the women's rights movement. The struggle of the Invisible Girl "echoes feminist cultural scholars Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, who argue that popular culture is a site of struggle where meanings of feminism are contested" (D'Amore 1229). Second-wave feminism brought with it new efforts to correct the representation of women in comics. When Gloria Steinem featured Wonder Woman on the cover of *Ms.* magazine in 1972, and later campaigned for the return of the Amazon's superpowers, some dignity returned to female comic book characters. Susan returns to the Fantastic Four in 1974, stronger than ever and able to balance motherhood with crime-fighting. Previously, Susan had struggled with being a working mother, but in this new

incarnation, she leaves with the team for a mission in the Negative Zone without a second thought. While the team is away in the Negative Zone, Sue sleeps with her husband. The comic shows the couple waking up in the same bed and then getting dressed, but even this small reference to actual sex was quite racy for the time. Sue is married, but explicitly showing her and Reed in bed shifts her out of the focus as a sexual fantasy. Yet again, she will bring attention to the reality of womanhood by getting pregnant a second time.

However, Susan's challenge to patriarchy was not to last. As I've discussed in detail in prior chapters, the return to the nostalgia for the 1950s nuclear family was ushered in by the Reagan's "Morning in America" campaign. Comics of this time followed suit. In the mid 1980's publishers moved toward darker and grittier stories directed to a more adult audience, through stand-alone comic book stores rather than newsstands. This made the comics audience change to primarily college-aged men. The Fantastic Four especially enjoyed a resurgence in popularity during this time. John Byrne took over as artist and writer of *The Fantastic Four*. As was mentioned in chapter one, Byrne is known for his nostalgic style that harkens back to the early Golden Age of comics.

When the team returns from their adventures in space-time, the Richards' son Franklin has been brutally attacked by a super villain. After he recovers, Susan and Richards decide that moving to the suburbs is the best way to protect their son. True to the nature of her role as homemaker on the team, Susan takes the helm on this domestic project, while Richards tinkers with new science projects in the lab. In keeping with the backlash against second-wave feminism, the attack against their son proves that Sue

cannot really be a mom and a superheroine. House hunting and coordinating the move also gives a convenient narrative reason for Sue to be moved to the margins of the story while she is pregnant.

Pregnancy in comics is a disability to be hidden or protected. The superheroine's condition means her body is no longer on display for the male gaze, but is now an object of "the stare," a term from the field of disability studies. Besides Susan's body expanding as a sign of abjection, she is now a liability to her crime-fighting team. Pregnancy renders the superheroine vulnerable and causes narrative tension. Later, in issue #267 of *Fantastic Four*, published in 1984, this tension breaks when Susan suffers a miscarriage of her second pregnancy. Her experience of the event is invisible, true to the patriarchal nature of comics. The focus of the issue is her husband, Richards, and the male doctors trying to save Susan and the baby. Susan fulfills her secret identity as the Invisible Girl by disappearing from the narrative and only shows up in four of the 104 panels of this 22-page comic. By losing the baby, she can now focus her attention back on Franklin (the child she allowed to get hurt by her adventuring) as well as go back to being an object for the audience to look at and a surrogate mother for the team.

At the very beginning of the story, we see Susan in a hospital bed, hand to forehead, mouth open as if in pain. She-Hulk (who recently joined the team) looks on through a window and gives the audience some exposition through a thought bubble. Notable is the first line where She-Hulk disparages herself in comparison to the male doctors gathered to treat Susan. Her first thought is, "I may have been a hotshot lady lawyer in California, but compared to this group, I'm a kindergarten drop-out." She-Hulk is temporarily filling the diversity quotient on the *Fantastic Four* while Susan has been

out on maternity leave. This statement makes it clear that, even though she shows up more in this issue than Susan, she is still less than the men in the issue, by her own admission.

Susan is surrounded by doctors here because her pregnancy is in danger—the conception in the Negative Zone has led to complications, which, despite their PhDs, none of the men present are able to solve. Eventually, Bruce Banner (sometimes the Hulk) convinces Richards that he must get help from Otto Octavius, a Spider-Man villain, better known as Doctor Octopus. At the end of the issue, Reynolds has beaten Octavius into submission, but the miscarriage has already occurred. The audience learns of the loss through the male perspective of Reed Richards. On the final page, a single panel of the doctor breaking the news to Reed is dwarfed by a dramatic black border with white speckles signifying space. This framing gives the effect that Reed’s world is closing in on him. However, the question a feminist reader might be left with at the end of the issue is, “Where is Sue?” She is nowhere in the final panels of this issue, and the issue does not show her reaction to the miscarriage at all. Her husband’s reaction is more important than the person physically experiencing the event.

Allison Reiheld theorizes miscarriage as a liminal event. Socially, it occupies a middle space between the states of pregnancy and abortion, as well as pregnancy and parenthood. Loss of a wanted pregnancy is “an event that was nothing,” because our society does not have a way to conceptualize it. So, like the many events surrounding female biological functions, the miscarriage and “those who experience it are set off from society, sequestered, and occupy unclear social roles and personal identities” (11). What could have been an excellent opportunity to examine a common but little discussed

experience of women (one in five pregnancies will end in miscarriage) was lost here.

Additionally, prioritizing the male perspective over the female preserves the patriarchy.

This event started Sue's transition from the Invisible Girl to the Invisible Woman during John Byrne's creative time on FF. When she named herself Invisible Girl in the first issue of the comic, the irony was most likely lost on a 1960s audience. Little did she know it would take almost twenty-five years to grow up into an Invisible Woman. As empowering as it was when Susan Storm finally taking on the mantle of Invisible Woman, that transition was surrounded with some very problematic events, indicative of the patriarchal nature of superhero comics. One of them was the erasure of her experience during the miscarriage of her second child.

In 1999, when *Women in Refrigerators* published a list of over 100 female comic book characters, from Aqua Girl to Zatana, who were killed, raped, or otherwise victimized, it gave a name to the comic book trope about violence against women to motivate male characters and sparked a movement toward looking more critically at the portrayal of women in comics. This issue of *Fantastic Four* serves as an example of how the *Women in Refrigerators* trope can be applied not just to sexual violence, but to any event that violates the Superheroine Mystique, which requires performing as an object for male fantasy. It applies to any event that might draw the focus away from the male protagonist.

IV. BARBARA GORDON AS COLLATERAL DAMAGE IN THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THE SUPERHERO

Although there is some overlap with the case of Carol Danvers, the example of Barbara Gordon in *Batman: The Killing Joke* constitutes a departure from the superheroine double-bind of the previous two chapters. In other stories, both before and after *The Killing Joke*, she is a crime fighting superheroine, but in this story Barbara is simply a civilian. Her previous life as Batgirl is never mentioned or shown on the page.

Rather than focusing on the unstable female element or abject maternal body, this chapter considers the misogynist idea that women are inherently vulnerable and weak. Even if they are contained by a male element, like Superman's girlfriend Lois Lane in the Golden Age, women are a liability, at best, or a potentially fatal burden, at worst. Previous scholarship has covered Alan Moore's writing in general as well as on specific titles, such as *Watchmen*, including a few articles on *The Killing Joke*, but none of them focuses on the role of women in the best-selling graphic novel, nor do they even comment on the notable lack of women. There are a few studies about Barbara, both as Batgirl and as Oracle (the superhero she becomes after the events of *The Killing Joke*), then Batgirl again, but most of them gloss over *The Killing Joke* or, as is quickly becoming a trend, point it out as a "classic fridging" and then move on (Simone 2011). As in considering the other case studies in this thesis, I am trying to dive more deeply into these traumatic narratives and look at what themes are at work in creating a so-called "classic fridging" moment.

Batman: The Killing Joke was a story written by Alan Moore and drawn by Brian Bolland. In it, the Joker has escaped from Arkham Asylum with a horrific plan that plays

out over the course of the 64-page stand-alone book. He shoots Barbara through the stomach, resulting in her paralysis, and kidnaps her father, Commissioner James “Jim” Gordon, then tortures the commissioner with his daughter’s pain through naked photos of her. Rather than his previous silly caricature of an evil clown, this new Joker uses a pop psychology version of chaos theory, where everything in the universe is because of random chance, to prove that he can bring Jim or Batman down to his level—all it takes is one bad day for anyone, including Jim and Batman, to become a killer. This twisted Batman tale was very popular when it initially came out and continues to be one of DC’s best sellers today. According to their company website, it is “[o]ne of the most popular graphic novels of all time.” *Killing Joke* (as it is more commonly called) somehow makes all the lists of worst fridging moments in comics, yet fans frequently cite it as their favorite Batman story.

