Female superheroes, rhetorical reading, and feminist imagination: a study of college-aged readers and comic book reading practices using eye tracking and cued retrospective interviews

Aimee Vincent
University at Albany, State University of New York, vincent.aimee@gmail.com

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by

Aimee E. Vincent

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation uses feminist analysis and rhetorical genre studies to analyze the strategies used by college-aged students to read female superhero comic books. The dissertation responds to the growing trend of literature and writing instructors assigning comic books and graphic novels under the untested assumption that these texts are readily accessible to college students. This assumption contradicts what we have learned from studies of rhetorical reading strategies that found that readers analyze texts most effectively when readers are familiar with the text’s genre. In addition, the assumption ignores the specific rhetorical contexts of comics, including a problematic but powerful narrative that comics readers are primarily straight white men. This dissertation presents an exploratory study of the actual comic-book reading practices of a diverse group of eight college-aged students gathered through a combination of surveys, eye-tracking, and interviews using cued retrospective reporting. Its findings firmly position comic-book reading practices as a form of rhetorical reading that is dependent on genre knowledge and shaped by a rhetorical context that frequently excludes marginalized readers.

The dissertation begins by articulating key formal conventions and ideological contexts for the comics medium. Then, it argues in favor of analyzing comics through the lens of feminist imagination, a form of rhetoric that persuasively uses creative texts to serve feminist goals. The dissertation offers an analysis of feminist imagination in Batwoman: Elegy and Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight that explains how the comics work against existing tropes and expectations within the comics medium to produce complex, powerful female superhero protagonists in both the text and the images. The dissertation then compares the author’s feminist reading with data gathered empirically from the study participants. Participants read excerpts from both comics while using eye tracking technology that pairs an infrared sensor, which tracks how students’
eyes move as they read, with software that overlays a map of their eye movements onto an image of each comic-book page. Recordings of these gaze trails facilitated cued retrospective follow-up interviews in which participants watched portions of their eye tracking maps to cue a reconstruction of the thought process they had used when they first read the comics.

Participants’ expertise as comic book readers had impacts on their reading practices. Those with prior experience as comic book readers stood out as skilled rhetorical readers through their knowledge of genre conventions. They had a stronger sense of agency as readers than the novice readers, having greater confidence in their interpretations while accepting that processing both the images and the text on each page would take time. Additionally, these expert readers had a wider range of evidence available for assessing the presence of feminist imagination in the comic books. Novice readers identified their beliefs about gender and comics as a reason they had not read comics prior to the study. In comparison with the study author’s positive feminist analysis of the comics, participants were more ambivalent in their response to depictions of gender. The participants’ interest in gender analysis and ability to locate evidence to support their analysis were affected by their individual subjectivity, including demographics, comics reading experience, and fields of academic study. The findings caused the author to develop a more complex understanding of feminist imagination, in which feminist imagination can originate from both authors and readers. The dissertation concludes with recommendations for teaching reading strategies based on these findings that seek to ensure that all students can effectively read and respond to comics texts. The project demonstrates the importance of genre specificity within the study of visual and multimodal texts. It also models eye tracking and cued retrospective reporting as feminist research methods that facilitate collaborative research with study participants.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ii</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv</td>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Chapter 1: Methodology and Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>Chapter 2: Feminist Imagination in Batwoman and Captain Marvel Comics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>104</td>
<td>Chapter 3: Rhetorical Expertise and Genre Knowledge in College-Aged Comics Readers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>152</td>
<td>Chapter 4: College-Aged Reader Responses to Gender Ideology and Female Superhero Comics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>204</td>
<td>Appendix: Surveys Used in Stage 1 of Data Collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>208</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>213</td>
<td>Works Cited</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

This study, like so many rhetoric and composition studies before it, originates with a teaching failure in my classrooms. In my second semester of teaching as an English master’s student, I led two sections of First-Year Composition (FYC) that used a pop culture theme to shape the class readings. About two-thirds of the way through the semester, I assigned the first chapter from *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, as excerpted in Diana George’s and John Trimbur’s textbook, *Reading Culture*. *Persepolis* is an autobiographical graphic narrative, and the excerpt from *Reading Culture* depicts Satrapi as a child, forming a personal relationship with God. Satrapi does not align herself with any specific religion, but rather shows the author’s own vision of God as a bearded, enrobed old man who offers warm hugs and encouraging words. Satrapi decides she is going to become a prophet for her version of God and begins secretly writing a holy book that includes such childish rules as “everybody should have a car” (qtd. in George and Trimbur 377). The textbook includes the excerpt in its chapter on storytelling and frames the excerpt with a brief page discussing memoir and visual narrative.

On the day that my students were going to discuss *Persepolis*, I assumed that students would have enjoyed the reading and would be ready to practice some of our critical analysis and writing skills in relation to the text. However, I was completely unprepared for my students’ general response to the reading: they were so confused, and even resentful, about the comic itself that we spent the full class day in both of my classes unpacking the comic and addressing the students’ criticisms. In part, I made a common, rookie teacher mistake: I assumed that just because I loved something (comics), my students would too. This can happen with any kind of text or topic in any discipline, of course, but my students voiced a series of specific concerns about the comic itself that genuinely surprised me: the students did not seem to enjoy or even
understand the reading, because it did not meet their expectations for a) a comic or b) reading material that is fitting for a college classroom.

In light of the first problem, various students in both of my classes seemed confused on two main points: they did not know why this comic was not funny, and they did not know how to read the text. In these two classes, the majority of the students had exposure to comics through comic strips, and they were used to three or four panels in a neat row, in which the first few panels set up a joke and the final panel delivers the punch line. This comic did not meet their expectations, because it was several pages long and did not end with a joke. Even more surprising to me, several students confessed that they did not know where to look on the page. They did not understand the order in which they should read panels that covered a full page, and they did not understand conventions that I had assumed would be familiar to any college-aged reader, like the difference between a narration box and a speech bubble. When my second class of the day repeated most of the same concerns as my first class, I realized that I had made unfair assumptions about my students’ familiarity and comfort with the comics medium.¹

In light of the second problem, several students expressed disgust or even offense at being made to read something they associated with childhood in their adult education. *Persepolis* is a mature text, covering such topics as the Iranian Revolution and exploring themes like the author’s sense of isolation within her changing country. Satrapi wrote this comic for a mature audience, but for many students in my college classroom, the medium itself indicated that the text must be intended for children. They did not enjoy reading the excerpt and did not want to discuss the content because they felt it was beneath them as college students. I did my best to answer their questions and respond to their frustration. Then I wrote off this one day as a
teaching failure and moved on with writing instruction and a more traditional reading assignment in the next class.

Despite my sense that I had failed to make the comic work in light of my FYC course goals, those classes prepared me to think more critically about the cultural and pedagogical role of comics in an American college classroom. During my master’s program, I was in an academic moment when comics were becoming trendy in academia, so I had many opportunities to compare my own experiences with other English teacher-scholars. I began to notice that many pedagogical texts made similar mistakes to the ones I had made. As such, current scholarship on comics and pedagogy often asks teachers to make assumptions about how students will respond to comics.

Some teachers assume that freshmen will respond well to comics because they are easier to read than novels. English professors Jeffrey Kahan and Stanley Stewart begin their textbook, *Caped Crusaders 101: Composition through Comic Books*, with glowing reports about the large number of children and teens who willingly read comics on their own time. They cite statistics from the Simmons Market Research Bureau and summarize, “Teen comic readers go through some 72 million comics a month” (2). They hope that using comics in the classroom will “revive a love of reading”, particularly in English classrooms (1). In their introduction, the authors take an enthusiastic and thoughtful look at the multiple roles that comics hold as entertainment, big business, and possibly even literature. Within the book, they use comics in combination with literary criticism, such as an examination of race in Luke Cage comics and the role of capitalistic critique within the comics industry. But they also indicate that their underlying goal for comics in the classroom is to move students to other books. They argue, “If we can get you to think of comics as literature, telling similar stories, expressing similar concerns, then you might see the
role that other literature can play in your life.” (Kahan and Stewart 3, original emphasis). Kahan and Stewart value comic books, but they value them primarily as a means to an end. They do not offer any evidence that students will find in-depth literary analysis easier in comics than in novels, but they base their entire book on this premise. And because they value literacy as a verbal skill, they offer little attention to the complexity of words and images working together on a comics page.

Dale Jacobs has had a profound impact on the use of comics in composition pedagogy and argues for seeing comics as “a complex form of multimodal literacy” as opposed to “a debased form of word-based literacy” (“More” 20). In “More than Words: Comics as a Means of Teaching Multiple Literacies” Jacobs analyzes a page from the comic *Polly and the Pirates* and argues that “it is impossible to make full sense of the words on the page in isolation from the audio, visual, gestural, and spatial” elements on the page (“More” 22). He demonstrates his methods for making meaning from all these different registers in the comic and concludes

By complicating our view of comics so that we do not see them as simply an intermediary step to more complex word-based literacy, we can more effectively help students become active creators, rather than passive consumers, of meaning in their interactions with a wide variety of multimodal texts. In doing so, we harness the real power of comics in the classroom and prepare students for better negotiating their worlds of meaning.” (Jacobs “More” 24)

Jacobs offers a useful corrective to reading comics as a lesser form of literacy, and his articles about comics and multimodal literacy often serve as lovely odes to the pleasure he finds in reading comics.2 Yet, he does little to support his assumption that his enjoyment of comics will immediately translate to his students. Much like Kahan and Stewart, he seems to presume that
his students are already reading comics and our job as composition instructors is to develop professional value for a popular text that students already enjoy.

I also saw colleagues at conferences make assumptions that comics would seem fun and easy to their students. For example, one composition teacher suggested using the graphic narrative, *Fun Home*, by Alison Bechdel, as an accessible visual text in a composition class. When I asked how she planned to frame the difficult topics in the novel, including sexual abuse and suicide, she admitted that she had not actually used the text yet and had not thought about that problem. She seemed to be relying on the medium itself to render the mature content less shocking. I am not picking on this particular scholar for a lack of foresight; rather, this anecdote, alongside both my own experience and published scholarship in English studies, indicate broader trends of problematic thinking around comics in relation to college instruction and college readers.

**Assumptions about Comics within the Field of Rhetoric and Composition**

Many of us in English studies, including rhetoric and composition scholars, make similar assumptions that comics are easy, enjoyable texts that students prefer to read, at least in comparison to denser, more difficult canonical literature. Perhaps one of the most useful examples for thinking about rhetoric and composition scholars’ beliefs that comics are easy, fun, and approachable can be seen in the hybrid comic book/textbook, *Understanding Rhetoric: A Graphic Guide to Writing*. Two rhetoric scholars, Elizabeth Losh and Jonathan Alexander, and two cartoonists, Kevin and Zander Cannon, collaborated to create an FYC textbook in comics format. The textbook is an ambitious project that has been done with the best of intentions. In the introduction, the authors explain
We hoped that by emphasizing multimodal approaches to composing, we would engage student writers in thinking about their identities, contexts for their research, and effective writing processes. But we also wanted to create a book that students would actually want to read—a book that could make rhetoric interesting and maybe even enjoyable” (v).

Their introduction models two trends in rhetoric and composition’s approaches to comics: first, the authors assume that students will enjoy reading comics, and second, they connect comics to multiliteracies and multimodal composition.

Assumption 1: Comics are fun, and students will enjoy reading them.

My personal experiences ground my own resistance to an assumption about the accessibility of comics, but Understanding Rhetoric offers a useful case study to further analyze some of the problems with this assumption. To some extent, the authors’ predictions that students would enjoy reading a comic book/textbook were justified in the responses to the book. Many academic reviewers enjoyed the textbook and offered positive reviews that furthered both trends: collapsing comics into the umbrella concept of multimodal texts and assuming that comics translate to fun and easy reading for students. For example, Ken Lindblom’s review in the English Journal describes the book as an “extremely user-friendly guide to rhetorical theory for writing and reading. It’s also a lot of fun” (92, original emphasis). He “highly recommend[s]” the textbook for composition classrooms and reports that it was “a big hit with the students” he taught in an upper-level college rhetoric class (95). Molly J. Scanlon, writing in a special issue on “Comics, Multimodality, and Composition” in Composition Studies, offers a positive review of the rhetorical theory in the text and links her praise to student enjoyment, saying, “I have had more students complete the readings in Understanding Rhetoric than in any other textbook I
have assigned” (206). In the introduction to the second edition of the book, the authors note that they were overwhelmed by the enthusiasm that both teachers and students had for the first edition and stated that some teachers had “nothing but positive reviews from students” (v).

Taken in isolation, these reviews suggest that *Understanding Rhetoric* succeeded as an accessible and enjoyable text for students. Indeed, the overall reaction from rhetoric and composition scholars to the book has been extremely positive, and a third edition was published in 2021. There is ample evidence to suggest that *Understanding Rhetoric* is a successful and effective textbook for many teachers and students.

However, these positive reviews do not offer perspectives from students who did not find the textbook accessible or effective. While it’s difficult to compare the writers’ and instructors’ claims to students’ reactions to the textbook, a quick scan of the reviews for the first edition on Amazon suggests that students had mixed feelings about *Understanding Rhetoric*. Some reviews mirror the excitement and praise reported in the second edition introduction. A reviewer named Ryki exclaims, “I wish all my textbooks were graphic novels. I’m a visual learner, this book is captivating and so easy to follow.” However, other students express frustration with the medium. A reviewer writing online as C states, “I hated the comic book layout. It’s [sic] was a nightmare using this book.” Reviewer Jim Holleman offers this scathing assessment: “This is by far the most unusable, unreadable, and unhelpful book I’ve ever used in a college course. The comics are distracting…I’m overwhelmed by every page since it is completely unreadable.” Another student, named Joseph Hotto, expresses concerns similar to my FYC classes. He argues, “This is NOT a textbook, this is a comic book…First of all, the comics in the story distract the student…I am using this in my first semester English class, and I really don’t like it. The point of first year English composition is to prepare students for university level writing…and this book is
anything but formal.” Another reviewer named Cu Sidhe, who identifies themselves as a Master’s student in rhetoric and composition with a focus on graphic fiction, explains that the page layouts are frustrating, even as a regular comic-book reader: “Very often the pages feel cluttered and disorganized and the reader finds it difficult to trace a logical path through the text bubbles.”

These responses to Understanding Rhetoric indicate that some students respond positively to the use of comics (or at least this comic) in a college writing classroom, but other students find the medium bewildering and/or childish.

In my own anecdotal experience, I believe that these frustrations are wider spread among student readers than many teachers expect and by no means limited to the Understanding Rhetoric textbook. Teachers in both literature and rhetoric and composition studies seem excited to embrace comics as fun alternatives to more traditional academic genres, but English instructors as a whole do not seem prepared to grapple with the complexity of the medium, particularly when it leaves some students feeling lost and frustrated. Now that I have taught for years with comics in college-level English classrooms, I know that the beliefs that English academics hold about comics as fun, easy texts are not only untested, they are often wrong. My own teaching experiences, both in those first two FYC classes and in later comics-centered English classes that I taught as a PhD student, indicate that college-aged students hold strong opinions about comics, including what content is appropriate for comic books and what audience demographics should enjoy comic books. Yet, there is very little research available about those student beliefs and the impacts they have on college instruction. My personal experiences as both a teacher and developing academic have led me to believe that before academia can make the best use of comics as pedagogical tools, we need better information about the medium and, more specifically, how college students respond to comics.
I am not trying to be overly critical of *Understanding Rhetoric*—which does have many praiseworthy aspects—or teachers who use comics in their classroom. Just like Jacobs, and Losh and Alexander, I believe comics have a lot to offer college students. But I think that we as a field need to be more conscientious about the introduction of comics into our classrooms, and we need to be attentive to which students get excluded by assumptions that comics are easy-to-read texts that are well liked by student readers. It is easy enough to write off student complaints about their classroom texts as an inevitable problem, or to dismiss critical online reviews as students who blame the medium for their struggles rather than acknowledge issues in their own reading practices or study habits. However, responses to comics, like Joseph Hotto’s, that frame comics as childish or inappropriate for college classrooms may speak to bigger problems about the intersections between student identities, expectations for academic rigor, and the ongoing failures of universities to serve students from a class and/or cultural background that does not immediately mesh with academic expectations. These concerns have long been prevalent in pedagogical research. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks speaks about students from working class backgrounds, many of whom are people of color, who bring specific anxieties to college classrooms, such as meeting the demands of an academic space with very different requirements from their home discourses. She writes, “since these fears are rarely addressed…students caught in the grip of such anxiety often sit in classes feeling hostile, estranged, refusing to participate” (hooks 189). hooks reminds us that marginalized students’ negative reactions may come from valid sources of tension between their personal values and the values of the American university system.

Mike Rose notes that students with cultural and class backgrounds that do not prepare them for success in a research university are often labeled “remedial,” and he writes eloquently
about the varied challenges faced by these students, including the psychological effects of their awareness that universities see “underprepared students” as “deficient” (209, 211). In *Lives on the Boundary*, Rose argues that the curriculum for “underprepared students” in developmental English “teaches students that when it comes to written language use, they are children: they can only perform the most constrained and ordered of tasks, and they must do so under the regimented guidance of a teacher” (211). Students who are used to being seen as deficient might then respond to comics in the college classroom as one of many teaching strategies that are infantilizing. Some students might resist comics as a potentially racist and/or classist failure to teach marginalized students at the same level as privileged students. This is not the kind of concern that should be ignored.

**Assumption 2: Comics are just one of many multimodal texts.**

*Understanding Rhetoric* references the conflation of comics with multimodal literacies, but this conflation is widespread throughout the field of rhetoric and composition. Rhetoric and composition scholars frequently analyze comics in relationship to the growing importance of visual rhetorics and multimodal literacies that correspond to the increased importance of visual culture for millennial and Gen Z students. In a 2002 *College Composition and Communication* article, Diane George argues, “it is crucial to understand how very complicated and sophisticated is visual communication to students who have grown up in what by all accounts is an aggressively visual culture” (15). She briefly mentions comics as one location for visual culture. Other writers in rhetoric and composition have made similar arguments that visual rhetoric is an important field of study for contemporary scholars, including Mary Hocks, also in *College Composition and Communication*, Steve Westbrook in *College English*, and Marguerite Helmers.
and Charles A. Hill in their edited collection, *Defining Visual Rhetorics*. Visual rhetorics are also frequently studied in relation to the study of multimodal literacies or multiliteracies, such as those analyzed in recent monographs by Kristie Fleckenstein and Jason Palmeri. Yet, the growing importance of comics in rhetoric and composition within the study of visual rhetorics and multimodal rhetorics also includes some limitations.

The first problem with the field’s current focus on a broad analysis of visual rhetoric or multimodal rhetoric is that it often fails to provide scholarship and modes of analysis for specific visual genres and/or media, such as comics. Of particular importance to my project, much of the rhetoric and composition scholarship on comics focuses on the medium as simply one example of many multimodal texts that can be used in combination with each other. For example, Kevin Brooks suggests that *Understanding Comics*, a seminal comics studies text by Scott McCloud dedicated to introducing new readers to the particular features of the comics medium, can be used by composition instructors to create a heuristic for students reading and grappling with Marshall McLuhan’s *The Medium is the Massage*. Anne Frances Wysocki frequently mentions comics in her publications, including an explanatory chapter on multimodal analysis, “The Multiple Media of Texts,” as one of many types of texts that include visuals and images, making them a useful site for investigating visual literacy and cultural ideology about literacy broadly speaking. She also highlights two comics creators, Lynda Barry and Alison Bechdel, in a short response article in *College Composition and Communication* that discusses ethics and teaching multimodal texts.

Within the rhetoric and composition field’s flagship journal, *College Composition and Communication*, only six articles (by Ken Donelson in 1977, George in 2002, Jacobs and Wysocki in 2007, and Brooks and Trimbur in 2009) as of December 2021 have included some
study of comics. Only Brooks, Jacobs, Trimbur, and Donelson analyze comics at some length with specific examples of comics texts. All the authors use comics within a larger argument about broad visual or multimodal analysis and/or literacy, although Trimbur does discuss the genre specificities of comics within his larger argument. Other journals in our field, like Composition Forum, Kairos, and Composition Studies, particularly in its special issue on comics and multimodality, offer more extensive publications about comics, but they follow similar patterns of connecting comics to pedagogical aims, particularly in relation to visual and multimodal literacies. Taken as a group, these studies imply that comics do not need to be studied separately, since they require and produce a general visual or multimodal literacy that is similarly required and produced by other multimodal texts. However, reducing comics to a mere example of a multimodal text means overlooking many of their specific features and folds back into the problems inherent in Assumption 1 about the accessibility of comics.

**Pedagogical Imperative**

The problems in my teaching failure anecdote, as well as the inherent problems in Assumptions 1 and 2, all have strong connections to rhetoric and composition’s pedagogical imperative (Kopelson). With the exception of the Helmers and Hill edited collection, all of the scholars mentioned thus far investigate visual and multimodal rhetorics exclusively within their capacity for pedagogy and instruction. For example, George’s article focuses entirely on why visual rhetoric matters for students and mentions comics only in relation to historical anxieties that teachers have had about students producing visual texts in composition and English classes (27).
The primacy of the pedagogical imperative is not an unusual problem for rhetoric and composition research—as the term “pedagogical imperative” indicates—but it is particularly noticeable in visual and multimodal research. Current rhetoric and composition research on visual rhetorics in general, and comics in particular, very rarely deals with clarifying terms for visual rhetoric or establishing methodologies for studying visual rhetoric. They often avoid clearly analyzing the results of visual analysis outside pedagogical uses. Rather, the focus is almost exclusively on teaching visual rhetoric, and if any other purpose gets served, that purpose is merely a means to a teaching end. George’s article calls for a clear understanding of “visual literacy” explicitly because teachers need a clear understanding of the term in order to best serve their students (15). Hocks’ article works toward producing a “better understanding of the increasingly visual and interactive rhetorical features of digital documents,” but only because teachers should also be “recognizing the hybrid literacies our students now bring to our classrooms” (631). The problem with jumping straight to pedagogical uses for visual texts rather than producing analysis of visuals texts is that we as scholars should have an understanding of what these texts are before rushing to conclusions about what they can do for our students.

Current pedagogical research on comics, particularly within rhetoric and composition, often asks teachers to make assumptions about the type of work that comics readers actually do and/or the messages that they receive, because the scholarship has skipped past analyzing the medium and its related discourse communities and jumped straight to pedagogical uses. Some rhetoric and composition scholarship has begun to acknowledge these concerns. In a pedagogical article in *Composition Forum*, Stephanie Vie and Brandy Dieterle argue that comics can work well in an FYC classroom as tools to introduce cultural literacy. They praise comics for their ability to help readers “easily” visualize difficult concepts, like power relations and cultural
values and power relations in culture. They go on to say, comics “[offer] students opportunities to grapple with the often-difficult task of critical literacy through an appealing and familiar format” (par. 4). The majority of their article weaves together scholarship on multimodal literacy and cultural literacy with comics serving as a useful tool for teaching the skills together in FYC, but they also offer a moment of reflection on the challenges of using comics in their classroom. They say, “a comic like Fun Home is actually quite difficult to read because there are essentially two story lines…This made it more difficult for students to read, and since this week was the only use of comics in the class, it may have been more productive to choose an easier text to work with” (par. 27). They ultimately defend the value of comics as pedagogical tools for cultural literacy because “convoluted texts…challenge the student to attend more carefully to the rhetorical choices in composing that the author has made” (par 28). They acknowledge that comics can be frustrating for students to read, but claim that frustration can be productive as long as students are given time to process and work through it. I appreciate this honest assessment of comics as difficult, but I remain disappointed with the retreat to defend comics in light of other multimodal texts and multimodal literacy.

Assumptions about comics do not preclude the possibility of producing useful pedagogies and analytical methods, and I, of course, have been guilty of this same pedagogical move—using comics in short classroom segments without introducing the medium or taking the time to scaffold it effectively. But the lack of concrete data to support our field’s assumptions about comics remains troubling. Therefore, this project is one attempt to take comics seriously as their own medium and gather data about how college-aged students read comics before making any claims about the pedagogical value of these texts.
The following chapters represent a decade of wrestling with my own frustrations over the complexities of comics and their role in a college classroom, while also trying to take a step back to consider the comics medium as an entity that does not solely exist in a pedagogical setting or even an academic environment. To meet the latter goal, this study places my own analysis of two female superhero comics alongside reactions and analysis from eight college student participants representing a range of comics-reading experience. By using a combination of qualitative empirical research methods, I have gathered data about students’ reading practices, ideologies, and personal reactions to the comics medium. To some extent, these chapters offer a clear pedagogical intervention: the study originates from a bad teaching experience, and it examines the reactions of college-aged students to comics. However, I also wanted to limit the pedagogical imperative in this study as much as possible in order to leave space for research and discoveries that do not immediately translate into FYC assignments and lesson plans. I designed a project that left room for weird, complicated results. While these results ultimately offer some insights for teaching with comics, pedagogy is not my main endpoint for this study. My project is exploratory, offering an entry point into understanding the rhetorically complex relationship between the comics medium and college-aged readers, and I use female superhero comic books as a useful and manageable point of entry into the diverse world of comics.

Superhero Comics

“Comics” may seem like a concise genre to academics and general audiences outside the comics-reading discourse community, but there is actually great diversity within the comics medium. The modes within the comics medium vary widely: some prominent modes include comic strips, comic books, collected volumes, zines, and digital comics. Geography, distribution
models, genre expectations, industry expectations, professional and popular criticism, and the differences between solo and collaborative authorship influence individual texts across these modes. In the United States, most individuals are familiar with comic books in relation to the superhero genre. Even though many different publishers create and distribute superhero comics, the most influential publishers are Marvel Comics and DC Comics, in part because of beloved characters like Spider-Man (Marvel) and Batman (DC), and in part because of their financial success that enables widespread distribution. Most Americans have some understanding of the genre expectations for superheroes, even if only by association to the wildly successful film franchises in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the DC Extended Universe. The superhero comics that Marvel and DC distribute are often lumped under the terms “mainstream” or “popular” comics to reflect their large audience and broad distribution.

For my study, I have chosen two texts with female superhero protagonists, Batwoman: Elegy and Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight, to offer a blend of familiar and unfamiliar concepts to both experienced and inexperienced comics readers. Both of my primary texts come from the familiar superhero genre, and both are widely available because they are mainstream. (DC Comics publishes Batwoman and Marvel publishes Captain Marvel). The characters’ connections to popular film franchises means that their fictional universes reach broader audiences than comic book readers alone, which offers one possible point of familiarity for any reader. However, female superheroes are often less well known than male superheroes, so even experienced readers may need to do some close reading to learn about Batwoman and Captain Marvel.5

The Batwoman and Captain Marvel stories in this study were originally published in comic book issues, which are short comics stories that are released weekly on a set schedule akin
to the episodes of a television show. Each issue contains common features, such as letter pages (similar to letters to the editor) at the front of the issue and advertisements inserted throughout the pages. These issues are designed to appeal to comic book fans: they are sold either in comic book stores or through online subscription services, and the brevity of the stories may make it difficult for new readers to know when or how to enter a story. Sometimes individual comic book issues are collected into a volume that contains a longer, complete story arc. These are called trade paperbacks, and they read like a comprehensive graphic novel. Trade paperbacks remove many of the supplementary features from the individual issues, such as the letter pages that can feel like confusing ephemera to new readers. Readers can still purchase these texts from comic book stores, but they are even more readily available in popular online venues, like Amazon, or large bookstores, like Barnes and Noble. Trade paperbacks reach a wider audience because they are available from less niche venues and offer a useful grouping of stories that can appeal to fans and new readers alike.

The first primary text in this study is *Batwoman: Elegy*, a trade paperback collecting five comic book issues. These comics narrate Batwoman’s transition from being a minor character in a previous comics series, which followed the path of several superheroes in the wake of a worldwide crisis, to her own comics series featuring Batwoman as the primary protagonist. In *Elegy*, which collects the first five issues in the new Batwoman series, readers are introduced to Kate Kane, a former military cadet who has been discharged from her training program because she has been caught in a lesbian relationship and refused to lie about it when confronted, violating “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (Rucka and Williams 137). The plot follows Kane as she begins using her military training to take on a vigilante role similar to Batman but not subordinate to him. In fact, part of the plot involves her refusal of Batman’s assistance, because
Kane wants to pursue her vigilante work on her own terms. The primary plot follows Batwoman as she investigates a mysterious new villain in Gotham City known as Alice, a mentally unstable young woman with a strong attachment to *Alice in Wonderland* mythology. The book also navigates Kane’s difficulties in trying to maintain her “cover” as party-girl Kate Kane, an identity that has made it difficult for her to maintain a healthy relationship with her girlfriend.

The second primary text, *Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight*, collects six comics issues. This trade paperback does not introduce the reader to its main character, Carol Danvers, but instead collects a story arc of Danvers’ struggles with the recent death of her superhero mentor and the effect that her personal loss has on her role on the superhero team known as the Avengers. The plot involves Danvers traveling back in time through a number of important genre-infused moments in world history (for example, she joins an all-female battalion fighting against aliens allied with the Axis powers during World War II) and her own personal history (including the moment she first received superpowers). It is difficult to effectively summarize both the plot and the protagonist in this collection, since it addresses so many previous iterations of the Captain Marvel character. I explore those complexities at length in Chapter 2. First, I offer an introduction to some important context that surrounds both the Batwoman and Captain Marvel trade paperbacks as female superhero comics.

**Superhero Comics and Comics-Reader Discourse Community**

As I have explained, *Elegy* and *In Pursuit of Flight* work well as texts for a wide range of comics-reading experience, which has practical applications for the empirical research in this study. These comics also appeal to me as a feminist rhetorician because they sit within a complex rhetorical situation. Feminists, both in the public sphere and in academia, have critiqued
both the female characters in superhero comics and the male-dominated fandom that often informs the content in superhero comic books. There is plenty to criticize in female superhero comics, as well as the industries that produce these comics, but that does not diminish the value of superhero comics for academic research. Instead it invites scholars to be thoughtful and rhetorically savvy in our analysis.

Probably the most obvious critique for those within and without the comics discourse community is the critique of the female bodies depicted in comics. This is a long-standing critique, stemming back to the 1940s, during which comics artists began attracting sales by drawing women in sexualized poses while wearing clothing that highlighted breasts and legs (Madrid 6-9). The sexualization of female characters grew more pronounced over time, and Trina Robbins, a feminist comics author and historian, notes in her analysis of trends in female superhero comics that in the 1990s in particular, characters like Catwoman had breasts that were as large as their heads, which Robbins argues should “hamper [Catwoman’s] athletic prowess” (166). Robbins references a common feminist critique: that female superheroes’ sexual imagery and crime-fighting jobs seem totally at odds with each other. In other words, comic book writers and artists frequently prioritize the visual, sexual appeal of female characters over other aspects of the character.

The depiction and characterization of female characters connects to the perceived all-male audience for comics. Both those inside and outside the comics industry often marginalize or exclude women from their understanding of comics fandoms. Comics and digital rhetoric scholar Matthew Cicci explains, “Women are and have always been present in comics, from creators to consumers...[but] the cultural conception of superhero comics is that it is a male pastime. Its labor force is also predominantly male” (194). Fan studies scholar Suzanne Scott argues that the
“invisibility” of female fans is an ongoing problem within comics fandom, and this problem is
“cultivated and sustained through a variety of journalistic, industrial, and academic sources” (par. 3.3). Cicci offers examples in popular culture that reinforce stereotypes of an all-male comics fandom: “The Simpsons’ Comic Book Guy, AMC’s docu-show Comic Book Men, The Big Bang Theory’s male characters’ weekly sojourn to the comic show, and, of course, the ubiquitous term fanboy” (194). He also cites prominent, mainstream comics creators who believe that superhero comics are a genre that will only appeal to men. Cicci argues that by pushing this narrative of an all-male fandom within the comics industry, especially in relation to superhero comic books, comics creators have “carte blanche to ignore female readership” (194).

Scott argues that women who enter the comics world frequently do so by adopting a strategy of rejecting traits or concerns that code feminine. This allows women to enter the comics community but costs them expressions of femininity. Women who use this strategy do not challenge patriarchal power structures, because they do their best to conform to those power structures in order to access the community. She says, “it is not enough [for women] to be visible; it is the terms and conditions of that visibility that are central” (S. Scott par. 3.4). The myth of male fandom thus has powerful effects on women within the fan community. It also works as a justification for ignoring the concerns of women within the community, which allows comics creators to continue to feel justified in depicting women as sexual objects designed to meet the male gaze of the mythical all-male comics fandom. Thus, women are often represented poorly on the pages of comics, and they are actively marginalized beyond the pages of comics, both as creators and as fans.

Scott and Cicci discuss a discouraging reality for female comics fans. However, Brett Schenker’s research indicates that women make up a sizeable portion of comics fandoms.
Schenker, a political consultant and former comics store manager who runs a website on the intersections of comics and progressive politics, spent years compiling self-reported gender data from comics fandoms on the internet. In February 2014, he determined that 46.67% of self-identified comic book fans on Facebook identify as female, a statistic that strongly challenges the common perception that women are not a major part of the comics audience (Schenker). Cicci notes that online and digital female fan groups have an increased impact on the superhero genre because they are able to make themselves visible without any assistance from the comics industry. He says, “Comic creators can’t ignore the digital presence of female readers without publicly spurning a segment of their readers” (196). However, he also notes that superhero comics industry executives often frame female fandoms as “emerging” as one way to excuse the limited scope of their response to female readers, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s (193). This framing can generate backlash from male fans because the superhero comic industry’s new attention to its female readership frames female readers as an antagonistic “incursion” into an all-male fan space.

These sources offer two main strains of critique in relation to women and comics: First, women are represented poorly on the pages of comics. Second, women are actively ignored within comics fandoms. Within the superhero genre, these two critiques are related: ignoring a female fandom enables creators to produce hyper-masculine male superheroes and hyper-sexualized female superheroes that appeal to their imagined all-male, heterosexual audience. Cicci explains, “Female superhero fans ‘emerge’ as resistant today because their beloved fan object—the superhero genre—has, via exclusion and marginalization, created the conditions in which female fans seem both new and revolutionary for wanting progress” (193). Addressing these dual concerns of representation and audience requires modes of analysis that adequately
address complexity in the relationship between comics content and comics discourse communities.

To illustrate the need for complex and rhetorically grounded modes of analysis, I will unpack a recent example of mainstream comics analysis and the response from the comics discourse community. In a May 2015 issue of The New Yorker, Harvard professor Jill Lepore analyzes the cover to the first issue of The A-Force, a comics series about an all-female superhero squad. Lepore begins her critique by stating “they all look like porn stars.” She then continues her analysis by consulting with “the experts”, who turn out to be her son and his friend, both of whom are elementary-school-aged boys, who offer observations such as, “All the girls here have, like, gigantic cleavages” (qtd. in Lepore “Looking”). Applying a more adult lens, Lepore offers a brief history of American female superheroes and concedes:

Maybe it’s not possible to create reasonable female comic-book superheroes, since their origins are so tangled up with magazines for men. True, they’re not much more ridiculous than male superheroes. But they’re all ridiculous in the same way…[Female superheroes’] power is their allure, which, looked at another way, is the absence of power. Even their bodies are not their own. They are without force. (“Looking”)

Without context, Lepore’s argument presents a convincing analysis grounded in feminist concerns about women’s empowerment and the ways women are visually depicted. But further examination indicates Lepore bases her analysis on several problematic assumptions about the superhero genre and artistic depictions of women within popular comics.

The lead writer of the comic, G. Willow Wilson, responded to Lepore’s column by pointing out three things that Lepore had failed to consider in her critique: the content of the comic, the content within the context of the superhero genre, and the images within the context
of the superhero genre. Wilson explains that the clothing and posing were both chosen deliberately to fall within the often ridiculous costuming of superhero comics, while offering some key improvements for female superheroes. She clarifies, “[the characters] are for the most part, fully covered—a profound departure from the teeny bikinis of the 80’s and 90’s, while still cognizant of the fact that these characters are superheroes, and superheroes—male and female alike—wear funky colored latex” (Wilson). In addition, Wilson explains that none of the characters stands, crouches, or contorts themselves in the sexually objectified poses that have been standard practice for years in the comics industry for women on the covers of comics. Instead, she says, “They are, in other words, posed the way their male colleagues are typically posed. They are posed as heroes.” She concludes:

A FORCE comes out of a very specific conversation about gender in comics that has been evolving rapidly in the past few years, driven as much by fandom as it is by creators and editors…To anyone familiar with the often heated dialogue surrounding the role and representation of women in comics, these choices are pretty symbolic. There are many women (and plenty more men!) in the comics industry and in comics fandom who have fought hard to get us to this point—costumes that cover the butt, book covers where no one is spread-eagle, storylines that don’t involve women being sexually brutalized in order to provide motivation. This may not seem like much to someone outside the comics-reading community. But to those of us with a vested interest in this medium…it is a coup…[Lepore’s] article is a very crisp demonstration of the difference between criticism from within the community—criticism from people who love comics and want to see them succeed—and criticism from the self-appointed gatekeepers of art and culture, who categorically do not give a shit.” (Wilson)
In contrast to Lepore, Wilson grounds her analysis within the genre of superhero comics and the related discourse community of comics fans. She creates ethos by positioning herself within the community as someone “who love[s] comics and want[s] to see them succeed,” and this ethos carries weight for readers like myself who value comics both as sources of entertainment and valuable sites of feminist work.

I have taken the time to unpack this exchange at length because it offers a key example of the possible pitfalls of feminist comics analysis, specifically by feminist academics. Lepore’s analysis was quickly met with an outcry from the comics fandom, particularly female comics fans. Many fans felt betrayed by Lepore’s article because she had recently published a well-received history of Wonder Woman that linked the character to various periods in American feminist history. Lepore also carries academic credibility as a professor at Harvard. Yet, her column in The New Yorker serves to undermine comics as a space that offers anything of value to female readers. Even her attempted humor by choosing ten-year-old, male “experts” indicates her ideologies about comics are grounded in two longstanding myths about comics that I have already mentioned: 1) Comics are intended for children, and 2) Comics are intended for a male audience. In contrast to her thoughtful Wonder Woman book, Lepore’s dismissive analysis of a new all-female superhero squad is frequently glib and reductive, relying entirely on an analysis of the cover rather than the full comic.

