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The Power of a Black Superheroine: Exploring Black Female Identities in
Comics and Fandom Culture

by

Grace Deneice Gipson

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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and the Designated Emphasis

in

New Media

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Chiyuma Elliott, Co-Chair
Professor Abigail DeKosnik, Co-Chair
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Professor Keith Feldman

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Abstract

The Power of a Black Superheroine: Exploring Black Female Identities in
Comics and Fandom Culture

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Doctor of Philosophy in African American Studies

Designated Emphasis in New Media

University of California, Berkeley

Professors Chiyuma Elliott and Abigail DeKosnik, Co-Chairs

2018 begins on very promising note for comic book fans, as the long-awaited Marvel Comics Black Panther film premieres in February. While Black Panther is the first black superhero comic character to appear in American comics in July 1966, and his stories are plentiful, the adventures of America's first black superheroine are few and disparate. The appearance of "The Butterfly,"[1] America's first black superheroine is not as well-known and documented along with many other noteworthy black female superheroines in comic books. The black female superheroine's narrative, a diverse and complex one, is slowly building traction and worthy of scholarly attention. Her narrative is crucial and significant to the overall story of American comics. Thus, examining various Black female superheroine stories offers an opportunity to (re)explore new identities and territories in comics, reframe our understanding of certain terminology and concepts, and most notably to empower the black female voice.

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[1] Despite Marvel Comics "X-Men's Storm" being considered the first black female superhero in comics, "The Black Butterfly" makes her debut in August 1971 in the first issue of Hell-Rider #1; whereas Storm does not first appear until May 1975 in the Giant-Size X-Men #1. However, Storm was one of the first black comic book characters, and the first black female, to play either a major or supporting role in the big two comic book houses, Marvel Comics and DC Comics.

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This dissertation is dedicated to those ancestors who came before me who gave their life and paved the way so that I could take this very personal and intellectual journey.

To my personal Black Women Superheroes:

Mama this is as much yours as it is mine! Your endless love and support is your greatest superpower! The true 'Quiet Storm'!

Grandma (Susie Gipson), my partner-in-crime and the reason I have a love for comics…the ultimate superhero! I know you are looking down on me smiling!

Miss and Love You!

Acknowledgements

"If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." – African Proverb

"I always think about the next generation and creating a different blueprint for them. That's my goal: to let them know there's another way." ~Janelle Monae

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The Power of a Black Superheroine:
Exploring Black Female Identities in Comics and Fandom Culture

Introduction: The Visual AfroFuture

In 2018, comic book fans were very excited with the release of the long-awaited Marvel Comics *Black Panther* film that premiered in February. For Black fans, the *Black Panther* film was a time to celebrate a historic movie, as this was Marvel's first Black superhero film. Additionally, many fans, in anticipation and excitement, prepaid for tickets months in advance, organized "opening night" screenings, and donned traditional and African-inspired outfits befitting a film heralded as a cultural movement. Projecting to have a $165 million-plus opening (meaning it would be the biggest launch ever for a Marvel Cinematic Universe hero's first stand-alone movie), *Black Panther* would exceed expectations by bringing in $370.8 million, and ultimately grossing over $1.346 billion.[2] While it became a critical and financial success, the film also garnered success during award season with the notable nomination of Best Picture at the 2019 Academy Awards (the first comic book and superhero film to be nominated) and numerous other wins. Many of these wins included: 2019 Academy Awards for Best Original Music Score, Best Costume Design, and Best Production Design;[3] 2019 Screen Actors Guild-Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture Award; BAFTA Award for Best Special Visual Effects; and 2018 MTV Awards for Movie of the Year, Best Hero, and Best Villain. Its overall success expanded our views of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and proved to studio executives that all people (nationally and internationally) will and did go see a movie about a Black superhero set in Africa, with a predominately Black cast. Ultimately, its significance highlights a representation that "indicates that our humanity is multifaceted"[4] and worthy of having a global visibility.

Although Black Panther is the first Black superhero comic character to appear in American comics in July 1966, and his stories are plentiful, the adventures of America's first Black superheroine are few and disparate. The appearance of *The Butterfly*,[5] America's first Black superheroine, and many other noteworthy Black female superheroines in comic books, are not as well-known and documented in comic book history. Diverse and complex narratives of Black superheroines are slowly building traction and worthy of scholarly attention. Her narrative is crucial and significant to the overall story of American comics. Examining various Black female superheroine stories offers an opportunity to (re)explore new identities and territories in comics, reframe our understanding of certain popular culture and comic book terminology and concepts, and most notably to empower the Black female voice.

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[2] The film would go on to become the second-highest-grossing film of 2018, behind *Avengers: Infinity War*, the third-highest-grossing film ever in the United States, and the ninth-highest-grossing film of all time by a Black director. Globally, it became the highest-grossing film within territories of East, West, and southern Africa.

[3] Black Panther became the first Marvel Cinematic Universe film to win an Academy Award.

[4] Smith, J. (2018, February 8). The Revolutionary Power of Black Panther. *TIME*. Retrieved from http://time.com/black-panther/

[5] Despite Marvel Comics X-Men's Storm being considered the first black female superhero in comics, "The Black Butterfly" makes her debut in August 1971 in the first issue of Hell-Rider #1; whereas Storm does not first appear until May 1975 in the Giant-Size X-Men #1. However, Storm was one of the first black comic book characters, and the first black female, to play either a major or supporting role in the big two comic book houses, Marvel Comics and DC Comics.

To examine the ways in which the Black female voice is engaged, or underutilized, in comics, I employ Michel-Rolph Trouillot's framework for understanding silences in historical narratives and the strategies we can use to address them. In *Silencing the Past,* Trouillot aims to find "the many ways in which the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production."[6] He argues that by analyzing power, not as hierarchy but in the construction of history, we can understand how it works in the world. Historical production is important to understand so that we can explore the creation of silences, "how history works," and who controls the historical narratives.[7] Trouillot explains that by looking closely at the work of history, we can understand its power, know its secrets, unveil it, and perhaps put it to use for good. Thus, taking a closer look at the history of Blackness in comics particularly from the Black female superheroine viewpoint, we can re-tell, rename, and recreate new narratives of Black women and girls. Trouillot's framing also suggests how Black feminism as a framework can be used to support this project's endeavor while working to eradicate societal oppressions and make the Black woman visible.

Throughout Trouillot's writing, he discusses how historical production is facilitated in our society and that this production plays a role in the creation of silences. The creation of these silences is manifested through four moments of historical production: 1) fact creation (the making of sources), 2) fact assembly (the making of the archive), 3) fact retrieval (the making of narratives), 4) retrospective significance (the making of history).[8] Thus, as argued by Trouillot, "power is constitutive of the story"[9]—not outside of the story. In the case of Black female superhero characters, further research is needed on these characters (fact creation); so that they can become a part of the comic book archive (fact assembly). This leads to the recognition of these characters no longer being silenced, and then becoming a part of [comic book] history. Much of what is depicted or not depicted in popular culture plays a significant role in how Black women are included and represented.

Moreover, history is not fixed and can be measured by those who deconstruct the silences. Trouillot states that "the inequalities experienced by the actors lead to uneven historical power in the inscription of traces."[10] This argument speaks to certain experiences, characters and their narratives within the comic book narrative that are acknowledged and shared. Historically, these experiences have not included the Black superheroine. Often Black female characters were excluded from being lead characters in major storylines, or minimized to non-speaking, sidekick, or for voyeuristic pleasure. Although Wonder Woman would be the first superheroine to have a continuous publication record (dating back to 1941), it would 38 years later before a Black female, X-Men's Storm, secured a feature cover and lead series narrative (*Uncanny X-Men #102* [December 1976] and [*Uncanny X-Men #117*]). Thus, this dissertation becomes important as it allows for a shift in who gets to be represented and given a voice. When certain comic book character narratives are minimalized or dismissed this can have an impact on what narratives are

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[6] Trouillot, M. (1995). Preface. In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (p. xix). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
[7] Ibid
[8] Ibid, p. 27
[9] Ibid, p. 28
[10] Ibid, p. 48

recognized in the present and future. Black female narratives in comics have especially been impacted by these silences and are in need of a re-evaluation of their past portrayals. Knowing their troubled past, it is essential to note the existing longstanding silences and tropes regarding Black women and girls, so that as Trouillot's explains we can disrupt the past legacies and create new future ones. Many of these controlling images[11] include:

- Asexual
- Minstrel-like (i.e. Mammy/Aunt Jemima, picaninny)
- Mythical superwoman
- Exoticized/Hypersexualized (the Jezebel)
- Sidekick
- Comic relief
- Needing to be rescued
- Emotional (i.e. sassy, overly-aggressive, angry, 'strong black woman')
- Body-shamed
- Disruptive childhoods

Unfortunately, as seen in the list above, many female Black characters have been relegated to these one-dimensional personalities and tropes; thus, resulting in their silence, sexualization, bullying, or simply being ignored (whether in fiction or reality). Especially in society today, it is necessary to explore "the ways in which the black female body . . . [has] been constrained and diminished within the American body politic,"[12] which also becomes important in the comic book medium. These silences also raise a key question, "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?"[13] From the past to the present, Black female diasporic people have been dehumanized by slavery, silenced and oppressed by Jim Crow, and subjected to state-sanctioned execution. Thus, my project seeks to serve underrepresented Black diasporic female voices through the analysis of futuristic Black diasporic superheroine characters in comic books. Each comic book and character demonstrates an inquiry into the relationships between Afrofuturism, technology, gender, race, and their thematic intersections with agency, identity, and liberation. The experiences of these fictional female voices creates discussions and dialogues among readers, fans, critics, which can play a role in reclaiming, re-writing, and re-imagining the voices and stories of the female voices.

Furthermore, this study offers a unique approach to challenging the historical and scholarly silences of Black women and girls from an Afrofuturist framing via a creative medium, the comic book.[14] This framework provides additional illustrations of gender, race, and

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[11] Controlling images and silences function in similar fashion in that they are used to marginalize and make the persons who are impacted invisible within society. Each play a role in multiple settings/spaces (i.e. the academy, media, workplace) that can and do have long-term, physical and emotional consequences.

[12] Threadcraft, S. (2016). *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

[13] Dery, M. (1994). "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." In *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (pp. 179-233). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

[14] It should be noted, that [t]here are more (Black) female superheroes starring in mainstream comics and more female writers and artists working on comics in the 1990-2010s than in the last seventy years. As mentioned in Gipson, G. D. (2018, Fall). "She Makes Comics" (2014) [Film Review]. *Films for the Feminist Classroom*, *8*(1-2). Retrieved from http://ffc.twu.edu/issue_8-1-and-2/rev_Gipson_8-1-and-2.html

technology in the production of science fiction.[15] Many of the characters represent amalgams of gender, race, technology, such as the all-female military unit the Dora Milaje tasked with protecting a king while armed with swords and jetpacks in a fictional African country like Wakanda in the Marvel Comics *Black Panther*. These characters also intermix the experience of everyday life, visual semblances of the pastoral, and futurism as the backdrop for a "race war" between humans and Elvaans (elves) as seen in Ashley A. Woods' comic book *Millennia War*.[16] Another example of blending real world problems with fantasy is seen in the Dark Horse Comics comic book series *Give Me Liberty,* which introduces a Black female sci-fi freedom fighter Martha Washington. Set in a dystopic future-Chicago, Martha rises up from the horrible conditions in the now demolished Cabrini-Green housing project to become a computer programmer turned revolutionary, using her tech-savvy talents to fight off megalomaniacal artificial intelligence in outer space, while also seeking humanity on planet Earth. Each of these characters, among others, is presented with specific challenges and unique narratives. Moreover, these characters also challenge the conventional portrayal of Black female characters should be portrayed as within popular culture, which is to be invisible, hyper and sexualized, marginalized, and or relegated to mammy and side-kick roles. These controlling images, according to Patricia Hill Collins, validate racism, sexism, and poverty and normalize their power as a part of everyday life.[17] Furthermore, disrupting these images is essential and is representative of Afrofuturist and Black feminist interventions.

Afrofuturism, from a multi-faceted standpoint, proves to be a convincing identity, network, safe space, and artistic expression that dismantles the box and open up a plethora of imaginary spaces of creative thought. The evolution of Afrofuturism not only can be interpreted through novels, film, music, fashion, and social medium platforms, but also through another popular culture medium, comic books. Comic books as written text, which integrates Afrofuturism as a genre, provide a fantasy setting with visual storytelling. Within the academic space, there is a small but growing representation of Black women in comics scholarship, as well as the role of Black female imagery in comics. Scholars such as Deborah E. Whaley, Nancy Goldstein, and Lysa Rivera explore Black women in comics, graphic novels, video games, and animation, and discuss the advent of the post-human,[18] through the persona of the black cyborg or a mash-up of a human and machine. As a whole, each of the above scholars have made deliberate efforts to focus on Black women stories, whether they were the characters in the comic, the writers, and/or artist/creator. They also sought to re-write and re-draw the appearances and their narratives from what had been previously depicted. In addition to the above scholars, there is also a Black digital presence that provides a platform to acknowledge, give a voice, and bring attention to Black women and girl characters and their narratives. With the rise in popularity of blogs and podcasts, these platforms are taking an active role in changing this white, male-centered dominated medium.[19] Such blogs and podcasts as *#BlackComicsChat, Nerds of*

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[15] Anderson, R. (2015). Critical Afrofuturism: A Case Study in Visual Rhetoric, Sequential Art, and Postapocalyptic Black Identity. In F. Gateward & J. Jennings (Eds.), *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art* (pp. 171-192). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

[16] Woods, A. A. (2010). *Millennia War: The Graphic Novel.* vol. 1*,* [Comic Book]. Indy Planet.

[17] Collins, P. H. (2002). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. London, England: Routledge.

[18] This is a science-fiction concept in which a person or object exists in a state beyond being human.

[19] Specific engagement and examination of the role of certain blogs and podcasts will be discussed later in the dissertation project.

Prey, The Blerd Gurl, and *Carefree Black Nerd* play a role in centering Black female characters, while sharing the overall importance of representation in comics and related media.

Unlike print media and most visual and video art, the Internet, specifically the social microblogging platform Twitter, can be edited and changed quickly. It allows readers to be interactive by giving them the opportunity to become part of a narrative as it unfolds -- the chance to play a part in a story as they read it. This becomes especially relevant for Black comic book fans. Electronic conversations, such as tweets and Tumblr posts, which serve as microblogging/short-form medium, can (re)shape trends, issues, events, and politics. Scholars have argued that social media tools also potentially provide (new) opportunities for citizens and subordinate groups in society to bypass state and market controls, as well as the mainstream media, to construct alternative collective identities.[20] Additionally, using these social media tools as a political platform for discussing comic books embodies various elements of Afrofuturism, including technology and the digital, a focus on African diasporic voices, and a critique of past and present oppressions. Twitter has provided a platform for fans to be progressively more active and organized (via online campaigns and Kickstarters) in pushing for more diversity among creators and characters. For example, social media personality Jamie Broadnax tweeted, "I volunteer as tribute to lead a social media charge to get Lupita cast as Storm!" As a result of the responses to the tweet, Broadnax created a Change.org petition[21] for Marvel Entertainment to cast Oscar-winning actress Lupita Nyong'o as the African weather goddess Storm in an X-Men origin feature film. During the 2016 San Diego Comic-Con when a group of comic book artists and writers created the hashtag and eventual movement #BlackHeroesMatter. This movement was created to make visible and give voice to the underrepresentation of Black people in superhero properties. These Afrofuturistic moments serve as new perspectives and representations of African diasporic voices of change.

A Black Feminist Framing

The Black woman narrative, which is rooted in resistance, has always created creative and alternative frameworks that gives agency to their experiences and can change the way we discuss and engage with society. As new lines of intellectual inquiry regarding Black feminism and pop culture continue to evolve and transform, it is also important to acknowledge the diverse structures and approaches that paved the way and created the foundation. Dating back to the 19th century, Black women spoke out in their communities, at formal meetings and informal gatherings, voicing the need to abolish slavery and the granting of civil rights to all African Americans. As a key Black feminist subject, Maria W. Stewart was the first American-born and first African-American woman known to address a mixed audience (men and women) from 1831 to 1833. Stewart spoke about gender oppressions and the unique, historical repercussions for Black women living under a racist and economically exploitive system, while also publishing essays and speeches on abolition. Sojourner Truth was also an abolitionist and women's rights activist who unabashedly vocalized similar concerns to Stewart. Stewart's and Truth's public

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[20] Boyd, D., & Ellison, N. (2010). Social network sites: definition, history, and scholarship. *IEEE Engineering Management Review*, *38*(3), 16-31.; Murthy, D. (2011). Twitter: Microphone for the masses? *Media, Culture & Society*, *33*(5), 779-789.; Gleason, B. (2013). #Occupy Wall Street. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *57*(7), 966-982.

[21] The petition can be found at the following link: https://www.change.org/p/lupita-nyong-o-as-storm-lupitaforxmenimage-by-danielthompson?
recruiter=13777769&utm_campaign=twitter_link&utm_medium=twitter&utm_source=share_petition

presentations were some of the first acts of defiance and expression of Black feminism. As 19th century forerunners of Black feminist theory, these Black women made themselves visible as they spoke about civil rights, freedom, and empowerment, while challenging the racial and gender standards and mores of their era.

The antislavery and women's rights movements of the nineteenth century would continue to have a presence and influence the voices of the Black and women's rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s as well as see Black women asserting their own brand of feminism. This was seen specifically seen in 1974 with the formation of the Combahee River Collective (CRC). As a collective of Black women who sought to have their voices heard and recognized, they also developed strategies that secured equal access as well as economic, social, and political rights for Black women and other women of color. Additionally, Black women have immersed themselves in theoretical debates and discussions towards building a critical apparatus that would address both artistic and political concerns regarding the "place" and "position" of Black women in society. In particular, during the 1970s, one of the early Black feminists, Barbara Smith, voiced a "call to action" for a Black feminist theory that argued for a breaking of racial and gendered silence: Black women's existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these in the real world of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown.[22] For Smith, Black women struggled to be heard and acknowledged as contributors to literary traditions, and as "outsiders," were subject to marginalization in academic discourse. During the 1980s and 1990s, Black Feminism entered the academy and served as a form of literary inquiry, or what later became known as "Black Feminist Theory."

Thus, incorporating a Black feminist approach allows the opportunity for Black female superheroines to be integral to the comic book narrative, which is often been traditionally male-centered Moreover, there are five core themes of Black feminism that have resonated over time. These themes are: 1) the presentation of an alternative social construct for now and the future based on African American women's lived experiences; 2) a commitment to fighting against race and gender inequality across differences of class, age, sexual orientation, and ethnicity; 3) recognition of Black women's legacy of struggle; 4) the promotion of black female empowerment through voice, visibility and self-definition; and 5) a belief in the interdependence of thought and action.[23] These themes recognize the multiple systems of oppression, a pursuit for action and change, and an expression of their own agency and self-determination. Even though there have been differing arguments and thoughts and various viewpoints, Black feminism has and continues to serve as a sisterhood of women, while simultaneously embracing an evolution of a rising consciousness. Many of the women involved in the creation of Black feminism—i.e. Audre Lorde, Barbara Christian, Patricia Hill Collins, Toni Cade Bambara, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, bell hooks, and Sojourner Truth, a forerunner to the development of the concept—served a dual role of a feminist and a fighter in the race struggle. Furthermore, these Black women are breaking the silence and incorporating their public discourse into the conversation, which has been dominated by men, while also reclaiming Black female subjectivity.

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[22]Smith, B. (1978). Towards a Black Feminist Criticism. *The Radical Teacher*, (7), 20.
[23]Collins, P. H. (1993). Feminism in the Twentieth Century. In D. C. Hine (Ed.), *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia, Vol. 1*. (p. 418). Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing.; Guy-Sheftall, B. (1995). Introduction. In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (pp. 23-24). New York, NY: The New Press.; hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. (p.15). Boston, MA: South End Press.

Contemporary Black feminism has also garnered attention by shifting how we think about "traditional" feminism. With the entrance of third and fourth wave feminism, this called for a need for more intersectionality in feminist activism and the continued inclusion of Black female voices. The mid to late 2010s saw a revival of Black feminism, across ages, as personified through an increase of influential and public figures. This is seen in such notable and popular Black female figures as actresses Kerry Washington and Amandla Stenberg, pop singer Beyoncé, television showrunner Shonda Rhimes, and director Ava DuVernay identifying as Black feminist/feminists; and prominent Black feminists in the academy such as Jennifer C. Nash, Melissa Harris-Perry, Brittney Cooper, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. As a result, there has been a rise in young and seasoned Black feminists wanting to push the dialogues forward, while bringing attention to racist and sexist situations.[24]

This renewal of Black feminism is also explored and fostered through the development of a digital feminism method. Black women are actively using social media to discuss and debate issues of equality as it relates to race and gender, and social justice. Using such digital platforms as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, a "put on blast"[25] culture has been created in which racism, sexism and misogyny is immediately called out and challenged. For Black women, especially, Black feminism amplified through social media becomes a medium that expresses praise and dissatisfaction with organizations and individuals, while providing a voice to be heard and represented.

Creating a conversation between Black feminism and Afrofuturism provides a way to create new dialogues, interrogate and move beyond traditional academic borders. Inserting Black female comic book character narratives into these conversations allows for new academic and popular relationships. These conversations also create new lines of intellectual inquiry, while providing different ways to explore transformation, empowerment, resistance, and perseverance, which are key tenets when discussing Black feminism. Black feminists have persisted in creating bridges that question and unravel stereotypes, while opening possibilities for critical inquiry, which makes it a unique framework to discuss Black female superheroes and comic book characters.

Utilizing a Black Future framework

For the purpose of this project, I explore the manner in which Black superheroine characters and digital story narratives in question uniquely incorporate Afrofuturistic and a blend of Black feminist interventions. As argued by Black feminist scholar Paula Giddings, the Black feminist narrative style is one of recollection and remembering in order for past and present oppressions, stereotypes, and controlling images to be subverted and corrected so that new forms of activism can emerge to tell stories from a Black woman's point.[26] This recollection and remembrance that Giddings speaks of is further explored and imagined through an Afrofuturist lens as noted by Afrofuturist writer and artist Ytasha Womack states, "Afrofuturism is an

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[24] Peck, P. (2014, March 5). Has Social Media Sparked A New Black Feminist Movement? Retrieved from https://hellobeautiful.com/2708338/has-social-media-sparked-a-new-black-feminist-movement/

[25] This term means to publicly embarrass, denounce, or expose someone or some idea especially through social media.

[26] Giddings, P. (1984). *When and where I enter: The impact of Black women on race and sex in America*. New York, NY: W. Morrow.

intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation."[27] Additionally, reflecting on Troulliot's ideas about history and its silences and their connection to the past and current work of Black feminism and novel framework of Afrofuturism serves as a unique bridge of academic inquiry. Through a creative medium such as comic books the ability to address past oppressions and silences, especially as seen through Black fictional characters offers another approach to further extinguish them. Furthermore, the reimagining of the Black female superhero can be done via discussions on the representations of Black female voices, re-defining physical norms, elements of science-fiction and fantasy, a critique of past and existing stereotypes and tropes, and an engagement with new media tools via podcasts and blogs.

Investing in Black Futures

The African diaspora has historically been deeply invested in the future, from Sun Ra's use of Egyptian iconography to imagine leaving Oakland, CA for a future destination in Saturn, to musical artists like Parliament and Outkast taking us on the 'mothership' experience, to writers and scholars Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, Walidah Imarisha and Kodwo Eshun creating academic bridges from Africa to America to space. Many of the conversations amongst key figures in Afrofuturism have taken place in real time, through comic books and graphic novels, film and television, and within digital spaces. Specific conversations date back to W.E. B. DuBois's early short stories "The Princess Steel" (1908) and "The Comet" (1920), as well as in Ralph Ellison's seminal text "Invisible Man" (1952); progressing into prominent and more explicitly sci-fi texts such as Octavia Butler's "Patternist"[28] series and the albums of Sun Ra and Parliament-Funkadelic. Moreover, Afrofuturism has always been seen as a liberating practice for Black people within the African diaspora as they are able to use the fantasy, science fiction, and Afrocentrism to not only preserve the existing cultural legacy, but to also reimagine and recreate black futures. Ultimately, Afrofuturism as a movement and a tool for freedom, self-determinism, and equality, seeks to overcome the ways that society remains unequal.

Following Dery's formal introduction of the term "Afrofuturism,"[29] sociologist Alondra Nelson and artist Paul D. Miller (also known as DJ Spooky) developed the concept further when they created the Afrofuturist listserv in 1998. Scholars, authors, musicians, and artists subscribed to the Nelson-Miller listserv. Shortly after, in 2000, Nelson and Miller launched the website Afrofuturism.net. The listerv and the website served as online spaces of expression and interaction for participants deeply invested in studying and creating texts about Black futures. In addition to the listserv and website, Nelson and Miller co-edited a 2002 special issue of *Social Text* dedicated to the topic. In this special issue, Nelson, Miller, and their contributors sought to demonstrate and share the diverse range of thinking that had arisen around the concept of Afrofuturism and to open new areas of scholarly inquiry. As explained by Nelson and Miller, the task of Afrofuturism is to "explore futurist themes in black cultural production and the ways in which technological innovation is changing the face of black art and culture."[30] Ultimately, for

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[27] Womack, Y. (2013). *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books.

[28] The "Patternist" series would be later called "Seed to Harvest"

[29] Mark Dery would coin the term 'Afrofuturism' in 1993, but over time the term has been redefined and evolved.

[30] Nelson, A., & Miller, P. D. (2006, June 28). *"About Afrofuturism": Afrofuturism*. Retrieved from http://www.afrofuturism.net/text/about.html

Nelson and Miller it is important to discuss the relationship between the art and scholarly aspects of Afrofuturism. This however did not explicitly address women in particular, but Black people generally.

Historically, the work of Afrofuturism has existed in multiple ways and has always been concerned with creatively telling the histories of those from the African Diaspora, while also designing new narratives. In speaking to Troulliot's history of silences, the role Afrofuturism becomes very important in that further imagines the existence and relevance of Black people. This is especially noteworthy for the existence of Black women's stories. An example of sharing these stories and amplifying voices is illustrated in the following image/tweet from Twitter user @MelanieCoMcCoy:
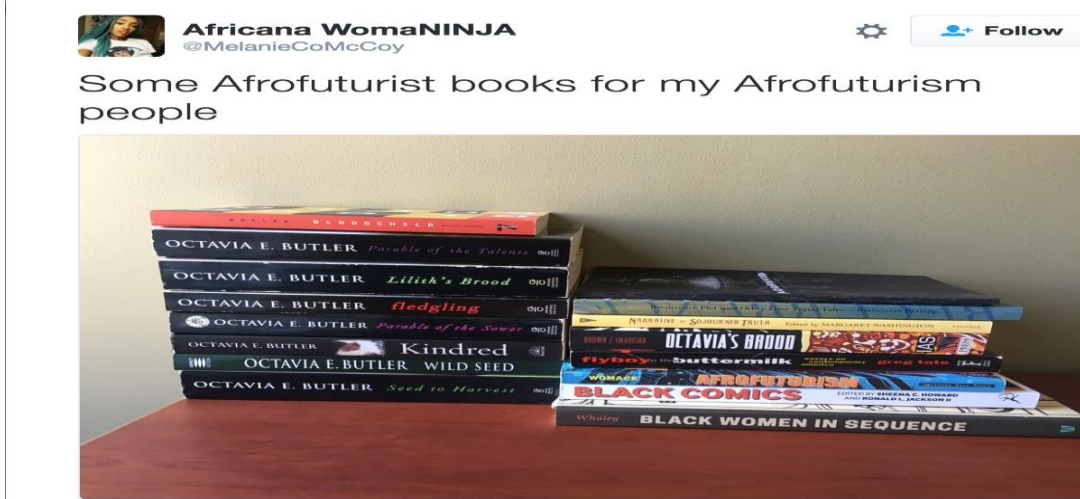
(Figure 0.1-An introduction/starter kit of texts for newcomers to the field of Afrofuturism)

The above tweet/photo can be described as a preservation of existing cultural production and body of knowledge and or an introduction/"starter kit." Several genres are represented: novels, autobiographies, edited collections, scholarly monographs, and comic books. Ytasha Womack's landmark book *Afrofuturism*: *The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture (2013)* lies atop Deborah E. Whaley's *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime (2015)*, and beneath Greg Tate's essay collection *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America (1992)*. Black science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler authors the majority of the books. McCoy also includes less canonically Afrofuturist texts, such as Sojourner Truth's 1850 *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. Through this inclusion, McCoy expands the boundaries of Afrofuturism, indicating that historical Black texts can be read as documents of how thinkers from different eras envisioned Black futures. These texts used in the above tweet are aimed at different demographics and employ diverse methods of and approaches to Afrofuturism.

The work of Afrofuturism has also fused deployments of technology, a promotion of Black media innovation, a positive engagement with underserved but deserving communities, while functioning as a vehicle for change, a tool for teaching and learning, and a method of community building. The relationship between Twitter and #Afrofuturism has become an alternative discussion site with a wide reach. Scholars, critics, students, artists, musicians, STEM workers, and others who are doing work on blackness and technology, social justice and black futures, and black fantasy are afforded a welcoming space to share their work in #Afrofuturism.

Scholars within African American/African Diaspora/Black Studies frequently share news about academic conference, symposia, and colloquia in the #Afrofuturism tag, and are thereby using Twitter to create and foster Afrofuturist academic communities. Through #Afrofuturism, the dissemination of Afrofuturist scholarship evolves and expands, and research opportunities are announced and spread. The tweet below exemplifies how Afrofuturist scholars network and share news from conferences in the #Afrofuturism tag:

Britt Rusert
@b_rusert

Follow

Yaszek looking at covers of Amazing Stories next to covers of the Crisis magazine #afrofuturism symposium @CAU

(Figure 0.2-An example of how scholars use hashtags to network and share news at conferences)

Here, Britt Rusert, Assistant Professor in the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, tweets about her experience at the 2016 Clark Atlanta University Afrofuturism Symposium. Through this tweet, Rusert reports on how fellow Afrofuturist scholar Lisa Yaszek, in her conference presentation, drew parallels between the covers of American science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories* and the influential *The Crisis,*[31] the official magazine of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It is important to note that the founder and first editor of *The Crisis* was another Afrofuturist, W.E.B. Du Bois.[32] By bringing these publications into conversation with one another, Yaszek employs a common Afrofuturist method of foregrounding the relationship between history (non-fiction) and science fiction, that is, between the real past and the imagined future. Rusert's tweet executes three-fold agenda: it increases awareness of historical media from the Black community, acknowledges historical texts as part of the lineage of Afrofuturism, and it showcases the manner in which Afrofuturist academics network with one another and learn from each other's work at academic symposia and conferences.

Critiques & Advantages of Afrofuturism

In the current moment, Afrofuturism is concerned with issues of representation, social activism, re-defining Black culture in the present, and opening up future potentialities for Black people. Nelson writes, "Afrofuturism was a possible way around—if not an escape from—the matrix of technology, colorblindness, and false gender equivalence that was being laid as a cornerstone of a brave new world in the making."[33] Afrofuturist scholarly and artistic works

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[31] *The Crisis* publishes work towards the present and future serving as "a quarterly journal of civil rights, history, politics and culture and seeks to educate and challenge its readers about issues that continue to plague African Americans and other communities of color." http://www.thecrisismagazine.com/

[32] The founder and editor of *The Crisis* was W.E.B. Du Bois who many have labeled the original Godfather of Afrofuturism with his contribution of his 1920 science fiction short story "The Comet"

[33]Nelson, A. (2013, December). A Feminist Critique of Afrofuturism. Retrieved from http://www.bayreuth-academy.uni-bayreuth.de/resources/ANelson-_Bayreuth-Proposal_.pdf

continually ask the following questions: How do we get to a moment or a reality where there are no more oppressive structures? Where's the world in which categories of identity no longer constrain individuals? Afrofuturism has sought to construct alternate realities, universes, and technology for Black individuals and communities that are necessary imaginings of future possibilities.

However, Afrofuturist works before 2000 were primarily male-authored and centrally based in an African American perspective. Science fiction and fantasy writer Nnedi Okorafor claims that Afrofuturism needs to overcome its geographic myopia. Okorafor argues, "My issue with Afrofuturism is that it has traditionally been based and rooted far too much in American culture." Okorafor's argument can be seen in the films "The Brother From Another Planet" (1984), an independent film directed by a white American filmmaker (John Sayles), and "The Book of Eli" (2010), a post-apocalyptic tale directed by the African American brother team Albert and Allen Hughes. Thus, Okorafor contends there is a need for an "African-based sci-fi"[34] like Kenyan filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu's "Pumzi" set in a post-apocalyptic Kenya and Frances Bodomo's 2014 "Afronauts" a film about Zambians in the 1960s who are trying to make it to the moon.

Afrofuturism has also been critiqued as being merely a placeholder and/or a substitute for an investment in scientific research. The critiques suggest that Afrofuturism does not advance technology, or create new technologies that have practical, real-life applications. However, according to Boston Arts Academy-STEAM Education Lab Director Dr. Nettrice Gaskins, there are Afrofuturistic creations with real life applicability. For example, Grandmaster Flash created the first crossfader, an Afrofuturistic invention, by sourcing parts from a junkyard in the Bronx.[35] This tool is an audio mixer, primarily used by musical DJs, to fade one source of audio out while fading another source in simultaneously. As a practical product, the crossfader incorporates an Afrofuturistic way of thinking that helped bring hip-hop to the rest of the world. The crossfader and George Clinton's mothership are part of the newly opened Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Scholar Lisa Yaszek discusses Afrofuturism as an analytical intervention, arguing that Afrofuturism is not merely a subgenre of science fiction, but a larger aesthetic mode connecting artists and scholars who have a shared interest in "projecting black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences."[36] Afrofuturist scholar Reynaldo Anderson further claims, "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, Fantasy and the Speculative are all about bending racial categories and rethinking these genres as forms of resistance."[37] Yaszek and Anderson both underscore how Afrofuturist sci-fi can serve as means of transportation for the reader to a particular space that is both virtual and productive, a space that allows for the creative conceptualization of blackness in the future and of the future as black. A common theme that surfaces among Afrofuturist scholars is the notion that Afrofuturism is fundamentally about

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[34] Olukoton, D. B. (2015, November 30). Utopian and Dystopian Visions of Afrofuturism. *Slate*. Retrieved from http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2015/11/utopian_and_dystopian_visions_of_afrofuturism.html

[35] Atlanta Blackstar. (2014, October 9). Using STEAM to Move Marginalized Students into the Future: An Interview with Dr. Nettrice Gaskins - Blerds. Retrieved from http://blerds.atlantablackstar.com/2014/10/09/using-steam-move-marginalized-students-future-interview-dr-nettrice-gaskins/

[36] Yaszek, L. (2006). Afrofuturism, science fiction, and the history of the future. *Socialism and Democracy*, *20*(3), 41-60.

[37] Anderson, 2015

Black artists, writers, musicians, and thinkers reclaiming the future, and presenting it on our own terms. As an aesthetic, a point of political activism, and a genre, Afrofuturism allows and encourages individuals to freely experiment with and reimagine black identities, and to activate a sense of liberation from hegemonic structures that often seek to limit or foreclose black futures.[38] This study contributes to this discussion of Afrofuturistic interventions with a critique of male-dominated visions of an Afro-future.

Within the last 15 years, Afrofuturist scholarship has broadened in scope, including more Black and female voices. Scholars and artists such as Yaszek, Britt Rusert, and Walidah Imarisha, Dutch visual artist and photographer Ai Rich, screenwriter M. Asli Dukan, poet and visual artist Krista Franklin, and Kenyan visual artist and sculptor Wangechi Mutu are just a few of the Black and female Afrofuturist creators emerging over the past few years and gaining public attention. In addition, Afrofuturist work produced in the 2000s and 2010s show increasing affiliations with cyberpunk, technoculture, and posthuman thought. Scholarship on this concept has penetrated various academic disciplines such as Africana Studies, English, communication studies, visual culture studies, new media studies, and digital humanities.

Twenty-first century Afrofuturism resists "the danger of a single story"[39] of the Black experience. Having access to multiple narratives gives the members of the African diaspora a variety of ways to define and communicate their perspectives and to challenge and redefine existing dominant paradigms. The short science fiction stories of W.E.B. Du Bois, the pop and hip hop music of artists like Janelle Monae and Outkast that intentionally vocalize and broadcast futuristic themes, the futuristic interpretations and representations of Blackness in visual art, and Nichelle Nichols' role as Lieutenant Uhura in *Star Trek: The Original Series* all serve as examples of how Afrofuturism has developed into a global phenomenon.[40] Despite those that argue that the concept is merely a subgenre of science fiction, the phenomenon has deep roots in African diasporic history and Black culture. Afrofuturism is a widely flexible and productive framework that requires careful attention so that it does not lose its power. According to Rasheedah Phillips, creator of the Community Futures Lab, "the Afrofuturist landscape lends itself well to exploring notions of institutional liberation, unearthing our true histories, mapping our futures, understanding our present conditions in the flow of time and through a speculative lens."[41] Thus, I posit that Afrofuturism is especially rich as a method for facilitating the emergence of new stories and theories of Black women, especially within the comic book narrative.

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[38] TEDx Fort Greene Salon. (2011, September). Ingrid LaFleur: "Visual Aesthetics of Afrofuturism" | TED Talk | TED.com. http://tedxtalks.ted.com/apiv2/player?id=HPG9MR3210V4G0N3&hostname=tedxtalks.ted.com&permalink=TEDxFortGreeneSalon-Ingrid-LaFl&chromeless=true

[39] This is in reference to a TEDTalk given by Chimamanda Adichie in 2009 as she tells a story of finding her authentic cultural voice, or risk a critical misunderstanding. TEDGlobal. (2009, July). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: "The danger of a single story" | TED Talk | TED.com. Retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

[40] Nelson, A. (2002). "Introduction: FUTURE TEXTS." *Afrofuturism: A Special Issue of Social Text*, *20*(2 71), 1-15.

[41] Simpson, M. (2016, July 12). Race Against Time: A North Philly artist aims to document her disappearing community. Retrieved from http://www.phillyvoice.com/race-against-time-north-philly-artist-aims-document-her-disappearing-community/

In sum, the work of Afrofuturism has had an historical past and an ever present and growing future. The utilization of Afrofuturism also allows for opportunity to create new lines of intellectual inquiry and alternative, creative methodologies. In addition, exploring Afrofuturism, through fictional Black female characters offers a method to reclaim and re-write multiple identities, explore notions of belonging, and healing of oppression and marginalization from different perspectives. These perspectives generate political tools of agency, power, resistance, and transformation.

Project Overview
An Academic Social Experiment

In many ways, this project is an academic social experiment, as it proposes cross-disciplinary collaborations between Africana Studies, new media studies, and comic book studies in order to explore how Black females are portrayed in comic books and graphic novels. As a creative, academic project, this dissertation includes both written and digital components. Additionally, it also uses unconventional formats such as photo essays and virtual museum exhibits in order to more vividly and accurately capture the visual components of arguments and representational strategies that are characteristics of comics and comic books. I argue that by redefining and imagining a Black future, female Afrofuturists artists, creators, and social media users are freer than they would be in other genres to question the assumptions of the past, critique the present, and suggest different paths to the future. Since the past and present is fraught with violence, injustice, and oppression, the future becomes a viable space for freedom, healing and renewal. I also argue that access to social media and digital technologies produce materialist interventions in western norms of temporality.

The substantive chapters of this project engage with a multifaceted interplay of issues that foster a discourse on the importance of mainstream representation in comics and comic books. As noted earlier, this dissertation project functions as curatorial practice that chronicles Black women and girl experiences especially as superheroines in comics and their various interpretations (i.e. film, television, and online spaces). As a curatorial practice, this project in a way can serve as an academic exhibition space that can eventually translate into a classroom space.[42] Thus, it they also create future academic and community collaborations which engage in practices of history and theory. These chapters also serve as guides for creating real-world collaborative, individual exhibitions, and academic curriculums which can raise awareness, bridge societal gaps, and catalyze exchanges across various disciplines. Although incorporating a curatorial approach is typically likened to the art world, it becomes useful for this project as it serves as a way to connect various audiences. Ultimately, each chapter whether in the traditional format or in a photo essay seeks to produce public knowledge that can be shared and potentially create correspondences between the comic book creators and their viewers.[43]

Moreover, each of the specific superheroines and digital narratives in this project were chosen because of their various identities, intended audiences, paucity of scholarly discussions, and degree of innovation. In some cases, the characters are wrought with diversity and include complex storytelling. While others discuss more stereotyping, marginalization, underrepresentation, and sexualization of the Black female narrative. As a whole these Black female characters in question how and why past and present representations and creative practices occur in comics and popular culture, so that imagined future identities can exist.

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[42] Making Learning Visible. (2013). Creating an Exhibition of Teaching and Learning. Retrieved from http://www.makinglearningvisibleresources.org/creating-an-exhibition-of-teaching-and-learning.html

[43] Kusina, J. M. (2005). The Evolution and Revolutions of the Networked Art Aesthetic. *Contemporary Aesthetics*, *3*. Retrieved from https://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=263

Dissertation Overview
Chapter 1: Stepping into the Spotlight: Introducing the Dora Milaje

The Dora Milaje within comics is not often discussed, nor is there a surplus of academic inquiry. Making their first appearance in *Black Panther* Vol. 3 #1, *The Client* (November 1998) written by Christopher Priest, the Dora Milaje's existence in comics is relatively young. This elite, all-female military faction of Wakanda was formed with the intention of training young girls as future wives to T'Challa (Black Panther) king of the fictional country Wakanda. This make-up of women is filled with layers of complexity, addressing issues of tradition, patriarchy, and child warriors. As a way to keep the peace, the Dora Milaje are the daughters of rival tribes selected to serve T'Challa as bodyguards and potential wives. This was a tradition Wakandan women held onto this tradition in order to strengthen national unity and build political ties between the various families. In the earlier interpretations, the Dora Milaje which followed five central characters (Aneka, Ayo, Okoye, Malice, and Queen Divine Justice), can be read as submissive warriors who are loyal to the king and must sacrifice their lives and hide their emotions. Although this narrative continues into the *Black Panther* reboot and the new *World of Wakanda* series, there is also a shift in focus on not just loyalty to the king, but a mentality of resistance, freedom from an assigned path and survival. In 2015, acclaimed writer Ta-Nehisi Coates would incorporate the first African queer couple (Midnight Angels—Aneka and Ayo, members of the Dora Milaje) in mainstream comics through Marvel Comics *Black Panther* series reboot. The following year another first would take place as a companion series to *Black Panther* titled *World of Wakanda* premiered. The *World of Wakanda* series is significant as it continues the story of Aneka and Ayo. It is written by Black women feminist writer Roxanne Gay and poet Yona Harvey, and primarily illustrated by women of color. Although women of color, very few, have played a role in illustrating comics, there has never been a Black female to serve as lead writer.

For the purpose of this dissertation, this photo essay chapter examines the presence of radical, Black and queer feminist narratives, as described by Audre Lorde, which emphasizes the need to celebrate the diversity of Black women experiences whether through race, sexual orientation, identity, socioeconomic status, religion, and age. Lorde's work on resisting heteronormativity and promoting various womanhood encounters speaks to this fictional group of women, starting with the introduction of the Dora Milaje in 1998 to the present-day personification of the elite group in the *World of Wakanda* series to their portrayal in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* film. The characters Aneka and Ayo channel Lorde's perspective specifically as it relates to the thought of self-care as a part of self-preservation, survival, and an "act of political warfare." Their story is of sacrifice, strength, power, challenging heteronormativity, and transformation. Ayo and Aneka's relationships also speak to this notion of affirmation of one's network, survival, and resiliency. Additionally, their radical act of love becomes an ongoing pursuit to freedom and victory. This notion is aligned with the thinking of Black feminist scholar Beverly Guy-Sheftall and her views on visibility, inclusivity, and avoiding marginalization surrounding gender and sexuality. As a collective group of female warriors in the *Black Panther* film, led by Okoye (played by Danai Gurira),[44] they have the ability to obtain a sense of agency, re-envision standards of beauty, while refuting and

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[44] The characters are quoted the first time as they are mentioned in the chapters in order to distinguish them from real people.

dismantling past stereotypical notions that have been historically attached to them and Black women as a whole.

The Dora Milaje's iterations, whether on-screen or on the comic book pages are potential figures of inspiration to all types of women, but especially for Black women and girls. Whether in the comic book format or on film, they are placed at the center of the discussion, proving that their inclusion is not simply supplemental or an attempt to pacify Black audiences/readership. The Dora Milaje contributes to the real work of establishing spaces where, as bell hooks states, Black women move "from margin to center." Additionally, as stated by Ta-Nehisi Coates, the Dora Milaje also "creates a template for how the sexist, troubling backstories of long-standing female characters can be flawlessly course-corrected."[45] Thus, the re-introduction of the Dora Milaje through these various storylines provides readers and viewers multiple ways to see how this group of Black women creates new ways to embrace Black femaleness, while disrupting the power shifts in a heteronormative, white, male society.

Chapter 2: Examining a "New Normal" in Marvel Comics Misty Knight

In continuing the discussion of exploring new territory with regards to Black female superheroes, the second chapter examines this idea of normalizing disability as an empowering ability through the Marvel Comics character Misty Knight. For different communities, disability is a contested concept that has different meanings.[46] Disability incorporates a spectrum of individuals and a range of conditions that can be developmental, physical, mental, and acquired. Historically, disability has always been attached to scientific and clinical medical discourses. These discourses were attached to conversations around eugenics and led to the formation of such concepts as: "abnormal" and "outside of the norm." These concepts would also become markers of profitability[47] as evident in the reputation of eighteenth and nineteenth century carnivals and freak shows.[48] Still operating under the guise of normalcy, disability was still being discussed based on a person's physical and biological make-up. This narrative remained relevant based on a reliance of medical doctors framing of their patients, which resulted in the formation of a medical model of disability.[49] According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the framework recommended a narrow approach to disability through the use of such terms as *impairment, handicap and disability*.[50] Hence, the focus of the medical model was seen as a way to analyze the body as needing to be fixed in order to fit into normative standards.

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[45]Ta-nehisi Coates as quoted in Pulliam-Moore, C. (2016, April 7). Queer, powerful women are the heart of the new 'Black Panther'. Retrieved from http://fusion.kinja.com/queer-powerful-women-are-the-heart-of-the-new-black-pa-1793856028

[46] Linton, Simi (1998). *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York: New York University Press.

[47] This showcasing resurfaces in more modernized formats through today's popular television shows and films.

[48] Bogdan, R. (1990). *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

[49] As a model it links the diagnosis of the disability to an individual's physical body with a focus on curing or managing the illness or disability. As noted by Christopher Lawrence in *Medicine in the Making of Modern Britain, 1700-1920* (2006), the model also plays a role in defining what is normal and abnormal in terms of biology and disability.

[50] World Health Organization (WHO). (1980). *International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps*. Geneva, Switzerland.

In response to this model, disability activists and academy began to re-center the conversations from being focused on limitations and impairments to a social model,[51] which focused on what disability rights activist Michael Oliver distinguished as "the society that limits a person needs to be fixed." Since its inception, it has been grown to include all disabled persons who have learning difficulties/disabilities, or are intellectually disabled, or persons who have behavioral, emotional, or mental health issues. The social model also brought attention to the economic and accessibility aspect of disability. Not only was it important to factor in the "whole" person, but also address discriminatory and protective issues specifically those related to workforce accommodations and access to day-to-day activities.

For this study, my emphasis on disability is centered on the social model of disability and its connections to discussions surrounding visibility, belonging, and representation. This is further explored in the format of a photo essay, primarily through Misty Knight's portrayals in the *Daughters of the Dragon* and *Secret Love: Misty and Danny Forever* comic book series, and in the Netflix *Luke Cage* series, which explores disability from an emotional and physical standpoint. Over the past 40 to 50 years there have been numerous changes in our society with respect to the perceptions and treatment of disability. Particularly within popular media culture, the portrayal of disability has been complicated, challenged, uniquely performed, and has pushed and created boundaries. A popular discussion is how such media platforms as television, movies, and comic books have contributed to the reinforcement of both affirming and undesirable images and ideas in regards to people with disabilities. In many instances within popular media culture, those who are disabled have been relegated to being either sensationalized (i.e. *Little Women: Atlanta and Houston*) or dehumanized (i.e. *Captain Hook*). These portrayals and representations have resulted in a variety of tropes, which include "eternal innocence" (i.e. *Rain Man, Forrest Gump*); "disabled victim of violence" (i.e. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*); the "Magical Negro" (i.e. John Coffey in *The Green Mile* film); or Gilligan "Left-Ear" in *The Italian Job*. Unfortunately, these tropes and stereotypes reinforce ableism, ignorance, and create perceptions of revulsion and fear.

In recent times, comics has played a consistent and evolving role in the way disability is defined, portrayed and represented particularly within popular culture. Comic books have been described as political, satirical, comical, entertaining, and inviting. In contrast, disability takes on a more serious tone, embodying attributes and labels such sadness, pity, physical and mental impairment, and "special people." In recent years there have been many conversations and realms of inquiry surrounding disability and comic books, especially with the fame of the *Marvel Comics* Netflix series *Daredevil*. The realms of inquiry welcome possibilities for re-visiting popular and under-discussed narratives such as the "super-crip," the "tragically disabled," the representation of disabled characters through an "inspiration porn" mentality, and this idea of transformational empowerment. These inquiries offer different representations and perceptions of how we understand disability through comics. Thus, exploring a scholarly dialogue between

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[51] Coined in 1983 by Michael Oliver, the social model of disability identifies systemic barriers, negative attitudes and exclusion by society (purposely or inadvertently) that mean society is the main contributory factor in disabling people. As a reaction to the dominant medical model of disability, according to Oliver, it also served as a starting point to reframing how society views disability. As noted in Oliver, M., & Sapey, B. (2006). *Social Work with Disabled People, Third Edition*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

comics and disability is noteworthy and needed as the Black female narrative regarding comics and disability is still absent. Therefore, Misty Knight's character and narrative becomes an ideal example to further explore the complexities of the Black woman, disability, and how one's disability can be re-framed as humanizing and empowering.

Given the insufficiency of women of color and disabled protagonists in the arts and media, representations are particularly important as visualizing them contributes to their normalization (it un-others them, respects their otherness, and potentially destigmatizes otherness). Misty Knight, who is introduced in the *Marvel Team-Up #1* in 1972, but is formally introduced in the *Iron Fist #6* (1976) is as a character that was originally created during the Blaxploitation and Kung-Fu era of the 1970s. Within comics Misty was primarily a supporting character in the Luke Cage and Iron Fist's series (*Power Man and Iron Fist* [1972] and *Heroes for Hire* [2006]), until branching into a partnership with fellow superheroines Colleen Wing in the Daughters of the Dragon and Valkyrie in the Fearless Defenders series. Prior to these partnerships and relationships, Mercedes "Misty" Knight served as a patrolwoman in the 12th Precinct of the New York Police department. Unfortunately, while trying to intercept a group of terrorists attempting to bomb a bank, Misty retrieves the bomb, but it explodes before she is able to disarm it. As a result of the explosion, Misty's right arm is amputated and replaced with a cybernetic limb. In addition to changing careers from a patrolwoman to private investigator, this major change in Misty's life creates a new set of abilities. Misty's character and her various narratives are unique in that they integrate her experiences as a Black woman with being empowered by her disability, which involves a technologically advanced limb. Despite having to navigate a variety of emotions, Misty's journey to recovery and healing, through self-reflection, is significant in how we can redefine and further normalize disability.

As an able-bodied Black woman, my goal is to serve as not only as a fan of the character, but also an ally who can contribute to the deconstruction of hegemonic narratives that exclude Black, female, and disabled narratives. Thus, it was important for me to confront my own privileges, prejudices and preconceptions of disability. When discussing diversity in popular culture, especially in comics, it is essential that the conversations are intersectional and inclusive of disability. As the visibility and awareness of disability increases in film (*Justice League* [2017]), television (Netflix's *Daredevil* [2015-2018] and *Luke Cage* [2016-2018]), and in the presence of such characters as Marvel Comics Native American heroine Echo and Archie Comics Harper Lodge comics are steadily playing a role in the (re)shaping of disability within popular culture. It is important to address the lack of representations regarding women of color, as well as disabled protagonists, and identities at these intersections in comic book culture. This acknowledgement and incorporation into the narrative "un-others them, respects their otherness, and potentially destigmatizes otherness."[52] Moreover, the visualization of these identities, as seen in Misty Knight, contributes to their normalization.