In this chapter, I look at Barbara Gordon’s history pre-*Killing Joke*, the publication history of *Killing Joke*, and then iconic writer Alan Moore’s influence on comics. Next, I head into analysis of the book itself, looking at how visuals and text together work to form a cohesive narrative that, in the case of *Killing Joke*, tries to deconstruct the idea of a superhero without deconstructing the patriarchy. I will address both forms of trauma that happen to women in this book, including that of Joker’s pregnant wife Jeannie, who is notably absent from existing research and commentary. Ultimately, Barbara and Jeannie both fulfill the Superheroine Mystique theory, that women’s main purpose in comics is to support male characters. But I contend that Barbara’s assault is not a “classic fridging,” but rather created a community-wide trauma to the comics’ fandom.

Barbara Gordon is the daughter of Police Commissioner James "Jim" Gordon in Gotham City. She takes up the mantle of Batgirl because of a kind of Batman hero worship. According to Neumann and Parks, Batgirl was an example of early female superheroes who "had been aimed at boys and men since her creation in 1961" (292). This may have been partially true of the first Bat-Girl, Betty Kane; however, Barbara Gordon as Batgirl, created in 1967, served more to highlight Batman and Robin and was a poor attempt to bring in a female audience. Her appearance in the comics only slightly preceded her introduction to the *Batman* TV show, and according to actress Yvonne Craig: "They were adding Batgirl to the show because they needed someone who could encourage an over-40 male audience and a prepubescent female audience" (Jankiewicz). There is something quite disturbing about the combination of those two target audiences that brings to mind the superheroine double bind of last two chapters. How could Batgirl appeal to both over-40 men, as an object to be looked at, and young girls, as a subject to aspire to? Or when these two ideas are synthesized, is the message that young girls should aspire to be looked at? Another possibility is that Barbara is a kind of physical proxy for her father's desires. He was an officer of the law, so although he sometimes worked with Batman, Jim could not actually fight side by side with him as a vigilante.

According to Phillips and Strobl, in their 2013 study *Comic Book Crime*, super villains "present a threat that is greater than the capabilities and constraints of traditional law enforcement mechanisms" (85). So, while the Commissioner was constrained by the law, his legacy Barbara was not. But of course, being a woman, she was weaker; therefore, she would not challenge Jim or Bruce's hegemonic masculinity. She certainly acts as a physical proxy in *Killing Joke*, where the most violent acts occur to her and not

her father. Jennifer Stuller uses Barbara as an example of how “some of the strongest, most complex, and independent superwomen in modern mythology are raised by a single father, while their mother is almost always physically absent” (105). She then uses Joseph Campbell to investigate this idea on a comparative mythology level; however, I believe Jeffrey Brown has the right idea, that, in superhero narratives, “as fantasy stories about policing borders between good and evil, and of ultimately upholding the law, the rejection of the maternal is tantamount to an acceptance of patriarchal authority, of the Law as the word of the Father” (84). So, by Barbara being daughter to the police commissioner and protégé to Batman, she is doubly enforcing hegemonic patriarchy, where men are the power and make the laws.

In her original conception, Barbara is the stereotypical shy librarian by day, and Batgirl, the crime-fighting sidekick, at night. She was given a PhD, although a Masters is all that is needed for a librarian, and a brown belt in judo, the second-highest rank. At first, it seems odd to give Barbara a higher degree than is needed for her job, yet not also a superlative fighting rank. However, as education is historically an appropriate field for women, and librarian is a historically feminine and white occupation, this degree marks her as very female as well as very smart. Her brown belt in judo, the second-highest marital arts rank, is a convenient excuse for why she cannot quite live up to the same level of fighting as Batman or Robin.

For her first several appearances, Barbara is really not effective at crime fighting, despite her enthusiasm. Stuller identifies that Barbara “consistently bungled missions, instead of truly being an asset to the dynamic duo, and usually needed to be saved, rather than actively doing the saving” (24). Sometimes, she was foiled by things pointing to her

femininity, like dropping her combat compact or getting a run in her pantyhose; these characteristics would survive in some form or another even up to today. In her early days, they highlight the exceptionalism Batgirl stands for as often the only female character and main female heroine in the Bat-family for many decades. They also support the idea of Barbara as a stand-in for her father's desire to work outside the law, but she can simultaneously uphold Man's law by being subordinate to the men and reinforcing stereotypical ideas of women as weaker. It would not be until later in the 1970s that Barbara would run for Congress in the comics and star in an Equal Pay public service announcement on TV.

Even though Barbara Gordon had a long history within the DC universe, the company's highest executives still cared little for what happened to her. Before *Killing Joke*, Batgirl had become a Senator and gained some ground as a stronger female character, although still staying subordinate to Batman on the Gotham streets. Then, in 1980, she lost her reelection just as Ronald Reagan took office and thereafter was characterized as constantly doubting her abilities or comparing herself poorly to other crime fighters.

By the time *Killing Joke* was in process, Barbara had faded from the spotlight. This disappearance was not surprising, based on the trend of conservative values the Reagan Era brought to comics, as discussed in the previous two chapters. In 1988, DC asked Barbara Kesel to write a Batgirl special where she hangs up her cape. The higher-ups specifically told Kesel, by her own account: "She's getting her spine blown out in *The Killing Joke*, so try to make people care" (DCWKA 2011). In other words, Barbara

Gordon did not choose on her own to retire from being Batgirl, she was *being retired* by DC to build sympathy for the character in their upcoming hope for a new big seller.

British writer Alan Moore had recently seen wild success with *Watchmen*, a gritty tale of original superhero characters that ushered in a new era of depicting ultra-violent images and stories deconstructing the very idea of the superhero. Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* had also done very well and was also part of this growing trend. DC hoped to capitalize on this trend with Alan Moore trying his hand at the Batman franchise. Batgirl's parent company cared so little for the character, they put next to no thought into the decision to paralyze one of their main female heroes. When relating his own reservations years later about what he did to Barbara, Alan Moore blames his editors, Len Wein and Dick Giordano, who "should've reined [him] in," but instead, after Moore initially asked for approval to shoot Barbara, the DC execs told him after a quick conference over the phone to "cripple the bitch" (Cotton 2004). Alan Moore's shifting of blame aside, these two accounts of DC's plan to create sympathy for a character, only to have her horribly maimed, supports my claim that there is a history of institutional misogyny rampant at the highest ranks of the comics industry.

In the previous two chapters, the stories worked to uphold dominant conservative values, which resulted in their respective corrective narratives (Carol's rape and leaving the team, and Susan's miscarriage). Here, *The Killing Joke* marks a move toward a different way women would suffer to uphold the patriarchy. This event is the result of anxiety over how deconstructing the superhero threatened the patriarchy. In late 1980s and early 1990s comics, the deconstruction of the superhero was a growing trend that

would have far-reaching repercussions: when you deconstruct the superhero, the very symbol of the strong heroic male, it threatens the patriarchy.

Moore is known for helping usher in this new trend, with characters “like the Comedian from *Watchmen*, or Batman in *The Killing Joke*,” who, according to Annalissa Di Liddo, “do show the traits of the vigilante, but the weakness that lies under their shield is always brought to light” (48). I suspect that this is one reason people still cite *The Killing Joke* as one of their favorite Batman stories. These storylines that attempt to deconstruct the superhero, like *Watchmen*, *Killing Joke*, and *Identity Crisis*, all sold very well. *Watchmen* and *Killing Joke* continue to be popular today. *Killing Joke* was DC’s bestselling book in 2016, and a full-length animated adaptation premiered the same year.

Deconstructing the superhero appeals to people because it humanizes these larger-than-life men and gives a kind of pathology to villains’ destructive actions. Phillips and Strobl explain, “[T]he heroes and villains in comic book world appear to be startling opposites of each other, yet readers ultimately find themselves immersed in plots that explore the similarities between the two” (82). Breaking down the superhero brings him closer to the mortal man’s level, while breaking down the villain might bring us closer to understanding what leads people toward the dark instead of the light. This is the main theme driving the narrative of *Killing Joke*: superheroes and super villains have a “mutual dependence on one another” and are not as far apart as they seem (Phillips & Strobl 82). The Joker says only “one bad day” separates him from Jim or Batman. When boundaries start to blur, they are intriguing examinations of the human condition, but can also uncover other instabilities society would rather be left alone.