The differences in tone and style of analysis between Lepore’s book and her The New Yorker column can be explained in part by different genres and audiences, but Lepore’s analysis also uses her academic ethos, and her supposed comics-studies ethos based on her recent Wonder Woman study, to reinforce ideologies about gender and comics discourse communities for a broader reading audience. Wilson begins her response by expressing confusion that “someone
who obviously values rigorous scholarship” would produce an analysis so devoid of the contextual concerns of genre and medium. Lepore’s and Wilson’s gender critiques of comics in the popular sphere offer useful comparison points: Both Lepore and Wilson are self-identified feminists, both have a certain credibility in relation to comics, and both offer comics analysis grounded in evidence. These comparisons raise an important question for feminist comics scholarship: why was Lepore’s analysis so roundly rejected within the comics discourse community, whereas Wilson’s was widely circulated and praised? The answer may seem obvious—Lepore’s response is negative while Wilson’s is positive—but there are important factors found in their evidence in addition to their conclusions.

First, successful feminist analysis of comics must consider comics content as both images and words, which Lepore fails to do. Wilson positions Lepore’s column within a growing trend of comics analysis beyond the comics discourse community and points out, “It is a shame that, in this recent wave of mainstream media attention toward comics, actually reading comic books does not appear to be a prerequisite. And it shows” (original emphasis). Rhetorical scholars cannot produce adequate analysis by simply focusing on images (or words) in comics alone. They must read the both the images and the textual content, analyzing the relationship between images and text, and they must use analytical frameworks that can accommodate the complexity found within that relationship. Second, the best comics analyses will be grounded within the medium of comics and its development. In her column, Lepore fails to do that as well, despite the “expert” analysis she includes and the brief history of Wonder Woman that she invokes as representative of female superheroes. Lepore’s analysis fails to consider the roles female fans and creators have had in shaping better representations of women on the pages of comics and
how those representations balance the conventions of the superhero genre with the pressures of an increasingly visible feminist presence in comics readership.

Wilson’s analysis considers both text and images and demonstrates how genre-based analysis (considering both the specificities of the comics medium and the superhero genre) offers a much more compelling critique of female imagery. While Lepore’s analysis suggests that sexual female characters are the same as sexualized and disempowered characters, Wilson argues that while sometimes sexual, the female characters on the cover all retain key aspects of power that are recognizable within the superhero comics context. She also asks a witty but telling question in relation to the depiction of She-Hulk, the central figure on the cover of A-Force: “What is the appropriate amount a 9-foot-tall green woman should cover up in order not to be considered ‘pervy’ by Harvard professors? Can we get a hem length?” (Wilson). Wilson’s critique responds to Lepore’s glib tone with her own glibness, but her question indicates a certain disconnect between Lepore’s analytical critique and Wilson’s production of the text produced via creative imagination. Lepore’s critique is based on an acontextual analysis of the final product, while Wilson reminds readers that in creating the A-Force comics, she and the other comics creators needed to consider and address creative concerns: What should characters wear? What should these characters look like? How do these decisions need to address the complexity of the comics medium, the superhero genre, and the desires of a feminist creative team wanting to bring more feminist depictions of female superheroes to their work? While these questions relate to fantastical stories, they also connect to a creative process grounded in the need for practical outcomes.

As a comics creator, Wilson’s critique indicates that a strong analysis of comics will not only address genre and discourse community concerns but also consider the creative decision-
making that went into producing the final text. In other words, this A-Force example indicates that there is space for critique and analysis of female superhero comics, but that analysis is most effective when it is grounded in rhetorical concerns. The A-Force example also offers a point of hope for me as a scholar-fan in the rhetoric and composition discipline: Rhetoric and composition scholars already have the tools, like an understanding of discourse communities and rhetorical situations, that can enable them to move past reductive, limiting assumptions to thoughtful, convincing analysis. This dissertation offers one possible path for producing research that combats assumptions within scholarship about comics, in part by relying on rhetorical analysis and in part by inviting college students to voice their own responses to the kinds of texts that well meaning instructors assume they will enjoy.

Conclusion

Comics are a sophisticated medium in need of focused, thoughtful rhetorical analysis. While rhetoric and composition often defaults to pedagogical concerns, this study takes a step back to consider the specific complexities of the comics medium, including the conventions of the medium, the discourse community surrounding the medium, and the (often negative) ideologies that can affect readers and critics of the medium alike. Scholars in rhetoric and composition stand to benefit from sustained inquiry that does not rely on flawed, widespread ideologies about who reads comic books and why they read them. While my research is exploratory, it offers one entry point for future comics research within rhetoric and composition. It also offers compelling evidence from eight college readers that comics are not necessarily easy to read.
In Chapter 1, I introduce my methodology based in feminist rhetorics and rhetorical genre analysis. I also explain the modes of inquiry and feminist ethical commitments that guide my dissertation. In Chapter 2, I analyze the two trade paperbacks that my participants used as reading samples. I introduce feminist imagination as a rhetorical framework for both the production and analysis of creative texts and model that framework by analyzing the primary texts in this study. In Chapter 3, I begin the chapter by explaining the empirical methods that I used to gather data from college-aged readers reacting to comic books. Then I analyze the data through the lens of rhetorical genre and expertise. In chapter 4, I use a feminist rhetorical lens to analyze the effects of gender-based ideology within my empirically gathered data. I also compare my initial analysis from Chapter 2 with the study participants’ analysis of gender and reflect on how our differing rhetorical situations contribute to our different analyses. Finally, I conclude with an overview of the useful findings from my study, reflections on the limitations of this specific project, and my hopes for further research.
Chapter 1
Methodologies and Methods

In typical dissertation fashion, my project has morphed and changed over the course of conceiving and writing the chapters. However, three core principles about comics, and best practices for researching comics, have guided the project from start to finish. These three principles are:

- utilizing an interdisciplinary approach combining methodologies from comics studies with methodologies from rhetoric and composition
- establishing research methods consistent with feminist ethics
- making use of eye-tracking as a burgeoning rhetoric and composition research method

These principles create the framework that explains and guides the empirical methods that I used to interact with my study participants. They also offer an academic framework for investigating my personal investments in this research project.

In this chapter, I will begin by unpacking these three principles in more detail and explaining their importance in relation to my research. I will expand on the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach and the specific aspects of feminist ethics in this project. I will also introduce the eye-tracking method, both as a general research tool and as it specifically benefits the rhetoric and composition discipline. Throughout, I will explain how these three principles are interrelated and interwoven, which offers a useful framework for investigating the complexity inherent in the comics medium and in readers’ responses to that medium.
Interdisciplinary Approach Combining Comics Studies with Rhetoric and Composition

I have always believed that an interdisciplinary approach provides the best conditions for the academic study of comics. In particular, comics studies provides research on the specificities of comics as a unique and challenging medium. Rhetorical genre theory provides a useful framework for unpacking the effects that the specificities of the comics medium have on readers and reader expectations for the genre.

A Brief Introduction to Comics Studies and the Comics Medium

Comics studies is an established, interdisciplinary field of scholarship. Even though comics scholars are frequently irritated by explaining the history and common tenets of their field, scholars outside comics studies, such as those within English or rhetoric and composition, often believe that comics studies is new—or perhaps even nonexistent. In actuality, comics studies has had a strong presence in American colleges since at least the 1990s. John Lent founded the International Journal of Comic Art in 1998, and since then academic publishers have begun additional journals for comics studies, including ImageTEXT and the Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics. The field also has its own scholastic conferences, including the Comics Arts Conference, the academic branch of the San Diego Comic Convention held since 1992, and the International Comics Arts Forum, which began in 1995 at Georgetown University. The Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University and the English department at the University of Florida offer concentrated programs in comics studies. These are just a few examples that demonstrate that comics studies is well established and has long been producing scholarship that rhetoric and composition scholars can and should benefit from. In addition, by paying attention to the work already done by comics scholars, rhetoric and
compositionists can avoid many of the pitfalls of those new to comics scholarship, such as writing histories that have already been written or arguing that comics are an important site of study, which comics scholars already take as a given.

One of the insights about comics that is commonly understood by comics scholars but may be unfamiliar to those in rhetoric and composition is that comics is its own unique medium, rather than a genre of either art or literature or some other form. Hillary Chute, literature and comics scholar, effectively addresses comics scholars’ concerns in her *PMLA* article “Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative.” I will include a lengthy but worthwhile passage that represents the consensus from the comics studies field. Chute explains:

Comics might be defined as a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially. Comics moves forward in time through the space on the page, through its progressive counterpoint of presence and absence: packed panels (also called frames) alternating with gutters (empty space). Highly textured in its narrative scaffolding, comics doesn't blend the visual and the verbal—or use one simply to illustrate the other—but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back and forth of reading and looking for meaning….I treat comics as a medium—not as a lowbrow genre. (“Comics” 452)

Chute’s introduction makes it clear that calling comics a medium is not simple semantics for comics scholars, but rather an important distinction. In order to identify comics as a genre, scholars must decide of which larger medium comics is a genre. As Chute indicates, that usually requires thinking of comics as either a diminished form of literature or art.
Chute also clarifies the unique way that narrative functions through the complex relationships of image and text, and space and time, as they are represented on the comics page. Arguably, other media contain a similar presence of both text and images, but Chute clarifies that comics relate words and images to the development of time in a way that is entirely unique to comics. Furthermore, the white space on comics pages, known as the gutter, serves important narrative functions, works differently from negative space in other narrative or multimodal forms, and should not (and cannot) be ignored by readers. Chute and other scholars argue that by attempting to describe comics as a genre, readers miss the unique features of the medium. Arguably, when rhetoric and composition scholars reduce comics to one type of multimodal text, we are taking a genre approach to comics that ignores the important specificities of the medium and does not teach us to consider, analyze, or understand those differences for the benefit of our own scholarship or our pedagogy.

Comics studies scholars also clarify the specific ideologies attached to comics. These herald in part from complex comics histories that blend censorship, intended audiences, and commercialism. Again, this history is entirely unique to the medium. In 1953, a psychiatrist named Fredric Wertham published a book-length study on comic books called *Seduction of the Innocent*. Comics scholar Charles Hatfield explains that Wertham made a variety of arguments in his book, both “asserting a causal connection between comics consumption and delinquency” and claiming that “comics discourage or obstruct reading readiness” (Hatfield 34). Comics scholar Amy Kiste Nyberg clarifies that Wertham’s critiques were the most vocal and influential within a larger trend of parental and educational concern about comics (20). These broad concerns about comics came from the number of children who read comics. In one survey, children in the 1940s and 1950s self-reported that 90% of children in upper-elementary grades
read comics (Nyberg 1). In addition, children were able to afford and access comics easily because of their cheap price and wide availability “at grocery stores, news stands, and corner drug stores” with little to no adult control over what children bought and read (Nyberg 1).

Within this broader narrative, Wertham’s text had an enormous impact on public opinion about comic books. In 1954, the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency began investigating whether comics created juvenile delinquents. Wertham was one of the key testifying experts on comics’ effects (Nyberg 54). Nyberg claims, “The Senate committee clearly never intended for its investigation to be a fact-finding mission. The legislators were more interested in appearing to do something about a problem that had captured the public’s attention than in truly exploring issues of media effects” (79). However, the hearings intensified public scrutiny over comics. As a result, comics publishers self-elected to impose an intensely rigorous censorship code called the Comics Code Authority in order to continue selling their product (Nyberg 54). Despite their efforts, comics became popularly linked with illiteracy and criminal behavior.

These literacy concerns have not gone away. Hatfield argues that in more recent years, the debate over comics and literacy can be seen as the trickle down from Wertham’s claims. He notes that comics are viewed as potential “stepping stones” for literacy since they contain pictures alongside words, but they are also seen as hindrances to literacy for the same reason. In other words, comics are both valued and devalued because they are seen as “easy” (Hatfield 36). Hatfield argues that “what both schools [of thought] neglect is the specificity of the comics reading experience” (36). Rhetoric and composition’s inclusion of comics within a beneficial form of multimodal literacy could actually be seen as a positive step in relation to this history, but scholars should be aware that their claims exist within a very particular history that other
multimodal texts do not have. These ongoing biases and stigmas against comics reading, which may make comics less familiar or palatable in a college-setting than many educators would assume, must still be addressed. Rather than presuming that students will respond well to comics because they are “easy,” or even fun and “cool,” rhetoric and composition scholars should be prepared to encounter lingering stigmas from students, such as the belief that comics are too juvenile for college-age readers or that they are not texts worthy of serious study. The medium’s specific history needs to be accounted for, since it continues to have effects on the way contemporary readers perceive the medium.

Combining Rhetoric and Composition with Comics Studies

While rhetoric and composition scholars have not frequently analyzed comics on their own, genre studies within rhetoric and composition offers room for this kind of study. As indicated above, comics scholars have resisted identifying comics as a “genre” since it requires thinking of comics as a lesser form of another medium. Rhetorical genre theorist Amy Devitt explains that this is a “literary” understanding of genre rather than a “rhetorical” one. Devitt argues that literary genre privileges texts that are the “best” of any genre and through their exceptionality cannot be truly contained by any genre (“Integrating” 699). Through this literary viewpoint, thinking of comics as a lesser genre of art or literature indicates that comics can never be exceptional, which explains why many comics theorists—particularly those with a literary background—resist classifying comics as a genre. On the other hand, “rhetorical genre theory tends to be based in a functional, pragmatic theory of textual meaning. Genres help language-users achieve certain aims, fulfill certain functions, perform certain actions, and do things with language” (Devitt “Integrating” 701-702). Devitt argues that both rhetoric and literature are
moving away from a traditional literary understanding of genre to a rhetorical one in which “genres are defined less by their formal conventions than by their purposes, participants, and subjects” (“Integrating” 698).

At first glance, the rhetorical understanding of genre may not seem better for comic studies than the literary one. Comics studies theorists remain committed to studying comics in large part through the formal conventions of the medium. They also link those formal conventions to particular ideological expectations and genre expectations that comics readers have for their medium. For comics theorists, particularly theorists/comics artists like Scott McCloud, the formal conventions are fully connected to the reader expectations and purposes of the medium. McCloud, in Understanding Comics, argues that comics rely heavily on closure, the mental act taken by comics readers to fill in the story that takes place between comics panels (67). He explains, “Closure in comics fosters an intimacy surpassed only by the written word, a silent, secret contract between creator and audience. How the creator honors that contract is a matter of both art and craft” (McCloud 69, original emphasis). While comics theorists argue that comics are a medium distinguished by its formal conventions, they connect those formal conventions to the purposes that Devitt highlights as crucial to a rhetorical understanding of genre.

Visual rhetoric can provide a bridge between the formal and the pragmatic aspects of these two viewpoints. While they are not specifically genre theorists, visual rhetoricians Charles Kostelnick and Michael Hassett focus on the connection between visual conventions and the expectations for various types of texts. They explain how conforming to the expected conventions of a genre can be rhetorically effective, and they argue that audiences of certain genres come to expect authors will conform to the conventions of those genres (Kostelnick and
These conventions are “inherently rhetorical,” since they are able to authorize membership within discourse communities that use and read shared design conventions (Kostelnick and Hassett 10).

Kostelnick and Hassett particularly highlight “visual language.” They claim, “users of visual language are members of discourse communities that share similar experiences, needs, and expectations” (Kostelnick and Hassett 24). Visual design conventions help build communities, and using the appropriate conventions within those communities can “reflect and reinforce the ethos of the group” (Kostelnick and Hassett 86). Thus, the appropriate use of conventions indicates inclusion within a discourse community and builds credibility with other members of the community. Kostelnick’s and Hassett’s work fits in well with that of genre theorists like Devitt, who argues, “Based on our identification of genre, we make assumptions not only about the form but also about the text’s purposes, its subject matter, its writer, and its expected reader” (“Generalizing” 575). Devitt’s description makes it clear that genre analysis has much to offer to the world of comics studies, which has always dealt with issues surrounding the “expected reader.” With a rhetorical understanding of formal conventions, one with links to a rhetorical understanding of genre, the difference between medium and genre can be greatly reduced.7

In fact, a rhetorical understanding of genre can enhance the study of comics’ specificities. For example, Kostelnick’s and Hassett’s early description of conventions as “a coherent language” makes sense for the general layout for comics (12). Both comics readers and comics creators acquire the use of specialized “visual vocabulary” for making comics intelligible, such as knowing that Western comics are almost always read left-to-right and top-to-bottom, or that narration boxes are typically square, while thought bubbles are scalloped (Kostelnick and Hassett 23). Comics readers are familiar with panel order and speech bubbles as formal elements that
both distinguish the comics medium and make it intelligible. McCloud makes similar arguments about shared vocabulary in his book, but in academic circles, McCloud’s book is frequently criticized for a lack of citations and theory. Rhetorical genre studies has the potential to enhance comics scholarship by providing an understanding of formal elements as conventions with inherently rhetorical functions that form discourse communities, producing a more academically grounded and updated understanding of how formal conventions work within the comics medium.

Furthermore, contemporary comics are often concerned with pushing the boundaries of comics conventions. Media scholar Henry Jenkins has critiqued comics studies for its focus on the “purity” of the medium. He explains, “Many fields of media studies were stunted by the effort to figure out what their medium did that no other did, to assume that this was what the medium did best, and then to constrain its aesthetics so that what it did uniquely was what it must do constantly” (Jenkins 6, original emphasis). Jenkins goes onto claim that the best possible form of comics studies will be “broadly comparative” in order to best understand comics as its own medium and comics’ relation to other media (Jenkins 6). Devitt explains that a rhetorical understanding of genre serves both the purpose of clarifying genre boundaries while also acknowledging those boundaries are fluid. She states, “a contemporary genre theory must also shift away from traditional genre theory by emphasizing the nature of genre as difference as well as similarity….Texts must not only always participate in a genre but always participate in multiple genres simultaneously” (Devitt “Integrating” 700). A rhetorical genre-conscious understanding of the comics medium gives us a lens to see the medium defined by a continual push-and-pull between meeting the expectations for the comics medium and pushing the boundaries of that medium.
Carolyn Miller, another rhetorical genre scholar, claims that changes within a genre may also produce changes in the community surrounding that genre. She argues that pushing against the boundaries of a genre can push against the boundaries of that genre’s community, because genre and the community around it both necessarily include examples clearly within the categories and those that challenge the boundaries. She explains, “It is this inclusion of sameness and difference, of us and them, of centripetal and centrifugal impulses that makes a community rhetorical, for rhetoric in essence requires both agreement and dissent, shared understandings and novelty…identification and division (in [Kenneth] Burke’s terms). In a paradoxical way, a rhetorical community includes the ‘other’” (74). This is an important contribution for connecting comics content and ideology, while also reading shifting genre boundaries as more complex than merely changing formal conventions.

The insights from rhetorical genre study may help us understand, for example, reactions to texts that seem to push the boundaries of the comics medium. In his article “Imagetext, or, Why Art Spiegelman Doesn’t Draw Comics,” Joseph Witek discusses the way that critics distanced themselves from comics when they began praising *Maus*, a graphic novel that uses anthropomorphic animals to depict Spiegelman’s father’s experience of the Holocaust. Witek quotes the review of *Maus* from *The New York Times*’ book review, which begins, “Art Spiegelman doesn’t draw comics,” and goes on to praise the book for being too rich and complex to be a comic (qtd. in Witek). He also cites the *Village Voice* review which states, “*Maus* is not exactly a comic book, either; comics are for kids” (qtd. in Witek). Rhetorical genre study clarifies that these critics are operating under a blend of literary and rhetorical genre, in which *The New York Times* cannot view *Maus* as a comic because it exceeds their expected boundaries of that genre, but for the *Village Voice*, *Maus* is not a comic because it fails to meet the rhetorical
expectation of the intended audience. Comics are frequently critiqued, both internally and externally, through genre expectations, and rhetorical genre theory provides a necessary lens for understanding where those critiques originate and how those critiques affect the cultural value of comics.

In short, rhetorical genre analysis allows scholars to form—and study—a more complex picture of comics. By combining rhetorical genre studies with comics studies, rhetoric and composition also offers a useful methodology for analyzing the connections between comics’ specific formal elements and the expectations for the medium and the discourse community surrounding that medium. One of the problems facing comics studies is that comics scholars are able to identify the importance of formal conventions as narrative tools, and they are able to use empirical research to connect comics to cultural ideologies, but there is no set comics analysis methodology for analyzing the connections between the two. Rhetorical genre analysis provides that missing methodology, connecting formal conventions to authorial choices, reader expectations, shifts in the boundaries of the comics medium, and the ideologies surrounding the medium.

**Research Methods Consistent with Feminist Ethics**

At times, my dissertation analyzes ideologies about gender and sexuality in relation to comics, and this offers one obvious reason for using feminist methodologies in my project. However, my dissertation relies on feminist rhetorical methodologies as both an analytical lens and a framework for ethical, compassionate engagement with my research materials and my study participants. Feminism is obviously not the only methodology that allows a researcher to produce ethical research, but feminist rhetorical research methods draw upon ethical
commitments to emotion and reflection, inviting academic researchers to build knowledge from their emotional investments and from collaborating with study participants and/or scholarship as broadly conceived. These commitments are central to the design and implementation of my methods, particularly in three aspects: emotional investments; “cobbling” together interdisciplinary, multimodal research methods; and self-reflexivity.

Emotional Investments

My early failures with comics instruction gave me an emotional motivation for this project. I have already explained the surprise and confusion I felt when I first tried to teach with comics, but I did not disclose my initial anger with students who dismissed the medium as childish and beneath them. I held (and still hold) a deep love for comics and found myself wanting to defend the medium, not as an intellectual exercise that served the course goals, but as a personal one that protected something precious to me. In a classroom setting, I managed my anger and my defensiveness about the medium by scrapping my lesson plan and organically shaping class discussion around student questions. But after class ended, I felt curious about the intensity of my defensiveness, and I could not shake the anger that some of my students felt toward me for wasting their time with what they perceived as childish texts.

Rather than dismiss those emotions and try to replace them with a dispassionate empirical approach for this dissertation, I wanted to consider emotional responses as generative and relevant. Feminist rhetorician Julie Jung argues that this is an important part of feminist pedagogy: listening to student emotions and responding to them thoughtfully. Borrowing from bell hooks’ transgressive pedagogy, Jung argues that listening thoughtfully to student anger, even to the point of allowing confrontation in a classroom setting, is a powerful feminist move that
reduces hierarchies in the classroom and allows students to engage more fully in their own education (128). It can also offer an opening for students and teachers to examine their ideologies. For example, as Hatfield’s and Nyberg’s research indicates, my students’ beliefs about comics as a children’s medium have a strong cultural and ideological basis. To ignore my students’ anger, and never search for the roots of that anger, would be ignoring an important and frequent reader response with powerful educational potential.

It also feels important to acknowledge my own confusion, disappointment, and anger as a valid source for academic research. Feminist researchers in rhetoric and composition often introduce their own emotional investments as the genesis for their research projects. Krista Ratcliffe explains that she developed a methodology called rhetorical listening based on the discomfort she felt when omitting a chapter on Alice Walker from her book Anglo-American Feminist Challenges, choosing to focus instead on three white feminists (4). Ratcliffe explains that she felt “justified” in her decision but could not stop wrestling with “good old-fashioned liberal white guilt” (5). Her attempt to quell her unease with her focus on whiteness became the generative spark that developed into rhetorical listening. In yet another example, Wysocki describes a feminist teaching methodology involving visual texts that she calls “reciprocal communication” (149). This methodology addresses issues with other visual methodologies that “assume a separation of form from content” (149). Much like Ratcliffe, Wysocki explains that her choice to invent this feminist visual methodology came from a complicated emotional response. Wysocki cites viewing an advertisement for images from the Kinsey Institute, featuring a side profile of a naked woman, as the site that generates her emotional investment and related pedagogical intervention. Wysocki notes, “I think this advertisement is a lovely piece of work, but it also angers me. When I experience pleasure and offense so mixed, I know I have
a good opening into critical work” (149). Feminist rhetorical research offers a guide for generating research from an emotional response, as I have done for this project, while also reflecting on emotions that arise from both researchers and participants throughout the research project. For this dissertation, I rely on feminist research methods because they create space for a wide range of complicated human responses to a complex medium.

Feminist scholars also note that this is more an acknowledgement of scholarly practices rather than a new way to approach academic work. Patricia Bizzell writes about acknowledging the emotion that already exists behind the scenes of academic scholarship in an overview of feminist influences on researching the history of rhetoric. She explains, “we perhaps need more discussion of the part played in the setting of scholarly research agendas and the constructing of scholarly arguments by our emotions about our research topics—or subjects—and our imagined readers” (119). Her argument points toward acknowledging emotional investments underlying existing research. She notes a growing trend of feminist researchers “openly discussing their feelings…about their subjects of study” and cites Jacqueline Jones Royster as arguably the most influential voice in favor of incorporating emotion into methodology. Royster explains, “knowledge is produced by someone and…its producers are not formless and invisible” (loc. 3538.). She suggests that research happens most effectively when researchers consider their own investments in their material and investigate the human traces on existing bodies of knowledge, considering such factors as who makes knowledge and what strategies for knowledge-production are granted cultural and academic validity (loc. 70-84).
One impetus behind this project and my chosen methods was a sense—more of a gut feeling than an intellectual analysis—that I needed to include an analysis of gender as part of my dissertation about how college students respond to comics. My students had not mentioned gender in their critiques of the genre conventions for comics, but I knew that for me as a female reader, gender analysis and genre-based analysis were intrinsically linked. I suspected that this would be true for at least some college-aged readers as well.

However, this connection between genre and gender proved difficult to explain as I was shaping my dissertation. Whenever I tried to clarify my research questions, it seemed like I wanted to research two separate things—college-aged students comics’ reading practices, on the one hand, and gender in relation to comics, on the other—and I received feedback from other academics, usually in rejections to grant applications, that it would be smarter to narrow my focus to one of these research avenues. In honoring the emotional genesis for this project, I felt like I could not cut these two aspects apart; I just was not yet able to explain why I felt this way. I decided to move ahead with both areas of research, even though the connection between the two areas was nebulous and opened my project up to complications and possibly overwhelming complexity. I needed to craft a research methodology that used multiple research methods to best collect potentially complex data on student responses to the comics medium and triangulate students’ reactions to the intricacy of the medium, including narrative content, visual elements, and ideological components of the comics medium. I also hoped that using multiple methods would provide data that either clarified or disproved my sense that gender and genre analysis were connected elements of students’ reactions to the comics medium.
Feminist rhetorical researchers often use a hybrid method approach to grapple with complexity and plurality in their research. Eileen Schell describes establishing a feminist rhetorical research methodology as a graduate student as a process of “cobbling together bits and pieces from a variety of fields” (5). Schell goes on to describe her cobbling process as “a feminist rite of passage” shared by many feminist researchers who must invent their own methodologies through “struggle, borrowing, invention, and adaptation” (6). She explains that forming an adapted and adaptable research methodology is one of “the challenges I faced—and many of us face—as feminist academics who work at the borders and edges of a number of interdisciplinary fields of inquiry” (4). She explains how her methods combined textual analysis with qualitative research such as interviews (5-6). She also outlines the different disciplines that she drew from to shape her dissertation, including rhetoric and composition, feminist studies, and labor studies. My project uses a similar multi-method and interdisciplinary approach, which sits squarely in line with feminist rhetorical research practices. This feminist approach embraces “cobbling” as a method for clarifying connections between disparate fields of study, which was necessary for addressing the research questions I had in mind. I have already explained that my study combines genre analysis from rhetoric and composition with the specificities of comics genre conventions found in comics studies. In addition, my dissertation pulls from visual culture studies and feminist studies to consider depictions of female characters in comics. Finally, my research builds upon useful studies from the field of education that analyze reader responses in relationship to the comics medium and then folds in audience analysis from the growing field of fandom studies, a sub-discipline of cultural studies. Cobbling together specific analytical tools and disciplinary knowledge from these different disciplines offers a richer methodological base for my study.
Self-Reflexivity and Collaboration

While different researchers outline their ethics with different parameters, most feminist researchers require some form of accountability within their methods, usually through self-reflexivity and/or collaboration. In *Rhetorica in Motion*, Schell identifies “critical self-reflexivity and questions [as] a hallmark feature of feminist research” (4). She argues that feminist rhetorical researchers are able to use their training in rhetoric to consider questions such as what counts as knowledge in their field. She also indicates that rhetorical knowledge invites researchers to consider how their research methods establish and navigate power relations between researchers and their subjects. Royster also combines self-reflexive analysis and a self-reflexive research methodology in her final chapter. One of the key tenets for her afrafeminist approach is an “attention to ethical action,” which for Royster connects to a sense of constantly holding herself accountable for ethical methodologies, particularly in relation to her research subjects (loc. 3537).

In large part, community helps Royster establish her mode of accountability. She argues that her methodology “acknowledge[s] and credit[s] community wisdom and the roles that this knowledge might play directly and indirectly in affirming validity, reliability, and accuracy” (Royster loc. 3453). Royster sees the women she researches as more than subjects, but rather as “potential listeners, observers, even co-researchers” (loc. 3453). Royster argues for the importance of participant/observer researcher status. She claims that producing research from a participant/observer role makes biases more open and normal, ultimately allowing for “a role for caring, for passionate attachments” (loc. 3480). Rather than a distanced, objective stance Royster presents care and investment as ethical aspects of feminist rhetorical research. In a review essay
at the end of the edited collection *Feminist Empirical Research*, Kathleen Blake Yancey also argues that a commitment to inclusivity and community is part of a feminist commitment to “humanize rather than deconstruct” its subjects (154).

As I designed my research methods, I also wanted to find a way to openly navigate my own biases and investments. Therefore, my next chapter that offers my own feminist analysis of the primary texts in my study, but the final chapter in the dissertation compares my feminist analysis to that of the participants within my study. While it does not quite amount to the participant/observer status that Royster advocates for, it negotiates some of my power as the writer who frames my participants’ responses by investigating my own biases. It also offers an explicit form of self-reflexivity by returning to my initial responses, reconsidering my own assumptions, and offering alternate viewpoints. My multi-method approach leaves room for the study participants to collaborate in producing knowledge, particularly through my use of a burgeoning research method in rhetoric and composition known as eye tracking.

**Eye-Tracking as an Emerging Rhetoric and Composition Research Method**

Chris Anson and Robert Schwegler highlight the value of the eye tracking methodology in a recent *College Composition and Communication* special issue on methods. They claim “eye tracking provides ways to understand previously inaccessible dimensions of writing and reading that extend well beyond psychologically based studies of discourse processes” (Anson and Schwegler 152). The technology combines two components to work. First, “infrared light is reflected via a mirror into a subject’s eye, in turn creating a reflection off the retina and cornea. The corneal glint and the retinal reflection are used to calculate where the participant’s eye is focused” (Anson and Schwegler 154). Computer software then provides a map of the reader’s
gaze trail, which shows the path the reader’s eyes’ took as they read information. The map records fixations, indicating pauses in eye movements; saccades, which are periods of fast eye movement that usually move forward in the text; and regressions, which are a specific type of saccade that happens when a reader’s eyes move backward on the page or their gaze trail “usually because something isn’t making sense” (Anson and Schwegler 154-157). Western readers usually believe that they read in a smooth zigzag from left to right, moving down the page. However, Anson and Schwegler explain that our eyes actually move in jagged paths all around a page, “more like a subway map than a neat zigzag,” indicating that readers are “actively constructing meaning” from a written text, rather than passively consuming knowledge from the pages (152, original emphasis).

Anson and Schwegler argue that since written communication scholars “have generated large amounts of research on reading processes,” rhetoric and composition research could benefit from using eye tracking to study composing processes and the relationship between reading and writing tasks (151). For example, the authors summarize a study done by Anson, Schwegler, and Susan Rashid Horn that uses eye tracking to offer a different perspective than rhetoric and composition field’s ongoing study of errors. Anson, Schwegler, and Horn used eye-tracking to record their participants’ gaze trails while reading multiple selections of text, one without errors and one containing errors. By examining the gaze trails, they concluded that “certain errors had far more dramatic effects on readers’ processing and comprehension than others,” which has implications for how composition teachers should teach grammar in their classrooms and how teachers can best prepare students for revision and peer review (Anson and Schwegler 159).

In addition to advocating for using eye-tracking to study composition processes, their article closes with possibilities for eye-tracking in relationship to rhetorical genre analysis: “For
example, we can know much more precisely how students read familiar and unfamiliar genres, and we can chart differences in the way they read those genres over time” (Anson and Schwegler 167). They also suggest that eye-tracking has merit for researchers studying texts with verbal and visual components, such as students’ use of educational technology, including “the ways in which learners process some of that visual and textual information in textbooks and in e-learning environments involving multimedia presentations” (Anson and Schwegler 163). My study does not contain longitudinal analysis, but it does answer Anson’s and Schwegler’s call to combine eye tracking with rhetorical genre analysis, featuring a multimodal medium that offers insight into how readers process verbal and visual components.

Scholars outside of rhetoric and composition make similar arguments about eye tracking’s potential for researching the way that individuals read and understand multimodal texts. In an overview of the eye tracking methodology in the Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis, Jana Holsanova argues that “there is still little knowledge about how users actually are affected and interact with text design, how they read complex texts, what attracts their attention and what does not” (288). She argues that scholars like Theo Kress and Gunther Van Leeuwen (whose work has an important impact on visual studies scholars across disciplines, including rhetoric and composition) make claims about multimodal texts and the potential for meaning-making, but there is very little empirical data to support their claims. Holsanova argues that eye tracking offers a methodology for assessing the relationship between the composition of multimodal texts and a readers’ ability to navigate the composition in order to achieve the intended purpose of the text (288-289). Holsanova is not a rhetorician, but her argument offers a useful expansion of the future sites of study proposed by Anson and Schwegler. Her argument
suggests that eye-tracking can be used as a tool to investigate the rhetorical situation of a text, which should hold obvious appeal to compositionists.

Without mentioning comics specifically, both the Anson and Schwegler article and the Holsanova chapter indicate eye tracking has useful potential for studying readers’ ability to read and understand comics. However, there is very little research available that uses eye tracking as a methodology for analyzing comics and how readers actually read comics. Most of the current published studies are from the fields of education or educational psychology. In one such study, a team of international researchers, led by Lorena A. Martín-Arnal, used eye-tracking to compare the comics-reading practices of ten-to-twelve-year-old children against the reading practices of undergraduates. They found that the “children had more and longer fixations than adults,” indicating it took the children longer to read and make sense of a comic strip than it did for the adults (Martín-Arnal et al. 134) They argue that their findings match previous eye-tracking studies comparing children to adult readers in text-only materials, suggesting that children, as novice readers, need to take more time to understand any text they read, regardless of the medium. In another study, Charles K. Kinzer et al. use both comics and video games to examine sixth graders’ multimodal literacy, specifically “the relative importance of text and images in comprehension” (259). They found that when the students’ read the comics, they fixated on text far longer than they fixated on images, even though the images helped to tell the story. They then concluded that their findings had instructional implications for reading comprehension, especially if teachers were hoping to test students on information they could only learn from a visual portion of a multimodal text (Kinzer et al. 268). These studies model the eye-tracking methodology as an effective tool for locating connections between reading comprehension, the
things that readers actually look at when reading a text, and the amount of time that it takes to read multimodal texts.

Much like any emerging research tool, it is important to consider the limitations of the eye tracking method in addition to its potential. Holsanova points out that while eye-tracking can tell researchers how long a participant stared at a specific part of a text, it cannot tell the researcher why. She explains that a long fixation might indicate that something was interesting for a reader, so they spent longer fixating on that point out of enjoyment, or it could indicate the reader found this part of the text confusing and needed to stare longer in order to process new and/or difficult information (Holsanova 292-293). In addition, “we cannot conclude from the eye movement protocol alone what aspects and properties of the image element have been focused on, or….which concept was associated with it, or what the viewer had in mind” (Holsanova 292). In my study, a long fixation on an image from a comic book could indicate that the viewer is not sure what is happening in the image, or it could mean that the viewer is appreciating the artistry of the image, or it could mean something else entirely, and it is impossible to know from looking at the gaze trail alone. Holsanova argues that eye tracking is most effective when used alongside other research techniques, like comprehension questionnaires and interviews, to triangulate a better understanding of readers’ thought processes (292). In my dissertation, I use surveys and follow-up interviews alongside eye tracking to offset this limitation in the eye tracking methodology.

I also use a method called “cued retrospective reporting.” Holsanova recommends this as an effective method for connecting readers’ gaze trails with their cognition, and she cites an experimental psychology study by Tamara Van Gog et al. as the earliest study that links retrospective cuing with eye tracking. Van Gog et al. introduce the combination of eye tracking
and retrospective interviews within a study on reporting problem-solving processes in computer-programming tasks. They explain, “In cued retrospective reporting, participants are instructed to report retrospectively on the basis of a record of observations or intermediate products of their problem-solving process, which they are shown to cue their memories of this process” (Van Gog et al 238.) They argue that using a cue leads “to better results because of less forgetting and/or fabricating of thoughts than plain retrospective reporting” (Van Gog et al 238). In their study, Van Gog et al. first had participants complete a computer-programming task. They then showed their participants videos of their gaze trails that the researchers had recorded while the participants completed the computer-programming task. When the participants watched the cue videos, the researchers asked the participants to reconstruct their thought process, while also re-completing the same programming task, using the cues to stimulate their recall and their problem-solving process on the second attempt. This study focused on determining which types of recall would be most useful for explaining problem-solving processes, and the researchers concluded that cued retrospective reporting offered a useful tool for collecting metacognitive data, which is an important aspect of my research on reading practices.