Bringing Misty Knight's story to the forefront contrasts against superhero narratives that have suggested disabilities are limitation to overcome. Her story also incorporates an Afrofuturistic framing in the way that it discusses Black bodies as technologies. Like Donna Haraway's cyborg, Misty Knight functions as a Black feminist critique of identity politics and

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[52] Gipson, G. D. (2017, October 14). "The Future Is Black and Female: Afrofuturism and Comic Books" – AAIHS. Retrieved from https://www.aaihs.org/the-future-is-black-and-female-afrofuturism-and-comic-books/

moves beyond the traditional Western ideas of womanhood.[53] The image of Misty Knight's character pushes the limits of identification and plays with the hybridity of woman and machine. Afrofuturism troubles the slim boundary between (wo)man and machine in order to reimagine a super-humanity. Furthermore, this chapter examines how Misty embodies a model of normalization and transformational empowerment as she navigates between a superhero career and various social and romantic relationships. Normalizing through representations of everyday experiences through characters like Misty Knight is particularly significant as it represents disability as both "defect" and "empowering transformation." Instead of focusing on Misty's bionic arm as a disability or a hindrance, one should view it as a feature of enhancement. Depicting disability as a part of one's identity helps to normalize and humanize the character's narrative, and potentially re-situate the gaze. Misty Knight as a comic book character becomes an example of transformation and re-definition of how we define and approach disability, especially regarding representations taking place at the intersection of disability, gender, and race.

Chapter 3: #BlackGirlMagic and STEM in Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur

With the recent uncovering of hidden stories like that of the mathematical and science contributions of Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughn, and Mary Jackson from the 2016 film and book of the same name *Hidden Figures*, it is critical to bring exposure to the role of Black women and girls in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields. Chapter three of this study engages the popular social media term and hashtag #BlackGirlMagic, its relationship with STEM, and how it is personified through a pre-teen fictional Black girl. Created in November 2015 by writers Amy Reeder and Brandon Montclare and illustrated by Natacha Bustos, *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*[54] is part of Marvel Comics push to diversify the comic book narrative. Its main protagonist is a nine-year old intelligent Black girl named Lunella Lafeyette aka Moon Girl, who happens to also have high genius levels and possesses the Inhuman[55] gene. Those who possess the Inhuman gene are human in origin, but have a gene(s) manipulated by the Kree[56] causing them to have enhanced mutations within their genetic code. This enhancement is often dormant until activated by an outside force. Lafeyette's character is significant as she becomes one of the first and youngest female characters of color to possess the Inhuman gene and have her own series (Kamala Khan, a Pakistanian teenager, preceded her in the Ms. Marvel series).

With the consistent press surrounding the lack of women, particularly Black women, in the STEM fields, Marvel Comics character Lunella Lafeyette becomes distinctive example for promoting Black girls' engagement with science and technology. According to the 2016 National Science Foundation's Science & Engineering Indicators, "Female students' (K-12) achievement in mathematics and science is on par with their male peers and female students participate in high level mathematics and science courses at similar rates as their male peers, with the

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[53] Haraway, D. J. (1991). "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (pp. 149-182). New York, NY: Routledge.
[54] *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* is the re-imagining of 1978 Marvel comic Devil Dinosaur.
[55] Lunella Lafeyette's character is one of the newest characters bringing more exposure to the Inhuman characters of Marvel Comics. The Inhumans are unique set of fictional super-powered characters that possess strength, speed, endurance, and reaction time greater than the best human athletes. They were created millions of years ago by genetic experiments and after being abandoned created their own technologically advanced society.
[56] The Kree, also known as the Ruul, are a fictional scientifically and technologically advanced militaristic alien race appearing in comic books published by Marvel Comics.

exception of computer science and engineering."[57] Lunella's story aligns with the above statement as she is a star student in many of her classes and often times outperforms and out smarts her fellow classmates and even teachers. Although her story/narrative is very young, Lunella has already been deemed as the smartest person in the Marvel Comics Universe, which makes her the youngest Black character and puts her ahead of other super-genius comic characters (who happen to be white and male) such as Tony Stark (Iron Man) and Reed Richards (Fantastic Four). Obtaining this title at a very young age demonstrates this notion of #BlackGirlMagic a concept was popularized by blogger/social media maven CaShawn Thompson in 2013. #BlackGirlMagic aims to "celebrate the beauty, power and resilience of Black women," and to also congratulate the accomplishments and achievements of Black women and girls.[58] Lunella's achievement as the smartest person in the Marvel Comics Universe, her actual intellect within her storyline, and her love of science and technology qualify her as fictional example of #BlackGirlMagic. A character such as Lunella through a long-standing, major publishing company like Marvel Comics also plays a role in developing ways to incorporate, increase and sustain participation in STEM courses, majors, and careers. The comic becomes an alternative entry and access point into STEM.

In addition to promoting STEM and "BlackGirlMagic, Lunella's character also humanizes the experience of black children. She struggles with being rejected by her classmates, which results in being derisively called names such as "Moon Girl," and simply just longing to be accepted by her peers. Lunella's narrative engages with Aimee Cox's idea of "shapeshifting"[59] as she struggles to embrace her powers and talents, while also creating an identity for herself in the classroom and at home with her family. In addition to being described as a genius, Lunella is also a young girl that engages in normal activity such as watching television, playing video games, reading, cheerleading, and creating kitchen science experiments. Moreover, in contrast to other comic book narratives taking place in an alternative universe (like *Thor* [2011]*, Guardians of the Galaxy* [2014]*, or Doctor Strange* [2016]), Lunella, in the *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* series, embarks on adventures in New York City. As Lunella is challenged in her current environment, struggling with both her peers and the expectations of her parents, she also personifies a sense of Black joy and empowerment. Her experiences as a child are two-fold as they paint a visual story that diversifies the traditional white, male comic book narrative and provide a current day picture that other young Black girls are capable of being in STEM fields.

Comic book narratives like Lunella's within the comic book genre are not only notable, but also crucial because they aid in creating a bridge between fiction and real-world application. Instead of a young Black girl taking on the attributes of an older hero, she can identify more and fully discuss challenges through someone who looks, talks, and feels like her. Having a more

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[57] NSF-Science & Engineering Indicators. (2016). *S&E Indicators 2016/ NSF- National Science Foundation.* Retrieved from https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2016/nsb20161/#/

[58] Thomas, D. (8 September 2015). "Why everyone's saying 'Black Girls are Magic'". *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved 3 September 2016.; Wilson, J. (12 January 2016). "The Meaning Of #BlackGirlMagic, And How You Can Get Some Of It". *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved 3 September 2016. For the purpose of this dissertation, the above statement will be used to define #BlackGirlMagic.

[59] Shapeshifting is a term created by cultural anthropologist Aimee Cox in her 2015 book "Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship". This term and its applicability to Lunella Lafeyette's character will be discussed in more detail within the dissertation.

direct, specific, and relatable character may increase the chances of young girls, particularly Black, being able to connect to Lunella. Additionally, Lunella's character and storyline reveal a needed change beyond the world of comics. Many professional fields, especially STEM, lack women of color who are Black and Latina/Hispanic. When people of color are represented they tend to be of East and South Asian descent, which contributes to the model minority myth.[60] Many Black children, especially Black girls, find themselves invisible within these fields, making it difficult to encourage those who are passionate about the sciences.

Lunella's narrative illustrates the experiences of being a gifted Black child and the manner in which others, including peers and teachers, view her intelligence as Black and a young woman. Gifted and talented children like Lunella face many barriers in school, ranging from the lack of support and valuing from non-black educators, to their peers treating them as outcasts, or peers who use racism against them. Each of these struggles can amount to self-esteem issues for young, gifted Black children, causing a need to remedy the issues and highlight the achievements. Hence, a story like Lunella exhibits a humanized experience of little Black girls, while also celebrating their intelligence through a fictional character. As a character in one of the most popular comic book corporations, Lunella and her narrative highlight the challenges gifted Black children, especially Black girls, encounter and illuminate the tenacity exhibited by many of these children, which further speaks to the popular idea of #BlackGirlMagic.

Overall, Lunella's character and story embodies Afrofuturistic elements from a Black female perspective that promotes mastering science and technology as a way to survive and achieve. In an age in which technology seems to erase racial distinctions, the Lunella character, through Afrofuturism, poses a challenge of a future without race, which underlines the fact that race is still an important category even in a technologically driven 21st century. Furthermore, Lunella's narrative continues the legacy of such characters as Milestone Comic' Static Shock/Virgil Hawkins and Rocket/Raquel Ervin and fellow Marvel Comics character Miles Morales who struggled for acceptance and provided a face of color that embraces the idea of being a self-professed geek or Black nerd.

Chapter 4: Digital Storytelling in Comics and Fandom Culture
The final chapter deals with Black female comic book fan culture through the arena of blogs and podcasts. As noted in the above chapters, Black female voices are not only present in

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[60] Model Minority is defined as those members who are perceived to achieve a higher degree of socioeconomic success than the population average. This success is typically measured relatively by income, education, low criminality, and high family/marital stability. This argument is most often been applied to contrast Asian-American (both South & East Asians) against African Americans & Latinx Americans in America, enforcing the idea that Asian Americans are good law-abiding, productive immigrants/citizens while promoting the stereotype that Hispanics and African-Americans are criminally prone, welfare recipient immigrants/citizens. As noted in University of Texas at Austin Counseling and Mental Health Center. (2019). Model Minority Stereotype. Retrieved from https://cmhc.utexas.edu/modelminority.html#what and Poon, O., Squire, D., Kodama, C., Byrd, A., Chan, J., Manzano, L., Bishundat, D. (2016). A Critical Review of the Model Minority Myth in Selected Literature on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Higher Education. *Review of Educational Research*, *86*(2), 469-502.

and outside the fictional format of a comic book character, but they also tell stories digitally and through new media formats. In many cases, a simple tweet or Google search led to the creation of the following online communities and podcasts. These voices are able to unpack the Black female narratives in comics, introduce different and various perspectives of Black womanhood, and shift the mindset of a burgeoning, blended fan culture of comics and nerdom. The newly created podcast *Misty Knight's Uninformed Afro* (MKUA) is a present-day example of bringing Black female superheroines to the center of discussion by using a digital new media format.[61] Using the new media outlet *SoundCloud,*[62] MKUA as a podcast explicitly explored the absence of Black women as superheroes, bring attention and awareness to existing Black superheroines, and establishes a new lens and landscape to how we discuss Black female superheroines in comic books. Co-hosted by two Black women, Jamie Broadnax and Stephanie Williams, who have an appreciation and passion for the comic book medium, wear the "digital cape" and elevate the fictional voices of Black female superheroines who are often left out of traditional print and broadcast journalism.

With a specific focus on Black female superheroines in comics, *MKUA* is a groundbreaking podcast that brings color to a white-male dominated arena. A second example that addresses Black women, comic book culture, and geek/nerd culture is *Black Girl Nerds* (BGN). *Black Girl Nerds* is a prime example of an online community that embraces the many layers that exist with women of color. With its emphasis on geek and nerd culture for Black women and women of color, creator and editor Jamie Broadnax describes this community as "a place for women of color with various eccentricities to express themselves freely and embrace who they are." *Black Girl Nerds* encourages its followers to embrace their own identities, while also filling in the gaps of popular and mainstream culture. Particularly in the comic book genre, *Black Girl Nerds* has become a community that regularly acknowledges women of color creators, writers, artists, and the characters they create. Much like *MKUA*, *Black Girl Nerds* uses multiple new media platforms. Through online podcast shows and interviews (using media formats Spreaker, iTunes, and Stitcher), written content (online blog/website www.blackgirlnerds.com), and an active social media presence (Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook), Black Girl Nerds becomes an outlet that creates various sub-culture networks and communities, while simultaneously addressing the problem of racial and gender diversity within popular culture.

New media scholar Marshall McLuhan noteworthy phrase "the medium is the message" speaks to this idea that a "message" is "the change of scale or pace or pattern" that a new invention or innovation "introduces into human affairs;"[63] and that the medium is "any extension of ourselves." Platforms like *Black Girl Nerds* and *MKUA* speak to the functional diversity of blogs and podcasts, while digitally introducing audiences to Black female superheroines narratives, and access to elite comic book events. *Black Girl Nerds* and *MKUA* also help to close the gap that is the "digital divide" with the incorporation of race and gender. Blogs and podcasts

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[61] After two successful seasons of the MKUA podcast, co-hosts Jamie Broadnax and Stephanie Williams would part ways as well as the dissolution of the podcast in 2018.

[62] *SoundCloud* is an online, audio distribution platform that allows users to upload, record, promote and share original-created media work. As a free platform to distribute music and audio work, producers and consumers are able to build and create global media networks and communities.

[63] McLuhan, M. (1994). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. pg. 8.

are accessible tools that cross communities and generations, whether used in the classroom or personal use. *Black Girl Nerds*, as a blog, becomes a digital tool of empowerment and a place to escape and find community. *MKUA,* as a podcast, connects aficionados and novice readers and consumers of comic books while simultaneously acknowledging, recognizing, and giving just due to the Black female superhero. *Black Girl Nerds* and *MKUA* construct new methods of re-imagining Blackness, Black nerdom, and womanhood all through digital technology. The digital landscape is given more color and a female energy in a space that in the past has excluded and ignored their existence. This landscape also creates a unique space to articulate Black feminist issues, values, and history. By offering a venue for thoughtful challenges and critiques of industry norms they create spaces of recognition that produce meaningful knowledge and the potential to spark online digital activism. Furthermore, this chapter brings awareness to burgeoning black female social and digital media voices and the ways that they promote the full inclusion of Black female comic book creators and commentators.

Historical Background on Blackness in Comics and Comic Books

Before engaging with the core chapters of this dissertation project it is important to provide a background regarding Blackness within comic and comic books. Telling stories with images is a long, complex tradition. Some of the earliest examples, which foreshadow modern comics are Egyptian/Kemetic hieroglyphs (3200 B.C.- 400 A.D.), Rome's "Trajan's Column" (A.D. 113) and France's "Bayeux Tapestry" (11th century). These are the precursors of the contemporary sequential pictorial narratives we call comics and comic books. However, the first comic strip was not published until 1826 when the satire, *The Glasgow Looking Glass*, parodied the fashions and politics of the times.[64]

Since the genre's inception, comic books and comic strips have always been a storytelling medium that provides, political and social commentary via a combination of visuals and the written word. Black[65] bodies have long been important in these commentaries. One of the earliest depictions of a Black character's presence is seen in the 1848 British series, "The Surprising Adventures of Mr. Touchango Jones, an Emigrant,"[66] in which the protagonist is captured by Black savages. Visual depictions of, and their accompanied storylines about, Black characters have historically treaded a fine line between artistic license and ridicule. In the limited edition books and vintage comics printed in nineteenth century Europe, Black characters were depicted often as docile slaves, savages (tamed or primitive), or kidnapped educated Africans in European royal courts.

Despite the longstanding connection between the African continent and comics, and the troubling inclusion of stereotypical Black characters, there has been no systematic, in-depth research conducted that critically answers the question, *When do Black characters appear in comics?[67]* A brief chronological and thematic survey of the portrayal and representation of Blackness in comic strips and comic books shows some important trends and dynamics that continue to shape racial representation of American comic book culture (the larger subject of this dissertation). Although this chronology does not include every Black/African Diasporic[68] representation within comics and comic books, it does include a mix of mainstream, independent, popularly discussed, and lesser-known representations. With this chronology, I seek to share how Blackness has been represented from the antebellum period to the present. These layered depictions reveal a range of feelings from repulsion and sadness to determination and empowerment.

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[64] Gifford, D. (2013). Popular Literature: Comics, Dime Novels, Pulps, and Penny Dreadfuls. In P. Hunt (Ed.), *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (pp. 239-241). London, England: Routledge.; Crawford, R. (2013). *On Glasgow and Edinburgh* (p. 258). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.; Herald & Times Group. (2013, June 24). Have I got old news for you: Glasgow is home to world's oldest comic. *The Herald* [Scotland]. Retrieved from https://www.heraldscotland.com/arts_ents/13110858.have-i-got-old-news-for-you-glasgow-is-home-to-worlds-oldest-comic/

[65] Throughout the entire document, Black is capitalized as opposed to white not being capitalized. This is done as an act of resistance and an acknowledgement of racial respect that centers the authority and truths of those who I am writing about—particularly when they are marginalized—in the United States and African diaspora.

[66] *The Surprising Adventures of Mr. Touchango Jones, an Emigrant* was a series written by Albert Smith and H.G. Hine and published in the English humor magazine *Man in the Moon.*

[67] Italicized for emphasis

[68] Black/African Diasporic is used to describe all characters that are based within the entire African Diaspora, which includes all places in which Blackness is represented.

Bringing the African Diaspora into Comics

Over time, comics have brought visual life to fictional narratives, and created avenues of reimagining oral histories. Thus, it is an important medium to study, despite the troubling and visceral imagery that so often both marginalizes and focuses on Black/African Diasporic characters, writers, and creators throughout the history of comics. As Qiana Whitted notes, in their early years, comics would frequently mark and mute Blackness.[69]

Black characters are not always the ones directly satirized in early comics; the white character Ally Sloper was described as a "red-nosed, lazy schemer" who sloped through alleys to avoid his responsibilities. Ally Sloper was used as a way to mock British imperialism, but at the expense of African characters. For example, in an August 1872 episode titled "Sloper in Savage Africa," Sloper takes and African wife during one of his adventures, despite having a wife, back to his home in England. He rationalizes this by commenting that "…one must conform to the customs of the country. Only she might have been a little better looking." This episode belittles the appearance of African women. It also dramatizes Sloper's failure to "civilize" the natives, and indoctrinate them to conform to European standards.

Comic book journalist and author Fredrik Strömberg distinguishes three levels of racism in comics:

> First is purely pictorial (in which a certain minority is depicted with various stereotypical attributes); second is purely textual (in which captions and least the use of language present persons in a negative way); the third, and probably the most subversive, is on a content level (in which, for example, people from a certain minority are constantly portrayed as evil, stupid, foolish, subservient or quite simply nonexistent).[70]

This racism is exemplified in the second half of the 19th century by such satirical comic strips as French cartoonist Camileff's "Civilisons l'Afrique!" ("Let's Civilize Africa!"), published in 1893. In one sequence, the white explorers are seen telling the Africans, "Yes my darling negrillons [literally piccaninnies], good white brother brings you civilization…in bottles!"[71] Although the strip would function as a critique of colonialism and imperialism, the text and visual representation still remained racially stereotypical and problematic.

Representations of African characters in comic strips and magazines, like Camileff, during the period of 1880-1914, ranged from heavily caricatured to slightly distorted.[72] Other problematic examples include the 1905 comic strip, "Sambo and His Funny Noises," written by American William Marriner and published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. This comic strip featured a Black boy named "Sambo Johnson" (or Johnsin), and often depicted him as fighting

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[69] Whitted, Q. (2014). 'And the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics': comics, visual metonymy, and the spectacle of blackness. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *5*(1), 79-100.

[70] Strömberg, F. (2003). Prologue. In *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History* (p. 30). Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books.

[71] Camileff. (1893). Civilisons l'Afrique! (Let's Civilize Africa!). *L'Image pour Rire*.

[72] Lefèvre, P. (2016). Of Savages and Wild Children: Contrasting Representations of Foreign Cultures and Disobedient White Children During the Belle Epoque. In E. Wesseling (Ed.), *The Child Savage, 1890–2010: From Comics to Games* (pp. 55-70). London, England: Routledge.

against two white boy antagonists, Mike and Jim Tanks. Although he would regularly come out victorious, his victories were still based in stereotypes as it was either a result of dumb luck or the "natural ability" to endure pain. Similar to earlier "Little Sambo" books, which were originally written by Helen Bannerman in 1898, the character has been rewritten, retold, and illustrated in a variety of ways over time (which also include different time periods, languages, styles of illustration) (See Figure 0.3). Sambo's bright red protruding lips, over-sized mouth, wide shining eyes, and matted hair, which that typify picaninny misrepresentations of the black child, would be a lasting image with iterations that carried over into numerous future Black comic characters. This portrayal would also manifest within the Walt Disney Company as the early Mickey Mouse daily strips embodied Black stereotypes. In its first year (1930), the Mickey Mouse comic strip, which was written by Walt Disney, showed Mickey in conflict with stereotypical cannibal natives during one of his desert island travels (see Figure 0.4). Despite the sequence being later banned from reprint, Walt Disney nor the artist Win Smith saw the content as offensive.

**(Figure 0.3-Various depictions over time of the "Little Sambo" character (l-r), Little Black Sambo Cover [1899], Little Black Sambo [1908],
The Story of Little Black Sambo [1921], El Negrito Sambo [1935])**

(Figure 0.4-One of the earliest stereotypical depictions of Black characters from the Walt Disney Company, written by Walt Disney and art by Win Smith in 1930)

Not only were Black characters portrayed routinely as exotic savages who came from the jungle, they were also depicted as uneducated and simple-minded sidekicks. A standout character

that embodies this portrayal is "Mandrake the Magician," the 1934 comic strip created by American cartoonist Lee Falk. As the first Black character to be included into a syndicated comic strip, Lothar served as a supporting character. Formerly the "Prince of the Seven Nations," he passes on the opportunity to become a king so that he could follow main protagonist Mandrake, on his world travels of fighting crime. So not only is Lothar regulated to a supporting character, but robbed of his potential to disrupt past tropes and stereotypes. Instead of taking a royal path, he becomes an "illiterate exotic garbed in animal skins and serves as the muscle to complement Mandrake's brain."[73] Additional, notable Black sidekicks include Abestos, a 1920s character, and Ebony White (see Figure 0.5) from the 1940s Will Eisner series "The Spirit."

(Figure 0.5-The infamous sidekick character Ebony White from the newspaper comic series *The Spirit* [1940])

While often considered to be harmless mediums of entertainment, comics would literally illustrate the attitudes and prejudices of a culture, resulting in a legacy of racial caricatures and manipulated iconography. Early depictions of Black characters placed a heavy emphasis on specific physical features that were reminiscent of American slavery and minstrel shows. Over time, as artists made changes to the physical attributes and included more Black characters, the stereotypes and tropes became more modern and sophisticated. Furthermore, as long as Black fictional characters exist in comics, the racists stereotypes and tropes became more modern and sophisticated. Black characters continued to be thrust to the margins and misrepresented, sparking an ongoing battle for Black and people of color. The history of Black comic book characters sparked a discourse around representation, and triggered a movement of Black comic writers and artists who would seek to redefine Black characters, reclaim their humanity, and retell the stories.

Reclaiming a Black Comic Identity

Early Black cartoonists emerged during a time when the newspaper comic strip became their playground. They created an American Black press renaissance marked by monumental changes in the representations of Black characters.[74] Newspapers, especially during the times of

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[73] Hogan, E. (2004, February 4). AFROS, ICONS, AND SPANDEX: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN SUPERHERO. Retrieved from
https://archive.is/20120728134734/www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=14623
[74] Jackson, T. (2016). *Pioneering Cartoonists of Color*. Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

the Great Migration[75], such as the *Amsterdam News* (now *New York Amsterdam News*), *Chicago Defender*, and *Pittsburgh Courier* became the key press spaces to feature the work of Black cartoonists. Blurring the lines between high and low culture, Black creators[76] sought to capture various moments of Black life. Although the numbers were few, comic creators and artists begin to shift the representation and established new standards that uplifted the Black race, reflect distinct Black experiences, challenge Jim and Jane Crow stereotypes, and forge new directions within the comic and cartoon industry.

One of the first to blur and push the comic boundaries was New Orleans native George Herriman, who became the first major syndicated Black or "colored" cartoonist with his creation of the comic strip, "Krazy Kat." Throughout his career, Herriman took on many roles as a billboard painter, as well as sketcher for a variety of daily cartoon columns, cartoon strips and satirical magazines. It would not be until 1906 when he began a permanent position with the *Los Angeles Examiner* (King Features Syndicate), that his signature comic strip, "Krazy Kat," was created. Running from 1913 to 1944,[77] the "Krazy Kat" comic strip depicted an entangled relationship between the simple-minded black cat Krazy and the white mouse tormentor. With the gender of Krazy being unclear and the distinct black and white (cat and mouse) scenarios, this ambiguity and racial tension played a role in the strips blending of American irony and fantasy.

Many argued that "Krazy Kat" as a comic strip treaded the line between surrealism and vaudeville and, at times, slapstick humor. However, even with his unique and complex storylines and his inclusion of Black characters, his personal life reflected a distinctive departure. Herriman, who was considered "colored" as designated on his birth certificate, would tiptoe the color line and often "passed" as white. Diligently working to obfuscate his Black heritage,[78] he would assume a white identity given the hostile racial climate of that time, and did not count African Americans among his friends and associates. Nevertheless, many admired Herriman's work. It was not until his death in 1944 that a widespread of influence and critical respect surfaced. Herriman's work has been said to inspire several generations of cartoonists including Charles M. Schulz's "Peanuts" and Art Spiegelman's "Maus."

Although Herriman is regarded as the first major Black cartoonist, Wilbert Holloway and Jay Jackson would be the first self-identified Black cartoonists. The work of Holloway and Jackson was published in such newspapers as the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier (1907-1966)* during the 1920s and 1930s. Opposite of Herriman, their cartoon work was

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[75] The Great Migration/Black Migration was mass movement of 6 million African Americans out of the rural South to the Northeast, Midwest, and West during the time period of 1916 to 1970. According to journalist Nicholas Lemann, "the Great Migration was one of the largest and most rapid mass internal movements in history." In essence, this movement for African Americans meant leaving what was once their social and economic base and securing a new one. As noted in Lemann, N. (2011). *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (p. 6). New York, NY: Vintage.

[76] Black creators are being defined as Black artists and writers.

[77] On October 28, 1913 *Krazy Kat* debuted as a five-panel daily vertical comic strip. Some years later on April 23, 1916, it would become the first black and white full-page Sunday strip.

[78] Herriman routinely wore hats to conceal his kinky hair, which he kept very short, suggesting to his colleagues that he was possibly Greek, Italian, French or possibly Turkish. He also married a white woman, Mabel Lillian Bridge in 1902.

intentional about making the tragedy and humor of Black life in America visible. Their work would be the first of its kind to take artistic direct action to critique the lynching attacks from the Ku Klux Klan, produce integrated Pepsi advertisements, and incorporate lessons of humor and understanding between races. Holloway's comic strip *Sonny Boy Sam* and Jackson's penny postcards, war bonds during World War II, and his *Speed Jaxon* syndicated series presented a picture of Black life that had been rendered invisible by white media.

For much of the twentieth century, it was difficult to find Black cartoonists in the press, and even more rare for those who were Black women. Jackie Ormes was instrumental in re-setting the comic and comic strip standard. With her creation of Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger single panel cartoon, the *Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem* and *Torchy in Heartbeats* comic strip series, Ormes became the first Black female syndicated cartoonist. Ormes confronted social and political issues ranging from segregation, to free speech, to environmental pollution, anti-war efforts, to dating, and even creating fashion and style trends, while working for the *Chicago Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier* and composing her own cartoons and strips. Her work also countered white beauty norms and redefined the roles and images of modern Black womanhood. Throughout her life, Ormes, who was also part of the Chicago Renaissance[79], wanted to make sure that her socially conscious views[80] and artistic skills contributed to the elevation of the Black community, while holding the country (United States) accountable for their failures and missteps regarding civil rights.

The achievements and opportunities of the aforementioned creators also expanded beyond the Black press and into the publishing of all-Black comic book series. This was first seen with the creation of *All-Negro Comics* (June 1947) a direct result of the artists witnessing the lack of Black representation in and outside of comics and comic books. Created by journalist Orrin C. Evans with the assistance of past and present associates, *All-Negro Comics* featured a number of character narratives, written and drawn by African Americans. *All-Negro Comics* included such narratives as "Lion Man," which was meant to inspire Black people's pride in their African heritage, and Ace Harlem, a police detective who exhibited a sense of honor and justice and was respected by his community.

Evans, who was a member of the NAACP, was a strong advocate of racial equality and sought to use the comic book medium to foster what he called "the splendid history of Negro journalism." Known as "the Dean of Black Reporters,"[81] Evans rose to recognition by writing for the oldest Black newspaper, the *Philadelphia Tribune*, before crossing over into mainstream assignments. Similar to that of Ormes, Evans would also speak out against segregation, particularly in the military, while providing outlets for representing African American in a

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[79]The Chicago Black Renaissance, also known as the Black Chicago Renaissance, was a creative movement that emerged from the "Chicago Black Belt" on the city's South Side and took place during the 1930s and 1940s before transforming in the 1950s. It would be influenced by two major social and economic moments the Great Migration and the Great Depression. Such notable creatives included (but not limited to) Black writers Gwendolyn Brooks, Richard Wright, Lorraine Hansberry; musicians Louis Armstrong and Thomas A. Dorsey; and artists Elizabeth Catlett, Charles Wilbert White, and Margaret Burroughs.

[80] Ormes socially conscious views would also contribute to a 287-page file collected by the FBI based on her work and associations with many on the Left.

[81] Evans was given this name by the *New York Times*

positive light. This eventually led to an interest in studying the representation of heroes in comic books more closely.

There would be several other prominent characters, published series, and projects, many short-lived, that influenced the current work of comic books and comic strips. These included Parents Magazine Press *Negro Heroes* #1 (1947), which featured biographies of such African American heroes as boxer Joe Louis, scientist George Washington Carver, activist Mary McLeod Bethune, and explorer Matthew Henson. Black artists would also venture into expanding markets like romance comics. Developed as an experiment in the 1950s, *Negro Romance,* illustrated by African American artist Alvin Hollingsworth[82] for Fawcett Comics, the groundbreaking romance comic eschewed African American stereotypes and caricatures, and depicted stories compatible with those told about white characters. *Negro Romance* would also break barriers in its content as it made references to business ventures and the college experience, which was a rarity in the 1950s, even more so among African Americans.[83] *Negro Romance* appeared during a time when superhero narratives had briefly faded out of popularity. Though it would run for only three issues, its intentional subversion contributed to creating a leading Black presence in the romance novel genre, showing that Black characters did not have to be regulated to stereotypical comic book norms.

Additionally, there were character and topic-driven series that served as educational tools such as the Powerman[84] series, which was published in 1975 by Bardon Press Feature[85] for distribution in Nigeria. UNESCO General History of Africa Project launched a topic-driven series in 1964, which was the first of its kind to highlight the entire history of the African continent. This eight-volume collection brought attention to "the pre-colonial era and interweaves Africa's destiny with the rest of humanity's, examining its interaction with other continents and the role of Africans in the dialogue between civilizations."[86] Following in this tradition, from 2012-2015, UNESCO would publish an open source comic book that focused on the illustration and graphic arts and serve as a catalyst for young African artists.

All in all, the work of these cartoonist, creators, and publishing projects defied expectations, in spite of the hostile environments and limited opportunities, to give their readers empowering, critical and humorous models. This work laid the foundation and paved the way for the next generation of writers/creators: Aaron McGruder of *Boondocks* fame, Dwayne McDuffie, Micheline Hess creator of *Malice and Ovenland*, comic editors Joseph P. Illige and Paul Hendricks, and television showrunners Salim Akil CW's *Black Lightning* and Cheo Hodari Coker of Netflix *Luke Cage*. Prior to the advent of social media, these creators among many others challenged white norms, and pushed against racist, oppressive systems, all while re-setting the standard for the creation of diverse, complex Black characters.

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[82] Hollingsworth would become the first African-American artist hired by Fawcett Comics.
[83] Jackson, T. (2016). *Pioneering Cartoonists of Color*. Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
[84] His name would later change to "Powerbolt" to avoid confusion with Marvel Comics Luke Cage/Powerman
[85] "Powerman/Powerbolt" was co-written by Don Avenall and Norman Worker, illustrated by Dave Gibbons and Brian Bolland
[86] UNESCO. (1964). Volumes | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Retrieved from http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/general-history-of-africa/volumes/

Entering the Mainstream: Black Firsts in Comics

As society continues to embrace, incorporate, and create new opportunities for Black characters and their creatives, it is also important to acknowledge key Black characters, series, and publishing companies that have laid the foundation and helped to push the comic medium forward. While Orrin C. Evans *All-Negro Comics* would be the first to feature African American/Black characters in 1947, the first mainstream comic book feature with a Black star was Atlas Comics (Marvel Comics' 1950s predecessor) character Waku, Prince of the Bantu an African tribal chief. He was one of four features in the *Jungle Tales* (September 1954-September 1955) omnibus. Following the Waku character was Dell Comics *Lobo #1* in December 1965, which would be the first comic book with an African American star. Shortly after the creation of *Lobo #1*, Marvel Comics began introducing many of its Black superheroes (See Figure 1.4).

Character Name	Role and Year
Gabriel 'Gabe' Jones	First Black character to appear in Marvel Comics in 1963, serving as supporting character in the *Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos* series
Black Panther	First Black Superhero (introduced in Fantastic Four #52 [1966]
The Falcon	First African American Superhero (introduced in Captain America #117 [1969]; he would also take the mantle of 'Captain America' after Steve Rogers' retirement in Captain America #1 [2014]
Luke Cage	First hero to star in his/her own mainstream comic title in 1972, followed by "Black Panther" in *Jungle Action* [1973]
The Black Butterfly	First Black female comic book superheroine appearance in 1971
Storm	First major female character of African descent in comics in 1975 and the first female to lead the X-Men group

(Figure 1.4-Notable Marvel Comics Character)

In addition to the significant development of new Black characters in Marvel Comics, the first Black superhero underground comix [87] character, Ebon, was created in 1970. Unfortunately, due to the overwhelmingly large, white adult audience, Ebon was short-lived.

In the DC Comics Universe, Malcolm "Mal" Duncan (now known as Vox) was the first African American superhero, with Karen Beecher/Bumblebee as DC Comics first African American female character, and Black Lightning as the first Black superhero in DC Comics to star in his own series.[88] While John Stewart/Green Lantern is not the first DC Comics African American character, he is the first mainstream Black superhero to resist the stereotypical naming. Historically, John Stewart/Green Lantern has portrayed the "angry black man" archetype. However, through his depictions of complex masculinity he also provided a commentary on the state of race-relations in U.S. society. Additionally, John Stewart/Green Lantern was seen as

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[87] The underground comix movement (which was most popular in the United States from 1968-1975) focused on subjects dear to the counterculture of that time. The use of comix with an "x" was used to differentiate from mainstream publications, as a response to the fervent restrictions forced upon mainstream publications by the Comics Code Authority, and in some cases the "x" signified x-rated content. As noted in Sabin, R. (1996). "Going Underground." In *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* (pp. 92, 94–95, 103–107, 110, 111, 116, 119, 124–126, 128). London, England: Phaidon Press.

[88] Although the first DC character to have his own series, he is the third African American superhero to debut in DC Comics after "John Stewart/Green Lantern" and "Tyroc."

exploring the politics of affirmative action based on him replacing a white Hal Jordan. Thus, as a comic book character John Stewart/Green Lantern created an anxiety and internal fear, which symbolized white people's feelings towards Black individuals who they saw as being unqualified for leadership positions.

In addition to exposing white fears and anxieties in comics, the fictional narratives of Black superheroes imitated the lived experiences of Black people. Influenced by the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment story[89], the character Isaiah Bradley, known as the "Black Captain America," was created and provided a distinctive story about heroism and the distribution of power. Created by Marvel Comics in 2003 as part of the *Truth: Red, White, and Black* series, writer Robert Morales tells the story of Bradley who is accidentally injected with a Super Soldier serum. Through Bradley's story, Morales deals with the visceral past of Black Americans subjugation to institutionalized chemical warfare. Uniquely as a limited series, the "Truth" series further develops the Captain American mythos and offers an understanding of the methods used by comic book publishers and fans to create more racially inclusive comic book narratives.

Black female characters have also played a significant role in crossing boundaries and challenging mainstream standards, while highlighting issues of racism and sexism. Many of these characters provoke discourses surrounding the "Black body" and the Black woman. These explorations can be seen in such characters as DC Comics' Amanda Waller, who, throughout her history, has been portrayed as a villain and an anti-hero. Serving in a significant role as director of the Suicide Squad team, Waller's personality is mirrored after previous Black female icons and Blaxploitation figures Foxy Brown, Cleopatra Jones, and T.N.T. Jackson. These influences, plus her assertive, tenacious, and controlling behavior contributed to Waller being one of the most feared and respected characters in the DC Universe, hence her nickname "The Wall."

From a physical standpoint, Waller's character creates a discourse around body representation. Illustrated mainly as a plus-size character, Waller introduces conversations regarding body positivity and pushes against white, western standards of beauty. As a whole, Waller's character and temperament would pave the way for several characters that followed her such as Milestone Comics *Blood Syndicate* member Brickhouse and Image Comics *Bitch Planet* character Penny Rolle. Further exploration of the multi-faceted depictions in Black female comic characters is shown in the Marvel Comics character, Monica Rambeau. Monica Rambeau is a significant character primarily due to her status of becoming the second Captain Marvel[90] (also known as Captain Marvel II) in October 1982, being the first and only African American to hold the title, and her longstanding leadership with the Avengers.

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[89] The Tuskegee Syphilis Study (full name the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male) was a dishonorable clinical study by the U.S. Public Health Service that ran from 1932 to 1972 and became a 'byword' for racial and unethical medical experimentation. The study involved 600 poor and uneducated African American men from Macon County, Alabama, who many would be infected with latent syphilis and never treated. The legacy of this experiment speaks to the long-lasting trauma, hesitation, and damaged trust that African Americans have towards public health efforts. As noted in Brandt, A. M. (1978). *Racism and Research: The Case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study*. Retrieved from Harvard University-The Hastings Center Report website: https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/3372911/brandt_racism.pdf?sequence=1

[90] The first Captain Marvel was previously portrayed by an alien military officer in 1967.

With the emergence of more Black characters in comic book narratives, the quest for diverse representation continues. In spite of problematic narratives and societal fears, each of these characters ultimately pushes the boundaries of how we can interrogate race and masculinity in superhero comics. As Adilifu Nama notes, these heroes "serve as a source of potent racial meaning that has substance and resonance far beyond their function and anticipated shelf life."[91]

Not only have there been noteworthy strides in Marvel and DC, there is also a continued legacy of Black comic book publishing companies. Although Orrin C. Evans' *All-Negro Comics* would be the first Black owned and Black character-centered publishing company, there would not be another of its kind for over forty years. Building on Evans' legacy, artist Dawud Anyabwile and writer Guy A. Sims and Jason Sims, a fraternal team, created the *Brotherman: Dictator of Discipline* comic book series. Through this fraternal collaboration, and the disillusionment of present-day superheroes, the brothers sought to create and self-publish a comic book series that presented characters that looked like them, while also addressing the concerns of African Americans. Publishing the first issue in April 1990 and lasting until July 1996, *Brotherman* told the story of lead character Antonio Valor (Brotherman) who is committed to bringing justice to his home of Big City. Described as "armed only with his strength, wit, intellect, and his drive, Antonio Valor, straddles the line of being both the keeper and dispenser of the law."[92] An average attorney by day, Valor transforms into Brotherman, a superhero identity that encompasses street-fighting skills and an inner power that promotes self-discipline. Inspired by influential men in Anyabwile's life, "Brotherman" pays homage to those "who often go unrecognized but who are doing heroic feats like helping troubled kids in the neighborhood and being there for their families."[93] Thus, the simplistic portrayal of the Brotherman superhero was intentional for Anyabwile as he wanted to create a relatable character.[94]

Running until July of 1996, the series would take an extended hiatus till 2015. Resurfacing with a new graphic novel series, *Brotherman: Dictator of Disciple: Revelation* (2016) published by Big City Entertainment, Anyabwile would collaborate again with his brother Guy and add colorist Brian McGee to complete the first part of the renewed series. In spite of the hiatus, there still remained a dedicated following of fans. As stated by Morris Gardner, program division manager of Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American History and Culture (Atlanta, GA), "Brotherman has such an amazing following and crosses several generations," while also bringing "culturally relevant information to kids who may not be avid readers."[95] Described as both "historical and unique" by the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture (NMAAHC)[96] and fans, it has been argued that the series ignited the Black independent comic movement.

[91] Nama, A. (2014). "Introduction." In *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (p. 8). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

[92] Big City Entertainment. (2016). *Brotherman Comics*-About. Retrieved from https://www.brothermancomics.com

[93] Poole, S. (2013, November 11). "Brotherman" creator relaunches comic book series. Retrieved from https://www.ajc.com/news/local/brotherman-creator-relaunches-comic-book-series/LCWYelUvkNCVGXy1LmEg5H/

[94] Stidhum, T. R. (2018, January). These Philly Brothers' Comic Book Series Will Be Enshrined In The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Retrieved from https://blavity.com/philly-brothers-comic-book-series-will-be-enshrined-in-the-smithsonian-national-museum-of-african-american-history-and-culture

[95] Poole, 2013

[96] The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture (NMAAHC) in January 2018 announced the addition of artwork and memorabilia from the *Brotherman Comics* series. This achievement serves as

Brotherman showed a generation of Black comic book fans as well as future artists and writers the importance of telling our own stories and being represented in the comic book industry. *Brotherman* also proves that these stories can be told without having to rely on mainstream publishing companies. In addition to the comic and graphic novel series, there is an accompanying youth book series from Guy titled, *The Cold Hard Cases of Duke Denim*, and a creative collaboration/partnership between Big City Entertainment, Emory University's Center for Digital Scholarship (ECDS), and Emory's Stuart A. Rose Library that explores the endless possibilities of world building via virtual reality and comic art.[97] Beginning as a self-publishing entrepreneurial project, the character and series becomes an example of how Black comics can break boundaries and even re-invent themselves.

Another Black publishing company that would break ground in the comic book industry was Milestone Media (formerly known as Milestone Comics). Founded in 1993, Milestone Media is a union of Black artists and writers (Dwayne McDuffie, Denys Cowan, Michael Davis, and Derek T. Dingle) who felt there were a severe under-and misrepresentation of Black and other characters of color within comics. In the past, Black characters that were part of the two major companies Marvel and DC in the 1970s had been identified as petty criminals, comic relief sidekicks, and savages, and/or of the Blaxploitation era. Thus, it was essential to create and provide a new set of legitimate heroes in comics. Moreover, the function of Milestone's superheroes was meant to serve as a "focal point for interpreting revisionist notions of African American characters in comparison to more mainstream comic book ideals." Milestone Media would also enable progressive interpretations of masculinity which infused both intelligence and physicality.[98]

While Milestone Media is a Black publishing company with Black creators and Black characters, they would function as an independent company within a larger mainstream comic giant, DC Comics. Having this distinctive arrangement allowed for the flourishing of Milestone, as their books were printed in a quality format as well as being fully distributed on an international level. This was a unique and complicated position and different from Anyabwile and Brotherman Comics*/Big City.* Nevertheless, Milestone's mission to directly address the intricacy and diversity of the real world and reaching the largest audience possible through a major professional structure of distribution always remained the overall agenda.[99]

Milestone launched such notable titles as *Hardware, Icon*, *Blood Syndicate*, and *Static* that covered a wide array of sensitive and political topics, including teen pregnancy, gang violence, drug abuse, and tense relations between Black and Jewish communities. Most, if not all, of these topics would not be addressed in DC or Marvel*,* until later in each of the company's tenures. As openly relayed by the Milestone founders,

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Brotherman Comics becoming one of the first comic book series to go into the NMAAHC archive collection for use in research and exhibitions.

[97] This virtual reality and comic art experience initiated by Clint Fluker serves as a prototype that explores the possibilities of GIS mapping and various immersive techniques to highlight the creative process and design elements associated with developing fictional worlds. It can be found at the following link: https://www.bigcitymap.com

[98] Brown, J. A. (2001). Introduction: New Heroes. In *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (p. 2). Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

[99] Consistent distribution is essential to the survival of a comic and a major basis for establishing a loyal fan base.

Diversity's our story, and we're sticking to it. The variety of cultures and experiences out there make for better comics in here. When people get excited about the diversity in here maybe they'll get just as excited about the diversity out there—Call it a mission.[100]

The mission would serve in a dual role of educating and informing as well as entertaining their readers. Milestone's characters also reached from all ages as they included young adolescent and teen characters (ex. Static and Rocket) and adult characters (ex. Hardware, Icon, Technique). This mission also translated beyond the comic book medium as some of the characters, particularly Static, would be able to move from page to television screen.

After Milestone withdrew from their comic book partnership with DC in 1997, the company strictly became a licensing business that concentrated mainly on the animated show *Static Shock*.[101] However, much like Anyabwile and Brotherman Comics, Milestone would also venture in its own revival of sorts. In 2008, many of the Milestone characters would be revived and merged into the DC Universe, continuing and creating new narratives. Ten years later, Milestone would make another major announcement at the 2017 New York Comic Con with the "Return to the Dakota Universe" panel. The panel announced the return of co-founders Denys Cowan and Derek T. Dingle and the addition of (at the time BET president) Reginald Hudlin. Milestone also revealed that there will be a new writing and artists staff, the return of three titles—including *Milestone* (featuring Icon and Rocket), a revamped *Static* series, and "Duo" (based on the character Xombi), and two new titles: *Earth-M* and *Love Army*.[102]

Despite the limited series of *Brotherman Comics* and the critiques of Milestone, both companies provided a blueprint for exploring the ways in which Black companies survive, revamp, and create original content. The success of both companies would lay the foundation for other independent Black comic book companies like Ania and Kamite Comics to follow suit. Milestone and Brotherman, in their own unique way, carry on the legacy and tradition of *All Negro Comics*, but further contribute to the overall impact of the comic book world, and as well as the Black culture as a whole.

Queering Their Stories
Until recently, comic book narratives within mainstream publishing have been primarily based in a white, male, and heteronormative storyline. Characters of color, specifically Black, and queer character narratives now have a visible presence in both in mainstream and independent publishing comics. For most of the genre's history, though, queer storylines were relegated to underground and alternative comic book publishing companies (i.e. Image Comics, Dark Horse Comics, and Fantagraphics Books). There has been hesitancy to include queer characters of color that cross into the mainstream. The queer narrative in comic books in the mainstream has been relegated primarily to white characters such as Marvel Comics first major

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[100] This statement was found in the introductory editorial page of all four of the first issues.

[101] 'Static' was one of the first DC animated shows to feature major team-ups with members of the Justice League, doing crossover events with both the Justice League and Batman Beyond shows. Thus, Static Shock became an integral part of early 2000s superhero animation.

[102] McMillan, G. (2017, October 5). "DC to Relaunch Milestone Universe With 2018's 'Earth M'." Retrieved from http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/dc-entertainment-reginald-hudlin-relaunch-milestone-universe-2018s-earth-m-1046249 ; Gerding, S. (2017, October 5). Milestone Returns With Static Shock, Earth M From DC Comics. Retrieved from https://www.cbr.com/milestone-dc-comics-earth-m/

homosexual character Northstar from the Alpha Flight superhero team; Xavin, a non-binary/gender queer character from the Marvel Comics *Runaway* series, and *All-New X-Men* gay character Iceman/Bobby Drake. Nevertheless, there has been a sizeable independent and a slow growing mainstream representation of queer comic of color characters.

Fantagraphics was one of the first publishers to embrace and acknowledge various sexual identities and include LGBT-themed relative narratives. This is seen in the series *Love & Rockets*, which has become a series that has redefined the white, male, cis standard of comics. Created by the Hernandez brothers (Gilbert, Jamie, and Mario) during the 1980s alternative comics movement,[103] *Love & Rockets* was one of the first series to deliver progressive, complex representations of race, gender, and sexuality from the point of view a Latinx. The series also incorporated blended elements of fantasy, magic realism, and real-life social groups in Los Angeles, California. Another series that fused an explicit Black queer narrative, under a Black feminist framework, was the Dark Horse Comics series *Concrete Park*. Conceived by actress Erika Alexander and screenwriter Tony Puryear in 2011, *Concrete Park* was a two-volume series that depicted a dark and provocative Afrofuturistic story; it follows a group of Black and Latino teenagers in a tempestuous mega metropolis, dystopia "Scare City." By redefining and imagining a Black future, Puryear and Alexander are able to challenge past assumptions and myths like "Black people don't like science fiction — they don't see themselves in the future;" critique present injustices and oppressions such as the prison industrial complex system; and create a space for freedom and renewal through imagined spaces. Primarily voiced by two Black/Latina leads, Luca and Lena, themes of gender and sexuality are prioritized throughout the series and not just employed as a token subject matter in a creative storyline.

Image Comics also became popular publishing company for embarking upon Black, queer storylines. For example, the *Bitch Planet* series undertakes a similar task of embracing an openness to love anyone with the inclusion of lesbian relationship between two female characters Fanny and Renelle. Moreover, both *Bitch Planet* and *Concrete Park* feature creative narratives that critique the prison industrial complex system all through the lens of futuristic and dystopian realities. Another significant story from Image Comics is the graphic novel *VIRGIL*. Written by Steve Orlando, *VIRGIL* discusses the complexities of Black masculinity. *VIRGIL*'s storyline also challenges Black male hero archetypes and disrupts the traditional masculinity model within Jamaican/West Indian culture.

Finally, from the mainstream publishing companies, Marvel Comics recently embarked on the queer narrative with its first African queer couple: Ayo and Aneka of the Dora Milaje. The innovative 2016 *World of Wakanda* series was written by Roxanne Gay and Yona Harvey. I offer an in-depth discussion of this series in chapter two. Overall, the abovementioned stories include not only Black, queer representation, but also representations of Black survival, endurance, and resistance, which are often unacknowledged and or minimalized in comic book narratives.

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[103] The alternative comics movement was created to serve as shift from the mainstream superhero comic storyline, which had been dominating the 1960s and 1970s. Spanning a wide range of genres, styles, and subjects' alternative comics were published in small numbers so as to go against the traditional distribution scheduling. This allowed authors to publish on their own timeline without mainstream restrictions.

Speculative Blackness in Comics

The blending of fantasy and reality with the incorporation of Blackness is not limited to Octavia Butler novels, Janelle Monae music videos, or African-based sci-fi short films like Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi* (2009). Comic books have also played a role in interpreting speculative blackness. In many ways, comic books as a medium incorporates Afrofuturistic and exploratory elements that provide a fantasy setting resulting in visual storytelling. These choices sometime express a desire for Black characters to escape traumatic and oppressive encounters. Comics provide an entry point to discuss and explore the way that race and gender intersect with science fiction and technology. They create historically rare opportunities for creatives to re-write and re-draw previously depicted narratives—imagining realms that are filled with science-fiction realms, magical realism, African spiritual explorations, and technological advances.

One such example of this opportunity can be seen in *Marvel Comics* character "Brother Voodoo/Dr. Jericho Drumm."[104] Created with the intention of being a "heroic practitioner of voodoo and black magic (pro papu),"[105] Brother Voodoo is a lesser-known character that makes his first appearance in 1973, not long after the introduction of other Marvel Comics characters Black Panther (1966) and Luke Cage (1972). The Haitian-born superhero persona blended horror and supernatural motifs, and also reinforced conflicting and problematic racialized tropes. Brother Voodoo functioned as a sidekick who brings in occult/mystic-like elements, or the generic representation of his native homeland Haiti as voodoo cultists, unnamed villagers, and filled with tragedy. In spite of these misrepresentations, Brother Voodoo was one of the few period comics that had a narrative featuring a Black hero and composed of majority Black and Brown faces.

Another character from the DC Universe with similar characteristics was Papa Linton Midnite who made his first appearance in January 1988. Also, of Caribbean heritage, Papa Midnite is depicted as a Jamaican voodoo priest who was taught the family tradition of voodoo mysticism. For Papa Midnite, becoming a voodoo priest was both a spiritual calling and a means of survival. Sadly, his skills were pathologized in the series, and he was depicted more as a villain than a hero. Like so many other Black/African Diasporic characters, Papa Midnite's skills were used in nefarious ways as he often pretended to help people, but then tricked and conned them out of their money.

The speculative is a long-familiar mode in conventional novels, but there has been an increase in speculative graphic novels inspired by Black American mythological and folklore.[106] This is especially apparent in the Zuda graphic novel *Bayou* (2009) written by Jeremy Love. *Bayou* blends elements of the "Civil War, blues, African mythology, Southern Gothic and

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[104] Brother Voodoo would star in his own series, Strange Tales #169-#173 from Sept. 1973 – April 1974 and a feature in the black-and-white horror-comics magazine Tales of the Zombie #6 (July 1974, in a story continuing from Strange Tales #173) and #10 (March 1975).

[105] Aushenker, M. (April 2014). "Disposable Heroes". Back Issue!. Raleigh, North Carolina: TwoMorrows Publishing (71): 33–37.

[106] Other examples of speculative blackness in the graphic novel format include the Kyle Baker's 2006 "Nat Turner" text, Damian Duffy and John Jennings 2017 "Kindred" based on Octavia Butler's book of the same name, and Whit Taylor's 2018 "Ghost Stories".