If the hero/villain concept is not a black and white binary, as earlier superhero comics would have the reader think, then this breakdown casts a shadow on the gender binary Reagan Era ideals were trying so hard to uphold. If the idea of the superhero is constructed, it points to the possibility that the divide between male and female is constructed, as Judith Butler theorized in *Gender Trouble*. Therefore, just as the superheroine challenges hegemonic masculinity, so does deconstructing the superhero, because, as Blake Tyrrell states in his history of the Amazon myth, "when men cease to be men the world ceases to be ordered; and the topsy-turvy world of the Amazon results" (63).

The purpose of superheroes is to uphold the law and police the boundaries between good and evil. How can the reader keep faith in their historically patriarchal society if they cannot keep faith in those boundaries? Female characters would play a key role in supporting the power of men, despite their apparent weakness toward violence, by being the motivation for and staying secondary to men, upholding what Neumann and Parks identify as "a binary structure with long historical roots that situates men as active while women are passive and men as enacting violence upon the female body" (298). Barbara Gordon as Batgirl walked the fine line between challenging (as a superheroine) and supporting the patriarchy (as a daughter/sidekick) for many decades. Now she would continue that tradition in *Killing Joke*.

The focus in *Killing Joke* is on just plain old Barbara Gordon, not Barbara Gordon as Batgirl. Her past as Batgirl is never mentioned. She's just the Commissioner's daughter. There is no evidence in this narrative of the past times she came close to challenging the patriarchy as a superheroine. Bruce calls her Barbara, and Jim, her father,

brings up memories of telling her about the Joker in her childhood, not about fighting him as an adult. In *Killing Joke*, without prior knowledge of her past, Barbara is just another civilian.

However, similar to Susan and Carol, there were times in the past when she, as Batgirl, came close in power to rivaling her male counterparts. After the change in comics distribution narrowed to an increasingly male audience, combined with Reagan Era conservative ideals, these strong females needed to be taken down a peg. *Killing Joke* certainly accomplished that. Multiple researchers, including Carolyn Cocca and Jeffery Brown, have found that female action heroes, like superheroines in comics, transgress the boundaries between masculine and feminine, which can support or challenge gender norms (see Cocca 2016, Brown 2011). Batgirl was the perfect female character that could be written out of continuity so as not to challenge male authority; plus, combined with her history of being a supporting character, Barbara, as the Commissioner's daughter, would elicit the most emotional reaction from the male characters, thereby strengthening their position as masculine protectors. As comics writer Steven Engelhart wrote in his email response to *Women in Refrigerators*, "[M]ale adolescents fear strong women." By the late 1980s adolescent males had seemingly saved the comics industry, and DC was now playing to that demographic.

In *Killing Joke*, women are objects, either as the fat lady and the conjoined twins of Joker's carnival, both of whom are objects of the stare, or like the Joker's wife Jeannie, and Barbara, cast aside in favor of the male storyline. Unlike Wonder Woman, who had her own book and was not created as the distaff side of an existing character,

Barbara had always been subordinate to the men in Gotham, which means, in a system of misogyny, she is disposable.

If the aim was only to motivate Batman, why not shoot Jim? Batgirl was just as big of a character as Jim, if not bigger, since she did have her own short storylines. Gotham could get another police commissioner—and indeed it had, in other storylines. So, Barbara was not only chosen for this horrific honor because she was a side character, but specifically because she was female. Barbara, rather than Jim, would elicit the strongest emotional response, because women's weakness is needed to prop up masculinity in a patriarchal culture. Also, given that the comic ends with Jim overcoming his anger at his daughter's victimization to remind Batman not to retaliate by killing the Joker, if the situation were reversed and it was Barbara instead of Jim telling Batman not to lose his temper and to bring in the Joker "by the book," she would be threatening the patriarchy.

Not only is this book still popular *despite* general agreement that what happened to Barbara was awful, but perhaps *because of it*. Originally supposed to be a stand-alone story (out-of-continuity with the regular Batman universe), *Killing Joke* has caused unexpected ripples in comics. The imagery of Barbara's shooting, which was extremely graphic even by today's standards, is frequently used in a flashback style to remind superheroes that their loved ones are always vulnerable. Getting shot would later become a defining event for Barbara Gordon, but when *Killing Joke* was made, there was no intention for her to ever get up off that living room floor. I want to clarify that point, because it is sometimes used as a justification for *Killing Joke* that Barbara would later go on to become Oracle for a time, a disabled hero that many found inspirational. *Killing*

Joke did not create Oracle. The credit for resurrecting Barbara as Oracle should go to Jim Ostrander and Kim Yale, who came up with the idea, and writers, like Chuck Dixon and Gail Simone, who made her so popular with their respective work on her later ensemble series, *Birds of Prey*. Because of *Killing Joke*, it would be another 20 years before Barbara Gordon would get her own title book.

Killing Joke makes every list of top fridging moments in comics. Despite agreement that it contains one of the worst traumas women in comics have suffered, it is still often cited as one of people's favorite stories about the Joker, with an aside to "Poor Barbara." What no one mentions is that Barbara is not the only female character fridged in *The Killing Joke*. Before Barbara comes out of the kitchen with her tray of cocoa, only to be confronted by the Joker and his handgun, the reader meets another woman soon to head for the fridge: Jeannie, the Joker's late wife.

The first flashback in *Killing Joke* shows the Joker—as a civilian, before his super villain career—coming home after a night of bombing as a stand-up comedian. His obviously pregnant wife greets him and asks how the act was. He snaps at her in a way that would be a major flag for domestic abuse: "You think, you think I don't care, that it's all a big joke to me or something..." (7). This motif of everything in life being one cosmic joke is repeated throughout the story. This man, having quit his job as an engineer only to fail as a comic, must now depend financially on the charity of his landlady and sympathy for his wife's condition to get them through. All he wants is to have "enough money to get set up in a decent neighborhood." Then he comments on how women can use their bodies to make more money than he can: "There are girls on the /street/ who earn that in a /weekend/ without having to tell a single /joke/" (8). Apparently, his wife is not worried

about the way he snapped at her or how they will provide for their growing family, because of his sexual prowess, as she responds: "Job or no job, you're good in the sack... and you know how to make me /laugh/." (8) The flashback ends with the proto-Joker looking over Jeannie's shoulder at his shadowy reflection in a mirror.

The next panel is reminiscent of a match cut from a film as the present-day Joker looks at his reflection in the glass of a carnival game. It seems like this scene is supposed to be building sympathy for the Joker and his struggle to provide for his growing family. But instead, I see an emotionally abusive husband with a bruised ego. This disconnect made me suspect that this moment is where some of the nuance of Alan Moore's storytelling is overlooked. According to Jennifer Stuller: "Many writers would attempt to emulate this powerful graphic novel, but while inspired by the story, they lacked Moore's skill to balance the gruesome details with the tragedy of humanity" (203). Despite what seems on the surface as a justification for the Joker's origin, he starts as an aggressive, gaslighting husband and then brings doubt about the reality of his own memory almost immediately after telling it. As the Joker says shortly after this flashback, he prefers "multiple choice answers." Perhaps this confusion is a manifestation of Alan Moore's chaos theory theme, as here even the idea of an origin story for Joker is called into question. However, this is not the predominant reading, and many people call this their favorite *because* of the attempt to give Joker a backstory. It is possible that a mostly male audience would not see the Joker's behavior toward Jeannie as a red flag of existing or future abuse.

As the Joker's "origin story" continues, it seems his inability to provide for his family, a masculine trait highly valued by society (especially a Reagan-era society), is the

motivation that drives him down the proverbial wrong path to a life of crime. After the Joker signs on to do a one-time crime for a quick payout, the police show up and tell him that his wife died in an electrical accident: one involving a baby-bottle heater, in case we forgot how tragic this death was because she was pregnant. The bottom of this page, a classic nine-panel layout, has three panels clustered together where this information is revealed. In the first, the cop tells the proto-Joker what happened. The next panel is the same exact image with no dialogue, like taking a beat in a sitcom before delivering a punchline. But we know from earlier in the book that the Joker always messed up the punchline. Then, in the third and final panel of the row, the Joker just says, “What?” as the cops stare at him silently. When the panels pick up on the next page, he is walking back into the bar where they found him. The following scenes posit that the Joker was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, because he was trying to be a good provider for his family. Jeannie is fridged off panel, just like Susan Storm’s miscarriage, so the focus stays on the men as patriarchs with sympathetic losses.

Ultimately, *Killing Joke* supports the main idea that women in comics are only there to be supporting characters. Barbara hangs up her cowl in the issue just before *Killing Joke*, so that in this book she is just a civilian. Even though Joker shows some major red flags of domestic abuse, Jeannie dismisses those flags in favor of his humor and his sexuality. Women are around to prop up men or take care of their egos. Without them, the bad ones get worse, or the good ones stay pretty much the same, except now with more heroics.

