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Surveying the Field: Recent Scholarship on Superheroines

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- 1 The last decade produced a veritable flood of Hollywood adaptations of comic books. As the summer of 2011 approaches, we can expect to see several more summer blockbusters featuring crime-busting superbeings in capes and tights. We've seen modern interpretations of perennial crowd-pleasers like Batman, Superman, and Spider-Man as well as lesser-known characters such as Iron Man, the Punisher, Ghost Rider, the Spirit, Jonah Hex, Constantine, and now, Captain America and the Green Lantern. However, the list of forthcoming live action superhero films notably leaves out one of the most prominent names in comic book history: Wonder Woman. Furthermore, when superheroines do appear on the big screen, they frequently end up killed off permanently (Jean Grey/Pheonix in the 2006 film

X-Men: The Last Stand, Silver Fox in 2009's *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*) or temporarily (Elektra in the 2003 film *Daredevil*, Sue Storm in 2007's *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*, Liz Sherman in 2004 *Hellboy*, Patience Phillips in the 2004 flop, *Catwoman*), or otherwise depowered (Rogue in *X-Men: The Last Stand*) before the end credits roll. These decisions suggest that Hollywood believes comics' most powerful superheroines are less of a draw than their masculine counterparts. However, the work of a bevy of comics historians say otherwise. Trina Robbins' *The Great Women Superheroes* (1996) is a well-illustrated guide to the super women, those who remain famous today as well as those lost to history, who dedicated their powers to fighting crime. Mike Madrid's *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (2009) breaks the exploits of those women down decade by decade. Lillian S. Robinson's *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes* (2004) follows the twists and turns in the careers of the most beloved and long-lasting girl wonders, including Wonder Woman herself, Sue Storm of the Fantastic Four, the X-Men's Scarlet Witch, and the Sensational She-Hulk.¹ Finally, Jennifer K. Stuller's *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology* (2010) explores the impact of superheroines on film and television. Together, all four volumes function as feminist recovery projects. They prove that women have *always* been a part of the comics world. Furthermore, they were often quite popular.

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and Superheroes (2004) follows the twists and turns in the careers of the most beloved and long-lasting girl wonders, including Wonder Woman herself, Sue Storm of the Fantastic Four, the X-Men's Scarlet Witch, and the Sensational She-Hulk.^[1] Finally, Jennifer K. Stuller's *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology* (2010) explores the impact of superheroines on film and television. Together, all four volumes function as feminist recovery projects. They prove that women have *always* been a part of the comics world. Furthermore, they were often quite popular.

- 3 Robbins focuses on the big picture, searching out women who have faded from the popular imagination and tracing the shifts within the comics industry that caused desire for and interest in female heroes to wax and wane. Madrid is more interested in fleshing out superheroine archetypes like "The Debutante," who used a convenient trust fund to finance her adventures (6), "The Girlfriend," who took up crime fighting just to stay close to her more famous superhero partner (53), or "The Victory Girls" who fanned patriotic fervor during World War II (16). Robinson traces the ins and outs of comics continuity, explaining why individual characters evolve (or, in the case of a few, devolve) over time and across writers and artists. For example, she charts the repeated ret-conning of Wonder Woman's origins and gives an account of the transformation of Sue Storm from a mere Invisible Girl into an Invisible Woman. Lastly, Stuller connects the superwomen of comics to the modern day heroines who have inherited their mantle in the worlds of film and television, such as Buffy Summers and Xena, Warrior Princess.
- 4 All four authors write about the strong ties between the rise of the feminist movement and the improved quantity and quality of superheroines that can be found on the newsstands. However, each book represents a different perspective on the world of comics. Like Madrid, Robinson was a self-confessed fan, and they both dedicate space in their books to describe the way in which they came to love the medium. In fact, in addition to his writing, Madrid is also a prolific builder of superhero models, as his personal website demonstrates ("Heaven4Heroes"). But, in addition to her role as a fan, Robinson was also a feminist scholar, and so the tone of her book is slightly more formal than is Madrid's, and her sourcing is much more robust. Stuller also identifies as a media scholar and critic, while Robbins writes as a comics industry insider. Robbins first began working on the medium during the underground comix revolution of the 1970s, contributing to titles like *It Ain't Me, Babe*, and *Wimmen's Comix* (Robbins, *Girls to Grrrlz* 85-86), and she later wrote *Go Girl!*, a superhero title put out by Image Comics ("Trina Robbins: Writer and Herstorian").
- 5 One potential criticism of Madrid, Robinson, and Stuller is that they spend a great deal of time discussing the *stories* being told by the comics, while neglecting to tend to their visual composition. Their works do not provide illustrations (though Madrid created a space on his website to host the

images that are missing from his book), which makes some of their attempts at close readings of costumes or image-textual analyses of individual panels awkward. Robbins arguably goes too far in the opposite direction. Her text is packed full of images, but she assumes that many of them simply speak for themselves rather than interpreting them for us and explaining her particular selections.

