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Research Reflection Essay
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My entry for the Library Research Project is my final research paper completed for my History Senior Seminar course instructed by Dr. Chris Gehrz in Spring 2014. This project, designed to test students' skill in selecting, researching, and communicating their conclusions on a historical topic, required strong research abilities. Over the course of the semester, I developed and demonstrated my ability to gather, investigate, organize, and synthesize primary and secondary sources, apply the tools of qualitative and quantitative history, and utilize historical archives. The Bethel Library provided me with many resources that greatly benefited my research process and enabled me to uncover the answers that I pursued.

In this project, I combined gender studies, history, and various other disciplines with comic books, a medium left relatively unexplored by serious academic effort, in order to discover the extent to which comic books *reflected* the culture of American femininity in the 1940s and to what extent they had potentially *shaped* its adaptations in a wartime society. I began to immerse myself into the world of World War II era America by gathering general information about the genre and women's history from online reference libraries such as Gale, Credo, and Oxford. From these databases, I was able to pick up on key themes connected to my question, and I devised a plan for how to organize my ongoing research.

Before I could draw significant connections between comic books and American femininity, I needed to gather secondary sources to enrich my understanding of each topic. Using the library search tool, I attempted to discern books inclined toward fans from those inclined toward scholars by choosing books that emphasized critical analysis over commemoration and imagery. Soon I had gathered the few scholarly monographs published on the topic of comic book studies such as Mike Madrid's *The Supergirls*, and *Divas, Dames, and Daredevils*, and Bradford W. Wright's *Comic Book Nation*. I found the CLICnet and WorldCat interlibrary loan systems to be invaluable in my efforts to access critical texts outside of the Bethel library. Meeting with a Bethel reference librarian further broadened the horizons of my research by encouraging me to search out academic papers from a variety of disciplines on article databases such as JSTOR. Papers provided me with the details I needed to analyze the demographics of comic book consumers, a crucial section of my paper.

To locate primary text sources, the key evidence of my argument, I turned to the footnotes and bibliographies of my secondary source titles to discover the types of evidence that those authors had used. I was able to access many of original works through an online library research guide that searched both online databases and current library collections. The fundamental primary sources I relied upon most for this project were the original comic book texts. While most comic book collection archives were inaccessible to me, technology saved the day via digital archiving. Attending a presentation by Bethel's Digital Librarian Kent Gerber, I came to appreciate the benefits of broad public access to digitized documents, especially as I worked with an online archive myself. I was able to sort through the vast array of comics accessible to me by selecting a publication date, literary genre, or entering specific terms such as "ink artist Matt Baker" into a search bar. Because digital collections provided me with access to significant historical comics, the narrative of my research findings soon clicked into place.

This project has greatly developed my appreciation for the patience, persistence, and creativity involved in the research process. Due to the originality of my topic, I had to expose my

traditional ways of thinking about research to a variety of new approaches and methods. Exhaustively reading everything I could find on the topic, I found that integrating a variety of disciplines into my paper provided me with a much richer understanding of the zeitgeist of the American Forties. Repeatedly, I was struck by the ways in which culture simultaneously shapes and reflects the “spirit of its time,” capturing a piece of something invisible, inexplicit, and irretrievable. By both coincidence and design, comic books manifest significant cultural metaphors representative of the societies from which they emerged, and yet, they have only recently been explored as tools of academic inquiry. It is my hope that my research provides an example of how such inquiry might be conducted; furthermore, that it might benefit others seeking to enrich historical understanding through cultural studies.