The line between good and evil being deconstructed causes cultural anxiety. Society deals with that anxiety not by adapting or changing, but by trying to reinforce the

status quo: here, that of men as the powerful protectors. Joker got involved with the criminal element just to try and support his family. And now, despite the most horrible thing imaginable (or even beyond imaging) happening to his daughter, being played on a screen for him to see over and over, Jim is still the good man that inspires Batman to do the "right thing." One way of reading this comic is that Joker is right and there is not that much difference between him and Batman. This reading is evidenced by the final panels where they laugh together at the same joke. They are just trying to do right, but it does not always turn out that way. Women are not really even a part of the story; they are just props. This sidelining of female characters is the whole point of *Women in Refrigerators*: identifying the trope of something horrible happening to women to motivate a male storyline.

Jeannie's death definitely fits the definition of being fridged, but arguably Barbara's shooting does not. Possibly, she partially motivates Batman in this storyline, but he was already motivated to capture the Joker. Furthermore, the intention to demotivate Jim and turn him into a killer does not work. Almost the same things happen to both Jim and Barbara (kidnapped and tortured), but afterward, Jim still has his wits around him and is shown in the panel at middle-ground, with some distance (and dignity) to his recovery. He does not seem to need time to recover after his kidnapping, and is instead focused on acting as Batman's moral compass.

In contrast, Barbara wakes up and is drawn in an extreme close-up, face terrified, tears streaming down her face and bandage on her head, yet all she can talk about is her dad. Barbara's shooting and assault may not have worked on Jim as the Joker intended, but they do work on the audience. Gail Simone herself said she quit reading comics for a

time after what happened to Barbara, and it was her main motivation for creating *Women in Refrigerators* (Pantozzi 2011). I argue that this event is so often called a “classic fridging” because of the collective trauma it has caused among some readers of the comics community. As Cathy Caruth explains in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, “The trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continuing leaving of its site” (10). Because of *Killing Joke*’s long-reaching influence, both through imagery repeated in other DC books and commentary online, this event is experienced over and over again, proving that these traumatic events, even fictional ones, can have lasting effects on their audience.

Killing Joke is an example of what not to do to female characters. It is a classic case of fridging for Jeannie and a horrible trauma to Barbara, solely for shock value. Later, Barbara would regain some of her agency as Oracle and finally return to the mantle of Batgirl as a title character. But it would take 44 years for Barbara Gordon to get a title book (even as Oracle she was part of the *Birds of Prey* team). There were three different Batgirls, all with their own title books as Batgirl, before Barbara Gordon, the longest to hold the mantle, merited the honor. When Barbara returned as Batgirl, there was a lot of controversy over giving her back the use of her legs, in part because of the popularity of her depiction as the disabled Oracle. On the other hand, one of the prime examples of Dead Men Defrosting, in comparison to Barbara’s supposedly permanent paralysis, is when Batman’s back was broken by the villain Bane in the 1993-4 arc “Knightfall,” but that *still* didn’t keep him down. If there were more diverse characters in comics in general, Oracle would not have had to represent the female disabled experience by herself.

The 2011 relaunch of *Batgirl* was Barbara's chance to finally come fully out of the comics fridge, with none other than the Queen of Refrigerators herself, Gail Simone, at the helm as writer. However, I doubt that DC had Barbara's best interests at heart when they decided to defridge her. Just a year into the new book, during which time, according to sales figures on ComicChron.com, it was consistently the top selling female led title, Simone announced unexpectedly that she had been informed via email that she was no longer the writer of *Batgirl*. This announcement created a social media storm that would quickly see her reinstated. As Carolyn Cocca outlines in her book *Superwomen*: "Simone's *Batgirl*, which ran thirty-four issues up until August 2014, received mostly positive reviews and for over two years was usually the highest-selling female-headed comic title in any given month" (80). According to sales figures, which have often been a parent company's reason for pulling a title or changing up the creative team, there was no grounds for removing Simone. Instead of a return to a light-hearted Barbara pre-*Killing Joke*, who propped up the men in her life, Simone wrote a nuanced serious story about a damaged Batgirl trying to overcome PTSD and reclaim her crime fighting mantle on her own terms.

Here is where the misogyny in comics is exposed as not just systemic but also, or even primarily, an institutional misogyny. The publisher-wide "New 52" relaunch, of which *Batgirl* was a part, and which, as described by fan scholar Suzanne Scott, "presented a prime opportunity to attract new readers and reboot both comic book franchises and the comic book industry at large, instead kept its focus firmly on 18-to-34-year-old men" and was highly criticized online for hyper-sexualization of the few female characters it did have ("Invisible Fangirls" 4.7). In 2011, the same year of DC's big New

52 relaunches, comics across the two major publishers spurred viral parodies of covers like *Catwoman* #0 and *The Amazing Spider Man* #601. An internal page from *Red Hood and the Outlaws* depicting the character Starfire, particularly popular with young girls because of her appearance on the *Teen Titans* cartoon, emerging from the water in a barely-there bikini, excited much critique. In that context, why would DC fire Simone, one of their star female writers? In fact, Scott calls her “the Gail Simone defense”, pointing out that “if Simone, a vocal critic of gender and comics, chooses to align herself with DC and is known to craft narratives centered around compelling female characters, then the industry clearly doesn't have a gender bias” (4.3). Perhaps life was imitating art, and Simone’s growing success was threatening to the comics industry’s insistence that their narrow idea of an audience justified their sexist imagery and severe lack of diversity among creators.

In 2015, DC would finally get the hip and young Batgirl reboot they most likely wanted all along, but still saw *Killing Joke* as a defining and not a defeating moment for Batgirl. The marketing department commissioned an homage to *Killing Joke* as a variant cover to *Batgirl* #41, which went viral on social media because of the strong reaction it caused. Originally the artist, Rafael Albuquerque, turned in a tamer cover but was specifically asked to make it more extreme. The result is an image of the Joker holding Barbara captive with a gun pointed toward her crotch, clown makeup smeared across her face, a terrified expression on her face, and tears streaming down her cheeks. Again, after fan and, to their credit, creative team outrage, the company backed off and pulled the cover from publication. But the fact that this cover was commissioned in the first place *and* that the publisher was not satisfied with the level of shock in the first version again

points to systemic misogyny of the type Manne describes in *Down Girl*. This is not misogyny, according to the “naive definition” from a dictionary of men who hate women, but rather systemic misogyny, where men just do not care enough as a collective to make positive changes, because either the misogyny does not affect them *or* any changes might afford them less privileges than they enjoyed before. The hard-fought advances and corrections to past Women in Refrigerators events are due to the actions of individual creators, resisting this systemic misogyny regardless of their individual gender, who write women, trans, people of color, and people with disabilities as fully realized humans.

V. SUE DIBNY IN THE MASCULINITY CRISIS

This chapter examines a fridging event that takes place after *Women in Refrigerators* was first published. It presents differently than the last three events, but I argue is still a fridging nonetheless, as well as strong support for the Superheroine Mystique theory. The horrific death of Sue Dibny in *Identity Crisis* has been much discussed online, and only *Killing Joke* comes close to rivaling it for shock factor. While this book received plenty of commentary among fans, critical research on it was difficult to find. It is mentioned briefly in Phillips and Strobl's *Comic Book Crime*, but the largest analysis I discovered was a 2016 dissertation, "Performing the Female Superhero" by Matthew Nicosia. However, Nicosia focuses solely on three specific events from the story, specifically Sue's death, funeral, and rape through a flashback. While his findings do support my own argument for the misogynist history of the comics industry, it is limited to the subject of Sue Dibny. My own analysis in this chapter looks at the *Identity Crisis* story arc as a whole, and identifies the different forms of masculinity and femininity presented, which work together to support a patriarchal culture.

Although the character first appeared in 1961, Sue Dibny's history is short. She is known simply as the wife of the Justice League's Elongated Man, Ralph Dibny. Unlike the other case studies, Sue is not a crime fighter herself, but her fridging moment is one that covers all the major themes, making it arguably one of the worst examples of trauma in comics history. Sue is not on the original *Women in Refrigerators* list because her death occurred in a 2004 storyline, five years after the website shook up the comics industry. Because it has been much talked about online, I decided to include it in my case

studies. Additionally, I thought it valuable to look at a fridging that happened well after *Women in Refrigerators* caused a stir in the comics community.