Another study in education by Halszka Jarodzka et al. offers an important model for my dissertation by taking aspects of Van Gog et al.’s methodology and applying it to multimodal texts. The study uses cued retrospective reporting in combination with eye tracking to analyze the different ways that experts and novices learn from short videos. The researchers asked participants to first watch four videos that showed the ways that different fish move and then report on those “locomotion patterns” based on what the participants had learned from the videos. Afterward, the participants were shown a cue that “consisted of the videos with the recordings of participants’ own eye movements superimposed onto the video” (149). The
researchers referred to this specific form of cuing as “gaze replay” (149). The participants were asked to examine their gaze trails and then explain what they were thinking when they watched the fish videos the first time. Jarodzka et al. tested five hypotheses on the different ways that experts and novices read and understand instructional material, such as whether experts or novices had “a more diverse gaze pattern” (153). They argue that eye tracking enabled them to analyze the difference between experts and novices on a “perceptual level,” while the cued retrospective reporting enabled them to analyze differences on a “conceptual level” (152). My study borrows some of their methodology by combining eye tracking with cued retrospective reporting and by using gaze replay as a cue. In addition, I use these combined methods to assess participants’ reading patterns on both a perceptual and conceptual level.

Rhetoric and composition scholars may recognize research concerns about thought processes and cognition from earlier decades of rhetoric and composition research. Anson and Schwegler briefly mention that eye-tracking might “revitalize[e] cognitive research” (152). They later argue that eye tracking can help researchers analyze metacognition by “advancing earlier models such as that of Flower and Hayes, whose methodology was unable to describe as precisely how writers use a ‘monitor’ to control component processes while writing” (160). They suggest that eye tracking offers a different kind of data than previous methods like think-aloud protocols: eye-tracking data can fill in some of the gaps that earlier cognitive research was unable to fill.

When combined with cued retrospective reporting, eye tracking may also be a tool for revitalizing stimulated recall, or at least offering an updated method of using recorded data to prompt research participants to expand and reflect on their thought processes. In her chapter entitled “Stimulated Recall in Research on Writing,” Anne DiPardo reflects on her use of
stimulated recall as one tool she used to unpack the varied experiences within a writing tutor program for developmental English students. DiPardo interviewed both students and tutors, and she used stimulated recall in her end-of-semester interviews by playing excerpts from audiotapes of tutoring sessions recorded earlier in the semester. She then asked the interviewees to reflect back on their statements and ideas and found that students offered much longer, more complex answers after they heard their recorded sessions (DiPardo 167).

DiPardo praises stimulated recall in part for its flexibility as a research method (168). She explains that while the method had been used primarily to research individual cognitive processes, she was able to use it as a tool for unpacking the social and institutional contexts that surrounded her individual participants. DiPardo offers a case study of a Mexican-American student named Sylvia who responded to standard interview questions by describing her experiences with the tutoring program as “pretty good,” even though DiPardo suspected that Sylvia had a more complex and complicated experience (173). By using stimulated recall, DiPardo provoked deeper analysis from Sylvia. She found that, “Sylvia became both fascinated and reflective, repeatedly reconsidering and qualifying the generalities of her earlier replies, engaging in far more detailed analysis” (174). In addition, DiPardo offers a practical explanation for stimulated recall: since her study spanned the course of a semester, it was a useful tool for helping students remember forgotten words and interactions. Cued retrospective reporting with gaze replays offers a new method, based on contemporary technology, for inviting participants to remember and reflect on their reading, writing, and/or thought processes.

In my dissertation, I used cued retrospective reporting with gaze replays to uncover tacit knowledge and stimulate memory recall. Writing researchers Lee Odell, Dixie Goswami, and Anne Herrington explain tacit knowledge as part of a composition process: “That is, having
derived it through repeated experience, writers can use it without having to formulate it consciously each time they write” (222-223). Anson’s and Schwegler’s article suggests that tacit knowledge can also be a key component in reading processes. They claim that most readers are honestly unaware of what their gaze trails actually look like as they read over a page and that most readers will fill in the content of a page based on a quick scan over and around the full page, rather than following a neat and orderly reading progression. Since readers do not need to know about their gaze trails in order to read effectively, we could consider this a form of tacit knowledge that could be unpacked with the help of cued retrospective reporting. Tacit knowledge in relation to reading has both cognitive aspects (like being able to fill in words by looking at only a few letters) and embodied aspects (including, but not limited to, the actual movements that readers’ eyes make as they move around a page.)

Getting research participants to explain tacit knowledge involves some version of memory-cuing. Odell, Goswami, and Herrington argue that discourse-based interviews offer an effective method for understanding a writers’ tacit knowledge, especially in helping writers recall their understanding of the rhetorical situation surrounding non-academic writing tasks. The researchers’ discourse-based interviews use a form of cuing, based on previously completed pieces of writing, to help writers access the tacit knowledge they used to construct an effective and appropriate piece of writing. They offer an example in which the researchers asked a business executive to explain a business letter he had previously written to a sales representative. The researchers asked the executive to consider alternative words and phrases to his final draft. For example, they asked the executive to explain why he chose an informal greeting, “Dear Ron,” as opposed to a more formal greeting, “Dear Mr. Bunch.” The executive explained that he wanted the greeting to reflect a personal connection based on previous conversations with Ron.
Odell, Goswami, and Herrington argue that stimulating cognitive dissonance by providing alternatives and asking the writer to verbally respond to the alternatives is a useful tactic for uncovering the writers’ tacit knowledge.

Odell, Goswami, and Herrington clarify that they are using discourse-based interviewing to “identify the kinds of world knowledge and expectations that informants bring to writing tasks and to discover the perceptions informants have about the conceptual demands that functional, interactive writing tasks make on them” (228). Similar to DiPardo’s use of stimulated recall, they use discourse-based interviewing to access long-term memory, but Odell, Goswami, and Harrington are very suspicious of “using interviews to obtain information about mental processes,” because interviewees may have a limited or incorrect understanding of their own tacit knowledge (227-228).

Combining interviews with cued retrospective reporting and eye tracking offers a strategy for initiating cognitive dissonance in relation to participants’ reading strategies and giving even less self-aware readers a tool for accessing empirical data about their reading processes. My research project seeks to explore some of the potential for using eye tracking for this research purpose in rhetoric and composition. If readers are not fully cognizant of their gaze trails as they read, then gaze replays are in part informative: participants are seeing and learning about their gaze trails, at least to some extent, for the first time. Once readers view their gaze trails, they should be able to access some of the tacit knowledge in their reading process, including the reasons behind their choices as a reader. This combination of memory recall and metacognitive processing, which also lines up with findings from Van Gog et al., offers a good combination of both building on and updating rhetoric and composition research methodologies.
Cuing participants with gaze replays also serves my feminist commitments to collaboration and self-reflexivity within my study. While examining their own gaze trails during cued retrospective reporting, participants have the opportunity to collaborate with me as a researcher on making meaning out of the eye tracking data. DiPardo found stimulated recall useful for similar reasons. She says, “I had gathered that Sylvia held mixed feelings about [her tutor] Morgan, but without Sylvia’s own words…I would have been far more alone with the burden of interpretation” (176). Much like stimulated recall, cued retrospective reporting expands the role of data interpretation to my participants, rather than relying on my interpretation alone. Furthermore, cued retrospective reporting serves as a tool for encouraging participants to be self-reflexive about their own reading processes.

This form of collaboration does have limits. I am still the author of this project, and I get to choose which claims and statements show up in my dissertation, how those statements are framed, and which claims I choose to grant validity. DiPardo acknowledges other limitations that are similar to ones that I experienced. She says that in order to limit the times of her end-of-semester interviews, she pre-selected three interview segments to play for each of her participants, relying on her ability to locate common themes across the full semester’s interviews. As the sole researcher on her dissertation, no one was able to question or confirm her choices for the interview selections. She concludes, “There was no easy way to resolve this problem within the context of my study; it becomes, rather, a rationale for collaborative research, wherein checks on interpretations and decisions can become both integral and ongoing” (178). In my study, I am also a solo author, and I also selected short video excerpts to use as cues within my follow-up interviews. I selected clips that showed gaze trails that I did not feel comfortable interpreting without input from the participants, but this selection meant that the participants
rarely saw a section of their gaze trail that showed an orderly reading progression that already made sense to me, such as saccades that moved along a chain of speech bubbles or text boxes with fixations on each piece of text. This may have given the participants an inaccurate picture of their reading practices as a whole, but it felt like a necessary strategy to balance my need to gather data with my need to respect each participant’s time and retain their attention as much as possible throughout the interview. Even though the cued retrospective reporting method is not a perfect solution for bringing collaboration into a single-author project, it disperses the work of interpretation and requires me to be self-reflexive about my own conclusions, which hopefully offers a fairer, more complete analysis of the data I gathered from the study participants.

**Conclusion**

For this project I have built an interdisciplinary methodology that combines rhetorical genre analysis with knowledge from comics studies about the specific conventions and ideologies connected to comics. These research methods are consistent with a commitment to feminist ethics, specifically through accepting and investigating my emotional attachments to this research, cobbling together research methods from a variety of disciplines, and designing research methods that encourage collaboration and self-reflexivity. Finally, I use eye-tracking as an emerging rhetoric and composition research method that accesses both perceptual and conceptual aspects of reader responses to the comics medium, especially when combined with other methods, such as cued retrospective reporting with gaze replays, that mitigate the limitations of the eye-tracking methodology.

These three principles are all interrelated. My argument that insight from comics studies can benefit rhetoric and composition scholars is consistent with a feminist research strategy of
cobbling together methodologies and methods from multiple disciplines. My use of cued retrospective reporting alongside eye tracking fits into a feminist commitment to self-reflexivity. Overall, these three guiding principles underscore a commitment to investigating complexity in the comics medium and in reader responses to that medium.

In the next chapter, I further explore the feminist aspects of my project by introducing the role of imagination in my methodology and analysis. I begin with an introduction to the two comics that are the primary texts for this project. I also offer an interdisciplinary feminist analysis of the two comics that demonstrates the cobbling principle by pulling theories and analytical lenses from diverse academic fields, including visual studies, queer theory, and rhetoric and composition. My analysis unpacks the value that these texts have for feminist rhetorical research, but it also serves as my own reader response to the two comics. In later chapters, I return to my reader response and self-reflexively analyze my own interpretation of the comics in comparison to the data gathered from the eight study participants.
Chapter 2
Feminist Imagination in Batwoman and Captain Marvel Comics

In the previous chapter I argued that comics studies and rhetoric and composition offer complementary perspectives and tools for producing richer analyses of comics. In particular, I focused on the value of rhetorical genre theory for analyzing the relationship between the specific formal conventions of comics and the rhetorical effects these conventions have on their related discourse communities. I also introduced eye tracking, especially in conjunction with cued retrospective reporting, as a useful tool for gaining insights into both the perceptual and conceptual aspects of reading comic books. Finally, I explained how feminist ethics guide my research methods and my overall approach to shaping this project. In this chapter, I expand on the feminist aspects of my research. I develop an analytical lens called feminist imagination and argue that feminist imagination is a form of rhetoric that combines creativity and persuasion across a wide span of feminist work. I briefly unpack key ways in which feminist analysis has particular stakes within comics studies. Finally, I analyze the primary texts for my study, *Batwoman: Elegy* and *Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight*, as texts that are largely successful in using the rhetoric of feminist imagination to create more equitable versions of female superheroes that will likely appeal to the comics-reader discourse community. This chapter illustrates how a lens as broad as feminist imagination works well for analyzing the complexity inherent to feminist comics analysis.

**Feminist Imagination**

I have chosen the two primary texts for this study based on my feminist, compositionist, scholar-fan perspective. These two texts appeal to me because of their context within the comics
industry, and because they offer compelling examples of a form of feminist rhetoric that is often used but frequently under-analyzed: imagination. Imagination may seem like a strange or incompatible companion for feminist work because of its association with the Romantic lone, male genius. For example, in her book on imagination, Mary Warnock offers a thoughtful genealogy of Western conceptions of the imagination, focusing on such philosophers and theorists as Hume, Kant, Sartre, Coleridge, and Wittgenstein, that points to many issues that feminists have with imagination. Warnock’s genealogy, which includes only male thinkers, offers an important look at how male philosophers and their understandings of men’s imaginations were crucial to Western conceptions of imagination. Of particular use for those studying creative works, Warnock offers an analysis of imagination used for creative purposes, or what Hume refers to as “what constitutes genius” (qtd. in Warnock 35). In this chapter, she explicitly links imagination to the thinking and creativity of men. For example, in her summary of Kant’s “man of genius” Warnock explains, “the man of artistic genius is the man who can find new ways of nearly embodying ideas; and in his attempts imagination has a creative role” (63). Her chapter then offers an explanation of Western creative imagination that is grounded firmly in maleness and masculinity, indicating clearly why feminists might be wary of the term.

With her genealogy, and particularly her analysis of Kant, Warnock draws attention to longstanding beliefs that true imagination comes from men, and usually solitary, exemplary men working in isolation. Joan Wallach Scott notes a similar link between imagination and men in the eighteenth century, as thinkers like Rousseau and Voltaire both argued that women did not possess the capacity for imagination in the way men did (24-25). This belief often carries over into rhetoric, where imagination has long remained linked to male rhetors. Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede, for example, write about how authorship, an activity inherently involving imagination,
is connected to social beliefs about gender. They say, “society locates power, authority, authenticity, and property in an autonomous, masculine self” (234). There is a strong Western tradition of associating imagination with the work of men, most often individual gifted men.

In addition to the troubling connection between imagination and men (or masculinity), many feminists reject a study of imagination due to its connection to solitary genius rather than communal, collaborative knowledge. In order to discuss imagination outside the sole genius trope, feminist rhetorical scholars often turn to invention as a rhetorical canon that implicitly values imagination by positioning imaginative thinking within social, communal knowledge that a (not necessarily male) rhetor can reliably use to convince an audience. For example, Lisa Ede, Cheryl Glenn, and Andrea Lunsford analyze the value that invention has for feminist rhetorical work in their piece entitled “Border Crossings: Intersections of Rhetoric and Feminism.” Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford argue that invention offers a corrective to historical understandings of the rhetor as a sole male. They argue

feminists had to recognize, remember, and challenge traditional understandings of the rhetor, for until recently, the figure of the rhetor has been assumed to be masculine, unified, stable, autonomous, and capable of acting rationally through language…From a feminist vantage point, however, it is impossible to take the subjectivity of the rhetor for granted, impossible not to locate that subjectivity within the larger context of personal, social, economic, cultural, and ideological forces. (Ede, Glenn, Lunsford 59)

They position invention as a key tool for rethinking and reclaiming female rhetoric beyond the male canon or the male rhetorical tradition. In this piece, Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford are deliberately using invention in order to argue that rhetoric has useful tools for connecting the disciplines of rhetoric and feminism. However, pigeonholing imaginative rhetoric/rhetorical
analysis into invention threatens to produce a resistance to imagination as a whole rather than the problematic associations that link imagination exclusively to solitary male geniuses.

I frame my methodology through imagination rather than invention for three key reasons. First, the term lays claim to imagination as an existing feminist tool rather than ceding the concept entirely to its problematic Western, male, individualistic associations. For example, the kind of work that Ede, Glenn and Lunsford highlight—in which feminists need to imaginatively rethink perspectives, histories, and ideas in order to locate women’s work compellingly within male-dominated Western perspectives—demonstrates imagination as a methodological tool that already exists in feminist rhetorical work. In the arguably foundational text for feminist rhetorics, *Man Cannot Speak for Her*, communication theorist Karlyn Kohrs Campbell pores through various historical periods to look for ignored female rhetors that have been excluded from the traditionally male rhetorical canon. Campbell argues that women have no “rhetorical history” because men have traditionally encouraged women to be silent, and those rare women who dared to speak out publicly often did not have their words preserved (1). In Andrea Lunsford’s introduction to *Reclaiming Rhetorica*, a collection of essays examining female rhetoricians in order to propose a “less seamless” version of the rhetorical tradition, Lunsford details the struggles it took to get the book published, but also recalls that the contributors to the volume worked tirelessly toward publication because, “if ever women’s place in the rhetorical tradition were to be reconfigured…the work of this volume had to be done” (5). Lunsford’s volume also works to resist the traditional conception of rhetoric, which Lunsford and others in the book represent as “competitive” and “agonistic,” and searches the historical work of women for less obvious but no less important forms of rhetoric employed by women (6). These examples indicate a key component within feminist rhetorics: imaginative re-thinkings of rhetoric. In order
to claim space for female rhetors and feminist rhetoric, feminist rhetoricians must frequently begin by imagining ways in which women could be included, or already have been included, in rhetorical discourse. By examining feminist rhetorical projects through the lens of feminist imagination, we can see that the discipline has always valued creative, imaginative thinking as it seeks unlikely ways and places in which women use rhetoric.

In *New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch explicitly draw attention to the connection between feminist rhetorics and the need for imaginative thinking when they promote a form of feminist rhetorical inquiry that they label “critical imagination” (loc. 949). This term merits a lengthy explanation due to its importance within the scope of my work. Royster and Kirsch define “critical imagination” as one of several inquiry tools available for developing a critical stance in order to engage more intentionally and intensely in various intellectual processes. The idea is to account for what we “know” by gathering whatever evidence can be gathered and ordering it in a configuration that is reasonable and justifiable in accord with basic scholarly methodologies. The next step is to think between, above, around, and beyond this evidence to speculate methodically about probabilities, that is, what might likely be true based on what we have in hand. (loc. 949-953)

Arguably, Campbell and the contributors to *Reclaiming Rhetorica* used critical imagination in order to seek out feminist rhetoricians lost from rhetorical history. Eileen Schell’s process of cobbling together feminist research methodologies from multiple disciplines also offers an explicit link between feminist rhetorics and imagination (5). For these theorists, imagination is primarily a research tool, but these examples provide useful evidence for the role of imagination in line with productive feminist aims.
Second, using the term imagination, rather than relying on discipline-specific language like invention, offers a bridge for examining how feminist imagination functions as a rhetoric in feminist work both within and beyond the discipline of rhetoric. Scholars in other disciplines have tracked imagination as an important aspect of feminist politics. In her historical analysis of feminist political imagination, sociologist Vikki Bell argues feminism offers a different way of seeing future possibilities. She says, “The alternative vision of feminism is a display of an imaginative faculty; but while it is ‘about’ the future, it is in the present, and, therefore, open to historical and genealogical understanding” (6). In an introduction to an edited collection on “thinking through feminism,” editors Sara Ahmed et al. explain,

> the feminist belief in future possibilities involves rethinking histories of our relations to the body, to sensory perception, to knowing and to politics. Thinking through feminism is thus an invitation to re-member and re-imagine…The work of imagination allows an opening or fissure in the past, through which we may realize a different future.” (7)

Thus, whenever feminists engage in feminist thinking, they must be creative enough to see the past differently and/or envision different possibilities for the future. They must also be rhetorically competent enough to firmly grasp timeliness by responding both to present conditions and improving on conditions extending from the past.

Feminist imagination offers a lens for rethinking the role of rhetoric outside rhetorical studies, such as in fictional or artistic texts, by building better connections across feminist work from a variety of disciplines. By turning to feminist art theory, we can see how imaginative creativity is steeped in rhetorical concerns, like context and kairos. In her landmark essay, “Why Have there been No Great Women Artists?,” feminist art historian Linda Nochlin makes a
compelling connection between rhetoric and creativity in artistic production by focusing on the contexts that allow great art to develop. Rather than responding directly to the question that forms the title of her essay, she asks her readers to rethink the question itself and the assumptions that underlie that question. For example, she argues that questions about “great women artists” beget questions about “great artists” which she links to genius: “an atemporal and mysterious power somehow embedded in the person of the Great Artist” (Nochlin 153). She elaborates, “Underlying the question about woman as artist then, we find the myth of the Great Artist—subject of a hundred monographs, unique, godlike—bearing within his person since birth a mysterious essence…which, like murder, must always out, no matter how unlikely or unpromising the circumstances” (Nochlin 153). Notice that her explication of the Great Artist bears striking similarities to the sole, male genius outlined in Warnock’s genealogy.

Nochlin spends the majority of her essay unpacking the ridiculousness of this myth, since producing art relies heavily on such material conditions as gender, class, race, training, and “temporally defined conventions, schemata, or systems of notation, which have to be learned or worked out, either through teaching, apprenticeship, or a long period of individual experimentation” (149). Her essay relies on feminist imagination as a way to rethink criticism in the art world. In a different vein, but one that no less compellingly blends creativity and rhetoric under the auspices of feminist imagination, feminist art theorist Amy Mullin provides a helpful understanding of “imagination as simultaneously artistic and political” within the art world (189). She argues, “through our imaginations, we can explore both possibilities and impossibilities, and combine things not generally seen as coexisting” (Mullin 197). This offers a link between imagination as a form of rhetoric with political potential and imagination as a creative force used in the creation of artistic works. It also addresses some of the concerns that
G. Willow Wilson raised about Jill Lepore’s analysis of female superhero comic books that leaves no room for viewing comics within creative processes.

Finally, I endorse the term imagination over invention, because imagination already serves specific functions within marginalized communities that rely on imagination in fundamental ways for visibility and survival. While research on imagination and its relationship to marginalized communities may be not be explicitly framed as “feminist,” an intersectional feminist approach to imagination must acknowledge and explore imagination as it relates to complex identities that are shaped by race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality in addition to gender. For example, imagination has recently taken on a growing importance in ethnographic work with an eye to ethics and inclusivity. Michael Thomas Hayes, Pauline Sameshima, and Francene Watson, whose work comprises an interdisciplinary blend of cultural studies and education, argue that imagination is a central aspect of ethnographic work. They say, “we are suggesting that imagination is not just one component of ethnographic work that can be compartmentalized into a specific component of inquiry, but its very foundational organizing principle” (Hayes, Sameshima, and Watson 40). The authors explain that reframing imagination as the central tenet of ethnographic research serves an ethical need to produce research about a planet in crisis. They argue, “it is essential that an ethnographer of imagination intentionally adopt values and ethical commitments she or he believes will encourage the imaginative generation of a world in which we would wish to live” (Hayes, Sameshima, and Watson 43).

Social justice scholar Katie Bannon distills the power of imagination as method by explaining “this concept…guides the researcher in structuring their methodology to explore ‘what could be’ in order to transcend an over saturated production of ‘what is’” (142). Bannon argues particularly for using imagination as method to research Black, queer communities,
because the method “centers knowledge from historically marginalized communities,” which in turn allows researchers and research subjects to create narratives in which Black queer people are both seen and celebrated (142, 154). Bannon also argues that using imagination as method in ethnography offers a particularly compelling, ethical tool for recording grassroots social justice work in narratives designed to display authenticity and equitable “futurities” (143). Bannon links her argument to specific work done by social justice activists, such as an ethnographic article on an education program designed by and for incarcerated women that demonstrates centering the values of communities whose identities are marginalized from academic discourse and knowledge-building (155). Her examples suggest that imagination has practical aspects in addition to idealistic ones for researching marginalized communities.

In rhetoric and composition studies, Keith Gilyard is an advocate for “imaginative wanderings” as part of scholarly work (262). Gilyard delivered remarks as the Chair of the 51st Annual Conference on College Composition and Communication that highlight the ways in which great African American thinkers, like Martin Luther King, have “subordinate[d] certain other imaginative pursuits, such as leisurely study and contemplation of music and literature, to the taxing demands of the civil rights movement” (260). He muses about which thinkers face “that kind of tradeoff” out of some cultural necessity, while others are free to pursue “preferred flights of fancy” (260). Gilyard also makes a case for popular, creative works by Black authors taking a place of importance in contemporary academic studies. For example, he references lyrics by Jay-Z to support his claim that teachers can serve increasingly diverse students, in part, by “accord[ing] them certain respect” (271). Neither Gilyard nor the researchers who advocate for imagination as ethnographic method are centering feminism as part of their imagination-based arguments. However, these few examples illustrate ways in which scholars are harnessing
imagination as a powerful research tool that intertwines popular creative works with ethical academic work to serve marginalized communities. Claiming imagination as a feminist term offers a bridge to communities that already rely on imagination for envisioning more just and equitable futures.

By braiding the threads of imaginative work explored thus far—feminist invention, critical imagination, artistic imagination, and imagination as method—we can identify feminist imagination as a form of feminist rhetoric often employed by feminists within and without rhetorical studies. Feminist imagination as a rhetoric is slightly different from Royster’s and Kirsch’s critical imagination, since it does not focus on imagination-as-research-tool, and it is slightly different from Mullin’s artistic imagination, since it is not exclusive to artistic expression. Rather, it is a form of rhetoric that covers many pathways for thinking beyond present realities and reframing current narratives and epistemologies. Yet, not all imagination is feminist imagination. It is very possible to create a fictional, imaginative work that reifies or reproduces patriarchal conditions. Artists, rhetoricians, scholars, and others make use of feminist imagination when they ground their imaginative work in such rhetorical concerns as kairos, genre, audience, and exigency, using those rhetorical concerns to serve feminist aims and goals.

When scholars analyze fictional and creative works, they should obviously not assume that these works are feminist because they involve creativity. Instead, if scholars or creators want to make use of feminist imagination, they must consider how the text responds to feminist concerns, such as representations of gender, in order to determine if the use of imagination is in fact feminist.

The breadth of rhetorical feminist imagination offers a bridge between feminist work in different disciplines and work that furthers intersectional feminist goals without centering gender or feminism as its primary focus. Because of my broad reading of feminist imagination as any
rhetoric that uses imaginative thinking to achieve feminist aims, including that found in both theoretical and creative texts, almost any tool that feminists use could be seen as a form of this rhetoric. Thus, in my analysis of Batwoman and Captain Marvel, I will limit my analysis by looking at three different modes of feminist creativity and feminist rhetoric that hold specific value for a genre-based approach to superhero texts and that can be combined under the heading of feminist imagination. These three modes of feminist imagination are paradox, rhetorical listening, and disidentification.

Paradox

Paradox offers a useful mode for beginning an analysis of feminist imagination, because paradox as a lens demonstrates the value of synthesizing feminist thinkers from different disciplines. Paradox also has a unique role within comics, which gives it an important place within genre-based rhetorical comics analysis. Joan Wallach Scott explains paradox and its connection to feminism in her book on French feminist politics, Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man. In her first chapter, Scott argues that feminists must choose a political strategy of equality, in which men and women are fundamentally equal human beings, while at the same time adopting a strategy of difference, in which women are fundamentally different from men, as a groundwork for feminist politics (3-4). She claims, “feminism was a protest against women’s political exclusion; its goal was to eliminate ‘sexual difference’ in politics, but it had to make its claims on behalf of ‘women’ (who were discursively produced through ‘sexual difference’)” (J. Scott 3). Furthermore, “This paradox—the need both to accept and to refuse ‘sexual difference’—was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history” (J. Scott 3-4). Thus, feminist work must always
be tangled in the paradox of difference and equality. Scott focuses entirely on real-world feminist politics in her chapters, but arguably this paradox can also be found in creative feminist works as well. For example, Mullin makes a similar argument when she highlights the ability for imaginative artistic works to combine things that do not seem to coexist, depicting the possible and impossible. For both these theorists, paradox is a concept tied to rhetoric and creative imagination.

Many theorists frame paradox as a central problem for productive feminism, a roadblock that feminists cannot seem to get around, but Scott highlights the productive potential found in paradox. She claims, “The courage and inventiveness of individual feminists, the subversive power and historical significance of their collective voice, lay (still lie) in the disturbing spectacle presented by paradox” (J. Scott 11). She further points out that “in rhetorical and aesthetic theory, paradox is a sign of the capacity to balance complexly contrary thoughts and feelings and, by extension, poetic creativity” (J. Scott 4). Scott uses her book to explore the particular examples of French feminism in which paradox became a foundational groundwork for feminist political change. She argues that feminists are bound in the equality/difference paradox not through their own failings, but by “the discursive practices of democratic politics that have equated individuality with masculinity” and the individual as central to democratic citizenship and its related political agency (J. Scott 5). Women were a problem for French democratic politics, and similarly American politics, because rights were supposed to be universal, but because of “sexual difference,” women were not afforded those universal rights. Thus, their very exclusion pointed to a lie about universal rights (J. Scott 8-9).

Scott uses French feminist Olympe de Gouges as a key example for explaining the pairing of spectacle and paradox. De Gouges was a feminist activist in late 18th century France
who sought citizenship and political roles for women. In order to do so, de Gouge wrote several pamphlets in which she both highlighted her status as a woman, distinct from men, and highlighted her similarity to men, making a case for her place as a citizen (Scott 33). E. Lairtullier later went so far as to claim, “She made herself a man for the country” (qtd. in J. Scott 33). As part of her political work, de Gouges “claimed imagination to align herself with great creative minds” as well as to challenge such thinkers as Diderot who argued that women could not access imagination in the way men could (J. Scott 29). De Gouges’ activism ran afoul of Jacobin ideals to the point that she was tried by the Revolutionary Tribunal and executed for an “exalted imagination.” In other words, her imagination indicated that de Gouges had lost her sense of reality and this loss intruded dangerously into the public political sphere, to the point that it warranted her execution (J. Scott 53). For Scott, de Gouges serves as an important example of how feminist imagination works through paradox. Rather than simply imagining the ways that women have always participated in the public sphere, feminist work should reimagine the reasons and methods used to keep women excluded from that public sphere.

Paradox holds particular appeal for analyzing comics because the use of words and pictures together can offer narrative and visual paradoxes. Comics scholar Charles Hatfield argues that the relationship between words and images is itself paradoxical in the comics medium. He points out that comics “collapse the word/image dichotomy” since words are often hand drawn and graphically designed, while images can be “simplified and codified to function as a language” (Hatfield 37). At the same time, he argues that responding to comics often depends on recognizing word and image as two ‘different’ types of sign whose implications can be played against each other—to gloss, to illustrate, to contradict or complicate or ironize the other…We continue to distinguish between the
function of words and the function of images, despite the fact that comics continually work to destabilize this very distinction. This tension between codes is fundamental to the art form” (Hatfield 37).

In Hatfield’s analysis, the way that comics both ask readers to distinguish between words and images while collapsing their distinction functions as a paradox at the center of comics reading. Hatfield later expands on how words and pictures can work together to build paradox into the stories told within comics (38). He explains that it is entirely possible for the narrative told solely within a comics’ words in the narrative boxes and speech bubbles to be contradicted by the imagery, which produces a paradoxical experience for the reader since the narratives are presented simultaneously and neither narrative track is given precedence (Hatfield 38). Hatfield also explains that a comic’s imagery may be inconsistent from one panel to the next, building visual contradictions or even visual paradoxes into the comics medium.

Hillary Chute uses the autobiographical work of Aline Kominskey-Crumb to explain how visual paradox within comics can serve as feminist imagination. She explains that Kominsky-Crumb’s work “is characterized by deliberate visual inconsistency within its narratives…She frequently draws herself differently from panel to panel, even within the space of one story…[Her] noncontinuous self-representation…unsettles selfsame subjectivity, presenting an unfixed nonunitary, resolutely shifting female self” (Graphic Women 31). Chute argues that the visual inconsistency in Kominsky-Crumb’s work expresses the fragmented and paradoxical incidents at the heart of women’s lived experiences, in which conflicting expectations placed on women make a unified sense of self very difficult, if not impossible (Graphic Women 31-32).

Hatfield’s and Chute’s claims apply to comics in general and women’s autobiographical comics in particular, but they both focus their analysis on comics that are written and drawn by a
single author. The role of visual and visual/verbal paradox takes on a particularly interesting role in superhero comics, since most superhero comics are written by one author or group of authors and drawn by a different artist or group of artists. These material conditions open up a wealth of possibilities. For example, the paradoxes between the visual and verbal may simply illustrate different forms of imagination created by different authors and artists, and the ensuing paradoxes may be reflective of a collaborative but non-cohesive creative process. These unplanned paradoxes may unintentionally create powerful disjunctures by representing different versions or expectations of female superheroes, but they could also undermine the feminist imagination found in other aspects of one comic. Alternatively, the visual paradoxes between word-and-image or image-and-image could be planned tensions by a collaborative team working together to produce deliberate irony or conflicts, much like the tactics Hatfield and Chute argue that sole creators use. Both Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight and Batwoman: Elegy are comics written by one author and drawn by a different artist (Elegy) or small team of artists (In Pursuit of Flight), so applying paradox as both a tool of feminist imagination and a creative tool inherent within the creation of comics offers a rich and compelling lens for analyzing these female superhero comics.

Rhetorical Listening

Feminist imagination draws attention to non-verbal rhetorics. For example, feminist rhetoricians Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe focus on silence and listening as rhetorical acts no less important than speeches in the public sphere. In their edited collection, the two rhetoricians argue that “the arts of silence and listening are as important to rhetoric and composition studies as the traditionally emphasized arts of reading, writing, and speaking” particularly because these
arts are often used by “nondominant (subaltern) groups” with less access to traditional forms of rhetoric (Glenn and Ratcliffe 2). From a feminist perspective, nonverbal rhetorics offer sites of rhetorical agency that female rhetors may use more or have better access to than public, verbal rhetorics. This offers an interesting feminist reason for analyzing visual rhetorics within comics, and it also offers a valuable connection between reading and listening.

In *Rhetorical Listening*, Ratcliffe describes rhetorical listening as “a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (1). It is a form of listening that powerfully employs empathy and a willingness to accept and value perspectives that are different from the listeners’. Building on Ratcliffe, Lunsford and Adam Rosenblatt position positive models of empathetic and rhetorical listening against self-serving negative models of listening. They particularly focus on something they term “instrumental listening” (131). While they present empathetic and rhetorical listening as positive forms designed to build relationships that value the speaker’s agency and subjectivity, instrumental listening serves “not to know a person or to form a relational connection…but to obtain that person’s objectified experience” (Lunsford and Rosenblatt 134).

Lunsford’s and Rosenblatt’s contributions to rhetorical listening are particularly useful for combining feminist imagination with comics analysis, because in their article “‘Down a Road and into an Awful Silence’: Graphic Listening in Joe Sacco’s Comics Journalism” they combine an analysis of comics journalist Joe Sacco’s work with Ratcliffe’s concept of rhetorical listening. Lunsford and Rosenblatt are intrigued by how potent rhetorical listening becomes when one can visually see its effects. They conclude that instrumental listening reduces the person’s agency, and as Lunsford and Rosenblatt show through examples from Sacco’s comics, this kind of listening serves to dehumanize the speaker, prioritizing the listener’s wants and intentions. The
scholars note heightened discomfort when reading scenes in which Sacco, as a main character in his journalistic comics, uses instrumental listening, because it is particularly uncomfortable to see the effects instrumental listening has on the people with whom Sacco interacts (Lunsford and Rosenblatt). In light of Scott’s paradox, feminist imagination offers a framework through which to consider the co-presence of rhetorical listening and instrumental listening and analyze whether their co-presence is problematic or productive.

Disidentification

In addition to being interdisciplinary, feminist imagination is intersectional. It can accommodate methodologies that blend analyses of gender with analyses of race, sexuality, class, and other aspects of identity. Disidentification originates within queer theory and adds useful perspective for feminist imagination in superhero comics. In his book Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics, queer theorist and visual culture scholar José Esteban Muñoz explains that “disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz 4). He later clarifies, “Disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this working on and against is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance” (12).
Muñoz explains that disidentification is an inherently political act that serves marginalized individuals, particularly queer people of color.\textsuperscript{11}

In rhetorical studies, Muñoz’ concept of disidentification has similarities to a method of resistance that feminist rhetorician Elizabeth Ervin calls a rhetoric of “inappropriateness” (320). Ervin introduces “inappropriateness” as a strategy adopted by a political group called the Situationists who rejected appropriateness as implying such “bourgeois values as patience, caution, and respect” (320). While the Situationists’ work was grounded in Marxist critique in a way that Muñoz’ theory of disidentification is not, the rhetoric of inappropriateness relies heavily on a similar “on and against” strategy. In order to work effectively, a rhetoric of inappropriateness must understand the appropriate uses of social and genre conventions just enough to counteract them. Without this understanding of appropriateness, any resistance fails to serve any destabilizing purpose.

Disidentification is particularly compelling in superhero comics analysis because of the role of superhero origin stories and the revision of those origin stories within the superhero genre. The revisionist nature of superheroes is in no way limited to female superheroes. In his introduction to \textit{The Amazing Transforming Superhero}, Terrence Wandtke claims, “as long as the superhero has been in existence, the superhero has been ‘in the making,’ working through a series of revisions” (5). Wandtke posits that revising superheroes, often through their origin stories, is an essential component to superhero comics and movies, both as a result of changing cultural landscapes and the changing artistic visions of different authors and illustrators who write and draw stories for long-running superhero characters. Wandtke claims, “new audiences are introduced to the superhero and the current audience does not want to read about ‘their father’s’ Superman. However, at the same time, the psychic trace of the original is never
completely lost, despite the best efforts of comic book writers to obliterate the partially hidden past” (7). Thus, when new writers seek to rework superheroes for new audiences and new cultural contexts, they actively try not to fully identify with previous versions of superheroes but they also do not escape or counteridentify with those previous versions either. Superhero revision serves some of the same mechanical functions of disidentification, and when used by conscientious creators, revision can also be a political act within the comics medium.

Origin stories are a crucial and specific narrative convention within the superhero genre. Comics scholar Peter Coogan offers this summation: “Superheroes have origins, whereas characters in other genres may go through similar transformations but these are not referred to as origins” (84). Rather than a simple semantic distinction, a superhero’s origins work in key ways within the genre. Film scholar Scott Bukatman claims that a superhero’s origin establishes a clear demarcation between the human and superhuman. He explains

the origin story is the real site of plasmatic possibility…the characters, and perhaps the audience, do not yet know how the bite of a radioactive spider, gamma rays, particle accelerator, or mutant gene will manifest within, or more importantly, upon their bodies. This is the moment when, rarebit-fiend style, everyday reality will yield to something more, the moment when the constraints of the mundane world will evaporate.” (Bukatman 121)

Psychology scholar Philip Sandifer claims that the importance of an origin story comes from the ubiquitous presence of trauma within those stories. He says that in light of their traumatic origins, the superhero stories told through serial, issue-based comics (like Batwoman and Captain Marvel) are “best understood as a complex network of obsession and repression reorganized around traumatic incidents” (Sandifer 175). Wandtke connects revised origin stories
with a desire to “always revisit the traumatic point of the superhero’s origin,” a facet of superhero stories that he says remains a constant genre concern across TV, movie, and comics versions of superhero stories (2). Sandifer argues that the need for a hero to revisit his origin both serially and cyclically offers the fundamental ground on which a superhero’s character and stories are built.