American folklore."[107] It also pushes the boundaries of the types of stories that comics can tell. Lee, the story's main protagonist, is a young Black girl on a mission to rescue her friend and save her father from an impending lynch-mob death. Pulling from the folklore of Tar Baby and Brer Rabbit, *Bayou* follows in the tradition of young girls exploring fantastical realms similar to Alice (*Alice in Wonderland*), Wendy (*Peter Pan*), and Dorothy (*Wizard of Oz*). Lee's story differs from these other works of fiction, as her fantasy world is an actual American historical reality filled with pain and prejudice. Originally starting as webcomic and then moving to print form (under DC Comics), Love is able to craft an emotional and imaginative storyline that engages with the harsh realities of African American life in 1930s American south. Furthermore, while *Bayou* is able to address such issues as post-slavery and lynching, through a supernatural lens, it does so without glossing over the horror or sensationalizing the trauma.

Other important examples that incorporate speculative blackness include independent illustrator and creator Ashley A. Woods's comic book *Millennia War*, which intermixes the experience of everyday life, visual semblances of the pastoral, and futurism as the backdrop for a "race war" between humans and Elvaans (elves).[108] This comic blends real world problems with fantasy. The Dark Horse Comics comic book series *Give Me Liberty* is another graphic novel that incorporates the speculative. *Give Me Liberty* introduces the Black female sci-fi freedom fighter "Martha Washington." Set in a dystopic future-Chicago, Martha rises up from the horrible conditions in the now demolished Cabrini-Green housing project to become a computer programmer turned revolutionary. She uses her tech-savvy talents to fight off megalomaniacal artificial intelligence in outer space, while also seeking humanity on planet Earth.

As a whole, these characters represent amalgams of the African Diaspora. Their narratives blend race, religion, and culture identity.[109] Nevertheless, in some cases, Voodoo and Hoodoo culture is appropriated as an African mystical superhero ability, leading to missed opportunities to further engage with the religion and culture. However, the use of African cosmology, Afrofuturism, historical fiction, religion and spirituality, invoked in many of these characters and their storylines, are not simply the commodification of popular culture; rather they help build worldviews that highlight the complexities and richness of that the African Diaspora.

Finding a New Normal: Race and Disability

Disability is regularly represented in the larger format of television and film, and depictions of disability is just as prevalent in the comic book format. Over the years, a wide-range of disabilities has been represented in comics and related media. Comics, as an art form, has been able to personify stories of extraordinary individuals who overcome odds, but also show their struggles with acceptance and identity. In particular, Marvel Comics has presented an array of characters that are disabled. More notable characters include Daredevil, Professor X, and Hawkeye.[110] However, there are lesser-known disabled characters of color whose narratives should be more widely acknowledged, and in some cases re-imagined.

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[107] Hogan, J. (2009, June 2). Jeremy Love's American Style | GraphicNovelReporter. Retrieved from https://www.graphicnovelreporter.com/authors/jeremy-love/news/interview-060209
[108] Woods, A. A. *Millennia War: The Graphic Novel.* vol. 1*,* [Comic Book], Indy Planet, 2010.
[109] Chireau, Y. (2016, November 17). "Graphic Voodoo: Africana Religion in Comics" – AAIHS [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://www.aaihs.org/graphic-voodoo-africana-religion-in-comics/
[110] Although depicted as disabled in comics, he does not retain his disabled identity in other popular adaptations.

The few disabled Black characters in comics that do exist are often reduced in importance; they are enhanced with hyper-abilities, but remain alienated and villainized or their disability made invisible. Some of these characters have the ability to provide a balance between reflecting various, real-life situations, while also contesting the way we define disability. For example, Marvel Comics superheroine Silhouette is a character who was paralyzed from the waist down in a police raid gone wrong. As a result of her paralysis, she is given a special pair of combat crutches and leg braces; this can be read as an enhancement or her body being transformed into a weapon. In addition to the transformation of her legs, Silhouette also has the ability to teleport over short distances and "melt into shadows." These particular powers invoke a type of magical realism and fantasy, which allow her to enter into other dimensions due to her human-mutant composition. Nevertheless, even with these special abilities and weapon-like tools, Silhouette is not exempt from the stereotypical tropes as she is also portrayed as a "brainwashed bodyguard."

DC Comics also contributes to important conversations about race and disability, complicates the disability narrative, and offers a reinvented idea of "human machine" through the character Cyborg/Victor Stone. Best known as a member of the Teen Titans and the Justice League, Cyborg establishes a discourse around the idea of disability and adjustment. His character has several incarnations. Due to the paucity of Black male superheroes, early depictions of Cyborg portray him as a Black hero that confounds tokenism as diversity. Due to being in a near fatal accident (which results in him becoming a human-machine), the loss of his mother, and a strained relationship with his father, his character often embodies a self-deprecating and self-pity mentality. Throughout his storyline, Cyborg/Victor wrestles with trauma, pain, and a need to feel and be "normal." Many critics argue that Victor/Cyborg's self-pity is a sort of indirect commentary on the way white society feels about Black people's complaints towards white supremacy and anti-Black racism;[111] essentially, Black people become the source of their own suffering.

This rendering of anti-Blackness is further apparent in Cyborg's DC Universe *New 52* appearance. Interestingly, before his *New 52* appearance, Cyborg's sexual nature was not clear. His revamped appearance renders him literally emasculated and asexualized, as he is given no genitals. This emasculation and asexualization is further apparent in his interactions with other female characters, especially Justice League teammate Wonder Woman. Nevertheless, Cyborg/Victor does deliver a level of importance through his logical nature and a balance of lightheartedness and seriousness. As a part of the Justice League, his teammates are able to trust his intelligence and abilities. In spite of his narrative being filled with trauma and pain, the Cyborg/Victor story tackles the physical and emotional aspect of disability and becomes an example of how one adjusts and creates a new normal.

Along with the Silhouette character, Marvel Comics also created another character that balances between disability and adjustment, Misty Knight who I discuss at length in Chapter Two. As a character who becomes disabled, losing her right arm, due to a bomb explosion, Misty's storyline serves as a way to disrupt the narrative that having a disability means having to overcome some sort of suggested limitation. Given the insufficiency of representations of

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[111] Jones, Jr., R. (2017, December 30). "Humanity Not Included: DC's Cyborg and the Mechanization of the Black Body"-The Middle Spaces. Retrieved from https://themiddlespaces.com/2015/03/31/humanity-not-included/

women of color in the arts and media, as well as disabled protagonists, representations at the intersections of race and disability are particularly important, and visualizing them contributes to their normalization. Misty's distinctive story provides a lens into the daily experiences of a disabled person who functions with a technologically advanced prosthetic.

Both Misty Knight and Cyborg are examples of comic book characters who transform and re-define how we can approach disability. While Misty Knight operates in real-life situations, this is opposite for Cyborg and Silhouette, as their sci-fi prosthesis enhancements may not fully capture the reality of disability in today's society. Overall, Silhouette, Cyborg, and Misty Knight particularly allow for conversations surrounding "reimagining disability," and they ways in which we can be more inclusive of people with disabilities and blend reality with fantasy. Their narratives encourage more conversations regarding the intersections of disability, gender, and race.

To Be Young, Gifted, Black and in Comics
Comic books serve as a form of entertainment and as tools for getting children excited about reading; they are also methods for emboldening teenagers to develop their own imaginations and express their viewpoints. However, this is complicated by the fact that the majority of comic book characters are adults. Relatability becomes even more of a daunting task for Black children. In the past, many of the characters that Black youth looked up to were Marvel Comics Wolverine and DC Comics Batman and Superman, who all happened to be white men.

There has been a recent influx of youthful, age-appropriate Black characters that have entered the comic book realm. Many of their narratives engage with a variety of fun and provocative topics ranging from geek culture to teenage pregnancy. One of the most prominent Black youthful characters to date is that of Milestone Comics, Static Shock/Virgil Hawkins,[112] who makes his first appearance in 1993. Static, who draws inspiration from Marvel Comics Spider-Man, is a highly gifted student who has precise interests in sciences and possesses a "fanboy" type of knowledge for comic books, pop culture, science-fiction, technology, and role-playing games. Static, for a pre-teen audience, serves as an example that engaging with geek and nerd culture can be accessible and acceptable.

Along with discussing the intersections of Black youth culture and geek culture, Milestone Comics would also deal with more conservative and challenging issues with the character of Raquel "Rocket" Irvin. Although Rocket is a sidekick to title character Icon, she often outshines him in the series. As noted by writer/creator Dwayne McDuffie, Rocket, who aspires to be a writer like Toni Morrison, is said to be influenced W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*.[113] Rocket's character provides an existing reality and a story of perseverance. Early in her superhero career, she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son. While Rocket's pregnancy presented a temporary halt in her superhero adventures, she eventually is able to resume these activities while maintaining the role of a mother.

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[112] Static's main identity, Virgil Hawkins, was named after a Black man who was denied entrance into the University of Florida's law school in 1949. As noted in Fox, M. "Dwayne McDuffie, Comic-Book Writer, Dies at 49." *The New York Times*, February 23, 2011.
[113] Du Bois, W. E. (1903). *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago, IL: A.C. McClurg & Co.

Another character that follows in the legacy of Static and Rocket is Marvel Comics is Lunella Lafayette from the *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*[114] series, which I discuss at length in Chapter Three. Created in 2015 by writers Amy Reeder-Hadley and Brandon Montclare and illustrated by Natacha Bustos, the character and the series were seen as a push to diversify the comic book narrative. Although her storyline is very young, Lunella has been deemed as the smartest person in the Marvel Comics Universe, which puts her ahead of other super-genius comic characters who happen to be white and male (i.e. Tony Stark/Iron Man and Reed Richards/Mr. Fantastic, Bruce Banner/Incredible Hulk). Lunella's narrative humanizes the experience of little Black girls, while also celebrating their intelligence. Her narrative also serves as an example of the ways in which comics can collaborate with the STE[A]M (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) field and provide another entry point for young Black girls to engage with these disciplines. Lunella is gifted, and shows that intelligence can be both youthful and Black.

Young Black comic book characters do not need to take on the attributes of an adult hero. Arguably, their young fans can identify more fully with characters who look, talk, and feel like them, and share similar life challenges. These gifted and talented characters and their storylines reveal a needed change beyond the world of comics. In spite of the struggles faced by these characters, their narratives speak to a will to survive and thrive.

Space and Place in Comics

In this historical survey, I have explored specific Black characters, creators, writers, and artists. It is also important to acknowledge the spaces in which important discussions and conversations are happening. Although there are numerous articles, books, and commentaries that engage with the many aspects of Blackness in comics, the convention and conference space has created another outlet to create and continue those dialogues. Black conferences and conventions, in particular, have played a significant role in allowing Black voices and bodies to move from "margin to center."[115]

As the number of Black characters, writers, and creatives increases, there is an increasingly apparent need to see diverse individuals represented in comic book pages; that same feeling is also desired on larger pop culture arenas. This desire was manifested in the creation of the Black Age of Comics Movement and Convention. Garnering inspiration from the 1960s-1970s Black Arts Movement, the Black Age of Comics Convention, which was first organized in 1993 in Chicago, Illinois, emphasized a motivational two-fold mission centered on economic development and education. The mission was to focus on the importance of Black ownership in comics, while providing young African-American readers with positive messages and aspiring creatives a venue to showcase their talents.

As a result of this self-determination effort, it would further expand, and also inspire others to follow suit. The East Coast Black Age of Comics (ECBACC) was established in 2002, and has become the longest-running all-Black convention to date. Held annually in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, ECBACC has pioneered in providing a space to give Black heroes, super-powered

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[114] *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* is the re-imagining of the Moon-Boy character in the 1978 Marvel comic "Devil Dinosaur".

[115] As noted by bell hooks in hooks, b. (2014). *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. London, England: Routledge.

characters, and their creators a voice in the comic book industry. In addition to the convention, ECBACC also sponsors "The Glyph Comics Awards,"[116] which recognizes the best in comics made by, for, and about people of color from the previous calendar year.

The presence of such a convention and the awards allows creatives the opportunity to gain exposure, recognition, and build community. Such activities are important as Black characters and creatives are often ignored, minimalized, and excluded from other larger and predominately white spaces. Other conventions that push for the representation of Blackness in comics include ONYX-CON-Sankofa (Atlanta, GA), Sol-Con (Columbus, OH), BlerDCon (Washington, DC), the Schomburg's Center Black Comic Book Festival (Harlem, NY), and the Black Comix Arts Festival (San Francisco, CA), and numerous others in Los Angeles, Detroit, and Texas.

Even in the midst of obstacles and failures, past and present, Black characters, creators, artist and spaces have still been able to survive and thrive. But the future of Blackness in comics is something that must be actively cultivated. As historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes, the "future is unwritten and undrawn, but we can be sure that, like the past, it will reflect the genius and creativity of African Americans [and those of the African diaspora] shaping worlds within worlds within their minds and pens."[117] More stories are created, tropes and stereotypes are re-written, and boundaries are pushed. And the growing realm of Blackness and comics continues to merit careful scholarly analysis and attention.

Creating Future Black Female Narratives
This study while incorporating several academic disciplines reimagines them, while seeking to create future community collaborations and offers various contributions. First, it will be an important contribution to examining the representation and complexities of the Black female characters within the study popular culture, which have been understudied or relegated to certain stereotypes and misconceptions. Second, this dissertation explores discussing the transformative properties of comic books, their Black female characters, and creators**.** Many of these discussions build on the work of such scholars as Deborah Whaley and her specific work on Black female representation in comics, graphic novels, and anime in her 2015 text *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime*; Ramzi Fawaz analysis of post-World War II superhero comics using a queer theory framework in his 2016 text *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*; and the impact of social protest and controversial antiracist messages in 1950s crime and horror comics in Qiana Whitted's 2019 text *EC Comics: Race, Shock, and Social Protest*. Although each of the above texts offer various viewpoints and frameworks, they also along with the current project contribute to the highlighting underrepresented communities and challenge racist, sexist, and nationalist ideals upheld by past and present American comics. Lastly, the characters discussed in this dissertation offers an understanding of how they face their fears, find love, embrace

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[116] The Glyph Comics Awards were named for the blog Glyphs: The Language of the Black Comics Community at Pop Culture Shock, started in 2005 by comics journalist Rich Watson as a means to provide news and commentary of comics with black themes, as well as tangential topics in the fields of black science-fiction/fantasy and animation.
[117] Gates Jr., H. L. (2017). Foreword. In S. C. Howard (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Black Comics* (p. xiii). Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing.

difference, and pursue a passion. These narratives also address societal issues, reflect on historical trends, and new academic inquiries, which include Black feminism personified in comic form, disability and defining the new normal, the promotion of #BlackGirlMagic in STEM, and Black female digital storytelling.

As an imaginative, academic project, it seeks to facilitate a dialogue about the creation of a futuristic Black female identity as well as enables Black female voices (adult and children) to be heard and included in all dialogues. This is done through a curatorial approach. Many of these chapters are written in a non-traditional format (i.e. photo essay) and incorporate brief character profiles. Thus, as a result they can be easily translated beyond the ivory tower and be useful for those designing library and museum exhibits, K-12 curricula and after-school programs, and community workshops. Using a curatorial, non-traditional approach makes the stories available to multiple audiences across academic and non-academic communities. Their stories can and should be incorporated into traditional academic spaces, especially courses on the topics of Black feminist theory, media and film, disability studies, and cultural studies. Furthermore, the study's approach implements new, revised, and seasoned ideas of thought attached to Black women and girls that are voiced through Black female comic book superheroes. Ultimately, as a project that translates across spaces it serves a dual function of educating and as possible template guide for future community collaboration pursuits with such organizations as *Black Girls Code, Black Girls Rock!, and the Museum of dis-ABILITY*. Ultimately, this work re-imagines the boundaries of the academy, while creating cross-discipline collaborations with Africana Studies, comic book studies, and new media through new methods, models, and media.

This chronicling of Black women and girl as superheroes and digital curators seeks to introduce to many and re-introduce to others the importance of acknowledging and analyzing these diverse narratives. Although there is a growing catalog of Black female characters and fandom networks within comics I have selected from a wide range of materials to highlight connections and illuminate juxtapositions among and between various artifacts. Chapter One begins with a photo essay that chronicles the radical Black feminist and queer narratives that are deployed throughout the history (in comic books and cinematically) of one of mainstream comics only all-Black female military unit, Marvel Comics the Dora Milaje.

Chapter One: Stepping into the Spotlight: Introducing the Dora Milaje

A new crew is in town

Traditionally, superheroes are solo acts. Fans and readers connect with the individual struggles and attention-grabbing dynamics of a single superhero, yet there is something uniquely engaging about group dynamics. The first major superhero team emerged in 1940, with All-Star Comics Justice Society of America. Since them, the superhero concept has evolved dramatically. But despite the recent public attention garnered by such films as *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, or *Suicide Squad* and *Justice League*, or *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* little scholarly consideration has been given to the examination and significance of the superhero team, or the gender and racial norms these groups enforce and defy.

Many of these superhero groups are primarily white and male, and if women are included, there is only one token female—e.g. Wonder Woman in Justice League, Invisible Girl/Sue Storm in Fantastic Four, and the cinematic version of the *Avengers* featuring Black Widow. In rare cases, there are two women team members, such as Storm and Jean Grey/Phoenix in the X-Men. Prior to 2003, there were no well-established mainstream all-female superhero teams. This gap in the comic book universe changed when Gail Simone became the writer for DC Comics *Birds of Prey* series. Simone expanded the team from two women (Oracle and Black Canary) to, at times, four to five women,[118] all while gradually showcasing the deep arsenal of female characters from the DC Universe. Other comic book publishing companies followed suit by increasing female representation on their superhero teams, and even establish all-female teams (e.g. Femforce[119] by A.C. Comics, A-Force by Marvel Comics, and the all female X-Men team by Marvel Comics, and Danger Girl by IDW Publishing). Many of these superhero teams incorporate feminist ideas by proclaiming their independence, fighting patriarchy and misogyny, and disrupting problematic, stereotypical gender tropes.

Despite the effort to diversify mainstream comic books , and to bring more girls and women into the male-dominated fan base, there are still few all-Black superhero teams (noteable exceptions include Blood Syndicate by Milestone Comics, and The Crew by Marvel Comics); there are even fewer all-Black and female groups. On February 16th, 2018, Marvel Comics, showcased their longest-running Black comic book character T'Challa/Black Panther, in a film that placed a spotlight on Black female characters. The 2018 film *Black Panther* focused a great deal of attention on a group of Black female master combatant warriors known as the "adored ones" or the Dora Milaje. This chapter investigates the various evolutions of the Dora Milaje from their first comic book appearance in 1998, to their cinematic debut in the 2018 blockbuster *Black Panther*. Each iteration offers an opportunity to explore how Afrofuturism plays a role in the re-writing and re-creating of the Dora Milaje. These characters' narratives also engage with what Samantha Pinto notes as a "Black feminist imagination."

The cultural work of Afrofuturism, Black feminist thought, and intentional inclusion is an important and understudied part of the Black comic book tradition, both in the United States and globally. This blending of Afrofuturism and Black feminism is a key part of a framework that I

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[118] Periodically, there have been some men who served as guests of the team (i.e. Nightwing, Hawk, Wildcat, among others.)

[119] "Femforce" also known as the "Federal Emergency Missions Force," which began publication in 1985, are the first and longest-running all-women superhero team, with over 150 issues.

call future feminism. which I define as a political project that interrogates the potential possibility of a character's power to morph in unimaginable ways to secure freedom and justice from opposing forces. Future feminists assert independence in ways that disrupts gender norms and expectations; they defy restrictive stereotypes by creating their own knowledge and visions of liberation. Mainly occupying fictional spaces such as fantasy, comics, and science-fiction, future feminists challenge boundaries in order to achieve transformation.

The Dora Milaje exemplify the future feminism idea differently across their various iterations As Audre Lorde says, "Revolution is not a onetime event." The Dora Milaje are revolutionary, and ultimately become empowering figures whose distinctive and multi-faceted storylines address sexuality, Black womanhood, and African traditions. They are not above critique, particularly in their early years, when they were frequently depicted as hypersexualized peripheral characters. Yet, this unusual Black female superhero collective has played an important historical role in comics and popular media, particularly in challenging stereotypical representations of Black womanhood and girlhood. In many ways, the Dora Milaje narratives, and the creative teams behind them, are doing what acclaimed comic book writer G. Willow Wilson states as challenging the script, and we must "keep on telling different stories"[120] by widening the door of complex and diverse storylines within the comic book medium.

Although the Dora Milaje are fictional characters, their narratives deal with real-world issues. With the growing popularity of comic books, and the films and television shows that accompany them, the narratives provide agency, re-write standards of beauty scripts, while refuting and dismantling past stereotypical notions that have been historically attached to Black women. Each of the Dora Milaje's iterations, whether on-screen or on the comic book pages, offers potential inspiration to all types of women, but especially to Black women and girls. The Dora Milaje contribute to the real work of moving from "from margin to center." Revisiting the Dora Milaje, according to *Black Panther* writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, also "creates a template for how the sexist, troubling backstories of long-standing female characters can be flawlessly course-corrected." This re-introduction of the Dora Milaje through these various storylines provides readers and viewers multiple ways to see how this group of African diasporic women creates new ways to embrace Black femaleness, while disrupting the power shifts in a heteronormative, white, male society.

It all started in 1998…

The Dora Milaje made their first appearance in *Black Panther* Vol. 3, Issue 1, "The Client" (Figure 1.1) (November 1998), an issue written by Christopher Priest (Mark Texeira also served as co-creator and penciller/artist). The backstory of this elite all-female military faction of Wakanda was somewhat problematic, as this fighting force was assembled with a dual purpose: each young girl was trained to be both as Wakandan warrior and potential future wife to the king. The original make-up of the Dora Milaje is layered and complex, addressing the issues of tradition, patriarchy, and child warriors. Earlier interpretations of the Dora Milaje followed five central characters (Aneka, Ayo, Okoye, Nakia/Malice, and Queen Divine Justice) who were

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[120] Williams, M., & Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF). (2019, March 26). A Marvel in Her Own Right, G. Willow Wilson – She Changed Comics. Retrieved from http://cbldf.org/2019/03/a-marvel-in-her-own-right-g-willow-wilson-she-changed-comics/

sometimes presented as submissive warriors who were motivated only by loyalty to the king; that loyalty required them to sacrifice their personal lives and hide their emotions.

Character Profile

I am loyal to that throne. No matter who sits on it. ~Okoye (Dora Milaja member)

Name	Dora Milaje (Notable members: Aneka, Ayo, Okoye, Nakia, Mbali, Queen Divine Justice)
First Appearance	*Black Panther Vol. 3 #1* "The Client" **(November 1998)**
Alter-Ego	Adored Ones, Midnight Angels
Species	Human
Place of origin	Wakanda
Home	Upanga, Birnin Zana, Wakanda
Team Affiliations/Allies	Fantastic Four, Hatut Zeraze, Manifold, Storm, Thunderball, Wakandan Army, War Machine, White Tiger, X-Men
Partnership(s)/Team Leaders	Bodyguards for Black Panthers: (T'Challa, Shuri, S'Yan, T'Chaka), Leaders: Aneka, Mistress Zola
Notable Aliases	Daughters of Wakanda, Mighty and Adored
Abilities	Skilled weaponry, warrior/military tactics, hand to hand combat, huntresses
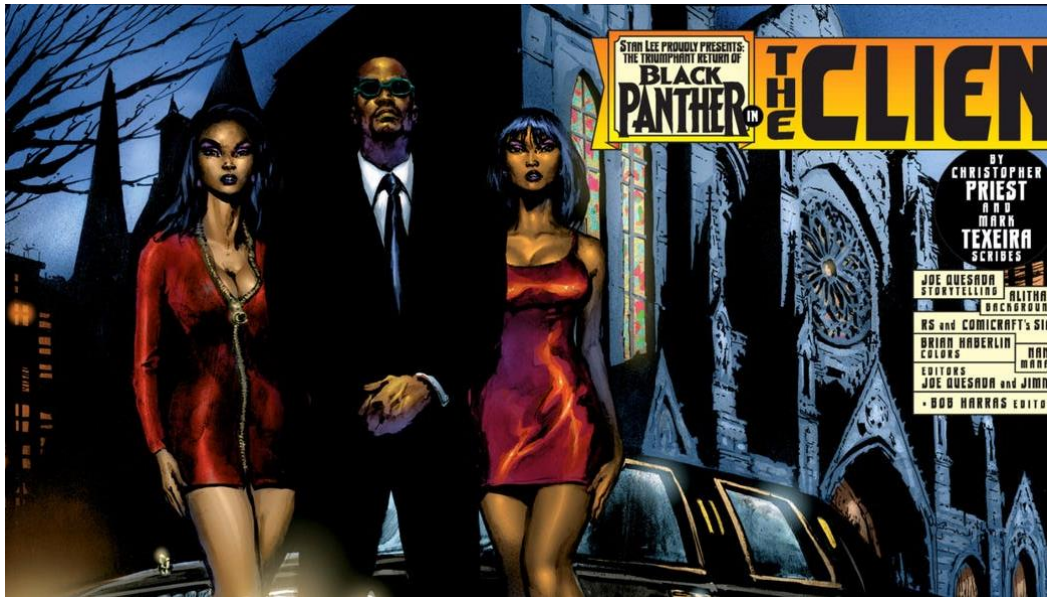
(Figure 1.1-Opening panel of *Black Panther* [1998], Vol. 3, Issue 1, "The Client")

Throughout human history, there have always been real or fictional collectives whose sole purpose is to protect family members, kingdoms, leaders, presidents, dignitaries or empires. These unique groups of individuals are sometimes called protection specialists, chauffeurs, security details, or simply bodyguards. And they work in various sectors (including law enforcement, government, military, and private security). Initially seen as "wives-in-training," the Dora Milaje were selected to serve as personal bodyguards to the King of Wakanda also known as Black Panther.

Entrusting the safety, without feeling threatened, of Wakanda's highest leader to an all-female protection unit speaks to a radical shift of placing Black women in positions of power. Prior to their debut, there was little representation of Black women in leadership and power in comic books (Storm led the X-Men team, Monica Rambeau/Captain Marvel II led the Avengers, and Amanda Waller lead the Suicide Squad), and even fewer superheroine forces. Thus, the addition of the "adored ones" to the *Black Panther* narrative introduced a new flavor to the female superhero persona, and opened the door for more Black female characters whose authority is acknowledged, valued, and legitimized.

The Dora Milaje was an entirely new group of characters in the Black Panther comic book narrative in 1998, so the author had to also invent a backstory for them. In their early appearances, Priest explained that the Dora Milaje were established to promote national survival and unity. Only the best women from each of the 18 tribes were selected; the resulting group was a symbol of the unification of Wakanda. During their training, they specialized in hand-to-hand combat, martial arts, and weaponry (e.g. swords, spears, and bow-staffs). While the majority of the Dora Milaje remained nameless, there are several characters who become stand-out figures throughout the Black Panther narrative. The primary members of the Dora Milaje included: Nakia (who served as T'Challa's personal aide and later became the villain Malice), Okoye (T'Challa's chauffeur), Queen Divine Justice, Aneka and Ayo (who later became a part of the Midnight Angels).

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Complicating tradition

The Dora Milaje's complex backstory also spoke to Wakanda's culture as being intentionally different from the United States. Priest describes the Dora Milaje as an ancient tradition that had been restored in recent years in order to suppress widespread cultural unrest. This selection process does promote a level of privilege and elitism. It also raises some troubling questions about the positions and roles of women in this fictional society. Nevertheless, Priest addressed the "wives in training" practice, and by so doing initiated progressive, albeit, small steps towards better rendering of female characters in comics.

King T'Challa dissolved the tradition of Dora Milaje being potential wives during his reign, but his relationships with and treatment of the women in his security force remained complicated. For T'Challa there was a boundary that he creates in which he would take on more of a non-sexual, paternal or fraternal types of relationships with the group of women. Many of the women, particularly Okoye, understand this position, with few harboring romantic feelings for the king. But Nakia uses her position in the Dora Milaje to try and win the king's love. Nakia manipulates T'Challa into passionately kissing her, while the king is under a powerful spell cast by the perennial villain Mephisto. This encounter fuels her obsession with him (Figure 1.2).

(Figure 1.2-An unknowing manipulative encounter between Nakia and T'Challa in *Black Panther* [1999], Vol. 3, Issue 9)

Her jealousy escalates with the re-entrance of one of T'Challa's past lovers, Monica Lynne. During a war situation, Nakia's jealousy causes her to push Lynne from a fighter plane--an action, which ultimately leads to Nakia being expelled from the Dora Milaje. In this situation, we see one of the first disruptions of order under the Wakandan system. The writer's treatment of Nakia is interesting. She literally transforms from being a respected soldier to an obsessed, jealous woman who takes on the new name Malice, and becomes one of T'Challa's long-standing nemeses (Figure 1.3). Although, no one should expect perfect portrayals, it is important to note how Nakia/Malice becomes yet another problematic Black female character. Even this notable group of women are occasionally subjected to portrayals of being insecure, "angry black women" who are vindictive and messy.

(Figure 1.3-One of several manipulation encounters of Malice, formerly Nakia, towards T'Challa in _Black Panther_ [1999], Vol. 3, Issue 3)

Encounters outside of Wakanda

When the Dora Milaje narrative was very young[121] , readers had to imagine their impact on Wakanda, King T'Challa, and the overall comic book medium. Primarily remaining in the background of the *Black Panther* series, they would however make brief, yet significant appearances. Some of these encounters included the Dora Milaje taking on "War Machine" and Russian assassin "Black Widow" during the 2006 "Civil War" storyline (Figure 1.4). Additional encounters from the 2010 "Doomwar" storyline included, as requested by "Shuri" (T'Challa's sister) a group of 500 Dora Milaje members and 80,000 Wakandan army soldiers sent to fight against Doom's global network.

(Figure 1.4-The Dora Milaje showing their weaponry and fighting skills against Black Widow in _Black Panther_ [2007], Vol. 4, Issue 24)

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[121] The Dora Milaje storyline would be later ret-conned indicating that they had existed for decades having fought against the Nazis, Namor and the Invaders during WWII under the command of T'Challa's grandfather King Azzari.

Following this attack, King T'Challa/Black Panther, whose original intention was to kill Doom, assembled a special commando team consisting of Dora Milaje members known as the "Midnight Angels,"[122] and "Deadpool" to take on this task. Interestingly, their appearances in the Doomwar storyline would suggest that the Dora Milaje were not simply a group of selected women, but more of a small army. With many of these battles being easy to win, this left room for a noteworthy display of their combat talents and skills and demonstrated how they could fight in any environment. However, they would encounter a commendable defeat from T'Challa's ex-wife and X-Men member Storm (Figure 1.5). These encounters, although few, also speak to why they were labeled as the fiercest and most accomplished female fighting team in the Marvel Universe. This acknowledgement would be highlighted even more in their 2018 cinematic interpretation.

(Figure 1.5-Another noteworthy battle encounter with X-Men's Storm in
***X-Men: Worlds Apart* [2009], Vol. 1, Issue 2)**

Creating a Journey that challenges Stereotypical Representations

From their beginnings in 1998, the Dora Milaje have pushed the representational limits of how Black female characters are being portrayed in comics books. However, there would be several stereotypical missteps. Early interpretations of the Dora Milaje presented them with a westernized, hyper-feminine look; they were often drawn provocative poses, dressed in mini-skirts and high heels, and wearing straight hair styles. Instead of being depicted as bodyguards, they more closely resembled a blending of fashion models Naomi Campbell and Iman with 90s R&B female groups Jade and EnVogue (Figure 1.6). Though they were not portrayed in an exotic/animalistic or nature-goddess manner (like that of DC Comics Vixen or Marvel Comics Storm) or depicted in an asexual/mammy-like way, they mirror white female heroines, except they are painted brown. Despite being described as a skilled group of women, they would fall into the same stereotypical and controlling image trap of being an overly endowed male fantasy, versus re-scripting the stereotypes about what it means to be a woman with power (Figure 1.7). It is not enough to just exist as a collective of Black female heroines; their appearances "provides one visual clue to a culture that is gradually becoming more open to non-stereotypical gender

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[122] The "Midnight Angels" were a specific group of Dora Milaje members assigned to special intense missions.

roles."[123] As mentioned earlier, even though T'Challa does not engage in any sexual relations with the women and essentially treats them as his equal, visually the role of the Dora Milaje can be read as exclusive, female escorts rather than protective security.

(Figure 1.6 and 1.7-Earliest depictions of the Dora Milaje in *Black Panther* [1998], Vol. 3, No. 1)

Transforming looks

As the Dora Milaje grew more established, illustrators made efforts to shift their aesthetic toward a more Universal Soldier/African-inspired look (Figure 1.8). Over time, their appearance changed from bodies naturalized under the male gaze to non-gender conforming yet still alluring figures (Figure 1.9). In 2010, a more dramatic and significant change in their attire and bodily presentation took place; these new illustrations of the Dora Milaje, albeit still semi-sensual would show the superheroines with shaved bald heads and African tribal markings. This became the group's customary look in the anticipated 2018 cinematic costuming and makeup. This change in appearance marked the beginning of moving from drawing Black superheroines as brown carbon copies of white women to more globally inspiring and empowering depictions that appealed to Black women and girls.

(Figure 1.8 and 1.9-Various comic book makeovers of the Dora Milaje in *Black Panther* [2006], Vol. 4, Issue 6 and *Black Panther* [2006], Vol. 4, Issue 14)

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[123] Inness, S. A. (1999). Tough Girls in Comic Books: Beyond Wonder Woman. In *Tough Girls: Women, Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (p. 143). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

The Dora Milaje should have sparked many conversations about race and gender representations in comic book storylines. Yet very little discussion has centered on this group of women, despite their being attached to one of the most well-known superheroes in Marvel Comics history. Little was done initially to capitalize on these characters' potential within the Marvel Comics universe. However, there continues to be a hunger for more quality female characters and versatile heroines who speak to a variety of audiences in comics.[124] This hunger was engaged with the rebirth and relaunch of the Dora Milaje in 2016, some 18 years after their original unveiling.

Queering the 'adored ones'

In contemporary American society, normalizing different sexualities is just as imperative as thinking about appropriate representations of race and gender. Rooted in gay liberationist movements from the 1960s through the 1980s, and in the issues faced within the LGBT community, queer media criticism contends that notions of identity should not be seen as fixed and stable, but instead as complex and layered. Queer media criticism focuses on the manner in which social and cultural institutions (especially media) shape the realm of sexual possibilities. This critique argues that homosexuality and transgender individuals should not be viewed as binary opposites of heterosexuality; it proposes that all sexualities are points on a continuum of possibilities. This is seen in the work of such scholars as Annamarie Jagose who notes bring ing a queer approach to media criticism endeavors to suspend sexual and gender identities rather than underscore them.[125] Also the work of Kara Keeling is significant as she engages with innovative approaches between queer theory and new media like that of her speculative rubric that she calls "Queer OS". For Keeling, "Queer OS" highlights the emergence of a queer common sense with regards to thinking about new media's relationship to race, sexuality, the body, and material environments.[126] And lastly, the praxis work of Black, queer, feminist Charlene Carruthers and her radical approach to collective liberation of Black feminists and members of the LGBTQ community through her 2018 text *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for radical Movements*. Inspired by the legacy of such organizations as Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Combahee River Collective, Carruthers's work looks to uproot and transform the systems of racism and patriarchy and implement methods of healing justice. This continuum of possibilities is helpful in inserting and assessing the quality of queer representations in popular media, particularly the images in comic book narratives.

Until very recently, comic books by mainstream publishers have been based on white, male, heteronormative storylines, Black, and queer character narratives are slowly developing a presence within the industry, mainly in comic books published by underground and alternative

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[124] Recently there have been various articles that speak to the need for a larger presence for quality female superheroes, as noted in the following: Engle, J. (2019, March 6). Do We Need More Female Superheroes? *The New York Times* [New York]. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/06/learning/do-we-need-more-female-superheroes.html ; Rodriguez, A. E. (2018, October 23). We need More Female Superheroes, leaders. *NIU-Independent*. Retrieved from https://neiuindependent.org/10627/opinions/we-need-more-female-superheroes-leaders/ ; Peters, M. (2018, October 8). New Study Says The World Needs More Female Superheroes. Retrieved from https://comicbook.com/marvel/2018/10/08/female-superheroes-need-more-study/ ; Williams, S. (2018, June 6). The evolution of the Dora Milaje, from comics to movies. Retrieved from https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/the-evolution-of-the-dora-milaje-from-comics-to-movies

[125] Jagose, A. (1996). Queer theory: An introduction. Melbourne, Australia: University of Melbourne Press.

[126] Keeling, K. (2014). Queer OS. *Cinema Journal* 53(2), 152-157. University of Texas Press.

comic book companies (i.e. Image Comics, Dark Horse Comics, Iron Circus Comics, Fantagraphics Books). The Fantagraphics Book series *Love & Rockets*, created by Chicano brothers Jamie, Gilbert, and Mario (known as Los Bros Hernandez) in 1981, was one of the first comics to venture into visual storytelling that provided complex, honest, and progressive representations of race, gender, and sexuality. Image Comics,[127] as a publishing company, has not shied away from its production of queer of color representation, which includes *Saga*, *Paper Girls*, *Monstress*, *Virgil*, *Bitch Planet*. The *Bitch Planet* series, in particular, is very unapologetic with its representation of Black women and other women of color characters and queer women who do not physically or socially comply to white, male, heteronormative standards, thus are subjected and forced to go to a sci-fi, dystopian prison.

Introducing Aneka and Ayo's love story

       Traditionally, mainstream comic book outlets included queer narratives that catered to primarily white and male audiences. However, in 2016, Marvel Comics took another progressive step by launching and African lesbian love story in the *World of Wakanda* series. Created as a companion piece and spin-off series from Ta-Nehisi Coates *Black Panther* (2016) title series, *World of Wakanda,* written by feminist author Roxanne Gay and poet Yona Harvey (drawn by Afua Richardson and Alitha E. Martinez), tells the story of two African lovers, Ayo and Aneka, who are former members of the Dora Milaje. *World of Wakanda* departs from the traditional Wakanda storyline which centered around T'Challa/Black Panther and, instead, highlights the women in Wakanda. As a prequel to Coates *Black Panther* series, *World of Wakanda* explores and dives more into the backstory of the Midnight Angels. Before the World of Wakanda story begins,[128] one must become familiar with the introduction of Aneka and Ayo who leave the Dora Milaje and are now fugitives in *Black Panther* #1 (2016). Ayo aids Aneka's escape from a death sentence for enacting justice upon a village chieftain who uses his power to imprison and sexually abuse women and girls (Figure 1.10). This escape leads the two of them to form the Midnight Angels and begin the long fight for survival, belonging and acceptance.

(Figure 1.10-The introduction of the first queer, African couple Ayo and Aneka, in a mainstream storyline in *Black Panther* [2016], Vol. 1, Issue 1)

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[127] *Image Comics* popularity comes from the fact that all who publish through Image owns and controls their own work. As *Image Comics* founder Eric Stephenson notes it's a promise of "unbridled creativity". Being able to not only own one's work and control speaks to the notion of not having a larger corporation potentially dilute, filter to their benefit, or eliminate the work. As a result of this freedom, readers also respond positively to this trend.

[128] The *World of Wakanda* series occurs just before *Black Panther* issues #1-4 and during issue #5

Romantic Anticipation

Love and romance are significant theme in the series, and are displayed in way that are vulnerable, fun, and healing. Aneka and Ayo grapple with their feelings as they navigate expressing their attraction for each other. In the Figure 1.11, we see a tension-laced argument between the two women as Aneka deals with being a member of the Dora Milaje and not fulfilling her duty of being romantically available for T'Challa. As a result, she feels the need to hide her relationship with Ayo. This is demonstrated in the following panel:

> ***Undermine you? Games? I was protecting you from yourself you foolish woman! We are here to serve. We are women T'Challa could marry. We do not question his decisions.[129]***
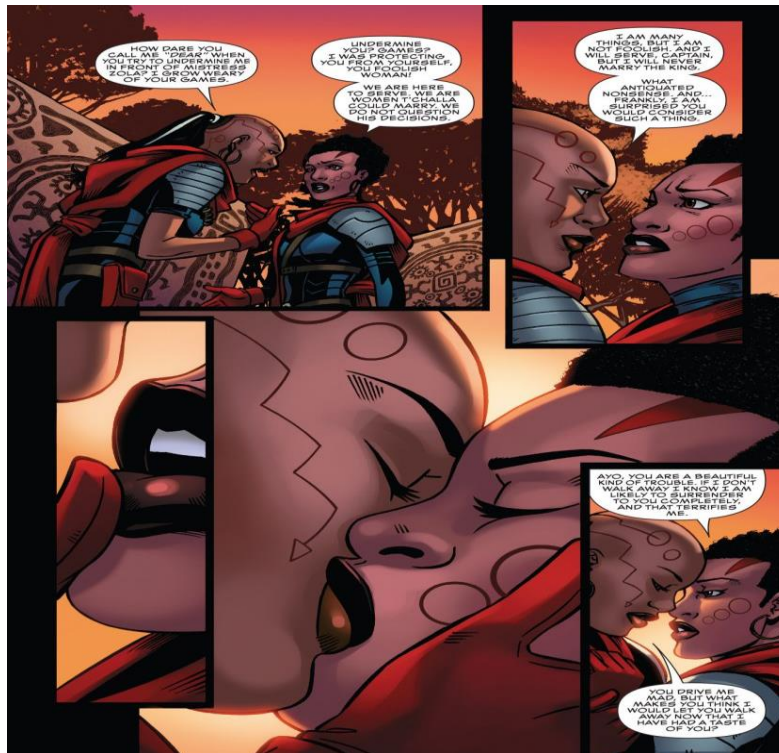
(Figure 1.11-Aneka and Ayo navigating their intimate feelings and responsibility to the throne in *World of Wakanda* **[2016],** *Vol. 1, Issue 2* **)**

This kind of push-pull moment frequently resurfaces in the series. Aneka's predicament is reminiscent of the difficult choices that Black women must make in order to have both success and happiness. This moment also speaks to Ayo scoffing tradition and being explicit about her commitment, to love and being with Aneka regardless of their status. Ayo even questions Aneka's commitment:

> ***I am many things, but I am not foolish. And I will serve, Captain, but I will never marry the king…What antiquated nonsense. And…frankly, I am surprised you would consider such a thing.[130]***

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[129] Gay, R. (2016). *World of Wakanda, Vol. 1-Issue 2* [Comic]. New York, NY: Marvel Comics.
[130] Ibid

On the same panel, we see the romantic anticipation played out visually. Alitha E. Martinez's art seamlessly zooms in and out guiding the reader's gaze and highlighting the subtle shifts in mood, which draws attention to moments that might otherwise go unnoticed. The portrayal of Aneka and Ayo's kiss underscores a sensual energy of the moment through a close-up. Martinez's art avoids falling into exploitative sensationalism and traps of fetishism that are often portrayed in female sexuality, primarily that of queer women and women of color in comics and media. The reader's gaze of this intimate moment is refused allowing for the reader to look without becoming an active participant in the character's moment. Even the asymmetrical formatting of the panels allows for the images to instantly grab the reader's attention. This break from the traditional comic format also builds anticipation, momentum and eagerness. Voiced through Gay, the tension is released with a kiss, playful flirting and slight hesitation,

> Ayo, you are a beautiful kind of trouble. If I don't walk away I know I am likely to surrender to you completely and that terrifies me." With Ayo following up with a determined reply, "You drive me mad, but what makes you think I would let you walk away now that I have had a taste of you?[131]

Martinez's striking art and Gay's prose stitched together a narrative of quick-witted humor and touching moments of sincere intimacy.

Just "friends"

One thing that makes the *World of Wakanda* series unique is its ability to deal with real-life predicaments and situations. Although these are fictional characters, the circumstances are relatable. Having to balance loyalty to a job and personal happiness is a constant struggle for Aneka and Ayo. Even though they are "loyal to the throne," they constantly face the reality of their relationship. Throughout each panel, Aneka and Ayo wrestle with keeping their relationship secret especially from their superior Mistress Zola, who seems to have apparent knowledge and acceptance of the relationship (Figure 1.12). *"Aneka why do you shroud yourself in such fiction?"[132]* This is further seen in how Aneka refers to the love as simply a friendship and denies what exists between them. Although Ayo agrees that they both need time away, it is because of wanting to further cultivate a relationship and not simply a platonic friendship. Sensing Ayo's frustration, Aneka tries to remedy the situation…: **"*Ayo, wait, don't be angry!*"** **Aneka replies "*Whatever do I have to be angry about, 'friend'?*"[133]**

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[131] Gay, R. (2016). *World of Wakanda, Vol. 1-Issue 3* [Comic]. New York, NY: Marvel Comics.
[132] Ibid
[133] Ibid

(Figure 1.12-Aneka trying to balance between masking and confronting her relationship with Ayo in *World of Wakanda* [2016]*, Vol. 1, Issue 3*)

For Aneka, confronting the reality of their relationship is difficult because it complicates tradition and their vows to Wakanda (Figure 1.13):

> *…You need to give me time Ayo…When I joined the Dora Milaje, I swore to protect Black Panther. I…we both swore we would make ourselves available to him if he were to choose one of us to be his wife…This…This is betrayal.*[134]

(Figure 1.13-Aneka contemplating her loyalty to throne and Wakanda as well as her relational commitment to Ayo in *World of Wakanda* [2016]*, Vol. 1, Issue 3*)

In the previous panel, Ayo is very clear about her feelings and what she wants from Aneka: ***"we are more than just friends and yet you denied this to Zola."***[135]

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[134] Ibid

[135] Ibid

Even in this struggle, Ayo is a reason and continues to show and give her support (Figure 1.14): **"*Aneka, I have thought about what you said in the terminal, and I respect that, but believe me when I tell you that this is not a betrayal, and I refuse to think of us that way."*[136]**

(Figure 1.14-A contentious moment shared between Aneka and Ayo as they embark on this 'getaway trip' in *World of Wakanda* [2016]*, Vol. 1, Issue 3*)

Their relationship is reminiscent of Audre Lorde's discussion of "difference,"

> Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference – those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older – know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths.[137]

Both Aneka and Ayo, feel like outsiders, going against the traditions of Wakanda, yet they transform those differences into strengths for themselves. Their story mirrors real life struggles of Black women having to choose their careers over pleasure and making the decision of being in a same-gender loving partnership. Their story speaks to feminist Carol Hanisch notion of the personal as political. Additionally, their story also addresses the survival of Aneka and Ayo's devotion at all costs, regardless of the circumstances. The aforementioned panels of *World of Wakanda* and the overall series centers on the experience of queer Black women warriors who fiercely love their country and each other, while fighting for the forgotten Wakandans, particularly women and the poor, and challenging the traditional structures of the Dora Milaje. Through Gay and Harvey's writing they grapple with questions based on the larger social context that Black queer women face, including challenging tradition (which is only hinted at in Priest's earlier interpretation), navigating pressures of work and relationships, and outing themselves to their superiors and peers.

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[136] Ibid

[137] Lorde, A. (1984). The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House. In *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde* (p. 112). Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press.

Gay's writing allows Aneka and Ayo's love story to shine and highlights their desire to honor the truth and equality of their relationship. The writing is also notable as it utilizes dialogue, rather than description to propel the narrative and overall series forward. The use of well-timed thought bubbles adds depth and complexity to the characters, emphasizing subtle nuances, hidden meanings, and unspeakable desires. This plays a part in the women being portrayed in the series as believable, non-fetishized characters who also find balance with romance and action-packed encounters. A spotlight is placed on the community of women as they demonstrate their capability of being warriors and protectors of Wakanda, and not reliant on a single male hero.

World of Wakanda plays an important role in the comic book and popular media landscape by offering a queer love representation that challenges obligatory heterosexuality. The series also involves Black women warriors who reject the notion of acquiescing to the power elite. There is a resetting of the Dora Milaje from simply bodyguards, to multifaceted women who challenge oppressive systems, express their emotions, are flawed, and fight for their beliefs for a better Wakanda. Women in Wakanda do not expect to be in the shadows; their full selves must be revealed.

Behind the Scenes

Historically, Black women have used their voices to improve the visibility of their group. Sojourner Truth declared her female status; Anna Julia Cooper served as a voice for social change; the Combahee River Collective and Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press (Figure 1.15) addressed oppressions through intersectionality; Alice Walker created new lanes with womanism; and Opal Tometi, Patrice Khan-Cullors, and Alicia Garza (Figure 1.16) created social movements. These women, alongside numerous others, have been able to break barriers in male-dominated spaces, while also creating work that explores race, gender, social issues, history and identity. These Black women have helped to catalyze various movements that celebrate womanhood, fight sexism and marginalization, and place Black women and girls at the center of narratives about selfhood and human flourishing.

(Figure 1.15-Member of the of Combahee River Collective & Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, l-r: Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, and Hattie Gossett)

(Figure 1.16-Black Lives Matter Co-Founders, l-r: Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza, and Patrisse Khan-Cullors)

(Figure 1.17-Panels from Jackie Ormes *Torchy in Heartbeats* comic strips series as published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*)

Black female writers have been able to break barriers, change the rules, and challenge the status quo through their writing. The *World of Wakanda* series becomes an example, in the comic book medium, of these strides coming to fruition as fans witness Roxanne Gay and Yona Harvey becoming the first Black female writers to headline and publish their own series.[138] Gay and Harvey are giving life to characters that had not prior existed thus morphing their storyline into the mainstream comics arena.

Long before Gay and Harvey debuted their work in this groundbreaking series from Marvel Comics, Black women had been making strides in the anime, comic book, cartoon, and fantasy medium. In spite of the lackluster portrayal of Black female characters, Black creators and artists would find a space to share their talents. As described in great detail within the project's "Historical Background," writer and cartoonist Jackie Ormes was one of those creators, who took part in re-setting the narrative, eventually becoming the first Black female syndicated cartoonist. Ormes created the *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* cartoon panel and the *Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem* and *Torchy in Heartbeats* (Figure 1.17) comic strip series. Through her comic strip series and single panel cartoons from 1937-1954, Ormes confronted social and political issues such as segregation, free speech, environmental pollution, anti-war efforts, dating, and even

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[138] Nilah Magruder is the first Black woman to write for Marvel by writing *A Year of Marvels: September Infinite Comic*.

fashion trends. Her work also re-wrote the expectations for Black women, while dismantling the stereotypical media portrayals placed on them.
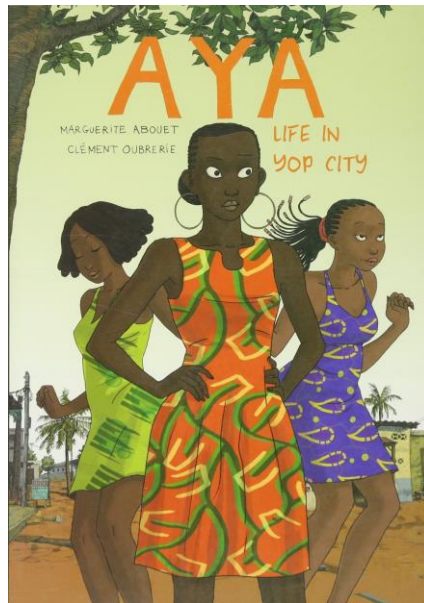
(Figure 1.18-Title cover from Marguerite Abouet's graphic novel *Aya*)

Another notable Black female comic creative that helped establish a context for the newer iterations of the Dora Milaje is Ivory Coast writer Marguerite Abouet, author of the 2005 influential diasporic graphic novel *Aya* (Figure 1.18). *Aya* was inspired by childhood memories of Abouet and her desire to depict Africa in a different light without having to focus on the typical negative issues (i.e. war, famine, corruption), which is often emphasized by the media when portraying the continent. Abouet was very intentional with portraying her characters as individuals who attend school, trek to work, plan for their futures, and deal with domestic entanglements of the Ivory Coast, much in the same way that it happens in other places. Having sold over 200,000 copies in France and 10,000 copies in the United States, the success of *Aya* is significant especially for a first-time author. *Aya* also won the Angoulême International Comics Festival Prize for First Comic Book in 2006 and the "Rising Star Award for Best Self-Publisher" at the annual Glyph Comic Awards in 2008.
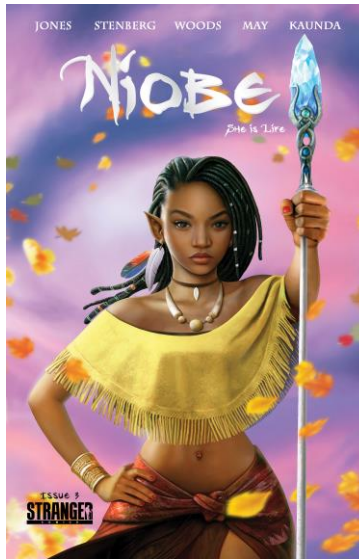
(**Figure 1.19-Title cover page from *Image Comics*, *Niobe: She is Life* (2015)*, Issue 3)***

The path for Gay and Harvey was also paved by the work of actress/writer Amandla Stenberg through her co-creation of the Image Comics comic book *Niobe: She is Life* (Figure 1.19). In this series, Stenberg along with her co-creator Sebastian Jones fuse fantasy and the exploration of modern issues like racism and religion. Additionally, in 2015, the series became the first internationally distributed comic/graphic novel with a Black female author, artist (Ashley A. Woods) and central character. These Black women creatives are proof that Black women voices are very much capable of making lasting contributions to the comic book industry. Their work also speaks to the sad reality of the gaps in mainstream representation of Black women and women of color.[139]

The contributions of Roxanne Gay and Yona Harvey to *Marvel Comics*, and the Black Panther narrative are momentous and important. In the past, the Black Panther story has had only three Black all-male writers, all of them male (Christopher Priest, Reginald Hudlin, and Ta-nehisi Coates). These early authors focused on men headlining the narrative, and offered only a limited engagement of its female lead and supporting characters. By contrast, the writings of Gay and Harvey gave voice to the Dora Milaje by placing Black diasporic female characters at the center of the narrative and providing a strong Black female LGBT perspective. For Gay, especially, the queer voice is not simply an add-on but essential to the overall narrative. This significant contribution aids in filling a void that is often overlook or minimalized in popular media, especially in comic books. As Gay states, "the opportunity to write Black women and queer Black women into the Marvel universe, there's no saying no to that."[140]

Although Gay became the first Black queer female writer to headline and publish for a mainstream comic there has been a growing list of independently published Black, queer women

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[139] Although there is a consistent growth and achievements in independent production of comics and graphic novels by Black women, I also am inclined to question whether there is a need for Black women creatives to pursue mainstream success.