Identity Crisis was written in 2004 by thriller novelist Brad Metzler. The basic plot is that Sue, specifically positioned as the Elongated Man's wife, is murdered in their home, and then other family members of the Justice League (JLA) start to receive threats. Her death, true to the fridging trope, forms the impetus for her husband's storyline of solving her murder. This event also covers child loss, as Dibny was pregnant when she was killed.

Over the course of the story, it is revealed that in the past Sue was raped in the JLA headquarters, but the event was literally erased by Zatanna, a Justice League member and powerful magician, from the memories her rapist Doctor Light and Batman through mind control. It is not explicitly stated that the event was erased from Sue's memory as well, but as the event is told from Ralph's point of view in flashback her experience in the story is erased nonetheless. This past event makes the JLA think Doctor Light is Sue's murderer in the present. However, the rape proves to be a red herring, at least as far as solving the mystery of Dibny's murder is concerned. The whole arc is an extended whodunit-style story with the big reveal at the end that the "who" was a really a "she" all along. The murderer turns out to be Jean Loring, ex-wife of the Ray Palmer (the Atom), who thought hurting a family member of the JLA would make her ex come running back to her—Sue's death was essentially accidental. Thus, Loring's crime engages with the last theme of mental illness and villainy.

Identity Crisis represents a new development in the fridging trope, in which women are the cause of the trauma, rather than men. But true to fridging, men's reactions

to the female trauma are centered in the storyline. One of the big discussions surrounding female characters in comics was their lack of agency; here we do have female agency, but in service of a patriarchal agenda. Like *Killing Joke*, this story deconstructs the idea of the superhero, but also the superhero team and their support systems. Events set into motion by *Identity Crisis* would influence later stories and result in a breaking up of the Justice League.

I will divide my analysis into three parts—masculinity, dominant femininity, and deviant femininity. What I find represents a change from women in comics merely being passive objects to becoming dangerous subjects, and supports the unstable woman problem introduced in my first chapter.

Although solving the mystery of her death drives the plot of *Identity Crisis*, this story is not about Sue. Rather, it is about the Justice League falling apart. Arguably, they are falling apart because of the vulnerability of women. Sue's death is the catalyst, but her rape and Zatanna's erasure of the event are the skeletons in the closet. Loring's plan to threaten the loved ones of the JLA, born out of some twisted hope to "win" back her ex-husband, leads to not just one but three deaths by the book's end.

The deconstructing of superheroes, first shepherded by Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and *Killing Joke*, sees a resurgence in books like *Identity Crisis* after the events of 9/11/2001. In *Comic Book Crime*, Phillips and Strobl show how, "the events of 9/11 reverberate in comic books by ushering in a reconsideration of the concept of heroism and serving as a cultural resource for dealing with anxieties in an era of uncertainty surrounding public safety" (18). Just as in *Killing Joke*, the best way to deconstruct the idea of the hero without threatening the patriarchy is a narrative where men stay higher in

the power structure than women. Therefore, women in *Identity Crisis* stay secondary to men—or, in a new presentation of the Women in Refrigerators trope, they are a direct danger to both themselves and men.

Men, in *Identity Crisis*, embody R.W. Connell's sociology theory of hegemonic masculinity. His work in the 1980s on sociopolitical power structure resulted in the idea of "a pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allows men's dominance over women to continue" (832). This research posited a hierarchy of dominance, seen as strong (heterosexual), and subordinate masculinities (homosexual). Applying the terms to femininity, dominant femininity supports the patriarchy and subordinate femininity, or as I call it in this chapter, deviant femininity, challenges gender norms. As this concept is based on men's dominance over men, Connell later admits, "In some contexts, hegemonic masculinity actually does refer to men's engaging in toxic practices—including physical violence—that stabilize gender dominance in a particular setting" ("Hegemonic Masculinity" 840). These are the ways the Women in Refrigerators trope is expressed in *Identity Crisis*. Keeping this strict hierarchy allows an ideological examination of heroes and villains without disrupting gender norms.

Similar to *The Fantastic Four's* fridging of Susan Storm's miscarriage, the story here focuses on Ralph's pain rather than his wife's. Continuing the idea that women are the cause of all that goes wrong in *Identity Crisis*, Sue was killed while her husband Ralph (The Elongated Man), was on patrol with a female hero named Lorraine Riley (Firehawk). The book opens with Ralph on a stake-out with Lorraine, and the thinly veiled misogyny of this narrative presents itself from the first few pages. Emphasizing

that this is a story about men, the first point of view is that of Ralph. He calls Lorraine a “puppy,” and says that he is there to “make sure she doesn’t get herself killed.” This statement turns out to be an instance of dramatic irony, as by being out protecting Lorraine, he does not protect his wife. This moment is the first of many of what Phillips and Strobl describe as “glosses on Sue’s death as symbolic of men’s failure to protect their wives and girlfriends from violence and injustice” (145). From the start, Ralph is established as dominant to the female superhero with whom he is working, and her implied weakness is why he cannot get home in time to save Sue; it is not revealed until the very end of the book that her death was caused by a brain injury and would not have been preventable by his particular superpowers. While the two heroes try to pass the time on stake-out, Lorraine asks Ralph how he met his wife. He fires back quickly: “Can I say one thing?—And not to be sexist—“ then Lorraine tries to reply to his question. Interrupting her he ploughs on: “...But when you’re on a stakeout with Batman, he *never* asks that. Black Canary asked that./So did Zatanna. Power Girl didn’t, God bless her, but that’s—.” He then either trails off or is interrupted (it is unclear from the text or visual, an extreme close-up of their faces emphasizes the intimacy of the question), and Lorraine asks again how he met his wife. What follows next would be odd except in the delicate system of misogyny that comics must uphold.

So far, the narrative has established that Ralph is top dog to Lorraine’s puppy, and her girly interest in his romantic relationship is annoying. At the top of the next panel are Ralph’s reflective thoughts: “It’s the one problem with having your identity be public. Once they get a nibble, they always want more. But the truth is, if I didn’t love the attention, I would’ve become a fireman.” This inner dialogue continues the hyper-

masculine posing, as Ralph revels in the sexual attention his position as a superhero gets him. Instead of continuing his macho thought, he answers Lorraine's question: "She noticed me across a crowded room." The subsequent retelling of their romance does not line up with his original annoyance with Lorraine's question. Additionally, as he tells it, the reason he and his wife are together is because Sue picked *him*, Ralph, over the more popular superheroes. Specifically, he means the more attractive male heroes as he describes their physical attributes, such as Hawkman's "hairy chest thing" and Superman's "melt-your-heart baby blues."

This way of putting himself down seems out of place with the hyper-masculine posing Ralph has shown thus far. However, in the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity, things become clear. First, it is established that Ralph is dominant over a female superhero, Lorraine. Then, his statement about his enjoyment of the sexual attention he gets from being a superhero establishes that he is heterosexual and does not fall into the subordinate masculine category (coded as homosexual). Finally, he relates a romantic story that, much like Batgirl's special retirement issue, would gain sympathy for him when it is revealed that Sue is the one referred to in the title of issue one, "Coffin."

According to Connell's concept, Ralph falls under the category of "men who received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong form of masculine dominance" and is "showing a complicit masculinity" (832). Another of the major themes *Identity Crisis* follows is the burden of keeping their secret identities and cleaning up the aftermath of superhero fighting that secondary characters, like Ralph, must carry to hold together the group. Here is an interesting concept that comics could explore, but

even this type of questioning threatens hegemonic masculinity, and therefore women take the blame for the group's implosion.

Sue's death serves as the motivation for the main story arc. It sows fear and dissent in the Justice League because of the uncertainty caused by her unsolved murder. She is the catalyst for the rest of the plot, not an active part of it. The characterization of women in *Identity Crisis* reinforces the stereotype that women are weak while men are strong.

Because there is so much misogynist subtext in this book, I want to take a moment to point out the difference between sexism and misogyny, as Kate Manne identifies in *Down Girl: A Logic of Misogyny* (2017). She argues that the conception of misogyny as men who hate all women is a false conception that perpetuates the suppression of women who do not conform to the hegemonic masculinity Connell classified; for Manne, misogyny is a system in which men can participate regardless of their individual sexism.

From the beginning of *Identity Crisis*, despite the not-so-subtle jabs at women and femininity, Ralph is set up as definitely not sexist. He is protecting Lorraine and loves Sue very much; there is no way he could do those things if he hated women. This contradiction is what Manne calls the "naïve conception," which makes misogyny "a psychologically puzzling and predictably rare phenomenon in what ought to be its native habitat: social environments with patriarchal norms and expectations. For, when women know their place, what's to hate, exactly? Why would even the least enlightened of men insist on biting the hand that soothes and serves him?" (31) Indeed, Ralph tells Lorraine that Sue is preparing for his yearly surprise party and that, since she enjoys it, he

encourages her even though he always knows when it is and what the gift will be. Another instance of dramatic irony, as Sue's has finally surprised Ralph this year with a pregnancy announcement, which increases the importance of her death as a loss of masculinity through his legacy. Sue like Lorraine is weak and needs to be protected by men like Ralph, who, because he is so sensitive and caring, according to the "naïve conception," is obviously not a misogynist.