These scholars offer an important reading of the origin as turning point, both a site of change and a site of frequent return. A superhero’s origin produces the characteristics and concerns that will determine their superhero identity, so an origin story is frequently the way in which a superhero’s writers establish them as a unique entity, unlike other superheroes. Wandtke points out, for example, that Superman’s origin as the last living man sent to Earth from a dying planet and Batman’s origin as an orphan who witnesses his parents’ brutal murder are as crucial to their stories as their costumes, superpowers, or villains. For Coogan, a superhero’s identity is one of his defining features that makes him a superhero, alongside a clear superheroic mission and a unique costume, all three of which stem from the superhero’s origin. When a new writing team revises the origin of an existing superhero, they inherently revise all other aspects of that hero to match the new origin. Origin stories serve a specific rhetorical purpose for writers and readers in the superhero genre.

Origins remain an important aspect of female superhero identities, but their origins require special consideration. The origin of male superheroes entails an individualism and autonomy that is denied to most female superheroes. Unlike male superheroes, female superheroes often have origins rooted in their relationship to a male counterpart with a more “original” origin. For example, Batwoman and Batgirl are both indebted to Batman, wearing his insignia on their own costumes as a literal sign that they are connected to him. If a superhero’s
origin serves as both the point at which a superhero becomes a distinct individual and a point to which they will cyclically return in order to process their origin trauma, female superheroes whose identities can be boiled down to “the female version of [insert male superhero name here]” are not given the same important uniqueness granted to male superheroes, and they must keep reinforcing their connection to the male superhero by returning to their male-related origins. When authors and artists take on a revision of a female superhero, they have the opportunity—much like authors of male superhero revisions—to add character traits or espouse ideologies that are preferable to the ones located in previous versions of the character, even if they can never fully escape the traces left by those previous versions. When writers and authors revise a female superhero, this opportunity specifically offers the chance to rework the inherently patriarchal origins of female superheroes whose identities are beholden to their male counterparts. This opportunity links directly to possibilities found within disidentification and feminist imagination.

**Feminist Imagination in *Batwoman: Elegy***

One of the major appeals for feminist scholars and fans of *Batwoman: Elegy* is that it reimagines the character of Batwoman to be less indebted and connected to Batman. Batwoman was first introduced in *Detective Comics* #233 in 1956. The story introduces Kathy Kane, whose alter-ego Batwoman provides Batman with both female crimefighting competition and the possibility of romance. She uses tools like a hairnet and powder puff from her utility purse to capture villains. Kane proves to be an adept crimefighter, but in the end of the comic, Batman convinces her that crimefighting is too dangerous, and she vows to give up her Batwoman identity (Kane). Comics scholar Will Brooker explains that Kathy Kane was introduced primarily to thwart parental and educator concerns—and the related threat to sales—about
Batman’s lack of important relationships with a female character, and the underlying implication that Batman was gay (150-152). Batwoman’s extreme femininity reflects this particular cultural context, but it also does very little to present a female character with much value for feminist readers.

Kathy Kane reappeared throughout the 1950s and 1960s as a sometimes-love-interest for Batman, but eventually disappeared from Batman storylines in the mid-1970s. Batwoman then reappeared in 2006 in a very different form in 52 #11. In this story, Batwoman’s alter ego is wealthy socialite Kate Kane. Batwoman is once again a secondary character in the story, which primarily centers on protagonist policewoman Renee Montoya investigating underground gun smuggling. Batwoman shows up to help Montoya fight off low-level bad guys who are guarding a warehouse of guns. Tension ensues when Montoya identifies Kane, who also happens to be her ex-girlfriend. The comic ends with a successful resolution of the fight with the bad guys (Johns et al.) In the comic, Batwoman shows powerful fighting skills, but her clothing is always skintight, highlighting her breasts, buttocks, and groin. She also fights in heels. Her storyline is more compelling, and certainly queerer, than the original Batwoman, but her visual depiction makes her primarily a sexual object rather than a compellingly feminist character.

In light of this history, comics scholars praise Batwoman: Elegy for providing a totally different version of Batwoman, both in terms of character development and visual depictions. Batwoman: Elegy offers beautiful artwork that makes use of unique page layouts. Batwoman wears a visually striking uniform. The background is black and she wears crimson red combat boots, cape, utility belt and bat insignia, all standard accessories in the DC comics superhero universe. She also complements her standard superhero gear with two markedly feminine aspects: a red wig with long, curly, crimson-red hair, and bright red lipstick. The black and red
color scheme extends into the artwork. For example in an often-cited dual page layout, Batwoman delivers a powerful split-kick in the foreground across both pages. In a series of jagged panels behind her, unnamed low-level criminals react to the kick with knocked-back heads, expressions of pain, and blood flinging from broken noses and damaged mouths (Rucka and Williams 30-31). The entire layout is drawn only in shades of gray and Batwoman’s signature crimson, offering a strikingly beautiful image, enjoyable purely from a creative artistic perspective but also notable for offering a concise depiction of Batwoman’s ability to quickly and effectively dispatch a variety of henchmen in various combat situations, including hand-to-hand combat, and disarming opponents wielding an automatic weapon, a revolver, and nunchucks. This is only one example of the unique artistry that artist J.H. Williams III brings to the story in terms of his use of color, panels, and page layouts. These pages demonstrate Williams’ full understanding of the comics medium, while also indicating his ability to push at the boundaries of what readers expect to see on a mainstream comics page.

The unique artwork complements the complex characterization within the comic, and the complexity of both the artwork and the storytelling introduces the value of analyzing _Elegy_ through feminist imagination. Batwoman is presented for the first time as a female ex-military cadet, rather than the wealthy dilettante from earlier versions of Batwoman (Kane; Johns et al.). The authors of _Batwoman: Elegy_ re-imagine Batwoman as a heroine whose career choices have prepared her to understand the mental and physical demands of combat. She has the skills to train her body for physical altercations, and the competence to choose combat boots that seem practically suited to her vigilante work (Rucka and Williams). In order to present Batwoman as a strong, powerful, and effective superheroine, the authors have given her career experience more common to a male character. Thus, her success is predicated on eschewing the overt femininity
of her earlier versions, and replacing it with a more stereotypically masculine identity. Yet, her costume continues to have extremely feminine elements, including skin-hugging material, glossy red lipstick, and her flowing red wig (Rucka and Williams). As a superheroine, she embodies seemingly contradictory traits of both equality and sexual difference.

Batwoman makes effective use of this paradox by highlighting a disturbing form of spectacle. Scott argues that within history, some feminists used spectacle to bring attention to the paradox of their existence as both equal to and different from men. Women who used spectacle wielded an enormous amount of transformative power. In her own context as a female superhero, Batwoman wields an enormous amount of power through spectacle. Early in the comic, Batman visits Batwoman. He begins the conversation by offering her some of his gathered intelligence on her adversary, Alice, and she outdoes him by indicating she actually has more knowledge about the situation than Batman does. The conversation ends when Batman says, “This one’s yours. I’ll be watching if you need help. Do something about your hair. One pull, the fight’s over for you.” Batwoman responds, “I’ll take it under advisement” (Rucka and Williams 18). After the dialogue, the panels show Batwoman removing her cowl to reveal that the hair is attached as a wig, and her real hair is a natural red bob that is much more practical (Rucka and Williams 19).

In this scene Batwoman demonstrates two things. First, she is well aware of how to use feminine costuming as spectacle, one that actually offers her a possible combat advantage. If men, like Batman, assume her hair is real hair that they can pull to cause pain and render her immobile, she will be able to surprise them by not responding as they expect. This is an important use of paradox as an empowering tactic: her feminine features seem to be combat disadvantages (within the story) or visual nods to a male gaze (within the discourse community). However, her wig is actually a calculated costuming choice designed to distract and misinform
opponents about her combat weaknesses. By having Batman, one of the main DC superheroes within the DC universe, misread Batwoman’s costume and its purposes, Batwoman establishes herself as wily enough to function as the crime-fighting equal of Batman. In addition, her knowledge of feminine costuming supersedes Batman’s enough to indicate that difference offers her an edge in a world in which male superheroes are the expected norm.

Second, this scene demonstrates that while Batman ostensibly allows her to pursue Alice to stop her crime spree, Batwoman does not actually need Batman’s help or permission. Here, the revision of Batwoman begins to enter the realm of disidentification. She has gathered intelligence that Batman has not gathered thus far, namely the number of “covens” serving Alice, giving her a tactical advantage (Rucka and Williams 16-17). She also notices that Batman has arrived on the scene before he announces himself, and Batman’s stealth is one of the key ways that he overpowers criminals in Gotham, a fact well-known to the DC reading audience. Batwoman’s ability to detect Batman despite his stealthy arrival further indicates to the comics reading audience that Batwoman is a capable super heroine on her own terms. This is a stark contrast between this version of Batwoman and the 1960s version, in which Batwoman stopped being a vigilante because Batman warned her it was a dangerous profession. In Elegy, Batwoman stands out as a powerful, capable superheroine through disidentification with her previous versions. Batwoman remains connected to Batman through the bat icon on her chest, but her costuming is very distinctive from Batman’s, and she explicitly removes herself from Batman’s oversight in this scene. This version of Batwoman does not ignore the previous versions of Batwoman in that she is a vigilante, like Batman, whom Batman does not entirely approve of. In this instance, her own interests are more important to Batwoman than Batman’s concerns, and
this scene establishes several subtle proofs that Batwoman is correct. Unlike previous versions, this Batwoman has autonomy and pursues agendas that are unrelated to Batman.

Batwoman’s sexual identity as a gay woman also offers fruitful material for analyzing the text through disidentification. Some critics make important connections between *Elegy’s* visual elements and its depictions of queerness and identity. Comics studies scholar Andréa Gilroy, for example, points out that Batwoman subverts expectations for the superhero genre because a minor female character becomes a powerful superhero, and is now an openly gay woman, allowing readers to resist claims that the superhero genre is inherently misogynistic and heterosexist. Gilroy’s article indicates why disidentification offers such a powerful analytical tool for analyzing Batwoman. Muñoz explains that disidentification functions in part to offer queer possibility by depicting “fantasies of the other in a reflective fashion” (x). He explains this use of disidentification by analyzing an example of queer performance artist Maria Montez, who used “over-the-top images of ‘exotic Third World ethnoscpes’” (Muñoz x). Rather than supporting the Western world’s fetishization of Asian women, such as harem girls, Montez offers images in which the depictions of Western fetishes are heightened with color, glitter, and posing to make the fetish absurd to the audience (Muñoz x). *Elegy* offers a similar use of disidentification, in which the comic resists the fetishization of Batwoman’s queerness by making fetishes associated with lesbian characters seem ridiculous, or even tragic.

Gilroy points out that one stereotypical Western male fantasy is the sexy female lesbian who engages in sexual acts with other women for the benefit of a male audience. *Elegy* effectively plays with this trope. While the myth of the all-male straight audience, and the presence of an all-male creative team, leaves the possibility open that the comic would play into the fetishization of its lesbian lead, the comic avoids doing so in large part by using
disidentification in the relationship between Alice and Batwoman. Alice is the most sexualized character in the comic. She wears several semi-Victorian, heavily stylized outfits designed to heighten her feminine body as a sexual object. Alice’s original outfit, in which the reader first sees her, features a tight-fitting corset designed to accentuate her cleavage and a very short skirt that flares out to reveal that she is also wearing thigh-high tights held up by garters and a knife strapped to her upper thigh (Rucka and Williams 32-33). Her outfit is overly sexualized to the point of ridiculousness.

As Trina Robbins points out, ridiculously sexualized female outfits are actually commonplace within female superhero stories, and are not in and of themselves subversive. However, the ridiculousness of Alice’s styling takes on new heights as the story progresses to the point in which Batwoman learns more about Alice and takes her on in combat. In their first combat scene, Batwoman must disarm Alice, and thus must have her hand next to her upper thigh to remove Alice’s knife and next to Alice’s chest to remove a gun she has holstered there. In both images, Alice erotically presses in toward Batwoman (Rucka and Williams 43). In one of their combat scenes, Alice wears skin-tight pants and an extremely low-cut collared shirt that hangs loosely across her breasts. As she physically fights Batwoman, Alice’s shirt gapes open revealing additional cleavage and glimpses of her nipples (Rucka and Williams 100-103). Their battle takes on an erotic quality, as readers can scour the scenes of combat to get glimpses of sexualized female anatomy that are heavily hinted at within the earlier pages of the comic, but only revealed in the combat scenes. These erotic battle scenes are heightened by the dialogue in the volume, in which Alice sometimes speaks flirtatiously with Batwoman. In a fight scene between Batwoman and some of Alice’s minions, Alice warns Batwoman that one of her
minions “might bite… I can bite anything I want,” as she looks down on a crouched Batwoman beneath her (Rucka and Williams 61).

These erotic battle scenes become scenes of disidentification as the narrative progresses. Batwoman finally defeats Alice in combat and Alice falls to her death saying, “You have our father’s eyes” (Rucka and Williams 105). The scene is followed by a flashback in which the story reveals that Kate Kane had a twin sister who was captured by terrorists during their father’s military career and was presumed killed. In fact, Alice is that twin sister, who now falls to her death as a result of her battle with Batwoman. The climax of the erotic battles between Batwoman and Alice is not a sexual one, but instead a traumatic one. In this scene, we see disidentification through the heightened ridiculousness of combining so many Western erotic tropes: Alice’s sexualized costumes, homoerotic interactions between Alice and Kate, the erotic quality of their battle scenes, and twin sisters with sexual chemistry. In individual panels, the pictures are frequently sexual, but in the culmination of the story, the images work together as a ridiculous depiction of homoeroticism that neither endorses these tropes nor fully rejects them. It instead shows them as over-the-top and ridiculous, much like Muñoz argues Montez does in her performance art. In addition, the story further makes use of disidentification as the book does not end with Alice’s death, but instead shows Batwoman’s developing trauma over the loss of a sister she already thought was dead, her sense of responsibility for that sister’s death, and Batwoman’s newly damaged relationship with her father, who knew that his missing daughter was alive and never told Kate. Erotic imagery does not stand on its own in this comic, but instead is placed within a troubling narrative of betrayal and loss that diminishes the eroticism, or at least the effects of the erotic imagery.
At the same time, feminist critics of Batwoman should not be so quick so consider all the images of female sexuality in the book as resistant to misogynistic superhero tropes. In fact, much of the imagery of Batwoman also depicts her as a sexual object. Even though this Batwoman’s costume is far more combat-ready and less sexualized than her previous iterations, the depictions of her body and her body’s poses are often still sexual. Batwoman’s silhouette frequently depicts the shape of her nipples, an odd choice for a costume that is designated as body armor. Since this sexualization offers no combat purposes—and Batwoman carefully rejects costuming choices that do not serve combat purposes within the comic (Rucka and Williams 166-167)—it becomes clear that the sexual depiction of her breasts serves the audience’s gaze rather than a narrative function. The angles and perspectives of the drawings confirm this assessment. For example, on the first page of Issue #1, one panel depicts Batwoman kicking an unknown bad guy in the face. The kick is directed outward toward the viewer, which offers the viewer two paradoxical viewpoints: from left to right, the viewer is treated to an undershot of Batwoman’s breasts in her uniform, carefully depicting the shape of her nipples and the size of her bust, and then the deep tread of a combat boot as it kicks out to make contact with the bad guy’s face (Rucka and Williams 12-13). This is a central paradox within the imagery of Elegy: scenes that show off Batwoman’s combat prowess also highlight her breasts and butt as sexual imagery. We see a similar use of perspective of the double-page layout in which Batwoman takes on a variety of unknown henchmen. Most of the imagery indicates her skill as a combatant, and at the same time, the perspective presents Batwoman to the reader as if they are slightly underneath her, looking up at her pointy breasts and muscular butt (Rucka and Williams 30-31).
Feminist readers should not overlook the problematic nature of this sexualized imagery. While scholars that employ feminist imagination should be mindful of discourse community expectations for the comics medium and frame their analysis accordingly, they should also feel able to critique aspects of a text that fall short of feminist goals. Given the patriarchal nature of both the mainstream comics industry and American culture as a whole, it should not surprise readers to see that *Elegy* struggles to fully embody feminist imagination in all aspects of the text. The authors’ insistence on combining sexualized imagery with combat scenes feels troubling in light of the presumption of the all-male audience and the mainstream comics tradition of sexualizing superheroines in the service of that presumed audience’s straight, male gaze. On the one hand, this imagery may then be an example of patriarchal imagination mixing with feminist imagination in *Elegy*. Feminist imagination offers a lens for parsing texts like this one that blend patriarchal and feminist imagination.

On the other hand, Gilroy offers a possible feminist reading of the comic’s presentation of Batwoman as an object of sexual attraction. Kate Kane is a lesbian character, and the Batwoman series overtly reaches out to queer and female readers. *Elegy* depicts Kate’s sexuality as one that includes both sex and relationships. Over the course of the story, one relationship breaks up over Kate’s perceived irresponsibility and another relationship begins in response to Kate’s confidence in her own sexuality. Gilroy argues that by creating a believable sexual identity for Kate Kane, and pairing sexualized imagery of Batwoman with Kate’s believable queer identity, the comic resists a straight male gaze that is only interested in fetishized depictions of homerotic female sexuality and instead combines a sexual female body with a confident female sexuality that appeals to a queer female gaze. Thus, paradox and disidentification combine in Gilroy’s reading to frustrate the male gaze and offer a different form
of female sexuality to the readers of *Elegy*. When framed within the rhetorical situation of female superhero comics and their marginalized female fans, this depiction of sexuality offers a more compelling version of female characters in comics who exists almost exclusively for the gratification of a male gaze. It also raises questions about whether a queer gaze offers a valid justification for continuing to sexualize female superheroes.

**Feminist Imagination in *Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight***

Much like *Batwoman: Elegy*, *Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight* collects six comics issues into one volume and provides a rethinking of a previously existing comics character that offers both feminist potential with some reliance on problematic stereotypes for depicting Captain Marvel. Captain Marvel’s backstory and history is more complicated than Batwoman’s, in part because Captain Marvel originates from science-fiction aspects of the Marvel comics universe (aliens and time travel), and in part because multiple characters have donned the title of Captain Marvel, and in part because Carol Danvers—the woman who serves as the protagonist in *In Pursuit of Flight*—has appeared as several different superheroes since her appearance in the 1960s. Danvers first appears in the 1968 comic *Marvel’s Super-heroes #13*, in which she serves primarily as an attractive female character showing admiration for Captain Mar-Vell. Captain Mar-Vell is actually an alien from a race called the Kree, a technologically advanced alien race that make frequent appearances throughout Marvel’s superhero comics. Captain Mar-Vell adopts an alter ego as a mild-mannered scientist, using his advanced Kree technology and military officer training to fight crime and defend earth from intergalactic attacks (Cocca 206-207). In this comic, Danvers has no superpowers and no heroic identity, but it does introduce her character and establish a connection between Danvers and Mar-Vell.
Danvers disappeared from comics until 1977 when she reappeared as the superheroine Ms. Marvel in *Ms. Marvel #1*. In this new Ms. Marvel series, Danvers possesses superpowers, including superhuman strength, the ability to fly, and the ability to sense danger before it occurs with her precognitive “seventh sense.” In an overview of Captain Marvel’s history, Vox culture reporter Alex Abad-Santos explains that, “Her powers fell into traditional superhero lore, and were similar to those initially borne by Superman. Ms. Marvel wasn’t so much presenting an alternative to the patriarchy as she was embodying its ideals.” She served patriarchal ideals primarily through a lack of agency. Originally, Danvers had no idea she was Ms. Marvel. Danvers would get crippling headaches and black out, during which Ms. Marvel would appear and fight criminals and supervillains, after which Danvers would regain consciousness, feeling drained and confused.

Once Danvers joined the Marvel superhero team the Avengers, and writer Chris Claremont began filling in Danvers’ backstory, she became a much more interesting and autonomous character. Over the course of the late 1970s, Claremont gave Danvers a full origin story, one noticeably lacking from the initial Ms. Marvel storyline: Danvers was in an explosion that supernaturally granted her Kree-like abilities, such as her ability to fly without the use of a plane. Claremont also gave Danvers a prominent place in the mostly male Avengers team in which she more than held her own (Abad-Santos). Despite the positive aspects of Ms. Marvel’s characterization, much of the positive work done by Claremont to strengthen Danvers’ character was destroyed in 1980. First, Marvel canceled Claremont’s *Ms. Marvel* comics line. Then, written by another writing team, Bob Layton, David Michieline, George Perez, and Jim Shooter, Danvers appeared in the special issue Avengers #200, in which a Kree villain named Immortus
kidnaps and forcibly impregnates Danvers (Cocca 191). This issue changed the Danvers character, and her position in the Marvel universe, for decades.

In January 1980, pop culture scholar Carol A. Strickland published an essay in the first issue of a fanzine called *LoC: On Comics Opinion and Comics Review* that drew attention to the problematic nature of the story. She highlights Immortus’ explanation of “wooing” Danvers, which begins with “poetry, clothes and music” and when those methods do not work, Immortus relies on what he describes as the “subtle influence” of brainwashing machines to convince her to have his child (qtd. in Strickland). Strickland argues, “This is not hidden between the lines. Little kids can read the obvious fact: he raped Ms. Marvel.” She also targets the lack of negative response from comics fans, saying, “I should think that such a story would create an uproar in fandom—but where is there even a whisper of discontent?” Strickland points out that the end of the comic is also extremely disturbing: the comic ends when Danvers leaves the Avengers to live with Immortus and the Avengers allow her to leave without any struggle or concern, with Iron Man noting, “We’ve just got to believe that everything worked out for the best” (qtd. in Strickland). In a contemporary analysis, political scientist Carolyn Cocca argues that Carol Danvers’ treatment in the 1980s through the 90s is similar to that experienced by other superheroines at the time, including Wonder Woman, and “can be read as steeped in backlash to feminism and to strong female characters” (191).

Claremont, working on the *Uncanny X-Men* after the cancellation of Ms. Marvel, spent much of the 1980s trying to recover Danvers as a strong, complex character dealing with the effects of her rape. Claremont brought Danvers to the X-Men as a new superhero named Binary who developed the additional ability to absorb and channel energy. Cocca explains that “Danvers in *Uncanny X-Men* showed her characteristic strength and courage when she went with the team
on missions. She also faced the frustration over the loss of her Ms. Marvel powers” (193). Binary eventually left Earth to explore space, unable to trust any team enough to fully join the X-Men. Danvers reappeared briefly in the 90s as the Avengers member Warbird, a post-Binary version of Danvers who had lost many of her cosmic powers and fell into depression and alcoholism as she was unable to cope with the loss of her abilities. She eventually left the team because her alcoholism became too severe to allow her to participate in the Avengers’ work and she disappeared from the comics universe until the mid-2000s, when she returned again in her own self-titled Ms. Marvel line.

Given this dark and frequently patriarchal history, DeConnick’s version of Captain Marvel relies heavily on disidentification in order to create a compelling female lead that effectively deals with her history at the same time that she begins anew. In Pursuit of Flight begins the work of reimagining Danvers immediately. The opening page of the collection shows a news article for an exclusive interview with “Ms. Marvel Unmasked!” The page also includes an inset picture of Danvers in her 1990s-era Ms. Marvel uniform—a black leotard and thigh-high black boots—with flowing blond hair, hovering in the air to indicate her ability to fly. The opening page also includes the taglines “A New ‘Do and a New Costume: Why She’s Ready for What’s Next!” and “Bid on the Old Ms. Marvel Costume for a Good Cause!” (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 5). The majority of the page is taken up by an image of Carol Danvers wearing a new outfit that covers her whole body except her head, which is indeed unmasked, and showing off her newly faux-hawked hairstyle.

Her new look, and the pose she adopts in this scene with her head held high and her hands on her hips, are both much more assertive and masculine than the sexualized costume, hairstyle, and cocked-hip posing of the old Ms. Marvel inset image. This opening page quickly
introduces readers to several aspects of this version of Danvers. First, the authors claim Danvers’ recent backstory of the mid-2000s Ms. Marvel by associating her with the same outfit as that version of Ms. Marvel, and they give readers a glimpse of the superpowers associated with the Ms. Marvel character. However, it also glibly indicates that Danvers is moving on to something new, and the story itself spends all six issues helping Danvers decide what type of superhero she wants to be, what superhero name she wants to adopt, and whether she actually wants to be a superhero at all. The new book works entirely around granting Danvers agency, a key factor that Danvers has often been denied in the past.

In the opening scene of the collection, Danvers and Captain America are fighting a villain named Creel, and the fight sets the tone for the comic and further sets the tone for Danvers’ character. Creel insults Danvers by yelling, “Lucky me! If it ain’t Captain America’s secretary, Mrs. Marvel!” (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 6). Undaunted, Danvers warns Captain America about crumbling debris behind him that threatens to crush two innocent bystanders. She yells, “Behind you! The shield! Now!” to which Captain America responds, “Yes ma’am” and flings his indestructible shield behind him to stop the debris from harming the bystanders (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 7-8). Creel responds, “You letting the little missus give the orders now?! Wouldn’t catch me getting’ bossed around by no broad!” Danvers points out, “This ‘broad’ left the service a full bird colonel. So technically I outrank him” (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 8-9). She then masterminds the plan for defeating Creel by tricking him into attacking Captain America as a decoy long enough that she can wrap a piece of airtight fabric around Creel’s head until he passes out.

This opening scene establishes several key aspects of the story. First, the story links misogyny to villainy and gives Creel outdated dialogue to indicate right from the start that this
The comic is actively resisting misogynistic treatments of Danvers’ character. Danvers herself will not stand for it. Second, it indicates that Danvers is at least Captain America’s equal. She reminds readers that she is a highly ranked veteran of the military, and she demonstrates her ongoing talents for tactical intelligence and efficiency in combat situations. She also works well in a partnership with Captain America, who has no problem following her lead. Thus, the opening scene indicates that Danvers is a key member of the Avengers, not a problem member like Warbird in the 1990s, and not a lesser member because of her gender like Ms. Marvel in the 1970s.

The main plot of *In Pursuit of Flight*’s story begins when Danvers learns of the death of one of her mentors and heroes, female fighter pilot Helen Cobb. Cobb leaves Danvers her plane—one in which Cobb set a record for reaching 37,000 feet, a record that Cobb was never able to confirm. As a tribute to her mentor, Danvers decides to fly the plane to the same record height, but while doing so, the plane somehow breaks through space and time, sending Danvers back to an unnamed Japanese island during World War II. As Danvers tries to make it back to her correct time and place, she ends up in the same flight training program as Cobb and works through her struggles to figure out her new superhero identity alongside her mentor and other strong female characters against the backdrop of World War II and 1940s attitudes toward women in combat.

Another crucial aspect of the plot revolves around Danvers struggling with the recent death of Captain Mar-vell, and what type of superhero she will be in the wake of this loss. Danvers has to decide whether she wants to adopt the identity of Captain Marvel, fearing that it might be an unworthy theft from her recently dead friend Captain Mar-Vell, a man who is
closely aligned to her own origin as a superhero. As she explains to one of the characters in the collection:

“I was working with a man…a good man. A brave man. A man who, it turned out, was not from our world. He was trying to protect our planet against a dangerous weapon from his. When the explosion [of that weapon] happened, he held me in his arms. I thought I’d die. I thought he’d die too. I wished…for more time, that I had done things differently, but mostly, I wished I ‘d been powerful enough to stop it. That I’d been strong enough to save myself, to save my friend. The device magnified brainwaves and manifested them as tangible weaponry. It was a wishing machine, almost…but one designed for war. In its last act, it gave me what I wanted. It made me more powerful.” (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 60)

In this version of Danver’s superhero origin story, her powers still derive from the explosion of a Kree machine, but they are also prompted through an emotional connection to a man that Danvers admires.

The ways that Danvers displays grief in her conversations about Marvell further depicts feminist imagination through disidentification. In an early dialogue with Captain America, we see that Danvers’ relationship to Captain Marvell is framed heavily through emotion. Captain America suggests that Danvers should take on the title of Captain Marvel. She says, “He was a good man and a real hero. Too many things were taken from him. I won’t take one more” (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 13). Her reflections on Marvell reflect grief, guilt, and respect. Muñoz argues that melancholy and mourning can be crucial parts of disidentification. He draws on melancholia from a psychoanalytic frame, but also distinguishes psychoanalytic mourning from disidentificational mourning. He says, “Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis describe
the work of mourning as an ‘intrapsychic process, occurring after the loss of a loved object, whereby the subject gradually manages to detach itself from this object.’ The works of mourning that I am discussing offer no such escape from the lost object. Rather, the lost object returns with a vengeance. It is floated as an ideal, a call to collectivize, and identity-affirming example” (Muñoz 52). Disidentificational mourning replaces detachment in psychological grief with a motivating, affirming attachment.

Muñoz links his version of disidentification to works by Jean-Michel Basquiat that are dedicated to enshrining Black grief through memorializing Black heroes, such as famous musicians or athletes. Danvers’ grief for Mar-Vell does not have the same racial components, but it does share the need to collectivize, to take on action. Part of her resistance to taking on the Captain Marvel identity is that Mar-Vell was a “real hero,” a title she seems uncomfortable donning for herself (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 13). By taking the name Captain Marvel, she is also taking the mantle of the hero that was Captain Mar-vell. Much like disidentificational mourning, Danvers forms an identity by linking herself intrinsically to the hero and friend she has lost, knowing that his legacy and mantle will not disappear if she takes them for herself. However, she does not replace her identity with Mar-vell’s, and the rest of the story expands Danvers’ autonomy to avoid diminishing Danvers as a lesser form of Mar-vell. The story’s valuation of Danvers’ grief is also important since it allows Danvers’ emotions not to be a sign of feminine weakness but a path for achieving a more complete and whole sense of herself as a person and a hero, which is particularly important given Danvers’ history within the Marvel universe.

By the end of Issue #1, Danvers decides to take the name Captain Marvel, even though she shows initial resistance to doing so (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 19). This decision in and of
itself indicates major aspects of feminist imagination. In large part, her decision to adopt the name comes from rhetorical listening in her conversation with Captain America. Lunsford and Rosenblatt argue that rhetorical listening can be identified largely through the motivations of the listener, and whether listening values subjectivity and agency of the speaker. In the aftermath of their battle with Creel, Captain America and Danvers engage in a dialogue about whether she should adopt the title Captain Marvel. She expands on her grief when Captain America suggests that she take the name Captain Marvel instead of Ms. Marvel. He says, “I am making a suggestion. A suggestion I have made before. But the timing with the new uniform—” Danvers interjects, “It’s not my name,” to which Captain America responds, “No your name is Carol Danvers. Captain Marvel is—” Danvers cuts him off with her quote from above, declining to “take” anything further from Captain Mar-Vell (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 13). In the exchange about the title, both characters demonstrate rhetorical listening, an important extension of their equality in battle earlier in the story. Captain America clearly points out that he is not telling Danvers what to do, but instead suggesting a way for her to shape her own hero identity more fully. He clarifies, “My point remains. Captain Marvel wasn’t his name. It was his mantle. Now, it’s his legacy. And he wanted you to have it…Bottom line is this: you have led the Avengers. You have saved the world. Quit being an adjunct…Take the mantle” (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 14). Captain America does not dismiss Danvers’ concerns. Instead he takes them seriously, and also points out ways in which the name change connects to her own concerns: her search for a new identity with the new costume and hair, her respect for the legacy of Captain Mar-Vell, and her desire to work as a fully integrated member of the Avengers team.

While Lunsford and Rosenblatt highlight the motivations of the listener as an important marker for rhetorical listening, they also highlight the effects of the types of listening as
guidelines for determining whether listening is rhetorical or instrumental. Immediately after their conversation, Danvers flies into outer space to think quietly on what Captain America and she have talked about. She concludes, “I’m taking the damn name,” indicating that her conversation with Captain America indeed involved rhetorical listening, allowing her to make her own choice and keep her own agency (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 19). The effects of this choice become heightened later in the book. At the end of the story, after Danvers has been teleported through various points in time, she and her mentor Cobb—about 30 years old at this point, due to time travel—get teleported together to the cave of Danvers’ superheroic origin, just as Danvers is about to receive her superpowers for the first time due to the machine explosion. Referring to the Danvers who is about to be blasted with Kree technology, Cobb points out, “Doesn’t have to be this way. You could change it…right now. You get that gal down there out of the blast radius and you get to be her again” (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 118). Danvers questions what Cobb is talking about and Cobb responds, “Oh come on, Carol! You’re dying to get in there and stop this” (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 118). In the end, Danvers decides not to rescue her past self and gets Cobb out of the cave instead (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 119-121).

However, Cobb receives some of the energy from the Kree machine, and develops Kree powers very similar to Danvers’ own. At that point, the time-machine plane flies overhead, and Danvers realizes that in order to get herself back to the correct time and stop the disruptions to the timeline she will need to get back onto the plane. Cobb figures out what Danvers is thinking and says, “You want this? Guess you’re gonna have to race me for it” (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 127). Danvers responds, “Beat a knock-off version of myself to an airplane-shaped time machine? I’m Captain Marvel…I call that Wednesday” (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 127). She fights to beat Cobb to the plane, eventually reaching the plane before Cobb does, and as she
struggles to push herself into the plane she tells herself, “Get inside…if you want the life you left back…get…in…side…” (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 129). She manages to get in the plane and returns to her correct time.

The ending of this volume is crucial for understanding how *In Pursuit of Flight* depicts feminist imagination. Rather than having her fate as a superheroine thrust upon her by an accident, this version of Danvers has now chosen to take up the mantle of a superhero. She also has claimed for herself the title of Captain Marvel and the heroic implications of that title. Unlike previous versions of Danvers who have had little say over their role as hero, DeConnick writes a version of Captain Marvel who demonstrates agency but who develops that agency through her relationship to the community she exists within and in terms of her sense of responsibility to an ideal of heroism that values the self-sacrifice and bravery modeled by Captain Mar-Vell.

Furthermore, her relationship to her female mentor is only one of many female relationships in the book. Cobb stands out as being a very important voice in Danvers’ choice to fully embrace her identity as Captain Marvel. Thus, Captain America’s voice is just one in the overarching narrative, and not the one that is given the final and weightiest impact on Danvers.

The plot for *Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight* is arguably more complicated than that in *Elegy* and may be less accessible to new readers, but it offers an appealing resource for feminist comics fans and readers for several reasons. First, Danvers is a fascinating, complex character who, much like Batwoman with her military training, embodies traits that are often associated with masculinity and uses those traits to be a successful heroine. In addition to the superhuman flying abilities, super strength, and energy manipulation abilities that she possesses as a superhero, Danvers maintains her above average skills as a trained Air Force fighter pilot and demonstrates leadership ability and intelligence within combat situations. At the same time,
she suffers from brashness and occasional rage that make her a challenging friend and can be liabilities in combat zones.

Second, Kelly Sue Deconnick, a female author, writes the comic, which remains rare in the mainstream comics world, and Emma Ríos, a female artist, drew Issues #5 and #6 that are found within the collected trade paperback *In Pursuit of Flight*. Third, *In Pursuit of Flight* focuses heavily on Danvers’ interactions with important women in her life, offering a break from her place as one of the few female heroes within the mostly male Avengers team she usually works with. Captain America and Spider-Man make brief and important appearances at the beginning of the story, but these interactions are not the primary focus of the collection. Finally, *In Pursuit of Flight* works hard to establish a character that maintains the best qualities of past Carol Danvers, while also reimagining the character to avoid many of the pitfalls of earlier versions, such as sexualized costuming, her lack of agency as a superhero, and her difficulty working well within a team. These aspects of the story use rhetorical listening and disidentification to achieve a rhetoric of feminist imagination.

One place where *In Pursuit of Flight* struggles to maintain feminist imagination, similarly to *Elegy*, is in the physical depiction of Captain Marvel. Often, Captain Marvel is depicted as muscular, strong, and confident, as in the opening scene of the collection. However, there are times when she is sexualized in a way that does not serve the comic narrative but instead seems designed to appeal to (male) readers. While her costume does show improvements in terms of combat capability—the comic briefly mentions that her suit was designed by Tony Stark to specifically work for superhero levels of combat—it remains skin tight, hugging her groin, butt, and breasts. In one panel during her fight with Creel, Danvers hovers mid-air with her butt facing out toward the reading audience, highlighted with shading that draws visual interest
(DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 9). In the same panel, Captain America also faces away from the viewer, but the lighting draws attention to his powerful back muscles, using imagery to draw attention to Captain America’s strength rather than a sexualized body part (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 8). A similar sexualized image of Danvers happens mere pages later during a sparring match with Spider-Man back at the Avengers headquarters (DeConnick, Soy, and Ríos 16).

However, these sexualized images only happen during the first four issues from the edited collection, all of which were drawn by Dexter Soy. In Issues #5 and #6, Emma Ríos takes over as the artist. Her artistic style is very different from Soy’s. Soy uses art that looks like paintings, with dark thick lines and realistic depictions of characters and backgrounds. Ríos’ style makes more use of cartooning, with more abstract character depictions and less background detail. In Ríos’ artwork, the bodies of the characters are never sexualized, which offers intriguing possibilities both for thinking about the ways in which male artists may bring a sexualized element to comics imagery that female artists may be less likely to contribute.

