

FEMALES AND FEMINISM RECLAIM THE MAINSTREAM:  
NEW SUPERHEROINES IN MARVEL COMICS

By

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I dedicate this research to real-life heroines like my great-grandmother,  
who risked her reputation to educate women about their bodies.

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## ABSTRACT

Representations of females in visual media continue to be problematic. As media studies increasingly reveals the influence of visual representation upon our internalized ideologies, the significance of positive female representation only increases. This is especially true for mainstream superhero comics, which have been often criticized for representing females as heavily sexualized and passive characters, and which also wield great social influence by their connection to Hollywood cinema. Since academic scholarship of superhero comics rarely analyzes the increasingly positive representations of females, this study contributes to that work by closely examining three comic series featuring female protagonists and released by Marvel between 2014 and 2015. Viewed in relation to the portrayal of heroines historically, these comics are deconstructed using techniques borrowed from textual analysis, genre studies, film, feminist, and comic theory. Close study of *Thor*, *Ms. Marvel* and *Storm* reveals the underappreciated intentionality with which Marvel has reformed their heroines into active icons capable of revolutionizing the genre.

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## INTRODUCTION

In an article published in the *New Yorker* in May of 2015, Harvard professor Jill Lepore criticized Marvel's all new, all heroine comic book series, *A-Force*. Lepore read an issue of the series with her son, and utilized the experience to openly bemoan the apparent objectification of the superheroines depicted therein. In her strident article she claims that "Their power is in their allure," and remarks that this is actually "the absence of power. Even their bodies are not their own" (Lepore, "Looking at Female Superheroes"). In a more directed assault, she writes that "it's weird, and depressing, that 'Age of Ultron' and the 'A-Force' should have such pervy characters and costumes, since Joss Whedon, who directed both the first Avengers movie and this latest installment, and G. Willow Wilson, one of the creators of 'A-Force', have been on a mission for a while now to re-invent the female superhero." According to Lepore, they are both failing miserably.

But Lepore's full-frontal assault is pithy when contextualized within the history of comic book criticism. The objectification of female heroes has been an increasingly studied phenomenon in both academic and cultural circles since the 1990's, when comic book readers generally agreed that hypersexualization was at its worst. Although Lepore's assertion that writer G. Willow Wilson is part of a larger cooperative attempting to revise the production of comic book heroines is correct, her investigation into the history of the cause is shamefully underinformed for someone who recently published a book on the creation of Wonder Woman. "*A-Force* comes out of a very specific conversation about gender in comics that has been evolving rapidly in the past few years,

driven as much by fandom as it is by creators and editors,” wrote Wilson on her website sometime after the *New Yorker* published Lepore’s article. “Across the industry, we have been systematically un-fridging . . . female characters who may have gotten short shrift in the past, looking at their backstories, and discovering, as a community, what has been left unsaid. And in *A-Force*, we’ve put them all together—for the first time” (Wilson, “Dr. Lepore’s Lament”).

Like the concept of “fridging”,<sup>1</sup> Wilson’s refutation is grounded in her knowledge of comic history. While Lepore calls their costumes “pervy,” Wilson explains “that these specific iterations of our heroines’ costumes were purposefully crafted to resemble those of male superheroes. They are, for the most part, fully covered—a profound departure from the teeny bikinis of the 80’s and 90’s, while still cognizant of the fact that these characters are superheroes, and superheroes—male and female alike—wear funky colored latex.” In addition, Wilson notes the visual representation of these heroines in heroic (rather than sexualized) poses. To an industry with a torrid past, these are major gains; “There are many women (and plenty more men!) in the comics industry and in comics fandom who have fought hard to get us to this point—costumes that cover the butt, book covers where no one is spread-eagle, storylines that don’t involve women being sexually brutalized in order to provide motivation. This may not seem like much to someone outside the comics-reading community,” writes Wilson, “but to those of us with a vested interest in this medium—who do not aspire to whatever self-congratulatory bar of high culture Dr. Lepore requires us to leap over in order to be considered ‘real’

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<sup>1</sup>“Fridging” which stands for “refrigerating” is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

artists—it is a coup.” The representation of females in comics has come a long way since the 1990’s. By examining three of the most recent female protagonists in relation to their comics predecessors and the representation of women more generally, this study will simultaneously applaud the way in which superhero comics have become more feminist and reiterate the need for increasingly equal and common representations of women in general.

As I will examine, the rendering of female heroes as heavily sexualized, scantily clad objects for visual consumption has been perpetuated by the assumption that comic book readers are—and always have been—almost entirely male (Edmunds 212). Of all comic genres, superhero comics have received the most criticism, often rightly, for failing to evolve ideologically with other forms of media. Lepore is not the first critic to publicly shame the major publishing houses (DC and Marvel Comics) for the perpetually superficial and objectified heroines in their texts; in fact, the objectification of women within superhero comics is one of the largest aspects of comics analysis, both in the developing comics studies field and in the larger world of comics journalism. Although the field did not become fully self-aware until after some of the worst portrayals in the 1990s, the sexualization of female icons has been a characteristic of the genre since its inception. The general consensus today is finally that “Comics’ role in the lives of many girls—to represent the female experience and instill cultural mores—is underestimated,” explains Jacqueline Danziger-Russell, author of the critical history *Girls and Their Comics: Finding a Female Voice in the Comic Narrative*. This is particularly true now that recent data suggests that 43% of comic readers are female (Schenker). Luckily, the recently published *Thor*, *Ms. Marvel*, and *Storm* prove that the industry is evolving.

This present work is divided in two parts. In Part One I briefly examine the many voices which inform the feminist analysis of comics studies. Chapter One focuses on ongoing problems of female objectification in American media, with a particular focus on expressions of lingering racial prejudice towards women of color. This is an examination of the major works of criticism which justify this study, particularly regarding the female subject's risk for internalizing the male gaze, institutionalized racism, or both. Chapter Two provides a brief but thorough history of the objectification of females in comics specifically, as well as rebuttals to the most common justifications for these outdated practices. This chapter is particularly necessary to the larger work, as it provides the specific context which Lepore lacked: the long history of hypersexualized comic heroines. Both chapters inform my analysis as representations of how media has failed women in the past. In Chapter Three I detail the particular idiosyncrasies of comic books which justify them for scholarly study, and also detail my own scholarly approach. This chapter denotes not only the ways in which comic studies are indebted to other mediums, such as film, but also emphasizes the need for a semiotic approach to the text.

In Part Two I apply these contexts to rigorously analyze three distinct comic heroines who began their own solo titles last year. All three comics deal intimately with the concept of identity, which I explore in my analysis. Chapter Four examines *Thor*, a solo series about the first female hero in comics to not only wield the mythic Norse Hammer Mjolnir, but also to take the old Norse god's name: Thor. Throughout the eight-issue story arc the mysterious masked woman refuses to reveal her identity to Mjolnir's owner, Thor Odinson, the Norse god of legend, who at first rages against her audacity. He initially challenges her to fight, but eventually realizes they are on the same side, both

intent on protecting Midgard from evil sorcerers, frost giants, and a misguided Odin. In an important scene in *Thor #4*, Thor Odinson bequeaths his first name to her willingly, much to the chagrin of his father. “Thor” thereafter is the name of the mysterious blonde woman, while “Odinson” refers to the now-hammerless Norse god, who spends much of the rest of the series attempting to identify the woman behind the mask. Odinson’s family becomes divided by the controversy over Thor, with Odin objecting in a traditional, patriarchal fashion, while his wife Freyja supports her son’s decision whole-heartedly. Though the new Thor’s identity is only revealed in the very last issue of the story arc, the goddess of Thunder ultimately proves that her gender has little effect on whether or not she is worthy.