This distinction between perceived misogyny and a system of misogyny is an important one. If this idea could become dominant in conversations about sexual abuse, gender identity, and feminism in general, it could help society better navigate these rough, ever-changing waters. In a system of misogyny, men do not hate all women and may not intend violence against them at all, but if faced with the breakdown of hegemonic masculinity, their reaction will seek to normalize the hierarchy that upholds the patriarchal society.

After her death, another manifestation of weak womanhood comes in the form of Sue's rape. The comic reveals that sometime in the past, Sue had been brutally attacked and raped by the villain Doctor Light. To protect their other loved ones, the JLA decided Zatanna would attempt to reprogram Light's mind toward less violence.

The depiction of Sue's rape is more graphic in my estimation than Barbara's shooting. The pages from *Killing Joke*, with their classic nine-panel grid structure feels less chaotic, and in particular, the panel of Barbara falling backward, her image looking like she is stuck in midair, makes it feel like everything is happening in slow motion. Barbara's sexual assault happens off panel, which could be argued is a form of fridging, but it also helps lessen the trauma to the reader of the shared experience.

In *Identity Crisis*, the composition of the panels in the two-page spread (where left and right page of the fold work together to tell a part of the story) is nontraditional; size, shape, and number of panels vary, which contributes to a chaotic, frenetic reaction. Rather than the three-quarter framing of Barbara, these panels are extreme close-ups of facial reactions or snapshots of action with a focus on particular body parts, like the bottom left panel, in which Light grabs Sue by the hair and yanks her back. Only his hands and the back of her head are visible as he appears to grab her from the gutter, the blank space outside the frame of the panel. This particular panel also contains Ralph's commentary: "She told me she fought. I hope she fought." Sue's experience of trauma is silenced both by having this flashback narrated by Ralph and by the JLA's decision to wipe the memory of her attacker rather than seek justice.

In their study of how sexual assault was presented in comic books, Garland and Branch's findings pointed to the fact that comics "support a number of rape myths such as victim blaming (i.e., job choice, dressing provocatively, being out alone, or being under the influence)" (84). The rape in *Identity Crisis* is no exception, and, in fact, is indicative of the problems Garland and Branch explain come from perpetuating such myths. Like Barbara, Sue is attacked because she is associated with superheroes (similar to the job choice myth). Additionally, as Ralph's narration over the flashback details next, she put herself in danger by going to the satellite alone.

The next page shows mostly extreme close-ups of Sue's face or her hands as the sexual assault happens off panel, just beyond the frame. Ralph's narration continues in six boxes on this page (versus Sue's three short dialogue bubbles of her resistance): "Years later, I found out she was up there simply because she was bored." He goes on to

explain that she said there was nothing on TV she wanted to watch, so Sue went up to the roof to look at the stars: “That’s all she wanted.”

The last two panels take up the full width of the page. From the left is Doctor Light’s hand holding Sue’s arm down as wavy lines around her fingers indicate she is struggling. This action is aligned to the left against the crease of the book, while the right half of the panel is a view of the stars from the desk of the satellite towards which Sue is facing as Light assaults her. Bottom right is Ralph’s narration over the scene, simply: “A Quiet Night.”

The last panel has the same composition but a little closer, and now Sue’s hand has stopped moving. Ralph’s narration continues: “Looking at the stars.” Setting aside the very visceral emotional response the composition of these pages causes, again Ralph’s narration reveals disturbing misogynist undertones.

Some of the classic rape myths about victims are here; she went to the satellite alone, which constitutes “at-risk behaviors that placed them in contact with criminal masterminds” because of her “association with superheroes” (Garland and Branch 84). Here is strong evidence that Sue is vulnerable, both as a woman who would put herself in a dangerous position and because of her association with superheroes.

As Garland and Branch put it, “focusing on victims and victim behavior creates an environment where perpetrators of sexual violence can thrive” (84). This insight is in keeping with the overall deconstructionist theme of *Identity Crisis*; if doubt is cast on Sue because of her behavior, hegemonic masculinity is less threatened. Ralph’s comment that he hopes she fought back also dictates the way in which people think sexual assault survivors should act, as well as calling into question whether the depiction presented is

really true at all, and not just Ralph's imagination of the assault. Since only the Flash because of his super speed saw Doctor Light attacking Sue before the rest of the team showed up, and Sue is now dead, her truth is as silent as the "Quiet Night," Ralph's words echo on the page.

The conclusion these pages suggest is that Sue was raped because she was alone in the JLA headquarters, reinforcing the idea that women invite violence on themselves by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sue's death and rape strengthen the claim of hegemonic masculinity that men are in power because of their strength, and others are not because of an inherent weakness.

The other female characters of *Identity Crisis* support this idea. In the later confrontation between Doctor Light, the mercenary Deathstroke, and the JLA, Zatanna and Dinah (Black Canary) are quickly overpowered and then shown littered around the fight radius in more prone positions than the male superheroes. Wally (Flash), who was stabbed with a katana, is back on his feet a few panels later, but Zatanna, who was only punched in the liver, lies vulnerable on the ground. When the other heroes fall, the reader sees the action fully depicted in the panels, but when Dinah goes down the action happens off panel, the next panel shows her already on the ground from behind, with her buttocks presented larger in the foreground and framing the action of the male characters. Furthermore, all the female characters in *Identity Crisis* are introduced in relation to a male character—not some, or only sometimes; every time a major female character is introduced, it is in relation to their male counterpart: "Sue Dibny. Wife.", "Jean Loring. Divorce' " later "Lover.", and "Lois Lane. Soul Mate." James Olsen, a reporter from the Daily Planet, hits the nail on the head when he comments that the serial killer, confirmed

by a death threat to Lois Lane and the attack on Jean Loring, seems to be “pick[ing] off all the wives... strike where it really hurts, right?”

Women here are vulnerable, present a danger to men, and even themselves, pointing to the underlying misogyny of this narrative and underscoring that what these traumatic experiences “have in common is their social-cum-structural explanation: roughly, they must be part of a system that polices, punishes, dominates, and condemns those women who are perceived as an enemy or threat to the patriarchy” (Manne 34). Jean Loring, as it turns out, is the premiere example in *Identity Crisis*; she represents the Women in Refrigerators category of mental illness turning to villainy.

Jean is a liberated woman who has seen the error of her "feminist" ways and wants back into patriarchy. Similar to Carol's narrative, the story emphasizes her complicity in upholding and desire for the hegemonic masculinity she once rejected. A lawyer, Jean is the epitome of independent career woman, without being an actual superhero herself. A framed copy of the cover of the in-universe *Persons* magazine, with an article on Jean titled “Ms. Atom: On Divorce, Going Public, and The Little Man,” features prominently in several of her story's panels. The magazine calls her “Ms. Atom” instead of Ms. Loring, even though she is already divorced, according to the headline. Jean cannot be in the magazine as herself on her own merits, only in reference to her ex. The magazine makes several reoccurring appearances throughout the story, like a leitmotif pointing to how she went wrong by leaving the Atom, otherwise known as Ray Palmer, and compounded that wrong by trying to get some kind of fame out of it.

The main plot of *Identity Crisis* hinges on events set in motion by Jean's determination to get Ray back. That she framed this symbol of her attachment to her ex-

husband foreshadows the later revelation of her guilt; the frame's glass is broken, exemplifying the danger for women in stepping outside the private sphere reserved for "good" women.

Jean went off on her own, for reasons that are unclear, and the narrative has corrected itself to punish her, turning her into a super villain with fewer morals than the criminals from Ralph Dibny's original stakeout. When those criminals start to run off after accidentally shooting Bolt, the mercenary man they were there to meet, he shames one of them into at least calling the police, suggesting that even these criminals have some empathy. In contrast, Jean also accidentally commits violence when she causes the brain aneurysm that leads to Sue Dibny's death, but instead of calling for help, she sets Sue's body on fire to cover her tracks.

Jean initially seems to embody the "strong independent woman" cliché mentioned above. She tells the Atom, when he flirts with her, "I don't like mushy stuff." But as soon as they are back together, her dialogue takes a turn for the submissive, as she crawls toward him in bed, asking: "Doesn't every woman want her buttons pushed?"