[140] Flood, A. (2016, July 25). 'Bad feminist' Roxane Gay to write new Marvel Black Panther series. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/25/bad-feminist-roxane-grey-to-write-new-marvel-black-panther-series-world-of-wakanda

who are also writing diverse voices into their comic book and graphic novel storylines such as Mildred Louis (*Agents of the Realm* series) (Figure 1.20), Joamette Gil (*Heartwood: Non-binary Tales of Sylvan Fantasy*, *Power & Magic: The Queer Witch Comics Anthology*, *Blackbirds*), and Tee Franklin (*Bingo Love!*) (Figure 1.21).[141] Whether it is showcasing Black characters as superheroes and adventure-seekers or opening the door to fantasy and horror storylines from a Black queer perspective, the face of comics, comic strips, anime, and cartoons has been and is currently being changed by Black women creatives.

(Figure 1.20-Characters from Mildred Louis' *Agents of the Realm* webcomic series)

(Figure 1.21- Covers from Joamette Gil's *Heartwood: Non-binary Tales of Sylvan Fantasy*, *Power & Magic: The Queer Witch Comics Anthology* and Tee Franklin's *Bingo Love!*)

Despite its groundbreaking impact and popular social success, the with the *World of Wakanda* series would only last for one volume. The unfortunate 2017 cancellation speaks to the larger problem of mainstream companies not having consistently diverse and multi-faceted characters and storylines. It also continues the contentious relationship between avid readers and fans who hunger for this long-awaited diverse content and the major companies that prematurely cancel it. Companies like Marvel Comics and DC Comics step outside the margins by breaking boundaries, but it often comes at a cost, especially for writers, artists, and characters of color. As

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[141] While comics is behind on this venture, pioneering queer female writers of color is familiar territory in the science-fiction/fantasy literature realm with such writers as Jewelle Gomez, Nalo Hopkinson, and Nisi Shawl.

Black Panther writer Ta-neshi Coates notes, "We have to open the door…it's not 'wouldn't it be nice if there are more women writers, more women creators in comics?' That would be nice, but in many ways, it is kind of an imperative." Nevertheless, even though the series ended in 2017, it also sparked a sense of hope for more beginnings and possibilities. Gay and Harvey's history-making writing along with the innovative illustrations from Black artists Afua Richardson and Alitha Martinez, were long-awaited strides toward greater inclusiveness. All in all, having a queer relationship featured in the *World of Wakanda* series, under the *Black Panther* umbrella, opens the door for more mainstream, racially balanced LGBTQ narratives in comics as well.

Challenging Black female tropes in cinema

The media, particularly film and television, influences how many people come to understand race, gender, and sexuality. This is especially important in relation to the portrayals of Black women in film. Throughout cinematic history, Black women have been able to transcend, shape, overcome obstacles and stereotypes, and cross over into mainstream international success. Actresses such as Hattie McDaniel, Dorothy Dandridge, Bessie Smith, Cicely Tyson, Abby Lincoln, have negotiated the uneven terrain of racial, gender, and class stereotypes. As Mia Mask's notes these women ultimately complicate,

> the discursive and industrial practices through which blackness, womanhood, and African American womanhood have been represented in commercial cinema, independent film, and network television.[142]

This negotiation within popular media has continued in recent years, resulting in the creation of an array of roles, personas, and performances. Despite increasing numbers of Black women on the screen, there has been a lack of quality representation, particularly as it relates to Black women, action, and heroism. The key players in these areas were primarily seen during the Blaxploitation era which included Pam Grier, Tamara Dobson, and Jeanne Bell. Although there has been an increase in Black women on the screen—e.g. Angela Bassett, Viola Davis, Taraji P. Henson, Regina King, and Tiffany Haddish—they have mainly occupied the genres of drama and comedy roles.

The presence of starring Black women in action roles would not be seen again till the early 2000s, primarily in television. Many of the films that featured Black action heroines were based on comic book and graphic novel characters such as Storm from the *X-Men* (2000), *X2: X-Men United* (2003), and *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006) as played by Halle Berry, and Vernita Green/Copperhead from *Kill Bill Vol. 1* as played by Vivica A. Fox. The transformation of the Dora Milaje from the comic book pages to a mainstream cinematic feature follows this pattern. I argue that these characters contribute to the evolving representations of women in film. Cinematically, the Dora Milaje become transformative and transgressive women and heroines that reconceptualize the way we think about action heroines and create alternative images of female subjectivity.

In February 2018, when Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* premiered, many fans assumed that the bulk of the attention would focus on the film's main protagonist T'Challa/Black Panther

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[142] Mask, M. (2009). Introduction. In *Divas on screen: Black women in american film* (p. 1). Champaign-Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

(played by Chadwick Boseman). However, to the surprise of many viewers, the women of the film, especially the Dora Milaje, were equally dominant and important. As a result of the Dora Milaje's presence, many saw the movie as more than just another superhero movie, it was a celebration of Black culture and female characters.

The Dora Milaje are portrayed in layered and nuanced ways in the *Black Panther* film; they possess both brains and beauty. Their presence on-screen helps re-writing the stereotype that bodyguards are only athletic men in dark glasses. Additionally, as a group of all Black women, they simultaneously disrupt the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU).[143] Because of their presence, there is a greater female to male ratio (3 to 1) in the film, which supersedes the Bechdel test[144] (in contrast to most Marvel Comics films). Wakanda, particularly through Ryan Coogler's vision, explored the idea of a political system where women and men control political institutions jointly. They are not simply "token, tough chicks" with exceptional physiques, but, instead women of substance. As fictional characters that challenge historical stereotypes, disrupt gender norms, and re-write beauty standards, the Dora Milaje also embody the future feminist framework. Throughout the film, these women provide a wide range of performances that speak to past, present and future personalities and identities of Black women.

Real-life influences that continue a diasporic legacy
The Dora Milaje's depictions in film were largely based on the Dahomey[145] (Figure 1.22) an actual group of warrior women. Much like the fictional Dora Milaje, the Dahomey were also known as Mino ("our Mothers") or ahosi (king's wives); they were all-female military regiment of the Kingdom of Dahomey (present-day Benin) that dates back to the 17th century. Originally a corps of elephant hunters, this group of women[146] would later be established by King Agaja in a dual role as a female militia and bodyguard unit armed with muskets to protect the king.[147] Their rigorous training became very useful as they defeated numerous neighboring kingdoms and invaders. Similar to the Dora Milaje's portrayal in the comics and the film the Dahomey warriors were wedded to the king (although he never actually engaged in any sexual relationships with them) and were essentially loyal to the throne. The Dahomey were seen more as the King's sisters, daughters, and soldiers. This unit was not a feminist utopia; membership came at the price of sacrificing being married and having children. However, many of the women involved voluntarily took on this responsibility and did not need to be recruited.[148]

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[143] The Marvel Cinematic Universe, also known as the MCU, is a shared media franchise and universe which is centered on a series of superhero films that are independently produced by Marvel Studios. The characters based on these films appear in Marvel Comics publications.

[144] The Bechdel test measures the representation of women in fiction and media. Essentially, the test asks whether a work (such as a film and or television show) and features at least two women who talk to each other about something other than a man. As noted in Raalte, C. V. (2015). No Small-Talk in Paradise: Why Elysium Fails the Bechdel Test, and Why We Should Care". In H. Savigny, E. Thorsen, D. Jackson, & J. Alexander (Eds.), *Media, Margins and Civic Agency*. Basingstoke, England: Springer.

[145] The European-Westernized name given to them is the Dahomey Amazons

[146] In some cases, the unit did include female child warriors.

[147] Alpern, S. B. (2012). "Origins of Dahomey". In *Amazons of Black Sparta: The Women Warriors of Dahomey* (p. 20). New York, NY: New York University Press.

[148] Clarke, J. H., & Van Sertima, I. (ed.) (1984). African Warrior Queens. *Journal of African Civilization*, 6(1), 133.
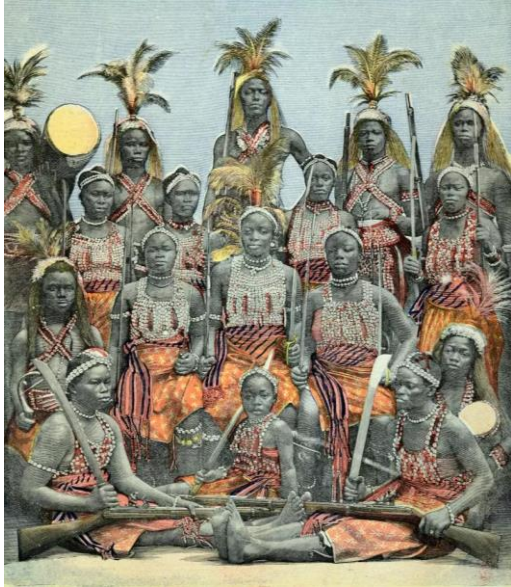
(Figure 1.22-The inspiration for the Dora Milaje, the Dahomey Amazons Women Soldiers in their traditional garb)

This dynamic is echoed in the *Black Panther* film through the character Okoye (played by Danai Gurira), general of the Dora Milaje. Okoye speaks to this commitment of being "loyal to the throne" regardless of who sits there during an encounter with fellow sister Nakia (played by Lupita Nyong'o).

Historian John Henrik Clarke in his essay on African Warrior Queens in "Black Women of Antiquity,"[149] explains that in the years before colonialism, "Africans had produced a way of life where men were secure enough to let women advance as far as their talents would take them." This African influence on the *Black Panther* film is seen during the many Wakandan fight scenes where women are fighting alongside men in battles; in almost every shot, there is always at least one Dora Milaje counterpart fighting.

The Dora Milaje in the *Black Panther* film are an example of how a real-life historical collective of warrior women can be positively personified through a fictional depiction. This influence plays a role in inserting Black women into action film roles and also shifts the way tough, strong Black women have so often been depicted: as loud-talking criminals, single mothers fighting the system, or rescued prostitutes. The comparison between the Dahomey soldiers and the Dora Milaje not only inspires, but also continues a historical legacy (Figure 1.23).

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[149] Ibid

**(Figure 1.23-Uniform worn by the Dora Milaje in the 2018 *Black Panther,*
which was inspired by a fusion of both African and Filipino artifacts)**

'Move or you will be moved': Not just another Black woman

   The Dora Milaje's real-life antecedents led me to reflect on a question posed by comics scholar Jeffery A. Brown: "When women are portrayed as tough in contemporary film, are they being allowed access to a position of empowerment, or are they merely being further fetishized as dangerous sex objects?"[150] This question is important as I reflect on the evolution of Black female heroine representations, especially in film. Director Ryan Coogler spoke to these questions about inclusion by being very intentional about how Black women were portrayed in the film. In addition to the Dahomey warrior women, he drew inspiration from the "incredibly strong black"[151] in his own life, which included his mother, aunts, and his wife. Through this inspiration, it becomes more of a personal effort to ensure that these characters are in a position to empower versus falling into stereotypical traps.

   The 2018 *Black Panther* was an important avenue for introducing this elite squad of women to audiences who may not have known them from the comic book pages. However, technically this would actually be the second time, as audiences were given a bold introduction to a member of the Dora Milaje in the 2016 film *Captain America: Civil War*. "Move or you will be moved" (Figure 1.24) says T'Challa's Security Chief, (Ayo played by Florence Kasumba),[152] to "Black Widow" (played by Scarlett Johansson). This bold statement is a preview of what we would see from the Dora Milaje in the *Black Panther* film, and hints at how the Dora Milaje are able to function individually or as a collective.

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[150] Brown, J. A. (2004). Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness: The Bad Girls of Action Film and Comic Books. In S. A. Inness (Ed.), *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* (p. 47). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

[151] Mallenbaum, C. (2018, February 15). Admire the Amazons in 'Wonder Woman'? You'll love the Dora Milaje in 'Black Panther'. *USA Today*. Retrieved from https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2018/02/15/black-panther-dora-milaje/309218002/

[152] Although she is only credited as T'Challa's Security Chief it is known that this is Ayo second in-command of the Dora Milaje.

(Figure 1.24-Unofficial cinematic debut of a Dora Milaje member in *Captain America: Civil War* [2016])

Dora Milaje cinematic encounter

Our first encounter with the Dora Milaje in *Black Panther* occurs toward the beginning of the film with the introduction of Prince T'Challa's first in command Okoye, who serves as the Dora Milaje's General. After being told by T'Challa that it is not necessary for her to assist in the coming rescue mission to save Nakia, Okoye shows up at the fighting moment killing one of the enemy soldiers with her spear and potentially saving both the lives of Nakia and T'Challa. Immediately, we see the significance and usefulness of her character. Historically, in superhero films, there is either one solo Black female character (i.e. Storm in the Marvel Comics *X-Men* films or Amanda Waller in DC Comics *Suicide Squad)*, ornamental characters (i.e. Black female Amazon warriors in DC Comics *Wonder Woman*), miscellaneous characters that need saving or worse killed. Okoye is not relegated to a sidekick status but is presented as an equal to T'Challa. In addition, to demonstrating her impressive weapon skills, she also commands respect as she sternly warns the Nigerian villagers, in the aforementioned fight scene, that "you will speak nothing of this day." The villagers, who were held captive before Okoye's arrival, responded to her directive with gratitude and thanks. They do not question Okoye, but instead, assume that she knows what she is doing.

Making sudden moves

The Dora Milaje act as a collective, but they often make sudden moves at the appropriate time without seeking outside approval. One example of this is Prince T'Challa's "challenge day" ceremony. The Dora Milaje are vigilant and on guard for any potential danger. As the Jabari tribe makes an entrance disrupting what appeared to be a "challenge day" with no opponent, the Jabari tribe leader, M'Baku, dares to verbally scold and physically confront T'Challa's sister Shuri. Swiftly, he is met with a band of spears from the Dora Milaje (Figure 1.25). From this quick reaction, we see that the Dora Milaje are able to handle the confrontation; they do not rely on T'Challa to save the day, nor do they need to ask for his assistance. They serve to not only protect the King, but his family and all the rest of Wakanda, and their assertiveness and indispensableness command respect even in the presence of a boastful M'Baku. Their badass attitude is reminiscent of a Foxy Brown or Cleopatra Jones but magnified because of their numbers.

67
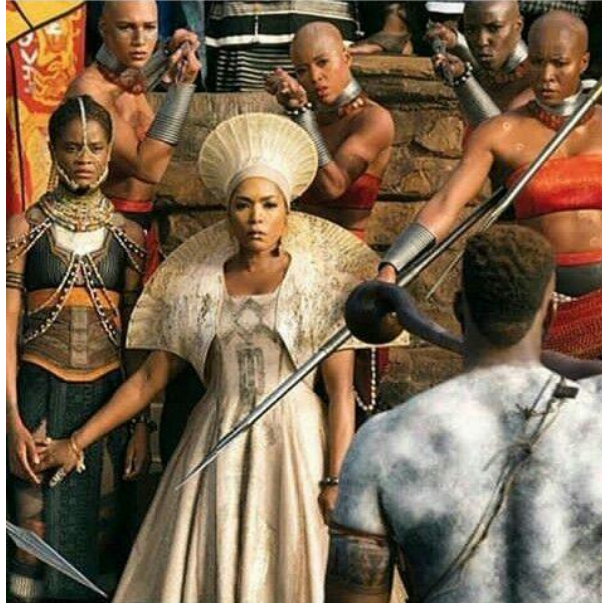
(Figure 1.25-The Dora Milaje protecting Queen Ramonda and Shuri at all costs from M'Baku on 'Challenge Day' in *Black Panther* [2018])

Respect my presence: Challenging the 'angry Black woman' trope

An additional notable encounter that highlights the importance and independence of the Dora Milaje is an interaction between T'Challa, Okoye and the American CIA agent Everett Ross (played by Martin Freeman). In this scene, Agent Freeman possibly becomes a bit too familiar by questioning the king's authority, crossing into his personal space, and physically touching T'Challa. The gesture may have meant to be friendly, but Okoye takes exception and threatens Ross in Xhosa, "If he touches you again, I'm going to impale him to this desk." Ross dismissively asks T'Challa, "Does she speak English?" Okoye then replies, "when she wants to." Startled by her reaction, Agent Ross is forced to challenge his assumption that she is simply a bystander without authority.

An encounter like this is not the first time we see a white male character underestimating and being dismissive of a Black woman. Such actions are commonplace, both in reality and fiction. To be a Black female professional comes with its challenges, whether it is colleagues questioning one's skills or just outright racism. In a strategic response, Okoye demonstrates how Black women must force their white counterparts to not only recognize their existence, but their intellect as well. Agent Ross initially assumes that she cannot be conversant in English and that she must rely on someone, in this case a man, to translate for her. Additionally, this scene also demonstrates how Okoye's threat and body language shows her discernment for alleged white allies but does not fall into the trap of just another "angry Black woman" (Figure 1.26). In that brief but impactful scene, Okoye quietly puts a fear into him, while dismantling his white male privilege, and dramatically shifting the power dynamics.

(Figure 1.26 Okoye, General of the Dora Milaje, balancing power and tactfulness in her encounter with Agent Everett Ross in *Black Panther* [2018])

Challenging colorism in Hollywood

In both comic book and film formats the Dora Milaje are skilled warriors who are able to handle their own, but they are also creatively shifting the gears of how beauty is being presented. Conversations about colorism[153] are important in Black communities, who note Hollywood's biased casting and the narrow range of Black women who obtain leading roles in films and get nominated for awards. Historically, dark-skinned Black women have been excluded from mainstream films; when included, they have been relegated to minor roles that are stereotypically colonial and neo-colonial in nature, or that embody white fantasies. This troubling history is important to bear in mind when analyzing the casting for comic book film roles. The most notable example of the disregarding of color is seen in the consistent (18-year) casting of light-skinned characters in the role of Storm (Ororo Monroe) in the X-Men franchise. In the comic book canon, Storm and her parents are consistently rendered as being dark-skinned. However, this has been repeatedly ignored in every live-action portrayal: Halle Berry (Figure 1.27) was casted in the initial X-Men trilogy and then Alexandra Shipp (Figure 1.27) starred in the *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016). Both light-skinned actresses were casted by the same white male director, Bryan Singer. Casting the Dora Milaje (especially the two highest in command Okoye and Ayo) and the rest of the female cast members as dark-skinned women, directly responds to the Storm casting example, while simultaneously addressing the past confinement of dark-skinned female characters to solely mammy-like, loud comic relief, hypersexual, or 'Black best friend'/supportive roles.

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[153] As defined by the National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ), colorism is a practice of discrimination by which those with lighter skin are treated more favorably than those with darker skin. This practice is a product of racism in the United States, in that it upholds the white standards of beauty and benefits white people in the institutions of oppression (media, medical world, etc.). National Conference for Community and Justice. (2019, January 9). Colorism. Retrieved from https://nccj.org/colorism-0

(Figure 1.27-Actresses Alexandra Shipp and Halle Berry as Storm within the X-Men franchise series)

'I am not my hair': Black Hair versatility

Skin color is an important factor in the Dora Milaje's portrayal, as are their hairstyles. The shaved, bald hairstyle is the standard look for all Dora Milaje members (Figure 1.28). Similar to how Grace Jones redefined beauty by performing an androgynous femininity, the Dora Milaje have inverted beauty standards by exemplifying how beauty does not depend on long, straight, white-presenting hair.

(Figure 1.28-Two members of the Dora Milaje who accompany King T'Chaka to the home of Prince N'Jobu in *Black Panther* [2018])

Okoye also embodies the "I am not my hair" statement in a particular scene where she is visibly uncomfortable with wearing a short, straight-hair bob wig as a disguise. She is anxious to remove "this ridiculous thing" from her head. For Okoye, a wig, is a disgraceful and unnecessary accessory. Ever resourceful, she ultimately snatches the wig off her head and uses it as a weapon in a casino fight (Figure 1.29).

(Figure 1.29-Okoye exhibiting a moment of turning a Eurocentric beauty marker, a wig, into a literal weapon in *Black Panther* [2018])

Danai Gurira (who plays Okoye) interprets this as a liberating and important moment:

> What does it mean that you're wearing a wig and need to cover up your head? There's so many ways that can be pulled apart. And the aesthetic — it could be a symbol of freeing yourself…it's almost like a removal of a shackle and breaking free of a certain type of bondage about what it means to fit into a convention.[154]

Black hair and identity are very much linked. With Black women's hairstyles being criticized, labeled as unkempt, and deemed as less than feminine, the Dora Milaje, as portrayed on screen, embody the radical notion of "I am not my hair." This self-expressive sentiment also channels a *[s]heroic* moment in which Black women can (re)define what is fashionable on their own terms.

Remixing the 'Black is Beautiful' moniker

　　The Dora Milaje pay homage to their ancestors through intricate and iconic outfits. Aesthetically, the Dora Milaje embrace their "adored ones" translation and also embody a techno-funky styling of the "Black is Beautiful" moniker. Guided by acclaimed costume designer Ruth Carter, the Dora Milaje are given an Afrofuturistic fashion upgrade from the basic two-piece red dress suits that their characters wear in the *Black Panther* comic book. According to Carter, the costume designs for the Dora Milaje were meant to incorporate the African diaspora and "show the world the beauty of tribal dress and move forward in a modernistic way."[155] In many ways the bold colors, printed fabrics, elaborate jewelry, and tapered stylish-militaristic presentation adorned on the Dora Milaje functions as a visual political statement that purposely does not fit into a certain mold.

　　　　Cultural theorist Carolyn Cooper argues that the black body has endured the literal and figurative scars resulting from generations of physical punishment. Thus, Carter, as a costume

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[154] Mallenbaum, 2018

[155] Ford, T. C. (2018, February 15). Why Fashion Is Key to Understanding the World of 'Black Panther'. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/02/why-fashion-is-key-to-understanding-the-world-of-black-panther/553157/

designer, uses clothing as a space to not just beautify these fictional characters, but also reclaim agency and re-aestheticize the wounded Black female body. Black women, in the twentieth century, were using clothing to write new "body narratives," new renderings of their personal narratives that reflected their more expansive views of selfhood and freedom. Through their clothing, they projected a sense of sexual freedom, gender nonconformity, and upward social mobility.[156] The hairstyles and fashions of the Dora Milaje provide similarly liberating assemblages of garments and accessories. As culture scholar and historian Tanisha C. Ford notes in her text *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (2015), Black women throughout the years have dually used their clothing and hair as a fashion statement and a tool of resistance. Particularly with the costuming of the Dora Milaje, Carter, who is African American, is creating a transnational conversation between the African diasporic influences and the convergence of modern African American styles. Therefore, the garments serve as a way to celebrate identity, culture, emotion, and expanded fashion terrain.

"Unapologetically feminine and ferocious…" ~Danai Gurira

The Dora Milaje reflect the breadth of the African diaspora and specifically evoke the histories and cultures of Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Kenya. These women of action have great potential to inspire Black girls and women to create their own identities by emulating the characters' boldness. Ryan Coogler, through the Dora Milaje, and the *Black Panther* film as a whole, is able to epitomize how Blackness and womanhood can beautifully intersect through this superhero collective, whether she is fully dressed in a stylish uniform, sporting a tattooed bald head, or with a red lip on a glowing dark-skinned body. The Dora Milaje, as a portrayed on the screen, serve as a way to tap into what Audre Lorde speaks of when she proclaims, "if I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive." Self-definition for Black women is key to securing pride in one's own identity. Despite criticism of the film[157], *Black Panther* should be applauded for its gender politics and its celebration and validation of Black women, especially through the performances of the Dora Milaje. As examples of action superheroines, who are also Black, these women quench a thirst that many Black women who are part of the comic book and superhero fandom have long to see included. In essence these characters and the women who embody them are the beginnings of a return on fans' investment of time and care.

Prior to the cinematic introduction of the Dora Milaje in *Black Panther*, there were only five major female characters played by non-white actresses within the Marvel Comic Universe (Mantis and Gamora from *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014); Liz and MJ from *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017); and Valkyrie from *Thor: Ragnorak* (2017). Two of these women played non-human/alien characters in full make-up covering that covered any racial identifiers. When looking at the top films of 2016, women made up 29% of the protagonists; however 76% of them were white.[158] These limited representations show a need for women of color, especially Black

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[156] Tulloch, C. (2010). Style—Fashion—Dress: From Black to Post-Black. *Fashion Theory*, *14*(3), 276.

[157] Several criticisms of the film ranged from Marvel Studios/Disney exploiting Black cultural and social movements, to the film conveying a conservative political message, to the film portraying a regressive, neocolonial vision of Africa.

[158] Lauzen, M. M. (2017). *It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top 100 Films of 2016*. Retrieved from Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film-San Diego State University website: https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/2016-Its-a-Mans-Celluloid-World-Report.pdf

women, is needed to be reflected on Hollywood screens. Ultimately, the presence of the Dora Milaje as fictional characters aid in articulating a new more nuanced critique of Black female representation in comic books and cinematically.

Although the Dora Milaje are the king's personal bodyguards, there to ensure that no harm comes to him, they do not take on the mothering characteristic that are stereotypically ascribed to Black women. They move beyond the stereotype of simply just being a shield or cocoon, whether collectively or individually. As noted earlier, Black women have been actively pursuing and attaining roles in film and popular media, yet we must take into account the complexities of the women and the characters they play. There is no illusion of inclusion and their presence is more than just being noticed but one that is valued and respected. This inclusion demonstrates how Black female characters can be go beyond the drama and comic relief. Black women characters can have agency and bodies that do not have to be sexualized or marginalized in order to exist in a film. Audiences are able to see how the Dora Milaje share a mutual partnership with T'Challa, fight bravely and end a fight morally (Figure 1.30), and demand respect for their skills and intelligence, while they also make sure not to adhere to contemporary trappings of western beauty standards. From these portrayals, Black women are able to embrace the ways in which the Dora Milaje are carving out new lanes of being meaningfully recognized and represented. Each scene offers another Black feminist perspective on what a relatable, multifaceted superheroine can be.

(Figure 1.30-The Dora Milaje standing side-by-side with King T'Challa and as a collective fighting unit in *Black Panther* [2018])

It's her time to shine

Since their first introduction, the looks, skills, motivations and personalities of the "adored ones" have consistently stood out. This range provides numerous points of entry, identification and empathy for a wide spectrum of viewers and readers. Over time the Dora Milaje have been able transform their portrayals across media and, as a result, contribute and introduce important conversations (e.g. Black LGBTQ relationships in comics, sisterhood, camaraderie), disrupt past traditions, and gain new readers and fans all within various popular culture mediums. Cinematically and in comic book form, each iteration of the Dora Milaje offers different approaches to reading their narrative depending on the period of engagement. But the characters also maintain a consistent common thread of exposing readers and fans to various discourses regarding female strength and power, sexuality, loyalty, and physical/visual interpretations of Black womanhood. Even the specific members of the Dora Milaje (Okoye, Aneka, Nakia, and Ayo) present opportunities to identify with their personalities, and highlight the different roles of women in Wakanda. They serve as ambassadors representing the interests and culture of Wakanda. Grounded and inspired by diasporic historical figures, these cultural

ambassadors play a role in expanding the representations of Black women within comics and popular culture.

Black feminism and Afrofuturism jointly provide the frameworks to discuss the Dora Milaje. From a Black feminist standpoint, they collective promotes a free space of thinking; a feeling of being confident about one's entire self; and a way to express, discover and redefine Blackness and womanhood. Over their tenure in comics, the Dora Milaje have been able to re-write western standard beauty scripts and avoid common stereotypes and tropes of Black women such as the asexual mammy, hyper-sexed jezebel, emasculating Sapphire or other variations of the angry Black woman.[159] As it relates to Afrofuturism, the Dora Milaje are always immersed in some type of technology, whether through wearing kimoyo beads and vibranium armor or traveling in a "Quinjet" (Figure 1.31) a transportation method designed by T'Challa's Wakanda Design Group. Throughout their brief history, this special-ops team of women has never been confined to one type of identity or personality, which falls in line with how Afrofuturism as an idea, aesthetic, and a theoretical framework, avoids being singularly defined.
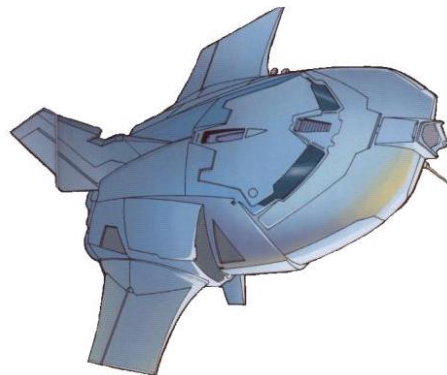
(Figure 1.31-A traveling device called a "Quinjet" often used by the Dora Milaje)

Skilled physically and intellectually, the Dora Milaje provide a contemporary perspective on a superhero team of women that treads the line between remarkable and intimidating (Figure 1.32). Their perspective provides a contrast from mainstream white female superheroines (DC Comics Wonder Woman, Supergirl, Mera and Marvel Comics Black Widow, Elektra," and The Wasp who are typically embody idealized notions of femininity. By contrast, Black superheroines are often "explicitly associated with exoticized notions of Africa, nature, noble savagery and a variety of dark continent themes."[160] Presenting images of strong, powerful diasporic Black female bodies resonates against such stereotypical beauty standards.

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[159] hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press.; Tyree, T. (2013). "Contemporary Representations of Black Females in Newspaper Comic Strips". In S. C. Howard & R. L. Jackson (Eds.), *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation* (pp. 45-64). London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury.; West, C. (2008). "Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and Their Homegirls: Developing an 'Oppositional Gaze' Toward the Images of Black Women". In J. Chrisler, C. Golden, & P. Rozee (Eds.), *Lectures on the Psychology of Women* (4th ed., pp. 286-299). New York, NY: McGraw Hill.

[160] Brown, J. A. (2011). If Looks Could Kill: Power, Revenge, and Stripper Movies. In *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (p. 134). Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.; see also Fawaz, R. (2011). "Where No X-Man Has Gone Before! Mutant Superheroes and the Cultural Politics of Popular Fantasy in Postwar America". *American Literature*, *83*(2), 371.

**(Figure 1.32-Members of the Dora Milaje preparing to fight
in the Battle of Wakanda in *Black Panther* [2018])**

     The Dora Milaje's contribution to comics not only contributes to the Black Panther theme of bringing pre-colonial ideas and practices into modern contexts. They also highlight a unique collective sisterhood and meaningfully increases the presence of Black female characters. These characters are not simply another "other" that falls into the background, a body to gazed at sexually, or one to underestimate. Even their name "the adored ones," contributes to their significance as Black diasporic women. Their name represents how they are defined and acknowledges why they matter. Black women in and out of comics are constantly challenging the politics of recognition, while simultaneously pushing against the idea that their Blackness and femininity can co-exist. Instead of being sacrificial heroines the Dora Milaje become "visionaries guiding our consciousness into their imagined realities."[161] They have moved from simply being protectors of the king and Wakanda to becoming central to the narrative and helming their own series—all while still maintaining a sense of style, grace, integrity and honor. As Mia Mask explains, these characters push past Black female portrayals having to fit in either the "good, politically progressive role models" or "bad, regressive Black stereotype" binary. For Black women and girls all over, the Dora Milaje and Wakanda represent a fictional space where one's sexuality, natural beauty, identity, femininity, and intelligence are recognized and affirmed.

     As the popularity of the Dora Milaje continues to be on the rise, their presence continues to change and evolve. In March 2018, Marvel Comics announced that the Dora Milaje would get their own arc in a three-part series, "Wakanda Forever," written by fantasy author Nnedi Okorafor.[162] Through this series, readers get to venture with the Dora Milaje as they collaborate with other Marvel figures such as Spider-Man, the Avengers, and the X-Men. The new series gives the characters a chance to break out on their own. As Okorafor notes, "they're not under the shadow of the throne." Additionally, this new arc provides another opportunity to focus on the humanity of this team of women (and not just their combat skills), offers more positions to Black women on the Marvel creative and writing teams, and contribute to the lasting, hopeful legacy of the Dora Milaje characters. These efforts also speak to the need to further engage with Black women and girl fans.

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[161] Womack, Y. L. (2013). The Divine Feminine in Space. In *Afrofuturism: The world of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture* (p. 100). Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books.

[162] Okorafor would also previously contribute to the Black Panther comic legacy with her 2018 six-issue series *Black Panther: Long Live the King*

Ultimately, the Dora Milaje legacy continues to expand; they have made appearances at the Disneyland Resorts, served as Halloween costume inspirations for adults and children, and, more than likely, will return in the upcoming *Black Panther* sequel. In Chapter 2, it takes another creative approach through a photo essay to discuss the relationship, of her comic book and television appearances, between race, gender, disability, self-acceptance from the perspective of Marvel Comics Misty Knight.

Chapter Two-Examining a 'New Normal' in *Marvel Comics* Misty Knight

      What does it mean to exist? What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to live an ordinary life? These are all questions that come to mind when we talk about disability. Popular media culture has contributed to numerous discussions surrounding the perceptions and treatment of disability within society, especially in the wake of such television shows as ABC's *Speechless* and AMC's *Breaking Bad* (Figure 2.1); the performances of Peter Dinklage as Tyrion Lannister[163] in HBO's *Game of Thrones* (Figure 2.2); Millicent Simmons as Regan in the 2018 drama/thriller *A Quiet Place* (Figure 2.2); Bryan Cranston's controversial performance in *The Upside* (2019) (Figure 2.3); and the animated performances of "Hiccup the Viking" and "Toothless the Night Fury" dragon in the film *How To Train Your Dragon* (2010) (Figure 2.3).
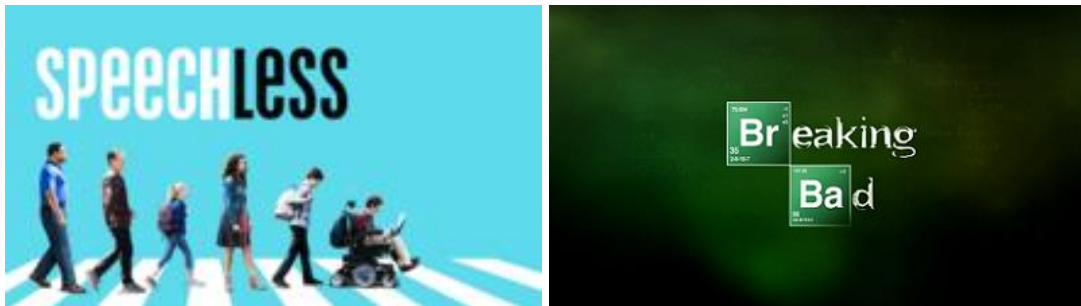
(Figure 2.1-Television posters for ABC *Speechless* and AMC *Breaking Bad*)

(Figure 2.2- l-r Peter Dinklage as Tyrion Lannister [HBO, *Game of Thrones*] and Millicent Simmons as Regan [*A Quiet Place*])

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[163]Although those who have some type of dwarfism do not feel that they have a disability, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) still protects the rights of people with dwarfism. As noted in Disability Unit. (2015, October). October is Dwarfism Month | Disability Unit. Retrieved from http://www.cput.ac.za/blogs/disability/health-calendar-2015/october/october-is-dwarfism-month/

(Figure 2.3-Movie posters for films that discuss and/or highlight some sort of disability within the storyline, l-r *How To Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World* [2019] and *The Upside* [2019])

Similar to the conversation surrounding race, gender, and sexuality, there is a need to change representations of disability in popular media. Additionally, the topic of disability studies is a subject area that is still evolving and being fleshed as society encounters better language and terminology and ways to humanize the experiences of persons who are disabled, while also bringing more awareness to diverse and accessible experiences. More specifically, the conversation around disability and comics has begun to shape with the popularity of such characters as Marvel Comics *X-Men's* Charles "Professor X" Xavier and Daredevil/Matt Murdock, and DC Comics Oracle/Barbara Gordon (Figure 2.5). Thus, this rise in representation reinforces the need to further explore deeper the "disabled superhero"[164] trope.[165]

Despite recent and evolving academic scholarship on comics and disability, narratives surrounding race and gender, specifically the Black female experience, are not as prevalent. The experiences of Black women superheroes' experiences with disabilities, such as Marvel Comics Misty Knight, offer a fictional opportunity to investigate how they function in day-to-day situations.

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[164] Disability superpower is defined as the character acquiring superpowers as a result of and/or to make up for their disability; the superpower disability is where the character is disabled in some way based on attaining superpowers.
[165] Trope is defined as a figurative or metaphorical use of a word or expression that when used in comic is often negative or derogatory in nature.

(Figure 2.4- Mercedes "Misty" Knight once a new York City police officer turned private detective)

With the loss of one arm and the regaining of a "new" one, we witness how her narrative (in comic form or through a Netflix series) provides an illustration of how disability can be complicated, challenged, and performed. Furthermore, highlighting Misty Knight's story provides an innovative narrative that disrupts the argument that "female, disabled and dark bodies are supposed to be dependent, incomplete, vulnerable, and incompetent bodies ... portrayed as helpless, dependent, weak."[166] Ultimately, Misty Knight's character exemplifies how we can approach the representations of disability and its intersections with gender and race.

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[166] Gipson, G. D. (2017, October 14). "The Future Is Black and Female: Afrofuturism and Comic Books" – AAIHS. Retrieved from https://www.aaihs.org/the-future-is-black-and-female-afrofuturism-and-comic-books/

(Figure 2.5- [l-r] Marvel Comics Charles "Professor X" Xavier, Daredevil/Matt Murdock, and DC Comics Oracle/Barbara Gordon)

For me, this chapter becomes a personal teaching moment as I seek to engage more with the disability community and the role that I can play as an able-bodied teacher-scholar. Instead of being afraid to engage or having a constant fear of offending someone, it is important to make the effort to see the differences. As noted by Audre Lorde, "It is not our difference that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences…difference is inevitable."[167] There should be a balance between celebrating and debating without fracturing communities. This notion is not only important from an individual standpoint, but also on a larger collective scale. As the arena of popular culture continues to expand, it is essential to work across boundaries. Thus, disability as a difference should not be viewed as a marketing niche, but as an opportunity for a promotion of cultural growth. As a creative medium within popular culture, comics have the potential to not only discuss and confront injustices of racism, sexism, ableism, but also applaud and encourage empowering disability narratives.

Race, Gender, and Disability in the Literature

While disability is not a new concept, the history of disability has undergone continuous transformation since the 1900s. This is due to people with disabilities demanding and creating change. However, in spite of the changes there are still gaps in knowledge, whether in reality or fiction, and a need for intersectionality within disability studies. Marvel Comics "Misty Knight" as a Black woman who is disabled, offers an opportunity to address this intersectionality from the perspective of fictional comic book character. But, before exploring the various representations of Misty Knight as a comic book character and her relationship with disability, it is important to offer a brief review of the scholarship on this subject. Misty Knight's narrative is unique in that encompasses a variety of conversations, which intersect across disciplines.

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[167] Lorde, A. (1986). *Our Dead Behind Us*. New York, NY: Norton.

Disability, Disability Studies and Language

      Defining disability has been contested subject, which has taken on various definitions in different communities.[168] Much of the controversy happened out of disability activism in the United States and in the United Kingdom during the 1970s. By challenging the medical model, many activists, during that time, were seeking to deconstruct the dominating perceptions and discourse surrounding disability. In different times and places, distinctive terms have been used to describe persons who are disabled. Common general terms that have and are often used include *disability*, *impairment, and handicap*. More specific terms include blind, deaf, cerebal palsy, and Down syndrome. A popular approach to discussing disability is "people-first language."[169] People-first language seeks to put the person before the disability and avoid terminology that is stereotypical, derogatory, and disempowering. Some individuals also prefer identity-first phrasing or language to highlight the role disability has in shaping and impacting one's identity. In the academic space, there have been various approaches to the language and terminology of disability. Some scholars have theorized it as an experienced-based identity,[170] while others have explored disability as a set of meanings that influence, and even *structure,* social relationships, both through and beyond personal experiences of disability.[171] This influence led to the development of the concept of ableism, created by Simi Linton in her 1998 text *Claiming Disability Knowledge and Identity,* which she defines as discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities and characterizes them as inferior to the non-disabled.

      Additionally, a contemporary approach to disability is seen in the Sami Schalk's 2018 text *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Whereas some scholars make the distinction of dis/ability or ability/disability to encompass a system of normalization, Schalk makes the distinction of using the parenthetical designation of (dis)ability. The use of parentheses surrounding (dis) signals the mutually dependent nature of disability and ability.[172] For Schalk, the use of these distinctions and designations in critical disability studies can better engage in conversations about the ways both ability and disability operate in representations, language, medicine, the law, history, and other cultural arenas.[173] Therefore, whether formally or informally, implementing approaches that center the individual first continue the transformation process of reclaiming and redefining the

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[168] Linton, S. (1998). *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

[169] This approach is also described as person-first phrasing and or identity-first phrasing.

[170] Gill, C. J. (1997). Four types of integration in disability identity development. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 9*(1), 39-46.; Linton, S. (1998). *Claiming disability: Knowledge and identity*. New York: NYU Press.; Putnam, M. (2005). Conceptualizing disability developing a framework for political disability identity. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 16(3), 188-198.

[171] Davis, L. J. (1995). *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books.; Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.; Rogers, L.J. & Blue Swadener, B. (Eds.). (2001). *Semiotics & dis/ability: Interrogating categories of difference*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.; Snyder, S.L. & Mitchell, D. (2006). *Cultural locations of disability*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.; Thomas, C. (2004). Rescuing a social relational understanding of disability. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 6*(1), 22-36.

[172] Schalk, S. (2018). *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books.

[173] Schalk, S. (2017). Critical Disability Studies as Methodology. *Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*, 6(1).

terminology that has been used to objectify and pathologize. Overall, this type of language is the difference between explaining what a person *has* and who a person *is*.

As a fairly new academic discipline, disability studies, which began in the 1980s, was primarily studied from a medical/clinical perspective. With universities and colleges having a consistent interest in studying disability, the first journal addressing this interest was the "Disability Studies Quarterly" in 1986, the formalization of the first disabilities studies program began in 1994 at Syracuse University. As noted by disability studies scholar Lennard J. Davis, the establishment of this program was significant due to the fact that at one time, it was virtually impossible for someone to cover disability within the humanities.[174] Disability studies would continue to expand beyond the sciences and humanities to include education, art, and social sciences. Over the course of the next ten years, the field would begin to grow with the creation of new programs (offering certificates, undergraduate and graduate degrees),[175] and added courses to college and university curriculums.[176] Ultimately, as disabilities studies continues to grow as a discipline, it is critical to find a useful balance between boosting curriculums that acknowledge the medical approach without stigmatizing individuals, while also incorporating diverse personal, collective day-to-day experiences of persons with disabilities.[177]

Disability and Gender

The intersection of gender and disability shapes some of the most severe forms of marginalization and discrimination. Nevertheless, they are frequently treated as separate issues. Some of the earliest efforts to discuss the gendered experience of disability include Jo Campling's *Better Lives for Disabled Women* (1979)[178] and her collection of essays *Images of Ourselves: Women with Disabilities Talking* (1999).[179] Both were grounded in individual perspectives that stressed culture, personal relationships, sexuality, education, and motherhood. These experiences would be expanded and given a wider theoretical framework in the work of writers Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch. Through their work they found that disabled women experienced more shrewd patterns of discrimination than that of non-disabled women. Susan Lonsdale's text *Women and Disability: The Experience of Physical Disability Among Women* (1990)[180] further documents the range of disadvantages socially and economically and how they reproduce gender divisions within the general populations.

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[174] Davis, L. J. (1997). *The Disability Studies Reader*. New York, NY: Routledge.

[175] Additionally, the first edition of the *Disabilities Studies Reader* was published in 1997 and the Modern Language Association would establish disability studies as a "division of study" in 2005. As described in Simon, C. C. (2013, November 1). Disability Studies: A New Normal. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/education/edlife/disability-studies-a-new-normal.html

[176] To date there are over 40 programs within the U.S. and Canada. These programs employ an interdisciplinary approach, which includes work on disability history, theory, legislation/policy, ethics, and the arts. This approach allows for various perspectives and the use of multiple theories to define and understand disability and its experiences.

[177] Society for Disability Studies. (2016, September 16). "About SDS." Retrieved from http://disstudies.org/index.php/about-sds/

[178] Campling, J. (1979). *Better Lives for Disabled Women*. New York, NY: Time Warner Books.

[179] Campling, J. (1999). *Images of Ourselves: Women with Disabilities Talking*. London, England: Routledge.

[180] Lonsdale, S. (1990). *Women and Disability: The Experience of Physical Disability Among Women*. London, United Kingdom: Macmillan International Higher Education.

As time has progressed, the research and writings on disabled women has progressed to not only incorporate women into disability theory but offer and include more creative, innovative, and radical approaches to the conversation. Some of these conversations include formulating critical interventions into feminist theory, queer theory, and disability studies. Alison Kafer's text *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013) questions the future of disability studies and its need to address gender and sexuality simultaneously. Much in the same way that Afrofuturism seeks to include Black bodies in the future, Kafer argues that "disabled people are continually being written out of the future, rendered as the sign of the future no one wants."[181] She further builds on this notion, explaining that we must imagine queer and crip futures in the face of a society that desires and prioritizes heteronormativity and able-bodies. Other conversations include interrogating the cultural conceptions of disability and sex, such as the collection *Sex and Disability* (2012), edited by Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow, which contributes to the disruption of how disability pushes against the norms of respectability and demands for accessible sexual citizenship.

Disability studies and feminist theory scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson translated the feminist notion "the personal is political" to incorporate the experiences of disabled women. Thomson's work[182] would be one of the first to insert feminism and the ways in which it expands the terms and confronts the limitations of disability studies. She also integrates feminism with constructions of human diversity and the materiality of body. Her text *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997)[183] serves as a founding text in the disability studies canon and offers a look into disability studies from a humanities perspective. *Extraordinary Bodies* also demonstrates a cultural attitude shift analysis towards people with disabilities through the works of twentieth-century African American women writers like Ann Petry, Audre Lorde, and Toni Morrison. Through these Black women writers Thomson provides a revision to disability as a marker of identity to reclaim and celebrate.

In a similar fashion, Sami Schalk also offers a Black feminist perspective to the experiences of disabled Black women. Disability and Black feminism, a fairly new relationship, is another area in which we are able to see interdisciplinary experiences and social justice investments. Even though the work of disability implicitly appears in Black feminist theory work (i.e. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* [1995],[184] *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* [2000],[185] *Race, Gender and the Activism of Black Feminist Theory: Working with Audre Lorde* [2015][186]) it is not generally explicitly discussed. Schalk's text *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race,*

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[181] Kafer, A. (2013). Time for Disability Studies and a Future for Crips. In *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (p. 46). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

[182] Garland-Thomson, R. (2001). *Re-shaping, Re-thinking, Re-defining: Feminist Disability Studies*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Women Policy Studies.

[183] Garland-Thomson, R. (1997). *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

[184] Guy-Sheftall, B. (1995). *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. New York, NY: The New Press.

[185] Collins, P. H. (2002). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. London, England: Routledge.

[186] Nayak, S. (2015). *Race, Gender and the Activism of Black Feminist Theory: Working with Audre Lorde*. New York, NY: Routledge.

and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction (2018) provides a way to specifically understand disability and reimagine the bodies of Black women through the works of Black women speculative writers. *Bodyminds Reimagined* celebrates these writers and subjects, while challenging the status quo within speculative fiction and (dis)ability studies, and moves them from marginalized objects to realist representations.[187] This specific work is timely as it relates to the growing popularity of comics and rising representation of Black women who are disabled in these narratives. Ultimately, what becomes important is the acknowledgement and recognition of disabled female (especially Black) bodies and their experiences, the moving away from being labeled as passive victims and disadvantaged, and an assertion of self-worth and normalcy.

Disability and Blackness

Although disability studies have positioned its approach from an interdisciplinary perspective that includes conversations on gender and sexuality, race is often an issue that has been avoided. According to the late disability scholar Christopher M. Bell, disability primarily has been attached and concerned with white bodies. Thus, it becomes essential that lanes are carved out to discuss the intersections between people of color and disability.[188] There is still a lack of discussion between Blackness and disability in Africana Studies, despite the disciplines emphasis on abjection and oppression, rejection, resistance, anti-blackness, discussions that overlap with disability, there still lacks an explicit discussion.

This avoidance would be addressed during a workshop on "blackness and disability" at the 2007 Collegium for African American Research (CAAR) Conference in Madrid, Spain. Following the workshop and the discussions that emerged at CAAR. Bell organized a collection of essays entitled *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions* (2011). Bell's collection pioneered the beginnings of an investigative dialogue on the crossroads of blackness and disability. Additionally, *Blackness and Disability* offers a chronological and thematic discussion of blackness and disability, which includes such topics as disability and its relationship with slavery, challenging illness (AIDS & cancer), media, hip hop, and Black soldiers (World War II to Iraq). Further conversations around Blackness and disability include Josh Lukin's 2014 chapter in *The Disability Studies Reader* titled "Disability and Blackness" in which he discusses the lack of dialogues surrounding Black disability studies and the role of literary scholars have in developing a bridge between Blackness and disability studies and how these are also connected with Black activism and disability advocacy.[189] From a legal standpoint, law scholar Kimani Paul-Emile's 2018 article "Blackness as Disability?" explores new approaches to the legal framework and normative commitments of disability law, specifically regarding race jurisprudence and structural inequality.[190] The above readings contribute to recovering missed opportunities, uncover misrepresentations, and keeps blackness and disability in conversation with one another.

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[187] Gipson, G. D. (2018, August 3). Disability, Race, and Gender in Speculative Fiction – AAIHS. Retrieved from https://www.aaihs.org/disability-race-and-gender-in-speculative-fiction/

[188] Bell, C. M. (2011). *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press

[189] Lukin, J. (2014). Disability and Blackness. In L. J. Davis (Ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader* (4th ed., pp. 308-315). New York, NY: Routledge.

[190] Paul-Emile, K. (2018). Blackness as Disability. *Georgetown Law Journal*, *106*(293). Retrieved from https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3107289

All in all, each of the above texts contribute and expand the understandings regarding race, class, gender, and sexuality under the umbrella of disability. The conversations above also engage with moving away from the notion of disabled bodies being marked as other, but rather understand the unique layers of disabled identity. As scholars continue to study disability, more conversations emerge that are inclusive of multiple identities.