Chapter Five plumbs the adventurous *Ms. Marvel* to elucidate all of the positives in this representation of a young, Pakistani American Muslim superheroine. Unlike *Thor*, Ms. Marvel’s adventures are more episodic, following Kamala Khan as her Inhuman powers manifest and she joins the ranks of the very superheroes she has admired from afar. In the first comic Kamala deals with the awakening of her powers and how they add a new, complicated layer to her already multi-faceted identity as a Pakistani American, as a Muslim, and as a modern teen girl. They are awakened (as is common with Inhuman superheroes) by a Terrigen Mist<sup>2</sup>, which floods the city just after Kamala sneaks out to

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<sup>2</sup>The Terrigen Mist, a green, chemical cloud, is a common narrative tool in Marvel comics, which serves to trigger the expression of powers—or “Terrigenesis”—in a group of characters known as “Inhumans.” It is released from “Terrigen Crystals,” although the timing and reason for each release varies from story to story. These “Inhumans,” are similar to “mutants,” as they differ from regular humans at a genetic level and have varying superhuman abilities, but while mutants are a naturally occurring evolution from humans, Inhumans were implanted with dormant genes by a group of aliens called the

attend her first high school party. Since one of her new powers is the ability to change her appearance, Kamala at first imitates the form of the tall, white, blonde Ms. Marvel, who in 2012 changed her name to Captain Marvel. Though Kamala ultimately decides to fight crime looking like herself, Kamala keeps Ms. Marvel's moniker.

Kamala's crime-fighting initially focuses on finding a group of runaway teenagers, who turn out to be sacrificing themselves as human batteries to fuel the creations of a manic, half-bird, half-Benjamin Franklin clone named "the Inventor." This brings her into contact with other superheroes, including the famous mutant Wolverine and the Inhuman Queen Medusa, who help her learn to fight and provide her with a sidekick in the form of Lockjaw, a giant, sentient, teleporting dog. Finally, Kamala attempts to date, spending time with a young Pakistani Muslim man she knows from childhood, only to discover that he too has encountered a Terrigen gas cloud and has become an Inhuman. Her interactions with him force her to assert herself over his violence and misogyny, further contributing to the coming-of-age story that is the basis of this series.

Lastly, Chapter Six will discuss the recently released (and unfortunately no longer ongoing) *Storm*. Like *Thor* and *Ms. Marvel*, Storm's story is largely about her identity; Storm, or Ororo Munroe, is the descendent of a series of African Priestesses, born in New York, raised in Cairo, and living as a goddess in Kenya when she is first recruited by the X-Men team. When *Storm #1* opens, Ororo has recently accepted a position as the headmistress of the Jean Gray School for Higher Learning—the X-Men base—after her divorce from her husband (the Black Panther and King of Wakanda). She is trying to

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Kree ("Inhumans"). Therefore, every new Inhuman is related somehow to an Inhuman created by the Kree.

figure out how to remain true to her new identity as a single woman and as a superheroine, while also taking on a new responsibility for a school full of young mutants. As is clear from the text, Storm feels a responsibility to remain a humanitarian and a force for good, as she evidences in the first issue where she saves Santo Marco from a tsunami and then defends it from a corrupt militia.

In several of the subsequent issues she is able to consider her identity in relation to characters from her past; in the second issue she tracks a runaway teenager to the subway, where she discovers that her old antagonist Callisto is actually caring for the youths. In *Storm #3* Ororo returns to Kenya, where she once was treated as a goddess, and encounters her ex-lover Forge, a Native American scientist who once accidentally removed her powers. This encounter is particularly interesting, as it recalls a time when Storm was forced to understand her identity as a human, without the aid of her gifts. After dealing with the loss of Wolverine, who died in continuity in another comic produced by Marvel in 2014, Storm returns to the States, where she helps the ninja Yukio undermine the criminal infrastructure which seems to subliminally control the business world. Here she encounters an ideological conflict, as she discovers that both Yukio and Wolverine were willing to kill in the name of good. Ultimately deciding that she is not willing to murder even the leader of a criminal faction, Storm leaves Yukio and returns to her work at the school. Finally, Storm discovers that a presumed-dead businessman has resurrected the remains of an old enemy named Kenji, in retribution for her interference in his business interests in Santo Marco. Kenji used to be a student at the Jean Grey School, and Storm's previous battle with him is a part of the larger X-Men continuity. In *Storm #11* she convinces him to withdraw his attack, using the power of empathy rather

than violence, and he flees with the suggestion that he will return amicably. In the last few pages of *Storm #11*, Ororo appears to finally accept that her identity is an amalgam of her desire to defend her students as well as her values, and that these aspects are not mutually exclusive.

These three comic heroines exemplify the type of industry changes that Jill Lepore neglects in her review. Although mainstream comics have long contributed to the wealth of objectification of women in mainstream media, the fact that one of the top comic publishers in the world is producing drastically improved representations of superheroines indicates the genre is changing. By closely analyzing the content of three of Marvel's most effective recent titles, it becomes obvious the intentionality with which Marvel's writers, artists, and editors have created these new narratives, and models a new standard that the industry would do well to perpetuate.

PART ONE: THEORY AND CONTEXT

CHAPTER ONE:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN VISUAL MEDIA

There are a lot of negative images in our media today which reflect power inequality in our social sphere more broadly. In that the following chapters are concerned with positive representations of females in mainstream comics, it is primarily the treatment of women in American culture that provides background to this study. “How are women represented in popular culture, and what might that say, if anything, about a culture’s ideas about gender, femininity, and sex roles at a given point in time?” asks Jennifer Stuller, a contributor to Matthew Smith and Randy Duncan’s *Critical Approaches to Comics* (237). By examining the broader cultural context of women’s objectification, we may better understand how it informs the history of objectification in comics.

Truly the objectification of women in the media is pervasive, as evidenced by the Media Education Foundation’s recent release, *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising’s Image of Women*, part of a larger study spanning five decades and focused on portrayals of women in mainstream media. In it, critic Jean Kilbourne examines the negative effects of these images on women and on American culture. Kilbourne’s work emphasizes how the standard of beauty in America is represented in unachievable—and photoshopped—forms, and claims that the recurring representation of female as objects, often literally *merged* with objects—may account for an increase in sexual violence (Hodgson 5). Feminist popular culture scholar Carolyn Cocca, whose work is important to my Chapter Two, points out that “A number of studies have found correlations between exposure to sexually objectifying media and higher self-objectification, body shame and surveillance,

and eating disorder symptoms, particularly among young women” (422-3). As social research exposes the negative influence of media messages, the presence of researchers examining media texts for subtle ideologies becomes even more important.

As scholars of popular culture have noted, the power of these representations is often found in their relationship to the male gaze. Initially criticized in Laura Mulvey’s seminal article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the male gaze “projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 4). Though Mulvey’s assertion that the displayed woman “functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” is troublesome enough, critics today have turned the focus on the male gaze to the effect of its institutionalization (Mulvey 5). Nathan Miczo, author of “Punching Holes in the Sky: Carol Danvers and the Potential of Superheroism,” contextualizes his analysis of Marvel comics to this social perpetuation of the male gaze. “To the extent that [women] desire and/or are forced to be participants in this masculine culture,” writes Miczo, “females internalize the objectified perspective, self-objectifying and subsequently coming to devalue their own subjective experiences in favor of conforming to societal standards of beauty; further, they also turn this adopted male gaze upon one another” (177). This type of female-on-female bullying undermines the ultimate goals of feminism altogether, as Rory Dicker examines in *A History of U.S. Feminisms*.

Already, a backlash against feminism has made it difficult for modern-day feminists to want to identify themselves that way, but this self-perpetuating cycle of “competitive individualism,” which is coincidentally “one of the beliefs on which our capitalistic American society is founded,” is—according to Dicker—probably “the biggest threat to sisterhood” (16). If Kilbourne is correct that the average American imbibes three thousand images of idealized women in the course of a day *in advertisements alone*, then the fact that women would internalize these depictions for their own sense of value (and then project this value onto each other) seems unavoidable (Hodgson 5).

Estelle B. Freedman elaborates on the consequences of this internalized male gaze in both her book *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* and her later essay collection *The Essential Feminist Reader*. According to Freedman, female sexuality has long suffered from a sexual double standard, even including an association with devil worship during the renaissance (Freedman, *No Turning Back* 35). Unfortunately, a pro-sexual movement for women’s sexual autonomy cannot exist in a vacuum, and Freedman points out that “Third wave feminists face the dilemma of affirming female sexual agency in cultures that market the hypersexuality of young women” (Freedman, *Essential Feminist Reader* xviii). In other words, now that the representation of women as objects for the male gaze accounts for such a high quantity of our daily consumption of media, even the critically thinking woman is forced to examine her ideals of beauty and sexuality in relation to a culture which advertises hypersexuality as success (Hodgson 5).