Conclusion

When extending rhetorical genre analysis to female superhero comics, feminist rhetorical scholars must use a lens that allows readers to address the complexity of the medium, including the complicated relationship that female readers and writers have with the mainstream comics industry. I have proposed feminist imagination as a broad analytical lens that allows feminist scholars to combine various theoretical viewpoints that foreground the relationship between rhetoric and creativity, particularly when the connections between rhetoric and creativity serve feminist goals. To show the usefulness of this lens in the comics medium, I have focused my analysis on two female superhero comics, Batwoman: Elegy and Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of
Flight, because these two trade paperbacks demonstrate feminist imagination in their narratives and artistic appeals to a female and/or feminist audience. Both comics work against tropes within the superhero genre by using paradox and disidentification to meet some of the expectations from the superhero genre while resisting the patriarchal histories of both characters. Elegy and In Pursuit of Flight offer powerful, complex, humanized versions of female superheroes that could arguably appeal to a wide swath of readers rather than a mythological all-male audience. Feminist imagination serves as a rhetorically grounded lens that can help scholars understand why these comics, even though they have flaws like sexualized imagery, function largely as feminist texts.

However, for the purposes of this study, I do not want to rely solely on my own analysis of these comics, since that approach would duplicate one of the main assumptions that I discussed in my introduction: the belief that because I read these comics in a certain way, other readers will read them similarly. Scott McCloud points out that the success of any given comic relies heavily on a relationship between reader and author, in which the reader “acts as an accomplice” by reading carefully and filling in the gaps in the story (68). As an “accomplice” who is given to examining texts for feminist potential and who is well versed in the complexities of reading comics, I am not surprised that I have found many instances of feminist imagination in Captain Marvel and Batwoman. In my next chapter, I temper my analysis of these texts by analyzing the responses of eight college students to reading excerpts from Elegy and In Pursuit of Flight. I explain my methodology for assessing the participants’ reading practices and their responses to the comics’ images and text. Then I use rhetorical genre analysis to examine the role that expertise plays in how these participants physically read the comics, and what they notice about the artwork and the narratives in the comics. In the following chapter, I return to
feminist imagination and analyze the participants responses to see what, if any, aspects of the comics seem to align with feminist imagination for other readers.
Chapter 3

Rhetorical Expertise and Genre Knowledge in College-Aged Comics Readers

In my methodology chapter, I argued that rhetorical genre methodologies offer useful insights for comics studies scholars. In this chapter, I explore one aspect of rhetorical genre theory that benefits comics studies: the connection between genre and expertise. Rhetoric and composition scholars have studied the distinctions between novice and expert readers and writers for decades, often concluding that experts demonstrate savvier rhetorical practices than novices. Christina Haas uses the term “rhetorical reading” to describe “recognizing the rhetorical frame that surrounds a text, or constructing one in spite of conventions which attempt to obscure it” (49). She explains that rhetorical reading involves thinking about such rhetorical concerns as the purpose for writing a text, the contexts surrounding a text, and the relationship between an author and a reader. Readers who do not use rhetorical reading often think of the text as autonomous and do not consider the layers of contexts and relationships that contribute to a text’s meaning. Haas says that freshmen often think of texts as autonomous, indicating that this is a novice reading strategy, as opposed to the expertise of rhetorical reading. In a collaborative study, Haas and Linda Flower found that rhetorical reading connects to an understanding of reading as a “discourse act” in which each individual reader combines knowledge gleaned from the current text with prior texts and other sources of knowledge (168). They discovered that because these multifaceted layers of knowledge can include personal experience and individual contexts, “different readers might construct radically different representations of the same text and might use very different strategies to do so” (Haas and Flower 169).

In a later study, Richard Haswell et al. suspected that the reader’s personal context could play an important role in readers’ abilities to use rhetorical reading strategies. The researchers
duplicated Haas and Flower’s previous study, asking participants to read an excerpt from a psychology text. They also ran a variation on the study, in which they asked participants to read and respond to a newspaper editorial that would allow all readers to bring their own “repertoires,” a concept that literature and pedagogy scholar Kathleen McCormick defined as “bodies of cultural value, knowledge, and convention” (qtd. in Haswell et al. 13). According to McCormick, when readers do not possess the repertoires necessary to understand a text, they are “unable to interact in any meaningful way” with that text (qtd. in Haswell et al. 13). Readers that were unfamiliar with the scholarly context surrounding the psychology text struggled to respond to the text effectively, which confirmed what Haas and Flowers had found in their study. However, Haswell et al. found that both experienced and novice readers used rhetorical reading strategies when they analyzed the editorial. They summarized, “Perhaps the most revisionary implication of our replications is that although they support the belief that experienced students use more rhetorical reading strategies, they do not support the belief that first-year college students use few or none” (Haswell et al. 23). These studies together suggest that rhetorical reading is a mark of expertise, but that a reader’s abilities to demonstrate rhetorical reading is contingent upon their familiarity with the genre of the text they are analyzing.

These findings on genre and expertise point to a gap within the current research about comics, particularly within rhetoric and composition. If we believe that a reader’s understanding of a certain genre and its rhetorical context relates to the reader’s ability to process the text in a “meaningful way,” then rhetoric and composition scholars should expect that readers who are unfamiliar with comics will not be able to engage with those texts for meaningful, academic purposes. Yet, as I outlined in my introduction, the opposite usually holds true: rhetoric and composition scholars assume that all (or at least a vast majority of) college-aged readers will find
comics easier to read than other texts because of some pre-supposed visual literacy, or because comics are inherently fun and easy. This assumption ignores the findings of studies on genre and expertise, such as those reviewed above, that suggest that our field’s underlying premise about the accessibility of comics deserves to be investigated.

Rather than duplicating this assumption in my study (and repeating my own past mistakes), I wanted to gather data about the actual reading practices that different readers used to read the images and text in a comic. I also wanted to compare my feminist analysis to responses from college readers across a range of demographics. I suspected that comics-reading experience would affect how well any college-aged reader would actually read and process comics texts, but there is very little research on the relationship between expertise and comics-reading ability. I also suspected that expertise would have an effect on the ways that different readers reacted to representations of women in the comics. To test my hypotheses, I collected data from eight participants using surveys, eye tracking, and stimulated recall interviews using gaze replay.

The findings from my study suggest that comics readers have very different reading experiences based on their level of expertise in reading within the comics medium. Expert comics readers took longer to read the comics in my study, and they were able to read the comics by using their knowledge of the genre conventions and the comics medium. Novice comics readers were confused about many aspects of the comics text, such as how to look at the words and images together, and they relied on external repertoires that were not always helpful. This chapter introduces my empirical research methods and focuses on my findings in relation to genre and expertise. In my next chapter, I build on my findings about expertise by analyzing the same data through a feminist lens.
Methods

I collected my data in a two-stage research plan that I detail below. I used a mix of empirical methods to gather data in my study: surveys, eye tracking, and interviews with cued retrospective reporting. These methods were used in combination with each other to triangulate my findings, to integrate collaboration into my research methods, and to offer built-in moments for my participants and myself to be self-reflexive about our own reading practices.

Participants

The eight participants were all students who worked as tutors in the university writing center, where I also worked as an assistant director. These students volunteered to participate, knowing they would be compensated with $25 Amazon gift cards for their involvement at each stage of data collection. In many ways these students should be among their university’s most expert undergraduate readers, capable of rhetorically reading and evaluating complex texts. All eight participants were either English majors or minors at the time of their participation and all had worked in the Writing Center as trained writing tutors for at least one year by the time of their participation. Between these two factors, all eight students were very skilled in critical reading and thinking and had been trained to work through challenging texts without giving up out of frustration. I also had a close professional relationship with all the participants through our work in the Writing Center, so they may have felt more comfortable with me than students often feel with their instructors or with an unknown researcher.

The participants fit into the following demographic groups:

- Gender: 2 male participants, 6 female participants
- Race/Nationality: 1 African-American participant, 1 Chinese international participant, 6 white American participants
- Sexuality: 4 heterosexual participants, 2 bisexual participants, 1 lesbian participant

The students were all full-time college students and ranged between 20 and 22 years old at the time of the study. These demographics produced a wide variety of perspectives, even within a small participant pool. I have identified the participants in the study with the following pseudonyms: Erin, Mackenzie, Natalie, Erica, Nicki, Emmy, Eli, and Matt.

**Research Site**

I completed my research at the University at Albany (UAlbany), a public research flagship school in the State University of New York (SUNY) system. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that in Fall of 2020, the school had 13,182 undergraduate students. 52.2% of those students were female and 47.8% were male. The racial demographics for undergraduates during the Fall 2020 semester were as follows: 43.7% White; 19.7% Black or African American; 17.6% Hispanic/Latino; 8.3% Asian; 4.3% Non-resident alien; 4% Two or more races; 2.1% Race/ethnicity unknown. These demographics indicate that my study does not offer a representative sample of the student population, and my findings do not purport to do so.

Both stages of data collection took place in my office on the third floor of the Humanities building on the Uptown campus. My office was an interior office with a window facing into the hallway, offering some indirect natural light from a skylight in the hall. My office also had overhead fluorescent lights and an incandescent desk lamp. These lighting conditions had effects on the calibration of the eye tracking system, as detailed below.
Stages of Data Collection

I completed two separate stages of data collection. In the first stage of data collection, I introduced the eight student participants to the eye tracking system and calibrated their gaze. Students then read excerpts from *Batwoman: Elegy* and *Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight*. Half of the participants read *Elegy* first and the other half read *In Pursuit of Flight* first. All participants read these excerpts in PDF form on a computer screen while the eye-tracking sensor followed and recorded their eye movements. Students read the pages at their own pace. They would indicate that they had completed a page by saying something like “okay” to let me know I could hit a button to move to the next page. This allowed students to keep their eyes on the screen without having to look away or lean forward to reach a keyboard. After each participant finished a comic, he or she completed a survey that asked open-ended questions about the visual and narrative depictions of female characters in the comic books.

In the second stage of data collection, I did 30-60 minute cued retrospective reporting interviews with seven of the original participants. The eighth participant was unavailable for a follow-up interview. I recorded the audio for all seven interviews. At the beginning of the interviews, I showed each participant four brief segments, two from each comic, of their own recorded reading maps. For Batwoman, I shared the kicking double-page layout for every interview participant to watch because it was the only layout without any text and required a different kind of visual analysis than the other pages. I also selected an additional double-page layout for Batwoman and two double-page layouts for Captain Marvel that were unique to each individual participant based on gaze trails that I felt warranted further discussion, usually from a sense that as a researcher I was not quite sure how to interpret the participant’s reading patterns and wanted the participants’ input. Each segment ran between 10 and 60 seconds long.
Participants were able to rewatch the segments if they wished. As they watched the segments, I asked each participant to retrospectively construct the thought process they believed they used to originally read through that excerpt from the comic book. After the participants watched and responded to the segments, I prompted them to explain their survey answers about depictions of gender with more depth and clarity and/or make connections between their reading paths and their assessments of the comic book characters. (See Appendix A.)

In the interviews, I primarily used individualized interview questions that I generated after watching each participant’s eye tracking maps and reading their survey answers. I asked all participants if they would be comfortable identifying their sexuality (and all seven interview participants did) and if they felt that their sexuality affected their reading of the comics. I also asked each participant if they felt they had read differently in any way because they knew they were participating in a study, and if so, how. At the end of each interview, I asked the participants if they had any questions for me about the comics, the characters, or my research study.

Materials

My materials were a combination of excerpts from my primary texts, surveys that the participants completed in the first stage of data collection, and the eye tracking hardware and software that I used within this study.

Excerpts from Elegy and In Pursuit of Flight

Elegy and In Pursuit of Flight are both too long to finish reading in one stage of data gathering, so I chose excerpts from both comics that I thought would offer a useful introduction to both Batwoman and Captain Marvel as characters and offer a representative snippet of the
artwork and the narrative in the trade paperbacks. These excerpts did not allow study participants to have as much content to analyze as I had when I read the full trade paperbacks, but they allowed the participants to read a meaningful sample of the comics without being overwhelmed.

The excerpt from *Elegy* is the longer of the two. It covers 28 pages and contains Issue #1 in full and part of Issue #2 of the Batwoman comics series, which shows some of the interaction between Batwoman and Alice that forms such a crucial part of Batwoman’s story arc in *Elegy*. The excerpt includes the well-known double-page layout in which Batwoman kicks across the pages in the foreground while panels in the background depict her attacking a number of henchmen and henchwomen to gather information. The pages are scanned from a hard-copy trade paperback and most of them are presented as the double-page layouts from the trade paperback, with the exception of two pages that were scanned as individual pages because they were paired in the trade paperback with “bonus” artwork that was not part of the narrative.

The excerpt from *In Pursuit of Flight* includes the full Issue #1 of the Captain Marvel series, which contains Captain Marvel and Captain America’s fight with a villain named Creel, and Captain Marvel’s conversation with Captain America after that battle. The excerpt is sixteen pages long. Since Issues #2-5 include time travel and reference a lot of Marvel’s complex world-building without much explanation (such as referencing the alien race known as the Kree without explaining their relationship to the Marvel universe or Captain Marvel herself), I decided that it would be difficult to bring in any of the last four issues in the trade paperback without bringing in large chunks that would be overwhelming. This means that participants got less information about Captain Marvel’s backstory than I would have preferred. They also did not get to see any of Emma Ríos’ artwork and only saw artwork by Dexter Soy. However, participants did get an introduction to Captain Marvel’s combat abilities, her relationship to other Avengers, and her
internal struggle over how to identify herself in the wake of Captain Mar-Vell’s death. All of the pages are scanned in double-page layouts from the hard copy trade paperback.

**Surveys**

During Stage 1 of data collection, each participant filled out a survey immediately after reading their first comic book excerpt. The participant would then read the second excerpt and complete a second survey. Since half of the participants read *Elegy* first and the other half read *In Pursuit of Flight* first, the participants were given a set of surveys that reflected which comic they read first. Both survey sets are available in Appendix A. Regardless of which comic the participants read first, their first survey began with demographic questions asking participants to identify their gender, age, and race or ethnicity. The survey asked participants how often they had read comics during the year in which they participated in the study and in the past, prior to the year they participated in the study. These questions had Likert scale answers, with a scale from “never” to “once a week.”

After these questions, the surveys asked open-ended questions about the character, artwork, and potential audience for the comic. For example, if a student read *In Pursuit of Flight* first, the first survey asked:

- Briefly summarize *Captain Marvel #1* as if you were describing it to a friend.
- How would you describe Captain Marvel’s character in this comic?
- How is Captain Marvel drawn in this comic?
- Who is the intended audience for this comic and why do you think so?

In the second survey, the first four questions are the same, but ask about the second comic. At the end of the second survey, participants were asked to compare the two comics:
• Which of the two comics is your favorite and why?
• Do you like Captain Marvel or Batwoman better? Why?
• Which of the ways the superheroines are drawn do you like better? Why?

These open-ended questions were designed to elicit a possible analysis of gender and sexuality without requiring participants to overly focus on those areas. I withheld my gender-based research questions until after the participants had completed both surveys, at which time I gave participants the option to leave the study if they felt deceived. All participants opted to remain in the study.

**Eye Tracking Tools**

I used the myGaze Eye Tracking System (Version 3.2) to collect eye tracking data.\(^\text{16}\) This system pairs a stationary infrared sensor mounted onto a computer screen with software that calibrates the sensor for each participant and collects data from the infrared sensor. I also used the myGaze Eye Tracking Plug-in for Morae (Version 2.0) to record the participant’s gaze trails and view them as eye-tracking maps. The plugin recorded the images from the screen for each reading session and overlaid a map of the participants’ eye movements onto an image of each page the participant read. The plugin also provided numerical data, such as the coordinates of visual fixations and the length of those fixations for each participant.

When each participant began the study, I verbally explained the eye tracking system and either showed them an introductory video of how the system worked or, if the participant preferred, sent them the video over email for their future reference. After that, I calibrated the eye tracking system for each individual participant. For calibration, each participant looked at a group of five dots on the screen and the software then added dots to the screen that correlated to
the participant’s gaze fixation. In perfect conditions, the original dots on the screen and the software’s depiction of the individual’s gaze fixation would match up perfectly with 0 degrees of separation on the x and y axis between the dot on screen and the participant’s fixation.

The myGaze system was unable to accurately read the participant’s eye movements if they were wearing corrective lenses (including contact lenses). The system was also unable to accurately sense the participant’s eye movements if they sat too far from or too close to the computer monitor, which meant that participants had to be able to read comics on a computer screen from about 2 feet away from the screen without wearing corrective lenses. This placed limitations on which participants I could enroll in the study. Even with participants who could read from a set distance without corrective lenses, I was unable to perfectly calibrate the system for the participants. Given the lighting conditions in a graduate student office, the limitations to distance and use of corrective lenses, and my lack of experience with the system, I accepted any coordinate between a 0 and 1 degree margin of error on the y and x coordinates in my calibrations. This means that the data I collected using the myGaze system cannot be used for pinpoint accuracy, but it offers useful trace data that can work in combination with other data-gathering methods to identify trends in reading practices.

**Data**

I gathered quantitative data for this study in two main categories: 1) the lengths of time it took readers to read the comic excerpts and to complete their cued retrospective reporting interviews, and 2) eye tracking data corresponding to the visual representations of gaze trails.

*Time Measurements*
The cued retrospective interviews ranged from 36 minutes and 1 second in length to 62 minutes and 13 seconds in length, which is a difference of 26 minutes and 12 seconds. The average length of an interview was 46 minutes and 11 seconds (46.19 minutes).

The length of time spent reading *Batwoman: Elegy* ranged from 5 minutes and 34 seconds to 11 minutes and 28 seconds, a difference of 5 minutes and 54 seconds. The average time spent reading was approximately 8 minutes and 56 seconds (8.93 minutes).

The length of time spent reading *Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight* ranged from 5 minutes and 31 seconds to 10 minutes and 4 seconds, a difference of 4 minutes and 33 seconds. The average time spent reading was approximately 7 minutes and 17 seconds (7.28 minutes).

**Eye Tracking Data**

Following previous studies and overviews, including Van Gog et. al, Holsanova, and Anson and Schwegler, I use the following terminology to describe the visual eye tracking data:

- **Gaze trail**: the overall path that a reader’s eyes take as they move across a page
- **Saccade**: a quick movement when a reader’s eyes move from one point to another on a page without pausing
- **Fixation**: a stop or pause in the reader’s eye movements
- **Recursion**: a specific kind of saccade in which a reader retraces a previous saccade to return to a previous fixation
The Morae plugin recorded gaze trails as modeled in Figure 1, which shows part of the gaze trail of a participant named Natalie reading *In Pursuit of Flight*. The comic image is a close-up of a large panel from the right half of the first double-page layout from *In Pursuit of Flight*. This portion of Natalie’s gaze trail takes place 21 seconds into her reading of *In Pursuit of Flight*, so she has already read part of the page. The gaze trail for those earlier seconds has disappeared from the screen in order to make the new saccades and fixations in the gaze trail easier to see.

The visible gaze trail takes Natalie approximately 5 seconds to complete. Larger circles indicate longer fixations.

Figure 1. An approximately five-second portion of Natalie's gaze trail from the first page of the study excerpt from *Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight*. Comic book images are copyrighted by Marvel Characters, Inc. and used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, in the U.S. Copyright Act.
The gaze trail here begins with a fixation, depicted as a red circle, over the text on the upper right hand portion of the page. Next, there is a saccade as Natalie’s eyes move to Captain Marvel’s shoulder and face, where there is another, longer fixation, indicated by a slightly larger circle. Natalie’s gaze then travels to Captain Marvel’s chest, then to her left forearm, then to her crotch, and then to her stomach. There is a short fixation at each of these points. Finally, Natalie’s gaze moves to an AR logo at the bottom right of the page, and then again to the corresponding explanation for the AR logo at the very bottom of the page underneath the large panel in this image. Natalie’s gaze trail has short fixations in four places on the text as her gaze trail moves from left to right across the AR directions.

In addition to the visual depictions of gaze trails as seen in Figure 1, the Morae plugin provided timestamps that correspond to x and y coordinates on each page. These timestamps and coordinates offer quantitative data to identify each participant’s gaze trail and the length of their fixations. Holsanova explains that “fixation duration is often used as a measure of how much cognitive effort is required for information processing…Saccades are very short, usually lasting from 20-40 ms. Our vision is suppressed and we are essentially blind during saccades (Plate 20.1). She also says that eye-tracking data can be used “as a cue for another process measure” (291). For the purposes of my study, I have used eye tracking as a tool for stimulated recall and triangulation, so I have focused my analysis more on the visual representation of gaze trails that the participants saw in their video clips and less on the quantitative data related to fixations.

What follows next is a qualitative analysis of the survey responses, eye tracking data, and the interviews from which I was able to inductively gather a picture of the participants’ familiarity with the comics medium. The quantitative data and gaze trail maps indicate different reading practices and different levels of engagement with the comics.
Analysis

The data from this study indicates that there are several distinctions between the reading practices of expert and novice comics readers. At the beginning of the study, each participant answered multiple-choice survey questions about both their past and their present comics-reading habits. Erin, Mackenzie, and Eli self-reported that at some past point in their lives, they had read at least one comic a week. Erica reported that at one point she had read a comic at least once a month, and Emmy used to read a comic once a day. Erin, Erica, Eli, and Emmy reported that they all had read at least one comic within a year of their participation in the study. Natalie and Matt had only read one or two comics in isolated instances in the past, and Nicki read her first comic as part of her participation in this study. These survey answers offered a useful baseline for categorizing the participants into groups: Erin, Mackenzie, Erica, Eli, and Emmy are all experienced comic-book readers, while Natalie, Nicki, and Matt have little to no experience. However, experience did not exactly correlate with rhetorical concepts of expertise.

My study yielded important results about the nature of expertise and the use of rhetorical reading among comics readers. I was able to group the participants into 3 broad categories formed after an inductive study of the data. Unsurprisingly, more experienced readers tended to be expert readers and less experienced readers tended to be novices. Of more interest from a rhetorical perspective, these categories were based less on self-reported experience and more on demonstrated characteristics, including the use of rhetorical reading, participants’ sense of agency, familiarity with discourse-community terminology, and demonstration of genre knowledge. Based on these characteristics, Natalie and Nicki were novices at the time of the study. Erin, Erica, Eli, and Emmy were experts. (Emmy had less data available for analysis since
she could not complete a follow-up interview, but her survey answers and eye-tracking data demonstrates the same skills modeled by other expert participants.) Mackenzie and Matt did not quite fit either category, but instead seemed to demonstrate an intermediate level of expertise.

**Expert Readers: Erin, Erica, Eli, and Emmy**

Despite not all participants having familiarity with comics, all of the study participants used some degree of rhetorical reading within their answers. I asked each participant questions about the intended audience for the comics, so to some extent I invited rhetorical reading with the design of the study. In addition, each of these participants was a trained writing tutor who had experience with rhetorical reading as part of their jobs. However, experienced and inexperienced comics readers used rhetorical reading in very different ways. All of the students brought in repertoires to help them process the text, but expert readers tended to bring specific knowledge of the comics medium and/or the superhero genre, while novice readers tended to bring in generalized knowledge that they could apply to the texts as a helpful tool of interpretation. The more knowledge a participant had of the comics medium and superhero genre conventions, the more expertise they demonstrated in their reading practices. For example, Erin’s plot summaries considered the short comic book excerpts within both the context of a broader comic book series and the genre expectations of superhero comic books. In her summary of Captain Marvel, she referred to the protagonist’s “origin story,” and in her summary of Batwoman she explained that the comic is “an introduction to a new Batwoman villain.” Her survey answers indicate that she was able to think about the goals for the plot points within broader contexts, an important aspect of rhetorical reading. In addition, considering the
characteristics of the superhero genre helped Erin make sense of the content, like the expert readers in the Haas and Flower study.

The four experts in the study—Erin, Erica, Eli, Emmy—relied on medium and genre knowledge as key repertoires for understanding the comic-book excerpts in the study. Eli showed his expertise while discussing a concept he referred to as “legacy” in superhero comics. Scholars of superhero comics, such as Terrence Wandtke, note that superheroes morph and change over time and frequently superheroes must pass their title along to a new character. Eli was familiar with this concept, and discussed it in both his survey and interview questions. He thought legacy was central to Captain Marvel’s characterization. He said, “She is incredibly strong in the initial fight scene, but she is troubled when it comes to determining her own value in the context of legacy.” Similarly, in his analysis of Batwoman’s audience, Eli decided the intended audience “is interested in further exploring the Bat-verse without Batman. Maybe an audience who wants to be separated from the overbearing legacy of Batman.” When I asked him to expand on these ideas during the follow-up interview, he noted that both comics feature male characters with prominence and “value” in their respective comics universes. For example, in Batwoman he said, “Batwoman takes up the most space” in the comic, but “Batman is prominent” in the visuals. Eli explained that “Batman is always going to be there,” at least in the reader’s minds, in a comic set in Gotham city with a vigilante superhero protagonist. He then discussed the ways that other Bat-verse comic book writers had dealt with that “anxiety in the comic about Batman not being present.” Eli’s answers on legacy made it clear that, like Erin, he was able to think about the writer’s goals. He also demonstrates an in-depth knowledge of the superhero genre and his understanding of character and story tropes from that genre, which gives him useful context for
his analysis. Finally, he was able to draw on prior texts from the same publisher, DC Comics, to help him form a context for the Batwoman excerpt.

Emmy used genre knowledge to help her process her personal response to the comics in the study. She noted that in Captain Marvel, “the setting is too unreal/false for me to consider it an enjoyable comic book.” She posited that the intended audience would probably include readers who are already a fan of Marvel comics because the setting is “unrealistic” and Captain Marvel “flies into space.” Her answer indicates an understanding that readers of Marvel comics would probably not rely on realism as a criterion for enjoying comic books. She is also correct that Marvel comic-book readers will be used to space as a story setting, since many of Marvel’s superheroes spend time in space and on alien planets. Emmy’s responses indicate that her personal commentary is intertwined with her use of rhetorical reading.

All the expert participants also demonstrated an understanding of the visual conventions of the comic book medium. Visual rhetoricians Charles Kostelnick and Michael Hassett argue that visual design is an inherently rhetorical facet of any text. They explain that all genres have a “visual vocabulary” that is “acquired by its users—both the designers who deploy conventional codes and the readers who interpret them…Once learned, conventions perform an invaluable service for users by supplying the cohesion that makes visual language familiar, accessible, and imitable” (23). Kostelnick and Hassett argue that conventions help form discourse communities surrounding certain genres and also have enough mutability that members of discourse communities can change conventions in order to meet the evolving needs of any given community.

Sometimes expert readers in this study demonstrated their knowledge of visual conventions by such simple strategies as using appropriate terminology. For example, all of the
experts in the study were able to refer to the visuals with such terms as “panels” and “frames,” which are specific terms that would help them speak about specific aspects of a comic-book page. Perhaps ironically, both Erin and Emmy mentioned that they were more familiar with manga, a Japanese form of graphic narrative that uses many of the same conventions as American comic books, and were concerned that they would not be able to read superhero comics very well because they did not have as much experience with the genre. However, their ability to refer to different genres within the comics medium, and think about distinctions between those genres, serves as one indicator that they are members of the comic book readers’ discourse community.

The experts were also able to demonstrate their understanding that the visuals and the text components were interconnected. Chute and DeKoven explain that “comics is constituted in verbal and visual narratives that do not merely synthesize. In comics, the images are not illustrative of the text, but comprise a separate narrative thread that moves forward in time in a different way than the prose text” (Chute and DeKoven 769). They explain that readers who want to fully understand the narrative in a comic must be able to read the visual and verbal as related but not “unified,” and this is a particular skill developed by those who read the medium. Most importantly, expert comic book readers understand that this form of reading takes time: the reader “must slow down enough to make the connections between image and text and from panel to panel” (Chute and DeKoven 770).

The experts in my study were willing to take the time to view both the words and the images. During retrospective cuing, Erin linked an extended amount of viewing time with successfully understanding the content of the comic books. On the pages depicting Captain Marvel’s fight with Creel, Erin’s gaze trail includes fixations on each individual text box and
speech bubble. The fixations on the imagery are much shorter than on the text, but she interpreted that as a part of fully understanding the content of the pages. The longer fixations on both the text boxes and the images seemed to communicate a sense-making pattern. On a different set of pages, in which Batwoman interrogates a low-level henchman, Erin also noted the general pattern of her gaze trails. She explained that her gaze trail “go[es] in a giant circle.” She observed that on the pages in Batwoman, there are “a lot less words, a lot to take in, a lot of interesting color.” After examining the images, she says, “I think I try to retrace my steps and try to put it together in terms of story.” For Erin, it seemed worthwhile to take the time to process the pages, even when they were confusing to her. In her interview, she confirmed her desire to take time to understand the comics by saying that if she were reading a hardcopy version of the comic, she would have “flipped back and forth” between the pages.

Similarly, on the Batwoman double-page layout in which Batwoman kicks across the page break, Erin used the fixations to help her reconstruct her reading patterns. She said she “remember[ed] this page. At first I was confused by it.” However, she also thought that her gaze trails indicated that she was “connecting the dots of what’s going on in the background.” She said, “The first thing that stood out to me was that her pose was a little bit silly and I did not understand what was going on and then I saw…her foot is connecting with somebody’s face over to the right and then over to the left, it's the same suggestion, and then in the background it’s just depictions of violence.” She expressed concern over not knowing if interactions between the foreground and the background were “a thing that happens” in most superhero comics, but she felt that taking her time allowed her to make sense of the pages, despite her lack of familiarity with the specific conventions of the superhero genre. She said, “I wasn’t at any point afraid that I wasn’t really gonna grasp it. I found myself doing a once over of everything when I was reading
and then going back, picking out the details, and then using the words...the words are the last piece of the puzzle for me. So the visuals are obviously an important part of it.” Erin indicates that the conventions of the superhero genre are not familiar to her, but she is still comfortable with her process for reading within the comics medium.

Not all expert readers read through the words and images on each page in the same way as each other. Erica’s eye-tracking shows that she spent most of her time reading the text on a page, although she also frequently begins or ends a page by scanning the whole page layout. In her retrospective cuing for Batwoman, she noted that she began with “mostly reading” and then “glanced at the panel beside the text.” She frequently used the word “glance” during her descriptions of her eye-tracking patterns to describe saccades from text boxes to imagery and back to text boxes. Saccades between the textboxes and imagery, with longer fixations on the text than the images, were a common pattern in her eye-tracking gaze trails. She said that the narrative was most important to her, and Erica seemed to associate narrative primarily with the text. However, on pages with little text, Erica took time to look over the images carefully. On the double-page kick layout in Batwoman, Erica took several seconds to look over the whole page and “get a feel for the battle.” She then “looked [Batwoman] down to up” and started on the “leftmost image” to understand the storytelling in the imagery on the pages. Erica notes that the use of the color red seemed to help her look at important things in the double-page layout. The different eye-tracking patterns within the expert group indicated that there is more than one method for successfully navigating the visual-verbal conventions in each comic book, and that a single expert reader often relies on different reading strategies for separate pages and panels.

In fact, expert readers consistently demonstrated a sense of their own agency in reading the comic book excerpts. Rhetoric and composition studies on authority can help make sense of
agency as a facet of both comics expertise and rhetorical reading skills. In their article “Writing without Authority,” Ann Penrose and Cheryl Geisler use think-aloud protocols to explain differences between writers who think of themselves as insiders, and thus feel they have the authority to write their own claims within a field of their expertise, and writers who think of themselves as outsiders that should defer to the authority of published writers. They argue that novices and experts can be distinguished in part by experts having more disciplinary knowledge about a specific topic, as well as more rhetorical knowledge about “the development of knowledge as a communal and continual process” (517). In other words, experts see themselves as meaningful contributors that are participating in a process of knowledge-building, while novices see themselves as reporters who must only observe and reproduce knowledge as it already exists.

Reading a comic book differs from writing a research paper, but expert participants were still able to demonstrate their comfort with collaboratively building knowledge. Eli offers an excellent example of a reader who clearly sees himself as an insider and takes on agency in making sense of the comics he reads. He demonstrated familiarity with comics terminology, like panels and frames, and he explicitly referenced concepts from Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud. He also at times compared his reading experiences during the study to other reading experiences he remembered from other comics, such as Watchmen. Perhaps because of this level of experience, Eli had the longest interview answers of all the participants. During retrospective cuing, he offered step-by-step analysis of his thought process, which differed from some of the other participants, who were inclined to summarize a general pattern or thought process. For example, on the double-page-layout featuring Batman in the Batwoman comic, he started by noting that he looked at Batman first and explained, “Batman takes up the biggest part of two
pages.” He also noticed saccades moving back and forth across the two pages and deduced, “I was trying to figure out if it’s one big picture.” He ended his analysis by saying he “retraced [his] steps” to look over the full page.

Eli identified a very different reading pattern in the Captain Marvel pages, saying there was “a lot more text, a lot more reading, then [I] went back to the pictures.” He pointed out that on one page he focused a lot on the text boxes, but on other pages, there was more “reader trial and error.” He referenced McCloud’s ideas of closure, in which readers try to make sense of the panels on the page and fill in the actions that must have occurred between the panels, and said that closure was “particularly easy in Captain Marvel” but less easy in Batwoman. On the double-page kicking layout in Batwoman with no words, Eli said that the color scheme made “it a little difficult to, as a reader, read” and said that these pages were “pretty intimidating the first time I read it.” Eli was the only participant who suggested that any reading difficulty he experienced could indicate a fault with the comics’ creators, as opposed to his own reading practices. He did not seem to expect that one pattern of reading would work best for every comic or even every page in a comic, but instead repeatedly mentioned that he was “trying to figure out” how to read each page correctly. Eli also acknowledged that “the way panels move down the page, or from panel to panel, are different between the artist and the writer” so finding one “correct” path might not even be possible.19 His assessment indicates his own agency at the same time that it indicates that he is thinking of the words and images as related rather than unified, in line with Chute’s arguments about expert comics readers.

Thinking of Eli’s reading choices as agency sits at odds with some traditional definitions of rhetorical agency. Geisler explained in an overview of proceedings at the 2003 meeting of the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies (ARS) that one version of rhetorical agency relies on a traditional
concept of a speaker’s ability to effectively make an argument within the public sphere (10). However, she also notes that other participants at ARS viewed this less as a failing of agency itself and more a failing to understand the many ways in which rhetors access agency outside of “traditional political contexts” and/or outside the individuals (i.e. wealthy, white men) who are traditionally granted agency (10). Geisler summarizes several interesting avenues opened up by scholars thinking beyond the traditional concept of rhetorical agency at ARS. Among these, she highlights the work of scholars studying rhetorical agency in connection to media, such as photographs of the flag raising at Iwo Jima that have been widely dispersed and re-circulated to many different audiences. Geisler says, “What is interesting here is the interplay of audience and media in constructing and being constructed by these images, an interplay that raises questions concerning who has agency—and therefore responsibility—for these repeatedly circulating cultural products” (11). Comic books are not the same as photographs of historical moments, but this thread of rhetorical agency in relation to media seems to invite some similar questions about the roles and responsibilities a reader must take on in order to successfully read a comic book and the role that a team of writers, editors, and artists must take in order to produce a comic that meets the needs of the comic book discourse community. This media thread also suggests that agency cannot be evaluated at one single point in time, but rather that every new encounter with a piece of media invites a new analysis of agency.

Thinking of rhetorical agency through this lens, we can see expert participants demonstrating agency through their comfort and patience with themselves and the comics excerpts as they make sense of the connection between visual and verbal components in the texts. Erin said, “learning to read something visually is difficult,” but she did not respond to that difficulty with frustration. She explained that she “felt comfortable” reading the comic books.
Erin’s explanation that visual texts are challenging shows that she accepts and embraces sense-making as a part of her relationship to the comic-book medium. Rather than feeling like she had to unlock one single, correct way to read the comic book excerpts, Erin frankly states that reading visual texts is challenging and takes her time to process the pages until she feels comfortable. To both Erin and Eli, sense-making and re-reading are key components to successfully reading a comic book. Experts demonstrated their rhetorical knowledge in large part through demonstrating their sense of agency in processing each comic book panel and page. They did not see themselves as failures for having difficulty reading but rather took pleasure in making sense of the pages. They seemed to understand that rhetorical reading involved taking time to get the best comic-book reading experience, and they did not obsess over the exact process that they used to read each panel or page.

We can also see this version of rhetorical agency when the participants’ expectations for themselves did not match their eye-tracking videos. Even with Eli’s experience as a reader, he seemed surprised by certain aspects of his gaze trails during retrospective cuing. He noted that his reading patterns were never “one fluid movement,” which seemed to go against his expectations but also made sense to him as he reconstructed his “figuring out” process. When I asked if he was reading more carefully because of the study, he said that he was pretty conscious of what he was looking at during the first few pages, but he got comfortable by the time he was halfway through the first comic. He found his own gaze-trails surprising, but it never made him feel like he had been unable to read the comic book effectively. Instead, it prompted further reflection on his own reading choices.

Finally, some participants demonstrated agency by bringing in their own related repertoires of knowledge to process a comic book and feeling justified in their use of an
additional lens to help them work through a text. Erin used her knowledge of film studies, specifically citing film conventions in her interview, to help her read the comic books. She found her experience with film studies helpful, because it confirmed her own belief that visual texts are challenging to analyze. While film conventions offered a helpful repertoire for Erin, she did not rely on film analysis as the only repertoire she had available, and only brought up film studies at some isolated moments in her follow-up interview. For example, at one point she discussed Batwoman as a “deeper” character than Captain Marvel and said that she had learned about analyzing the depth of characters as part of her film studies experience. In the same interview answer, she connected the depth of character to the unusual, bold use of color in Batwoman. Her answer referenced film analysis, but also relied on her comics discourse community knowledge of color in comic books. She explicitly acknowledged the differences between the two mediums, but posited that color theory could be useful for both comics and film. Erin’s answers indicate that she had enough experience with comic books to know when film studies could help her process the images and the narrative, but they also show how film studies functions best as a supplementary repertoire that allowed her to deepen her comics-specific analysis at key moments.