Disability and Popular Media Depictions & Portrayals

The images and stories that are presented in the media play a major and can have a profound influence on public opinion and create societal norms. It is important that persons with disability are not just acknowledged and visible, but that they are not subjected to being featured as negative tropes, stereotypes, and/or inappropriately represented. Disability advocates actively work to move society from the "pity/heroism trap" or "pity/heroism dichotomy."[191] Considering that media platforms, in general, have been quoted as directly portraying and reinforcing the "plight of the disabled" along with negative images and ideas, it becomes essential to not only make aware, but also inform and educate. This awareness must also not rely on the medical model. For example, telethons such as the Jerry Lewis MDA Telethon has come under major scrutiny and even physically protested by disability rights advocates for its reliance on common stereotypes such as pity and heroism.[192] Additionally, the media must avoid falling into certain model traps and tropes. This is exemplified by the "super-crip" model, where persons are depicted as heroically overcoming their difficulties,[193] and "inspiration porn" coined by disability rights activist Stella Young, which describes persons with disabilities as inspirational solely based on their disability.[194]

Other tropes, but not limited to, that are often found in television and film include disability as sinister and evil where disabled characters are either portrayed as villains or anti-heroes (i.e. "Hector 'Tio' Salamanca" from AMC's *Breaking Bad*); disability being attached to asexuality or being seen as undesirable sexually or romantically (i.e. "Artie Abrams" on *Glee*); or the trope of eternal innocence where a character is paired with a side-kick like character that has an intellectual disability (i.e. *Rainman* [1988], *Forrest Gump* [1999]). In some cases, these tropes have also developed and are attributed to marginalized groups such as the "magical negro" (e.g. *The Defiant Ones* [1958] and *The Green Mile* [1999]). These tropes are also common in the comic book arena when disability becomes a superpower, such as the "Genius Cripple" trope that is most prominently depicted in Bullseye from the Marvel Comics Daredevil series, Mr. Glass from *Unbreakable* (2000) and *Glass* (2019), or Felicity Smoak from DC Comics *Arrowverse* series and her status as a paraplegic. These cases present complicated dichotomies as the characters are portrayed as *strong* in mind but *weak* in the physical form. Moreover, it is essential to dismantle these traps and tropes as they have the potential to become recurring

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[191] Ralston, D. C., & Ho, J. (2009). *Philosophical Reflections on Disability*. Berlin, Germany: Springer Science & Business Media.

[192] Longmore, P. K. (2016). *Telethons: Spectacle, Disability, and the Business of Charity*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

[193] Johnson, M. (1989). The "super-crip" stereotype: Press Victimization of disabled people. *FineLine: The Newsletter on Journalism Ethics*, *1*(4), 2. Retrieved from https://sites.mediaschool.indiana.edu/ethics-case-studies/the-super-crip-stereotype/

[194] Young, S. (2014, April). *I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much.* TEDxSydney. [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much?language=en

images and representations in the mainstream culture, and as a result becoming familiar identities.

There is a rise in accessible, empowering, and intersectional representations within popular media. Media's role in presenting disability is central in that it has the opportunity to dispel negative tropes and stereotypes, while advocating the rights and respect of persons with disabilities. This is shown in the #DisabledAndCute hashtag[195] as it serves as a viral example of bringing attention and awareness to disability culture, but also disrupt and revise the narratives often ascribed to disability. Created by Keah Brown a New York based journalist who has cerebral palsy, #DisabledAndCute was not meant to focus on literal cuteness, but rather a promotion of empowerment and self-love. As a Black woman, Brown is also able to take part in rewriting the historical visual narrative of Black female bodies, while simultaneously combatting body insecurity, and subvert mis-readings of disability as being connected to undesirability and brokenness. For Brown, "being both does not negate the other." While sharing her story through various visual tweets, she has encouraged others to share their photos, thus, creating an empowering experience.

Disability Personified in a Digital Space
The creation of accessible and intersectional representations can also be seen in such new media platforms as:

- **The Mighty**: an online community that seeks to "empower and connect people facing health challenges and disabilities"[196] (https://themighty.com/)
- **Claiming Crip**: a personal blog created by UK disability studies scholar Karin Hitselberger that chronicles her journey of what it means to be disabled, while finding pride and strength (http://www.claimingcrip.com/)
- **Ceep Style**: a photo based Tumblr blog about the intersection of disability and fashion, also run by Karin Hitselberger (https://ceepstyle.tumblr.com/)
- **Disability Visibility Project**: an online community that seeks to "create, share, and amplify disability media and culture"[197]

The *Disability Visibility Project* (DVP), in particular, which was created in 2014 by disability activist, media maker and consultant Alice Wong (Figure 2.5) serves as one of the leading online communities "dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture." For Wong, she wanted "to create disabled media that is intersectional, multi-modal, and accessible."[198] Due to media being a fundamental tool for awareness and counteracting stigmas, platforms such as DVP encourage and provide opportunities for people with disabilities to share their stories, while championing for accurate disability culture and history. Similar to Wong, disability advocate Vilissa Thompson has created a "self-advocacy & empowerment movement for people with disabilities" with *Ramp Your Voice with Vilissa* (Figure 2.6). Thompson who has a condition called Osteogenesis Imperfecta (OI) has used her story of being Black, female, and

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[195] Other popular and empowering hashtags that celebrate persons with disabilities include: #TheBarriersWeFace, #CripTheVote, #AbleismExists, #ActuallyAutistic, #WheelchairLife, #MobileWomen, #Visibility4Disability
[196] The Mighty. (2019). Who We Are. Retrieved from https://themighty.com/who-we-are/
[197] Disability Visibility Project. (2019, February 27). About. Retrieved from https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/about/
[198] Ibid

disabled to discuss the diversity of disability. Through such creations as the #DisabilityTooWhite viral hashtag and the "Black Disabled Woman Syllabus,"[199] Thompson has been able to address the impact of lack of diversity for disabled people of color as well as create resources that have gained interest and praise within the academy and disabled community.

(Figure 2.6- *Ramp Your Voice* **creator Vilissa Thompson [top] and** *Disability Visibility Project* **creator Alice Wong [bottom])**

While disability in media is regularly represented in the larger format of television and film, the depiction of disability is just as prevalent in the comic book format. As Rosmarie Garland-Thompson notes comics is described as light, inviting, and cheerful, however, in contrast, disability is heavy, forbidding, and dismal. Both disability studies and comic book studies separately are increasing their presence across the globe and are being theorized both inside and outside of the academy. Although disability scholars have examined and questioned the portrayals of disability in comics, there is a need for conversations surrounding how comic books and graphic novels depict a wide range of disabilities in their various narratives.

The intersection of comics and disability studies is a relatively new inquiry of scholarship. This rise in interest can be seen in José Alaniz's *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond*[200] (2014), which serves as the first detailed examination of the comic book superhero through the lens of disability studies. With a specific focus on characters from the Silver Age of Comics,[201] Alaniz offers an analysis of investigating the construction of "othering" the disabled body in contemporary culture and society. Through his analysis he speaks to how the disabled body is "politically charged" and perceived as abnormal, thus resulting in ableist anxieties that threaten U.S. optimism. In the following year, another approach to interrogating the unique relationship between comics and disability was conceived in

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[199] Thompson's "Black Disabled Women Syllabus" can be found at the following link: http://rampyourvoice.com/2016/05/05/black-disabled-woman-syllabus-compilation/

[200] Alaniz, J. (2014). *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond*. Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

[201] The Silver Age of Comics, which takes place from 1956-1970, marks a period in comic book history where they became mainstream sources of entertainment in America especially those featuring the superhero archetype. Notable introductions include a new version of *DC Comics* "The Flash" and the introduction of *Marvel Comics* "Fantastic Four." It precedes the Bronze Age of Comics.

the 2015 text *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*.[202] As a manifesto that includes physicians, graphic artists, and writers, this collection of work examines the intersections of literature and medicine by showing the potential of comics ability to redefine medical culture. Although this collection does not specifically use the language of disability, it tackles how comics, globally, can be used to discuss the performances and experiences of those who have a disability and those who come in contact with them from a medical standpoint. For the writers and artists, this collection serves as a way to merge the arts and sciences. While the above two texts play a notable role in an increased interest in disability and comics there was still a lacking in expanding on the significant conversations surrounding comics and disability (i.e. access and portrayals and experiences beyond the medical perspective). *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*[203] (2016) contributes to this scholarly tradition of examining disabilities in comics with an examination of superhero narrative and memoirs. This collection consists of three main themes: representation of disability in comics, graphic novels, and manga; the theoretical work of David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder on "narrative prosthesis" and how it is used in comic books; and reevaluating comic theory through the lens of disability studies. Despite the collection focusing primarily on American comics, this is the first edited collection that proposes inclusive and intersectional examples. It also incorporates various insights and different research methods for examining disability in comics and frames how disability functions in comic books and graphic novels.

Nevertheless, even with the wide variety of texts on disability, the discussions on race and gender are still very limited. The aforementioned texts focus on the medicalization and discriminatory representations of disability. Although there are some intersectional approaches, the inclusion of characters of color is primarily centered on one Black male character, and there is also no inclusion of queer and/or trans conversations. Even though these texts are providing a critical voice to various comic book characters while also bringing awareness to the evolving relationships between comics and disability there is still a lack of frameworks that empower and move the characters from being in the margins and placing them in the center. Even in comics, disability is treated as a problem or dysfunction needing to be fixed.

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[202] Czerwiec, M., Williams, I., Squier, S. M., Green, M. J., Myers, K. R., & Smith, S. T. (2015). *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*. University Park, PA: Penn State Press.
[203] Whalen, Z. (2016). *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*. Basingstoke, England: Springer.

Character Profile

"Hello, hero. This is control. Are you for hire tonight?" ~Misty Knight

Name	Mercedes Knight
First Appearance	*Marvel Premiere #21* **(March 1975)**
Alter-Ego	Misty
Species	Human
Place of origin	Harlem, New York
Home	Harlem, New York
Team Affiliations	New York City Police Department, Nightwing Restorations, Ltd., Heroes for Hire, Daughters of the Dragon, Valkyrior
Partnership(s)	Iron Fist, Colleen Wing, Luke Cage, Rafael Scarfe, Black Panther
Notable Aliases	Maya Corday, Control
Abilities	Highly skilled martial artist, Proficient hand-to-hand combatant, Near perfect aim, Via bionic right arm: Superhuman strength, Technopathy, Control over magnetism, Emit strong concussive blasts

A Look at Misty Knight

Over the years, a wide-range of disabilities has been represented in the medium of comics whether on the actual pages, a television series, and or on film. Comics, as an art form, have been able to personify stories of extraordinary individuals who overcome odds, but also show their struggles with acceptance and identity. With the slow progression of disability representation in popular media, comics have been able to successfully and consistently provide that representation as compared to other media formats. In particular, Marvel Comics has provided an array of characters who are depicted as disabled. More notable characters include Daredevil, Professor X, and Hawkeye.[204] However, there are lesser-known disabled characters like Misty Knight that are worthy of discussion. Misty Knight becomes disabled after a bomb blast while on the job. As a result, Misty Knight is able to obtain superhuman abilities through her prosthetic/bionic arm created by Tony Stark/Stark Industries. A heroine character like Misty Knight who is successful not in spite of or because of her disability offers a more inclusive comic narratives that is able "reimagine disability"[205] as a common human experience as seen through a Black woman.

Created by writer Tony Isabella and artist Arvell Jones in 1975, Misty Knight makes her first appearance in *Marvel Premiere #21* (March 1975). For some scholars, she is debatably the second-most prominent Black superheroine after Storm[206] based on her personality, skills and talents, and team affiliations/partnerships within comics. Her appearance in comics occurs during the "Bronze Age of Comics"[207] where, even though it was still majority male creators, there was an increase of superheroines due to lobbying of various feminist and civil rights groups.

Nevertheless, despite her creation, Misty Knight's character still becomes victim to the hypersexualized representation of a skin-tight costume, large breasts, and small waist. Previous depictions of her are very indicative to the Blaxploitation period, resembling Foxy Brown, and as a result, her character relies on "contrived exoticism."[208] Her explicit depiction of the Black female body incorporates an engagement between sexuality and disability. As a Black woman who is disabled, Misty Knight's character speaks to Nicole Fleetwood's notion of being "simultaneously invisible and always visible."[209] She is visible in her body, but less as a whole person. Nevertheless, Misty Knight becomes a missed opportunity to move beyond the exaggerated female body and reliance to Blaxploitation figures, and instead incorporate other 1970s pop culture Black female icons like that of Jayne Kennedy or Tracy Reed.[210] In some

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[204] Although depicted as disabled in comics, he does not retain his disabled identity in other adaptations.

[205] Garland-Thomson, R. (2005). "Disability and Representation". *PMLA*, *120*(2), 524.

[206] Nama, A. (2011). *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

[207] The Bronze Age of Comic Books is an informal name for a period in the history of American superhero comic books usually said to run from 1970 to 1985. It follows the Silver Age of Comic Books, and is followed by the Modern Age of Comic Books.

[208] Svitavsky, W. (2013). "Race, Superheroes, and Identity: 'Did you Know he was Black?'". In J. C. Chambliss & T. Donaldson (Eds.), *Ages of Heroes, Eras of Men: Superheroes and the American Experience* (p. 154). Newcastle, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.; Brown, J. A. (2013). "Panthers and Vixens: Black Superheroines, Sexuality, and Stereotypes in Contemporary Comic Books". In S. C. Howard & R. L. II (Eds.), *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation* (pp. 134, 137). London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic.

[209] Fleetwood, N. R. (2011). "Excess Flesh: Black Women Performing Hypervisibility". In *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (p. 111). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

[210] Both Jayne Kennedy and Tracy Reed were popular women during the 1970s, but were not highlighted as much as Blaxploitation female figures.

ways, this representation misses the opportunity to embrace the fusion of Black femininity and heroic morality beyond the typical black female tropes.[211] However, it should also be noted that, even with the enhancement and addition of her bionic arm she does become less exoticized by technology as compared to DC Comics character Cyborg who takes on a full body revision (Figure 2.7).

(Figure 2.7-An image of *DC Comics* character Victor "Cyborg" Stone)

In spite of her early hypersexualized interpretations, Misty Knight, as noted by Adilifu Nama becomes a part of a Black superhero gold standard when it comes to originality.[212] With key original figures like Marvel Comics Black Panther and Storm; Dark Horse Comics Martha Washington; and Milestone Comics Static Shock and Rocket; Misty Knight becomes another example of this originality as she is one of few Black female heroines who is not modeled after a white superhero. This originality also contributes to the way audiences can "re-think the role Black women play in the superhero comic book universe."[213] Taking an Afrofuturistic and Black feminist approach, her stories spark a way for Black women to grab hold of the future by reclaiming their voice, subjectivity, and humanity. Her story also creates a blending of innovate approaches that incorporate discussions of race, gender, and disability through a fantasy and technological lens.

In the interpretations to follow, each offers a reading that explores some sort of pushing against oppressive systems, finding one's self, while seeking recovery and healing. This analysis of the Misty Knight character provides a perspective of the Black and female experience, while building on the relationship between comics and disability. Characters like Misty Knight offers a cultural representation that can not only aid in disrupting stereotypes attached to disability and showcase the lived experiences of disability. Misty Knight as a fictional character also welcomes

[211] Nama, A. (2011). "Attack of the Clones". In *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (p. 99). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

[212] Ibid

[213] Gipson, G. D. (2017, October 14). "The Future Is Black and Female: Afrofuturism and Comic Books" – AAIHS. Retrieved from https://www.aaihs.org/the-future-is-black-and-female-afrofuturism-and-comic-books/

the opportunity to investigate access, managing trauma, and rewrite the telling of stories about the human experience, especially that of the Black female.

Daughters of the Dragon

        Created by writer Chris Claremont and drawn by artist Marshall Rogers in 2005-2006, *Daughters of the Dragon* is a limited series that features the duo of Misty Knight and "Colleen Wing."[214] Misty, who is now a private investigator, is partnered with Colleen and co-run a bail bonds company. Their relationship is one of an authentic, fun sister-friendship that was different, yet it did not succumb to a forced tolerable partnership.[215] Colleen, throughout this series as well as other appearances, never treats Misty as different because of her disability. Misty's narrative, specifically, in *Daughters of the Dragon* series moves from the typical male-centered comic narrative like that of fellow disabled *Marvel Comic* heroes "Matt Murdock/Daredevil" (blindness) and X-Men's "Professor X" (paraplegic), and *DC Comics* characters Cyborg (multiple prosthetics). Through this series, we see how protectors can come in different forms. Misty's character also challenges the traditional depictions of physically or mentally disabled characters as villains or invalid individuals. Throughout her history in comics, she has not only played a supporting role in various series (i.e. *Spider-man*, *X-Men*, *Captain America*, and *Heroes for Hire*), but as a co-lead in the *Daughters of the Dragon* series. For the purpose of this chapter, I focus on Misty's depiction in the *Daughters of the Dragon* series.

        Early depictions of Misty in the comic book pages has often been problematically represented as a strong, sassy, and diva-like sex symbol, which plays into the long-standing issues of misogyny and as more of a distraction. Some comic scholars have noted that Blaxploitation icons Pam Grier and Cleopatra Jones inspired Misty Knight's "no-nonsense" character. Being seen more as a sex symbol versus an empowering action heroine, this depiction is unfortunately most prevalent in the *Daughters of the Dragon* series. As a central and powerful female comic book character who is powerful, her authority is offset by amplified sexualization that attaches her femaleness to being seen as a sex object. As a result of her hypersexualized depictions, Misty's confidence, how she handles sexist and misogynistic behavior, and acceptance of her disability are topics not often discussed. For example, in Daughters *of the Dragon* Issue #1 while taking down a mutant villain, Misty and Colleen encounter two street cops who initially think that Misty and Colleen are involved in the incident. While, Colleen assures the officers that they are good and that the villain is their suspect the situation takes a turn. Before reading them their rights, one of the officers recognizes Misty:

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[214] Misty and Colleen, as two women of color, have a non-competing/equal partnership (versus other comic partnerships like that of The Falcon and Captain America where Falcon plays more second-fiddle, supporting role, treading the line as a sidekick, who was constantly striving to assert his equality).

[215] Connection with Brittney Cooper "Eloquent Rage" and the experiences she had with the complexities of white female friendships as noted in Cooper, B. (2018). *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (p. 45). New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

"Wait, I know you. Didn't you used to be on the force?...Bomb squad right? You got your…" (Figure 2.8)[216]

**(Figure 2.8-Misty Knight and Colleem Wing encountering a NYC police officer
and being mistaken as criminals in *Daughters of the Dragon (Limited Series), Issue 1*)**

At this point, Misty is fully aware of the officer's micro-aggressive behavior and what he is going to say next, resulting in her frustration building as she cuts him off: ***"Arm blown off, yeah, and I'm pretty damn sensitive about it, like the bad boys are…"[217]*** (Figure 2.9). In this encounter, Misty must curb the disrespect of the white and male police officer for questioning her authority and personhood, and attempting to throw the accident took took her arm, in her face. Historically, Black women have been marginalized, seen as less-than human, and incapable of power. If they do possess some level of authority or power they are seen as threatening and needing to be checked. As historian Deborah White-Gray argues with regards to Black women, "the more success you have, the more threatening you appear."[218] She goes further noting that "people think it's only black men who appear threatening, and that's not the case … they [Black women] have to be concerned that they don't appear too aggressive."[219] This is especially true in the case of Misty and her encounter with the police officer.

It should also be noted that during this encounter with the police officer, Misty is the only character questioned out of the two women. The white officer, who appears threatened, automatically tries to downplay Misty's skills because of her disability. However, this does not discourage Misty. Rather, she intentionally places her disability, literally and figuratively, as the

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[216] Palmiotti, J. and Gray, J. (2006). *Daughters of the Dragon (Limited Series), Issue 1* [Comic]. New York, NY: Marvel Comics.
[217] Ibid
[218] As told to Pfaff, L. G. (2018, October 9). "The Reality of Being a Black Woman in America." *Rutgers Today*. Retrieved from https://news.rutgers.edu/feature/reality-being-black-woman-america/20181008#.XHeSEZNKgWo
[219] Ibid

focus and assures him that it is not a hinderance but as an enhancement and possible weapon: ***"The good thing is I got a new bionic arm that crushes steel girders like rice paper, so I suggest you don't tick me off. Comprende?"*[220]** (Figure 2.9)
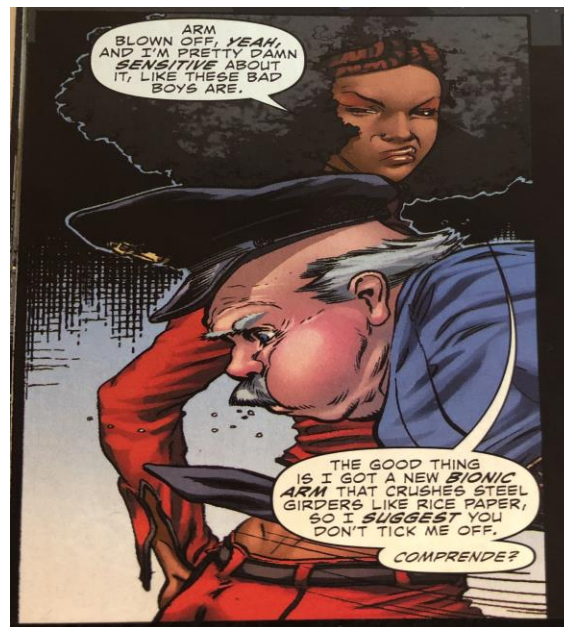
(Figure 2.9-Misty Knight having to put the police officer in his place
after his attempt to belittle her disability in *Daughters of the Dragon (Limited Series), Issue 1*)

Although Misty is on the brink of becoming incensed this does not deter her from displaying her capabilities and commanding respect as a Black woman and officer of the law. For Misty, she invokes a spirit of what Black feminist and historian Brittney Cooper calls "an eloquent rage,"[221] where her sass and attitude is honest and fearless but also can be read as threatening.

Another example that highlights Misty's skills, outside of her physical appearance is one where her disability becomes a tool that assists rather than be seen as a barrier. While encountering an informant who is seeking Misty's protection, we see her technological and weaponry skills as performed by her bionic prosthetic. Surprised at what her prosthetic can do he proclaims (Figure 2.10): ***"I thought that arm was just electronic muscle."*[222]** Misty who is unimpressed with his disbelief and sarcasm, goes on to tell him, ***"It's a lot of things, including a computer that's wired to sensory receptors in my brain, that's how I control it."*[223]**

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[220] *Daughters of the Dragon (Limited Series), Issue 1*
[221] Cooper, 2018
[222] Palmiotti, J. and Gray, J. (2006). *Daughters of the Dragon (Limited Series), Issue 3* [Comic]. New York, NY: Marvel Comics.
[223] Ibid

(Figure 2.10-An encounter with one of Misty Knight's informants as he looks at her bionic arm in shock and disbelief in *Daughters of the Dragon (Limited Series), Issue 3*)

Once again, her knowledge is undermined and her disability is diminished as a simple, non-productive tool. This panel alludes to the possibilities of what her character is able to accomplish.

Moreover, in the above panels, as well as throughout Misty's comic career, we see how she is living and functioning with her disability. Working with her disability, while fighting against oppressive behaviors and ableism and sexism, is key to her ability to survive and thrive.

Secret Love: Misty and Danny Forever

As a departure from the typical superhero narrative, the *Secret Love: Misty and Danny Forever* story arc, written by Jeremy Whitley, delivers an alternative version of the Misty Knight and "Danny Rand/Iron Fist" narrative. *Secret Love: Misty and Danny Forever* is part of the *Marvel Comics* one-shot title series *Secret Wars: Secret Love*, an anthology style sequence that features several romance story arcs between an array of *Marvel Comics* characters (i.e. "Kamala Khan"/"Ms. Marvel" & "Robbie Reyes"/"Ghost Rider" and a love triangle between "Karen Page"/"Matt Murdock/Daredevil"). In this story, readers are able to see Misty and Danny from the point of view as just regular people who have settled down and left their superhero lifestyle. We are able to dive into the struggles and happiness. In addition to stepping away from the crime fighting adventures, this particular story addresses a wide range of real-life topics that include questions of race, interracial marriage, characters with disabilities, and natural hair. According to Whitley, Misty and Danny's story is typical and relatable. He further notes, "the fact that depictions of superhero couples and interracial couples rarely goes past the early relationship stages bothers me and I wanted to make something that's a tribute to how hard real life is compared to superheroing."[224] Thus, as a fictional regular couple, readers are able to witness their day-to-day experiences and the ways in which Misty deals with self-image and intimacy.

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[224] Broadnax, J. (2015, August 27). Misty Knight and Danny Rand's Secret Love-Interview with Jeremy Whitley. Retrieved from https://blackgirlnerds.com/misty-knight-and-danny-rands-secret-love/

Self-Image/Body Conscious

      Self-image is one of the most prevalent themes in the *Secret Love* story. As a Black woman who is disabled, Misty constantly grapples with coming to terms with her disability and her appearance. This is seen through a few panels where Misty is having a "girl moment" with her friend and colleague Colleen Wing. Upon arriving at home, Misty shows Colleen the dress that she just purchased for a dinner date with Danny to Colleen. As she looks in the mirror and sees one of the straps fall off her shoulder, she begins to second guess her purchase and feel self-conscious about her bionic arm (Figure 2.11): ***"…It looked so beautiful in the store."[225]*** Noticing her discomfort, Colleen reassures her that *it is* beautiful. Still trying to parsing through her insecurities, Misty begins to have self-conscious doubts, ***"I know. It's me. It's the arm. It slides right off the metal."[226]***
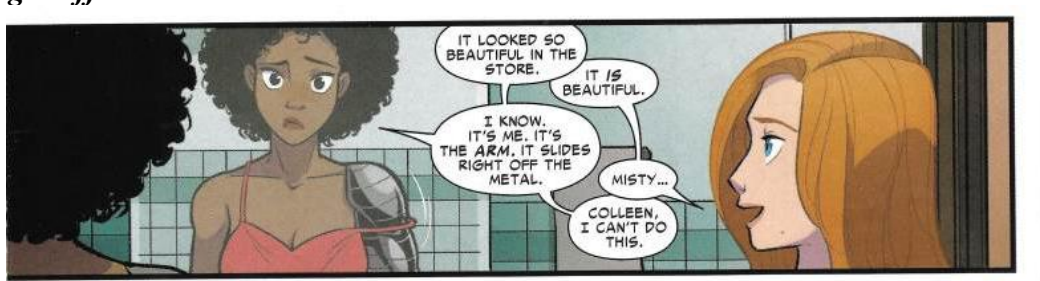
(Figure 2.11-Misty Knight and Colleen Wing reassuring Misty Knight of her beauty while helping her to prepare for a date with her partner Danny Rand in *Secret Love: Misty and Danny Forever (Limited Series), Vol. 1 Issue 4*)

Even though Misty has a bionic arm that gives her superhuman strength, she still has confidence issues regarding her self-image that she needs to tackle. Regardless, of how much technology helps in normalization of a disabled person's identity, it can only go so far.[227] Black women and western beauty ideals, in addition to being disabled, whether in comics and or in reality, are often not synonymous. Black women are frequently forced to reframe or conform to western standards of beauty. Misty's circumstances, even as a fictional character, are not exempt from this viewpoint. This can be read as a triple disadvantage in that women are seen as expressions of attractiveness and sexuality. Having a disabled, disfigured body is thus going against the western standards norms of beauty that are established and enforced by media stereotypes.

      However, even in the midst of her self-doubts, there is a moment of self-love. With the encouragement of Colleen and another dress option, Misty makes the decision to move from self-pity to embracing her beauty (Figure 2.12). This feeling of moving from self-pity to self-love resonates with how Audre Lorde embraced her own differences and selves. By claiming and celebrating them this enabled her to find her own voice. Lorde's poetry and prose demonstrated how not being afraid of difference can be a creative force for change. As affirmed by Lorde, "one of the most basic Black survival skills is the ability to change, to metabolize experience,

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[225] Whitley, J. (2015). *Secret Love: Misty and Danny Forever (Limited Series), Vol. 1 Issue 4* [Comic]. New York, NY: Marvel Comics.

[226] Ibid

[227] Chib, M. (2015). "I Feel Normal Inside. Outside, My Body Isn't!" In A. Hans (Ed.), *Disability, Gender and the Trajectories of Power*. New Delhi, India: SAGE Publications India.

good or ill, into something that is useful, lasting, effective."[228] Lorde was very intentional about making all parts of who she was visible, whether it was her race, gender, sexuality, or theoretical thinking. And this same reckoning is seen through Misty's story, as she must also come to terms with who she is as a disabled Black woman and realizing that what she may deem as imperfections can be nourishing and empowering. Both Misty Knight and Audre Lorde in their own unique ways challenge traditional Western ideas, while advocating Black women's ability to exist.

(Figure 2.12-Misty Knight having a moment of self-empowerment as she embraces and loves who she is as a woman in *Secret Love: Misty and Danny Forever (Limited Series), Vol. 1 Issue 4*)

A Desire for Intimacy

Intimacy, as personified through Misty specifically, is another significant theme in the *Secret Love* story arc. For many superhero comic narratives, the characters are not afforded the luxury of intimacy, especially disabled characters.[229] Tropes and stereotypes of people with disabilities would have us to assume they are isolated beings. Nevertheless, disabled persons and characters should be able to engage in erotic desires and practices.[230] These desires can be lighthearted as shown in Figure 2.13, where Misty is sharing an intimate movie night at home with her husband Danny. What becomes noteworthy is the level of comfort that she has with him as she allows him to do her hair and the close intimacy that they share, without her bionic arm. Presenting this visual of Misty exuding carefree happiness and relief, as compared to her "dress moment" with Colleen, is a very powerful moment. For Misty, disability does not impede a person's emotional need to be touched or loved emotionally or physically.

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[228] Lorde, A. (1984). "Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report." In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (p. 182). Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.

[229] This is also seen in other popular mediums.

[230] McRuer, R., & Mollow, A. (2012). *Sex and Disability*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

(Figure 2.13-A light hearted, fun moment shared between Misty Knight and Danny Rand with Misty feeling comfortable enough not wearing her prosthetic in *Secret Love: Misty and Danny Forever (Limited Series), Vol. 1 Issue 4*)

Frequently, able-bodied women are represented as attractive and sexually available, yet disabled women are portrayed as lacking sexuality or identified as automatically asexual. Unfortunately, disabled women's personal and sexual needs are constantly hidden and ignored.[231]

However, Misty is able to disrupt this depiction with her interactions with Danny. For example, in the last panel of the story Misty and Danny show a more passionate depiction of intimacy (see below Figure 2.14). Avoiding spectacle and inspiration porn,[232] she is captured holding and lying unafraid next to Danny, without her bionic arm. In this moment, Misty's disability does not hinder nor define her romantic relationship. Through her intimate moments with Danny, Misty is able to carve out and create her own identity, which incorporates being disabled and someone's lover.

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[231] Chib, 2015

[232] Coined by disability rights activist Stella Young, inspiration porn is defined as the portrayal, by abled persons, of persons with disabilities being seen as brave for doing things that abled bodies do.

(Figure 2.14-Another shared intimate moment between Misty and Danny where disability does not become a hindrance in *Secret Love: Misty and Danny Forever (Limited Series), Vol. 1 Issue 4*)

Misty's journey in *Secret Love* can be likened to a process of finding self-acceptance and joy. According to Brittney Cooper, "when we lack joy, we have a diminished capacity for self-love and self-valuing and for empathy."[233] Oftentimes writers, whether in comics or other media formats, overcompensate with sympathy narratives that undermine the intelligence of the characters. Hence, it becomes important to recognize that the disability community, much like anyone else, wants the same opportunity to be seen and read, with narratives written about them. Misty and Danny's relationship becomes an example of that acknowledgement and recognition. *Secret Love: Misty and Danny Forever* explores the softer, romantic side of superhero relationships, while also presenting a creative approach to exploring a realistic look at functioning and living with a disability.

While Misty and Danny's love story is familiar outside of comics, transforming it within the comic book pages offers a fresh new outlook. Their story in a way also humanizes the complexities of the superhero experience. Moreover, it opens the door for more narratives centered on functional relationships and marriages, including interracial couples, and disabled in the media. Misty's character in Secret Love also moves away from her previous depictions (as seen in the *Daughter of the Dragon* series) as the typical, sexualized, 1970s cinematic portrayal of Black women in comics. Misty Knight's character is an alternative to the stereotypical depictions of disabled Black women; she is empowered with her disability and engages in intimate relationships, while also being comfortable with her physical appearance, as shown by her clothing choices.

Misty Knight in Netflix's, *Luke Cage* series

Misty Knight's character has sparked various discussions on the comic book pages, as well as in a televised format. Her appearance, played by actress Simone Missick, in the Netflix *Luke Cage* and *Defenders* series offers a live-action portrayal of the iconic character. Misty's

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[233] Cooper, 2018, p. 275

presence in both series, although not as the lead character(s), offers an opportunity to engage with heroism from the Black female point of view. Whereas the Luke Cage character symbolizes an injustice of Black bodies dying from bullets fired by the police, the insertion of Misty's character as a police detective explores her understanding of Black people's distrust of law enforcement. Throughout the series, we witness her work as a police detective and her choices in better serving her community. She is able to breakdown crime scenes and analyze fatalities via her "Misty vision," which plays out to be more than just a ploy. This unique skill allows her to be a custodian of personal and institutional histories. Knowing how those histories, of marginalization, police violence and abuse, can tragically impact each other drives her "vision," which is part of her identity. As portrayed in the Luke Cage series, Misty moves from being an accomplished and respected New York City detective, to losing her 'self' mentally and her arm physically in a tragic accident in the *Defenders* series. As a result of this, her story then moves to seeing her work at reclaiming her identity while recovering and healing. Much in the same way that Misty's character slips into multiple identities (especially as an able-bodied person to disabled) on the comic book pages, viewers watch in a live format her transition of becoming and living as a disabled, career Black woman. The televised version of Misty begins to explore the human side of her journey into stepping into a superhero status. In examining how disability is personified through Misty's portrayal in the *Luke Cage* series, I engage in three moments of Misty's journey: from trauma to acceptance, being treated as "other," and working through difference.

From Trauma to Acceptance

Becoming disabled encompasses dealing with both physical and emotional changes. The concerns surrounding one's physical appearance impact a sizable proportion of the general population[234] as well as popular fictional narratives. In the closing of the *Defenders* series, Misty wakes up from her hospital bed feeling perturbed and "not quite whole" (Figure 2.15). She immediately takes on the mentality of subconsciously asking herself: ***How did this happen?*** **and *What are you going to do about?*[235]**

(Figure 2.15-Misty Knight realizing that she is without her arm, and processing what happens next.)

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[234] Gilbert, S., & Thompson, J. (2002). "Body Shame." In P. Gilbert & J. Miles (Eds.), *Body shame in childhood & adolescence* (pp. 55-74). Hove, United Kingdom: Brunner-Routledge.
[235] Bolded and italicized for emphasis

As Brinsenden notes, "the most important factor is not the amount of physical tasks a person can perform, but the amount of control they have over their everyday routine."[236] Losing her arm is a very traumatic experience for Misty, and in many ways disrupts her routine, as her character is used to being careful and able to avoid such circumstances. Her skills (i.e. fighting and weaponry) and talents (uniquely solving cases in a unique manner and her "Misty vision") are based on what she is capable of doing physically and mentally. The actress Simone Missick, who plays Misty, acknowledged the emotional and physical impact of the disability. Missick explains that she is able

> to explore the darker parts of humanity and what it's like to feel like your entire existence is based on your physical capabilities, as well as your mental dexterity. What is that like, for the men and women who live with disabilities, every day? Whether it's something that happens from a medical standpoint, or whether it's a soldier coming back from war that has to figure life out when they are no longer their full self, what makes a person whole?[237]

Physical disability plays a significant role in one's body image and body esteem. According to education scholar B. Lawrence, an impaired physique can be extremely frustrating and discouraging to the individual's emotional stability and can result in unpleasant and unrelenting emotional tension.[238]

For Misty, this loss creates self-doubt, causing her to question who she is as a woman and as a police detective. It also places a pressure of getting back to "a normal body." The pressure of having a normal body is a common narrative in comics and that creators and writers often try to remedy. This remedy fix is most notably seen in the popular DC Comics character Oracle (Barbara Gordon/previously Batgirl). At one time, Oracle was portrayed as being paralyzed from the waist down, but a 2011 relaunch resulted in a "new cured body" (Figure 2.16).

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[236] Brinsenden, S. (1986). Independent Living and the Model of Disability. *Disability, Handicap and Society*, *1*(2), 173-178.

[237] Radish, C. (2018, June 23). "Simone Missick on 'Luke Cage' Season 2, Misty's New Arm & Her Role in 'Iron Fist' Season 2." Retrieved from http://collider.com/simone-missick-interview-luke-cage-season-2/#iron-fist-season-2

[238] Lawrence, B. (1991). Self-concept Formation and Physical Handicap: Some Educational Implications for Integration. *Disability, Handicap & Society*, *6*(2), 139-146.

(Figure 2.16-[l-r] Portrayals of Barbara Gordon/Oracle[239] and the relaunched version of Barbara Gordon as Batgirl[240])

For many readers and fans, this ridding of her disability was not a welcomed fix, and was seen as a stripping of her identity. It became essential that the showrunners did not downplay Misty's loss with an unrealistic fix. Additionally, highlighting how Misty deals with this trauma is also an adjustment of Black female personification on the television and film screen. Misty's character provides driving motivations and layered personalities, whereas characters such as Marvel Comics Storm and DC Comics Catwoman (both played by Halle Berry), both popular motion picture roles, became one-dimensional and trapped in underwhelming plots and portrayals that disregarded and sometimes contradicted the original comic book narratives. For those disabled persons who may have negative thoughts about their body, it may be more likely to result from the limitations or even pain that their disability causes rather than from the altered appearance that their disability creates.[241] Furthermore, even in Misty's recovery and journey towards self-acceptance, this does not mean finding a cure is a necessary fix.

Treated as "other"

In addition to processing and dealing with emotional and physical trauma, Misty also encounters being pitied and treated as "other." In reality, there is underlying desire to strive to be seen in the best possible light. With our current society there is an increased emphasis on body normalcy and beauty. Even when a disability is obvious and impossible to hide on an on-going basis, society (family, friends, colleagues) magnifies the disability and disabled people are forced to confront and deal with the distorted/exaggerated pictures of their reality.[242] This becomes very prevalent with the interactions between Misty's fellow detectives and commanding officer. The second episode of *Luke Cage*, Season Two "Straighten It Out," we encounter Misty sitting at her desk filling out an evidence log form, but struggling to use her left hand to write. It becomes obvious this is not her dominant hand. As the camera angle widens, we see fellow officers whispering under their breath and watching her struggle as she becoming victim to the *gaze*. As a

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[239] Artwork by Adriana Melo in *Birds of Prey: The Battle Within* (2005)
[240] Alternate cover version from artist Clay Mann in *Batgirl: Futures End* #1 (November 2014)
[241] Lawrence, 1991
[242] Linton, S. (1998). *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

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Black woman, Misty is subjected to being and object of the evaluative male "gaze." However, as a Black female disabled body she is the object of the "stare."[243] Shortly after an assistant passes Misty's desk and jokingly asks, *"need a hand,"*[244] making an obvious reference to her absent arm. Their pity, although not vocal, is felt with the stares and side conversations. To their surprise, Misty reverses the gaze and confronts the othering of her colleagues with the following moment, *"Okay. Everybody take a good look…"*[245] as she takes off her suit jacket revealing her lost limb (Figure 2.17). She then further acknowledges, with frustration, what seems to be "the elephant in the room,"

> I lost an arm. This is who I am now. Now, it doesn't mean I need your pity or your jokes. Or you staring at me while I'm trying to do my goddamn job. Take a good look.[246]

(Figure 2.17-Misty Knight confronting her fellow officers and their silent judgement and stares)

This scene is reminiscent of how she is questioned and pitied in the aforementioned *Daughters of the Dragon* Issue #1 panel, and the notion of who looks out for Black disabled women, who is fighting for their humanity. In a society where Black women are already in a position of "double jeopardy," they have to combat the multiple oppressions of race and gender, and, in the case of Misty's character, race, gender, and disability. The interpersonal conflict that results in the above outburst forces Misty to validate her existence amongst her colleagues and peers. Misty's disability is neither an illness nor something to be shamed or made to feel less than normal. As sociologist Frances Macgregor argues, a person's visible differences include a "social disability." In addition to the disability having an impact on the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of those affected, it is also likely to be noticed by other people.[247] As a result of the othering and pity

[243] Garland-Thomson, R. (1997). "Feminist Theory, the Body, and the Disabled Figure". In *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (p. 26). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

[244] Cooper, A. (Writer). (2018, June 22). Straighten It Out [Television series episode]. In *Luke Cage*. Harlem, NY: Netflix.

[245] Ibid

[246] Ibid

[247] Macgregor, F. M. (1979). *After plastic surgery: adaptation and adjustment*. New York, NY: Praeger Publishers.

from her fellow officers, Misty must project a sense of self-confidence and self-value[248] towards her personhood. Both of these are privileges not often afforded to Black women bodies that are disabled, as they are made to feel uncomfortable and/or that their disability tarnishes their wholeness.[249] Black female and disabled characters like Misty Knight are able to reconceive narrative space by refusing to live their lives through male-centered, able-bodied narratives, and, thus, making new fictions and new realities.[250]

Embracing change…Moving Forward

Facing the trauma of a near fatal accident and the shaming from her fellow officers, Misty's journey continues as she wrestles with embracing change and moving forward with her life. Due to losing her arm, and before she receives her bionic prosthetic arm, Misty must re-learn how to function in her day-to-day experiences and regain confidence in her own body. In an attempt to move forward and come to terms with her loss, Misty, in *Luke Cage* season two episode three "Wig Out" reaches out to a sister-friend Colleen Wing to "punch out" her issues. Colleen who expresses her concern about whether Misty is getting help, is met with a "I don't need charity" response. For some Black women, accepting therapy and/or asking for help opens them to judgement and being stigmatized. Mental health scholars have found that African Americans are reluctant to make use of psychology's solutions to emotional hurdles for fear of being considered "crazy" in their social circles, as airing one's "dirty laundry," or showing vulnerability and weakness.[251]

Particularly, in the case of Misty she feels as though something is wrong with her: ***"I'm all jammed up. Emotions and anger. I can't even see things the way I used to."[252]*** However, Colleen does not let her reel in somber and pity. She reassures Misty: ***"you lost your arm, not yourself."[253]*** Colleen encourages Misty to accept the loss and to recover and rebuild: ***"to be aware of her whole self."[254]*** Taking it a step further Colleen attempts to push (literally and figuratively) Misty into feeling comfortable with her body and identity as a Black woman detective who is disabled: ***"Do you feel good, huh? Taking down a cripple?[255]*** As to Colleen responds, ***"Yeah. If that's how you see yourself"[256]*** (Figure 2.18). This response puts the responsibility back on Misty to endure change and growth and prepares her for future challenges.

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[248] This is often not afforded to Black women who are disabled as they are portrayed as less than whole

[249] Thompson, V. (2018, June 7). *Aunt Vi, #QueenSugar, Black Women, & Our Disabled Bodies: Why We're Still Whole* - Ramp Your Voice!. Retrieved from https://rampyourvoice.com/2018/06/07/aunt-vi-queensugar-black-women-disabled-bodies-still-whole/

[250] Barr, M. S. (1992). *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press.

[251] Alvidrez, J., Snowden, L. R., & Kaiser, D. M. (2008). The Experience of Stigma among Black Mental Health Consumers. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, *19*(3), 874-893.

[252] Owens, M. (Writer). (2018, June 22). "Wig Out" [Television series episode]. In *Luke Cage*. Harlem, NY: Netflix.

[253] Ibid

[254] Ibid

[255] Ibid

[256] Ibid

(Figure 2.18-Via a sparring match with friend Colleen Wing, Misty Knight comes to grips with moving away from being seen as the victim)

This future challenge comes in the form of a bar fight scene that takes place later in the same episode. After being taunted and knocked down by an angered bar guest, Misty must make the decision of giving up or facing her fear head-on. After a brief pause, Misty goes to swing at her opponent, forgetting that her arm is not there, but quickly swings and lands a punch with her left arm. The swinging of her "phantom limb"[257] is an example of Misty having an abled identity in a disabled body. Not backing down from the fight, Misty is able to fight back and successfully defeats multiple antagonizing men (Figure 2.19). As to which Colleen replies, ***"Somebody got their swagger back."[258]*** Misty follows Colleen's response with her held high while walking out the bar with a renewed sense of confidence. For Misty, this moment can be likened to what Brittney Coopers describes as being able to "snatch dignity from the jaws of power and come out standing."[259]

(Figure 2.19-Misty Knight having a "phantom limb" moment during a bar fight encounter)

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[257] Phantom limb is defined as the sensation and/or pain of an amputated or missing limb that is no longer attached.
[258] Coker, C. H. (Writer). (2018, June 22). "They Reminisce Over You" [Television series episode]. In *Luke Cage*. Harlem, NY: Netflix.
[259] Cooper, 2018, pg. 4

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Each scene also exhibits the significance of two women sharing in the struggle and motivating the other to not wallow in pity, but face each challenge while welcoming change. In a world of superheroes female characters, like Misty Knight, without the traditional superpowers (i.e. invisibility, shapeshifting, telepathy, immortality, and time travel) can still be read as fighters. Both experiences, sparring with Colleen and in the bar, explore a regaining and relearning to be independent (as assisted by her friendship with Colleen Wing) and a newfound freedom to be proud of herself and her potential evolution. In season two, viewers see a shift from season one of *Luke Cage,* where she exudes a high level of fearlessness and conviction, while having an identity tied to her physical capabilities. Season two questions comfort and complacency, as well as offers a new perspective of self-confidence and self-worth.

This journey for Misty is culminated in the final episode of *Luke Cage*, season two "They Reminisce Over You." Viewers see Misty, off-duty, coming to visit Luke at his club, Harlem's Paradise. Having a confident energy, Misty is dressed in a black with red trim fitted, sleeveless dress, which accents her entire body including her prosthetic-bionic arm. It becomes evident that Misty is moving towards finding herself and her femaleness. In this scene, Misty exemplifies a growth from feeling ashamed of her loss, to embracing a new aspect of her identity (Figure 2.20). While there should be a critical analysis of disability and sexualized portrayals in comic book portrayals (book, television, and film), it should be noted that there are depictions of disabled and beautiful characters who have agency of their own sexuality. Her prosthetic/bionic arm serves as a reminder of loss and pressure to assimilate, as well as aids in a transformation and rebirth, ultimately, becoming a part of her identity.

(Figure 2.20-Misty Knight fully embracing all of who she is and moving beyond being seen as simply a disabled Black woman)

Able-Bodies as Disabled

It should be acknowledged that actress Simone Missick is not a disabled. Past depictions of characters who are disabled being played by able-bodied actors/actresses (i.e. Dustin Hoffman in *Rain* Man, Jamie Foxx in *Ray*, Jodie Foster in *Nell*, and most recently Bryan Cranston in *The Upside,* etc.) has been a longstanding contested issue. In spite of the mixed arguments

surrounding able/disabled actors portraying disabled characters, many disability activists, including writer/journalist Keah Brown, political consultant Neal Carter, video gamer André Daughtry, and Ramp Your Voice![260] creator Vilisa Thompson have applauded Missick's portrayal of the disabled heroine. Thompson notes she appreciates the casting, but also hopes for further exploration of Misty being disabled, and embracing her disabled experience.[261] For many the casting of Missick, "a brown-skinned woman with 4C hair,"[262] provided a relatable appearance without actually being disabled, and also served as an uplifting change and more accurate portrayal considering the past controversial casting of Halle Berry as Storm in the Marvel Comics *X-Men* film series. As a superheroine who is described as a "strong female character," Simone Missick and her character offer a way to view "strong" as a nuanced interpretation rather than a stereotype or caricature.[263]

Ultimately, Misty Knight as a character—through her adventures as part of *Daughters of the Dragon*, her intimate relationships in the *Secret Love: Misty and Danny Forever* series, or in the Netflix's *Luke Cage* series—serves as a unique way to engage with the many facets of Black women experiences and disability culture. As the Misty Knight character continues to appear in both the comic book pages and on television, readers and viewers are able to see how the continued growth and evolution of the character. Her character has gone from being seen as a one-dimensional Blaxplotation-inspired, hypersexualized heroine to a character who is able to express her emotions and struggles while obtaining support, to a live-action personification of fortitude and future hope for her community. Despite the poor depictions in the past, Misty Knight's character has been able to contribute to the redefining the visual imagery of disability as well as the overall depiction of Black female characters in comics.

Through her various interpretations, the Misty Knight character allows for present and future opportunities to see the humanity of disability as portrayed through a Black woman. Each of these interpretations also uniquely embodies how her character is a future feminist. As her character asserts independence, she is also able to disrupt the stereotypes typically associated with disability. Additionally, Misty's personality is not tokenized but normalized in that we see a balance of strong-willed attitude, moments of vulnerability, and confidence mixed with action. Watching this unfold on the comic pages and supplemented on-screen can serve as a benefit for multiple audiences. Even though Misty Knight is an adult, young Black girls who may or may not have a disability can witness Misty's transformative journey of loss, recovery to eventual healing, and ability to be happy and successful. Readers and viewers also visualize the role relationships (whether as sister-friends or lovers) play in showcasing fair, empowering representations and real-life experiences of persons with a disability. As a motivated character, she shows her emotions and flaws, without needing to be pitied for her disability or seen as strong or sassy for her perseverance. Additionally, based on the rising popularity of Misty

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[260] Ramp Your Voice! is a movement that addresses and educates the public and political figures about the plight of disabled people, especially disabled women of color. Led by Vilissa Thompson who is disabled, she [strives] "to promote the importance of self-advocacy & strengthen empowerment efforts among disabled people. http://rampyourvoice.com/welcome-to-ramp-your-voice/

[261] Thompson, V. (2017). "Nothing About Us Without Us" – Disability Representation in Media – Center for Disability Rights. Retrieved from http://cdrnys.org/blog/disability-dialogue/nothing-about-us-without-us-disability-representation-in-media/

[262] Comics have had a notorious relationship with their portrayal of Black women's hair

[263] Cocca, 2016

Knight's character, it opens the door for further exploration of other Black and women of color disabled characters in comics, like that of Marvel Comics Silhouette" and Echo. Race, gender, and disability individually have been explored, but Misty Knight's story operates at the intersection of these identities.

As noted by former Lion Forge Comics President Geoff Gerber, "Everyone faces different challenges in life, but those challenges don't prevent us from wanting to be heroes."[264] This notion speaks to the everyday experiences of all individuals within society. Each of our differences and challenges are unique and no less normal. Even with Misty Knight's extraordinary abilities and talents, her enhanced power and strength does not invalidate who she is as a person with a disability. Through her narratives, there is an effort to explore her strengths and weaknesses, but also paint a picture that her disability is not a weakness but a part of her identity as a Black woman.

In the final photo essay, Chapter Three offers a curatorial discussion regarding the relationship between Black girlhood, STEM, and #BlackGirlmagic through the perspective a pre-teen genius Marvel Comics Lunella Lafayette/Moon Girl. This chapter also explores potential collaborative efforts of using this comic book narrative with existing STEM programs and organizations.

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[264] Pulliam-Moore, C. (2017, May 8). New Comic Superb Will Introduce a Hero with Down Syndrome. Retrieved from https://io9.gizmodo.com/new-comic-superb-will-introduce-a-hero-with-down-syndro-1795015916

Chapter Three: The Smartest Person in the Marvel Universe: #BlackGirlMagic and STEM in Marvel Comics "Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur"

"Kids should be allowed to break stuff more often. That's a consequence of exploration. Exploration is what you do when you don't know what you're doing." –Neil deGrasse Tyson

To be young, gifted, Black and female is an identity that taps into this notion of standing out and being different. On a daily basis, Black girls are constantly seeking validation, acceptance, and inclusion in their schools, families, or among friends in a society that constantly abuses, berates, and minimizes their existence. Considering the experiences of Black females at the intersection of race, class, and gender simultaneously, they become easy targets in the subordination and legitimation process of Western society.[265] Thus, within each of the spaces, they inhabit daily—their homes, classrooms, and peer groups—Black women have to continuously process navigating how and where they belong, with more care and effort than non-Black girls or boys of any race. Until recently, in social science and educational research, the experiences of Black adolescent girls have been left out, minimalized, whited out (counted under the experiences of white girls), Blacked out (generalized within the Black male existence), or simply criminalized. As stated by Evans-Winters, due to feminist epistemologies being concerned with the education of white girls and women and raced-based epistemologies being consumed with the educational and social barriers negatively effecting Black boys, the educational and social needs of Black girls have fallen through the cracks.[266] However, since the early 2000s, Black girls' collective self-regard, and mainstream society's view of Black girls have begun to shift. In the late 2010s, Black girlhood is more widely recognized, acknowledged, and celebrated. The positive attention being paid to Black girls has led to broader acknowledgement that they are not monolithic and that they are worthy of advocacy and empowerment.