This apparently dual identity is explained by Neumann and Parks' observation, "[T]he two major perceptions that have been attached to women trying to move beyond the social constraints imposed upon them by a patriarchy society are the mannish intellectual or the oversexed femme fatale" (296). The duality also echoes the later revelation that Jean is secretly a psychotic narcissist or sociopath who does not care that she left a trail of bodies in her wake.

The reason her original relationship with the Atom dissolved is unclear. Whether this ambiguity was intentional does not matter, because the system of misogyny (rather

than the naïve conception) applies to the male creators as well as the characters. These gaps, either in Ray or Jean's memories (a possibility, since altering memories comes up often in this story) or in Brad Meltzer's storytelling, cast more doubt on Jean. Early in the book, Ray says Jean walked out on him and makes a quip about how she still got half of everything. This depiction characterizes Jean early on not only as a deviant female for leaving her male counterpart, but also the worst type of lawyer and woman: a ruthless one. However, this information is given just before she signs back her half of Ray's patents as a sign of goodwill.

This action indicates that Jean may have had a change of heart, despite the mystery of her original reasons for leaving in the first place. However, this scene logically does not fit with Ray's thoughts after the revelation that Jean was Sue's killer; Ray then remembers "there was a reason we broke up." Originally, Ray indicated that she left on her own, but after Jean is unmasked, it is implied they broke up because Ray thought she was heartless. In any case, Jean obviously regrets that decision, as her motivation for the villainy of *Identity Crisis* was to get him back. The message that *Identity Crisis* is giving us is similar to Carol's story in *Avengers* #200—women are unstable, and unstable women are a danger to both the patriarchy and other women, especially if they are supposed to be supporting a man.

The two women not attached to men in the story both indicate the danger of unstable women. Zatanna is complicit in silencing Sue's rape by agreeing to wipe both her and Light's memory. As a result of her uncertainty or inexperience (it is not clear which), Zatanna loses control when she tries to use her powers on Doctor Light, and the guilt of lobotomizing him as well as lying to her teammates results in a weakening of her

abilities. Ralph Dibny mentions that she should be the most powerful team member, yet Deathstroke dispatches her right away in the battle. In the supplemental material for the hardback edition, Meltzer writes that one of his aims for Zatanna was to explain why she was not as powerful as she could be. Rather than expanding her powers and exploring new territory for the character, he gives her past trauma to explain her weakness on the team; however, all this does is to contribute to the overall idea that women are weak and potentially unstable. Superpowered women are deviant because they are invading the male space and cannot control their own powers.

As previously pointed out, deviant femininity is often coded as man-like and violent. In *Identity Crisis*, for instance, Wonder Woman tortures a man for an hour with her lasso of truth, only to find out he was innocent and knew nothing about the crime. At the end of the story arc Lorraine calls to tell her dad she's returning home, she has decided to give up her superheroine identity as Firehawk. In the course of trying to track down Sue's killer, she violently tortures suspects. After, the true killer is revealed and her actions were all for nothing, Lorraine would rather return to the patriarchy her father represents, then end up as Jean. Dinah, does not have super powers and is firmly contained by the male element Oliver, her husband and teammate, represents. So, she is not deviant as the other women, but is weak nonetheless because she is a woman.

The fact that men, such as Bruce (Batman), Oliver (The Green Arrow), Mister Miracle, and Ray (The Atom), are prominent in discovering the truth as well as deciding what to do with Jean reasserts the patriarchy. In the end, Jean gets what she wants: Ray tells the asylum staff to, "Take care of my wife." But Jean must face justice and be put

back in her place. The issue ends with a newspaper heading that reads, "Atom's Wife Tortured by Inmates."

Making Jean Loring the villain of this storyline reinforces the idea that women are unstable, especially if not contained by a masculine force. Neumann and Parks explain: "[I]f femininity in comics means largely being the subject instead of the actor of violence, then the question arises about the femininity of violent women characters" (293). The deviant femininity presented by Jean is the cause of her violent actions and their deadly consequences. Sue Dibny's happy marriage to Ralph is contrasted by Jean's broken divorce with Ray. Sue is a happy homemaker, going out of her way to create a mystery for Ralph to solve every year ending in a surprise party. It even turns out she was carrying his child; the most important American ideal of motherhood (as stated by *Avengers* #200) was in her future. Jean, on the other hand, is an independent lawyer who walked out on Ray and took him for all he was worth, including half his patents. So not only is Jean a danger to the patriarchy in general, but also to other women who align themselves with those men, and finally the patriarchy's legacy.

VI. CONCLUSION

Each figure discussed in this study represents a distinct—often contradictory or paradoxical—narrative motif. Carol Danvers represents the idea that women should fall under the mom/girl next door/apple pie trifecta. Susan Storm represents the notion that if they do strive for those ideals, it is still not satisfactory. If women represent all these categories, they become too threatening to men. It is a paradox that women cannot be all these mutually exclusive character types at the same time. Barbara represents a change from women being independent to women serving as the motivation and supporting character.

The Killing Joke represents a move away from super men being perfect. If even super men are imperfect, then super women cannot be perfect either. *Identity Crisis* represents a further development toward not writing women out of the stories but, instead, using them to reinforce the same old misogynist themes.

This reinforcement is the real problem. The issue is not about violence against women or violent women, nor the idea that violence should not happen at all. Rather, the problem lies in the way stories about women are told and the meta-messages they carry. *Identity Crisis* shows a shift in the presentation of Women in Refrigerators, from women being mere objects to the alternative option of characters having female agency—but only if the narrative reinforces the same system of misogyny that fridging represents.

Therefore, the publication of and subsequent industry discussions about the Women in Refrigerators idea did not create the comics utopia of the future. There are still fridging events, although these instances might present themselves in new ways that render women, not only just secondary, but dangerous if they are not subordinate to men.

Again, this study is paramount to understanding the social effects these stories can have because of the effect pop culture can have on people in real life. As indicated by the defensive responses Simone received for the *Women in Refrigerators* site, female fans have suffered a backlash in comic fandom and narratives since *Women in Refrigerators*. Just as their heroes have experienced corrective narratives, so, too, have female fans experienced misogynist narrative formulas, perpetuated by male fans.

For many years women, were absent or treated badly in popular culture storylines, but more recently they could no longer be ignored. Nonetheless, misogyny masquerades as female agency. Additionally, all these traumatic events are created within a historical context. Big changes for Carol and Susan came out of Reagan Era conservative ideals. *Killing Joke* started a trend of deconstructing heroic ideas during the collapse of the Cold War and the numerous armed conflicts of George H. W. Bush's term in office. Again, deconstructing the superhero would make a return in 2004, during George W. Bush's administration amid the fear and uncertainty of a post-9/11 world.

As long as the comics industry remains dominated by male creators and decision makers, the narratives will reflect their insecurities and seek to ease their anxiety at the expense of women. There are now more women in the industry making noise, thanks to digital and social media, preventing traumatic stories with no consequences from happening, even in the "Make America Great Again" era of President Trump. However, we must continue to examine patterns that support institutional misogyny in order to break or weaken them.

To solve a problem, it must first be recognized and articulated, a feat that the *Women in Refrigerators* site accomplished. It is still important to further analyze what

happened with this site and interpret the significance of its emergence, as I have attempted to initiate with the Superheroine Mystique identifier. Finally, scholars must attempt to identify possible solutions and pursue implementation of these remedies. This is the hard work the comics industry faces if its leaders truly wish to diversify, even out of pure economic, if not moral, motivations.

As different ideas became popular in comics, they clashed with what was happening in society. Women characters became collateral damage. The recognition of the variations on Women in Refrigerators was pointing to this pattern. After this website renewed the debate over women in comics, narratives started to include female characters who wished to live outside the roles of mother (maternal), apple pie (sexual), or girl next door (wife). However, to satisfy the Superheroine Mystique, these deviant women are called crazy and painted as villains. These characterizations are not far off from real life harassment of outspoken women in comics fandom, especially online. Until more analysis offers a critique of these historic patterns, progress will be stunted by harmful stereotypes and violent corrective narratives.

Women once needed to conform to these outdated American ideals of femininity, but more and more, women have continued to make it clear that they do not want to be categorized. In fact, as Betty Friedan reveals, women have always been unhappy with such restrictive gender roles. After the appearance of the Women in Refrigerators list, some comics attempted to evolve in order to try to appeal to female readers. However, the industry's half-hearted attempts have only caused ire from both sides of the debate.