Rosalind Gill, a British feminist and media critic, wrote an article in 2009 that aptly discusses the problematic nature of this system, which seems to trick women into becoming complicit, not only by objectifying each other, as Miczo says, but by advertising their own hypersexuality. Celebrities like Miley Cyrus assert that their hypersexual acts are to embrace the autonomous sexuality which feminism has long fought for, but Gill asserts that this is a red herring: “Is it a positive change . . . the assertive liberated subject of the feminist imaginary? I don’t think so. My reading is more pessimistic.” In particular, Gill points out that media has begun to emphasize the sexual autonomy of its women (who continue to be hypersexualized for consumption) thereby creating a new message that “women in these adverts are endowed with agency so that they can actively choose to objectify themselves.” This is particularly worrisome, as it depicts the ideological message that women become powerful by choosing their own objectification. Gill argues that today,

the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime. This representational practice offers women the promise of power by becoming an object of desire. It endows women with the status of active subjecthood so they can ‘choose’ to become sex objects because this suits their ‘liberated’ interests. . . . In this way, sexual objectification can be presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects (Gill).

If the male gaze was pernicious before when it effectively encouraged women to objectify each other in light of a hierarchy created of manufactured and unachievable

standards, it is even more troublesome now. “It seems to be an attempt to reclaim gratuitous display as a form of female empowerment,” writes Michael Goodrum in an article on superheroines. “A parallel can be seen in projects of positioning the Playboy bunny as a symbol of female strength and independence” (103). If women truly feel that embracing these standards is a form of empowerment, it becomes culturally acceptable for media to reproduce hypersexualized images.

Other scholarship is at work to determine the place of the sexualization of women’s bodies in relation to feminists’ work for sexual autonomy and equality for women. In a book-length study entitled *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, Jeffrey Brown examines heroines in a variety of media for their representation of both gender roles and feminine beauty. “My primary concern throughout the essays in this book is the awkward balance between the hope that action heroines embody radical cultural change in acceptable gender roles and the fear that they have only solidified the eroticization of female characters,” he explains in his introduction (9). Much of Brown’s work focuses on the action heroine’s blurring of gender binaries, arguably one of the most important points of conflict in the second wave of feminism. Though “Sexuality (together with class and race) is identified as a binary opposition (man/woman, black/white) which registers ‘difference’ between groups of people—differences which are manipulated socially and culturally in ways which cause one group to dominate or oppress another,” feminists of the second wave fought back against oversimplified definitions of femininity (Selden et al 137). In Brown’s work these oversimplifications are compared with media representations in order to determine how often the stereotypes are reproduced and how often they are transgressed.

Before Brown discusses individual action heroines, though, he discusses traditions of the genre more generally, a genre which encompasses the female superheroine. The female action heroine, according to Brown,

is inquisitive and intelligent, physically and emotionally strong, and is clearly portrayed as a heroic ideal with which audience members identify.

On the other hand, the action heroine perpetuates the ideal of female beauty and sexuality that has always been the primary cultural value of women in our society. Whether portrayed in live-action film and television by supermodels and centerfolds, in cartoons by anime-inspired wide-eyed preteen waifs, or stylized polygons and pixels in digital games, action heroines are conventionally beautiful, glamorous, and sexualized. (7)

Brown later aligns these apparently contrasting qualities with the concept of the dominatrix, but always returns to the problematic construction of a binary transgressing woman who portrays masculine characteristics in her physical strength, determination, and ability to work alone, but who is also fetishized visually for the consumption of the male and the idealization of the female. In general these “action heroine flicks seem content to pin their hopes for success on the sexual attractiveness of the lead character,” making their representations lack substance (Brown 244). No matter how strong the heroine is, her depiction is almost always hypersexualized, creating a consistent and pervasive association between “gratuitous display” of flesh and female power. Given the consistency of the reproduction, the hypersexualization of heroines reflects the continued inequality of women in western culture.

Unfortunately, sexual objectification is just one aspect of negative social constructs perpetuated by the media. Another important context for the study of female superheroes in mainstream comic culture is the media's representation of minorities. Just as Rachel Kinney's research indicates the relative naivety of American college students to the perpetuation of racial stereotypes in America, many consumers of media are unaware of the messages they imbibe on a daily basis. And they are everywhere; bell hooks' critical *Black Looks: Race and Representation* revolutionized the study of minority figures in the media, demarcating and problematizing the way that Black figures are represented in mainstream media. "Opening a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy. Those images may be constructed by white people who have not divested of racism, or by people of color/black people who may see the world through the lens of white supremacy—internalized racism" (hooks 1). Much like the complicated ideological begetting of the male gaze, stereotypical representations of minorities are similarly culpable for embedding racial stereotypes even within the members of the represented minority groups. "The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves," hooks explains (5).

There are copious examples of negative representations of minorities in modern media. So many, in fact, that Kinney writes that "unfortunately for the state of race in the United States, there is a never-ending stream of popular culture that produces, reproduces, and reifies racial logics of the progressive investment in whiteness" (52). Though specific representations of minority bodies in media are useful to contextualize

their representation within comics as part of a greater social narrative, it makes sense to begin with the most problematic aspect of minority representation active today: the fact that “whiteness” is considered the “unmarked” category (Kinney 46-7).

This is a pervasive ideology unmitigated by law or policy but which affects most other aspects of negative representation of minorities in media. Kinney does an excellent job of exploring this phenomenon in “But I Don’t See Race.” In particular she denotes the way that the popular novel *The Hunger Games* never racializes either the main character, Katniss Everdeen, nor the young girl Rue, though both are described as having dark complexions. When the book was adapted for film and cast for the screen, Katniss was portrayed by a white actress, while Rue was played by an African American actress. In her classroom and article Kinney presents her students with moviegoer responses, many of which denote surprise that Rue would be African American . . . but none of whom question the fact that Katniss is played by a white actress. “Why is a ‘white actress’ cast to play Katniss? How do we know Katniss isn’t black?” Kinney asks (46-7). As she goes on to assert, “This question highlights that in the US cultural imaginary whiteness is an ‘unmarked’ category,” because “If we truly lived in a world where ‘I don’t see race’ or ‘we are all equal’ the same amount of energy spent explicating Collins’ text for evidence of Rue’s ‘blackness’ would be spent looking for evidence of Katniss’s ‘whiteness’” (Kinney 47). Many Americans, as well as many of Kinney’s students, assume that an undescribed character is white, exposing a clear bias which persists inside our social strata. Hooks demonstrated this kind of unexamined bias in *Black Looks*, but the practice persists to this day.

This injustice is particularly pernicious because making ‘whiteness’ the foundational category makes every other race “Other.” Every other major example of criticism I can identify in the media stems from this inequity. Of particular worth for this study are visual representations of minority women in media, as themes of “Otherness” have lent themselves to the perpetuation of hypersexuality and exoticism in their representation as far back as the nineteenth century. Both hooks and Jennifer Nash, author of *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, explore these visual representations, beginning with the display of the infamous “Hottentot Venus” (Nash 27). Saartji “Sarah” Baartman, or the so-called Venus, was displayed fully naked for white viewers in a style similar to that of enslaved African women . . . for five years. “When she died, the mutilated parts were still subject to scrutiny,” meaning that her large breasts and buttocks were dissected in order to allow white viewers to continue to objectify the “naked image of Otherness” (hooks 62). According to Nash, this was just the beginning of a consistent “wounding” of Black female flesh (56).

This metaphorical “wounding” exists also in early opinions of racialized sexuality, which essentially reduced their subjects to little more than wild animals. Patricia Collins sees this tradition founded in colonization of new, “wild,” countries. In *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, she explains that “Under colonialism, West African people’s proximity to wild animals, especially apes, raised in Western imaginations the specter of “wild” sexual practices in an uncivilized, inherently violent wilderness” (120). In his own work Brown claims that the association of wildness extends to any non-white culture for similar reasons, claiming that “the mythical Orient encompasses all non-Western cultures, and by extension all non-White

peoples, ethnicities as diverse as African, Hispanic, Middle-Eastern, Far-Eastern, Mediterranean, and Asian.” He argues that this lingering xenophobia creates media representations that “are conceived primarily according to stereotypes. . . . Among the more obvious (and often contradictory) stereotypes are uncivilized, devious, religiously fundamental, violent, immoral, excessively sexual and excessively bodily” (Brown 169). Slavery in the United States also contributed to this reputation, as the sexual vulnerability and violation of African American women during slavery was attributed to their sexual immorality (Freedman, *No Turning Back* 80).