STEM and Popular Culture

There are many questions that are often asked when discussing race, gender, and STEM. Two of the most intriguing questions are: Why are there not more women of color in the STEM field? What can be done to bring about more equity? A change in popular fictional representations of Black women excelling at STEM work is necessary as it can potentially drive more Black girls into the STEM fields. Black girls' ambitions often collide with media stereotypes about them. As Dr. Jocelyn Elders, the first Black United States' Surgeon General, once said, "You can't be what you can't see." If there is no representation of what young Black girls can become, how can they strive to achieve that goal? Historically, media depictions, particularly in comic books, of scientists, doctors, and/or computer programmers have alienated Black women from these professions. For decades, comic book authors never created Black girls as STEM heroes. White male superheroes, such as Marvel Comics' Tony Stark/Iron Man, Reed Richards/Mr. Fantastic, and Bruce Banner/The Hulk, and DC Comics' Barry Allen/The Flash, were the main characters attached to science and technology. Before 2016, the list of Black female scientists/computer experts was quite small. The list includes superhero newcomer Marvel Comics RiRi Williams/Ironheart, Dr. Cecilia Reyes (X-Men team member), and DC Comics Anissa Pierce/Thunder. The list is even smaller for younger Black female characters.

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[265] Mirón, L. F. (1996). *The social construction of urban schooling: Situating the crisis*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
[266] Evans-Winters, V. E. (2011). *Teaching black girls - resiliency in urban classrooms*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

This further exemplifies the need for intersectionality within the presentation of science and technology.[267] The above characters and their complex and intriguing narratives can create alternative comic book storylines in popular culture, while bringing light to varied Black women's experiences.

Popular culture becomes a unique space to investigate the above questions. Black girls are seeing more contemporary representations of themselves in a variety of ways within STEM fields. These representations are found in books (Figure 3.1) such as *Bella Dear the Engineer* (2018), *Sasha Savvy Loves to Code* (2017), and *The Meteorologist in Me* (2016). These books provide fictional examples that can translate into the real-life existence of untapped potential that can be used in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields where women of color are underrepresented. These representations also disrupt the idea that Black girls and women are only one-dimensional heroines.

Historically, Black female characters have primarily been given minimal lead roles or assigned roles as sidekicks, love interests, and/or secondary players. These minor roles are seen across mediums, such as in U.S. and U.K. television (e.g. Martha Jones in *Doctor Who* [BBC One, 1963-present] and Zoe Alleyne Washburne in *Firefly* [Fox, September-December 2002], film (e.g. Selena/Naomie Harris in *28 Days Later* [dir. Danny Boyle 2003] and Amanda Waller/Viola Davis in *Suicide Squad* [2016]), and comics (e.g. *Marvel Comics* Captain Marvel II/Monica Rambeau, *DC Comics* Amanda Waller and Crimson Avenger and *Valiant Comics* Livewire). However, since 2016, there has been an increase in cinematic and television roles that represent Black women as young and smart heroines. This increase in popularity and significance of Black female characters in STEM can be seen in such films and television series as Oscar-nominated movies *Black Panther* (dir. Ryan Coogler, 2018) and *Hidden Figures* (2016) (Figure 3.2), and *Doc McStuffins* television series (*Disney Junior's*, 2012-present) (Figure 3.2). Thus, the relationship between STEM and popular culture can be used as a tool to increase interest in the field and provide more than one face of representation.
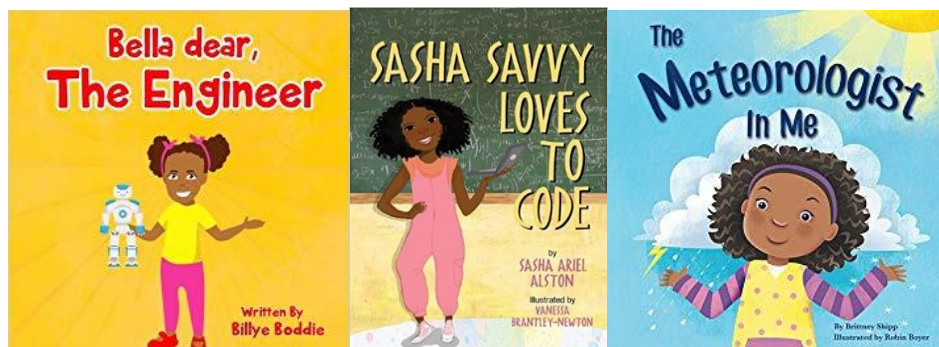
(Figure 3.1-Notable book covers about various Black girl STEM experiences)

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[267] It should be noted, as mentioned in the 2014 documentary "She Makes Comics" there are more (Black) female superheroes starring in mainstream comics and more female writers and artists working on comics in the1990-2010s than in the last seventy years.

(Figure 3.2-Notable film posters and television series portrayals about various Black girl STEM experiences)

"I Have Big Ideas!": Black Girls Creating Change

Debuting in January 2016, Lunella Lafayette (aka Moon Girl)[268] was created by comic artist Amy Reeder, co-written with writer Brandon Montclare, and illustrated by Natacha Bustos. Lunella, who also has an *Inhuman*[269] DNA makeup, is a Black preteen super genius that loves to learn, constantly inventing, and wants to change the world. Throughout her series, readers are able to step into the world of a young Black girl that deals with being bored at school, teased for being different, and misunderstood by her parents. Additionally, the *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* series explores big themes of belonging, safe space, places of empowerment, as well as participation in STEM. These are all themes that resonate with Black girls (and even Black women) and are often brought into the STEM conversation. *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* becomes a litmus test for promoting youth diversity in STEM, but also a strategic business move for Marvel Comics showing that white male superhero characters are not the only commercially successful comic book characters.

Deemed as the "Smartest Person in the Marvel Universe," beating out Iron Man and Reed Richards who once held this title, Lunella/Moon Girl[270] embarks on reshaping stereotypes, reversing expectations for young Black girls, and embracing personalities that have been otherwise relegated to negative perceptions (e.g. too smart, socially awkward). As STEM fields work to find spaces outside of the traditional academic classroom, comic book narratives like *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* provide a popular medium for circulating innovative activities that can develop from these fields.

Additionally, the STEM field is a unique space that can allow Black girls to experiment, explore, and discover not just the next new invention, but themselves as well. Encouraging, creating spaces, and acknowledging that Black girls can and should exist in the STEM world not only changes the conversation, but further increases interest. In today's society, children are not

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[268] Lunella Lafayette replaces the red Tyrannosaurus Rex's original caveman pal Moon Boy from the 1970s "Devil Dinosaur" comic book series.
[269] The *Inhumans* are a group of superheroes in Marvel Comics that possess a mutagenic called Terrigen Mist. As a result, these superheroes have certain advantages that go beyond the average superhero, such as lifespans of 150 years, possession of extreme strength, speed, endurance, the ability to switch bodies with any life form.
[270] Both names are used due to their experiences being interchangeable throughout the series.

afforded the privilege of being seen as holding power, let alone individuals who employ power to accomplish their goals and desires. Nevertheless, children, particularly fictional characters yield a power of imagination that transforms into reality. As a result of Black girls becoming a staple of discussion by educators, government-funded programs, policy-makers and also being placed in the center of STEM, a superhero discussion is warranted.

Lunella's Game Plan
"It says…It <u>means</u>…that I'm the Smartest There is. Or ever was. I've said that myself a <u>zillion</u> times. Now <u>no one</u> can ever test <u>me</u> ever again. Ever!" ~Lunella Lafayette
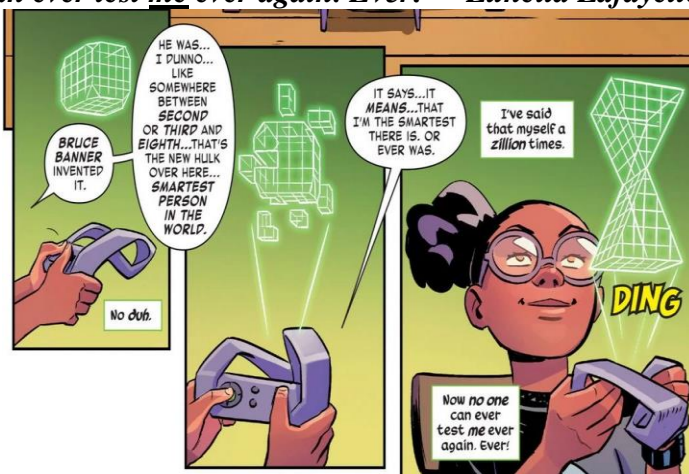
(Figure 3.3-Lunella realizing her full intellectual potential and where she stands in the pantheon of comic book-based scientists)

"Fooling everyone was too easy. People see what they want to see. And most people never wanted to see me as anything but a normal little girl…But I have big ideas."[271]

These thoughts can be read as a response to her parents not understanding her destiny/mission as a budding superhero and wanting her to be a "normal child." Additionally, in this panel, the Lunella complicates what it means to be normal. For Lunella, normal does not simply consist of going to school and playing with her friends but exploring beyond her limits and creating new lanes of learning engagement and fun. Throughout each issue of *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*, whether she is the quirky tween Lunella or the ambitious Moon Girl, the series is driven by her big ideas. Many people, like her parents and teachers, see her participating in "extra-curricular activities," but Lunella is actually working on an action plan for saving the world.

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[271] Montclare, B. and Reeder, A. (2016). *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur, Vol. 1-Issue 5* [Comic]. New York, NY: Marvel Comics.

(Figure 3.4-Lunella coming to terms with who she is a young brilliant mind in the making in
Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur, Vol. 1-Issue 5)

For Black children to reach their personal and intellectual capital, teaching and learning must be conceptualized in a way that affirms and values them.[272] It is even more important to tap into the potential and visibility of these Black girls. This visibility can also be associated with recognition. Oftentimes, Black girls exhibit brilliancy, but do not feel their family and teachers recognize their intellect and potential. This feeling is represented in the following panel:

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[272] Lemons-Smith, S. (2013). Tapping into the Intellectual Capital of Black Children in Mathematics: Examining the Practices of Pre-service Elementary Teachers. In J. Leonard & D. B. Martin (Eds.), *The brilliance of black children in mathematics: Beyond the numbers and toward new discourse* (pp. 323-340). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Pub., Inc.

"And no more of this…THESE…THINGS! I couldn't believe what we found in your backpack. This just isn't…isn't normal!"[273]

(Figure 3.5- Lunella's parents trying to understand who their daughter and the intellect that she possesses in *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur, Vol. 1-Issue 3*)

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[273] Montclare, B. and Reeder, A. (2016). *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur, Vol. 1-Issue 3* [Comic]. New York, NY: Marvel Comics.

(Figure 3.6-Looking into the mind of Lunella and how she is trying to navigate her world in
Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur, Vol. 2 -Issue 9)

"All my life, people have told me what they thought I should be. Parents. Teachers.
Classmates. Ancient alien geneticists who pre-programmed my DNA. But despite all of that
I'm still self-made. Being me wasn't easy at first. Nobody told me how. But I became good at
it…"[274]

      Despite her ambivalence, Lunella exudes a confidence. As her confidence and
determination builds, Lunella considers everything that has been taught and shared with her
about what is normal and ultimately forms her own conclusions. She is not arguing that her
parents, teachers, or the Hulk are wrong. Instead, Lunella believes that they are doing what is
deemed normal and she is choosing another path. Her growing conviction also taps into what
Kevin Young explains as being "interested in the ways in which black folks use fiction in its
various forms to free themselves from the bounds of fact."[275] Thus, Lunella/Moon Girl's story
offers a fictional example of the complexities in Black girls lives and explores the ability to use
their voice to create change.

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[274] Montclare, B. and Reeder, A. (2016). *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur, Vol. 2 -Issue 9* [Comic]. New York, NY:
Marvel Comics.
[275] Young, K. (2012). The Shadow Book. In *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (p. 34). Minneapolis,
MN: Graywolf Press.

Black Girl Experiences

What is Black girlhood?

"Black girlhood as a spatial intervention is useful for making our daily lives better and therefore changing the world as we currently know it." ~Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*

In the midst of the turmoil regarding migration, Black adults **"scrutinized black girls' behavior, evaluated their choices, and assessed their possibilities as part of a larger conversation about what urbanization ultimately meant for black citizens."** ~Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration*

"Finding black girls in the archive is challenging." ~Farah Jasmine Griffin, William B. Ransford Professor of English and Comparative Literature and African-American Studies, Columbia University

What does it mean to be a young Black girl?

"To consider black girls as full human beings, we need to understand their pleasures just as much as their pain." ~Lakisha M. Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans*

[**Black Girls**]…**"Don't be afraid to use your voice. Your thoughts, opinions, and ideas are just as important as anybody else's…Your voice has GREAT power, don't be afraid to utilize it when needed."** ~Stephanie Lahart, Author & Motivational Speaker,

"I am an example of what is possible when girls from the beginning of their lives are loved and nurtured by people around them. I was surrounded by extraordinary women in my life who taught me about quiet strength and dignity." ~Michelle Obama, Former First Lady of the United States

Stories such as these plays a role and contribute to the changing landscape of popular media culture in terms of race, gender, and comic books. As gateways for escapism fantasies, children do not have to picture themselves as adults, but more like kid-adventure seekers. Although it has been important for Black girls to read about popular Black female characters in comics (such as DC Comics Vixen and Bumblebee; Marvel Comics Storm, Misty Knight, and Spectrum; and Image Comics Michonne), these characters are grown women. Lunella/Moon Girl provides a youthful/tween perspective that young girls' hunger for and appreciate. Black girls should have the opportunity to read and view Black fictional female characters with different identities and perspectives, as these characters offer Black girls the tools for making and remaking themselves as they navigate this current radicalized and gendered society. Ultimately, Lunella/Moon Girl's narrative adds to the interdisciplinary work of Black girlhood studies

scholarship similar to that of Kyra D. Gaunt, Ruth Nicole Brown, Marcia Chatelain, and Lakisha Michelle Simmons.[276]

In addition to being an only child, Lunella also played alone with few friends. Oftentimes, she spent a great deal of time working in her lab and struggled with her parents *listening*[277] to her, while fully understanding all of who she is as a young scientist. Lunella has reached a point, where her gifts and talents are beginning to consume and overwhelm her, as well as impact her relationship with her parents. Due to some recent, frightening events that have involved Moon Girl/Lunella, her mother has become very scared for her daughter. As a result, Lunella lashes out in defense of her recent escapade.

"No…I never wanted you to understand what I might become I want you to understand what I am."[278]

(Figure 3.7-Lunella wanting her mother to understand who she is and the experiences that she is encountering in *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*, 2016, Vol. 1, Issue 6)

Lunella/Moon Girl's adventures are more than just trivial activities, but a release and an evolution of her superhero identity. The Inhuman DNA is a permanent part of Lunella's makeup and sheltering her from the inevitable only further strains the relationship with her parents.

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[276] Gaunt, K. D. (2006). *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-dutch to Hip-hop*. New York, NY: NYU Press.; Brown, R. N. (2013). *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.; Brown, R. N. (2009). *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-hop Feminist Pedagogy*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.; Chatelain, M. (2015). *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.; Simmons, L. M. (2015). *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans*. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press Books.

[277] Listening is italicized for emphasis. This becomes clear after reading the attached panel.

[278] *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*, 2016, Vol. 1, Issue 6

Interestingly enough, Lunella's greatest fear is being transformed beyond her parent's ability to love her. Thus, she is not able to take solace or comfort in them. Lunella/Moon Girl's story also brings in themes of acceptance and belonging, which are issues that children in today's society encounter.

For Lunella, she is able to find sanity and solace in saving the world through creating the next biggest invention with her Big Red Devil Dinosaur. In this time, as a comic book character, she embodies the spirit of a young rebel superhero/scientist who just wants to create new technology while changing the world. Lunella/Moon Girl inspires a new generation of scientists and brave Black girls. As stated by Lorraine Hansberry, in her biography/play *To Be Young Gifted and Black*, "we were also vaguely taught certain vague absolutes that we were better than no one but infinitely superior to everyone; that we were the products of the proudest and most mistreated of the races of man…"[279] This complex notion really hits home for Black girls (and Black women) as they continuously work towards not being feared and misread, but respected, accepted, and praised as future leaders of society. Furthermore, *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* also allows Black adult women to create their own paths, while reliving a childhood that may have been cut short or not given a chance to fully develop.

Changing the Look in STEM and Comics

In many ways, Lunella/Moon Girl's story further addresses the diversity and inclusion in both STEM fields and *Marvel Comics*. #BlackGirlMagic is not only expressed in the actions of people and fictional characters, but it is also personified in one's physical appearance. One characteristic that truly stands out is Lunella/Moon Girl's hair. In the past, Marvel Comics has struggled with styling Black female characters hair, such as Monica Rambeau/Photon's Jheri curl/Afro or disheveled braids and plaits; or Misty Knight's Afro/perm pressed bangs (Figure 3.8).

(Figure 3.8-Various hairstyles [Jheri-curl and braided plaits] given to Monica Rambeau/Photon and the combined hairstyle of relaxed bangs and an afro given to Misty Knight's character)

However, Lunella's character and her hair have been given many looks. Throughout each issue, she can be seen wearing various natural hairstyles such as Afro puffs, braided plaits, curly hair, or even a braided high bun or ponytail (Figure 3.9). Each of these styles disrupts the notion that Black girl's hair is "nappy" and needs to be tamed and or relaxed. Black women's hair has history, political meaning, and is deeply layered. As familiar as many of these styles are for Black girls across the globe, the presentation is very much new in the comic book universe. Not only is Lunella/Moon Girl's personality and intelligence a fictional depiction of

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[279] Hansberry, L., & Nemiroff, R. (1969). Chicago: Southside Summers. In *To Be Young, Gifted and Black: In Her Own Words* (p. 48). New York, NY: Signet.

#BlackGirlMagic, but her hair also gets to be a part of that representation. Black girls and women in comics are slowly showcasing a developing interpretation of themselves that interrogates the social constructions of their thoughts and identity. This is also how Black feminist thought and Afrofuturism offer reclamation and new ways to see themselves as different from the established social order. Black feminist thought rearranges the existing awareness and Afrofuturism aids in redesigning the representation. Overall, representation is an important element when discussing #BlackGirlMagic.

(Figure 3.9-Various natural hairstyles personified by Lunella/Moon Girl)

Character Profile

I'm Inhuman… or I will be. I've got the gene, you know. Not that you would know! I found out myself. And you're... well, a dinosaur! But I've got to stop it from happening. I don't want to change. The change is what scares me. More than anything. More than... more than you.
~Lunella Lafayette

Name	Lunella Louise Lafayette
First Appearance	*Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur #1* (**January 2016**)
Alter-Ego	Moon Girl
Species	Inhuman
Place of origin	Earth, Super-Genius Human with latent Inhuman lineage activated by the Terrigen Bomb
Home	Lower East Side of Manhattan, New York
Team Affiliations/Allies	Warriors
Partnership(s)/Team Leaders	Devil Dinosaur
Notable Aliases	Nella, That Crazy 4th Grader
Abilities	Super intellect; consciousness transferal; skilled inventor, engineer, hacker, and computer programmer

What does it mean to be a learner of STEM as a young Black girl?

"The gender-exclusive focus on boys (of color) as ground zero … continues to undermine the well-being of our entire community…We have to accept that there are wrongs that are happening to black girls" ~Kimberlé Crenshaw, co-founder of the African American Policy Forum

"We want to teach girls of color the skills they need and create a diversity of voices into the tech community." ~Kimberly Bryant, Founder and CEO of Black Girls Code

"The world needs you...you walk, you ARE magic! ~Danai Gurira, Good Morning America 2018

The more present Black girls and their experiences are incorporated into the STEM dialogue, the greater the impact on the field as a whole. This can be accomplished incorporating popular culture mediums, such as television and comic books, with STEM, which can become a space to create conversations and cross disciplines. These conversations include the marginalization and invisibility of Black girls as they begin thinking and discovering the fields. With an expected increase in STEM jobs by 2020, there is a continuous need for Black girls and women to be more present.[280] As the field grows and the barriers continue to be broken, scholars have been actively pushing for new ways to integrate Black girl experiences within STEM fields. In the same vein that STEM is about creating new paths and exploring innovative ways of thinking and learning, further discussions regarding STEM education and Black girls, while exploring a new relationship with Afrofuturist texts, particularly comic books, is very timely.

Many of these STEM discussions and conversations tap into traditions of Black organized intervention, which include Black feminism and Afrofuturism. This blending can help to change the evolution and conversations about STEM. Black feminism integrates the need to interrogate race, gender, class, and technology. Black feminist scholar Paula Giddings argues that a Black feminist narrative is one of recollection and remembering in order for past and present oppressions, stereotypes and controlling images can be subverted and corrected, leading to an emergence of new forms of activism that tells stories from a Black woman's point.[281] Afrofuturism operates as a vehicle to promote Black female voices, reclaim their future narratives, and presenting it on our own terms, while also exclaiming that representation matters.

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[280] Lockard, C.B. & Wolf, M. (2012). Occupational Employment Projections to 2020. Monthly Labor Review: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

[281] Giddings, P. (2001). *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (p. 349). New York, NY: Perennial.

(Figure 3.10-The importance of naming and self-identification in
Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur, Vol. 1 -Issue 6)

Making an exclamation like this is something radical. For Lunella she wants the naming, her talents, and intellect to be taken seriously. Speaking her truth as a scientist shows her conviction, determination, and demand for recognition. As stated by Noliwe Rooks, "concerns for dynamics of space and power are a common thread"[283] in various spaces and across ages. Using STEM as a survival and resistance tactic, Lunella reclaims her space and power.

Why should we care about Black girls and STEM?

Despite the popularity of STEM, there are subtle and overt gender-and race-based biases and stereotypes that consistently permeate throughout the field. With a paucity of successful female role models and mentors this reinforces girls and women's lack of belonging in STEM fields. Retaining and advancing women in STEM fields is a serious challenge with consequences for technical innovation, economic growth, and the status of the U.S. as a global leader in STEM disciplines.[284] The bias and disparities within the STEM fields are outlined below:

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[282] Montclare, B. and Reeder, A. (2016). *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur, Vol. 1 -Issue 6* [Comic]. New York, NY: Marvel Comics.

[283] Rooks, N. (2005). *Black Women's Studies: A Reader*. New York, NY: ProQuest Publishing and the Schomburg Center for Research in African American Culture.

[284] Committee on Maximizing the Potential of Women in Academic Science and Engineering (U.S.) Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy (U.S.). (2007). Beyond bias and barriers: Fulfilling the potential of women in academic science and engineering. Retrieved from The National Academic Press website: https://www.nap.edu/catalog/11741/beyond-bias-and-barriersfulfilling-the-potential-of-women-in

<u>Bias and Disparities in STEM fields</u>
- STEM—Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics—has multiple impacts; it infuses nearly every facet of our daily lives from smartphone use to music consumption to gaming to healthcare.

- According to the U. S. Department of Commerce, STEM careers have increased by 17%, while other occupations are growing at 9.8%. Those working in science, technology, engineering and mathematics play a key role in the sustained growth and stability of the U.S. economy.[285]

- STEM education creates critical thinkers, increases science literacy, and helps to bridge ethnic and gender gaps. Furthermore, STEM education particularly for younger children promotes natural curiosity about the world and the mentality of a love to learn through play mentality.[286]

<u>Some Sobering Facts</u>
- Black women make-up less than 5% of the population in STEM field careers[287]

- In 2012, white women earned 6,777 PhDs in STEM fields, whereas white men earned 8,478 PhD degrees[288]

- However, for Black women, that number was 684—10 times fewer scientific doctorates than their white counterparts[289]

- In 2015, less than one percent of all U.S. engineering Bachelor's degrees were given to black women, and minority women compromise fewer than one of 10 employed scientists and engineers[290]

Women of color, particularly Black girls and women are at the intersection of two of the most pervasive prejudices in this country: racism and sexism.[291] Even with vast improvements,

[285] Economics & Statistics Administration. (2017, March 30). STEM Jobs-Office of the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs. Retrieved September 2018, from https://www.esa.doc.gov/reports/stem-jobs-2017-update

[286] Engineering For Kids. (2016, February 2). Why Is STEM Education So Important? Retrieved from https://www.engineeringforkids.com/about/news/2016/february/why-is-stem-education-so-important-/

[287] National Academy of Engineering. (2018). About the National Academy of Engineering (NAE). Retrieved from https://www.nae.edu/

[288] National Science Foundation. (2017, January). Additional Resources - nsf.gov - Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering - NCSES - US National Science Foundation (NSF). Retrieved from https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2017/nsf17310/additional-resources.cfm

[289] Ibid

[290] Purdue University School of Engineering Education, & National Society of Black Engineers. (2015). Ignored Potential: A Collaborative Roadmap for Increasing African American Women in Engineering. Retrieved from http://www.nsbe.org/getattachment/News-Media/NSBENews/ignored-potential/NSBE-Ignored-Potential-Whitepaper-2-27-17.PDF.aspx

[291] Blake, S. (1999). *Mentoring Dilemmas: Developmental Relationships Within Multicultural Organizations*. Mahwah, NJ: Psychology Press.

creations of programs, and increased educational curriculums, there is still a need to normalize Black girl experiences in STEM.

Building Confidence
"My brain is all the superpower I need."[292]

(Figure 3.11- Lunella tapping into her "superpower" in
***Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*, 2016, Vol. 1, Issue 1)**

When further interrogating Lunella/Moon Girl, we find that #BlackGirlMagic is also a tool of agency and resistance. As much as Lunella/Moon Girl deals with her parents understanding the role and impact of possessing the *Inhuman* gene, not being pushed by teachers to her greatest potential, or being teased by classmates due to her superior intelligence, Lunella still exhibits the #BlackGirlMagic mentality. In the moment shown above, Lunella, with much anticipation and excitement, uncovers the Kree Omni-Wave Projector, a tool that will help her get closer to understanding the truth about the *Inhuman* DNA. Lunella is armed with self-confidence and is embracing her intellect as a superpower. Her ambition is peaking and she is more secure with herself despite the world telling her to be someone else. Gloria Ladson-Billings notes that "Black girls are so much more than magic. They are strong. They are smart. They are brave. They are resilient. They are capable. They are so much more than what society claims they are."[293] Recognizing her intellect as a superpower, Lunella simultaneously acknowledges the strength and bravery, which is referenced by Ladson-Billings. Lunella becomes the girl that refuses to be hindered. As a result, we get to discover with Lunella a new technological advancement.

Following in the same path as Lunella, there has been an increase of Black women representations that are normalizing what it means to be and see a young, smart, Black female hero. Comic book characters of color, particularly Black girls and women, rarely get to possess

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[292] *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*, 2016, Vol. 1, Issue #1
[293] Ladson-Billings, G. J. (2017). Black Girls Are More Than Magic. *Occasional Paper Series*, *38*. Retrieved from https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2017/iss38/1

such substantial traits that are not related to the stereotypes attached to their racial group. Thus, instead of duplicating the original white tableau of male superheroes, Lunella/Moon Girl's story becomes a part of the growing comic book narratives that more accurately reflect society.
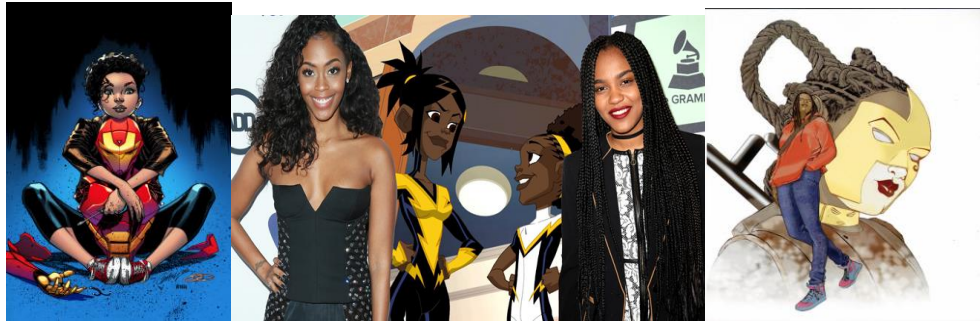
(Figure 3.12- Additional examples of gifted Black girls in comics (l-r) "RiRi Williams" from *Marvel Comics*-"*Ironheart*" series, Anissa and Jennifer Pierce (as playeharacterd by actresses Nafessa Williams and China Anne McClain from *CW's* "Black Lightning" series, and "Ajala" from *Xmoor Studios*)

Her character, along with others (Figure 3.12) speaks to this notion that Nazera Sadiq Wright claims as "the futurity of achievements." They become future role models that are breaking through boundaries and gaining platforms for their gifts and talents.[294] Black girls and women are not merely background characters in these new representations; they have also become heroes.

"Now it's my time. The things I can do with a Kree Omni Wave Projector!. I'm the boss of my own body. Nobody gets to tell anybody who or what they can and can't be."[295]

(Figure 3.13-Lunella realizing her power and the possibilities in
***Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*, 2016, Vol. 1, Issue 5)**

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[294] Wright, N. S. (2017). Epilogue: The Changing Same? Next-Generation Black Girlhood. In *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (pp. 179-186). Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
[295] *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*, 2016, Vol. 1, Issue #5

Black girl narratives, particularly in comics, encourage Black girl readers to embrace their own intelligence and to resolve to effect positive change in the world. The STEM-genius Black girl characters in comics not only face fictional worldly foes but juggle everyday problems that are relatable to Black girls in the real world. As stated by Ruth N. Brown "Silent Black girls have a lot to say; however, without time, good relationships, and patience their voices remain a backdrop to conversations about them."[296] Lunella is anything but silent, as she realizes it is her time to speak up and tap into the power (the Inhuman gene) that is embedded within her. In the panel above, we witness an uncovering of truth, a reclaiming of her body, and the determination to succeed.

Channeling the Ancestors

Lunella/Moon Girl's narrative also channels the voices of Black girls from Toni Cade Bambara's 1970 short story collection *Gorilla, My Love*[297] which included the perspective of a Black girl who was unmoved, outspoken, and unafraid. In this short story collection, Bambara addresses such themes as feminism, youth and innocence, growing up, and intelligence through the eyes of a high-spirited Black girl named Hazel. Set in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Hazel could be read as a precursor to the Lunella/Moon Girl character. Oftentimes, Black girls are confined to a box that marginalizes them, silences them, or worse, makes them invisible. Instead of being the victim or hiding in the shadows, Lunella proclaims that she has something to offer.

Shapeshifting

Lunella's narrative offers a creative parallel to Aimee M. Cox's 2015 book *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*. Cox speaks to this idea of these Black girls from Detroit, MI as "shapeshifters" who engage with, confront, challenge, invert, unsettle, and expose the material impact of systemic oppression.[298] She uses the term "shapeshifting" as a way to illustrate these young women's usage of personal agency in calling attention to their lives, voices, and standpoint in a space that often invalidates their experiences. Much like the girls in Cox's book, Lunella is disrupting the norms that have been relegated to Black girls and is creating her own identity, one that embraces her giftedness. Moreover, Lunella's story does "the culture work and cultural remapping produced by Black girls" which is in "a space of possibility that has yet to be fully investigated."[299]

To Be Young, Gifted, Nerdy, and Black

Being gifted is something that is not often associated with Black children. Nationally, there is very little representation of Black students in gifted education programs. There is a constant search to find ways to identify more gifted Black students. According to Grissom, Rodriguez, & Kern, "Black students are only 59% as likely to receive gifted services as would be predicted if their gifted participation was proportionate to their presence in the broader student

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[296] Brown, R. N. (2017). More than Sass or Silence: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood. In *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* (p. 184). Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

[297] Bambara, T. C. (1970). *Gorilla, My Love*. New York, NY: Vintage.

[298] Cox, A. M. (2015). *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

[299] Ibid, p. 26

population."[300] This concern for the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted programs dates back to Martin D. Jenkins' 1934 study of Black students with high intelligence test scores who were not formally identified as gifted.[301] Currently, while each state defines gifted on its own terms, according to the *National Association for Gifted Children* (NAGC), gifted children are defined as those "who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude…or competence…in one or more domains."[302] Lunella, as a fictional character, qualifies as gifted based on NAGC standards due to the fact that she shows evidence of "high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities."[303] As a gifted character, Lunella uses her intellect and creativity to explore ways of employing her talents and gifts outside of the classroom.

From the opening of the series, readers journey with Lunella as she navigates being challenged in the classroom, as well as finding a school that will motivate and challenge her intellectually. Nevertheless, *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*, as a diverse contribution to the comic book medium, offers a creative entry point to discussing the lack of representation of Black students in gifted programs. Sheena Howard argues that "comics represent imagination and inspiring people to imagine things beyond their realities."[304] This is critical especially during a time when the 45th President of the United States considers those of the African diaspora as inferior and worthless. Introducing a character like Lunella/Moon Girl who is smart, gifted, and a Black girl holds a lot of power to inspire and imagine a better future. In addition, Moon Girl's superhero story provides an escapism for young Black girls, and potentially Black women, from the daily realities of being Black in America as she triumphs over the odds and defeats evil.

However, to be gifted can seem like a privilege that is not regularly afforded to Black girls. In some cases, if Black girls possess a level of intelligence and outspokenness they are misconstrued as having attitude and disrespect by people who inherently see Black children as aggressive or a threat. This is expressed in a statement, seen below, made by Lunella's teacher,

[300] Grissom, J. A., Rodriguez, L. A., & Kern, E. C. (2015). Teacher and principal diversity and the representation of students of color in gifted programs: Evidence from national data. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting, Chicago, IL.

[301] Jenkins, M. D. (1936). A socio-psychological study of Negro children of superior intelligence. Journal of Negro Education, 5, 175-190.

[302] National Association for Gifted Children-NAGC. (2018). What is Giftedness? | National Association for Gifted Children. Retrieved from http://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/resources/what-giftedness

[303] Marland, S. P. (1971). *Education of the Gifted and Talented Volume 1: Report to The Congress of the United States by the U.S. Comissioner of Education*. Retrieved from U.S. Department of Health, Education & Welfare: Office of Education website: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED056243.pdf

[304] Jefferson, J. (2018, February 13). The Black Comic Book's Long Journey to Positive Representation. Retrieved from https://www.vibe.com/2018/02/black-comic-books-positive-representations/

"Well, maybe if little Miss-Know-It-All paid more attention!"[305]

(Figure 3.14-Processing between giftedness and outspokenness in
***Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*, 2016, Vol. 1, Issue 1)**

Lunella's experiences in the classroom speak to a variety of issues, which include teacher and peer interactions, learning styles, and socialization skills. Her character offers a new lens for the "growing up" and "identity" questions that are part of comic book standards. To witness a Black girl dealing with isolation, awkwardness, and owning herself is not only empowering for readers, but is a narrative of Black girl validation. Lunella, as a young role model, persists without structures of authority (super-powered or otherwise).[306] Throughout the series, writers Amy Reeder and Brandon Montclare, as well as artist Natasha Bustos effectively deliver the realities of Black girlhood by doubling down on Lunella's difficulties. She is not only different from her classmates, but also isolated from other geniuses by educational access and age.

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[305] *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*, 2016, Vol. 1, Issue #1
[306] Despite being the youngest and "weakest" of the *Inhuman* characters, Lunella's story is still recognizable.

Celebrating Black Girl Intelligence through #BlackGirlMagic
"You can't be hesitant about who you are." ~Viola Davis (Playbill, 2004)
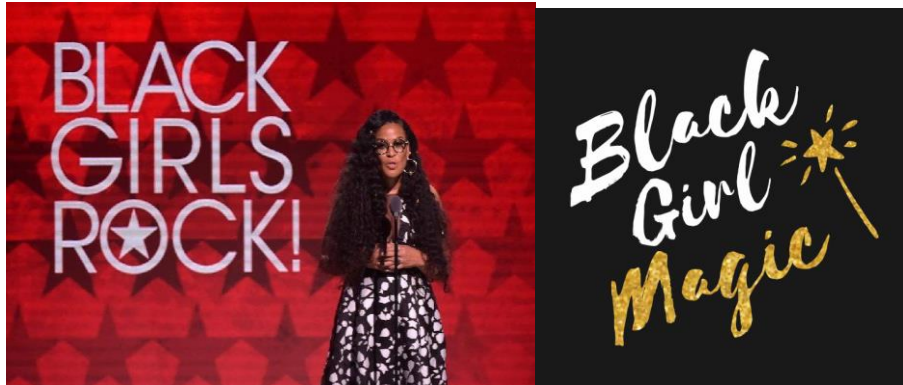
(Figure 3.15-Representations of #BlackGirlMagic)

As significant as it is to address the challenges that Black girls face in their local communities, schools, and, more specifically, in STEM fields, sharing and telling stories that celebrate their worth is a needed endeavor. As Ruth Nicole Brown argues in her 2009 book, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (2009), a celebration of Black girlhood and her many experiences centers on the everyday achievements that are in actuality not so commonplace. This thought speaks to the phenomenon that is #BlackGirlMagic. Created by CaShawn Thompson in 2013 as a hashtag that celebrates the beauty, power, and resilience of Black women and girls, #BlackGirlMagic has become a growing movement. It was not just relegated to social media but also illustrated in all facets of Black female life. According to Asia Leeds, as reported to CNN:

> The concept is important because it names and identifies the ways that black women make space for themselves, celebrate themselves, and connect to each other… I think that the various hashtags allow us to curate our magic and facilitate new connections and discoveries.[307]

These connections and discoveries can be explored figuratively, through comic book form, in Lunella/Moon Girl's narrative. Lunella's storyline demonstrates #BlackGirlMagic by captivating pop culture audiences with her playfulness, honesty, intelligence, and resiliency, despite being rendered invisible by comic book creators. This celebration is an act of resistance against societal norms and aids in the development of Black girl's self-esteem. *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* creates a new space in a primarily white, male dominated arena of comics and connects with all ages of Black girls and women. This creation of a new space further solidifies the comic book as an affirming, celebratory resource and reclamation of power for Black girls. Thus, #BlackGirlMagic also allows us to further explore how Black girlhood experiences are not monolithic.

In 2016, award-winning director, producer, and screenwriter Ava DuVernay stated that "Black Girl Magic is a rallying call of recognition. Embedded in the everyday is a

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[307] Thomas, J., CNN. (2016, February 24). Black girl magic is more than a hashtag - CNN. Retrieved from https://www.cnn.com/2016/02/24/living/black-girl-magic-feat/index.html

magnificence that is so easy to miss because we're so mired in the struggle and what society says we are."[308] One way that this rallying call of recognition would be answered was in 2015, when Marvel Comics announced the introduction of a new character, Lunella Lafayette at the 2016 San Diego Comic Con.

(Figure 3.16-The poster image used to announce the *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* series and character to Marvel Comics)

With the announcement of Lunella/Moon Girl as a new character and her series in the Marvel Comics Universe, it immediately resonated as a personification of #BlackGirlMagic. Not only was there a new story starring a nine-year-old Black girl entering into the comic book realm, but this character would also be crowned the "Smartest Person in the Marvel Universe." Surrounded by technology and science (Figure 3.16), Lunella convincingly portrays a young Black girl who exudes a playful confidence. In what could be seen as her lab, Lunella possesses the vibranium shield of Captain America, the mind manipulator helmet of X-Men's Professor X, the skull key of The Punisher, the Fantastic Four emblem, and Iron-Man's laser glove. This becomes significant as the original owners of the items are all white men who have held some position of power and or held the title of the "Smartest Person in the Marvel Universe." The torch has been passed to a Black girl who wears two Afro puffs in her hair, large purple glasses, a pink bow tie and dons a Big Red dinosaur on her t-shirt. With a hand on her hip, Lunella flexes a top tier

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[308] #BlackGirlMagic in this quote from DuVernay demonstrates a way in which the term is linked and not only applicable to young Black girls but with Black woman as well.

intellect, while disrupting gender norms that say Black girls do not belong in the arenas of science and technology. Lunella/Moon Girl provides an example of how comics can represent Black girls as bringing their magic into the world with bravery, intelligence, and an overall resolve to effect positive large-scale change. This announcement and her centered presence in the above poster demonstrates the manner in which non-Black creators (e.g. Amy Reeder and Brandon Montclare) and women of color artists/creators (e.g. Natasha Bustos) are creating ways for Black girls to make their mark and have a regular presence in mainstream comics.[309]

"We all go through changes Lunella…Inhuman is what you were always meant to be Lunella. It's what you are you should embrace it."[310] ~Ms. Marvel/Kamala Khan

      Addressing the inclusion of diverse experiences and perspectives, like Lunella Lafayette/Moon Girl, with regards to STEM will undoubtedly challenge mainstream views that girls and women of color do not belong are not part of that narrative. Instead of viewing Black girls as problematic and troublesome, they should be motivated and encouraged to exceed the ascribed expectations placed upon them.[311] This motivation can specifically come in the form of peer mentorship and playful banter specifically between fellow teen superheroes Ms. Marvel and Ironheart mentor Lunella/Moon Girl (Figure 3.17).

      In the shared moments, Ms. Marvel ensures Lunella of her gifts and talents. She explains to Lunella the importance of tapping into and embracing her Inhuman potential, including the overall impact this ability can have on her community. The interactions between Lunella and RiRi/Ironheart serves as a moment of reprieve and a sister-like bonding. Despite not being accepted into mainstream culture, the importance of role models for intelligent/nerdy Black girls who are confident and ambitious is needed to help secure successful careers. A girl's ability to rely on others "to access knowledge and resources in her community and to cultivate a support network are just as important in enabling her to be persistent in the face of obstacles and adversity."[312]

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[309] Gipson, G. D. (2017, October 14). The Future Is Black and Female: Afrofuturism and Comic Books [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://www.aaihs.org/the-future-is-black-and-female-afrofuturism-and-comic-books/

[310] Montclare, B. and Reeder, A. (2016). *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur, Vol. 1-Issue 10* [Comic]. New York, NY: Marvel Comics.

[311] Morris, M. W. (2018). *Pushout: The criminalization of Black girls in schools*. New York, NY: The New Press.; Jones, N. (2010). "Introduction." In *Between Good and Ghetto: African American Girls and Inner-City Violence* (p. 8). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.; Evans-Winters, V. E. (2011). *Teaching black girls - resiliency in urban classrooms*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

[312] Erkut, S., Fields, J. P., Sing, R., & Marx, F. (1996). Diversity in Girls Experience: Feeling Good about Who You Are. In B. J. Leadbeater & N. Way (Eds.), *Urban girls: Resisting stereotypes, creating identities* (p. 55). New York, NY: New York University Press.

(Figure 3.17-Mentorship and sisterhood as personified through other likeminded female superheroes l-r Ms. Marvel and Ironheart)

Building Diverse, Global Partnerships While Making #BlackGirlMagic Visible

The shift to increase visibility and participation of Black girls in STEM is one that can be viewed as a collective effort. With expected increases in STEM jobs by 2020, there is a continuous need to put Black female faces in the forefront of the STEM conversation. Environments must also be created to support Black women in STEM, provide mentorship, and promote resiliency. Moreover, inserting the Black girl experience into STEM aids in pushing against the existing stereotypes, gender biases, and the overall hostility experienced by Black women in science, math and engineering workplaces. Black girls should have the opportunity to be a part of the STEM movement without feeling rejected.

Furthermore, highlighting these programs (listed below) equips Black girls to become active producers in the STEM fields, creates more diverse representation, aids in closing the existing STEM gaps, and makes the moniker of #BlackGirlMagic visible. The following existing networks below have a global impact as they are located in the U.S. and Africa.

Black Girls Code: *Black Girls CODE has set out to prove to the world that girls of every color have the skills to become the programmers of tomorrow. By promoting classes and programs we hope to grow the number of women of color working in technology and give underprivileged girls a chance to become the masters of their technological worlds.*
http://www.blackgirlscode.com

Key Facts:
- Over 8000+ African American, Latina, and Native American girls have benefited
- Has a thriving Twitter community of 80,000+ followers
- Partnered with Google, Adobe, and FedEx – to name a few companies

The Spelbots Robotics Team (Spelman College): *The goal of SpelBots, Spelman College's robotics team, was to encourage students and young women of African descent to explore robotics and computer science.* https://www.spelman.edu/academics/majors-and-programs/computer-and-information-sciences/spelbots-robotics-team

Key Facts:
- Made history as the first all-female and all African-American undergraduate team that qualified to compete in the International RoboCup four-legged robot soccer competition
- Tied for first place at the RoboCup Japan 2009 Standard Platform League Nao League humanoid soccer championship
- Had the opportunity to visit the Education Technology Showcase in Washington, D.C. and showcase their robots to U.S. senators and the director of the National Science Foundation; this was significant as they were one of 21 schools, and the only historically Black college or university to showcase their technology

The Visiola Foundation: *The Visiola Foundation exists to support the emergence of a new cadre of African leaders by mentoring and training academically excellent youth in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields.* http://www.visiolafoundation.org

Key Facts:
- Has partnered with leading universities across Africa
- Seeks to connect African women with possible grants, fellowships, and funding opportunities
- Partnerships with Google and Intel

The STEMinista Project: The STEMinista Project is a Michigan Science Center initiative created to defy statistics and raise expectations of interest in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) for 4th through 8th grade girls. The Project engages girls with authentic STEM experiences designed to increase their interest, confidence and skill sets in STEM. https://www.mi-sci.org/steminista-project/

Key Facts:
- Participants in the STEMinista Project take part in special Michigan Science Center events, along with being matched with role models who work in the STEM fields; participants also take part in STEM-related workshops
- More than 1,000 girls and 250 role models from a diverse range of backgrounds have participated in the program since their launch in 2016.
- Partnerships with Google, BOSCH, ITC, DIGERATI Girls

Women in Tech Africa: *Women in Tech Africa carries a three-fold mission: to create positive female leaders and role models, to demonstrate the capabilities of strong African women, and to support African growth through tech. Throughout the year, the organization runs many progressive projects and events all across Africa to encourage women to explore careers in STEM.* https://www.women-in-tech-africa-summit.com

Key Facts:
- Members from 30 African countries
- Inspired 100 children to pursue STEM careers
- 2000 careers influenced
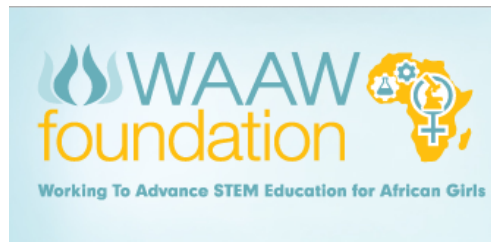
WAAW Foundation: *Founded in 2007 and headquartered in Nigeria, the WAAW Foundation holds the core focus to empower "African women to become impactful leaders to benefit Africa through experiential STEM education, leadership, and entrepreneurship training." The foundation acknowledges the community impact that educating women can have, and so aim by 2020 to increase the number of African women in STEM by 10%.* http://waawfoundation.org

Key Facts:
- Their STEM Outreach and Mentoring Program is in 18 chapter in 11 African countries
- 198 girls have participated in the STEM camp
- 31 college scholarship awarded

National Action Council For Minorities in Engineering (NACME): *The mission of NACME is to enrich society with an American workforce that champions diversity in STEM by increasing the number of underrepresented minorities in engineering and computer science. NACME partners with like-minded entities to provide scholarships, resources, and opportunities for high-achieving, underrepresented minority college students pursuing careers in engineering and computer science. By supporting their academic endeavors and professional development, NACME produces well-qualified candidates that meet today's urgent hiring demands for more diverse STEM talent.* http://www.nacme.org

Key Facts:
- The largest provider of college scholarships for underrepresented minorities pursuing degrees at schools of engineering
- Commitment to increase the number of NACME Scholars by 49% by 2020
- Around 150 students attend each Executive Sponsor Speaker Series event

  As we continue to celebrate Black girl's success, progress, and potential, it is inspiring to see what lies ahead in the future for them. Their unwavering resilience is expressed in and outside of reality. Lunella/Moon Girl's narrative is part of that resiliency and contributes to the collective progress. Lunella's story, as explored through the various issues, helps us to imagine and realize the untapped potential of young Black girls that are underrepresented in STEM and beyond. Young Black girls can use Lunella's narrative, and others who are following this tradition, as a tool for analyzing their own everyday experiences as Black females. Her story negotiates the boundaries and complicates the ways in which a fictional narrative mediates the experiences of Black girls in public and private spheres. Perhaps Lunella/Moon Girl's story will encourage more research on producing additional opportunities for creative dialogue that allows Black girls to share their own stories and experiences.

<p style="text-align:center">---</p>

  Much like Lunella/Moon Girl as a fictional character is able to create dialogues that can speak to various Black experiences, there are also real-life dialogues which are taking place within the digital landscape. In Chapter Four, the discussion surrounding Black female experiences within Black comic book fandom culture is explored through two Black female led podcasts and blogs*, Black Girl Nerds* and *Misty Knight's Uninformed Afro.*

Chapter Four: Digital Storytelling in Comics and Fandom Culture
Social Media & The Internet

As consumers of social media culture, we have become saturated to the point that it is impossible to escape. Our abilities to speak, think, form relationships with others are not only shaped by media like television and radio, but also through the internet and social media. Digital communication has transformed literacy practices and assumed great importance in the functioning of workplace, recreational, and community contexts.[313] The ways in which certain online communities can create alternative and additional spaces, within the academy and outside that interrogate, interpret, define, and document the experiences of Black women and their various communities within popular culture. As a Black woman who is a part of the academy as well as an active producer and consumer of popular culture, specifically comic books, I am invested in finding additional ways to blend the teachings of the academic with the experiences of the layperson. As a result, the selected sites, *Black Girl Nerds* (BGN) and *Misty Knight's Uniformed Afro* (MKUA), creatively address this concern. It should also be noted that BGN and MKUA are both sites created and led by Black women who unapologetically embrace the digital space to examine subject matters such as sexism, anti-blackness, American/international racism, equal opportunity and representation in the media and the idea of a post-racial society. Thus, the digital means/mediums in question utilize specific digital platforms such as blogging and podcasting to deliver their content while also incorporating multiple social media networks such as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and SoundCloud to engage with their audiences.

Online spaces, such as the ones that will be discussed, provide a sense of community and learning, while simultaneously building mutual networks and connections, or what we know today as participatory culture. As explained by media scholar and analyst Henry Jenkins, participatory culture is when fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content.[314] This is essentially the central core of social media. Social media plays a huge role in shaping society and because of this there are many diversified choices of consumption and participation which include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. The above-mentioned media have been able to reach a vast number of people, globally. Thus, it is important that we study social media because of its importance to social networking, content sharing, and how it contributes to how we understand ourselves and society.[315] Additionally, the advancement of social media also presents specific tools that work in conjunction with social media that allows ordinary people to become content creators. Two of the latest popular tools are the Internet-based blog or web-blog and the podcast.

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[313] Mills, K. A. (2010). A Review of the "Digital Turn" in the New Literacy Studies. *Review of Educational Research*, 80(2), 246-271. doi:10.3102/0034654310364401

[314] Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

[315] Ott, K. (2018). Social Media and Feminist Values: Aligned or Maligned?. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 39(1), 93-111.; Ekpe, B. N. (2017). Social Media: Towards the Realisation of a Global Stance for the African Voice. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, (10), 109.; Shaw, F. (2013). "These wars are personal": Methods and theory in feminist online research. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *13*(1), 90-101.; Asur, S., & Huberman, B. A. (2010). *Predicting the future with social media.* 2010 IEEE/WIC/ACM international conference on web intelligence and intelligent agent technology, Washington DC. Retrieved from
http://www.hpl.hp.com/research/scl/papers/socialmedia/socialmedia.pdf

The Art of Blogging

Blogging started in the latter part of the 1990s; a digital medium, it consists of written entries or "posts" and can contain texts, hypertexts, pictures, video, and audio material. Blogging originally involved a personal web log that was used to provide a unique way for people to journal about their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and opinions. Eventually, the idea of a "web log" became what is known today as a "blog." The evolution of blogging has been one of the foremost factors in re-conceptualizing how individuals can participate in publishing information on the Internet.[316] For many, blogging becomes a quick and safe space to disseminate compelling content. Due to its popularity, blogs are now being recognized as an alternative format of news media. However, unlike traditional news media which were dominated by news agency and professional reporters, blogs are managed and operated by millions of ordinary people. Additionally, local businesses, major brands, entrepreneurs, and academic institutions quickly saw the marketing potential in utilizing blogs to increase their digital presence and inevitably increase their bottom line.

Since blogs have reached a wide audience,[317] their subject matter ranges from topic-specific blogs (i.e. popular culture, fashion, food & wine, film), to news and current affairs (i.e. CNN, Huffington Post), to personal diary style (i.e. motherhood).[318] In recent years, blogging has shifted from unconventional activity to mainstream media activity. Moreover, it should be noted that the performance of blogging has become another format to obtain important information and considered one of the most popular social media and networking tools.[319] Blogging in a way becomes reminiscent of a conversation, in which the person or organization initiates by posting an article and then readers give their comments following the post. A measure of a blog's success is the number of comments it receives. In the end, readers' inputs become community postings where discussions take place. As the traffic of the conversation increases, people become part of the news. This act speaks directly to Jenkins idea of participatory culture. Blogging, in many cases, does steer towards specific audiences. Over time, they have created and developed methods of reaching their audiences. These include incorporating contests to keep audiences engaged as well as to offer incentives to contribute to their following and having outside extended dialogues (i.e. Live twitter chats, online roundtable discussions) to continue the conversations. As social media increasingly becomes more prevalent, we are witnessing where people are directly engaged and becoming 'the media' themselves. This notion points towards Marshall McLuhan's noteworthy phrase "the medium is the message," where the medium is the blog itself that becomes the important tool for disseminating the message.