Women still recognize negative stereotypes and hyper-sexualized reflections of themselves on the pages of these new "lady" comics, while some male fans feel the

industry is pandering to these “social justice warriors.” These people may not represent real fans at all, but simply readers who seek another battleground for the growing unrest over social norms that long oppressed them. In reality, these marginalized groups simply want to see themselves reflected in the media they consume.

There is a history of institutional misogyny in comics. Even comics fans agree that most mainstream comics are written by men, for men, about men. That is the definition of patriarchy. When the focus is only on men, women are indeed acceptable collateral damage. Recently, through the interconnectedness of the internet, there has been a rise in female fans and creators announcing their presence, and demanding stories that appeal to and are about women. There has been considerable push-back by the male-dominated comics community to these changes. However, it makes economic sense that, if comics want to stay relevant, they will have to start appealing to an audience made up of more than white males.

The reality is that the portion of the population long-ignored by the comics’ market is more than half of the potential audience. That portion represents the majority of America now, which is not white and not male. Everyone needs an aspirational example to live up to. Now that comics are expanding again into other mediums, and especially into stories for younger readers, we have to make sure that the messages portrayed by these characters are good ones, and that these narratives do not perpetuate antiquated ideas of what men and women should be like. Putting so much pressure on male heroes, and by extension men, to be everything all the time creates toxic masculinity. Enforcing strict gender roles hurts all people, not just women. The rigid way we portray masculinity matters just as much as how we portray femininity.

One of the major limitations of my study is the focus on gender roles. But as my theoretical research has taught me, there are sociopolitical systems that are policed by hegemonic masculinity, such as race, class, and sexual identity. The next step is to address how this pattern of systemic misogyny—established in this study as a cause of the phenomenon of Women in Refrigerators—affects other marginalized groups in the comics community. It is important to connect pop culture not just to gender perspective, but the deepening race and class divisions in America.

My thesis focused on parsing the data given by the *Women in Refrigerators* list and then analyzing main events from each category to see how the trope worked within the comics themselves. However, the concept of “fridging” has bled over into other media, such as film and television, just as the heroines themselves have found more representation in these formats.

Another possible avenue for further work would expand the theory of the Superheroine Mystique to cover any powerful female character whose agency is diminished to reassert the patriarchy and to reduce them to an object, not just those in comics. Objects are disposable, and these kinds of narratives perpetuate the cycle of toxic masculinity plaguing American society, as evidenced by the recent Women’s March, #MeToo, and #TimesUp movements.

Comics, as a male-dominated industry, is the perfect mirror of our patriarchal culture. Female superheroes have the power to subvert the patriarchy but are limited by a long history of policing by undermining their abilities and storylines. By using critical theory and close reading to expand the Women in Refrigerator’s idea beyond a buzzword,

the comics industry can begin the true work of superheroes—fighting for justice for the marginalized and victims of society.

WORKS CITED

- Brown, Jeffrey A. *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*. University Press of Mississippi, 2011,
<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/alltitles/docDetail.action?docID=10447295>.
- . "Supermoms? Maternity and the Monstrous-Feminine in Superhero Comics." *Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics*, vol. 2, no. 1, June 2011, pp. 77–87,
doi:10.1080/21504857.2011.576885.
- Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993.
- Bryne, John. "A Small Loss." *Fantastic Four* #267. New York: Marvel Comics. June 1984.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Edited by Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Cocca, Carolyn. *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2016.
- . "The 'Broke Back Test': A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of Portrayals of Women in Mainstream Superhero Comics, 1993–2013." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, vol. 5, no. 4, Oct. 2014, pp. 411–28,
doi:10.1080/21504857.2014.916327.
- . "Re-Booting Barbara Gordon: Oracle, Batgirl, and Feminist Disability Theories." *Imagetext: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2014. EBSCOhost, libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2016026354&site=eds-live&scope=site.

- Connell, R. W. and James W Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender and Society*, no. 6, 2005, p. 829. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1177/0891243205278639.
- Conway, Gerry. *Ms. Marvel #1* New York: Marvel Comics. 1977.
- D'amore, Laura Mattoon. "Invisible Girl's Quest for Visibility: Early Second-Wave Feminism and the Comic Book Superheroine." *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture, 1900 to Present*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2008, <http://search.proquest.com/openview/828f2db2e194dbf655af7cd9546e268c/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=2026687>.
- . "The Accidental Supermom: Superheroines and Maternal Performativity, 1963–1980." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 45, no. 6, 2012, pp. 1226–48, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jpcu.12006/full>.
- Di Liddo, Annalisa. *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, ©2009., 2009. Great comics artists series. EBSCOhost, libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b4112555&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York, Norton. 1974.
- Garland, Tammy S., et al. "Blurring the Lines: Reinforcing Rape Myths in Comic Books." *Feminist Criminology*, vol. 11, no. 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 48–68. *CrossRef*, doi:10.1177/1557085115576386.

- Groensteen, Thierry. *System of Comics*, University Press of Mississippi, 2007. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/lib/txstate/detail.action?docID=619195>.
- Horeck, Tanya. *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film*. London: Routledge, 2004., 2004. EBSCOhost, libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b2350673&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Inness, Sherrie. *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. ebrary, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/alltitles/docDetail.action?docID=10135608>.
- Knight, Gladys. *Female Action Heroes: A Guide to Women in Comics, Video Games, Film, and Television*, ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010.
- Kukkonen, Karin. *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels*, Wiley, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/txstate/detail.action?docID=1245462>.
- Madrid, Mike. *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines*. Ashland, Oregon: Exterminating Angel Press, 2016. EBSCOhost, libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b4003186&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Manne, Kate. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017., 2017. EBSCOhost, libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b4381361&site=eds-live&scope=site.

- Meltzer, Brad. *Identity Crisis*. New York: DC Comics, 2005.
- Moore, Alan. *The Killing Joke: The Deluxe Edition*. New York: DC Comics, 2008.
- Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Basingstoke: England; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009., 2009. Language, discourse, society series. EBSCOhost, libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true &db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b1755431&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Munford, Rebecca and Melanie Waters. *Feminism & Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2014. EBSCOhost, libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true &db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b3817562&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Nicosia, Matthew. "Performing the Female Superhero: An Analysis of Identity Acquisition, Violence, and Hypersexuality in DC Comics." *Dissertation Abstracts International*, vol. 78, no. 6, Dec. 2017. EBSCOhost, libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true &db=mzh&AN=2017832580&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Phillips, Nickie D. and Staci Strobl. *Comic Book Crime: Truth, Justice, and the American Way*. New York: New York University Press, 2013. Alternative criminology series. EBSCOhost, libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true &db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b3794214&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Reiheld, Alison. "'The Event That Was Nothing': Miscarriage as a Liminal Event." *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2015, pp. 9–26.

- Robbins, Trina. *The Great Women Superheroes*. Northampton, Mass.: Kitchen Sink Press, 1996. EBSCOhost,
[libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true
&db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b1421343&site=eds-live&scope=site](http://libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b1421343&site=eds-live&scope=site).
- Robinson, Lillian S. *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes*. New York: Routledge, 2004. EBSCOhost,
[libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true
&db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b1584302&site=eds-live&scope=site](http://libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b1584302&site=eds-live&scope=site).
- Sielke, Sabine. *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002.
EBSCOhost,
[libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true
&db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b4106518&site=eds-live&scope=site](http://libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b4106518&site=eds-live&scope=site).
- Shooter, Jim. *Avengers #200*. New York: Marvel Comics. 1984.
- Simone, Gail. "Women in Refrigerators." *Women in Refrigerators*. 1999.
<http://lby3.com/wir/index.html>
- . "WiR – Fan Gail Simone responds." *Women in Refrigerators*. 1999.
<http://lby3.com/wir/r-gsimone.html>
- . "WiR – Fan Gail Simone responds." *Women in Refrigerators*. 1999.
http://lby3.com/wir/r-4_2899.html
- Strickland, Carol A. "The Rape of Ms. Marvel." Carol A Strickland.com
<http://carolastrickland.com/comics/msmarvel/>

Stuller, Jennifer K. *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology*. I.B. Tauris, 2010. *ebrary*,

<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/alltitles/docDetail.action?docID=10424550>.

The Superhero Reader, edited by Charles Hatfield, et al., University Press of Mississippi, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/lib/txstate/detail.action?docID=1113445>.

Tyrrell, William Blake. *Amazons, a Study in Athenian Mythmaking*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, c1984., 1984. EBSCO*host*,
[libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true
&db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b1276749&site=eds-live&scope=site](http://libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b1276749&site=eds-live&scope=site).

Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001., 2001