The tendency to associate minority women with hypersexuality is particularly strong in American media. Although this is “often presented as a type of celebration of ethnic diversity and appreciation . . . in truth it never strays far from the racist and sexist origins of timeworn stereotypes,” claims Brown, citing “Jennifer Lopez’s and Beyoncé’s ethnic booties . . . Lucy Liu’s and Kelly Hu’s Asian dominatrix Dragon Lady roles,” and even the “special edition series of *Playboy* simply entitled *Exotic Beauties*” as evidence (170-1). Though law and policy have reformed to disallow the type of overt inequality experienced in the dehumanizing acts done to Saartji Baartman, social stereotypes were founded in these early ideologies and have not yet been eliminated from our culture. Unfortunately “The twin yokes of racial Otherness and fetishized femininity are essential to any consideration of ethnically identified women in popular culture” (Brown 176). African American women are still assumed today to have intrinsically larger backsides, to the point that African American culture has internalized this old racism in the social construction of the ideal of Black beauty.

Collins published an intuitive explication of female representation in Black rap culture, which has adopted some of the historical fetishization of Black women's bodies. "Objectifying Black bodies turns them into canvases that can be interchanged for a variety of purposes," she explains (129).

Historically, this objectification had a clear racial motive. In the post-civil rights era, however, this use of Black women's bodies also has a distinctive gender subtext in that African American men who star in music videos construct a certain version of manhood against the backdrop of objectified nameless, quasi naked Black women who populate their stage. At the same time, African American women in these same videos often objectify their own bodies in order to be accepted within this Black male-controlled universe. (Collins 129)

Equally affected by the internalization of the male gaze as other American women, the hypersexualization of Black women in rap culture eerily echoes the forewarning of Sojourner Truth when she addressed the lack of attention to minority women's rights in the initial push for gender equality: "if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before" (qtd in Freedman 79). Although feminism has since embraced the representation of all groups who experience inequality, African American women are still often subjugated in the interests of African American men.

K. Sue Jewell, author of *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond*, studies four older stereotypes for African American women in media, both hypersexual and not: The Mammy, The Aunt Jemima, the Sapphire, and the Jezebel. According to Jewell the

Mammy is the “most pervasive” of these images, typically appearing as an “obese African American woman, of dark complexion, with extremely large breasts and buttocks,” and generally both independent and submissive, a la slavery (39). The Aunt Jemima stereotype is very similar physically, although she is both “extremely jolly, and, according to Bogel . . . also cantankerous” (44). As Jewell explicates, these two forms are combined to create the stereotype of the Sapphire, a term drawn from a character of the same name on *Amos and Andy*. The stereotypical Sapphire is always presented in the presence of a foolish African American man, so that she may berate him incessantly. Although Jewell suggests that the Sapphire’s form is not necessarily obese, “her complexion is usually brown or dark brown” (45). Finally, Jewell discusses the figure of the Jezebel, which is a stereotypical representation of an African American “bad-black-girl” (46). More typically a “mulatto or fair-complexioned African American female,” the Jezebel “conforms more to the American standard of beauty than any of the other images” (46). The “bad-black girl” is most often depicted “as alluring, sexually arousing and seductive,” and Jewell suggests that she “reinforces cultural stereotypes regarding the hypersexuality of the African American female, who yearns for sexual encounters” (46). Although representations of the Mammy and Aunt Jemima figures seem to have fallen mostly out of favor in American media, characters who reflect the Sapphire and Jezebel stereotypes still run rampant.

Rap culture has also contributed to the emergence of stratified stereotypes of black female sexual identity, primarily in developing new facets of the old Jezebel stereotype. According to Collins there is now the “Black Bitch” (with a capital ‘B’), an often positively received identifier for the type of woman “who control[s her] own

sexuality . . . Whether she “fucks men” for pleasure, drugs, revenge, or money, the sexualized bitch constitutes a modern version of the Jezebel, repackaged for contemporary mass media” (Collins 127-8). As Collins rightly identifies, “The difficulty lies in telling the difference between representations of Black women who are sexually liberated and those who are sexual objects, their bodies on sale for male enjoyment” (126). These “Bitches,” like the women in rap videos, appear to re-sexualize themselves as Gill suggests: as though it is a source of power.

Unfortunately, these stereotypes from within and without African American culture sometimes cause women to alter themselves in order to succeed. “Images of working-class Black femininity that pivot on a Black woman’s body politics of bitchiness, promiscuity, and abundant fertility also affect middle-class African American women. In essence, the controlling images associated with poor and working-class Black women become texts of what *not* to be,” says Collins (138) and “to achieve middle-class status, African American women must reject this gender-specific version of authenticity in favor of a politics of respectability” (138-9). To borrow Judith Butler’s iconic phrase, the middle-class Black woman’s gender performativity is thus affected by her desire to remain unassociated with these negative stereotypes.

Unfortunately, these racial stereotypes often return to the concept of whiteness-as-innocence. Hooks discusses this as an underlying characteristic of her conversations with white men who expressed a desire to have sex with minority women. “As is often the case in this society, they were confident that non-white people had more life experience, were more worldly, sensual, and sexual because they were different” (hooks 24).

Although these men saw themselves as “non-racists,” their desires to engage with non-white sexual partners stemmed from a racial inequality with a long history (hooks 24).

And these “non-racist” ideologies are everywhere, hidden even in uncriticized language. “Awkward moment when Rue is some black girl and not the little blonde innocent girl you picture,” reads one of the tweets that Kinney uses to prompt discussion in her classroom (47). “Juxtaposing the phrase ‘some black girl’ with ‘blonde innocent girl’ helps students think through the conscious linkages with non-blackness and innocence and blackness and non-innocence,” she writes (Kinney 47). “This is an important point of analysis in terms of the historical ways in which white women have been constructed as “innocent” by virtue of their race and gender and women of color and black women in particular as always non-innocent” (Kinney 47-8). As students within the class begin to realize, these subtle racisms linger in our culture at the level of our language, though legally we have moved forward.

The concept of “whiteness as innocence” and “Other” as “non-innocent” is also visible in American treatment of Muslims after September 11th, 2001. In a collection of personal essays published in 2011, editors Maria Ebrahimji and Zahra Suratwala provide glimpses into the personal experiences of Muslim women, who know themselves to be American but who have experienced increased xenophobia since 9/11. The book, entitled *I Speak for Myself: American Women on Being Muslim* includes chapters written by Pakistani, African, and Libyan Muslims, among others. “Although we had been born and raised in this country and knew no other place to call home, I and other American Muslims came to realize for the first time that we were not perceived as American in the eyes of a large swath of the general public,” writes Ebrahimji. “. . . They saw my

foreignness before they accepted me as an American” (23). Though American-born Muslim Americans are every bit as American as the descendants of Polish, Irish, English, or German immigrants, for example, the national crisis on September 11th fostered a gruesome affiliation of Muslim culture with terrorism, and the often-visible aspects of their religious culture, such as the hijab, have made Muslim American women particularly vulnerable.

This increased scrutiny of Muslim women (in comparison with Muslim men) is largely inspired by misinformed presuppositions about Islam’s treatment of women. In “Islam’s Trojan Horse: Battling Perceptions of Muslim Women in *The 99*,” author Edwin Shirin explains that “texts such as the *hadith* (exemplary actions and speeches of the Prophet Muhammad), of questionable provenance, and the *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), heavily saturated with patriarchal ideology, have subverted women’s fundamental Qur’anic rights to equality and justice,” but the Qur’an itself, the central Islamic text, is full of egalitarian messages (173). As such the Qur’an has been adopted by Islamic feminism, which (unlike secular feminism) “is ostensibly shaped by religious discourse” (Edwin 173). It is not untrue that some Muslim women experience cultural restrictions and inequalities not shared by non-Muslim women, though the opposite probably also occurs. Given that the image of the Muslim woman as culturally repressed without exception is so prevalent, it is important to recognize that not all Muslim women experience this repression, suggesting that their culture has been oversimplified by outsiders.

Susan Muaddi Daraaj, a feminist contributor to Betsy Reed's collection entitled *Nothing Sacred: Women Respond to Religious Fundamentalism and Terror*, gives a fuller picture of Islamic feminism.