- 6 Despite these minor problems, all four volumes should be lauded for laying the groundwork for further scholarship on the women of comics' most well-known genre. However, in their zeal to shine a light on gender relations in the various Halls of Justice to be found in comic-dom, they collectively leave many important questions unexamined. Most glaring of these is an examination of the ways in which race plays into the formation of their subjects of study. For example, Madrid often fails to notice the ways that comics writers have used racial cues to "shore up" a super woman's femininity. In fact, in a few passages, he makes the same move himself. Take the case of the X-Men's Psylocke, who, Madrid writes, was transformed from a young British girl into an "Oriental femme fatal" (275) in an attempt to boost her sex appeal for the male fan base. Madrid uses the episode to illustrate the 1990s trend of "sexing up" the superheroine, but he fails to think through what it might mean to link Asian bodies with the height of erotic fan boy appeal or to historicize the ways in which that particular link came about.
- 7 Robbins and Stuller, on the other hand, engage briefly in racial analysis in that they are both careful to note that women of color are underrepresented in superhero comics. For example, Robbins laments that, even today, "Latina and other nonwhite superheroines are still very much in the minority" (183), and she takes time to praise the existence of rare exceptions to this rule like Storm of the X-Men, and the Dark Horse label's Martha Washington (176). Stuller also pays homage to groundbreaking heroines of color such as *Star Trek's* Lt. Nyota Uhura (31), Pam Greer's blaxploitation heroine, Coffy (51), and *Dark Angel's* mixed-race, genetically engineered avenger, Max (80). However, neither volume dedicates much critical focus to the ways in which race is deployed by texts featuring superheroines of color, and thus, they are never able to take apart the ways in which being racially marked differently inflects the portrayals of those heroines. They are unable to flesh out what it might mean to be black, a woman, and super all at once or to spell out the ways in which white superheroines meet with different difficulties than superheroines of color, both within the drawn worlds that they inhabit and in the popular culture at large.
- 8 Robinson's book, on the other hand, deals at great length with the story of Scarlet Witch, a nonwhite woman who finds herself in a position of authority within Marvel's super-team, the Avengers (121). However, reading Robinson's text, one would never know that the Scarlet Witch was a woman of color (she is Gypsy, on her mother's side of the family, and Jewish, from her father, the

supervillain Magneto's side). This omission might leave readers assuming that she is white. In fact, the entire book feels as though it has been purposefully rendered colorblind when it comes to racial issues; the skin color that is mentioned most often is the She-Hulk's unique shade of green. It is disappointing that these authors did not devote space within their celebration of the history of heroines to complicate or problematize their subjects, to examine the ways in which the first female heroes might contribute to the oppression of others even as they open up new roles for white women or to examine the ways in which race and gender-based oppressions intersect within the life of a superwoman of color.

- 9 Also of potential interest is the fact that two of the more recently published volumes (Robinson's and Madrid's) curiously neglect to weigh in on a controversy that has haunted discussions of women in comics since 1999: the fate of the women in refrigerators (Simone). *Birds of Prey* and *Wonder Woman* writer Gail Simone coined the term in honor of Alex DeWitt, the lover of Ron Marz's Green Lantern who was murdered and stuffed into the aforementioned appliance. Simone argues that women in superhero comics have historically been far more likely than men to suffer terrible fates like murder, rape, torture, disempowerment, and permanent disfigurement, and she devotes a website to cataloging, or some might say memorializing, the many women who have suffered these ends. Robinson fails to address the existence such a trope at all, and Madrid is seemingly unaware of its existence, writing that "only one heroine [Batgirl, otherwise known as Barbara Gordon, daughter of Police Commissioner Jim Gordon] had a brush with tragedy, and never recovered from it" (239). One assumes that he could not have written such after having perused Simone's exhaustive catalog of brutality. Luckily, Stuller's text fills this void with a fascinating section on both the phenomenon in question and the critical female comics readers who took to the blogosphere to vent about their sometimes frustrating relationships to fandom in a male-dominated medium in the wake of Simone's coining of the term (142-146).
- 10 These books do the important work of blazing the trail for what will hopefully be an avalanche of academic work to come on superheroines. They currently define the field, but it is important that future scholars complicate and deconstruct the foundation they have built. The category of "woman" (and the subcategory of "superwoman") cannot be understood on the basis of gender alone. It must account for the differences in experience that arise from intersections of the categories of race, class, sexuality, age, and ability as well. Robbins, Robinson, Madrid, and Stuller celebrate the uncovering (or recovering) of a history of superheroines that many assumed did not exist or at least went no deeper than Wonder Woman and Supergirl. In the next decade of scholarship on the subject, there will be time to question and perhaps even to criticize that history.

Notes

[1] Ms. Robinson died of ovarian cancer in 2006. This reviewer is grateful to her for her contribution to the field of feminist cultural studies.

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