As this awareness increases and more individuals embrace the blogging phenomenon, we

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[316] Bloch, J., & Crosby, C. (2008). Blogging and Academic Writing Development. In F. Zhang & B. Barber (Eds.), *Handbook of research on computer-enhanced language acquisition and learning* (pp. 36-47). Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference.

[317] As reported in 2017 by Demand Metric blogging is responsible for 434% more indexed pages and 97% more indexed links, and 90% of consumers find custom content useful. Additionally, 53% of content marketers use interactive content to explore scenarios and engage with their audiences.

[318] Walters, T., & Rose, R. (2015). *Is Native Advertising the New Black?*. Retrieved from Content Marketing Institute website: https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/NEOMG_Whitepaper_final_11-10-15_lk.pdf

[319] Banks, M. A. (2008). *Blogging Heroes: Interviews with 30 of the World's Top Bloggers*. Indianapolis, IN: Wiley.

can see how blogs possess a media power. This power can be used to promote such topics as women's equality and empowerment, representation within popular culture (specifically comic books), and the Black nerd (Blerd) community. In Stuart Hall's 1974 essay "Media Power: The Double Bind," he speaks to this idea that communication is always linked with power and that those groups who wield power in a society influence what gets represented through the media.[320] Blogging becomes a popular and accessible media format that gives power to content creators to deliver singular or multiple message that can inform the masses and impact change in a certain arena. Furthermore, these messages work in complex ways, and are always connected with the way that power operates in any society.

Podcasting

A second tool that has generated a popular interest within social media is the podcast. The podcast is described as an episodic series of media files that are distributed over the internet which users can download or listen to through a portable/mobile device or personal computer. Generally, the files or episodes are distributed to subscribers or followers in an audio or video format. The word podcast came from the portmanteau of 'iPod' and 'broadcast' and was first proposed by journalist Ben Hammersley in February 2004,[321] although the technology for producing and distributing these recorded files had been available since 200.[322] Much like blogging, podcasts have also become a popular medium for accessing and assimilating audio and video content about news, music, and entertainment. Podcasts are usually free of charge to listeners and can often be created for little to no cost, which sets them apart from the traditional model of "gate-kept" media and production tools.[323] However, if creators do want to receive money from their podcast, they can allow companies to purchase advertisement time, or use sites such as Patreon[324] to obtain funds.

Additionally, the same way that there are different sites to create a blog, there are several mobile applications/platforms for podcasts, so that people can use, subscribe, and listen to them. The most common applications/platforms for podcasts are iTunes, Soundcloud, Spreaker, BlogTalkRadio, and Podomatic. Many of these applications allow users to download podcasts or stream them on demand as an alternative to downloading. Streaming on demand gives the opportunity to access the information from multiple outlets, whether in a car, at home, or place of work. Just like written or electronic communication, the content of the podcast is important for the subscribers. Typically, the content of a podcast is crafted with the listener in mind. To maintain and bring in new followers, podcast creators must provide valued content for their listeners. It should also be noted that podcasting as an audio format is one that is not easily searched or scanned, which creates deterrents for harassers, thus requiring a temporal

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[320] Hall, S. (1974). Media Power: The Double Bind. *Journal of Communication*, *24*(4), 19-26.

[321] Hammersley, B. (2004) Audible revolution, The Guardian. Available online at: http://technology.guardian.co.uk/online/story/0,3605,1145689,00.html (accessed 11 July 2017).

[322] Ulmer, M. (2006). Podcasting, EDUinsight: Higher Education's Internet Advisor. Available online at: http://eduinsight.com/articles/podcasting.html (accessed 8 June 2017).

[323] Berry, R. (2006). Will the iPod Kill the Radio Star? Profiling Podcasting as Radio. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, *12*(2), 143-162. doi:10.1177/1354856506066522

[324] Patreon is an online site that allows content producers to get paid by running a membership business for their fans. Producers can have a revenue stream, while maintaining creative freedom. (https://www.patreon.com/)

commitment to listening. [325] As a result, valued content is what audiences will listen to, share with others, and come back for more in the next episode.

In addition to entertainment purposes, podcasts have been used in university settings as a method of distance-learning and e-learning. Numerous universities are using podcasts to deliver supplementary lecture materials for campus-based students, extending the trend of using e-learning to improve performance.[326] For this dissertation, I am primarily interrogating the social uses of podcasting. As mentioned in the introduction, the popularization of such video podcasts as Duke University's "Left of Black" series hosted by African American Studies scholar Mark Anthony Neal provides an example of how the field of African American Studies can have conversations in and outside the academy from a mobile and digital perspective. This leaves room for the opportunity to envision future relationships where we can blend the arenas of the academy and popular culture, while also disrupting the long-standing notion of high vs. low culture.

Unlike print media (i.e. magazines and newspapers) or traditional visual media (i.e. television and film) blogging and podcasts becomes a digital form of storytelling that can be edited and changed quickly and can offer readers the ability to interact and become part of the story they read or listen to. It is very much a horizontal media form: producers are consumers, consumers may become producers, and both can engage in conversations with each other.[327] While both blogs and podcasts avoid the gate-keeping of older forms of media, it should be noted that even with the creation of micro-communities that are ostensibly safe, they can also create a sense of insularity or an echo-chamber like quality. For Black women, blogs and podcasts also create a balance of what Robin M. Boylorn calls a "duality of identity."[328] Many women must negotiate personal politics as well as increasing an online presence. However, blogging and podcasts serve as a way to transform the work of academics (particularly Black women) and are increasingly portable and inexpensive. Both are most suitably characterized as an interactive process, relating media content, individual needs, perception roles and values, and the social context in which a person or group is situated. Specifically, as it relates to Black culture and Black women, blogging and podcasts have become a digital place of refuge, a safe space to engage with narratives specific to them, and even for some a type of therapy because it involves relatable discussions. Whereas historically these narratives and discussions took place in place in beauty salons or other gendered spaces, the conversations have spread to the digital.[329] Furthermore as digital mediums, podcasts and blogs for Black women specifically, offer a two-fold opportunity: as a space to not have to suffer in silence, or feel like they are the only one, as well as a place to build comradery, and promote social uplift. These creative tools play an increased role in the establishment of a digital culture that is invested in the variations of Blackness and Black women.

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[325] Florini, S. (2019). Enclaving and Cultural Resonance in Black Game of Thrones Fandom. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *29*. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2019.1498

[326] Concannon, F., Flynn, A. & Campbell, M. (2005). What campus-based students think about the quality of benefits of e-learning, *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 36, 501–521.

[327] Berry, 2006

[328] Boylorn, R. M. (2013). Blackgirl Blogs, Auto/ethnography, and Crunk Feminism. *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, *9*(2). Retrieved from http://liminalities.net/9-2/boylorn.pdf

[329] Brock, A., Kvasny, L., & Hales, K. (2010). CULTURAL APPROPRIATIONS OF TECHNICAL CAPITAL. *Information, Communication & Society*, *13*(7), 1040-1059.

Creating an online legacy voiced through Black women

The general impact of blogging and podcast is on the rise thus, it is important that we investigate specific sites that use these tools to promote their ideas and experiences. The internet, and the sites within it, have been heralded as a quick, streamlined way of giving marginalized communities a new way to voice their thoughts, concerns, and experiences. Additionally, other communities and networks can collaborate and form additional alliances that address their needs in a way that had not existed before. For this dissertation, I examine two sites that cater to the representation of Black women in the nerd community and explore specific Black female representation in the comic book genre, *Black Girl Nerds* (BGN) and *Misty Knight's Uninformed Afro* (MKUA). Drawing on established Black traditions within private and public discourses, both networks function as multi-media, interactive, and informative pop culture and comic book fandom networks. This is important to recognize since the very phenomenon of fandom is itself constructed as white.[330] Considering that Black fans have historically been understudied and excluded from academic and popular fan spaces, networks like BGN and MKUA are created to as Sarah Florini states as, "availing themselves of digital media technologies to engage in fan practices."[331] In this case the fan practices are centered around Black female media representation in comic books. Their unique origin stories, their popularity and impact within media culture, their original content, and the fact that both sites embody Black feminist and Afrofuturistic qualities also play a role in their selection. The transparency of these mediums speaks to this idea of a powerful and liberating collective vulnerability of Black women sharing their stories as well as educating listeners about their realities.

Historically, Black women have been set apart by others and positioned themselves to speak up against marginalization and oppression. For example, Maria Stewart and Sojourner Truth have discussed concerns about Black women's rights, religion and social justice for Black people through speeches and lectures; whereas other Black women like Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Amy Ashwood Garvey voiced anti-lynching campaigns and international race relations through newspapers, editorials, and pamphlets. The content produced on the BGN and MKUA sites invokes the spirit, activist work, and commitment of such Black women. Many of these issues, such as slavery, Jim Crow, and gender equality are familiar topics discussed by the above-mentioned women as well as new ones. They also empower and motivate Black women to be change-agents and to disrupt the notion that Black women are monolithic. Portrayals of Blackness and Black womanhood are constantly being challenged, redefined, and creatively voiced whether it be in a public lecture or in a 60-minute podcast. Through a vision, BGN is an interactive, digital community which explores various realms of comic book culture particularly for Black women. And as a result of a disrespectful and condescending internet troll[332], MKUA creates an increased interest in engaging, from a Black female perspective, various Black female comic book character and their storylines.

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[330] Stanfill, M. (2010). Doing fandom, (mis)doing whiteness: Heteronormativity, racialization, and the discursive construction of fandom. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *8*. https://doi:10.3983/twc.2011.0256 ; Wanzo, R. (2015). African American acafandom and other strangers: New genealogies of fan studies. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *20*. https://doi:10.3983/twc.2015.0699

[331] Florini, 2019

[332] MKUA was created as a result of internet fan-boy making the assumption the Black women are incapable of being well-informed on comic book culture, as well as an inference that Black female superheroes are irrelevant.

The above thought leads me to ask, are blog site and podcasts discussing race and gender in a specific way online? Or what language is being used to discuss Blackness and womanhood, via certain popular culture mediums like comic books, in the digital? Thus, BGN and MKUA are collaborative sites that ask and answer questions about Black women, their identity, and activism in a digital age. I argue that BGN and MKUA are creating digital and audio texts that categorize Black female nerd and comic book culture. And the missions of both BGN and MKUA are to make visible the presence of Black female nerd culture and everything that it encompasses. Each disrupts the past and present notion that only white men dominate and control the comic book culture. Black women and girls are very much a part of the comic book present and are laying the foundation for the future. Furthermore, in this chapter I analyze conversations by and about Black female creators and characters in comics by studying participation in popular new media tools. Collectively and separately BGN and MKUA serve as online community diaries that disrupt white male cultural domination and impact popular culture by influencing the producers and reshaping the content.

Black Girl Nerds (BGN)
"This is a website for every nerdy girl that can finally come out of the closet and tell the world that they are PROUD to be who they are." ~Jamie Broadnax, Creator of *Black Girl Nerds*

The above quote is a bold proclamation that brings attention to a community that has been under-recognized, marginalized, and often ignored, "Black Girl Nerds." This community is also the name of the nationally-recognized blog-site. *Black Girl Nerds* (BGN) was created in February 2012, as the result of an instance when creator Jamie Broadnax was searching the internet for information on "Black girl nerds." To her dismay, there was nothing that appeared in her search. Because of this disappointing discovery, Broadnax launched the *Black Girl Nerds* blog. According to Broadnax, BGN can be described as a site for "Black women and women of color to embrace their nerdiness and eccentricities."[333] In many ways, it can be likened to an online, alternative version of *Essence* or *Ebony* magazine. Similarly, BGN as a blog takes on the task of providing critical commentary that disrupts the status quo that Black women are not diverse and exceptional, challenges patriarchal and heteronormative narratives as being the standard, and embraces Black women as dynamic. The blog also provides, new conversations to some, Black female representations within nerd culture addressing such topics as comic books, graphic novels, gaming, manga/anime, skateboarding, etc. With many of these topics being dominated and voiced by white men, BGN provides another voice and brings an importance to the many narratives in digital media where blackness and femaleness is concerned.

Since the blog's inception, Broadnax and BGN have particularly played a role in comic book culture, discussing a myriad of topics such as the opening of the first Black female-owned comic bookstore on the East Coast, *Amalgam Comics & Coffeehouse* in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; showcasing the reboot of Marvel Comics *Black Panther* series from writer Ta-Nehisi Coates and illustrator Brian Stelfreeze; and featuring a ranked list of the "Top Ten Black Female Characters." Through BGN, Broadnax has created an interactive digital community that informs and educates, critiques and brings awareness, and empowers and spotlights Black female artists and creators in the comic book arena. This can be seen in the following three features:

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[333] Broadnax, J. (2012, February). About BGN. Retrieved October 8, 2017, from https://blackgirlnerds.com/about-bgn/

BGN Con Report- *East Coast Black Age of Comics: ECBACC Rocks the Block*; BGN Podcast-
Nerdy History, Superheroines and WOC in Comics; and BGN Spotlight- *Black Women in
Comics: The Gibbs Sisters*.

BGN Con Report- "East Coast Black Age of Comics: ECBACC Rocks the Block"
        One of the key signature features of the *Black Girl Nerd* site is that it provides a regular
source of information to its readers and listeners. BGN Con Reports provide readers other
options of comic book conventions to attend, legitimizes Black artistry in comic books, and
underscores a growing relationship between comics and education. This is a valuable tool as
regular viewers and newcomers can be informed about current events, while also being educated
on the various activities happening within the Black nerd (Blerd) community. In this specific
report, BGN brings attention to one of the leading organization in the Black comics industry, the
East Coast Black Age Comics Convention, also known as "ECBACC," while simultaneously
reflecting on its diversity and how it further defines the Black American experience. ECBACC is
an annual comic book convention, founded by Philadelphia-based educator Yumy Odum, and
was established as a non-profit literacy and arts organization of the same name in 2008.[334] In this
specific BGN Con Report (June 16, 2017), it offers readers a glance into this convention and
shares the various experiences from the event. The report documents how ECBACC is the first
full-service convention of its kind, even above San Diego Comic Con and New York Comic
Con, in that it offers year-round workshops and trainings that promote literacy and creativity via
designing superheroes and comic books. Not only is it an experience that promotes positive
Black imagery, while providing exposure to some of the leading Black writers and artists in the
comic book industry, but it is also an educational and fun experience. As stated in a June 2017
interview from Odom, "ECBACC is educational. It is fan based too, but initially the foundation
of ECBACC was literacy, using current books and imagery, especially imagery of Africana and
Black characters to promote literacy."[335]

        What also becomes important about this report is that BGN is highlighting an
organization/convention that embraces the Black experience from various perspectives that
include Black women. Voiced through the BGN site, listeners engage with another perspective
outside of ECBACC to show how they acknowledge and reward the work of mainstream and
indie creators and artists. This is important as it shows its relevancy in Black nerd culture as well
as its attractiveness as an organization. Also, through this spotlight BGN becomes another
platform and avenue for audiences to learn about ECBACC. This is seen in the post highlighting
the annual Glyph Comics Awards[336] and one of ECBACC's new initiatives, the "Pitch Room."
In the "Pitch Room," creatives put together presentations for a panel of judges to solicit financial
and technical support for their various ventures. In the first year (2017) of presenting the "Pitch
Room" award, educator, writer, and Black girl nerd Rorie Still (Figure 4.1), creator of the
science-fiction anthology *Flashbang: Sci-Fi That Will Blow Your Mind* (Figure 4.2) received the
top prize. Still's work also aligns with what Broadnax seeks to embrace through BGN regularly

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[334] ECBACC was founded in May 2002 but became a registered organization in 2008.
[335] Sparrow, C. R., & Black Girl Nerds. (2017, June 16). BGN Con Report: East Coast Black Age of Comics.
Retrieved September 8, 2017, from https://blackgirlnerds.com/__trashed-3/
[336] The Glyph Comics Awards recognizes the top comics made, for, and about people of color. The awards has a
two-fold mission, which is to encourage and bring awareness to diverse, high quality work and inspire new creators
and artists to contribute their voices/work to the field of comics.

that, "…being a nerd is a gift and should be highly revered."[337] Sharing this recognition and the organization is two-fold, as it recognizes and makes accessible the work of individuals without having to compete on a large-scale and further contributes to the growing terrain of Black cultural production in the nerd community and popular culture overall.[338]

(Figure 4.1-Creator Rorie Still and
Figure 4.2-Cover for "Flashbang: Sci-Fi Stories That Will Blow Your Mind!")

BGN Podcast #95- New York Comic Con-Women of Color (WOC) In Comics
Some of BGN's most popular features are its podcast segments, which offer an online forum to critique and analyze various topics within the comic book genre. One podcast featured a 2016 New York Comic Con[339] panel on *Women of Color (WOC) in Comics: Race, Gender & the Comic Book Medium*. This panel was moderated by Founder and Coordinator of "Women in Comics Collective International" and comic creator Regine Sawyer and featured panelists newspaper cartoonist Barbara Brandon-Croft, comic writers, filmmakers and editors Carol Burrell, Che Grayson, Camille Zhang, and comic creators Jules Rivera and Micheline Hess, many of whom have been featured on the BGN website. The panel discusses the comic book medium, WOC comic characters, the complexity of WOC characters and their creators, and WOC working in the comic industry. Also the cross-cultural efforts of the *Women of Color In Comics* panel focuses on the representative shift of seeing more WOC creators (ex. Vita Ayala-*The Wilds*, Juliana "Jewels" Smith- *(H)afrocentric*, Mildred Louis-*Agents of the Realm*, Ngozi Ukazu-*Check, Please!*) the embracing of nuanced characters (ex. Valiant Comics-*Livewire*, Image Comics-*Bitch Planet* characters Kamau Kogo and Penny Rolle, and Regine Sawyer/Lockett Down Productions- *Ice Witch*), and the new approaches to artwork and storytelling (via webcomics and Kickstarter campaigns). Oftentimes online communities, such as BGN, not only facilitate conversation on various social media platforms, but they also foster and encourage offline gatherings such as the one at New York Comic Con.

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[337] Broadnax, 2012

[338] This initiative also speaks to the Kwanzaa principles of Ujima (collective work and responsibility) and Ujamaa (cooperative economics) which brings prevalence and pride to the African American community.

[339] New York Comic Con is annual New York City fandom convention dedicated to comic books, graphic novels, anime, manga, gaming, film and television. It serves as the largest pop culture event on the East Coast with an attendance in 2016 reaching over 180,000 participants. Several guests have included such icons as Marvel Comic chairmen emeritus Stan Lee, actor Vin Diesel, actresses Carrie Fisher and Lucy Liu, scientist Neil deGrasse Tyson, and acclaimed comic writer Chris Claremont.

Considering the growth of representation in comics, which was a constant theme during the panel discussion, many of the panelists believed the comic book field is expanding its scope of artistry and creativity. During that panel, BGN served as the only mainstream outlet to have coverage on the panel during the conference. Most of the coverage was placed on the larger, more publicized films and television series. According to filmmaker and comic book writer Che Grayson, the "visibility of Black women characters is being seen in all shapes and sizes, queer, and disabled,"[340] which promotes and embraces an appreciation of their complexity. This is important as it addresses many of the concerns that can be found in past comic book narratives, such as not being able see themselves written or drawn into the storyline. Many of the panelist, like Barbara Brandon-Croft who is the first syndicated Black female cartoonist also shared the importance creating Black female narratives to incorporate social commentary, while also exploring racial and social issues. This exploration not only tells stories that appeal to various audiences, but also creates additional conversations that can be discussed in other social settings, classrooms, and on sites such as BGN. These conversations, although exciting, also become constant reminders of how far Black women and other women of color still must go in the struggle for diversity, not just in comics, but in the creative teams who bring fictional worlds to life. Nevertheless, these conversations do forge counter-representations, new reading publics, and contribute to scholarly pursuits.

In the end, the panel concluded that although more work still needs to be done to make women of color more visible; there has been more of an unapologetic attitude that artists and creators can have when bringing to life Black and women of color comic and cartoon characters. No longer do Black female characters have to be normalized as one-dimensional, marginalized, or viewed as simply stereotypical sexual objects for men's viewing pleasure. Much like what BGN does with its site, pushing beyond the discourses of inclusion, exclusion, and representation, the featured panel engaged the critical question of how Black women are semiotic referents for discourses regarding politics, gender, race, and sexualities. Referencing such creators and artists as non-conforming cartoonist and publisher Spike Troutman and her erotic, lady-centered, Iron Circus Comics company; Sana Amanat and her editorial work with the Marvel Comics *Ms. Marvel* series starring Kamala Khan a Muslim, teen-age superhero, or Alitha Martinez and her inking skills with Marvel Comics *Black Panther* spin-off series *World of Wakanda* articulates a wide variety of narratives stemmed from women of color.

These women, as well as the featured panelists, are creating imprints in the comic field[341] that are unapologetic, inspiring, and valuable as they open doors to a universe of superheroes that step outside the heteronormative boundaries. Featuring such a panel offers listeners and BGN followers an up-close and personal look at a diverse, functioning community of creatives and artists that answers the question of where are all the women of color in comics.[342]

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[340] Black Girl Nerds. (2016, November 5). BGN #95 | WOC In Comics panel at New York Comic Con - Black Girl Nerds. Retrieved from https://blackgirlnerds.com/bgn-95-nerdy-history-superheroines-woc-comics/

[341] The Ormes Society is also another site named after the legendary Jackie Ormes—the first African-American female cartoonist—which is dedicated to the inclusion of black women in comics and animation and the promotion of black female characters in sequential art and cartoons; which features a growing list of Black female creators. http://ormessociety.com/creators

[342] It should be noted attending a con, such as New York Comic Con and San Diego Comic Con, requires some preparation and prior research. Both cons, as well as others, are open to anyone that wants to attend regardless of age. Depending on the con, there is a particular process to purchasing a badge for admission. The cost of admission

BGN Spotlight- Black Women in Comics – The Gibbs Sisters

   Finally, another important and significant feature of the *Black Girl Nerds* site is how it also empowers and spotlights up and coming talent. Periodically, the BGN site offers its followers an opportunity to support new talent, like Los Angeles-based writer's twins Shawnee' and Shawnelle Gibbs (known as The Gibbs Sisters) (Figure 4.4). In this spotlight, BGN shares how The Gibbs Sisters are creating their own brand in the comic book and animation industry. As co-founders of their own production company, Reel Republic, these two young Black women not only get to tell the stories, but they have control as to how they are created and disseminated (The Gibbs sisters are writers, producers, directors, animators, and artists of their brand). Furthermore, their brand includes telling diverse stories that center around "bold female leads." And their latest project (which debut in Winter 2017) is a 24-page steampunk comic titled, *The Invention of E.J. Whitaker* (Figure 4.3). As a comic, *The Invention of E.J. Whitaker*, is a story "that follows the adventures of a young, African American female inventor whose latest creation, a flying machine, causes a stir at the dawn of the 20th century." This spotlight not only tells a diverse story, but engages audiences with a fictional visual that can inspire future innovators. The sisters are very intentional about this purpose as Shawnee' explains, "Shawnelle and I seem to find a way to work a little science fiction into most of our stories, probably because we were such imaginative kids."[343] Like the way Marvel Comics *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* engages little Black girls to take an early interest in the STEM field, The Gibbs Sisters present another narrative, often not afforded, for Black women to be represented. "We've told stories of little black girls flying in spaceships with one of our first animated cartoons, *Adopted By Aliens*, now with E.J. Whitaker, we're telling a story of a young woman who could possibly build one"[344] as explained by Shawnee.

   Stories like this one shift from past to present and to the future offering an Afrofuturistic conversation about new possibilities for interpreting Black female discourses in comic books and popular culture. Thus, according to Shawnee Gibbs,

> we hope that our first issue becomes one of a series of books about our young heroine and her allies. I think in this country, we tend to concentrate on the history of African Americans during Slavery and the Civil Rights era and often overlook the wealth of stories in between. The 1900's was such a significant time for us as a people–and America as a whole–that it begs to be re-discovered in a new way (as told to Broadnax).[345]

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can range from free to a one day kids pass at $12.50, adult day pass at $50.00, and military/senior rate pass at $23.00 and in some cases a Fan Verification will take place (ex. NYCC Badge process: http://www.newyorkcomiccon.com/Attend/Badges/). Also, for those that are participating as a panelist whether as an academic or non-academic there are discounted or complimentary passes provided. Access to such events gives fans early intel on a wide variety of pop culture mediums, a chance to meet their favorite creator, or share their own scholarly knowledge of an interest within the pop culture world. Outside of attending the actual con event one must also factor in travel and housing, recently Air BnB's have become popular as hotel rates are quite expensive (due to the popularity) and/or rooms sell out quickly. It is usually recommended for the major cons that one prepares at least a year in advance. As the popularity of the cons rises, the process of attending expands.

[343] Broadnax, J. (2016, February 23). Black Women in Comics - The Gibbs Sisters - Black Girl Nerds. Retrieved from https://blackgirlnerds.com/black-women-in-comics-the-gibbs-sisters/
[344] Ibid
[345] Ibid

The Gibbs Sisters, using a fictional format, are addressing the gaps, reclaiming and retelling the stories that are typically dismissed or misrepresented. Moreover, BGN becomes an outlet to bring these narratives into the view of new and existing followers. Spotlighting such creatives and artists as The Gibbs Sisters, also allows BGN to open the eyes of their followers to a new world in which women like them can be both the protagonists, and the creators as well. No longer do Black women and/or girls wonder if they can be represented as inspiring and noteworthy characters.
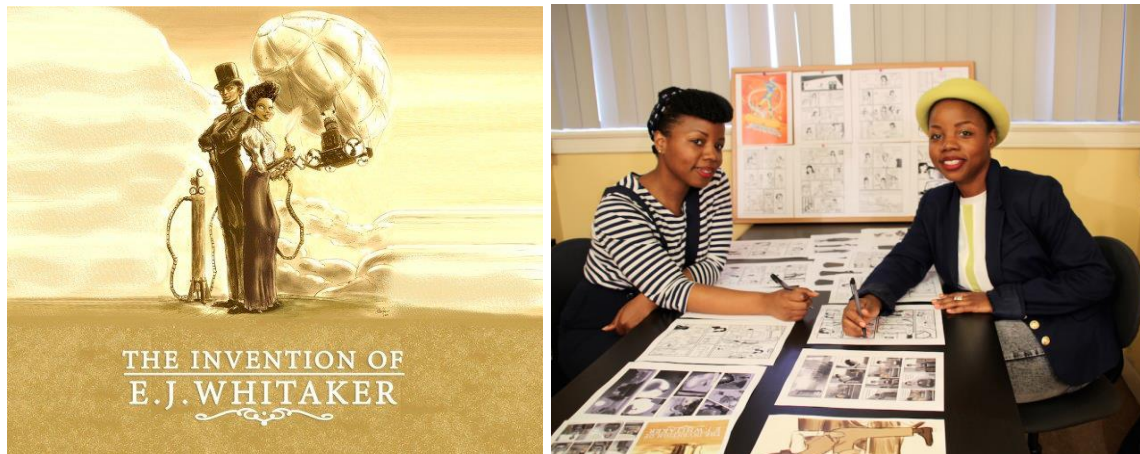
(Figure 4.3-Title Cover for "The Invention of E.J. Whitaker" comic and Figure 4.4-The Gibbs Sisters (l-r) Shawnelle & Shawnee')

BGN Impact outside of the site

Through the years, Broadnax has played an active role in bringing national attention to the *Black Girl Nerds* site and Black nerd comic book culture. In 2017, according the BGN site, it would encompass over 129,000+ followers on Twitter (including *Black-ish* stars Marsai Martin and Yara Shahidi, film director Julie Dash, pop culture icon and blogger Luvvie Ajayi, and Black feminist scholars Kali Gross and Robyn C. Spencer), 32,000+ fans on Facebook, and 3,000+ YouTube subscribes; showing how BGN reaches a wide audience of all ages and professions.[346] The notoriety of *Black Girl Nerds* with Broadnax as creator and editor-in-chief has garnered attention from such names as Melissa Harris-Perry, television actor B.D. Wong, president of Stranger Comics Sebastian Jones, and TV mogul Shonda Rhimes, making it a site that is embraced not just by Black women, but also, those who support its message. Online spaces like BGN, continue to prove to be important sites that push against the boundaries set for women to stay within, informing their audiences of current talent, and documenting the varied experiences of Black women and girls. As a site that speaks to the tenets of Black feminism, BGN uses its various features (blog posts and interviews) to insert Black women into public popular culture debates concerning race, gender, and class.

Since its beginnings as just a blog, Black Girl Nerds has grown to include regular pop culture commentary, live audio and video interviews, representation at comic conventions nation-wide, regular podcasts episodes, and a YouTube channel. BGN becomes this gateway and information hub into popular culture. Readers can read about current events, social and political

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[346] Much of the data was acquired primarily through Google Analytics, from the various social media sites, and the information provided in the individuals social media bios.

commentary, film reviews, and "geek-out" on all things under the umbrella of Black nerdom. More specifically, with each new addition, BGN has evolved to not only inform through written blog posts on Black girl nerdom, but has created additional voices and visibility about Black hair, Black women's health, questioning the creative choices of cable network channels, and even putting out a call for the WGN show Underground to be picked up, among many other things. Even with these mainstream pursuits, sites like BGN maintain the intimacy as there are blossoming networks and communities that are established as result of the mainstream visibility.

Misty Knight's Uninformed Afro (MKUA)

When discussing representation in comic books it is easy to focus solely on what does not exist when discussing Black female characters. Comic book narratives, historically, have always used this extreme reliance on gender and racial stereotypes. Marc Singer notes that: "Comic books, and particularly the dominant genre of superhero comics, have proven fertile ground for stereotyped depictions of race."[347] Equally important, though, is the celebration/recognition of what is present. This celebration/existence brings awareness, while maintaining their visibility in comic book discussions. The existence of formidable Black superheroines in comics is not a new concept. Despite their long, rich history there has been little dedication to analyzing and discussing these characters and their narratives. Such scholars as Deborah Whaley's *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, Anime* (2016) and Nancy Goldstein's book *Jackie Ormes: The First African American Woman Cartoonist* (2008) have focused specifically on the origin stories, character development, and story arcs of Black female characters. However, in 2016, two Black female bloggers and comic book fans decided to create a show/podcast that not only celebrated the Black female superheroine, but also inform listeners about these unsung superheroine narratives. *Black Girl Nerds* creator Jamie Broadnax and fellow 'Blerd' blogger and creator/host of *The Lemonade Show* Stephanie Williams, bring a seasonal weekly podcast called *Misty Knight's Uninformed Afro* (MKUA). It received this name from co-host Stephanie Williams as a funny, but distinctive name that would fit the context of the show and as a spinoff of her then Twitter name "Misty Knight's Twist Out." As a podcast, the show is dedicated exclusively to the discussion of the Black female superhero and seeks to carve a new landscape in the podcast genre as well as educate and produce content about an often overlooked and underserved set of characters. In addition to highlighting the characters the series also brings exposure to the writers and artists of their stories. According to Broadnax, the concept of the podcast was two-fold to inform and create a space for fun, she states:

> I wanted to take podcasting to another level with having a fun, yet informative discussion about Black superheroines" [in comic books and graphic novels] "We incorporate media clips as well as reference specific comic issues with titles, dates, and creators behind each book discussed. We're here to shed light on these women in a way that hasn't quite been done before.[348]

Thus, MKUA provides an online informative yet comfortable space to interrogate the various featured characters and all their complexities. Each superheroine provides unique perspectives and experiences from the point of view of a Black woman. Although the show is meant to

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[347] Singer, M. (2002). "Black Skins" and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race. *African American Review*, *36*(1), 107-119.

[348] Broadnax, J. (Executive Producer/Co-host). (2016, December 12). *Misty Knight's Uninformed Afro*-Podcast Preview [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from http://mkuapodcast.com/

explore and learn more about their favorite Black superheroines in comics, from the perspective of two comic book fans, the commentary of each episode provides a cursory explanation of each character's history with certain aspects of the character's timeline is highlighted. MKUA is not meant to be the sole place to learn about the characters, but more of an introduction with the hopes that individuals will seek out more information. In addition to the audio podcast, listeners are provided with a "Reference" section on the corresponding website ([www.mkuapodcast.com)](www.mkuapodcast.com) to allow for further research. In the same way that BGN is meant to inform and highlight, MKUA uses that same energy and takes it a step further by providing deeper and critical analysis of certain comic characters, their narratives, the writers, artists, and editors. Whereas BGN provides an introductory and surface-level perspective to all different types of topics (ex. Box office numbers, representation in non-comic related films and television series) within various pop culture mediums (ex. Television, film, toy products, con events), MKUA is more narrow-focused (comics and graphic novels). Due to the content provided, MKUA serves as a standalone site which provides fans (new and old) a specific outlet to engage with Black female comic book characters.[349]

MKUA goes beyond the surface of the characters

MKUA enlightens listeners with facts and figures, but also interrogates all parts of the story and the physical representation of the characters. With each episode, there are various themes that get addressed through these characters ranging from family dynamics, leadership, representations of Black womanhood, questions of body image, and identity formation. A common thread that is discussed with each of the characters is this theme of "hair politics." Historically there has been no aspect of black women's corporality that is more contested and debated than their hair.[350] Due to the many distinctive and controversial representations of hairstyles in these Black superheroines, both Broadnax and Williams make it a point to discuss the significance of their styles and their connections to conventional standards of beauty and to the overall character identity and narrative. For many Black women, the topic of hair is a significant feature linked to politics of respectability, status-level, or being radical. Additionally, there is an entertainment factor that brings a light-hearted feel to the show by posing hypothetical questions such as "Would you have a "girl's night out" with this character?" "Could you trust this character to style your hair?" or "Would you bring this character with you to retrieve items from an ex-partner's home?" Asking these questions provides a sense of familiarity to the social experiences of Black women while bridging together all the commentary from the show to bring closure to the episode. Ultimately, the MKUA podcast is another outlet to question the ways in which Black female identities are formed and explored. The examples to follow, which include Marvel Comics character Monica Rambeau and DC Comics character Amanda Waller, are a sample of what MKUA and its hosts bring to the table regarding Black women in comics.

"Monica Rambeau Or Spectrum...If Ya Nasty" (2017)

In this contemporary moment of comic books in popular culture, there seems to be an increase in media messages toward women and girls, particularly Black, under the notion of empowering representations. This is a shift from the historical racist and misogynist representations of Black femaleness in comic book culture, but not without complications.

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[349] Although MKUA can be read as an affiliate and/or spinoff due to Broadnax being a co-host and also creator of BGN, it is a separate site.

[350] Gill, T. M. (2015). #TeamNatural: Black Hair and the Politics of Community in Digital Media. *The Journal of Contemporary African Art*, *2015*(37), 70-79.

Recently comic book fans have seen a proliferation of women and girl characters of color, ranging from the smartest person in the Marvel Universe Lunella Lafayette/Moon Girl, to the Dora Milaje and Shuri in the 2018 *Black Panther* film, to Marvel Comics *Guardians of the Galaxy* Gamora to *The Walking Dead* Michonne, and Misty Knight in Netflix's *Luke Cage*. However, there are some existing characters who have not been afforded the opportunity to be acknowledged or examined. In MKUA's first episode, co-hosts Jamie Broadnax and Stephanie Williams bring attention to a superheroine that is not often discussed in comic book conversations, Marvel Comics character Monica Rambeau also known as Captain Marvel II, Photon, Pulsar, and Spectrum. Monica Rambeau is a significant character of inquiry primarily due to her status of becoming the second Captain Marvel[351] in October 1982, and the first and only African American to hold the title, and her longstanding leadership with The Avengers. Throughout this episode, listeners are informed of how Monica's history and development circled around three major themes her family, her determination as a Black woman and a superhero, and her leadership roles.

We learn that *The Amazing Spider-Man Annual #16* (1982) is where Monica Rambeau makes her first comic book appearance.[352] In this issue, Broadnax and Williams bring attention to Monica's origin story in detail, including not only her development of powers, but her family history and two-parent home upbringing in New Orleans, Louisiana. This is a rare instance, considering more popular characters like Marvel Comics X-Men Storm and DC Comics Vixen do not have elaborated origin stories in their narratives. Furthermore, in this episode, Broadnax and Williams in their analysis bring attention to Monica Rambeau's family dynamic of a two-parent home, which plays a significant role in her character development. From this inquiry, we get a glance into how many Black characters are not afforded a look into their familial upbringing, a trait that is common among white male characters. Providing an origin, presents the character some depth and provides readers and fans the opportunity to have a familiarity about the characters. As we learn about Monica Rambeau's powers and self-naming of Captain Marvel in *The Amazing Spider-Man Annual #16* issue, we also learn of the close relationship that Monica has with her parents. This closeness is captured in the business partnership/venture that Monica has with her father, and also how she shares this news with her parents Frank and Maria Rambeau, and subsequently how they support and stay informed about her abilities. In the *Giant Size Special Captain Marvel: The Supersonic Sensation REBORN!* (1989) written by the late Dwayne McDuffie, we witness the concern that her parents have for her as superhero, and how much aware they are of her potential (Figure 4.5 and 4.6). In this moment, despite Monica losing her power (temporarily not being Captain Marvel), she still is able to push through her career outside of being a superheroine. Also, instead of shunning her away, Monica's parents seek to understand and comfort her through her weakness and strength. As Maria would tell her daughter, "I almost forgot how proud I was of the woman my baby grew into, you're going to be that woman again. I know it."[353] Both Monica and her parents work as a unit as they play a role in her everyday life experience as well as shape her superheroine life.

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[351] The first Captain Marvel was previously portrayed by an alien military officer in 1967.

[352] Monica Rambeau was created by Roger Stern and John Romita, Jr. in 1982 inspired by 1970's actress Pam Grier.

[353] McDuffie, Dwayne. "Giant Size Special-Captain Marvel: The Supersonic Sensation Reborn." 1st ed., vol. 2, Marvel Comics, pp. 1–48.
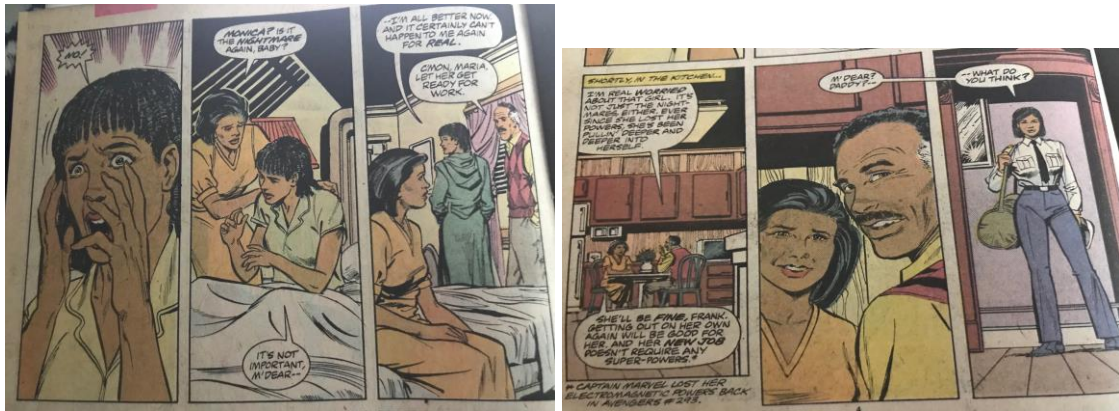
(Figure 4.5 and 4.6-The concern of Monica Rambeau's parents as they wonder how she will be able balance her "new life" in _Giant Size Special Captain Marvel_ [1989], pg.4)

Being able to see an engagement/involvement of a Black character's family (physically and emotionally) is critical in the comic book medium. In many ways, this humanizes the experience and shows the complexity of Black female characters. Monica's character re-situates the ways in which most Black superheroines have been personified as simply characters who lack support, are lonely, bitter, or limited to sexual binary of asexual or hypersexual.

Determination

In her origin story, Broadnax and Williams bring attention to Monica Rambeau's determination and the many ways it is exhibited. Her origin story particularly highlights feminist themes that address racism and patriarchy; working her way up the corporate ladder; as well as proving her value and worth to others and herself. This is identified in her early career as a lieutenant and cargo ship captain. Having made a long commitment to her job, possessing many achievements and accolades, Monica sought to move up in the ranks applying to become captain in her department. Unfortunately, she was denied this opportunity due to her status as a woman, and eventually demoted. Feeling as though her boss did not want "to see a woman in charge of a patrol boat" this thought also speaks to the current popular culture climate of the lack of Black women in high-ranking positions of leadership and authority. During 1980s on television, the face of Black upward mobility was taking the place of the past Black urban poverty image.[354] Certain Black comic book storylines, like that of Monica Rambeau, are possibly influenced by the upward movement of showcased in television shows. Furthermore, the demotion and refusal to promote became an inspiration for her to leave her job for something better. Monica's departure eventually led to her to becoming the superhero. Her determination is also seen again in the _Giant Size Special Captain Marvel_ (1989) where Monica must fight multiple enemies even in her weakest moment (without powers). In this issue, Monica is able to use her quick-thinking skills and all her resources to battle against her opponents (Figure 4.7). Monica is able to remain confident and secure in her abilities despite doubt from others (Figure 4.8).

Ultimately, she is able to cope with being powerless. These moments show that Monica is still able to be a superhero, without having the superpowers. As Stephanie mentions in the

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[354] Gray, H. (2005). _Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation_. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

episode, Monica Rambeau embodies the "perfect imperfect captain with or without powers."[355] Taking on this personality contributes to the changing social narrative that women must be perfect in everything that they do. Monica's confidence even without a superpower also shows that she does not have to be reliant on a superpower in order to be successful. A thought that is becoming popular again is women reclaiming their humanity, much like how Sojourner Truth proclaimed 'Ain't I a woman', and how this resonates with the idea of Black women wanting to be seen as individuals rather than belonging to someone or something. Being "perfectly imperfect" exists as a site of resistance and revision towards stereotypical representations for Black women.[356] As a fictional character, Monica demonstrates a Black female character that revises the idea that it is more so, not possible to be perfect, but that being "perfectly imperfect" can actually be a strength. This notion continues to be seen throughout Monica's storyline.

[355] Misty Knight's Uninformed Afro. (2017, February 28). MKUAPod #5 | Monica Rambeau or Spectrum…If Ya Nasty – Misty Knight's Uninformed Afro. [Stitcher]. Retrieved from https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/black-girl-nerds/misty-knights-uninformed-afro/e/49292796
[356] Emerson, R. A. (2002). "WHERE MY GIRLS AT?" Negotiating Black Womanhood in Music Videos. *Gender & Society*, *16*(1), 115-135.

(Figure 4.7 and 4.8-An example of Monica using her quick-thinking skills and all her resources to battle against her opponents *Giant Size Special Captain Marvel* [1989], pg. 16, 18)

Leadership

Along with Monica's close-knit family ties and her determination, Broadnax and Williams also bring attention to her various leadership roles. Monica's leadership qualities are first identified in her role as a lieutenant for the New Orleans harbor patrol, but we also learn of leadership with several groups as a superhero. In her role as leader of The Avengers, she would take a grounded, no-nonsense attitude, always making sure she had the best interest of her fellow teammates even when faced with opposition from her own teammates. This is seen in the sexist and patronizing behavior from group members such as Thor, and risky competitive behavior from such group members as Dr. Druid who sought to overthrow her as the leader of the group. Monica must also face racial opposition from her enemies. She must fight against a racist student group, reminiscent of today's "Alt-Right" groups in the *Mighty Avengers #250* (1984). Having to tackle hate crimes, especially as a Black woman in a leadership position is rarely ever, if any, highlighted in comic book storylines. This narrative can also be placed into what Richard Iton calls the "Black Fantastic."[357] For Iton, the "Black Fantastic" in popular culture encompasses "the experiences of the underground, the vagabond, and those constituencies marked as deviant."[358] Additionally, the "Black Fantastic" uncovers "notions of being that are inevitably aligned within, in conversation with, against, and articulated beyond the boundaries of the modern."[359]

Monica's leadership creates questions about Black women characters beyond a fantastical figure or marginalized heroine. Taking on these leadership roles was not always an easy decision for Monica to make. However, even in doubt or when the odds were against her, Monica perseveres. And, despite her internal team battles, primarily from other white male characters, Monica would find inspiration and drive from some of her teammates. This worth and value was especially seen in the platonic friendship between her and Captain America. This respected

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[357] Iton, R. (2008). *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the post-Civil Rights era*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
[358] Ibid, p. 16
[359] Ibid, p.16

friendship, that is not attached as a love interest, particularly from her white male counterpart, ultimately led to her becoming the leader of The Avengers (Figure 4.9 & 4.10).

(Figure 4.9 and 4.10-A level and respect and friendship as shown between Captain America and Monica Rambeau in *Captain Marvel* vol. 2, no. 2 [1994]), *Mighty Avengers* #250 [1984])

In this same issue, Broadnax and Williams also highlight how the comic incorporates Black feminist figures to flesh out her story as this laudable leader.

I speak without concern for the accusations that I am too much or too little woman, that I am too black or too white or too much myself and through my lips come the voices of the ghosts of our ancestors living and moving among us.[360] ~ Audre Lorde

Including such a quote as the one mentioned above were rare instances. Due to the lack of Black comic book writers, especially Black women, it is refreshing to see the script engage in this type of thinking. Incorporating Lorde's thoughts spoke to the potential of the type of stories they were willing to present in comics. Furthermore, the inclusion of Lorde in the opening pages of the issue offers a potential Black feminist reading of Monica's character, as well as the potential future usage in other Black female comic book narratives. Lorde's quote also shows how it can be translated in way that bridges reality and fiction in a productive way. The use of Lorde's quote, specifically, speaks to the representation of Black women in and out of the comic book. This idea of being "too much or too little woman" is a direct correlation of Monica's various

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[360] Lorde, A. (2000). Prologue. In *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

leadership roles. Likewise, "she [Black woman] had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may well have invented herself."[361] In many ways, Monica becomes that Black woman that Morrison is referring to. Moreover, by becoming the first African American leader of The Avengers demonstrated a shifting viewpoint of leadership in a white-male dominated group as well as in the comic book genre. As a member of The Avengers team, Monica could have easily been positioned as a sidekick or figure of male pleasure. This positioning of Monica as a leader demonstrates the inclusivity and shaking up of the typical "boys club" behavior that is often portrayed in comic book narratives. It also highlights that writers are capable of diverse storylines.

Thus, serving as a leader who happened to be a Black woman challenged society's way of viewing her, considering she is normally rendered largely invisible to society and unworthy of the privileges associated with being male, white, or a "lady."[362] This same sentiment is reflected in Toni Morrison's 1973 book Sula, which reflect the oppositional discourses that reemerged in the 1970s and 1980s by Black women who rejected the limited conceptions of feminism purported by white women, and sought to theorize Black feminisms in the tradition of women such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McLeod Bethune, Septima Clark, and Ella Baker.[363] Black feminist scholars of the twentieth century sustained this legacy of inventing herself through self-definition, theory building, and heeding Collins' call to proffer "theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it."[364]

As opposed to the commonly discussed Black female characters like Marvel Comics Storm (from the X-Men series) or DC Comics Vixen and Catwoman (as played both Eartha Kitt and Halle Berry in the television and film versions), Monica disrupts several stereotypes that have been attached to the Black woman. For example, unlike other Black female character (like the ones mentioned above), she is not unduly exoticized or saddled with having "Black" be a part of her codename,[365] nor does she fit the mold of other Black female media stereotypes such as mammy, jezebel, gold digger, or welfare queen.[366] These notions, speak to Monica Rambeau's determination to be respected as both a Black woman and superhero. In addition, a focus on Monica's leadership throughout her various comic book storylines embraces a narrative that is needed in comic book analysis. Her leadership steps away from the "angry Black woman" stereotype and offers humility and dedication. Monica's creators and the story they present through her character also reveals how the intersectional identity of a Black women leader has

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[361] Morrison, T. (1971, August 22). What the black women thinks about women's lib. *New York Times Magazine*, p. 63.

[362] Ibid, p.63

[363] James, S. M., & Busia, A. P. (Eds.). (1993). *Theorizing black feminisms: The visionary pragmatism of Black women*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge.

[364] Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black Feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York, NY: Routledge.

[365] Svitavsky, W. L. (2013). Race, Superheroes, and Identity: Did you Know he was Black? In J. C. Chambliss, W. L. Svitavsky, & T. C. Donaldson (Eds.), *Ages of Heroes, Eras of Men: Superheroes and the American experience* (pp. 153-162). Newcastle, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

[366] Tyree, T. (2013). Contemporary Representations of Black Females in Newspaper Comic Strips. In S. C. Howard & R. L. Jackson (Eds.), *Black Comics: Politics of race and representation* (pp. 45-64). London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic.

created a bridge for others, to others, and between others that brings about discussions of an effective model for the presentation of leadership in the comic book narrative. She is not simply a painted character, but a character that can be visualized through an actual Black woman.

Hair Politics-"Multiple Naturals"

With the closing of each MKUA episode, co-hosts Broadnax and Williams step away from the character analysis and bring in another conversation popular with Black women, the politics of a Black woman's hair. Incorporating a commentary on hair politics as a regular segment of each MKUA episode speaks to its importance in the minds of both Broadnax and Williams as hosts and creators of the podcast. Hair emerges as a medium that reflects notions about perceptions and identity.[367] The pervasiveness of why hair matters among Black women, particularly as it is represented in comics, is evident in the telling critique and analysis from both Broadnax and Williams within each podcast. Throughout comics, Black women's hair is a conversation piece that is often a point of contention. The hairstyles that have been given to Black female comic characters' ranges from natural hairstyles like the afro, locs, and braids to more Eurocentric traditional styles like the straight/relaxed look, a straight bob, or short cropped 'page boy' look. In some cases, there has been a combination of both natural and Eurocentric styles. Not only do comics address political and moral issues, but there is also a perpetuation of a standard of hair beauty in comics.

Since Monica's first appearance in 1982 to 2013, she has worn an Afro, a relaxed look, and locs, Monica is one of the few Black superheroines who has been represented with a variety of versatile hairstyles. According to her creators, Monica's appearance and career was influenced by that of 1970s blaxploitation character Foxy Brown (played by Pam Grier). Much like the characters Foxy Brown and Coffy ushered a new type of heroine and contributed to the redefinition of Black beauty and womanhood, during the 1970s, Monica's character similarly does the same for Black female characters in comic books. Additionally, the topic of hair politics for Monica has even filtered into one of her narratives. In *Mighty Avengers #6 (2013),* as discussed in the podcast episode, Monica directly deals with a "straight vs. natural" debate. Overall, this longstanding debate/conversation is also discussed in other MKUA episodes. At the time in this issue, Monica is wearing her hair in a straight hairstyle, and a woman thanks Monica for serving as this role model to help her convince her daughter to relax her hair. The woman tells her daughter, "Looking like that Madison no one will ever take you seriously" referring to the current natural state of her hair. With regards to hair for Black women, MKUA critiques how in the above situation there is an insertion of a Eurocentric point of view has which suggests that this is or should be the standard. Unfortunately, this conversation is a missed opportunity for the writers and creators to obtain outside consulting and to have a critical discussion about how Black women should not have to conform to supposed hair beauty standards.

"The Wall You Won't Try" (2017)

In this next episode, Broadnax and Williams calls attention to a character that has commanded attention since her first appearance, DC Comics Amanda Waller. Broadnax and Williams discuss her origin story of raising her children as a widow in the Cabrini-Green projects, to the dramatic transition of her appearance in the *New 52* reboot of Amanda "The

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[367] Banks, I. (2000). *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness.* New York, NY: NYU Press.

Wall" Waller. Unlike Monica Rambeau, little is known of Amanda personal history prior to young adulthood. Although not a superhero in the traditional sense, Amanda character is able to offer an additional reading of what it means to lead. As one of the most popular Black characters in the DCU[368], Amanda's career background includes being a key, political figure who has been involved with several espionage and law enforcement agencies (i.e. Suicide Squad, Task Force X, and Checkmate). Nicknamed "The Wall" for her assertive, persistent, and at times manipulative behavior has made her one of the most feared and respected people in the U.S. government. Her attitude and personality, in past and present-day representations, is reminiscent of previous popular culture Black female film icons like Blaxploitation figures Foxy Brown, Cleopatra Jones, and TNT Jackson; and influenced such comic book characters as Milestone Comics and *Blood Syndicate* member "Brickhouse" and *Image Comics Bitch Planet* character "Penny Rolle."