“There are other key issues, beside the much-hyped issue of female genital mutilation, around which Arab feminists today organize, including the insurance of fair divorce laws, proper health care for women, family planning education, and others. Two of the most prominent have also received some attention from Western feminists in their quests to encompass all women's voices: a historically accurate picture of Arab women, and, of course, the veil.” (Reed 171)

As Muaddi-Daraaj rightly suggests, Muslim women, like other women, have a much more complicated intersection of concerns than outsiders, even within feminism, understand. Rather than make an effort to better understand Muslim American women, American culture has a tendency to villainize, victimize and marginalize them.

Unfortunately, this association of whiteness with innocence and Other-ness with non-innocence and deviance, combined with the xenophobia expressed after 9/11 has together created a culture where minorities are subtly encouraged to look and act as “white” as possible. Dicker discusses a documentary on this very topic, noting that “*A Girl Like Me* represents an effort to educate the public about the attitudes about beauty held by young black women. . . . A number of women in the film describe the bleaching creams used by dark women to lighten their skin; one woman talks about a mother who put bleaching cream on her daughters starting when they were very young.” (Dicker 142)

As Dicker points out, these drastic actions were taken in hopes of greater acceptance within Western society. “Davis's film is a contemporary challenge to lingering racism

and sexism in a culture that still perpetuates the idea that black is not beautiful” (Dicker 142). Bell hooks’ students expressed similar experiences: “they had tried to attain whiteness, if only symbolically. They gave graphic details about the ways they attempted to appear “white” by talking a certain way, wearing certain clothing, even choosing specific groups of white friends” (hooks 16). Many Americans are wholly unaware of this phenomenon, but “this concept of passing—successfully pretending to be normal—is an important and well-documented real-life experience among homosexuals and light-skinned African Americans” (Housel and Wisnewski 8). That the concept of “normal” should preclude anything except “whiteness” is a revolting aspect of lingering racism in America. Consider again the action heroine, as studied by Brown: she is “predominantly represented in the media as an ideal of feminine beauty that is almost exclusively Aryan” (Brown 16). In an extremely diverse country the reality that minorities are poorly represented in media is repulsive.

One of the most problematic characteristics of American media is the limited quantity produced with minority audiences in mind. “It’s a shame how black people consistently have to settle for less when it comes to quality programming,” Roxanne Gay writes in the first few pages of *Bad Feminist* (4-5). The media rarely depicts narratives centrally focused on African Americans, though this has improved drastically since the publication of hooks’ work, and significantly even in the last decade. Other minorities, such as Mexican Americans, Muslim Americans or Native Americans have even fewer programs produced for them, and even then the media continues to incorporate stereotypical representations, though often they are crafted by African American or minority writers. Clearly the American media needs to change. The sexual objectification

of women in the American media is pervasive, and the infrequency of positive minority figures is reprehensible. With every negative representation we enforce the status quo, encouraging the internalization of the male gaze and of lingering racism. In such a battlefield of representation, the infrequency of positive female and minority representation in American media increases the importance of each successful work.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALES IN COMICS

Comic books have been culpable in the representation of hypersexualized and stereotyped women of all ethnicities for a long, long time. As G. Willow Wilson points out, however, current representations of females in comics are extremely positive in light of their history, though they have further to go. In order to adequately assess the positivity of the representations of women in *Thor*, *Ms. Marvel* and *Storm*, it is important to understand some of the most common missteps in the representation of women in comics.

Sheena, the “Queen of the Jungle,” was the first female to have her own comic series, produced in 1937 before the foundation of the superheroine tradition. In *Girls and their Comics*, Jacqueline Danziger-Russell recalls that “Although she was represented as a strong and powerful female, Sheena resembled a pin-up model, designed for the male gaze. Though she would fight and often kill her opponents brutally, yet efficiently, she would do all of this with her statuesque form clad only in the scantiest, often ragged or torn leopard-hide bathing suits” (Danziger-Russell 12). Much like the other female action heroines who would follow, Sheena represented the first in a string of women who would be as beautiful and scantily dressed as they were powerful.

When Wonder Woman emerged as the first iconic superheroine in 1941, she suffered largely the same fate. Her creator William Moulton Marston “understood that female readers wanted to read about strong women—women who were smart, physically strong, and capable, but still caring,” but her conformity to the pin-up art style has drawn

criticism from scholars (Jorgensen and Lechan 269). Jeffrey Brown goes so far as to suggest that Wonder Woman, as the first iconic superheroine, actually bore responsibility for the perpetuation of sexualized heroines ever after:

Of course the fact that Wonder Woman was illustrated as exceptionally attractive and clad in first a short skirt [see Figure 2.1], and then tight shorts and a bustier [see Figure 2.2], helped make her palatable to the boys and WWII servicemen who constituted the bulk of the comics reading market in the 1940s. The sexually charged and revealing nature of her costume set a standard for all action heroine costumes to follow. (Brown 236)

Though Marston created Wonder Woman as an empowered woman, the desire to make her a figure who would appeal to both men and women became a lasting justification for sexualized costumes for many decades afterward.

Still, blaming the pervasive sexualization of all subsequent action heroines on Wonder Woman may be overzealous. Brown is right to suggest that comic heroines continued to be rendered as both strong and sexy, however, with a particular influence on sexy. In comparison with modern female action heroines the initial rendering of Wonder Woman appears relatively tame, though certainly similar to pin-up art. Within the industry, however, costuming like Wonder Woman's has become identified as "Good Girl art," and has been criticized for subtly implying sexual connotations. "Good Girl art takes the signs of pornographic discourse (whips, chains, spiked heels, beautiful but blank faces) and integrates them into the context of non-pornographic story structures," claims Mila Bongco, author of *Reading Comics* (see Figure 2.3). "In this way, the sign

of pornography (never explicitly delivered) comes to stand in for an entire pornographic subtext” (Bongco108). Wonder Woman has recently received increasing critical attention for her impact on the genre, and more and more critics have identified the potential association of both her lasso of truth and her wrist cuffs as subtle references to bondage<sup>1</sup>. Given that she is frequently shown tying up her enemies in her lasso, it seems likely that even early audiences would have identified an erotic element to her comics.

And yet, Wonder Woman was only the tip of a veritable iceberg. Jennifer Stuller discusses the many explicit ways that heroines have been sexualized in her contribution to the *Critical Approaches to Comics*:

The bodies of women in mainstream comics tend to be fetishized, receive more focus than their narrative, are shown as parts rather than the active whole (i.e., panels focus on cleavage or derriere rather than a whole body) and are typically drawn in physically impossible positions that manage to display both their breasts and their rear ends. Their bodies are twisted, distorted, and exaggerated. (237)

These are not only the ways that heroines are exploited in comics, as later shown. But the frequency of physically objectified female heroes has borne a number of critical studies attempting to deconstruct these portrayals objectively.

Carolyn Cocca quantified this objectification of females in mainstream comics over a twenty-year span by establishing a series of objective standards. Sampling over

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<sup>1</sup> See Noah Berlatsky’s *Wonder Woman: Bondage and Feminism in the Peter Marston Comics, 1941-1948*; Tim Hanley’s *Wonder Woman Unbound: The Curious History of the World’s Most Famous Heroine*, and Jill Lepore’s *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, among others.

140 issues of both DC and Marvel comics for her study, Cocca looked initially for unnatural posing such as the “broke back pose,” which Stuller hints at in her summary. “In the most extreme version” of the pose, “a female character’s back is drawn unnaturally twisted as well as arched; displaying all of her curves in front and back simultaneously [see Figure 2.4]. That pose has come to be called ‘broke back’ since one’s back would have to be broken to possibly contort oneself in that way” (Cocca 411).<sup>2</sup> Next, she sought portrayals of women “with their breasts or buttocks falling out of their clothes,” or with breasts larger than their heads (see Figure 2.5). In addition, she counted every panel of each issue, and determined how many females (and speaking females) were present in each issue. Ultimately the findings were not encouraging: “Almost every issue of mainstream superhero comics in the sample—136 issues out of the total sample size of 144 issues—had sexually objectifying portrayals of female characters,” according to these standards (Cocca 420). Unfortunately, this does not mean that even eight of the issues featured unobjectified women: some simply did not include them at all. Cocca’s findings ultimately suggest that female superheroines are less objectified in female-lead titles rather than ensembles, and that cover art tends to be consistently more explicit than panel art (420).