Erin, Erica, Eli, and Emmy offer clear criteria for expert-level rhetorical reading within the comics medium. They combine rhetorical agency, genre knowledge, and discourse community membership together to analyze the comics excerpts in light of their various contexts and visual-verbal conventions. These rhetorical skills also play a key role in helping expert readers decide which of their own repertoires will help them analyze the comics excerpts and under what conditions those repertoires will be useful. While rhetoric and composition’s own disciplinary conventions often suggest that we view aspects of rhetorical analysis, such as
rhetorical reading and genre knowledge, as distinct fields of study, the expert participants in this study indicate that these rhetorical skills are often linked and intertwined. Combining multiple aspects of rhetorical study under the umbrella of rhetorical reading offers a much fuller picture of these participants’ comics-reading expertise. While it would be much easier to rely on participants’ self-reported reading experience as a measurement for comics-reading expertise, my data suggests that expertise can be more accurately identified by examining the readers’ demonstrated rhetorical skills and whether those skills reveal knowledge of the specific conventions of the comic book medium.

Novice Readers: Natalie and Nicki

Novice readers did not demonstrate the same level of familiarity with genre/medium conventions or discourse community expertise as the expert readers in the study. This is unsurprising, since these participants indicated that they had little to no experience with reading comics prior to their participation in the study. However, as trained writing tutors, novice comic book-reading participants are skilled and thoughtful rhetorical readers, so the techniques and methods that they used to process an unfamiliar medium provide interesting data.

Agency, or the lack thereof, provides a major distinction between novice readers and expert readers. Expert readers felt comfortable with the process of reading and analyzing a comic book, because they connected their process with normal reading practices within the comics medium. Novice participants consistently professed anxiety or concern about their lack of knowledge about comics and how to read them. This anxiety sometimes caused novice readers to downplay or overlook their previous comics-reading experience, even when limited, that was useful to them as readers. For example, Natalie repeatedly identified herself as a novice comic-
book reader. She said that she was not sure if she could tell whether she read differently during this study because, “I don’t read many comics on my own. I don’t have really a baseline.” But she also was able to list specific comics that she had read in the past and said that she remembered enjoying how “the art style kind of echoes thematically a lot of what’s going on textually.” These reading experiences did not seem to matter to her as a repertoire for analyzing the comics in this study.

Natalie offered a high level of detail in her retrospective cuing, particularly in reconstructing her gaze trails and fixations on the imagery. When watching her gaze replays of reading the pages in the Captain Marvel excerpt, she primarily noted that her gaze trails moved between the text and the imagery. She said, “I see that my eyes kind of skip from text and then to the image and kind of linger on that for a little bit but then go right back to the text.” She talked more about reading the imagery when she was looking at the double-page spread of Batman and Batwoman meeting. She said that she started on the top left of the page because “you always learn to read left to right.” From there, she said that her eyes were drawn to contrasting colors and strong lines. She explained, “[Batwoman’s] chin and lower face area sticks out as so pale against her dark masks and clothing and then bright red hair and cape, so I guess that was my first fixation and then…my eye followed the line of the cape down and the highlights of that drew my eye down and then to the text boxes.” She noticed a moment when she read downward on the left-hand page, even though the narrative continues across to the top of the right-hand page. She interpreted this as a lack of expertise, reminding me, “again, I don’t read many comics, so that might be why I was a little bit confused.” That’s why I might be a little confused.” Natalie interpreted this moment in her gaze replay as evidence of her lack of experience, because she seemed to think that a more experienced comics reader would know to look across the
double-page layout. This moment offers one good example of when the intended reading path might not be clear to any readers, regardless of expertise, but Natalie saw this as an individual mistake that reflected her lack of experience.

Natalie’s combination of rhetorical expertise with novice comics reading practices can make it confusing to categorize her expertise. James E. Warren’s article “Generic and Specific Expertise in English” offers a framework for understanding distinctions in types of expertise. He explores different poetry analysis methods employed by English professors who consider poetry their field of study and English professors whose work does not focus on poetry. He argues that whereas any English professor might display generic knowledge, or “the ability to represent field-specific problems accurately and efficiently,” only those who study poetry are able to draw on specific knowledge of poetry conventions (Warren 350). His terms are slightly confusing in the context of my study, but we could also think of Warren’s distinction between generic and specific expertise as the difference between disciplinary knowledge from the field of English and rhetorical genre knowledge about the comics medium.

Warren’s distinction is useful for my study since all of the study participants have the disciplinary knowledge of generalized English studies practices and rhetorical analysis, and these skills allow them to analyze comics more effectively than many readers that teachers might encounter in their own classes, who could be novices in both disciplinary critical analysis skills and comics genre knowledge. Warren’s study helps to explain the complicated blend of knowledge demonstrated by novices in my study. On the one hand, these participants all possess at least an intermediate skill-level of rhetorical analysis, which allows them to understand that the comics require a certain level of interpretation based on things like audience and purpose. At the same time, participants who lack genre knowledge still stand out as novices compared to
their peers with middling to high levels of comics genre knowledge. Notably, Warren makes different conclusions about expertise in relation to the participants’ awareness of their own lack of knowledge. Natalie, a novice, was keenly aware that she lacked genre expertise. She brought up her own inexperience throughout her follow-up interview and indicated that since she knew she lacked knowledge, she did not feel she had agency to fully analyze the text or trust her own reading choices. Warren argues that only experts are able to identify their own lack of knowledge and identify what they need to know. He explains

whereas freshmen produced shorter protocols [for reading poetry] due to premature closure on texts, or because they simply gave up in frustration, professors in this study…took stock of their (lack of) knowledge and worked for as long as they deemed appropriate…but they also knew when to stop, what additional information was needed, and where to find it.” (368)

This could indicate that the novice comic book readers are demonstrating a form of expertise by identifying their lack of genre awareness. Rather than feeling empowered to move on because of a lack of knowledge, like the experts in Warren’s study, novices’ awareness that they lacked genre knowledge strongly contributed to the lack of agency that characterized novice comics readers. While novices usually did not give up on reading a certain panel or page, they expressed guilt or frustration over not knowing more about comics.

We can see the connection between awareness of the lack of specific genre knowledge and a feeling of loss of agency even more clearly with Nicki. Nicki had never read a comic book prior to participating in this study. During her interview she began by explaining, “I had no idea how to start reading a comic.” When I asked her to describe her first comics-reading experience, she explained, “It was kind of what I expected it to be, but just difficult because I just didn’t
know how to initially read it. But other than that once I got into the swing of it, it was fine. I was able to understand the comic, and I was surprised by that.” Her self-expressed ability to understand the comics is supported by several of her survey answers. She understood the complex plot in the Batwoman segment, and offers thoughtful character analysis of Batwoman herself, saying, “Kate is very strong and determined. Her father instilled certain values in her, to be ‘soldier-like’; she doesn’t seem to let anything stop her.” In the Captain Marvel summary, she focused on the conversation between Captain Marvel and Captain America, glossing over the initial battle. In her follow-up interviews she explained that she found the Captain Marvel story to be a little more confusing and particularly didn’t feel as confident about the content of the initial fight with Captain Marvel, Captain America, and Creel.

Nicki’s lack of comic-book-reading experience did not seem to hinder her ability to understand the comics, but it did have an impact on how she read the comics. The majority of her fixations were on speech bubbles or other text. Her gaze trails show saccades with very short fixations over the art. On the kicking, double-page spread in Batwoman, Nicki spent only eight seconds looking over the pages, the shortest of any participant. Her gaze trail is erratic. When asked to describe this in retrospective reporting, she laughed and said she gave up on it and moved on because it was overwhelming. She explains her gaze trail as, “it’s just me looking all over the place trying to just gauge where to start, and especially because there’s so much detail within the images it’s like trying to grasp it all at once but you have to look at the individual parts of it first.” Nicki explained that during her reading process, she would consider what she thought comics readers do. For example, she notes that in her first clip of her Batwoman gaze trail, she says she would look at “the background too when I was done reading,” and she did so because, “I figured, okay, it’s a comic, so most people would look at the actual comic images.”
Nicki’s answers mirror some of the complicated layers of expertise that we may see in Natalie’s responses: They both demonstrate rhetorical expertise alongside novice comics reading experience. Nicki is very aware of what constitutes effective reading strategies for analytical purposes. She talks about the importance of taking time to read and paying attention to what you are reading, which includes images in a comic book. She criticizes her reading strategies when she notices that she hasn’t taken enough time to understand a page or when she skips a panel or two without any fixations on them. In her Captain Marvel gaze trials, Nicki noticed that she spent most of her time reading the text and concluded, “I didn’t pay enough attention to the images.” However, she is also aware that she had to piece together the rules for reading a comic book as she read along. Over the course of her gaze replays, she looked for improvement in her reading patterns. In one clip of her Captain Marvel reading, she identifies a moment when her gaze trail becomes more orderly by saying, “right there is when I actually understood, ‘okay, this is how you read a comic.’” She identifies even short-term comics experience gained within the study as a factor in better reading practices.

To compare an expert approach to a novice approach, let’s briefly compare Erin’s and Nicki’s gaze trails on the Batwoman pages in which she kicks across a double-page layout. In Erin’s gaze trail on these pages, Erin’s eyes move from the bottom right hand side of the screen (which is the end of her gaze trail from the previous page) to one of Batwoman’s breasts in the center of the double-page layout. Erin’s eyes then move over to a small, gray panel on the right page depicting stained glass, and her gaze fixates there for 4 seconds. From there, Erin’s eyes dart leftward to Batwoman’s torso, then travel across her butt to a red panel formed from Batwoman’s red wig. Erin’s eyes move down along Batwoman’s right arm and continue downward across Batwoman’s torso and butt again to the lower section of the panel that begins
in Batwoman’s wig. (Batwoman is kicking across the foreground of this panel, so her body breaks up the visual flow.) Erin’s gaze trail moves left to a bad guy’s face, drawn in gray, in the bottom left of the pages. Her eyes move up to another bad guy’s face, drawn in red, directly above the gray face. Her gaze then skips across the whole layout to a third bad guy’s face in the bottom right of the layout, and finally moves upward on the right page to look at a fourth bad guy in a red panel, drawn with nunchucks flying out of his hands.

Figure 2 shows the final seconds of Erin’s gaze trail on these pages. Erin’s gaze moves counter clockwise to look at the first three bad guy’s faces again, then follows the line of Batwoman’s leg from Batwoman’s boot in the bottom right panel to her outstretched arm in the upper left, and then moves straight right to the henchman with nunchucks again. Erin’s gaze goes back to the gray stained-glass panel, returns to the henchman with nunchucks for a third time, and moves diagonally down to the bad guy in the lower right of the layout. Her gaze fixates on this bad guy for about four seconds, then her eyes dart briefly to an unclear point on the bottom center of the pages, and return to the far right bad guy. Finally, Erin’s eyes dart to the far left bad guy drawn in red, up to Batwoman’s wig, then down across Batwoman’s arms to the bad guy with nunchucks for a fourth and final time. She then moves to the next page. It takes her about 24 seconds to complete her gaze trail on these pages.
Compare Erin’s gaze trail to Nicki’s gaze trail on the same double-page layout. Nicki begins by looking at the bottom part of the wig panel. She then looks up to Batwoman’s torso, and quickly looks at Batwoman’s right arm, her left thigh, and her wig in rapid succession. Nicki’s eyes then move across the page from left to right, with brief less-than-a-second fixations on Batwoman’s arm, the bad guy with nunchucks, and the stained glass panel. Nicki’s gaze (as seen in Figure 3) moves downward to the far right bad guy, saccades all the way across to the gray bad guy in the bottom left of the layout, moves up to the broken sunglasses in the top of the wig panel, across Batwoman’s body to the bottom portion of the wig panel, and immediately back up Batwoman’s torso to fixate near her head. From there her gaze moves right to the
nunchuck guy, then to the stained glass panel. Her eyes dart back and forth between these two panels for another second, and then she moves to the next page. Nicki’s gaze trail takes about eight seconds to complete.

Figure 3. Nicki’s full eight-second gaze trail on the double-page kick in *Batwoman: Elegy*. Comic book images are copyrighted by DC Comics and used in accordance with Section 107, Fair Use, in the U.S. Copyright Act.

The biggest perceptual difference between these two gaze trails is the amount of time Erin the expert reader took as opposed to Nicki the novice reader. Both readers focused on eye-catching visuals, such as the gray panels that stand out from the primarily black and red colors on this double-page layout, the clearest faces in the background panels, and the white highlights on Batwoman’s costume that draws attention to areas of her body like the underside of her breasts and her right arm. Both readers had recursions that returned to some of these key images. Both
readers had saccades that moved across the full width of the double-page spread. However, Erin took some time to look at individual panels with longer fixations. She also returned to the faces more times than Nicki did. This supports the difference between Nicki’s self-described “giving up” on these pages, versus Erin’s attempts to make sense of the complex imagery. The biggest conceptual difference between the two readers is Nicki’s lack of experience caused her to feel overwhelmed. She was not sure that spending time on the page would help her understand the content. As she put it, she knew she should spend more time trying to understand the page, but at the same time she felt, “It was just like, ‘okay, yeah, that’s enough.’”

Nicki expressed similar confusion in her cued retrospective reporting of the pages in Captain Marvel. At one point during the fight with Creel, Nicki’s eyes wander up over the top of the page. She laughed when she viewed the gaze trail and wondered aloud, “Oh why am I up there?” She also pointed out a section of the art that she completely missed and was not sure why. On the final pages of the Captain marvel excerpt, her gaze trail moved rapidly across the images and she said, “My eyes did a lot of scattering in that one section.” Nicki reacted apologetically to her gaze replay videos, and she seemed to believe that she had done something wrong by glancing over the images rather than examining them more closely. It is worth pointing out that skimming the images did not seem to hurt her ability to understand the plot or the characters, nor was skimming uncommon in the overall gaze trails from the expert comics readers in this study, but Nicki expressed doubts in her own readership abilities and identified her confusion as an individual failing rather than the standard challenge presented by the conventions in the medium. Like Natalie, Nicki demonstrated strong skills as an analytical reader, but she felt her lack of specific expertise prevented her from reading the comic well.
Nicki’s awareness that she lacked familiarity with the comics medium dominated her follow-up interview and sometimes had clear impacts on her physical reading practices.

One possible solution for a lack of comics genre knowledge could be the use of external repertoires to aid novice readers as they analyze this unfamiliar medium. However, even when novice readers used external repertoires, they were unsure about whether they should do so. Nicki briefly referenced cartoons with female superheroes as a lens that helped her understand some of her expectations for superhero comics. She also discussed some of the knowledge she gained from seeing Marvel movies with her boyfriend, who was a big comics fan and would explain more about the characters and storylines after seeing the film. Although Nicki’s detailed answers indicate the strong reading comprehension and analytical ability of an advanced English major, she did not mention these skills as a repertoire that she consciously accessed. She viewed her reading choices primarily through her lack of experience in the medium. Natalie said she brought in strong analytical skills from her English and art history classes that she used to notice many details within the artwork and the narrative. She said that her art history minor meant she had been “trained to look at visuals.” Yet, she did not find either of these external repertoires met all her needs as a comics reader, and her cued retrospective reporting indicates that she did not engage the different narrative registers in the comics the same way as expert readers.

The novices in this study present data that sits at odds with some rhetoricians who argue that external repertoires are key tools for novice readers and writers. Kevin Roozen offers a longitudinal analysis of a student named Angelica who slowly builds her collegiate journalism writing skills out of her comfort with her personal journaling. He explains,

> it was the very practices Angelica employed to inscribe her experiences in her private writing that allowed her voice to be heard both in the undergraduate curriculum and
beyond...rather than abandoning the rich constellation of practices that informed her private writing, Angelica threaded them into her the writing tasks she encountered at critical moments [as she developed as a writer].” (Roozen 565)

While Angelica becomes stronger at combining her private and professional writing skills over time, Roozen here suggests that retaining her private writing practices from the beginning of college career, even at times when those practices proved problematic for academic success, ultimately leads to her developing an effective professional writing style that she could not have developed if she had abandoned her private writing. While Roozen never uses the term “repertoires,” Angelica’s experience blending personal and professional writing requirements maps well onto the use of external repertoires explored in Haswell et al.’s studies on rhetorical reading.

Roozen’s study raises the possibility that external repertoires can function powerfully and effectively for novices. However, unlike Angelica in Roozen’s study, the novices in my study did not feel at ease with their use of external repertoires. This could be because Roozen studies Angelica’s writing over time, allowing Angelica to reconcile the demands of her different writing environments in a way that the participants in my study do not yet feel comfortable doing. Roozen argues, “our sense of ourselves as literate persons is forged in the interplay of multiple encounters with literacy, private as well as public” (542, emphasis added). Nicki especially lacked the benefit of multiple encounters with reading comics, since she read her very first comics during her participation in this study. Both Nicki and Natalie identified their lack of experience as a challenge that made their ability to read the comics more challenging, and while Natalie was able to use her art history training to analyze the visuals, she repeatedly expressed
frustration and confusion about her gaps in knowledge about the comic book characters and the
kind of reading expertise that she felt more experienced comics readers would be able to access.

It is useful to note that Nicki and Natalie are in many ways correct about the effects of
their lack of genre knowledge. Even when the novice readers demonstrated thoughtful analysis
of the comics, their analyses did not have the same level of specificity that the experts
demonstrated, particularly when it came to thinking about the relationships between visual and
verbal components in the excerpts. Chute and DeKoven explain that “the medium of comics is
cross-discursive because it is composed of verbal and visual narratives that do not simply blend
together, creating a unified whole, but rather remain distinct.” (769). They argue that careful and
effective readers of the comics medium will be able to notice the connections between the two
narratives, but they also must process both narratives as separate entities. Natalie demonstrated
skill and sophistication in her analysis of the visuals and verbal components working together,
but did not seem to think about the narratives as distinct, indicating a lack of comics expertise. In
Nicki’s case, the page layouts and the amount of detail in the imagery seemed to be
overwhelming. She identifies a big difference between reading books and reading comic books:
books have a prescribed reading path that is not present in comics. On the final pages of the
Captain Marvel excerpt, she notes, “Even on this page it’s like, ‘Where would I start?’ Because
there’s no symmetry or pattern to where the narrative box and all those things are placed. That
makes it difficult to follow.” Nicki said that she had originally expected that the images “would
fill in any gaps” in her understanding but ultimately the images “didn't help me to the full extent
I expected it to.” She seemed to regret her lack of time spent looking over the images. When I
asked whether she felt the images were not as helpful because of a fault in the artwork or a fault
in her reading strategies, she explained, “I feel like it’s my own doing where I didn’t stay on a
page long enough for me to fully understand it.” Natalie’s use of external repertoires helped her analyze the images more effectively than Nicki, or at least feel more confident in her analytical strategies, but both novice readers were correct that they lacked knowledge of the medium to help them read like experts.

Finally, both novice readers brought in their own beliefs about the medium of comics. They both explained ideologies about comics and who they are written for, cobbled together primarily from the general popularity of superhero movies and conversations with their friends about comics. Their ideologies seemed to function as an external repertoire, but as one that was limiting rather than beneficial. Natalie made several comments about what superhero comics “usually” do, such as her assessment that all superheroes have tight costumes, but she also stated that she had never read a superhero comic before. When I asked her to explain where she got her ideas about the superhero genre, she attributed that knowledge to watching superhero films and to having conversations with friends and her sister, who was a frequent comic-book reader. This became a trend within her answers: she repeated that she had not read superhero comics before, yet she frequently referenced strongly held beliefs about the norms for the superhero genre. These norms were almost never favorable and had direct connections to gender. When describing Batwoman’s workout scenes, she commented, “I assume [the comic] has a male writer just because I always assume that.” She believed that superhero comics, more so than other comics, appealed to male readers and these beliefs had an impact on her choice to avoid superhero comics prior to this study.

Nicki explained similar reasons for never reading a comic book prior to the study. She brought in intersectional analysis as she noted that it is rare to see women as leads in entertainment media and even rarer to see African American women as leading characters. She
said she “would have been really surprised” if the protagonists were African-American women. Nicki explained that she had never gotten into reading comics for a number of reasons, and one factor was this expected lack of African American female characters in strong leading roles. She said that she felt like comics “didn’t represent me or relate to me.” Nicki acknowledged, “I do have a lot of African-American friends who do read comics too,” but she had never considered asking them “do you feel like the comics represent you [and] your identity?” Therefore, the use of external repertoires could also be a limiting factor by causing potential readers to avoid comic books based on their beliefs about their content and their intended audience, without using the actual medium itself to decide whether comic books could appeal to them as individual readers.

*Intermediate Readers: Mackenzie and Matt*

Intermediate readers in the study did not fit neatly into either the novice or expert reader categories. Their answers combined components of both novice and expert readership. Warren adopts an expanded model of expertise proposed by cognitive psychologist Vimla L. Patel and educational psychologist Guy J. Groen that includes intermediate expertise. Warren argues that graduate students serve as good models of intermediate readers; they have more specific disciplinary expertise than novice readers, but they do not possess the characteristic that Warren attributed to expert readers of correctly identifying gaps in their knowledge and responding effectively to those gaps. The intermediate readers in my study were able to demonstrate some level of genre knowledge, but did not always identify when they could benefit from more experience or expertise. Strangely, intermediate readers did not seem to have the same level of genre knowledge awareness as either their novice or expert peers. Novices knew they lacked comics genre knowledge and felt hindered by that lack, and experts knew that they had
knowledge about the conventions and typical reading practices in the comics medium and felt empowered by that knowledge. Intermediates did not link the majority of their reading choices to expertise or the lack thereof, and that could be a factor in their use of both expert and novice reading practices.

Mackenzie demonstrated familiarity with the medium’s conventions during her interviews when she used comics terminology like “panels” and “page layout.” When I pointed out that she was using discourse community terms, she laughed and seemed surprised by this observation. She said she did not know how she learned the terms. In her cued retrospective reporting, Mackenzie was usually able to reconstruct how the art drew her eye. She identified a pattern in which she first scanned a page, then tried to move through panel by panel, usually guided by the “dialogue,” and then did a final review of the full page. She also identified a difference between pages when she seemed to be able to find an orderly reading path and pages when she seemed confused about where to look. Mackenzie identified several pages in the Captain Marvel comic, such as a double page layout in the fight with Creel in which the top of both pages is one large panel and there are small inset panels in the bottom, as a challenge for her. She said, “I wasn’t sure whether to read across or down and over.” During her gaze replays, Mackenzie switched back and forth between identifying rapid saccades around the page as a standard, useful part of reading the comic or a sign of confusion. Her answers demonstrated that she waffled back and forth between expert-level confidence in her ability to read the comics and novice-level concern that she had read the comic incorrectly.

Matt also was familiar with comics terminology, such as panels and speech bubbles. When I asked if he thought he had read differently because he was being observed he said he was not sure given his lack of experience, but he felt like his primary goal was “trying to mostly find
my bearings in the medium again.” Matt reported that the last time he had read a comic was probably about a decade prior to his participation in the study. Like expert readers, he seemed unbothered by the process of figuring out the pages and the medium. He explained that he didn’t know either of the main characters, but “it was okay,” because he “never had a problem picking up on the plot.” He also relied on a combination of visual and verbal components to analyze the comic. During retrospective cuing, he described fixations around the “speech bubbles and faces.” On the page in Captain Marvel when she begins to fly into space and contemplates why she remains reluctant to own the Captain Marvel title, Matt’s gaze trails moved in a pattern from one text box to the associated image and then to the next text box and so on. He noted, “these text bubbles let me take in more of the action [in the images] at the same time as I was reading [the words].” On the two-page spread of Batwoman kicking across the layout, his gaze trail begins by moving around quickly before focusing on the faces across the pages. He said, “it looks like I’m trying to piece together what’s happening.” His full gaze trail on these pages took just over 8 seconds, slightly longer than Nicki’s, but he felt comfortable that he understood the content of the page as “an intense beat-down,” indicating that he was able to understand the plot from the imagery. At times, Matt identifies the images as their own narrative register, a mark of comics reading expertise. However he is not consistent in this practice, because at other times he speaks about the images as illustrations that are present only to support the textual narrative.

Matt again showed some expertise in his audience analysis. He believed the intended audience for Batwoman would be “people familiar with comics who appreciate the art form. The interesting page design, artwork, and storytelling choices are something I haven’t seen before.” He said that he thought fans of the medium would “appreciate this interesting approach.” His answer indicates that he had working knowledge of the “norms” for comic book conventions.
This surprised me at first, since Matt’s survey answers said he had only read one or two comics in the past, but his interview answers indicated that he had clear memories of the Superman comics he read as a child, even though he had not read very many. He was able to cite specific examples from the comics to support his claims and said that he was using those few Superman comics as his source for comparing the artwork in Batwoman with audience expectations. Matt had also watched most of the Avengers and Batman movies, which made him feel comfortable with the superhero genre. He posited that Captain Marvel has a different audience: new comics fans who sought out comics after watching the Avengers movies. He theorizes that the new fans may be “looking for a new character to identify with and follow from the beginning.” His answer here shows a more generalized analysis based on an external repertoire rather than a careful reading of the comic. This also suggests that his beliefs about the expectations for comic book conventions are based less in expert-level knowledge of conventions than in novice-level generalized beliefs about comics.

In fact, intermediate readers often relied heavily on external repertoires and used comics knowledge as a supplemental repertoire, which is the reverse of expert readers. Matt’s outside repertoire of movie knowledge worked in tandem with his English-discipline knowledge so that his analysis focused mostly on plot and characterization derived from the textual narrative. For example, he compared Captain Marvel’s story to a Bildungsroman and said that it felt more like a coming of age story than he originally expected. Mackenzie had training in gender studies, and that seemed to form a far more important repertoire for her analysis than her knowledge of comic-book conventions. Her reading of gender in the comics heavily influenced how much she enjoyed the comics. She explained, “I like Batwoman better because she does not accept sexism or aggression from any of the characters in the way that Captain Marvel does.” In her follow-up
interview, she was not able to cite specific scenes, but confirmed that she felt it was a trend “overall” for the character. In addition to her distaste for the sexualized depictions of Captain Marvel’s body, she also disliked the way that Captain Marvel “blended in a bit with her surroundings.” Furthermore, she found the male characters were just as important to the Captain Marvel story as the protagonist was, while Batwoman was clearly the most important character in her comic. Mackenzie approached her survey and interview answers through a feminist lens, and after analyzing the comics’ story, characterizations, and artwork through that lens, she decided she preferred Batwoman as a comic and a character.

Both Matt and Mackenzie displayed better discourse community knowledge and more confidence about their reading choices than novice readers. Matt and Mackenzie both used appropriate comics terminology at times, although they did not use it consistently. Matt was confident in his readings and interpretations throughout his interview answers, whereas Mackenzie felt confident on some pages and less confident on others. While they displayed too much expertise to be considered novices, they did not demonstrate all of the same qualities of their expert reader peers. They often relied more on external repertoires than expert readers did. Intermediate readers also seemed inconsistent in the way they read the relationship between text and images, which indicates they process the comics differently than expert readers. In the case of these two intermediate readers, they had both read comics as a child but had gone for many years without reading any comics, so their intermediate expertise may have reflected the process of accessing expert reading skills that had gone unused for a long time. Either way, they did not read as experts at the time of the study.

Discussion
Even with only a few participants in each category, this data allows us to draw some general conclusions about rhetorical expertise and reading comics. In the first place, the participants in this study indicate there is value in an expanded model of expertise, like that suggested by Warren, that offers categories between expert and novice readers. This expanded model leaves room for processing the effects of students’ expertise in other repertoires as well as their direct expertise within the comics medium. Using this expanded model, we can see that all participants bring a complex network of knowledge to their analysis, but within that complexity, we can also identify some general trends and characteristics that distinguish different levels of comics-reading expertise.

Experts stand out as skilled rhetorical readers through their knowledge of genre conventions. They know terminology from the medium that identifies them as part of a comics-reader discourse community and allows them to speak specifically about the components on each comics page. Sometimes they are also able to use terms from comics criticism, like McCloud’s work, although not all experts showed this trait. Experts feel comfortable bringing in outside repertoires to assist their analysis, but they do not rely on these external repertoires as their primary analytical lens. Experts know enough about comics conventions to develop in-depth, thoughtful analysis based on those conventions and then identify when an outside repertoire will be useful. They also think about the goals and purposes of individual comic book issues within the broader comics medium. Finally, experts have a strong sense of agency as readers. They accept that processing both the images and the text on each page takes time, and that different reading patterns may be necessary as they move from page to page and panel to panel. Experts feel comfortable with temporary confusion and see “sense making” as an inherent part of reading any comic.
Novice readers, even ones with intermediate to subexpert levels of rhetorical analysis skills, demonstrate very different characteristics in their reading of comic books. They do not have access to most of the terminology and knowledge about comics conventions that guide their expert peers. Since that is the case, they rely heavily on external repertoires to help them process the comic book pages. This sometimes manifests as relying heavily on the text boxes as the primary or only source of narrative development. Most importantly, novices do not have a sense of agency in how they approach reading a comic book. Novices in this study seem aware that they lack this important genre knowledge and they have strong emotional responses to this awareness, such as guilt and frustration. Unlike experts, who feel comfortable navigating through confusion, novices feel unsure about whether their interpretations are thorough or even accurate. In some instances, novices may simply give up on pages or panels out of frustration. Even without specific knowledge about the medium and genre conventions in comic books, novices held strong opinions about the content, intended audience, and value of comic books. Unlike expert readers, novices mostly held general opinions that lumped all superhero comics or all comics together. Alternatively, experts were able to identify specific comics that informed their opinions about broad trends in comics genres. Here again, experts stand out because they have access to specific genre knowledge, while novices generate their opinions from generalized sources, like friends and family members who read comics.

Intermediate readers fall somewhere between these two categories. Participants in this category did not display trends quite as distinct as in the other two categories. Instead, intermediate readers wove together traits that indicate both novice and expert reading strategies. Intermediate readers had more knowledge about genre conventions than their novice peers, but there seemed to be some limitations to that knowledge. For example, intermediate readers might
use the correct terms for describing and analyzing a comic book without demonstrating a clear sense of the narrative goals for an individual issue of comics within a large series or ongoing comic book universe. They also seemed to have ambivalence about their own comfort with comic book reading. At times, intermediate readers seemed comfortable with the process of making sense of both images and text on the comic book pages. At other times, they did not seem sure that they were analyzing them correctly or ignored the images to rely solely on the text. Intermediate readers felt agency on pages that seemed to follow familiar reading paths, but often were less sure of their readings on pages that were complex and unique, but they did not have strong emotional responses to either type of page layout. Expert readers understood that confusion was frequently a natural and necessary part of reading a comic book. Intermediate readers seemed confident in their own abilities to read comics generally, but did not embrace confusion and sense making in the same way as their expert peers.

Overall, these participants make a good case for thinking about rhetorical reading in the comics medium as a combination of several factors, with the most important being genre knowledge. In my next chapter, I deepen the analysis of this data by using a feminist lens to explore the connections between comics and ideology about gender that show up briefly in this chapter. I show that the different levels of expertise identified in this chapter have effects on how well participants were able to locate and identify evidence to support their analysis of gender representations in the comic book excerpts.
Chapter 4

College-Aged Reader Responses to Gender Ideology and Female Superhero Comics

In the previous chapter, my analysis focused on the relationship between expertise, genre knowledge, and rhetorical reading practices. Expert participants showed strong rhetorical reading practices based in their knowledge of comics conventions. Novice readers demonstrated a lack of agency based in their limited knowledge about comics conventions. Intermediate readers demonstrated a blend of expert and novice reading practices and relied on external repertoires, like gender studies and literary tropes, to read and analyze comic books.

The participants’ expertise also had interesting connections to their beliefs about the presentation of gender in comic books. All the participants referenced gender ideology about female characters in general and in superhero comics in particular as part of their responses. Expert readers were more likely to base their expectations on their previous experiences reading other comic books and their knowledge of the comics medium. Intermediate and novice readers were more likely to base their expectations on external repertoires. Yet, all three groups held strong beliefs about gender, as well as the ideologies about gender that they believed would be presented in superhero comics. Novice readers identified their beliefs about gender and comics as one reason they had not read comics prior to this study.

In this chapter, I analyze the same data that I analyzed in the previous chapter (survey responses, eye tracking data, and cued retrospective interview responses) through a feminist lens. I begin by explaining the different methodology I used to analyze gender in the data. I then summarize the participants’ two main concerns in relation to gender in Elegy and In Pursuit of Flight, sexualized imagery and clichéd characters, and the aspects of gender in the comics that the participants responded to positively: strong female protagonists, complex relationships
between male and female characters, and improvement within the superhero genre. Finally, I analyze the participants’ responses through the lens of feminist imagination and compare my own feminist analysis from the second chapter of this project with the participants’ responses.

**Women and Comics Audiences**

In my introduction, I gave a brief overview of an ongoing problem in comics: there is a popular belief that women do not read comics. This belief rarely holds up to scrutiny but it functions as a powerful, exclusionary myth. Scholars who study the history of comics, like Amy Kiste Nyberg and Trina Robbins, note that female readers have always been engaged fans of the medium. Researchers who track contemporary audiences, like Brent Schenker, argue that female readers make up a significant portion of comics reading audiences. Scholars who study fandoms, like rhetorical scholar Matthew Cicci and fan studies scholar Suzanne Scott argue that creators and editors in the comics industry frame female fans as recent additions to the comics reading audience in order to avoid responding to their concerns. Scott explains that the myth that women do not make up a large percentage of comics fans has the potential to produce “a self-fulfilling prophecy, a vicious circle” in which women retreat from comics because they perceive the medium as inaccessible to their gender (Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber qtd. in S. Scott). Despite the historical and contemporary realities that female comics readers exist and have always existed, the narrative that women do not read comics has become a powerful myth with real effects on existing and potential comics readers. These exclusionary effects grow more exacerbated for female readers whose gender identities intersect with additional forms of marginalization. Deborah Elizabeth Whaley prefaces her book about Black women’s roles in the production of comics and within comics fandoms by addressing her own position as a Black,
female comics creator and American studies scholar. She argues that she is a “Black woman in a fanboy world,” which continues to affect her and shape her scholarship. She says the fan spaces that surround comics, namely conventions and comic book stores, remain largely male and white, and “these sites are difficult for women of color to penetrate….I have never seen anyone in a comic book store who shares my ethnic and gender identity” (ix-x, original emphasis). Whaley notes that every layer of identity that does not comport with the myth of the straight white male audience creates another barrier to feeling welcomed in comics culture.

Educational scholar Robin Moeller discovered a practical effect of the “vicious circle” when she began an empirical study about the effects of reading graphic novels on male and female readers. She had no problem recruiting male participants, but she had a hard time finding female participants, because high school girls claimed, “Those are boy books” (qtd. Moeller 477). She found that these preconceptions developed in part from expectations that comics often focus on male superheroes. When the participants in her study read a superhero comic about a teenaged female superhero, the female participants “were surprised to find that they enjoyed reading about an intelligent and physically strong girl growing up in extreme conditions” (479). Male participants were less comfortable with the reading, arguing that the female superhero was “an exception to the rule” that superheroes are male (qtd. in Moeller 479). Some male readers also viewed the character as completely unsuccessful in her attempt to be a superhero (Moeller 480). Moeller found that students developed heteronormative and sexist readings of the characters that affected which comics they valued.

Another education study by Lyndsay Moffatt and Bonny Norton explores how comics can be a source for patriarchal views of women and heteronormative views of sexuality. Moffatt and Norton examined 55 preteen participants’ responses to an Archie comic that portrayed a love
triangle between Archie and his two love interests, the intelligent Betty and the attractive Veronica. Moffatt and Norton found in their research that students developed a blend of perspectives on how men and women should behave but always assumed that the characters were heterosexual. This study became a partial model for my methodology for analyzing my results in relation to gender, so I will describe the study in some detail.

In the Archie comic Moffatt and Norton used in their study, Betty “revisits” traditional fairytales in order to make the female characters better role models for girls. In the final scene of the story, Betty becomes Little Red Riding Hood. She visits her grandmother’s cottage and finds a wolf pretending to be her grandmother so that Betty will come close enough for the wolf to attack her. The scene cuts away to Archie, playing a fairytale woodsman, who hears cries for help from Betty’s grandmother’s cottage. He arrives at the cottage and learns that Betty has attacked the wolf and the wolf is crying out for help. Betty declines Archie’s offer for help, suggesting a possible feminist story. However, Veronica arrives, wearing a sexier version of the Red Riding Hood outfit than Betty is wearing, and asks Archie to accompany her through the woods to protect her from wolves. Betty is left standing alone while Archie and Veronica wander off together surrounded by cartoon hearts (Moffatt and Norton 109-110).

To gather data about participants’ responses to this comic, Moffatt and Norton used surveys with four open-ended questions: they asked participants to summarize the story, “describe the scene in the final frame,” offer advice to Betty in the final frame, and explain why they thought Betty and Veronica liked Archie. Moffatt and Norton then used the survey responses to select 10 girls and 10 boys for follow up interviews. They transcribed the interviews and coded them for “Patriarchal Discourse, Feminist Discourse, Girl Power/Mixed Messages Discourse, Heterosexist Assumptions/GLBQ Possibilities.” For example, some participants
argued that Betty should have accepted Archie’s offer for help as one way to try to win him back, which the researchers coded as patriarchal discourse. Other readers suggested that Betty was fine and did not care that Archie had left with Veronica, which the researchers coded as feminist discourse. All of the participants presumed that the characters had a heterosexual interest in each other, even though the comic never shows evidence that Betty has an attraction for Archie. One participant, Dave, offered a succinct statement that was representative of the ideas presented by approximately three-quarters of the survey respondents: “Archie comics tell you that girls go out with boys and boys go out with girls” (qtd. in Moffatt and Norton 118.) Moffatt and Norton are less interested in the comics medium than in the kinds of beliefs that the preteen participants held about gender and sexuality, but their findings suggest that comics like this *Archie* comic are one source for preteen readers to construct knowledge about gender relations and sexuality.