As a take-charge type character Amanda, as explored in the MKUA podcast, offers listeners an opportunity to consider Black women's essential and autonomous role in U.S. government nation making. Through a comic lens, Amanda's character provides a fantasy of governmental inclusion for black women (who in some instances have been systematically excluded from real-life political positions for 200+ years as a result of such oppressive institutions as slavery, apartheid, and Jim Crow segregation). Even though we are not made aware of her childhood, Broadnax and Williams inform us of her educational and work background, which ultimately leads to her numerous positions and relationships with the government. Despite being a widow and single mother, Amanda exemplifies a persistency that pushes her to put her children through college as well as herself. This persistency can also be likened to the "strong, black woman"[369] archetype a familiar label that is attached to the Black woman.[370] Coming across this archetype also prompts a few questions such as "do Black women have to always be strong?" and "how do we push towards additional ways of seeing such characters?" To address both questions, one might consider the complexities of her character and how they can be seen as a strength versus a weakness. Similar to how Monica Rambeau was a standout leader with the Avengers, Amanda differs in that she does not question her leadership skills or choices when dealing with her teams. As a former Rhodes scholar and leader of intelligence under three presidential administrations, audiences learn that Amanda does not follow a standardized moral guidebook, but instead operates by her own rules. Although this can be read as problematic, her tactics have led her to be one of the best U.S. agents, as each of her missions serves a higher purpose which is national security above everything. Her visibility as an intimidating, formidable and hard-nosed strategist also challenges the notion of who can be a

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[368] This popularity is based on the amount and type of issues the character is represented and or featured within comic book culture (i.e. comic book front covers, television and animated series, and films).

[369] Historically, as argued by Morgan, Black girls are (often) reared to embrace the "strong black woman" archetype (and ultimately the Matriarch ideal) and see their ability to maintain a stance of unwavering strength as an essential component of their identity and connectedness to others. This becomes important "as generations black women maintain a sense of dignity while reflecting on their lives and contributions to their families and communities." (see notes for citation)

[370] Morgan, J. (1999). *When chickenheads come home to roost: My life as a hip-hop feminist*. New York: Touchstone.; Baker, T. A., Buchanan, N. T., Mingo, C. A., Roker, R., & Brown, C. S. (2015). Reconceptualizing Successful Aging Among Black Women and the Relevance of the Strong Black Woman Archetype. *The Gerontologist*, *55*(1), 51–57. http://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnu105

superhero. Amanda's character traits construct her as a figure of either aspiration or someone to fear.

In some ways, Amanda's status as leader of the Suicide Squad and the only Black woman in an environment that is dominated by white men is consistently put into question. Nevertheless, this does not stand in the way of Amanda completing the task/job. For example, in *Legends #1* (1986), which is Amanda first appearance, she is to meet with a "Colonel Rick Flag" about program missions for the Task Force X group. During this meeting, he questions her plans for the program, stating "Are you out of your cotton-picking mind?!"[371] Yet, Amanda explains to him that she does not care about his feelings as long as he does his job, and even puts him in his place with regards to how he speaks to her (Figure 4.11). This situation becomes an example of why the episode is titled *The Wall You Won't Try*. Amanda's leadership and overall story is about dedication to a cause, liberating oneself from other people's expectations (ex. as a subordinate, meek and submissive, relegated to secretarial/administrative duties), while ultimately seeking justice despite whether one is for or against her. Much of Amanda's work makes her an enemy of the state, specifically of patriarchy and anti-black racism. Similar to Monica Rambeau's character as a rare, consistent Black female figure in comic book narratives, Amanda challenges the idea that a woman should expect to sacrifice her personhood or career for the comfort of the men in her life.

(Figure 4.11: Amanda Waller having to exhibit her authority to colleague Rick Flagg in *Legends #1* [1986])

What is also interesting about this episode is the way both Broadnax and Williams critique and recognize the ways in which the comic book genre brings attention to body image especially for Black women. In her 2016 book *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime*, Deborah E. Whaley brings attention to how historically there have been "erroneous depictions of women of African descent in popular culture" and more

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[371] In this particular statement, "cotton-picking mind" is used as an expression of frustration and disgust. Additionally, it is a racialized reference which speaks to the long-forced labor history of Black people and cotton.

specifically in comic books that requires consideration and further analysis.[372] Amanda Waller's character is one that is able to speak to the erroneous depictions that Whaley refers to as well as the way the character is able to reclaim her body representation. Thus, it is important to not only investigate and critique these depictions, but also explore how Amanda's character pushes back against these inaccurate representations/depictions/expectations of her body. Amanda's body image humanizes the Black female figure, while pushing against the boundaries of what a woman should look like in comics.

Media Representations and Depictions of Amanda Waller over time

Historically, female characters within comic books have typically been portrayed as trivial or vacillating. Many female characters were also portrayed as the slim bodied and large breast, girl-Friday, seductive temptress, or perhaps accommodating girlfriend; and in some case's written as desexualized mammy figures.[373] Amanda is in opposition of this portrayal, as she is a plus-size character who is not a sidekick, holds a high-profile government leadership position, and did not come from a broken home. This boundary pushing also disrupts the idea that a plus-size/full-figured[374] character was only used for comic relief. Historically, there has been a lot of criticism that can be pointed at the unrealistic body types (i.e. very slim, hourglass shape/narrow torsos, long thin legs, and gravity-defying breasts etc.) perpetuated through many (if not most) female characters. However, at the same time, there are characters such as Marvel Comics Black Mariah and Femme Fatales member Knockout who are purposely drawn with unrealistic body types' to be fat-shamed and poked at as clowns.[375] Thus, Amanda's existence in the DC Comics canon as a large and in charge "badass Black woman," was even enough to put fear into such popular white male characters like fellow DC Comic superhero Batman (Figure 4.12) and Suicide Squad member "Deadshot." Amanda as a full-figured, Black female character, who happens to lead and has led many previous government-sponsored team and agencies, questions as well as problematize the way bodies become scripts or models through which readers and viewers can read the actualities and limitations of the comic book world.[376] [i]. Her character particularly at that time in the late 1980s, which is when Amanda Waller was introduced to comics, was simply allowed to exist in a full-figured body without being scrutinized or minimalized. Her size also facilitates the visibility of other Black characters, this notion of size diversity, and the way we might re-imagine the representations of Black women in popular culture.

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[372] Whaley, D. E. (2016). Conclusion: Comic Book Divas and the Making of Sequential Subjects. In *Black women in sequence: Re-inking comics, graphic novels, and anime* (p. 182). Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

[373] Lavin, Michael R. (1998, Summer). Women in comic books. Serials Review, 24(2), 93-99.

[374] Throughout this section, plus-size and full figure will be used inter-changeably.

[375] Historically, the physique of superhero characters (male and female) has consistently stayed the same. For example, Marvel Comics villain 'Kingpin' (white and male) is described and represented by readers as being overweight, but he is actually entirely muscular and very strong; then there is Marvel Comics "Luke Cage" villain Mariah Dillard/Black Mariah who is portrayed as 400lbs drug lord inspired by the Blaxploitation period. Black Mariah's weight is represented as either an intimidating factor or as a "jive-talking" criminal. Until the 2000s, characters who were not svelte, muscular, slim curvy, tall, and overtly sexy were either an anomaly or if they existed used as the brunt of the storyline jokes. Society and comics are reclaiming and shifting into more of a body positive direction, which allows more diversity and inclusiveness.

[376] Collins, A. (2017, January 9). When It Ain't Broke: Black Female Representation in Comics – AAIHS [Black Perspectives-Blog post]. Retrieved from http://www.aaihs.org/when-it-aint-broke-black-female-representation-in-comics/

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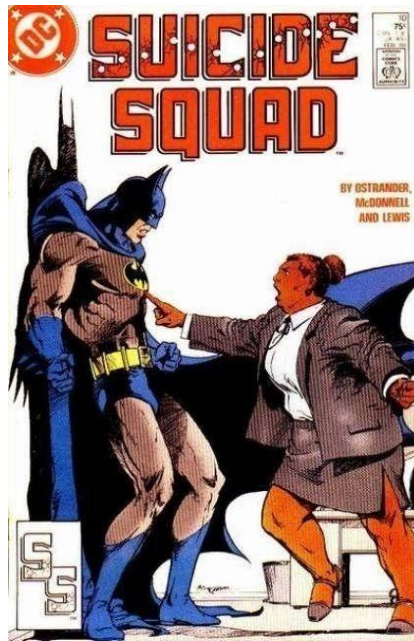
(Figure 4.12-Another moment where Amanda Waller must exhibit authority and fear in such white male hereoes as Batman in *Suicide Squad***-"Up Against the Wall" vol. 1 #10 [1988])**

What becomes even more intriguing about Amanda's body image is her body size transition. With pop culture depictions of such Black women in the 1970s who were caught between a normalizing figure such as Diahann Carroll's single mother professional in *Julia* (1968-1973) and Blaxploitation inspired icons such as Pam Grier's tough vigilante *Coffey* (1973) and Tamara Dobson's alluring undercover special agent character in *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* (1975) ,Waller's debut in the 1980s struck a more balanced note in a social and political landscape shaped by warring conservative and liberal views of African-American life and culture.[377] In 2011, DC Comics revamped and relaunched its entire line of ongoing monthly superhero comic books, calling it *The New 52*.[378] With this debut, Amanda would get a complete makeover as she transformed from an older plus-size, short stature woman to a taller, svelte, younger version. DC Comics was looking to address issues linked to identity and gender, while attempting to make her character more accessible to a broader reading public. According to such fans as MKUA hosts Broadnax and Williams, this was not a welcome change; Amanda's original physical appearance was relatable for many women readers and fans who did not fit into the "perfect size 2" box. According to *Comic Book Resources*, in agreeance with both Broadnax and Williams,

> Until *Suicide Squad #1*, by Adam Glass and Marco Rudy, Waller was one of the few
> prominent heavy-set characters in superhero comics. Rarer still, her weight wasn't used
> for comic relief (like, say, Etta Candy in her earliest incarnations) or somehow connected
> to superpowers (as with Bouncing Boy, or Marvel's Blob or Big Bertha). In a sea of

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[377] Chambliss, J. (2014, April 17). What about Amanda Waller? « The Hooded Utilitarian. Retrieved from http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2014/04/what-about-amanda-waller/

[378] In *The Hooded Utilitarian* (2014), according to Julian Chambliss, "The New 52" was a reboot that unfortunately had a lot of missed opportunities. It would incorporate uneven characterization, failed links to diversity and abandoning continuity.

ageless and impossibly thin and tall figures, Waller stood out as a squat, middle-aged force to be reckoned with.[379]

Amanda's original portrayal becomes an example of an "if it ain't broke don't fix it". Waller's transformation in *The New 52* speaks to a greater impact, within comic book narratives, due to her unique status as a woman of color in a position of authority.[380] Thus, her creators John Ostrander, Len Wein, and John Byrne were very bold and brave enough to create a new standard of a powerful Black female character in the DC Comics Universe (DCU) who performs as a character that is unbothered by how her relative physical attractiveness might change how much power or agency she receives. It is interesting to note, that receiving the nickname "The Wall" transformed from a "fat-phobic" joke to a point of pride. Reclaiming the name "The Wall" speaks to her firm determination, demand for respect, incorruptible state of mind, and her authoritative personality in a government space that is not open and has not been welcoming of her. Moreover, making such a drastic change to a character like Amanda Waller (Figure 4.13) was a disservice to not just her character, but any other comic book character that has spent time cultivating their specific characteristics. Amanda Waller's character provides a point of representation and identification not only to women and girls (particularly women and girls of color), but also to others who feel forced to feel marginalized due to gender, race, and size.

(Figure 4.13: [l-r] One of the of the original portrayals of Amanda Waller [1986] and the controversial revamped *New 52* version [2011])

Media consolidation and the contemporaneous revitalization of comics through convergence–with blockbuster Hollywood films, animation, and television series mining the archives of comics for content–have given a second life beyond the comic book pages to many intriguing characters like Amanda Waller. In addition to discussing Amanda's physical appearance and her role as a leader of the Suicide Squad, Broadnax and Williams bring attention to how Amanda's character is able to transform into other popular media outlets. As one of the few Black female characters in the DCU, Amanda's character has been able to have a presence

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[379] Melrose, K. (2011, September 15). Another casualty of DC's New 52: Amanda Waller's weight. Retrieved from http://www.cbr.com/another-casualty-of-dcs-new-52-amanda-wallers-weight/
[380] Chambliss, 2014

that is not solely relegated to the comic books. Seeing Black women characters represented in multiple popular culture media forms "moves conversations about representation and inclusion to a critical terrain where the complexities of narrative and visuality collide, to imagine spaces where the fictive lives, ideas, and historical images of Black women matter."[381] Amanda Waller's character is one of the few characters to have multiple media representations (Figure 5.15a and b), which include film (Viola Davis-*Suicide Squad* [2016] and Angela Bassett-*Green Lantern* [2011], television (Cynthia Addai Robinson-*Arrow* [2013-2016] and Pam Grier-*Smallville* [2010], and animation (voiced by C.C.H. Pounder [2014, 2013, 2009, 2004-06], Yvette Nicole Brown [2015-17], and Penny Johnson [2015]). Each of these Black women have uniquely commanded the role Amanda Waller and embodied her personality and vocal and physical characteristics. The longevity of her character in these various media formats speaks to her complexity and continued interest as a comic book character. One might say that complicated characters are remembered, and to be remembered is to have an impact. As Nina Cartier explains "Black people are always in the process of becoming;" therefore, each media representation provides another voice to represent the Black female.[382] In 2015-16, there were more than thirty plus television and animation projects on air or in development, over fifty films set to star comic book-based superheroes. A small percentage of these are solo vehicles for female superhero characters (Table 4.1)

Table 4.1-Solo Superheroine Films/Television Series (Since 2015-16)
Marvel Comics, *Captain Marvel* (Released March 2019)
DC Comics, *Stargirl* (series released in 2019)**
DC *Super Hero Girls* (series premiered in 2018)**
DC Comics, *Harley Quinn* (in development for 2019)***
DC Comics, *Wonder Woman* (2017)
DC Comics, *Supergirl* (2015-present)**
Marvel Comics, *Agent Carter* (2015-2016)**
DC Comics *Vixen* (2015-2016)***

*=Films, **Television series, ***Web series

Media representation and depictions of Amanda Waller's character is one that encompasses various topics as it relates to physical appearance. These include body positivity, controlling image representation, forced sex appeal and androgyny. Historically, Amanda's character has generally been described as abrasive, no-nonsense, and cutthroat. More specifically, she has been physically portrayed as "fat/overweight and or 'the big boss'" (Figure 4.15a-1986, 2004, 2009, 2010, 2011). Interestingly, when Amanda is depicted in either television or film/live-action format (non-animated) she is casted by thinner and what is viewed by some as more attractive actresses. The exception to this is the 2010 television version on the CW's *Smallville* where she is portrayed by Pam Grier who some felt as though still attractive just a larger size. The most

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[381] Whaley, p. 182

[382] Cartier, N. (2016). The Possibilities of Liminality: Black Women's Future Texts as Productive Chaos. In V. Callahan & V. Kuhn (Eds.), *Future Texts: Subversive Performance and Feminist Bodies* (p. 44). Anderson, SC: Parlor Press.; Cooper, N. (2016, September 22). 'Perfectly Imperfect? The Backlash to Conceived 'Perfection? - Fashion Handbook. Retrieved from https://fashionhandbook.co.za/perfectly-imperfect-backlash-conceived-perfection/

controversial depictions of Amanda are represented during DC Comics the *New 52* series (Figure 4.14a-2011 animated version) and the CW television series *Arrow* (Figure 4.14b-Cynthia Addai Robinson). Both are represented in a way that can be described as "adaptational attractiveness"[383] seeing as both are younger versions (opposite of Waller's long-standing portrayal) and having a sexy, supermodel look. According to the writer and creators, these changes were made to make the character more modern and accessible.[384] However, by making those extreme changes this negates the accessibility and diversity of the character and in some ways creates unrealistic expectations of Black women. The versatility of Amanda Waller's character is an important example of how adaptability can have adverse effects and the continued argument that there does not have to be a certain body type/physical standard. Furthermore, Amanda's sustained media representation is very important, especially when Black women and girls are seeking to find someone like them whether it is physically, personality, or similar situation.

(Figure 4.14a: Timeline of Amanda Waller's character represented in film, television, and animation)

(Figure 4.14b: l-r Additional Amanda Waller portrayals through actresses Cynthia Addai Robinson in CW's *Arrow* and Viola Davis in *Suicide Squad* [2016], and voiced by actress Yvette Nicole Brown voicing Principal Amanda Waller in the animated series *DC Super Hero Girls*)

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[383] A termed coined by tvtropes.org, https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/ComicBook/AmandaWaller
[384] DC Entertainment. (2018, May 23). DC COMICS: THE NEW 52. Retrieved from https://www.dccomics.com/graphic-novels/dc-comics-the-new-52-2011/dc-comics-the-new-52

Hair Politics-"Classic Lady"

Compared to Monica Rambeau's character's hairstyles, Amanda Waller's hairstyles were few, simple, and straightforward. Her hair politics played into her personality direct and to the point, as she was known to sport a short close afro, fade look or smooth combed into a bun style. As a character who was known to be very business-minded, Amanda's look needed to be convenient and portray a level of professionalism. Although, some might portray her hairstyle, particularly the fade, as being androgynous Amanda disrupted and challenged gendered norms attached to hairstyles, much like actress/model Grace Jones mastered. Amanda disrupted and challenged gendered norms attached to hairstyles. The characters fade hairstyle can be seen as promoting the concept of freedom of choice in dress and hair, which pushed western society to accept changing fashion styles for women.[385] In many ways Amanda's hair along with her clothing selection played a role in her character not being under-estimated. Amanda's character allows us to re-center conversations surrounding equity, justice, and revolution through the lens of a Black woman and a Black feminist framework. Such a change of focus is a novel reflection.

Representation Matters!

These two words are very important and essential when discussing the Black female in popular culture and more specifically in comic books. bell hooks notes that, "representations of Black female bodies in contemporary popular culture rarely subvert or critique images of Black female sexuality which were part of the culture apparatus of nineteenth century racism and which still shapes perceptions today."[386] The portrayal of Black women as superheroines in comic books parallels many of the same features associated with Black female representation in other media forms.[387] Nevertheless, past representation of Black women now more than ever are resurfacing and slowly challenging the "traditional" ideas about race, gender and womanhood. As a result, we are beginning to see a subverting of the stereotypes that are attached and have discussions on the ways these characters can empower and offer a dialogue that explores new and old portrayals and why they matter to their fans and potential fans.

After what started as a reaction to a Twitter troll condescending comment[388], MKUA has become a "Girls Time" welcoming space particularly for Black female comic book fans to embrace the varying degrees of femininity and womanhood within comics all of which is voiced and led by Black women.[389] Monica Rambeau and Amanda Waller amongst many other Black female characters provides a breakthrough moment for Blackness, gender, and comics in the present. Ultimately, the characters being investigated do not necessarily "provide perfect

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[385] Hillman, B. L. (2013). "The Clothes I Wear Help Me to Know My Own Power": The Politics of Gender Presentation in the Era of Women's Liberation. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, *34*(2), 155.

[386] hooks, b. (1992). The Oppositional Gaze. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (pp. 115-132). Boston, MA: South End Press.

[387] Brown, J. A. (2013). Panthers and vixens: Black superheroines, sexuality, and stereotypes in contemporary comic books. In S. C. Howard & R. L. Jackson (Eds.), *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation* (pp. 133-149). London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic.

[388] Co-host Stephanie Williams tweeted a comment about the lack of Black women as superheroes. Her tweet went viral, and as a result, she received a lot of vitriol (mostly from men) on Twitter trying to defend the fact that there are films with Black women superheroines. According to Jamie Broadnax, this "knee-jerk" reaction due to not paying attention to the context and nuance, thus quickly dismissing her concerns.

[389] It should be reiterated that MKUA served as an introductory, informational tool for engaging with Black female characters in comic books and graphic novels.

reflections of the social world, nor do they give form to the collective fantasies of the populace;" however they do manifest some of the future possibilities of recreating existing and new trajectories of Black female identities in comic book culture.[390] This brief analysis allows for what Collins calls a "focus on articulations of particular black woman-hoods and allow us to consider and ask questions that we cannot answer with other bodies."[391] Furthermore, the selection of these episodes was very intentional, due to many layers that each female character brings to comic book medium. Through the MKUA platform, we are informed about media represented Black character in comics (Amanda Waller), one of the few Black female characters that disrupts the trope-like origin story (Monica Rambeau). Each character presents a distinctive and valuable model of representation for women in comics and popular culture. In addition, they shift from the stale monoliths and expected representations while moving the focus into investigating possible lived realities that have traditionally been unacknowledged (Monica Rambeau), as well as misrepresented and misunderstood (Amanda Waller).

Premiering on February 1st 2016, a total of 19 episodes were recorded covering seasoned Black female characters such as Marvel Comics X-Men Storm, DC Comics Vixen, and Milestone Comics Rocket/Raquel Irvin to new heroines like Marvel Comics Riri Williams/Ironheart, and Dark Horse Comics character Zula Hendricks (*Aliens Defiance*).[392] All in all, MKUA places a specific focus on validating Black female characters, which is rare for comic book focused podcasts. Their ability to have complex emotions and ideas while displacing the limiting stereotypes that perpetuate negative representations of black womanhood in comics is important. Moreover, with co-hosts Broadnax and Williams facilitating the numerous conversation they illustrate how such characters as an energy-fused heroine, a no-nonsense mastermind political figure, and an African shape-shifting superheroine can push national and ethnic boundaries of identification. By providing this commentary, the podcast moves beyond weekly entertainment to being a valuable resource of information about Black female superheroes within popular culture and comic book genres.

Women of different races, ages, and social classes have and continue to contribute to the blogging landscape. However, Black women have been some of the frontrunners in this digital medium. BGN and MKUA are examples of media platforms that contribute to the continuous evolution and definition of third (early 1990s to 2012)[393] and fourth wave (2012-present) feminism and its influence from previous waves. As movements established in the early 1990s continuing to present-day, third and fourth wave feminism separate themselves from previous waves in that each incorporated a global digital and technological reach (Third wave incorporating blogs and e-zines, Fourth wave incorporating the specific use of social media [Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube]) as part of the experience. Both BGN and MKUA are examples which integrate the above features. Thus, it important to recognize and acknowledge the use of new media (third and fourth wave components) and the important,

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[390] Carrington, A. (2016, December 6). Crossover, Convergence, and the Cultural Politics of Black Comics – AAIHS [Black Perspectives-Blog post]. Retrieved from http://www.aaihs.org/crossover-convergence-and-the-cultural-politics-of-black-comics/

[391] Collins, 2017

[392] Each episode can be streamed on such popular podcast sites as iTunes, Soundcloud, and Stitcher.

[393] The term *third wave* is credited to Rebecca Walker in 2003 in response to Clarence Thomas's appointment to the Supreme Court. According to *The Guardi*an journalist Kira Cochrane, *fourth wave* feminism is associated with the use of social media and "defined by technology."

innovative role it plays in the success of BGN and MKUA. The role of new media in relation to BGN and MKUA serves as nod to the central focus of Black feminism addressing the inextricably bounding oppressive structures of racism, sexism, class oppression, patriarchy, and gender identity.

With Black women and Black female characters at the center of the discussion, BGN and MKUA provide a digital, mainstream discussion that highlights the need for more intersectionality within popular culture feminist activism spaces. Both communities are evocative of the 1977 *Combahee River Collective* (CRC) Statement which was developed by a

> collective of Black feminists...involved in the process of defining and clarifying our politics, while...doing political work within our own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements.[394]

BGN a collective of Black women and MKUA the joining of two Black female bloggers is doing the work of "defining and clarifying" the politics of Black women and girls within popular culture and the comic book spectrum. As each site collects, preserves, and disseminates knowledge online that unites Black women, their allies, and fictional character narratives to make the public understand that these varied experiences/events/occurrences are not isolated and should not be marginalized. BGN and MKUA, although not overtly talking about the CRC, build off of their work that "[T]he most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identit(ies);"[395] and offer expanded visions and directions of the Black female perspective within popular culture. BGN and MKUA signal a new generation of women committed to anti-racist and anti-sexist politics; where both sites also become space for intervention and can be identified as "future texts". The use of the term "future texts" is inspired by the edited collection of the same from editors Vicki Callahan and Virginia Kuhn. Callahan and Kuhn define "future texts" as "alternative languages and writings that imagine new pathways through the forms and formats used to express contemporary questions of race, gender, and identity."[396] In essence, BGN and MKUA describe how comic book artists and creators are imagining these new pathways. Through the various examples they imagine, create, and expound on existing conversations surrounding Black women in relationship to nerd and comic book culture. They are ultimately creating a digital cultural memory, with each posts and podcast episode, and leaving a legacy, similar to the legacy created from the Combahee River Collective with *The Black Feminist Statement*.

From an Afrofuturistic perspective, BGN and MKUA integrate a focus to reclaim the future of the Black woman (fictional and real) and present it on their own terms. Each site through the scope of an Afrofuturistic lens allows and encourages individuals to freely experiment with and reimagine black identities, and to activate a sense of liberation from hegemonic structures that often seek to limit or foreclose black futures.[397] They each combine

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[394] Combahee River Collective (CRC). (2000). The Combahee River Collective Statement. In B. Smith (Ed.), *Home Girls: A Black feminist anthology* (pp. 210-218). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press. p. 210.
[395] Ibid, p. 212
[396] Callahan, V., & Kuhn, V. (2016). Introduction. In *Future Texts: Subversive Performance and Feminist Bodies* (pp. 3-10). Anderson, SC: Parlor Press.
[397] TEDx Fort Greene Salon. (2011, September). Ingrid LaFleur: "Visual Aesthetics of Afrofuturism" | TED Talk | TED.com.

technological resources with cultural resources in ways that are provocative, powerful, and popular for their audiences and beyond. Historically, Black women are often under-represented in traditional media, however new media and digital platforms are providing spaces for them to counter narratives, collaborate with other like minds, while gaining control of voicing and sharing their experiences. To date, *Black Girl Nerds* and *Misty Knight's Uninformed Afro*[398] sits in the company of hundreds of blogs and websites dedicated and created by and for Black women. In the case of BGN and MKUA new media tools contribute to the power they have to promote diverse representations for Black women.

Just five years after the launching of *Black Girl Nerds*, her platform continues to leave a color imprint in the comic book world, popular culture as a whole, as well as carve a niche within the academy. BGN and MKUA also create new commentary and questions of inquiry, through each post and episode, as it relates to blackness, gender, sexuality, while also critiquing the representations and oppression found in marginalized communities within popular culture. This commentary and questions of inquiry include, breaking down the physical and intellectual attributes of such female comic book characters as Vixen (Mari Jiwe McCabe) from DC Comics or Marvel Comics Ironheart who respectively offer an alternative reading of African totems and folklore and a youthful Black female face in the engineering field. Moreover, addressing such questions as *what does it mean to be a Black person living in Australia?* and where is the queer women of color in science-fiction narratives? Both BGN and MKUA provide additional outlets to build self-esteem and empowerment, and to celebrate fellow nerds of color communities. Such as collaborative live Blerd Twitter sessions with fellow Blerd group, Geeks of Color during the release of the Netflix series *Luke Cage*, or creating viral hashtags such as #GimmeSugar for the *Queen Sugar* television series on OWN Network executive producers Oprah Winfrey and Ava DuVernay. BGN and MKUA are inclusive platforms that problematize and transform. Additionally, these Black women and their followers are consistently connecting with each other as they tell their stories, support each other, and identify strategies for improving the quality of their lives and existence within the nerd community and society (oftentimes the two blur together).

Readers and listeners are treated daily through *Black Girl Nerds* and seasonally with *Misty Knight's Uninformed Afro* as both platforms are building a continuous archive that looks at the intersections of such disciplines as Africana Studies, History, new media, Communications, Black Queer Studies, and Gender and Sexuality Studies. Such sites as BGN and MKUA bridge and blend novel approaches that create dialogues often found in college classrooms, seen on local news, and on one's mobile devices via social media. Thus, BGN and MKUA offer different entry points for access to information that a college professor or K-12 school teacher can engage with, and for a pre-teen young girl to find encouragement, motivation and empowerment. Incorporating a mix of Afrofuturism and Black feminism, BGN and MKUA pursue an agenda that puts the Black female at the center of focus, controllers and creators of narrative, and exemplifies the new methods of technologies (blogging and podcasting) that reclaim, reimagine and redesign Black women and girl's stories. They also serve as ways to change cultural

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http://tedxtalks.ted.com/apiv2/player?id=HPG9MR3210V4G0N3&hostname=tedxtalks.ted.com&permalink=TEDxFortGreeneSalon-Ingrid-LaFl&chromeless=true

[398] As mid-Spring 2018 Season 2 would be the final season of the MKUA podcast and the final operation of the www.mkuapodcast.com website. All episodes are archived and can be found on Soundcloud and Stitcher platforms.

conditions and expectations of Black women and Black female characters in comic books. Ultimately, the digital storytelling from both *Black Girl Nerds* and *Misty Knight's Uninformed Afro* created imaginative, reflexive, and critical discursive spaces. Within these spaces, they also seek to affirm and accept black women characters, contrary to the alienating representations of black women that have historically dominated and continue to circulate in the comic book medium. Each of these sites also serve as an education tool and a network avenue within the Black Nerd community and specifically within the comic book arena. Both can also be viewed as a form of entertainment to be enjoyed, a social platform for various art interpretations to be appreciated, and/or as a critique of popular and media culture. As a result, an information revolution has been ignited by Black women that is creating commentary on Black women characters, their creators and artists, all while transforming the many ways we can interpret Black womanhood through the lens of popular culture and mainstream media.

Conclusion: The Comic Book Future is Black and Female-Directions for Future Research on Comics and Black Futurity

The "Personal as Political"

Overall, this dissertation project is a personal and a political project. My invisibility as a Black woman (professionally and socially) and interest in comics led me to my research focus on Black female characters, who are often sidelined rendered invisible. This study aims to make visible the marginalized and the invisible, whether they are Black women heroines who are disabled; Black girls in STEM; Black, radical, and queer women in major storylines; or Black women in the digital realm. As a Black woman who identifies as an Afrofuturist, Black feminist, pop culture scholar, and as a Black Girl Nerd, I see the importance of positioning these fictional Black women and girls in the center of academic narratives.

Despite being eclipsed by highly recognized superheroes, Black women and girls in popular fiction still create and find new ways of highlighting Black experiences. It is an interesting time for Black women and girls in comics, and is worthy of being chronicled. Important recent transformative changes include the increase in Black female characters, the hiring of more Black women writers, the inclusion of diverse narratives, and the presence of more leading roles in television and film. As I continue the journey of exploring representations for Black women and girls in comics and popular culture, I realize the urgency of championing more responsible representation. Diversity and representation is not simply about inserting a person of color, but also presenting a variety of perspectives and narratives from and about different racial and ethnic groups. Each of the characters, creators, and the avenues discussed in this study contribute to the range of humanity attributed to marginalized and disenfranchised groups.

An appealing aspect of the comic book, as a medium, is its ability to strategically tell a variety of narratives from a diverse group of characters. Historically, there has been very limited space for discussions of Black female characters in comics. I argue that Black female characters play a critical role conceptualizing the manner in which readers and viewers think about comic book imagery and the relatability of this group's experiences. By illuminating such characters as the Dora Milaje, Misty Knight, Lunella Lafayette, and the digital platforms like *Black Girl Nerds* and *Misty Knight's Uninformed Afro*, my hope is that this project initiates future dialogues about Black female characters, creators, and social media platforms.

My continued interest in the discipline of Africana Studies has allowed me to push my thinking on what it means to belong. I take a reflexive and personal approach[399] that is characteristic of such scholars and writers as Zora Neale Hurston, Pearl Primus, Niara Sudarkasa, and Alice Walker. As someone who has a personal and scholarly investments in this study, I aim to tell the stories of the Black female characters that were missing from my childhood so that they will continue to have a presence for future generations. There was a time when I yearned to find a comic book character that looked like me, yet my hope has shifted. My goal for this project is that more scholars will produce work about the diversity of seasoned and new Black female comic book characters. Through each of their narratives, they have the ability to become

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[399] An example of this reflexive and personal approach can be seen as Hurston is speaking on behalf of Cudjo Lewis (born Oluale Kossola) the last living survivor of the Middle Passage in the 2018 biography *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo."*

more than secondary characters; they also remind us of the fundamentally social nature of culture.[400]

We are beginning to see a transformation of the mainstream narrative[401] through several Black women writers, such as Nnedi Okorafor and Roxanne Gay, who are emerging as household names within comics (Gay has even had the opportunity to write another series under TKO Comics called *The Banks*.) Specific social media platforms, like Twitter, and fan-inspired campaigns have been critical in the increased presence of Black writers. For example, in November 2017 fans started a petition to let Marvel know who they wanted to guide one of their newest teen superheroines, RiRi "Ironheart" Williams, in the comic book universe. The petition[402] and active Twitter fans would inspire the eventual hiring of Eve L. Ewing University of Chicago professor, social media maven, and poet, to write for the series, which debuted November 2018.

Much like *Black Girl Nerds* and *MKUA* brought awareness to current and past Black female characters in comics, Twitter users leveraged social media to express the importance of having Black women tell the stories of Black female characters. This fan impact also has an effect on the authors. Ewing explains her writing process: "Periodically I have to sit back and go, 'Omigosh, I'm a Marvel writer' — there's nothing more implausible and more amazing that's ever happened to me."[403] She further explains that

> when you're a writer, oftentimes you're grinding away and there's a short list where you can tell your mom, grandma or your brother and they fully understand what it is. But this is something where everybody gets it; everybody understands the pop culture resonance with Marvel – what it means and what it stands for, so it's really exciting.[404]

Ewing's contribution as an academic and social media personality exemplifies the blending of the ivory tower with popular culture, which is the goal of this dissertation.

Whether in comic books or film, the women and girls in this project are placed at the center of the center of the discussion in ways that show that their inclusion is not simply supplemental, even when effected in an attempt to pacify legitimately aggrieved Black audiences and readerships. The narratives I discuss are able to serve, collectively and individually, as guides to reclaiming one's story, and encouraging Black women and girls to go beyond their current imaginings. I focused on Black female representation and identity formation within comic book narratives because Black women and girls have a history, in popular media, of

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[400] Churchill, M. L. (2010, March). University of Venus | GenX women on work, life, and higher education-Fantastic Reading: Comic Books and Popular Culture. Retrieved from http://uvenus.org/editorialcollective/mary-churchill/fantastic-reading-comic-books-and-popular-culture/

[401] Although the independent comic book movement, through such platforms and websites as *Lockett Down Publications*, *Lion Forge Comics*, and "Cartoonists of Color," are able to showcase a plethora of Black women writers and creators, mainstream companies like Marvel Comics and DC Comics are moving at a slower pace.

[402] The fan-inspired petition can be found at https://www.change.org/p/marvel-hire-eve-ewing-for-marvel-s-invincible-iron-man-comic-book

[403] Rockett, D. (2018, August 20). Chicago's Eve Ewing will pen Marvel's 'Ironheart'. *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved from https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-ent-marvel-ironheart-eve-ewing-0821-story.html

[404] Ibid

having others tell their stories; however understudied, Black women have spoken and written to resist these reductive portrayals, and have their voices on record via such avenues as podcasts, social media, television/film, or comics.[405] I hope that these voices encourage pop culture scholars, Black feminist scholars, girlhood scholars, and educators to pay closer attention to the ways in which popular fictional narratives serve as both assessments and evaluative tools for understanding the experiences of Black women and girls.

Reaching beyond the Comic Book Pages

As discussed in the Introduction and Historical Background, disrupting the historical tropes and stereotypes, while including more complex Black characters, is an important and ongoing process. Historically, there were several decades between the appearances of the first Black female leads, with the first lead character appearing in the late 1930s in the *Torchy Brown* comic strip series from Jackie Ormes. This predated This predated the first mainstream comic strip feature of a Black female lead *Friday Foster* (1975). It would be over thirty years before another notable Black woman would have a lead role: Eartha Kitt's portrayal of Catwoman in the *Batman* television series (1967-1968). Decades later, Halle berry would star as Storm from the X-Men in 2000. Despite such slow beginnings, an increasing of Black female actresses is being casted for comic book roles and Black female characters are proving to be in steadily increasing demand.

Although the traditional comic book has shown an increase in series projects that include Black women and girls as leads, the film and television industries have been outpacing the comic book with their portrayals of Black female comic characters. This is seen in the casting of such actresses as Regina King as Angela Abraham in HBO's newest series based on Image Comics *Watchmen* (2019); Tessa Thompson as Valkyrie in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) and *Thor: Ragnarok* (2018); Sonequa Martin-Green as Michael Burnham in *CBS All-Access's Star Trek: Discovery* (2017); and the addition of such prominent characters such as Jayna-Zod from *Krypton* (a television series on the Syfy network), as well as Mariah Dillard/Black Mariah and Tilda Johnson/Nightshade from Netflix's *Luke Cage* series. The representation of these characters and their layered and multifaceted portrayals provide more opportunities to witness the complexity of the Black female in popular culture. In all their diversity, these characters are shifting the ways readers and viewers envision power, vulnerability, and sexuality, while being reflective of Black women's experiences and exploring the variety of Black female identities.

In addition to writing Black female comic book characters, Black women are also directing and producing comic book television series. Gina Prince-Bythewood, an African American woman, is serving as an executive producer and director for the Marvel Comics' Freeform television series *Cloak and Dagger*. Additionally, there is a significant presence of Black female directors and producers, such as Akela Cooper, Neema Barnette, Kasi Lemmons, Salli Richardson-Whitfield, Aïda Mashaka Croal, and Millicent Shelton, who worked on Netflix's *Luke Cage* series. Black women are also taking on directorial roles, such as Golden Globe-nominated Ava DuVernay and her personal pursuit to direct DC Comics' New Gods film (Figure 5.1)

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[405] Peterson, C. L. (1995). "Doers of the word": African-American women speakers and writers in the North (1830–1880). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.; Royster, J. J. (2000). Traces of a stream: Literacy and social change among African American women. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press

(Figure 5.1: Tweets from Ava DuVernay expressing her interest in directing DC Comics "New Gods")

Overdue Recognition and Acknowledgement

Black women are being recognized for their current efforts in writing comic book series, in spite of the small number being hired as writers. For example, an unprecedented number of Black women and queer stories took the top prize at the annual Eisner Awards ceremony at San Diego's Comic-Con International (Table 5.2) in 2018. The award winners, listed below, illustrate the diversity and significance that Black creators, artists, and the characters bring to the comic book industry. This short list also shows Black women as superheroes, adventure narratives from a Black LGBTQ perspective, and a legacy of women who are changing the face of comics. With the recognition and additions of more Black female writers, producers, and directors, the trend of Black female representation is gaining traction in comics.

Award	Winner(s)
Hall of Fame: Judges' Choice	Jackie Ormes
Best Limited Series	"Black Panther: World of Wakanda" series (Written by Roxanne Gay & Ta-nehisi Coates; Art by Alitha E. Martinez [*Marvel Comics*]
Best Anthology	"Elements: Fire, A Comic Anthology" by Taneka Stotts [*Beyond Press*]
Best Adaptation from Another Medium	"Kindred" by Octavia Butler, Adapted by Damian Duffy and John Jennings [*Abrams Comic Arts*]

(Table 5.1: List of 2018 Eisner Award Winners which featured Black, queer women writers and characters)

Television and film are not the only places of significantly increased Black female representation. These representations are also found in comic book animation and video games. Between the 1990s and mid-2000s, there was an emergence of mainstream comic book-based Black and African female cartoon characters voiced by Black female actresses (e.g. Cree

Summer, C.C.H. Pounder, Gina Torres, and Yvette Nicole Brown) and the presence of such video game characters as Aveline de Grandpré (*Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*), Sheva Alomar (*Resident Evil 5*), Elena (*Street Fighter III: New Generation*), Rochelle (*Left 4 Dead 2 and Resident Evil 6*), and D'arci Stern (*Urban Chaos*).

In spite of these groundbreaking moments, many of the television characters are voiced by the same core personalities that are portrayed in different formats and installments, with new characters rarely being introduced or given any longevity. This representational fissure echoes Alice Walker's sentiments when she argues, in her prose text *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, that the lack of models, or literary representations, is an "occupational hazard to the artist, simply because *models* in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect—even if rejected— enrich and enlarge one's view of existence."[406] This quote from Walker explains the impact and power that writers have in saving lives. With "models" functioning as ideal images or representations of personhood, they have the potential to become real-life guides. Although Walker is talking about literary writers like Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Tillie Olson, and Virginia Woolf, this idea of models can be applied to such comic book characters as Lunella Lafayette, Misty Knight, the Dora Milaje, and the women of *Black Girl Nerds*. Their existence and narratives can challenge past misrepresentations and play a role in making sure that the lives of Black women and girls are not distorted, erased, or lost.

With the growing emerging presence of Black female comic book characters in film, television, and animation, creators are generating new paths of representation. For example, since its premiere in February 2018, *Black Panther* has made an impact and evolved to become more than just a superhero movie or a platform for #BlackFemaleMagic. In December 2018, *Black Panther* stars Danai Gurira, Lupita Nyong'o, and Chadwick Boseman created and awarded a scholarship and fellowship program for young women and girls. The Black Panther Scholarship[407] and Young Executive Fellowship program[408] are steps toward fostering a wider presence of young minority females entering the STEM fields, making Wakanda more of a reality. As proclaimed by actress Danai Gurira, "…we all know, if we want to live in a world that looks more like Wakanda, the first step is to invest in some girls and women."[409]

In addition to the scholarship and fellowship program, in October 2018, Marvel Comics released the standalone series Shuri written by science fiction and fantasy writer Nnedi Okorafor. Following Shuri, Marvel Comics also announced in April 2019, at WonderCon (Anaheim, CA), that the Shuri character would be getting her own Marvel Rising animated television special titled, *Marvel Rising: Operation Shuri* (Figure 5.2). This series

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[406] Walker, A. (1976). Saving the Life That is Your Own: The Importance of Models in Artists Life. In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (p. 4). San Diego, CA: Harcourt.

[407] The "Black Panther Scholarship" provides an incoming female college student a $250,000 full ride scholarship to Loyola Marymount University (Los Angeles, CA).

[408] The "Young Executive Fellowship" program is a two-year program that will provide high school students from Compton, Inglewood and Los Angeles with training and mentorship to become better future leaders in the entertainment industry.

[409] Taylor, M. E. (2018, December 9). Wakanda movie stars announce $250,000 Black Panther Scholarship for young women - Face2Face Africa. Retrieved from https://face2faceafrica.com/article/wakanda-movie-stars-announce-250000-black-panther-scholarship-for-young-women

will introduce the fan-favorite character Shuri, voiced by Daisy Lightfoot (*Marvel Avengers: Black Panther's Quest*) to the Marvel Rising universe in a 22-minute animated special. The lives of the Secret Warriors are turned upside down when faced with their latest mission: hang out with Shuri, the Crown Princess of Wakanda, and show her what it's like to be an ordinary teenager. But nothing's ordinary when you're dealing with one of the smartest and most famous people on the planet.[410]

Following in the path of fellow young tech geniuses such as Lunella Lafayette/Moon Girl and RiRi Williams/Ironheart, Shuri's animated series continues the legacy of showing young Black girls in STEM fields. Exposing the ability to have access to certain technology through such a fictional heroine helps to close the STEM and gender gap, provides more comic book narratives featuring Black girls, and expands the possibilities of positive representations in pop culture as a whole.

(Figure 5.2: A promotional poster for Marvel Comics animated series
Marvel Rising: Operation Shuri **)**

Another recent example of expanding the field of comic books and increasing the presence and visibility of Black women and girl heroines in popular media, is the 2019 announcement of Netflix's *Mama K's Team 4*, which is the first animated original series from Africa. Created by Malenga Mulendema a Zambian female writer, *Mama K's Team 4*[411] (Figure 5.2) is a series based on four teen girls that live in a "neo-futuristic Lusaka, Zambia."[412]

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[410] Obenson, T. (2019, April 22). All-Female Animated Superhero Series Is Just the Start of Netflix's African Ambitions. Retrieved from https://www.indiewire.com/2019/04/netflix-african-expansion-all-female-superhero-series-1202126653/

[411] "Mama K's Team 4" was created/produced from the Triggerfish Story Lab initiative and CAKE (London-based children's entertainment specialist company

[412] Salaudeen, A., & CNN. (2019, April 20). Netflix to launch all girl superhero animation series from Africa. Retrieved from https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/20/africa/netflix-first-african-animated-series-intl/index.html

Motivated by a lack of representation of African women, Mulendema created this story to change that narrative. She notes,

> in creating a superhero show set in Lusaka, I hope to introduce the world to four strong African girls who save the day in their own fun and crazy way. Most importantly, I want to illustrate that anyone from anywhere can be a superhero.[413]

The launching of this Netflix series creates a global, family-friendly investment into expanding the cartoon and animation content beyond U.S. borders. Animation is not new territory for many countries in Africa (e.g. Nigeria's *Bino & Fino*, South Africa's *Adventures in Zambezia*, Tanzania's *Ubongo Kids*, and Kenya's *The Legend of Ngong Hills*), but having the backing support of a major, streaming service like Netflix provides an unprecedented reach. *Mama K's team 4* is also unique because the four African teen girls in the series are written and created by an African woman. This trend of projects showcasing Black women and girls is also represented in the fantasy and science fiction genre through such studios as HBO, Amazon, Universal Pictures, Fox, and Warner Bros. Furthermore, series like *Mama K's Team 4* also help to dispel the global myth that Black female characters and creators are an anomaly.

(Figure 5.3: A promotional screen-shot for Netflix's *Mama K's Team 4*)

Re-Writing and Reclaiming Future Black Female Narratives

Depictions of society in comic books influence how people see each other and themselves. Heroic and entertaining narratives in this medium can spark the imagination of

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[413] Ibid

readers and viewers, and can inspire future realities. With the recent rise of more characters of color entering into the comic book arena, a focus on the embodiment of their realities of Black women and girls must come into sharper focus.[414] By examining the characters and platforms in this study through an intersectional lens that I call "future feminism," I aim to provide a critical and well-rounded approach to the experiences of Black women and girls in comics. This approach centers visions of futurity in evaluations and critiques of present conditions. It also takes creative mediums seriously as vehicles of aesthetic, intellectual and political theorizing. By engaging an Afrofuturistic framework, this study acknowledges the importance of re-imagining and revising Black female voices.

The Future of Future Feminism

As a theoretical framework, a strength of future feminism is its ability to better articulate interventions into Black feminist, Afrofuturist, popular culture, and comic book debates concerning future directions for scholarly analysis of Black female characters. A future feminist approach also normalizes the experience of these Black female characters, while exploring the potential possibility of each character's power to morph in previously unimaginable ways in order to secure freedom and justice from opposing forces. In offering this intervention, I do not claim to have the definitive answer, or to suggest this is the only way forward; it is one way to bring in Black female visibility, disrupt the stereotypical and one-dimensional comic book narratives, and discuss these characters' contributions to the comic book medium.

My Black feminist critique of comic book characters and their creators emphasizes the struggle to end racist and sexist oppressions through creative depictions. I argue that Black female characters, such as the Dora Milaje and Misty Knight, move beyond stereotypical caricatures and tropes, in part because they are rooted in the personal experiences of Black women. These characters and Black female creatives have been able to function as "sophisticated ciphers of race" and gender.[415] They find new ways of negotiating the intersectional identity of Black female superheroine. Their imaginary transgressions and transformations help us better understand the real-world constraints of race, gender, and sexual stereotypes. and offer alternative narratives of female subjectivity. Whether these characters are seen in comic books, cartoons, television series, or films, their innovative nature helps us to reimagine Black femaleness, womanhood, and childhood, in all their complexity. Future Feminism also exists to normalize the experience of these Black female characters while exploring the potential possibility of a character's power to morph in unimaginable ways to secure freedom and justice from opposing forces. As future feminist narratives, they assert an independence that disrupts and re-shapes societal norms. Additionally, these narratives continue to build a creative legacy that includes new fan bases and readerships.

Directions for Future Research on Comics and Black Futurity

This study focuses on identity narratives and representational depictions of mainstream Black female comic book characters in the United States, but it owes a debt to African comics and animation, which are also important and understudied subjects. Investigations of characters from other notable publishing outlets like Dark Horse Comics and Image Comics, as well as

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[414] Collins, 2017
[415] Nama 2011, pg. 154

independent publishing companies, should be conducted to investigate whether similar trends and representations are consistent and generalizable outside of the "Big Two" producers (Marvel and DC). My work also suggests the utility of additional research into the rapidly evolving roles of new media producers and audiences. Existing blogs and podcasts such as *Black Girl Nerds* and *Misty Knight's Uninformed Afro* continuously challenge oppressive systems[416] and model ways to merge and incorporate numerous social networks and other online platforms, an approach that may enable new media and other disciplines to reinvent activist scholarship.

The Black female characters and digital platforms explored in this dissertation are just a sampling of the larger landscape of Black superheroines, blogs, and podcasts. As pop culture scholar/professor Jared Gardner argues, they exemplify how, "the future of storytelling in the twenty-first century lies in the history of comics and its audiences."[417] With the steady rise of comics in print, television, film, and video games, as well as the increased presence of Black women, it is important to distinguish between the medium's developments aesthetically and its development as an industry.

The exploration of the characters and their multiple storylines contributes to the centering of understudied Black female narratives in comics. This is important both within and outside academia. As Carolyn Cocca argues,, "those from dominant groups need to see heroes who do not look like them. And those from marginalized groups need to see heroes who do look like them."[418] All superheroes should be acknowledged and seen. As a consumer and participant in this fan culture, I feel compelled to bring more scholarly attention to these characters and the fast-growing blogs and podcasts that play a key role in re-defining and providing contrasting depictions of Black women and girls in comics.

As Alondra Nelson notes, there are still "voices with other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come."[419] From their various viewpoints, these characters and culture creators model ways to redefine sexuality, showcase intellect, resist stereotypes, emphasize the importance of seeing disability as an integral aspect of human diversity, and acknowledge creative methods of storytelling. Thus, it remains important that the future voices and stories of Black women and girls in comics are always present. Their stories can and should be incorporated in traditional academic spaces, especially courses on the topics of Black feminist theory, media and film, disability studies, and cultural studies. I wrote some of these chapters in non-traditional formats so they can be more easily translated beyond the ivory tower and be useful for those designing library and museum exhibits, K-12 curricula and after-school programs, and community workshops. I also hope my study is useful for the amazing comic book fans and creatives who inspired it.

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[418] Cocca, p. 221

[419] Nelson, A. (2002). "Introduction: FUTURE TEXTS." *Afrofuturism: A Special Issue of Social Text*,*20*(2 71), 1-15.

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Appendix: Definition of Terms

Black superheroine: used in this research, refers to a layered fictional woman character who is representative of the Black/African diaspora, distinguishes courage and/or ability, respected for her brave deeds and self-sacrificing qualities

Disability: a character with physical impairment(s) that limit and or enhances their movements, senses, and abilities; it affects a character's life and may be present from birth or occur during the character's existence; due to the complexity and controversy of the term for the purpose of this project disability will be defined primarily from the physical perspective

Disability superpower: defined as the character acquiring superpowers as a result of and/or to make up for their disability; the superpower disability is where the character is disabled in some way based on attaining superpowers.

Empowerment: the process of becoming stronger and more confident, having the ability to create and control one's life, an investment in self-authority, a motivational practice that can be shared

Future feminism: Future feminism is a political project that interrogates the potential possibility of a character's power to morph in unimaginable ways to secure freedom and justice from opposing forces. It is in the gesture of performing that the future becomes present and the past is an essential foundational tool that propels resistance. Future feminist assert independence that disrupts norms and gendered expectations; thus, freely living outside of stereotypes by creating their own knowledge and visions of liberation. Largely occupying the space of the unreal, future feminist's orbit outside of marked boundaries, defined limits and suffocating standards in order to secure transformative agency.

Identity: a layered social and personal construct that allows for characters to stand out, develop a sense of well-being and importance, and adapt in any environment; it plays a central role in the personal and social discovery of race, gender and sexuality

Inspiration porn: Coined by disability rights activist Stella Young, inspiration porn is defined as the portrayal, by abled persons, of persons with disabilities being seen as brave for doing things that abled bodies do.

Medical model of disability: is defined as a model that links the diagnosis of the disability to an individual's physical body with a focus on curing or managing the illness or disability.

Model minority: defined as those members who are perceived to achieve a higher degree of socioeconomic success than the population average

People-first language: seeks to put the person before the disability and avoid terminology that is stereotypical, derogatory, and disempowering; this approach is also described as person-first phrasing and or identity-first phrasing.

Post-human: a science-fiction concept in which a person or object exists in a state beyond being human.

"Put on blast": this term means to publicly embarrass, denounce, or expose someone or some idea especially through social media.