Cocca later echoes Brown’s concern for the impact of action heroines:

These comics, then, are often showing readers dialogue and plot that depict a strong, active, female character, while also showing that character broke back and with her t&a hanging out of her clothes. Traditional

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<sup>2</sup>A professional contortionist actually tried to replicate the pose, and while she could technically replicate the basic concept, found that the usual portrayal of the women’s arms as outstretched makes it physically impossible (“A Contortionist”).

gender norms are simultaneously unsettled (by a woman being portrayed as a strong subject) and reinforced (by a woman being portrayed as a sexual object). (Cocca 421)

Role models such as the ones Cocca reviews may "offer women the promise of power by becoming an object of desire," as Gill suggests. Unfortunately, such a mindset will ultimately contribute to the replication of gender norms, rather than their transgression. "They tell me I can be beautiful and powerful," writes Laura Hudson, a journalist who writes frequently about the portrayal of women in comics, "but only if I wear as few clothes as possible. They tell me that I can have exciting adventures, as long as I have enormous breasts that I constantly contort to display to the people around me." These renderings of heroines reached a pinnacle of objectification in the 1990s, a decade which is the root of our problems today.

To contextualize the increase in hypersexuality, it is useful to understand that much of the representation of women in mainstream comics thus far had been mitigated by the suppressing force of the Comics Code Authority (CCA), first put into action in 1954. The CCA was a self-imposed set of guidelines created after Dr. Frederic Wertham, considered by some to be the first true critic of comics, expressed concerns that comics were contributing to the rise of juvenile delinquency after the war (Danziger-Russell 17). The CCA was primarily focused on depictions of violence, but also involved the following four stipulations regarding the rendering of females in comics: "1. Nudity in any form is prohibited, as is indecent or undue exposure. 2. Suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture is unacceptable. 3. All characters shall be depicted in

dress reasonably acceptable to society. 4. Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities” (Cook 191).

Until the end of the 1980s, these stipulations kept the physical appearance of mainstream superheroines relatively in check. Though there were many other ways that superheroines suffered in this time period (which I will discuss subsequently), it was not until underground “comix” began to release increasingly adult content that the mainstream publishers began to follow suit. When comic creators founded Image Comics in the 1980s in order to reclaim more creative freedom and control over their work, they vastly altered the depiction of females in the genre. “The style is sometimes referred to as Image house-style,” explains Cocca;

The art style often portrayed anatomically exaggerated male and female characters, but . . . with males the exaggeration was with musculature while with females it was usually with sexualized curves. The Image founding coincided with, or perhaps fostered or accelerated a similar trend known as ‘Bad Girl’ art, in which female superhero or antihero characters were portrayed in a manner that was both hyper-violent and hyper-sexualized. (423)

This “Bad Girl art” is in some ways an extension of “Good Girl art,” which claimed innocence but betrayed eroticism. “Bad Girl art” simply acted to reassociate a woman’s sexuality with violence or deviance, one of the unfortunate tendencies of media more generally (see Figure 2.6).

Hypersexual representations of heroines spiked after these developments. With the success of independent publishers like Image, mainstream comics began to eschew

the publication guidelines of the CCA and publish consistently more sexual and more violent comics to compete. Where “Suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture” had once been “unacceptable,” it was now commonplace; in fact, women in superhero comics became so heavily objectified that their images began to be identified as “cheesecake,” because they were obviously for salacious consumption.

David Brothers, author of the intuitive article “Art and Superheroines: When Over-sexualization Kills the Story,” tactfully describes this art as created “to get your rocks off.” In other words, “cheesecake” representation of superheroines is “Imagery that prizes sexualization above all else—especially when that doesn’t make sense for the story,” and it “can pull you out of the moment and stop your reading experience dead.” Comics in the 1990s were suddenly full of these representations, though they varied in gratuity. As Scott Bukatman commented in 1994,

The spectacle of the female body in these titles is so insistent, and the fetishism of breasts, thighs, and hair so complete . . . that the comics seem to dare you to say something about them that isn’t just redundant. *Of course* the female form has absurdly exaggerated sexual characteristics; *of course* the costumes are skimpier than one could (or should) imagine; *of course* there’s no visible way that these costumes could stay in place; *of course* these women represent simple adolescent masturbatory fantasies (with a healthy taste of dominatrix). (112)

Unfortunately, the pervasiveness of these types of representations assumed a male comics readership and perpetuated one, because, as Brothers rightly argues, the oversexualization of superheroines detracts from the actual narrative, and becomes attractive only to audiences interested in consuming them erotically.

At this writing, the gratuitous objectification of mainstream comic superheroines is too great a subject to discuss comprehensively, but a brief survey of the obviously salacious representations provides the context which Jill Lepore lacked when she published her article in the *New Yorker*. An article by Cyriaque Lamar is a good place to start, as it emphasizes the type of objectification born out of the 1990s. Entitled, “The X-Men’s 1991 Pool Party = Everything That’s Wrong with the X-Men in 2010,” the article details how the ideology inherent in a poster produced in 1991 is still reproduced in the twenty-first century. The two-page spread depicts the two X-Men teams relaxing around a pool (see Figure 2.7). The girls are front, center, and large-breasted in small bikinis, with Psylocke closest of all. She sunbathes closest to the reader beside a post card which reads “Wish you were here!” a sentiment that many adolescent male readers would likely understand. “Superhero fan service is nothing new,” writes Lamar, “but what kills me about the X-franchise is this: here is *the* superteam in which the majority of the interesting, powerful characters are female, and more often than not they simply stand around looking skimp and/or dying.”

According to Joseph Darowski, author of several works on the X-Men team, Psylocke is one of the most commonly “cheesecaked” superheroines in the industry. Originally a mutant from Britain who was drawn conservatively (see Figure 2.8) Psylocke lost her memory and was fused with an Asian woman, who had “one of the

most revealing costumes any female of the X-Men will wear regularly . . . generally drawn without any semblance of realistic body proportions” (see Figure 2.9) (Darowski, *X-Men 95*). In addition, “The Asian version of Psylocke is one of the characters that most frequently appear in a brokeback pose” (Darowski, *X-Men 95*). The correlation between Psylocke’s evolution and her costume change appears to support Brown’s theory of ‘exoticism,’ given that Psylocke was specifically altered from a white female into an Asian woman. Certainly Psylocke’s many appearances in the broke back pose far outclass any negative representations of the women on the *A-Force* cover.

Storm was also often objectified in this period, as I detail in Chapter Six, along with too many of her contemporaries to count. What is important is that although it may be expected that the 1990’s, so heavily criticized for ‘cheesecake’ portrayals, would boast the objectification of females like this, it is unfortunate that the tendency persists into the twenty-first century. Just as Lamar bemoans, the comic book industry replicated (and at some points compounded) this tendency to objectify their heroines.

As the previous discussion has indicated, objectification became very prevalent in the 1990s. But many are unaware of how these portrayals have evolved to incorporate a sense of the positivity of sexual liberty. Brown specifically denotes the depiction of Misty Knight, of the popular *Daughters of the Dragon: Samurai Bullets* comic series. Although comics continue to suffer from a lack of diversity, this series—which stars two women of color—exemplifies some of the worst hypersexualization in the genre. “Misty’s sexual attractiveness is put on display for readers early on when her naked body is glimpsed in the shower over the course of two full pages,” writes Brown (178). “And immediately after leaving the shower Misty engages in her first solo fight . . . while clad

only in a skimpy bathrobe, which conveniently affords lots of leg and cleavage shots” (Brown 178). At no point does Misty’s nudity appear to be necessary to the progression of the narrative, and seems included only for salacious impact. Worse yet, however, is what follows: when Misty loses her fight, she immediately seeks sexual intercourse. “Though the act is not depicted . . . the aftermath is shown and it is clear the encounter was aggressive—headboards and lamps are broken—and as Misty dresses Danny [a martial artist] lies spent in the broken bed, declaring ‘I think I need an I.V. drip and some pancakes.’ This scene has no bearing on the story except to mark Misty’s assertive and animalistic hypersexuality” (Brown 178). As Brown later criticizes, white heroines are almost never depicted pursuing random sexual encounters, contributing to the association of Misty’s hypersexuality with her ethnicity.

As Misty’s narrative indicates, the objectification of heroines has recently expanded to include representations of sexual autonomy. Unfortunately, just as Gill suggests in her article about the re-sexualization of women’s bodies in media more generally, these depictions appear to be suggesting that the free sexuality of these women is somehow empowering, even though they are essentially forced to engage in sexual activity for the audience’s consumption. “Female characters are only insatiable, barely-dressed aliens and strippers because someone decided to make them that way,” Gill points out.