**Methods**

*Elegy* and *In Pursuit of Flight* both appealed to me for this study because I analyzed them as displaying feminist imagination. Feminist art theorist Amy Mullin argues that “good activist artworks…may be seen as attempts to initiate dialogue or to imaginatively explore political alternatives” (195). I argue that feminist imagination in these comics offers imaginative alternatives about the depictions of female comic book characters, as well as broader implications about women in the comics medium that could spark dialogue in comics fandoms or college classrooms. However, I also know that I am a feminist scholar and a comics fan, so I knew that my excitement about these comics and their feminist potential might not translate to other readers.
I wanted to determine whether other readers, particularly college-aged readers, would identify messages about gender in the comics, and if so, whether they identified those messages as feminist imagination or something less progressive. I also wanted to learn whether a participants’ reading practices had any affect on their reaction to depictions of gender in the comics. I designed methods to assess whether the authors of *Elegy* and *In Pursuit of Flight* produced texts with feminist imagination that could impact any reader, and whether people reading with different kinds of lenses (not necessarily like my feminist rhetorician one) would identify feminist content. The feminist analysis in this chapter models one self-reflexive method for interrogating assumptions that scholars in rhetoric and composition make about the accessibility of comics by conflating their own beliefs about comics with their students’ beliefs. In addition, existing research on comics and gender usually focuses on K-12 education, so my study with college-aged readers offers a useful expansion for rhetoric and composition scholars and teachers who work in colleges. Finally, it invites a rhetorical examination of the relationships between text and reader to evaluate how (or perhaps whether) comics with feminist imagination can effectively communicate feminist messages to their readers.

I did not have a separate stage of data collection to gather data exclusively on participants’ responses to gender in the comics, but I did have a slightly different method for my feminist analysis as opposed to analysis on genre and expertise. Moffatt and Norton’s methods offered a useful baseline for my feminist research in two key ways. First, their survey questions were designed to prompt readers to reflect on gender relations in the *Archie* comic from their study. However, they were also open-ended questions, which allowed participants to provide their perspectives with limited influence from the researchers’ views. For example, Moffatt and Norton began their survey with a question that asked participants to “write a summary of the
story, retelling it as they would to a friend” (110). My survey includes a question with almost identical language. This question invited participants to discuss gender in the comics, since both comics foreground the gender of the protagonists at some point, but did not require them to analyze gender. It also helped me avoid imposing a specific analytical lens on the participants as they responded to the comic.

Second, I initially planned on borrowing Moffatt and Norton’s coding system. They transcribed 20 follow-up interviews with 10 male and 10 female participants from their study and then coded those transcripts. Moffatt and Norton developed one category on desire, “Heterosexist Assumptions/GLBQ Possibilities,” and I decided not to use that code since sexuality and desire seemed like yet another area of analysis (alongside expertise and gender) that might make my research too dense and complicated, particularly for a solo-authored study. The three other categories on discourse (Feminist Discourse, Patriarchal Discourse, and Girl Power/Mixed Messages Discourse) seemed adaptable for my study if I examined imagination instead of discourse. Moffatt and Norton use a poststructural gender studies frame for their study, but they do not link “discourse” to a specific theoretical frame. Instead, “discourse or language” refers to “how young people are talking and thinking about gender relations and sexuality” (Moffatt and Norton 105-106). Their results focus on what their participants said about the comic. My study is grounded in a rhetorical understanding of the relationship between readers, creators, and texts; imagination offers one frame for examining that relationship. As I explained in an earlier chapter, feminist imagination acknowledges that fictional texts, like the comics from my study, are creative and imaginative, which has rhetorical impact. Coding the study participants’ responses in terms of imagination instead of discourse centers the imagination of the texts’ creators, as well as the readers’ interpretation of the texts.
Like Moffatt and Norton, I analyzed what the participants in my study said, but I coded their responses as imagination. This shift suggests that their responses are less about reporting or summarizing the comics and more about interpreting and making sense of the comics. I planned to code my interviews with these codes:

- **Patriarchal Imagination**: a code for answers indicating a participant felt the comic reinforced patriarchal gender relations or stereotypical depictions of gender
- **Feminist Imagination**: a code for answers indicating a participant felt the comic resisted patriarchal stereotypes and instead depicted equality between genders and positive depictions of female characters
- **Mixed Imagination**: a code for answers indicating a participant felt that the comics (or parts of the comics) offered a blend of patriarchal and feminist imagination

These codes were always meant to be flexible, since I was not sure if I would need to offer more specific sub-coding, such as Feminist Imagination: Paradox, or something along those lines. I partially transcribed the sections of my interviews in which participants discussed gender and then tried to use my coding system to analyze the transcripts.

I found that these codes did not work very well to sort the results from my study. First, the participants in my study were college-aged students (20-22 years old) while the students in Moffatt’s and Norton’s study were aged 10-12 years old. Unsurprisingly, given this large age difference, the participants in my study offered more complex analysis around their own responses to gender in the comics, and that made all of their answers fit best into the “mixed imagination” category. In addition, Moffatt and Norton chose an *Archie* comic as an age-appropriate text, much like I chose Batwoman and Captain Marvel comics as appropriate for the age of the participants in my study. The stark differences in the genre and maturity of the content
in the two comics most likely contributed to some of the differences in responses between the two studies. My own initial analysis indicates that the female superhero comics themselves offer a blend of feminist discourse and patriarchal discourse, so while it would have been entirely possible for a participant to pick up on only the feminist imagination or the patriarchal imagination, it makes sense that this group of rhetorically savvy participants all offered answers that would fit best into the mixed messages category.

The participants in my study also offered compelling evidence that I needed to clarify the source of imagination in order to best analyze feminist imagination as a form of rhetoric. Moffatt’s and Norton’s study seems to blend the messages in the comics and the participants’ own responses as sites for discourse analysis. At times, they seem to think that the comic book taught a participant something about gender, which the participant then passively absorbed and repeated. For example, when Moffatt’s and Norton’s participant Dave said, “Archie comics teach you that girls go out with boys and boys go out with girls,” the source for the gendered message seems to be the comic, but the researchers coded Dave’s response as his own without making that clarification (118). At other times, Moffatt and Norton seem to view the Archie comic as one of many possible cultural artifacts that allows the participants to discuss their previously held constructions about gender. The researchers explain that a participant named Mohammad, who expressed mixed messages discourse, “told us that it is better if ‘things are not sexist,’ yet he also told us that it is ‘important’ for girls to be ‘good looking’ so that they can attract boys” (116). In Dave’s case, the comic seems to be the source of the gendered discourse. In Mohammad’s case, he seems to be the source of the gendered discourse, and the Archie comic seems only tangentially related to his statements. The researchers coded both participants’ responses without exploring that distinction.
The participants in my study highlighted the problem of not distinguishing between the text and the participant as the source of a message about gender. They often identified something in the comic, such as the objectified imagery, as problematic, meaning that for many participants, parts of the comic offered patriarchal discourse about gender, but the participant’s critical responses were feminist. I would be unable to effectively code their responses without considering that patriarchal messages in a text can become mixed or feminist imagination when a reader encounters and responds to those messages, or theoretically vice versa.

Instead of using codes adapted from Moffatt’s and Norton’s study, I followed the principle of grounded theory and developed a coding scheme recursively from rereading the interview transcripts and survey answers to identify trends in the participants’ answers (Glaser and Strauss). The new codes fell into two broad categories: participants’ concerns about the representation of gender in comics and participants’ positive reactions to the representation of gender in comics. The first category often included answers that could code as patriarchal imagination, but it was more useful to specify the specific issues that participants raised about gender in the comics. I established two codes: Sexualized Imagery and Clichéd Characters. In the positive reactions to representation of gender in the comics, I established three codes: Strong Female Lead, Complex Relationships between Male and Female Characters, and Improvement within the Superhero Genre. Once I had established these codes, I returned to the audio files and the written transcripts to code the participants’ responses. Like my analysis on genre and expertise, these codes produced qualitative analysis as opposed to quantitative analysis. I used the codes to identify trends and patterns in the participants’ gender analysis rather than counting instances of a specific code’s appearance in a participant’s answers. Qualitative analysis felt more useful than quantitative for this study, given the small number of participants and the
exploratory nature of my research. Below I draw examples from the transcripts to describe the trends I saw in my participants’ concerns about gender, while also highlighting the different language and evidence that each participant used in relation to these trends.

Data

All of the participants discussed gender at some point in their survey and/or their interview responses, but none of the participants talked about gender in exactly the same way. There are broad trends in the values that each participant considers good or bad in relation to depictions of gender, but there is no consensus on the texts or evidence that support those values. For example, all participants agreed that sexualized imagery was negative, but some participants identified Batwoman as having problematic imagery, while other participants spoke favorably about the imagery in Batwoman and identified Captain Marvel’s imagery as more offensive. All participants spoke about strong female protagonists in a positive light, but there was no clear consensus on which of the two superheroines counted as strong female characters or even what qualities would define such a character. This already offers a distinction between the genre-based findings and the gender-based findings: The participants’ responses in relation to genre draw attention to the shared qualities among participants with similar levels of reading expertise, inviting us to think of these participants in terms of discourse communities and groups. The participants’ responses in relation to gender draws attention to the individual position of each reader, inviting us to consider the reading expertise alongside the demographics, personality, and academic training of each participant separately to get a better sense of their rhetorical situation.

The distinction I draw between readers is not akin to American ideological individualism, but rather an acknowledgement that the reader’s positions complicate a monolithic reading of the
rhetorical analysis, specifically in relation to the rhetorical situation between readers and creators and texts. Overall it is clear that gender and the way that female characters were written and drawn mattered to the participants. Beyond that, each reader’s expertise and demographics seemed to affect how and why they responded to gender in the comics.

Here is a brief overview of the participants’ demographics at the time of the study (using their own language for their race and sexuality whenever possible), alongside their expertise as defined in the previous chapter.\textsuperscript{21} I have also included any academic training that they cited as useful to their comics analysis:\textsuperscript{22}

- Erin: 21-year-old bisexual, white female; expert reader; film studies class
- Mackenzie: 20-year-old gay, white female; intermediate reader; gender studies
- Natalie: 20-year-old bisexual, white female; novice reader; art history minor, including feminist visual analysis
- Erica: 21-year-old heterosexual, Caucasian female; expert reader; comics analysis class (which I had taught in a previous semester)
- Eli: 21-year-old heterosexual, white male; expert reader
- Nicki: 22-year old heterosexual, Black/African-American female; novice reader
- Emmy: 21-year-old Asian female; expert reader\textsuperscript{23}
- Matt: 21-year-old straight, white male; intermediate reader; some independent study of comics analysis

The other three participants did not offer specific information about their academic training that would shape their analytical lens. In addition to these demographic and academic factors, each participant’s personality and language illustrated the diversity in their analysis of gender in the
comics. Thus, the following categories compile the broad trends in the participants’ responses while acknowledging the distinct evidence, language, and, sometimes, emotional tenor that different participants used in relation to that category.

**Sexualized Imagery**

The majority of participants provided negative responses to artwork that they felt sexualized the female characters, particularly when the imagery did not seem connected to any narrative goals. The participants did not come to a consensus on which characters they felt were objectified, but they frequently identified sexualized imagery as a problem in the comics. For example, Mackenzie disliked the sexualized imagery in *Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight* and said she preferred the art in *Batwoman: Elegy*, because, “Captain Marvel is drawn objectified. Batwoman wasn’t drawn like that.” When she described the art in *In Pursuit of Flight*, she pointed out some moments when Captain Marvel’s butt and breasts were “defined.” She made a disgusted noise and said, “Why?!...It’s like: Who drew these?” Mackenzie used the term “defined” multiple times throughout her survey and interview answers, and for this participant, the term seemed to refer to exaggerated and sexualized anatomy. She indicated that she preferred the way Batwoman was drawn in large part due to the lack of objectification.

Some participants combined their critiques of sexualized imagery with a related, although slightly different, problem: they disliked imagery that fit into feminine stereotypes, even if the feminine imagery did not seem overtly sexual. Erin’s first observation for Captain Marvel was that “she’s drawn very sexualized. There were some unnecessary ‘shots’ of her breasts and rear end.” She also noted that other aspects of Captain Marvel’s depiction were problematic: the artist draws her in “uncomfortable” poses and depicts her as “pretty, even when she’s angry.” Erin
read Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight first, and her answers on the Batwoman survey often compare and contrast to her initial answers about Captain Marvel. In her analysis of the artwork for Batwoman: Elegy, Erin notes that Batwoman “dresses in black, obscuring her face and form. There are some occasions where her poses seem unnatural, but she is not always beautiful.” Erin also concludes that Batwoman “looks more like an average girl” when she is not in costume. She later explains that she likes Batwoman’s costume because it is “more recognizable.” She also appreciates that “the artist uses her costume to make her more mysterious. It’s also not in-your-face sexual.” Erin makes it very clear that she prefers the lack of overt sexualized and stereotypical imagery in Batwoman.

Natalie also criticized a combination of sexualized and stereotypical imagery. She described Captain Marvel’s appearance as “somewhat sexualized in the comic. Although the tightfitting suits are characteristic of all superheroes, hers clung to her large breasts and she was often put in poses that emphasized her chest or butt.” In her analysis of Batwoman, she notes that Batwoman’s hair “is always immaculate and her mouth is emphasized.” The physical depictions of both characters affected her ability to enjoy the comics. Natalie explained, “[I] liked how Batwoman was shrouded in shadows…but I didn’t like the weird, sexual positions she was drawn in when working out. But I think her features (besides the smile) were less overtly sexualized than Captain Marvel’s, with the emphasis on her breasts and butt.”

The sexualized imagery could be such a negative factor for some participants that it affected their ability to enjoy the comics as a whole. Emmy’s biggest critique of both comics was the sexualized imagery. She said she did not fully enjoy either of the art styles because in both comics, the artists “highlight [the protagonists’] breasts. Especially for Batwoman, she masks her face so when she is in her costume, her only highlight in her entire body is her pointy boobs.” In
an earlier survey response, she said that she preferred the overall artwork in Batwoman, because “it illustrates the story in diverse spread out.” Her gaze trails show multiple fixations on any panels with Batwoman’s “pointy boobs,” indicating that they were an area of focus during her reading. In combination with her survey answers, these fixations possibly indicate distraction or frustration.

Even participants who could potentially find sexualized imagery attractive due to their attraction to women did not seem to appreciate objectified female bodies. In her follow up interview, Erin noted that her eyes were often drawn to the “boobs and butts” in the images of both comics. She acknowledged that as a bisexual reader “attraction does come into play,” but immediately disparaged the sexualized imagery by saying it was “a little ridiculous…in terms of the narrative it’s not necessary.” Similarly to Erin, Mackenzie addressed her own sexuality when she unpacked her observations about the way women were drawn in the comics. She explained, “I’m gay, and I don’t know that that really has anything to do with [my analysis]…I think my [academic] studies probably do more because I’m more aware of how women are portrayed.” Her gaze trail showed frequent fixations on the female bodies of the characters, but her follow up interview usually indicated disgust about the most sexualized imagery. She noted, “I don’t think there’s a purpose, except for the reader, that Captain Marvel is so defined.” She did not seem to think this was an adequate reason for objectifying the character and filtered her analysis through her training in gender studies.

Several participants were willing to acknowledge that their sexuality could play a factor in their attention to sexualized imagery, but that did not mean they enjoyed the images. During her follow-up interviews, Natalie clarified that while she was bisexual and she “would not be surprised if that was a factor” in noticing the sexualized positions, the sexualized imagery did not
seem designed to appeal to female readers, whether they were attracted to women or not. She identified several sexualized positions in both Batwoman and Captain Marvel as “completely gratuitous” and “male gaze-y.” In particular, she read the fight scenes between Alice and Batwoman as a “male fetishization of same-sex female couples.” Her self-analysis during the follow-up interview portion matches a previous survey answer in which Natalie describes the intended audience for Batwoman as, “men, since even her fight with Alice placed the two in sexualized positions.” She also seemed to think that the sexualized poses affected the clarity of the plot. Again referring to a fight scene between Alice and Batwoman, she said, “they are supposed to be fighting but it looks like they are caressing each other.” In this case, Natalie felt that not only did the sexualized imagery fail to serve the narrative, it actually obscured it for her.

Matt, a straight male, said, “Captain Marvel is drawn better because I think she looks less sexualized and more badass.” In his follow-up interview, I asked him to explain some of his fixations on Captain Marvel’s butt in a panel during the fight with Creel. He said that he had noticed the sexualized imagery because it was “pretty overt” and when I asked him to expand on what he meant by “overt” he pointed to the butt, which faces out toward the reader, and said, “Like, come on.” His tone indicated, “How could you not look at this image?” He seemed neutral about the fact that the artist drew Captain Marvel in a sexualized pose, because Matt considered sexualized imagery “normal superheroine stuff.” He was more critical of the sexualized imagery in Batwoman, especially in the fight scene between Alice and Batwoman. He described the fight scene as “weirdly sexual” and said “it didn’t feel like it really served the plot much, so that’s why it jumped out at me.” When I asked if he felt the sexualized imagery in Captain Marvel helped the plot, he said he did not, but that it was “glossed over” by being present in one or two panels, as opposed to highlighted in every panel over the course of a
multiple-page fight scene. Like other participants, Matt did not seem opposed to the idea of sexualized imagery in general, but when the imagery seemed like it distracted from plot or character development, he was more critical.

Eli and Nicki had slightly different responses to the imagery in the comics than the other participants. Nicki said she noticed that the female characters, particularly Captain Marvel, were “curvy,” but it did not bother her, since her experiences watching superhero cartoons prepared her to think of curvy characters as a normal aspect of the superhero genre. When we were talking about her definition of “curvy”, I pointed to the panel that featured Captain Marvel’s butt facing out to the audience. Nicki mused, “Actually, I didn’t even notice that one…I analyze images, but not to that extent.” She did not mention any specific training she had in visual analysis or feminist studies, and she seems to consider looking for sexualized imagery as one aspect of visual analysis that she simply does not engage in. Eli did not bring up sexualized imagery until during his retrospective cuing, when I asked him to address fixations on Captain Marvel’s butt in one of the panels of the comic. He laughed, suggesting he was surprised, and said, “Oh wow. I am looking at her butt!” He did not express a value judgment of the sexualized imagery, but he offered an analysis of the way that the imagery seems designed to draw the reader’s eye to her physical form. He noted that Captain Marvel’s “butt is pointing out of the page” and that her butt was one of the most detailed images on the page. He explained that there was “no shadowing or detail on her face” that might have drawn his eye, but the “most present thing is her butt and her chest.” This is a plausible explanation that seems related to Mackenzie’s description of the character as “defined” and Matt’s description of the imagery as “overt.”

Clichéd Characters
Participants disliked and criticized female characters that they believed fit into sexist clichés and tropes. Once again, participants did not come to a consensus on which characters or characteristics were clichés, but they gave similar explanations for identifying different characters as clichéd. For example, several cited a lack of clear motivation for a character as something they felt was stereotypical of the superhero genre or female characters more generally. For example, Eli said he preferred Batwoman because “there seems to be a meaningful investigation going on, rather than a lame fight with a lame villain (in Captain Marvel.)” Eli focused his answers through genre concerns as opposed to gender analysis, so gender seemed like less of a factor for this particular reader than any other participant, but he still disliked clichés or “lame” characters.

Like Eli, the majority of participants briefly mentioned their criticism of clichés when explaining the comic or main character they liked best, so most of their answers focused instead on the positive opposite to a clichéd character, a strong female character. I go into more detail on the participants’ analysis of what characterized a strong female character later in this chapter. Erin, however, offers one initial example of the comparison between clichéd stereotypes and a character whose motivations can be understood by the readers. She argued that the intended audience for Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight “is male, as a lot of superhero comics seem to be.” She supported this claim with the sexualized imagery of Captain Marvel. She also believed that Captain Marvel’s character, which she described as “very tough” or “bad ass,” would appeal to a male audience. As a female reader, Erin seemed put off by the character’s toughness and anger because she did not “understand her motivations.” In contrast, she thought that Batwoman would appeal to both male and female readers “because of the focus on a strong, self-sufficient central woman who also appears to have depth.” While she did not directly say so, her answer
indicates that she did not find Captain Marvel self-sufficient or deep, and the lack of depth affected her ability to enjoy the comic as a female reader. She later explains that Batwoman’s “background/history of trauma helps explain her motivations.” Without motivation, Erin felt that Captain Marvel was an angry and violent cliché. While Erin argued that this cliché would not appeal to female readers, she posited that “the lack of depth, lack of a softer sensitive side” would appeal to male readers and felt similar to the “musclly bravado of superhero men” that male readers tend to enjoy.

Erin addresses another combination of related problems for many participants. Several participants disliked storylines or moments when female characters seemed lesser than the male characters in some way. Participants connected this problem to stereotypes they expected from the superhero genre. As Erin explained, “I know that [comics] have female superheroes. I think what’s troubling here is that they get their roots from male superheroes.” Sometimes these opinions were formed less from the excerpts that participants read in this study and more through external repertoires that they accessed during their surveys or interview answers. Erin said that she had exposure to superheroes mostly through movies or video games, but she connected the genre expectations formed from other media to her frustration that both comics in this study perpetuated the idea that a male version of the character needed to hand off his powers or his approval to a female version.

**Strong Female Lead**

Several participants used the phrase “strong female lead” to compliment Captain Marvel and/or Batwoman in their analysis. Participants identified a strong female lead through a variety of criteria, such as the character’s physical strength, the depth of her characterization, and a clear
motivation for the protagonist’s choices. For most participants, “strength” was not a fully defined concept, but was clearly a desirable attribute. Nicki seemed pleasantly surprised that both comics featured a female protagonist and said she enjoyed seeing the “strength in both” protagonists. Strength, while a bit nebulous, seemed to be a positive quality for both male and female participants in my study.

Motivation stands out as a key factor that distinguished an undesirable clichéd character from a positive presentation of a female character. In his survey answers, Matt said he liked Captain Marvel better because “she felt a bit more relatable. The struggle with how she wanted to present herself to the world is definitely an easier thing to empathize with than hunting those who tried to carve your heart out.” In his follow up interview, he also explained that he was not as interested in Batwoman because her origin story felt very similar to Batman’s and “felt like a normal hero trope.” He liked that Captain Marvel “seemed like she was just trying to find her place in the world.” He went on, “it’s nice to see a reflection of a human in a character” which he admitted “is very ironic” given that Captain Marvel has superhuman powers and Batwoman only has “sheer determination and badassery.” Erica appreciated strength in both protagonists. She described Captain Marvel as “a strong woman who is tired of being insulted for being a woman. She is very contemplative and seems to like her own space.” She described Batwoman as “a strong and determined woman looking for answers and she won’t let anything or anyone get in her way.” In both cases, Erica focused on the character’s motivations. Emmy seemed to value Batwoman’s motivation, independence, and success throughout her survey answers. She explained that “Batwoman was almost killed and she wants to figure why she was the target.” She also explained that Batwoman successfully “gets to the cult meeting and catches the leader of the cult.” She seemed less interested in Captain Marvel as a whole, because she finds Captain
Marvel’s motivations underwhelming: “She wants to be someone like [her mentor] Helen instead of being herself.” She identified a “female adult audience” as the intended audience for the comic, because the comic focused on “personal experiences, such as family and death.” While she disliked aspects of the artwork, she enjoyed the characterization of Batwoman.

Unlike other participants, Emmy offered a more complicated analysis of strength that did not preclude problematic characterization. She described Captain Marvel as “a strong woman but she is easily influenced. She made decisions based on other people’s opinions, such as Captain America and Spiderman and Helen.” She offers a more positive analysis of Batwoman as “a strong woman with determined and independent personality. Her heart was almost taken out by others and she is not afraid to question the group [that] did that to her.” In both cases, Emmy felt that the characters contained some strength, but additional answers for Captain Marvel seemed to focus on physical strength, such as Emmy’s summation of Captain Marvel’s image as a “nice body shape with muscles.” Batwoman seemed to communicate something like strength of character for this participant. Emmy said she liked Batwoman better than Captain Marvel because “She knows what she wants and she knows she is able to get what she wants.” She also indicated that she read Captain Marvel as a clichéd female character, while she read Batwoman as “a real woman.” Batwoman’s need to overcome a defined, personal trauma and her ability to do so with independence mattered to Emmy.

Complex Relationships between Male and Female Characters

While several participants were troubled by the relationships between the female protagonists and the male characters in the comics, other participants read at least some of the relationships between male and female characters in a positive light. Matt, who preferred Captain Marvel as a
protagonist, liked the conversation between Captain America and Captain Marvel. He also appreciated Captain Marvel’s “principled and respectful” memories of Captain Mar-vell. He felt like the comic walked an effective line between giving enough backstory to understand why Captain Mar-vell had mattered so much to Danvers and the Avengers team, while also leaving the reader wanting to read more. He said that the death of Captain Mar-vell was clearly a “huge traumatic event that changed the face of the Avengers” and now he was “interested to see where this storyline continues to.”

Erica often focused on the relationships between the protagonists and the male characters in the comics. She noted that Batwoman “had advice from Batman and her father” about investigating “the people who abducted and hurt her in the past.” In her summary of Captain Marvel, she explains that “Steve [Rogers, aka Captain America] suggests Ms. Marvel change her name to Captain Marvel” and then “Carol mulls the choice over by asking Spiderman’s opinion.” In her follow-up interview, she expanded on the different dynamics between the female and male characters. She felt favorably to Captain America in the Captain Marvel comic because she characterized Captain America as “definitely trying to be supportive of Captain Marvel’s talents, like ‘Take the credit you deserve.’” She saw Batman as a “bit more problematic” in the Batwoman comic, because he was “more directive.”

**Improvement within the Superhero Genre**

Only one participant cited improvement within the superhero genre as a positive part of the representations of gender in the comics, but it was very important to her. Erica, as a frequent reader of comics, explained that she could “sort of see [the imagery] as being sexualized” but thought both of these comics were “moving away from being sexualized.” She expressed
appreciation for the practicality of their costumes, such as Batwoman’s combat boots. With Captain Marvel’s outfit, she felt that the introductory splash page created a defiant tone for the heroine: “This is what I wear and I don’t care if you enjoy it.”

Even with these improvements over her expectations for the genre, a sort of back-and-forth ambivalence characterized many of Erica’s answers. She saw improvement in some aspects of the comics, but she still offered criticisms. She described Batwoman’s intended audience by saying, “I think Batwoman is meant to be an empowering figure for women to overcome past trauma and be their best, but some of the character designs like Alice’s might also attract a male audience.” Her brief mention of Alice’s costumes suggests that she notes more sexualized imagery in the comics than her later interview answers indicated, but it could also be an indication that she is reading the comics in relation to other superhero comics, where the imagery is often more sexualized and does not usually connect to the character’s own choices and goals.

She also explained that she was “used to male-driven protagonists” in the superhero genre and she was “not surprised but appreciated the change” to female protagonists. At the same time she seemed cautious in her praise of the female characters within the overall Marvel universe, because she felt they were both “added on to a universe with established male characters” and that superhero comics as a genre were “all about the guys.”

Analysis

When I return to my original explanation of feminist imagination and my proposed coding scheme, I see that my framework mirrors some of the issues that my participants’ answers raise in regard to Moffatt’s and Norton’s study. I posited that feminist imagination could be both an analytical tool for analyzing texts and a creative rhetorical tool that creators use when
producing texts. I still believe this is true, but the findings from this study indicate that feminist imagination is not solely a matter of either authorial intent or reader interpretation. My findings indicate that feminist imagination exists as a more complex relationship between readers and creators, and that complexity is worth unpacking.

I specifically chose *Batwoman: Elegy* and *Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight* for this study because I found them to be evident of feminist imagination on the part of the comics creators. There are moments in both texts that deliberately respond to earlier patriarchal, problematic versions of the heroines. For example, both comics deliberately transition the heroines from impractical, form-fitting outfits to more functional, combat-ready outfits. And both comics explicitly present the previous costumes as negative stereotypical imagery that the current costumes improve upon. These moments seem to deliberately call upon some form of feminist imagination as a part of the authors’ creative processes. In addition, my own analysis is based in a feminist imaginative lens, in which my analysis critiques some aspects of the comics that I believe fail to reach feminist goals, while praising and emphasizing traits that I believe best indicate feminist values. For example, I highlighted the contradiction between Batwoman’s military training, typically aligned with male superheroes, and her highly feminine costuming that emphasizes her hair and lips to the point of spectacle. I argued that this is a good example of paradox, one possible route for feminist imagination, because Batwoman is able to use spectacle as a distraction from her combat skills, and both aspects serve her vigilante work well. In this instance, I believe I am tracking a deliberate moment of feminist imagination, since the authors transition immediately from a panel in which Batman tells Batwoman to “do something about [her] hair” to a panel in which she removes a wig, indicating that even Batman has misread her costume. I do not think that the authors of the comic would have framed this moment as a
feminist paradox, but I believe it is a valid analysis that acknowledges the authors’ feminist imagination while adding a scholarly lens.

Interviews with the authors of the comics offer additional evidence that the authors are using feminist imagination in creating their comics. Kelly Sue DeConnick, the author of *In Pursuit of Flight*, is an outspoken feminist who faced backlash for the changes she made to the Captain Marvel character. Over the last decade, DeConnick has given multiple interviews and done convention appearances that defend her creative choices and argue in favor of a feminist perspective in comic books. In a *SyFy* interview about comics and politics, DeConnick responds to her critics by saying that comics are inherently political and they always have been. She also addresses the belief that men are the primary comics audience by saying “this idea that the core readership of comic books is white boys is very recent in our evolution…Girls read comics; girls have always read comics. There is nothing inherently masculine about words and pictures.” (*SyFy Wire*). In relation to Captain Marvel, DeConnick says in an interview in *Salon* that she has “always sort of felt that feminist ideals and the ideals of comic book heroes are very much in line with one another.” She claims that she was not trying to write Danvers as a “strong female” character but that instead she wanted to focus on Carol as a “heroine—someone who like Captain America stands up for what is just and protects those who can’t protect themselves” (*DeConnick*). In addition to creating female characters with rich interior lives and complicated personalities, DeConnick advocates for more visibility in the comics world for female fans and female comics creators. These goals are very much in line with feminist imagination.

Emma Ríos, the artist for the latter comic book issues in *In Pursuit of Flight*, has spoken about the invisibility of women in the comics industry. She says, “Nobody seems to understand my presence in comics as normal…I still feel like an outsider sometimes, which is rather
ridiculous at this point with so many women doing comics everywhere” (Ríos). She has expressed frustration with comics marketing that “attempts at stealing the concept of ‘feminism’” from female comics creators, and she participates in the Association of Women in Comics, a Spanish collective that works to improve visibility for contemporary and historic female figures in comics. She does not make big political statements like Deconnick and hopes that her “comics can speak on [her] behalf”, but her interview indicates that she also has the goal of improving female visibility in the comics community (Ríos).

The creators of *Elegy* are less explicitly feminist, but their interviews about Batwoman’s character and motivations suggest they had creative goals in line with feminist imagination. *Elegy* was written by Greg Rucka and drawn by J.H. Williams III, who later became a co-writer on the series. Both creators discuss how they intentionally formed the character of Kate Kane/Batwoman so that she would have depth and emotional pull with the audience. Williams explains that they wanted to improve queer visibility in comics with this version of Batwoman, but they did not want to be reductive: “We wanted to give acknowledgment to all aspects of who she is, not just her sexuality” (Williams). Williams felt it was important to “be faithful and true to the fact she has to be relatable and that means treating her as a real person. If you have that, you begin to respect the character.” Rucka felt it was important to create a character with independence. He explains, “She couldn’t care less about whether [Batman] approves or disapproves or whatever. He doesn’t have a monopoly on the Bat, as far as she’s concerned. Its too big…It’s a symbol for an ideal, and Kate is servicing that ideal” (Rucka). Rucka says that he and Williams wanted to “create a character that would endure…We wanted to make sure that she had a strong origin.” These answers suggest that the creators are thinking about this character with complexity and an eye to her future within the DC Comics world.
The interviews with the creators of *In Pursuit of Flight* and *Elegy* offer additional credibility to my argument that the authors employed aspects of feminist imagination in producing their comics. Of course the authors’ interpretation of their own work is just one of many interpretations, and I do not include these interviews to give the authors the final say over the meaning of their texts. Rather, these interviews offer some insight into the origin and location of feminist imagination. Readers can locate the authors’ feminist imagination in these texts, at least in part because of the creators’ intentions to develop complex, heroic female protagonists. But the results from my study indicate that readers can also make use of feminist imagination due to their own individual lenses and approaches to reading the text. Therefore, feminist imagination is a complex blend of authorship and readership that can be affected both by the author’s creative choices and by the reader’s approach to the text.

My original analysis gives credit to the creative choices that the authors have made, but it also collapses my own interpretation of the comics with the content of the text and does not acknowledge the dual sources of feminist imagination that I am identifying in my reading. Within English studies, and particularly literary studies, this kind of collapse is a disciplinary standard: since readers cannot really know authors intentions, and since authors’ intentions may be irrelevant when we consider their texts within the context of their historical, personal, and sociopolitical contexts, it would usually be a disciplinary faux pas to argue that an author “means” to do something, like use feminist imagination in the production of their texts. Instead, disciplinary standards encourage scholars to focus on their own analysis of the text and make plausible claims based on a combination of textual evidence and connections between the text and a critical lens. However, when I consider my own reading of the comics alongside the readings of the eight participants in my study, it becomes clear that the source of imagination
matters. At the same time, it is not very clear how to best untangle the strands of imagination that connect a text with its authors and readers.

None of this is an inherently new argument to rhetorical studies, since our field has a long tradition of unpacking and re-unpacking and dismissing and reclaiming what Lloyd Bitzer introduced as the rhetorical situation. Bitzer argued that any work of rhetoric was “pragmatic” and uniquely designed to “some specific condition or situation, which invites utterance” (3-4). Bitzer also argued that “situation” was the grounding element of rhetoric and offered a clear connection between rhetorical exigence, rhetorical agents, and an audience: “The world really invites change—change conceived and effected by human agents who quite properly address a mediating audience” (13). Richard Vatz challenges Bitzer’s concept of the rhetorical situation in a later article, arguing that it ignores the moral responsibilities and creative achievements of a rhetor. According to Vatz, Bitzer mistakenly believes that “meaning resides in events,” whereas Vatz claims that rhetors are responsible for creating meaning through rhetorical acts (155-156). Vatz argues that both the events that a rhetor responds to and the ways a rhetor speaks about events indicate “a choice, interpretation, and translation” in communicating both the importance and the meaning of an event to an audience (159). Bitzer and Vatz disagree on the relationship between rhetoric and situation, with Bitzer prioritizing situations and Vatz prioritizing rhetoric, but both scholars argue that there is a complex relationship between a rhetor, an audience, and the rhetorical act that connect the two.

The specifics of the results in my study, particularly in comparison to my own initial analysis of the comics, indicate that feminist imagination raises a different version of complexity than I expected, even as a rhetorical scholar. I did not initially consider the source of imagination as an important part of my framework, but the results suggest that the source matters. For
example, when I first read this comic for my own entertainment, I read the depictions of
Batwoman in her costume as a positive improvement over her previous depictions. Once I chose
this comic for my dissertation and started grappling with feminist imagination as both a creative
and scholarly tool, I was able to reframe this moment, which I had previously enjoyed as a casual
reader, as evidence of feminist imagination in the text. Therefore, it is easy to collapse the
feminist imagination in the text with my own use of feminist imagination in my analysis.

My participants’ responses were not always so easy to collapse, and it would limit the
results to try and do so. Natalie read Batwoman’s “immaculate” appearance in her costume as
evidence of patriarchal imagination, seeing the costume as stereotypical feminine imagery
designed to appeal to the male gaze. Emmy critiqued Batwoman’s costume because it
highlighted her breasts in a way she found unnecessary. In both cases, these readers found
evidence of patriarchal imagination in the text itself, but arguably used feminist imagination in
their analysis to flag the imagery as problematic. This then raises a couple of difficult and
fascinating problems for me as a researcher: Is my interpretation of these texts incorrect? Does it
matter if a text relies on patriarchal or mixed imagination if the readers are able to use feminist
imagination as part of their analysis? In order to answer these questions, we need to think about
the differing rhetorical situations of all eight participants and me.

Natalie’s and Emmy’s responses here connect to a feminist take on audience and the
rhetorical situation. Feminist rhetorical scholars Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede wrote an essay in
1984 responding to a scholarly debate at the time about the nature of audience, particularly
whether rhetoricians should think of the audience “addressed” with its own preexisting set of
beliefs and knowledge and expectations that must be accommodated, or as an audience
“invoked” that could be rhetorically shaped to be receptive to a rhetor’s argument. In “Audience
Addressed/Audience Invoked” they argue for a synthesis of the two positions: “a fully elaborated view of audience…must balance the creativity of the writer with the different, but equally important, creativity of the reader” (Lunsford and Ede “Audience” 165). They also highlight the need to think of the “fluid, dynamic character of rhetorical situations” (Lunsford and Ede “Audience” 165). Their essay suggests that within the rhetorical situation, there is a potential push-and-pull between the imagination of the reader and the imagination of the writer.

In a later response to their own essay, Ede and Lunsford go further in depth on this possibility. They argue, “our essay consistently downplays the possibility of tension and contradiction” between writers and readers (Lunsford and Ede “Representing” 815). They explain that tension can develop from any number of factors, including the writer’s and reader’s relative access to education and literacy, the demands of a genre on readers and writers, and the writer’s and reader’s willingness to identify and meet the demands of a rhetorical situation (Lunsford and Ede “Representing” 815-816). They conclude that these factors can lead to a breakdown of rhetorical effectiveness, either on the part of the writer or the reader. They also use their essay to reflect on the fact that they had not considered the depths of these conflicts, and that they had conflated their own successful experiences as students with their expectations for the students they taught. The findings in my study point to one possible parallel between the relationship that Ede and Lunsford highlight between teachers and successful student writers and the relationship between writers and readers: The closer a reader is to the perspective of the writer, the less mental distance the reader has to cover to understand the writer’s meaning. This may seem like a simple observation, but it is freighted with significance for understanding feminist imagination in relation to the rhetorical situation of these comics and these readers.
Comics scholars (particularly those who could be considered scholar-practitioners) have long discussed the reality that different readers will bring different reading strategies and interpretations to a comic. Will Eisner, a comics writer and artist considered an innovator within the comics medium, wrote several guides for aspiring comics artists. In one, he advises, “the artist must, from the outset, secure control of the reader’s attention and dictate the sequence in which the reader will follow the narrative” (Eisner 40). While Eisner does not discuss rhetoric, his arguments broach concerns of style and delivery that should resonate with rhetoric and composition scholars. Eisner’s argument does not leave much room for readers to bring in their own reading strategies—in fact he believes that a good comic will not require readers to do much analysis. However, his book contains an ongoing anxiety about how to best “control” a reader, indicating that there is an ever-present potential for readers to read a page differently than an author or artist intended. To Eisner, this seems like a key challenge for producing work in the medium. Scott McCloud, who has written and drawn numerous comics and wrote Understanding Comics, a seminal comics scholarship book that also happens to be a comic book, also addresses the relationship between authors and readers, but he takes a more democratic approach, saying that “the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator” in making sense of a comic (65). Because readers have to fill in the gaps between panels, McCloud argues that there is “a silent, secret contract between creator and audience. How the creator hones that contract is a matter of both art and craft” (McCloud 69). Both of these writers put more emphasis on the responsibility of the author, rather than the reader, to produce meaning. This makes sense, given Eisner’s and McCloud’s shared role as comics-creators-turned-comics-theorists.

Eisner and McCloud also indicate that readers have a role to play in making sense of the content of a comic. Eisner argues that a comic can only communicate if there is a “commonality
of experience” between a writer and a reader. He explains that communicating with images “depends upon the ease with which the reader recognizes the meaning and emotional impact of the image” (Eisner 8). He places responsibility on the artist to make clear choices that “gauge the commonality of the reader’s experience” in order to clearly communicate narrative development, panel order, and emotional content (Eisner 39). Eisner’s ideas have some resonance with Lunsford and Ede recognizing that “the students evoked in [our previous article] were in important ways the students we had been” (816, “Representing,” original emphasis). They both reference commonality as a factor in successful writing, although in their retrospective article, Lunsford and Ede are suspicious of the need for this commonality or for a restrictive concept of “success” in student writing (“Representing” 820). In creating a comic, writers may need to invoke an audience similar to themselves. In teaching a writing class, teachers may invoke student writers similar to themselves. My study takes this parallel one step further and suggests that scholars might also invoke readers similar to themselves as part of their research and analysis. In my own study, it may be easier for me to locate feminist imagination in the text because I am a member of the comics discourse community: I read comics regularly, I care about the evolving ways in which female characters are presented in the medium, and I am familiar enough with the backstories of certain characters (or willing and interested enough to research unfamiliar backstories) to notice important developments. This shared discourse community could be one reason that I located feminist imagination in places that the study participants did not.

For example, at one point, I analyzed a scene between Captain America and Carol Danvers discussing whether she should adopt Captain Marvel as her own superhero name. I read this scene as a depiction of feminist imagination, traceable through the use of rhetorical listening,
that indicated that Captain America sees Danvers as a highly qualified superhero that he respects and values. I argued that the two present as equals rather than a dominant male character speaking down to a lesser female character. I also pointed out that this later scene builds off an earlier conversation during their combat with Creel, in which Captain America points out that Danvers earned a higher military rank than he achieved, suggesting she may be a superior soldier. I identified these moments in the story as evidence of feminist imagination in the text and used a feminist imagination lens to unpack the value of these scenes.

The participants in my study approached these scenes very differently than I did. None of the participants in the study identified the conversation about the heroes’ respective ranks as important in any way. However, five participants alluded to or directly referenced the later conversation between Captain America and Danvers. Emmy felt that Danvers’ decision to turn to Captain America for advice made her a weaker character and less compelling heroine. Her analysis seems to be an example of using feminist imagination as a framework to identify patriarchal imagination in the text. Similarly, Erin briefly referenced this conversation in a survey answer that explained why she liked Batwoman better than Captain Marvel. She read the scene as an example of a subordinate relationship to both Captain America and the previous Captain Mar-vell, and she found that relationship disappointing. Erin read the imagination in this scene almost directly opposite of my own reading. While she sees patriarchal imagination in the comic itself, she uses feminist imagination to critique the subordinate role that female superheroes often have to male superheroes. Matt liked the respectful tone in the conversation, and Erica liked the support that Captain America showed Danvers. Both seemed to use a feminist imagination lens to identify feminist imagination in the text and their readings are more in line with my own.
The participants’ responses all indicate some support for feminist imagination, in hoping that the female characters will be equal to their male peers and exist beyond their relationship to male superheroes. However, expertise once again plays a factor in locating feminist imagination within the text. Emmy and Erin are both expert comics readers, but they both claim they are not very familiar with superhero comics. Matt, an intermediate comics reader, and Erica, an expert, both demonstrated knowledge about the superhero genre that helped them process the scene between Captain Marvel and Captain America, which indicates that multiple levels of genre knowledge (both the comics medium itself and the superhero genre) have an effect on acknowledging the creators’ feminist imagination. Erica’s analysis has an additional layer of complexity: Erica—in her job as a writing tutor—had read early versions of my analysis on rhetorical listening in Captain Marvel, so it is possible that my reading of the text affected Erica’s reading. In addition, she had previously taken a class I taught about comics reading and analysis. It is possible that her role as an expert, experienced comic reader already made her rhetorical situation fairly similar to mine. But I should also acknowledge that I probably helped shape some of that similarity.

Overall these results indicate that there is no perfect connection between feminist imagination in a text and feminist imagination on the part of the readers. Every one of these examples demonstrates some version of feminist imagination as part of the analysis of the text. However, the participants and I do not find consensus on whether each text itself contains feminist imagination, nor do we find consensus on what qualifies as feminist imagination within the imagery and storyline. I deliberately chose texts that I felt demonstrated feminist imagination in the hopes that the texts would encourage and enable feminist imagination within the participants’ own analysis. Since all the readers identified feminist imagination in at least one of
the two comics, it seems that there is some usefulness in choosing texts that indicate that the authors used feminist imagination as part of the creation of their text. However, it is worth unpacking some of the possible factors contributing to the lack of consensus in the different analyses of these texts. These factors include variations in our rhetorical situations, connections between genre knowledge and ideological analysis, and differing access to external repertoires.

First, the study participants were in a different rhetorical situation when they read excerpts for the study than I was when I analyzed the full comics and wrote my dissertation. My participants did not have access to the full comics when they read them, and none of my participants had read the full comics prior to the study. I had read and re-read the full comics many times, including the time spent analyzing the text alongside rhetorical and/or feminist scholarship. Our different rhetorical situations could explain some of the times that my participants and I varied widely on our identification of feminist imagination in the comics. For example, Erin and Eli disliked Captain Marvel and viewed her as a clichéd character because they could not understand her motivation. The excerpt of Captain Marvel that I chose for my study does not contain much of her motivation because her traumas and her responses to those traumas are spread out in flashbacks over the course of an entire Captain Marvel volume, and I found it difficult and confusing to combine them into a concise excerpt. Yet in my own analysis of the comic, I argue that the ending of the Captain Marvel volume is particularly important to understanding her character and the feminist imagination in the text. Since the study participants did not see the end of the story, it makes sense that they would see more patriarchal imagination in her character than I did. The differences in my rhetorical situation versus the participants’ rhetorical situations would necessarily offer different evidence for patriarchal or feminist imagination.
Second, the lack of consensus indicates that medium and genre knowledge have direct effects on the way that readers process the ideology in a comic. In my analysis of the comics, I went into depth about the feminist imagination in the heroines’ origin stories. I argued that if we consider their changed origin stories in light of Muñoz’ theory of disidentification, the comics indicate that they are embracing a different, more feminist politics than in previous origin stories for the character. However, this reading is based on both my use of feminist and queer theory and my knowledge of genre conventions for superhero comics. Two of the experienced comics readers in this study, Erica and Eli, are the only two participants who mentioned the concepts of origin stories in their analysis. It makes sense that they would consider origin stories in their analysis because they have comics expertise, and as part of that expertise, they know that altered origin stories are controversial, so the decision to change an origin story calls on superhero comics readers to pay attention to the changes. Like Eli and Erica, I identified both of these origin stories as crucial aspects of feminist imagination in the comics. Novice comics readers would not have the same knowledge about origin stories as an important facet of superhero comics and would not know to give the origin stories any special weight within their analysis. Similarly, Erica offered analysis of the way that both heroines had outfits that could be seen as sexualized but offered a definite improvement within the genre of female superhero comics. I responded similarly in own analysis. Our shared appreciation for improvement relies heavily on our knowledge of the superhero comic genre, and there is no reason that a novice comics reader should be able to factor this kind of evidence into their analysis of feminist imagination in a comic book. The experts in this study have a wider range of evidence for assessing feminist imagination than novice readers do, because expert readers have medium and genre knowledge that enables an additional layer to their ideological analyses.
Finally, the variation in readers’ external repertoires affects their ideological analysis of the comics. My own analysis of feminist imagination in the comics relies heavily on feminist theory, an external repertoire that may not have been available to all of the study participants. Sometimes, these feminist theories help me unpack underlying feminist imagination in scenes and imagery that might initially read as patriarchal, such as using Scott’s concept of paradox to read Batwoman’s feminized costume aspects as feminist. The study results indicate that participants without experience in feminist theory, or participants who have built their analysis on feminist theories different from the ones I chose, could have a very different analysis of the presence of patriarchal imagination. Only two participants, Mackenzie and Natalie, specifically mentioned that they had experience with feminist theory. Six total participants, including Mackenzie and Natalie, mentioned “objectification” or “sexualized” imagery as part of their critiques. In most of these critiques, the participants seemed to view objectification as inherently negative, but they were not always clear about why. Mackenzie and Natalie both referenced the “male gaze,” indicating they were relying on specific feminist theories stemming from Laura Mulvey about objectification and why it is problematic. Mackenzie and Natalie did not read the comics totally differently from their peers, but their analysis of objectification was linked to a specific feminist theory that enabled them to speak with more precision about why they were linking objectification and patriarchal imagination. Since I relied on a different feminist theory to analyze Batwoman’s costume, it makes sense that I would identify feminist imagination in her costume, while Mackenzie and Natalie identified patriarchal imagination, and all three of us used feminist imagination in our analysis. The lack of consensus here indicates that external repertoires are important factors in identifying feminist imagination.
Natalie’s answers during gaze replay illustrate how effectively gaze replay connected the participant’s physical reading practices with her analysis of the texts. For example, at one point during a gaze replay of a comics page in which Captain America helps Captain Marvel defeat a supervillain, Natalie laughed and said, “Wow. I notice that my eyes totally focused on [Captain America’s] butt like twice.” Natalie made other connections between her gaze trails and the images of the characters’ bodies as part of viewing her gaze replays. She noted that Captain Marvel’s breasts are often positioned close to “text boxes,” which encourages readers to fixate their eyes there. She highlighted a sequence of narrative boxes and said, “then to get to the next one you have to visually cross over [Captain Marvel’s breasts].” Farther on in the sequence she notes that Captain Marvel’s legs are also next to some of the narrative text and says, “It really drew my eyes across her body like that.” Gaze replay allowed her to see the words and imagery on the page in the context of the choices she had made as a reader, as well as the effects that the authors’ choices had on her reading practices. Natalie demonstrates astute visual analysis in her answers that offsets some of her lack of comics reading expertise.

Despite Natalie’s strong visual analysis of the texts, Natalie’s status as a novice reader becomes apparent as she addresses the rhetorical context for the comics. Unlike Erica, who frequently addressed the rhetorical context of comics within her cued retrospective reporting, Natalie’s analysis during her gaze replays was focused more specifically on the textual evidence from these comics. Later in the interview, after she had watched her gaze replays, Natalie made several comments about her “prejudice” against superhero comics despite her lack of reading experience. She explained, “I do have some preconceived notions about how comic books portray women…I haven’t read a lot of them but you do hear a lot about violence and sexuality in comic books, especially in superhero ones.” When I asked her to explain where she got her
ideas about the superhero genre, she attributed that knowledge to watching a limited number of superhero films and to having conversations with her sister, who was a frequent comic-book reader. This became a trend within her answers: she repeated that she had not read superhero comics before, yet she frequently referenced strongly held beliefs about the norms for the superhero genre. These norms were almost never favorable and had direct connections to gender. When describing Batwoman’s fight scenes, she commented, “I assume [the comic] has a male writer just because I always assume that.” Unlike her careful and thoughtful analysis of her own gaze trails and the images on the comics pages, her analysis of the context felt more generalized and less evidence-based.

**Discussion**

These findings support my argument that feminist imagination is a valuable form of feminist rhetoric that could benefit scholars of comics and other creative texts. The findings also offer a more complex picture of feminist imagination than I originally defined, largely because feminist imagination interacts with the rhetorical situation of a text more than I had originally accounted for. While additional complexity may seem undesirable for a feminist lens that is already as broad as feminist imagination, it in fact cements the need to think of imagination in rhetorical terms, since the use of imagination is rhetorically situated.

These findings also support my claim that it is not possible to simply divorce genre analysis from gender ideology. Ideology is part of the context for the construction and reading of a text. In superhero comics, gender is a key factor affecting creators’ and readers’ beliefs about the characters and the audience for the genre. The trends in the participants’ responses to gender
indicate that all participants had strong beliefs about gender in superhero comics generally and in these comics specifically and many of these beliefs existed before they participated in the study.

These findings also indicate that while I originally hoped to avoid analyzing desire in my analyses of gender and audience responses, that separation does not seem fully possible. However, desire is a complicated, personal subject that many of the participants downplayed or dismissed in relation to their analysis. For example, Eli explained his fixations on Captain Marvel’s butt by explaining, “Captain Marvel was more difficult to read,” and it was “harder to figure out what was going on.” But this contradicted a previous claim when he decided that Batwoman had been a more challenging comic and that it took him “more time to figure out” what was happening on the pages. My question about sexualized imagery was one of the few areas where Eli moved on quickly in the discussion, which was unusual in the overall interview. Other participants blushed or giggled or adopted a dismissive tone when discussing their own desires in relation to their gaze trails, indicating they may have felt embarrassment or wanted to keep their personal desire private rather than bring it into an academic discussion of a text. While it is plausible that the participants looked at butts or breasts in this study as part of their feminist analysis or because the art style invited their gaze, it is also plausible that the participants found the imagery attractive and did not want to discuss that in the context of this study.

Finally, it is worth noting that every participant in this study seemed at least sympathetic to feminist readings of the text. While there was a lack of consensus on the traits or imagery that the participants deemed sexist or clichéd, every participant—regardless of gender, comics expertise, or feminist training—spoke negatively about female stereotypes and were critical or at least ambivalent about sexualized imagery. This shared appreciation for feminist goals seems
unique to this group of participants and should not be extrapolated out to larger groups, particularly the wide range of readers that could be encountered in a college classroom.
Conclusion

My findings from this project uncover relationships between rhetoric, feminist rhetorical theory, comic books, and reading practices that are useful to rhetoric and composition scholars and teachers in a number of ways. My study points to important intersections between comics reading practices and multiple aspects of rhetoric and composition theory and practice. My findings also offer pedagogical implications for using comics effectively in a rhetoric and composition classroom. Finally, my study has methodological insights for rhetorical research, specifically for feminist rhetorical research methods, and offers several possibilities for future research.

Intersection 1: Comics Expertise and Rhetorical Reading

This study demonstrates a profound connection between comics expertise and rhetorical reading strategies. Experts in this study had different intellectual and emotional responses to reading a new comic book. They felt confident that they should take the time to “make sense” of each page, and they demonstrated tacit knowledge about comics conventions, like how to process the words and images both separately and together. They encountered confusion while reading, especially on complex, double-page layouts, but they embraced confusion as something to work through as part of a reading process. Novices demonstrated far less agency. They were keenly aware of their lack of genre knowledge and that made them doubt their individual reading practices and interpretations of the comics. Novices relied heavily on external repertoires, like art studies or film studies, to help them process the combination of words and images on the page. Sometimes novices benefitted from external repertoires, such as when it helped them understand the images in a large panel with very little text or gave them insights into the superhero genre as
represented in film, but the external repertoires offered limited assistance for understanding the cross-discursive relationship between printed words and images. This put novices at a disadvantage compared to their expert peers for understanding the full narrative and artistic content in the comic book.

**Intersection 2: Gender Ideology and Rhetorical Reading**

I found that gender ideology intertwines with genre knowledge and rhetorical reading strategies. Readers across the spectrum of expertise analyzed gender within their analyses of the comic books. Those who believed that the comics used gratuitous, sexualized imagery and clichéd female characters tended to dislike the comics and/or their protagonists. Novice readers relied heavily on opinions about superhero comics from external repertoires to form their analysis of gender in these comics, and these repertoires were often informal, such as the opinions of their friends. Intermediate and expert readers tended to focus more on evidence within the comics in this study. Experts and intermediate readers also folded in their knowledge from external repertoires, but these repertoires tended to be more targeted, such as additional comics in the superhero genre or broader knowledge about the protagonists in these comics, suggesting that expert and intermediate readers had more evidence at their disposal than novice readers when analyzing gender in the comics.

This trend has a few implications. Novice readers held preconceived beliefs from their external repertoires that comics would be sexist, or at the very least targeted toward a white, male audience. For the novices in my study, these beliefs had negatively impacted their interest in comics and contributed to their lack of previous comics-reading experience. My findings support findings from Moeller’s literacy study and from comics fan studies, like Cicci’s and
Suzanne Scott’s, that ideology about the intended audience for comics can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In a classroom setting, placing comics on a syllabus without any kind of framing about audience could further alienate students who are often already marginalized in university settings, such as female students and students who are people of color.

**Intersection 3: Feminist Rhetorical Theory and Creativity**

While imagination can be a fraught term within feminist theory, my findings support the value of theorizing a feminist version of imagination that is more collective and activist than concepts of imagination centered on a lone male genius. My findings suggest that reclaiming imagination as a feminist research tool will allow researchers to better investigate the purposes and goals of creators who have feminist intentions for their creative works. The evidence from my study, including my analysis of *Elegy* and *In Pursuit of Flight* and interviews with the creators of these texts, indicates that there are comics creators who are using creative comics texts for explicitly feminist goals. Rhetorical scholars of creative texts need a theoretical framework to address these goals, and my study indicates that feminist imagination is a useful rhetorical framework for analyzing texts that combine feminist rhetoric with creativity.

My findings also indicate that feminist imagination relates well to existing rhetoric and composition theory, particularly to theories about the rhetorical situation. The participants in my study all indicated that comics could have gender-based cultural impacts, even as their individual responses indicated that differentiating between feminist imagination and patriarchal imagination is a complicated task. The majority of participants in this study valued strong female characters and disliked clichéd depictions of gender, but they did not agree on which protagonist was a strong female character or which comic avoided clichés. My study indicates that feminist
imagination is a useful tool for analyzing creative texts for feminist goals, as I originally hypothesized, but it can also offer a framework for considering the complex relationship between authors, the texts they produce, and the readers of those texts. Feminist imagination can originate in creators and in readers.

**Pedagogical Implications**

This study has pedagogical implications for teachers who want to use comic books in college classrooms. My findings indicate that not all readers will believe that comic books are inherently easy to read. Instead, the novice readers in my study experienced strong emotional responses that made it difficult to engage with parts of the comics. The novice readers in my study were comics-reading novices, but they were skilled rhetorical readers who were trained in textual analysis. Participants in my study—across the spectrum of expertise—were aided by their knowledge of textual analysis and their training as tutors in the writing center. They were also motivated by a number of factors, including financial compensation and personal relationships with me, that encouraged even novice readers to work through their frustration or anxiety to finish the comics. The average classroom might have readers who give up on reading a comic book because they are unfamiliar with the conventions and do not have advanced skills in textual analysis to support them through their confusion.

Teachers should be mindful about the different feelings that their students may have about comics and how their level of expertise affects their ability to read through the comics. Teachers should also be cautious about assuming that students in their classroom will have comics literacy because they are familiar with other multimodal texts. My findings indicate that novice readers are able to use external repertoires to help them read a comic book, but those
external repertoires do not always enable the most effective readings and analyses. If teachers plan to use a comic in their classroom, they should take time in class to teach comics conventions and other relevant rhetorical genre knowledge to give novice readers the best chance for success with reading a comic. Teachers should scaffold reading comics texts with practical instruction about reading a comic book, such as basic reading patterns, strategies for making sense of pages with complicated layouts, and an overview of important comics terminology. In my experience teaching with comics, students have better classroom discussions and write better papers about comics when they have the correct language to do so.

Teachers should also introduce the importance of taking time to “read” both the words and images in a comic and explicitly tell students that even skilled readers will need to take time to do so. Both novice and expert comics readers often need some assistance in translating their understanding of the medium into words. For example, many English students have little to no experience describing images and might rely purely on textual analysis in their writing and discussions. Short classroom exercises, like having students “summarize” the images in a panel or short series of panels and then sharing their answers in a large class discussion will help students implement comics terminology and use the images as evidence in their analyses.

Furthermore, teachers should be ready to address ideologies about comics. In my class, I often have students write a short paragraph about who they believe “should” read comics, and then share their answers in a small group. I then have the groups share their answers into large class discussion, and it allows me to address concerns that the class may have, such as the perceived maleness of the comics audience or the idea that comics are childish. This exercise does not have to be long, and often begets a lot of eye-rolling from students who feel comfortable with comics, but it makes a big difference in addressing the concerns of students
who risk feeling excluded by the medium. I can also talk about how I will be addressing some of the factors that are in all fairness problematic in the comics medium or the superhero genre.

This kind of scaffolding may seem like a big ask, especially for teachers like Stanley and Kahan who plan to use comics as a quick and easy introduction to “more literary” texts that seem worthy of class time. However, evidence from online student reviews of *Understanding Rhetoric*, findings from other English scholars who teach comics, such as Chute and Hatfield, and the findings in my study indicate that it is not fair or productive for teachers to assume that comics are easy for their students to read. Because of the complexities of reading in the comics medium and ideologies about who should read comics, teachers who do not take time to introduce the comics medium to the classroom risk exacerbating pre-existing barriers between students and academic success.

For example, if a teacher hopes to use *Understanding Rhetoric* as the textbook in the classroom, students who have little to no comics reading experience may lack the tools to effectively read the class textbook. Students who believe that comics are only written for white, male readers, but do not fit into that audience demographic, could immediately feel negative emotional responses that affect their ability to read and process the core textbook for the class. Students who believe that comics are only appropriate for children could feel resentment that affects their willingness to read and engage with the core textbook for their class. I am not suggesting that teachers need to feel responsible for managing all their students’ emotional states. But existing research and the findings in my study suggest that comics produce strong emotional responses, particularly in novice readers, and those responses have practical impacts that should concern conscientious teachers. Teachers can use composition-based classroom instruction, like introducing rhetorical genre knowledge and using in-class group work to
practice rhetorical comics analysis, to help all their students be successful readers and analysts within the comics medium. Teachers who do not want to take the time to frame comics texts in their classroom would better serve their students by using texts in a different medium.

**Methodological Implications**

My study offers methodological insights that are valuable for rhetoric and composition scholars. My use of eye tracking videos as tools for stimulated recall offers researchers a new tool for updating valuable methods within rhetoric and composition. For example, traditional discourse-based interview methods are designed to assess tacit knowledge in relation to text-based mediums, but eye tracking videos offer researchers one method for accessing tacit knowledge in relation to visual and multimodal texts. It also expands our understanding of tacit knowledge to include reading processes in addition to writing processes, which offers interesting possibilities for future research.

Using eye tracking videos as stimulated recall tools also has implications for feminist research. Feminist rhetorical researchers like Schell and Royster argue that reflexivity is an important component of feminist research. Showing eye tracking videos to the participants in my study invited the participants to form their own narrative about their reading choices and their emotional responses to reading the excerpts. For feminist researchers, stimulated recall interviews with eye tracking videos offers researchers an ethical method for being reflexive about their own interpretations and biases. Researchers can place the participants’ analysis beside the researcher’s interpretations as a form of accountability to their participants. I have tried to do this in my study. This strategy was more collaborative than if I had tried to interpret
the participants’ reading maps without their input, and it is a form of collaboration that feels insightful and achievable for a wide swath of researchers.

**Research Limitations and Challenges**

As I imagine happens with most dissertations, I did not end this project exactly as I planned. I expected to have more quantitative data, and I expected to learn more about the time that comics readers spent on reading words as opposed to images, or vice versa. I expected to finish this project more quickly. To some extent, my project changed because I am using eye tracking for the first time. When I first began shaping my dissertation project, the one thing I felt sure about was that I wanted to use eye tracking technology to assess how readers physically read comics. I quickly found out that this method has some challenges, even at the level of access. It is expensive to buy or rent eye-tracking equipment. Renting the equipment can cost thousands of dollars per month. Renting or buying the equipment may require separate purchases for the infrared sensor and the associated software. It took me time to research comparatively affordable rental options for academic research, write grants for the funds to rent eye tracking equipment, contact other scholars in my field who had used eye tracking and get suggestions on how to borrow or rent equipment at a reduced cost, and research the possibility of buying the equipment with my own funds. Ultimately, I was lucky to have a professor in my field tell me about another professor at my school who was working with eye tracking. I was even luckier that Dr. Feyzi-Behnagh was willing to lend me his eye tracking equipment and explain how to use it. Many scholars will struggle with access to the eye tracking method either because they do not have the connections to equipment on their campuses or the funds to access the equipment directly through an eye tracking company. Some institutions have labs that contain eye tracking
technology that graduate students can borrow, but those institutions currently seem to be few and far between.

Once I had found a way to access eye tracking equipment, I struggled with some of the technical aspects of the method. My calibrations for each participant’s gaze trails are not perfect, and I did not feel like I could spend the time to make each participant sit through an unknown number of calibration tests to hopefully arrive at a perfect calibration. Perhaps if I were more experienced with the technology, I would have felt more confident that I could calibrate each participant’s gaze trails perfectly, and that might have reduced, or at least justified, the time it would take to achieve a perfect calibration. Given my lack of experience, I set what felt like a reasonable range of error in calibration to respect the time of my participants. This affected the type of data I was able to collect. In addition, I felt extremely limited in my ability to do quantitative analysis like I had originally planned. Most researchers who use eye tracking for quantitative research work in teams of scholars because it is a labor-intensive process of data gathering and analysis. But team research would be inappropriate for a humanities dissertation that is expected to be the product of a sole author and researcher. This limitation may prove a similar challenge for other humanities scholars who want to use eye tracking in their research.

Finally, I want to acknowledge some personal limitations that made this dissertation difficult to complete. During the time I worked on this dissertation, my dad died unexpectedly. I moved across the country. I had a child in late 2019. My pregnancy was physically painful and frequently debilitating, and I then found myself parenting with minimal support during an unprecedented pandemic. I have ADHD and anxiety and depression. All of these things affected my work on my dissertation. I am continually frustrated that it seems taboo to discuss these kinds of personal challenges, especially in the humanities field. In academia, we so often act as though
research and writing challenges are entirely about our work conditions (access to articles, institutional support, etc.) or personal discipline. Those things obviously matter, but they are not the whole of what makes writing difficult. It feels both humane and feminist to state that this dissertation would have been a lot easier to write and taken less time without adapting to massive personal changes, without working over the course of the COVID pandemic, and without battling chronic mental illness. I argue that as humanities programs shrink in their funds and consequently ask for more work from their graduate students, we need to leave more academic space for human challenges.

Directions for Future Research

The data and analysis in my dissertation are largely exploratory. Data from eight participants cannot offer definitive trends in reading practices, and I did not design my study to do so. Even with these limitations, the research in this study opens up several avenues for future research to expand and test these results. One important direction for future research would be to expand the study to include more research participants. It would also be helpful to have a participant pool of students with less rhetorical training than those in my study to assess how that expertise affects the importance of comics genre expertise. Another important route for future research would be quantitative analysis, such as the length of time each reader took to look at words and the length of time they took to look at images. Quantitative research might only be possible with a larger research team, and it might also require a smaller reading sample, which would limit some of the other ideological, feminist analysis I did in this study.

My results also indicate that some aspects of the qualitative analysis in this dissertation deserve further targeted study. My research indicates that novice readers battle feelings of
inadequacy as comic readers, and further affective research would be valuable for assessing the extent and impact of these feelings. My study also suggests that there is room for further analysis of the intersections between feminist analysis and visual rhetoric. When I asked readers to talk about their gaze trail fixations on female bodies in the comics, the readers in my study began to uncover a sticky web of personal desire, research interests, and the impacts of visual composition that would require further research to even begin to untangle.
Appendix

Surveys Used in Stage 1 of Data Collection

Note: Survey #1 and #2 function as a set, and Survey #3 and #4 function as a set. Both sets contain the same questions, but some of the questions are presented in different orders to accommodate the order in which students read the two comics. Survey #1 is the survey given to students about *Batwoman: Elegy #1-2* if they read that comic first. Survey #2 is the survey given to students about *Captain Marvel #1* if they read that comic second. Survey #3 is the survey given to students about *Captain Marvel #1* if they read that comic first. Survey #4 is the survey given to students about *Batwoman: Elegy #1-2* if they read that comic second.

Survey #1

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your race/ethnicity?
4. Which answer(s) best describes how you read comic books in the past, prior to this year?
   You may pick more than one:
   A.) Never.
   B.) I have read one or two in isolated instances.
   C). At one point, I read them about once a year.
   D.) At one point, I read them every two months or so (approx. five or six times a year).
   E.) At one point, I read them at least once a month.
   F.) At one point, I read them at least once a week.
   G.) Other: ________________________________
5. Which answer best describes how you have read comic books this year? Pick one:
   A.) Never.
   B.) I read one or two.
   D.) I read them every two months or so (approx. five or six times this past year).
   E.) I read them at least once a month.
   F.) I read them at least once a week.
   G.) Other: ________________________________

6. Briefly summarize Batwoman: Elegy #1, as if you were describing it to a friend.

7. How would you describe Batwoman’s character in this comic?

8. How is Batwoman drawn in this comic?

9. Who is the intended audience for this comic and why do you think so?

Survey #2

1. Briefly summarize Captain Marvel #1, as if you were describing it to a friend.

2. How would you describe Captain Marvel’s character in this comic?

3. How is Captain Marvel drawn in this comic?

4. Who is the intended audience for this comic and why do you think so?

5. Which of the two comics is your favorite and why?

6. Do you like Captain Marvel or Batwoman better? Why?

7. Which of the ways the superheroines are drawn do you like better? Why?

8. Are you willing to be contacted for a follow up interview? If so, what is the best email and phone contact information for you?
Survey #3

1. What is your gender?

2. What is your age?

3. What is your race/ethnicity?

4. Which answer(s) best describes how you read comic books in the past, prior to this year? You may pick more than one:
   A.) Never.
   B.) I have read one or two in isolated instances.
   C.) At one point, I read them about once a year.
   D.) At one point, I read them every two months or so (approx. five or six times a year).
   E.) At one point, I read them at least once a month.
   F.) At one point, I read them at least once a week.
   G.) Other: _________________________________

5. Which answer best describes how you have read comic books this year? Pick one:
   A.) Never.
   B.) I read one or two.
   D.) I read them every two months or so (approx. five or six times this past year).
   E.) I read them at least once a month.
   F.) I read them at least once a week.
   G.) Other: _________________________________

6. Briefly summarize *Captain Marvel #1*, as if you were describing it to a friend.

7. How would you describe Captain Marvel’s character in this comic?

8. How is Captain Marvel drawn in this comic?
9. Who is the intended audience for this comic and why do you think so?

Survey #4:

1. Briefly summarize Batwoman: Elegy #1, as if you were describing it to a friend.
2. How would you describe Batwoman’s character in this comic?
3. How is Batwoman drawn in this comic?
4. Who is the intended audience for this comic and why do you think so?
5. Which of the two comics is your favorite and why?
6. Do you like Captain Marvel or Batwoman better? Why?
7. Which of the ways the superheroines are drawn do you like better? Why?
8. Are you willing to be contacted for a follow up interview? If so, what is the best email and phone contact information for you?
Introduction

1. Scholars who study comics use “comics” as a broad singular term for the medium that encompasses many types of graphic narratives, including comic books, graphic novels, comic strips, and webcomics. “Comics” can also be a plural term to indicate more than one comic.

2. See, for example, “Marveling at ‘The Man Called Nova’” in *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 59, no. 2.

3. Granted, both hooks and Rose are writing within a specific cultural moment in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but these texts remain influential for teachers and resonate within the cultural battleground of American education today.

4. A handful of other articles include one mention of “comics,” but no in-depth study of them. Richard Braddock uses a book about comics in a 1967 article to demonstrate effective summarizing and paraphrasing of sources.

5. This may be less true now than when I conducted my study. Batwoman now has a TV show on the CW, and Captain Marvel has her own film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but my study took place before either the TV show or film was released.

6. For example, in 2011 DC Comics restructured its company in order to streamline all of its superhero comics into one line called “The New 52.” In the process of restructuring, DC Comics fired most of its female editors and creators, going from 12% female employees to 1% (Hudson). This was a shocking cut that DC Comics struggled to recover from. Tim Hanley tracks the number of female pencillers, inkers, colorists, cover artists, and editorial staff by month. He reports that it took DC until January 2014 to re-attain 12%
female employees (Hanley). He reports the other major employer, Marvel, did not make significant gains in female employment during this time period. In fact, between January 2013 and January 2014, female comics employees at Marvel dropped from 14.2% to 11.6% (Hanley).

Chapter 1: Methodologies and Methods

7. Despite my argument that we can analyze comics through a rhetorical genre lens that need not conflict with recognizing comics as a unique medium, “genre” and “medium” are heavily codified terms in rhetorical studies and comics studies respectively. To maintain clarity, I will continue to use “genre” when referring to rhetorical genre theory and “medium” to refer to comics as a distinctive type of text.


9. Royster’s commitment to emotion is tied to her position as a Black female researcher in an academic setting. Royster develops an “afrafeminist method” based in part on “passionate attachments,” or a sense of ethical and emotional responsibility to the Black women she studies in her research. My emotional investments to comics texts, formed through fandom and childhood nostalgia, offer a very different type of investment, and it’s important to make that distinction. Even so, it feels inappropriate to talk about feminist research and emotion without crediting Royster for her influential and far-reaching methodology.

10. While DiPardo and Odell, Goswami, and Harrington are older sources, retrospective cuing remains an important research method within the rhetoric and composition field.
Paul Prior draws heavily from DiPardo, as do Kevin Roozen and Angela Rounsaville. In addition, *Composition Forum* has an upcoming issue dedicated to exploring the ongoing influence of the DBI method in composition studies.

**Chapter 2: Feminist Imagination in Batwoman and Captain Marvel Comics**

11. I do not want to appropriate a lens clearly created for unpacking the real, lived experiences of those who face the complicated dual marginalization of both sexuality and race. However, Muñoz offers key links between feminist theory and disidentification that suggest feminist imagination can benefit from thoughtfully incorporating disidentification. First, Muñoz explicitly links his framework to Kimberle Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality, one that argues that feminist work must look at the ways in which women are marginalized by other factors, particularly race, at the same time that they are marginalized as women (8). Muñoz’ lens could help scholars understand the work of female creators who face marginalization within American mainstream comics based on gender alone and who sometimes face additional marginalization as people of color and/or as LGBTQ+ individuals. It could also help scholars unpack the relationship between female fandoms and the comics medium that usually ignores or denies their existence. Second, Muñoz cites the work of important queer feminists of color, such as Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldua, whose intersectional feminist work informs his theory of disidentification (11). Disidentification then offers another link in a chain of feminist intersectional work that could help feminist rhetorical scholars understand intersectional aspects of feminist imagination in the comics medium.
12. Bukatman makes this comment on the value of superhero origins during a reflection on the failures of superhero movies. He laments that superhero films seem obsessed with origins, but he understands the appeal of origin stories as a point of distinction between the various heroes and their respective films, even though the films often fall into indistinguishable clichés.

13. The frequently cited exception to the typical male-reliant female superhero origin story is Wonder Woman, who has had several origin stories that relied heavily on her role as a princess of the Amazon warriors. See Lillian S. Robinson’s and Jill Lepore’s respective monographs for extensive analyses of Wonder Woman as a feminist superhero.

14. I am only scratching the surface on the problems with this issue. In addition to being problematic, the story is extremely convoluted, and Impetus impregnates Danvers with a version of himself through what Strickland describes as “pseudo-scientific fashion.”

Chapter 3: Rhetorical Expertise and Genre Knowledge in College-Aged Comics Readers

15. One participant declined to specify their sexuality.

16. I am extremely grateful to Dr. Reza Feyzi-Behnagh for allowing me to borrow his myGaze Eye Tracking System and introducing me to the process of data collection with the tools. I would not have been able to complete my project without his generosity.

17. All participants are identified by a pseudonym.

18. The participants’ quotes have been lightly edited to remove verbal fillers, such as “um” and “kind of.”

19. Eli touches on an important distinction between this study and other studies on reading expertise. Studies like Haswell et al.’s and Halszka Jarodzka et al.’s use educational texts
that the researchers feel confident can either be read correctly or incorrectly. In studies like these, expert readers are marked in part by their correct reading of the text. In this study, I was unable to look at an eye tracking map and identify expertise based on the gaze trail itself, because comics do not have the same prescriptive reading demands as textbooks. This contributed to the importance of using follow-up interviews with cued retrospective reporting to assess expertise.

20. These interviews took place before the release of the Captain Marvel film and before the Marvel Cinematic Universe incorporated the character into its Avengers team.

Chapter 4: Reader Responses to Gender Ideology and Female Superhero Comics

21. Every participant is still identified by a pseudonym.

22. In retrospect, I would have asked each participant an interview question in relation to their training (if any) in feminist analysis or gender studies. This would have given me a more complete picture of each participant as an individual analyst and would possibly have helped uncover trends for the group. However, when I designed this study, I did not foresee that each participant’s feminist academic work would be such an important demographic marker, and I did not ask about it. Therefore, this category is only included for some of the participants who referenced it as part of their interview answers to other questions and sometimes the phrasing is vague, such as Mackenzie who briefly referenced “gender studies” as her academic focus, but did not clarify whether that was connected to any specific course(s) or academic curriculum.

23. Emmy did not disclose her sexuality.


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