Marvel was still guilty of these practices as recently as 2011, according to Michael Goodrum. He points out that in *Avengers Vs. the X-Men: Issue #6*, “half a page is given over to Hawkeye, a male Avenger, fantasizing about Spider-Woman fighting, in turn, Emma Frost, Storm, and Psylocke” (Goodrum 107). Although all three are

eroticized, “most apparent is the fact that Emma Frost is straddling Spider-Woman, who, although pinned to the ground, is doing her best to tear off Emma Frost’s costume, starting with the material covering the breasts” (Goodrum 107). The suggestion that the true winner of each of these three fantasies is “You!” establishes that the entire spectacle has nothing to do with advancing the plot and everything to do with eroticizing these women for the (presumably heterosexual male) reader.

As the ensuing discussions of *Thor*, *Ms. Marvel* and *Storm* will show, Marvel has clearly made strides to improve the representations of their female heroes. Meanwhile, DC’s 2012 *New 52* series was particularly full of female objectification. Despite being conceived under the guise of a desire to improve visual depictions of female heroes, DC’s representations of Starfire and Catwoman, are decidedly sexualized. In an insightful article entitled “The Big Sexy Problem with Superheroines and Their ‘Liberated Sexuality,’” Laura Hudson criticizes the *New 52* representations of both heroines.

Hudson’s analysis of DC’s representation of Starfire, while not exhaustive, is spot on. Like the self-objectification borne out of male-gaze media, Hudson argues that Starfire’s “liberated sexuality” as depicted in *Red Hood and the Outlaws #1* is actually undermining the female struggle for equivalent treatment of sexuality. The scene which particularly concerns Hudson is one in which Starfire invites Roy Harper to have sex with her, and when he expresses concern that she is in a committed relationship, essentially berates him as though he is undermining her rights as a liberated woman. Hudson begins her argument with a disclaimer:

I would like to say first and in the strongest possible terms that I absolutely support the right of women to embrace and act upon their sexual desires in whatever way seems right to them, within consensual boundaries. My sense of justice is *inflamed* by the double standard that tells us that every person a man sleeps with makes them more of a stud, and every person a woman sleeps with makes them a little less valuable and less respectable.

But, as Hudson points out, nothing about Starfire's desire to have sex with Roy Harper is rendered in a believable or respectable way. "Here is what it looks like just before Starfire tries to initiate sex," writes Hudson, referencing a picture of Starfire leaning over Harper's beach chair (see Figure 2.10). "Why is she contorting her body in that weird way?" she asks, referencing the almost-brokeback pose in which Starfire has been drawn. "Who is she posing for, because it doesn't even seem to be Roy Harper? The answer, dear reader, is that she is posing for you." Although DC Comics has expressed a desire to change their ways and establish better portrayals of heroines in their comic books since 2010, these comics from 2011 are excellent examples of their continued failure. "This is not about these women wanting things; it's about men wanting to see them do things, and that takes something that really should be empowering—the idea that women can own their sexuality—and transforms it into yet another male fantasy," argues Hudson. "It takes away the actual power of the women and turns their "sexual liberation" into just another way for dudes to get off. And that is at least ten times as gross as regular cheesecake, minimum." This is particularly gruesome because Starfire's history includes a backstory that very much includes feelings in her sexual encounters, which the writers

of *Red Hood and the Outlaws* have obviously chosen to ignore. That Starfire should wholly change her character simply to provide opportunities for her own objectification (see Figure 2.11) under the guise of liberation is even more misogynistic than objectification for obvious consumption. And, as Hudson and Gill seem to agree, it may be even more dangerous.

Meanwhile, *Catwoman* opens with a series of pages that do not even show her face, instead focusing on her breasts and back side (see Figures 2.12 and 2.13). This is a too-common problem, and a topic discussed in Smith and Duncan's *Critical Approaches*: the disconnection of a woman's body from her face, or the physical representation of her personality, marks her as a nothing more than the sum of her sexually appealing parts.

Ultimately the issue concludes with a gratuitous image of Catwoman and Batman having sex on a rooftop, as though her sexual liberation is helpful to display (see Figure 2.14). "Here's the question, though: Why?" asks Hudson. "I mean literally, why is that last page a full-page splash of Batman actually penetrating Catwoman? Why do we need to see that? What does it accomplish or tell us about the characters that would have been lost if that page had been omitted? The answer is nothing." The *New York Times* article by Lepore would certainly have been expanded by knowledge that unnecessary representation of heroines purely for titillation has been happening in much more gruesome and explicit ways than the cover of *A-Force* she discusses. As Brothers, Hudson, G. Willow Wilson, Lepore, and many others would certainly agree, this type of over-sexualization does nothing to advance the narrative . . . and yet it persists.

Though the physical objectification of these heroines is something which has begun to garner interest and reform within mainstream comics, as evidenced by titles like

*Thor*, *Ms. Marvel*, and *Storm*, there are many other ways in which mainstream comics have traditionally undermined women. Many of these are story-based; Michael Kramer explores the way that heroines' hard-won power is often undermined by subsequent action in his article "Empowerment as Transgression: The Rise and Fall of the Black Cat in Kevin Smith's *The Evil that Men Do*." Are superheroines, strong as they may be, ultimately undermined after particular shows of strength? Black Cat is, Kramer argues, in writer Kevin Smith's portrayal. "Even as they possess empowering elements, comic book heroines are often punished for their power," Kramer writes. "Such depictions strengthen the status quo and further undermine the heroine's ability to deliver positive gender messages to society" (236). In a particularly terrible example of sexual violence, "Smith chose to leave Felicia [the Black Cat] trapped as a victim in sex crime limbo *for three years* with little apparent regard for the feelings of readers invested in the story or characters," when he ended an issue with the character's rape and then took a professional hiatus (Kramer 240, emphasis in original). This came in the wake of "Black Cat besting the more experienced Peter [Parker, Spiderman] in physical combat," which seemed at the time to be "a giant step forward for the character," but was ultimately completely undermined when Felicia was later raped (Kramer 238). As Kramer asserts, Smith "at first entices the reader with a strong, dynamic heroine who directly challenges the superhero patriarchy, only to have her later retreat into victimhood, dependence, and passivity" (242). Rather than empower women, such a message aligns this power with hubris, sure to be the fatal flaw which subsequently defeats the heroine. Unfortunately, this is all too common in the depiction of heroines generally.

Another problematic narrative trope for superheroines is their encounter with brutal violence, particularly of a sexual nature. In fact, “depictions of violence enacted against female characters in mainstream comics—rape, torture, kidnapping, disempowerment—is so prolific the trope has a name: Women in Refrigerators (WiR) syndrome” (Smith and Duncan 237) In the industry, this is known as “fridging” a character, referenced by Wilson in her response to Lepore. Popularized by comic book writer Gail Simone in reference to “a story in which the Green Lantern’s girlfriend, Alexandra DeWitt, was strangled and stuffed in a refrigerator by his nemesis,” the trope epitomizes the way in which female characters (and heroines) are used as objects to motivate a plot line. Though the term is now synonymous with any unnecessary brutalizing of female characters merely for narrative movement, the concept of “Women in Refrigerators” began as a cultivated, online list of many of the women in mainstream comics who have experienced these kinds of traumas, which grew as comic history was plumbed and new comics were created. It is by no means exhaustive and the web site is no longer updated, but considering that Simone wisely excluded traditional fistfights—since superheroines are required by genre to have physical altercations with their foes—the length of the list (and the number of entries under each name) is sobering. As one critic notes,

Marvel Girl went insane and was killed . . . Ms. Marvel was raped, as was the Black Cat. In every case, the heroines were not just victimized; they were also submissive in the situation. Male heroes are often the victims of

torture, too, but they tend to escape and, against all odds, save the day.

Heroines tend not to be so powerful, stuck in their role as the submissive victim. (Edmunds 215)

Darowski also points out that although female heroes are regularly saved by male team-members, “the hegemonic male rarely required rescue and when he did, he was saved by another hegemonic male” (*Ages* 122). In each case the writer made an intentional decision to subjugate a female, reiterating the idea of female-as-victim and male-as-savior.

When they are not being visually objectified or sexually abused, female heroes often suffer other forms of subjugation. Another favorite tactic within mainstream comics is depowerment, or the removal of superhuman abilities from the female in question. This happens in a variety of different ways and for a variety of different reasons, but is often related to a portrayal of feminine instability. According to comic scholar T. Keith Edmunds, “Heroines with great power are often shown to be unable to wield it responsibly and eventually cause great damage to those they love most. This feminine weakness—whether mental or emotional—allows these heroines to either be easily exploited by outside forces or to personally wield their powers recklessly” (213).

American popular culture has a long history of vilifying powerful women, and mainstream comics are no exception; yet another example is the Scarlet Witch, who “went insane and depowered most of the mutant population,” essentially because her marriage fell apart (Edmunds 213). “Marvel Girl became Phoenix, and, corrupted by the power, eventually became Dark Phoenix. This cosmically powerful and deeply evil character, for no other reason than her own twisted enjoyment, killed a billion alien

creatures” (Edmunds 213). Darowski also recognizes “a close intertwining of female sexuality and transformations into evil supervillains, which is not apparent with male characters” (*X-Men* 102). Characters like the Scarlet Witch are “portrayed as emotionally needy, completely dependent on heterosexual pairings for meanings in their lives, and anything but independent” (Darowski, *Ages* 131). Certainly these storylines represent narrative qualities that mainstream comics ought to be interested in correcting.

Many other superheroines have been brainwashed or possessed and seem to experience a level of discrimination not brought to male heroes in similar situations. As Edmunds points out, “although both Wolverine and Spider-Woman have been brainwashed by evil forces and made to act against the forces of good, Wolverine was accepted back into the fold . . . relatively quickly, while Spider-Woman faced suspicion and mistrust for much longer” (213). Though the physical strength of heroines protects them from some of the cultural stereotypes of fragility that American culture has associated with women, the tendency of female superheroines to miswield their power or go insane reeks of the old association of females with hysteria.

Though there are other, less frequent traditions in the negative representation of superheroines, these are the most common and problematic. Edmunds attributes the lack of an iconic Marvel superheroine (a claim which may or may not be contestable now that *Ms. Marvel* exists) to the fact that most female heroines are created as either team members (like Storm) or love interests, as with Susan Storm, the Invisible Woman. As though stuck in a perpetual sphere of subjugation, even women “whose primary role was not of a love interest” still “tended to be clad in skimpy, highly sexualized outfits, substituting their position of love interest for another character with that of being a love

interest for the reader” (Edmunds 212). Ultimately, mainstream comics have perpetuated the representation of their female heroes as less important, less powerful, and less humanized than their male heroes for so long that it almost seems an insurmountable part of the genre itself.

A favorite justification for these inequalities is the assertion that both male and female heroes are objectified, though this assertion appears to employ a willful level of ignorance. As Wilson writes to Lepore in her defense of *A-Force*, it is certainly true that both male and female heroines choose to make their costumes from latex (or something similar) for freedom of movement. According to Bongco, this fabric choice was utilized for artistic reasons, as well as narrative. “Because of the acrobatic stances of the heroes, it was convenient to draw them in tights which did not encumber the emphasis on the muscles and the anatomy, in general” (Bongco 104). The superhero costume also served to differentiate the icon from the secret identity, and subsequently also “marked the superhero off from previous hero types and helped to establish the genre” (Coogan 80). Without a superhero costume, Batman would just be a private detective avoiding the law; genre traditions, specific to superhero comics, make these costumes necessary.

Genre traditions do not make male and female costumes equivalent, however. In Kelly Thompson’s insightful article, “She Has no Head! No, It’s not Equal,” the writer and critic contrasts the objectification of female characters with the idealization of male characters, in terms of their body types and costuming. “Men are generally portrayed with idealized athlete body types, while women are generally portrayed with idealized porn star and supermodel body types,” she writes. “If women, like men, were rendered like gymnasts, swimmers, runners, boxers, tennis pros, and body builders, you’d see far

fewer objections, because that would make things quite balanced.” In order to contrast the female characters to their male counterparts, Thompson compares four qualities: body type, clothing, beauty, and posing. Although both male and female characters are typically idealized, females are rarely depicted with truly athletic builds, or with sufficient clothing. By contrast, the women look like models. “An athletic male form suggests strength, power, and ability—all traits that make sense for superheroes. Porn star and model body types suggest beauty, sex, and frequently, submissiveness” (Thompson). In one particularly telling example, Thompson discusses the difference in the costumes of Star Sapphire and Green Lantern. Both have the same powers and are essentially the same hero. But while the Green Lantern is clothed from head to toe in latex, Star Sapphire wears little more than a revealing bathing suit. To make matters worse, the almost naked woman twists her body unnaturally so that both of her breasts are in view, and presses her impractically high-heeled boot into the Green Lantern’s neck (see Figure 2.15).

The comparison of male superheroes to their female counterparts exposes a recurring theme. Star Sapphire, Batgirl, and Supergirl “have the same powers as their male counterparts (although they are not as powerful), and differ only in the fact that they are female and have been clad in sexier costumes” (Edmunds 218). Unfortunately for heroines, much more attention is given to their physicality than is given to that of male heroes.

Kelly Sue DeConnick, author of the popular *Captain Marvel*, one of Marvel’s most successful and most positive female-led titles, responded heatedly to the suggestion

that the treatment of males and females was anything near equivalent in mainstream comics. “That is such a crock of shit!” she exclaimed. She continues:

I’m sorry, but I would stand in front of any one of those men and say this: ‘That is lazy thinking. Why, yes! That’s an idealized female body, and that’s an idealized male body! But from *whose* perspective did you decide that?’ And when we get into costumes? In order for the male figure to be idealized in the same way that the female figure is idealized, they would have to be wearing a thong that was glued to their half-erect penis.

Literally. . . . It is *not* comparable. It is lazy or willfully ignorant to think that it is. (qtd in Helvie)

DeConnick’s outburst points out an interesting aspect of this discrepancy between male and female heroes; although both are “idealized,” as she says, the “ideal” appears to be gleaned from the heterosexual male perspective. In essence, the tendency within comics has been to represent female heroes as rendered by the male gaze, rather than as a realistic woman in the world. Some scholars, Nathan Miczo included, have suggested that this hypersexualization is a response to the masculine qualities inherent to crime fighting; physical strength, determination, autonomy, etc. that aims to balance a superheroine’s feminine and masculine qualities.

Kerri Johnson, Leah Lurye, and Jonathan Freeman provide some of Miczo’s key data by surveying reactions to comic book heroes in “Gender Typicality and Extremity in Popular Culture.” In particular, they explore public reactions to gender atypicality in mainstream comics’ characters. According to their research, the transformation of male superheroes from secret identity to superhero identity involves an increase in masculinity,

reinforcing gender typicality, while the transformation of female superhero from secret identity to superheroine identity *also* involves an increase in masculinity, causing an increase in gender atypicality (Johnson, Lurye, Freeman 240)<sup>3</sup>. Simultaneously both become more hegemonically attractive, a phenomenon which Johnson, Lurye and Freeman call “super gender.” They explain that “super gender” requires that Superman have “the uber-masculine shoulder breadth and muscle mass” (241) to be able to perform his super-human feats of strength, but note the problematic representation of “super gender” in female supers: “How, for example, does a small waist and large breasts enable Wonder Woman, and others like her, to perform the death defying feats of which only Supers are capable?” That superhero identity appears to be directly related to perception of masculinization, paired with the drastically increased objectification of women (over their male counterparts) suggests to some scholars, such as Miczo, that gender atypicality is balanced in mainstream comics by hypersexualization.

In the past this was justified by the assertion that males, particularly adolescent males, made up the majority of comic readers. As Mike Madrid writes in his book *Supergirls*, “It’s always been difficult for the comic book industry to find an audience for a title starring a female superhero,” (304) and this has been the reigning assumption for a long while. Some scholars attribute this to the fact that comics stores “are typically geared towards males,” making the primary place for purchasing comics hostile to the female consumer (Danziger-Russell 123). “The cover art and representations of women may be designed to appeal to a particular male audience, yet they also serve as a deterrent to ‘unwelcome’ entrance to outsiders, in this case women,” claims Brian Swafford,

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<sup>3</sup> Any subsequent references to “gender atypicality” owe the term to this study.

author of an ethnographic article entitled “The Comics Shop as Cultural Clubhouse” (291). Swafford describes a visit he made to one establishment: “Looking around the shop, the four patrons playing a tabletop game, the two employees behind the counter, and the three other patrons leafing through the wares of the shop are all male” (291). As the research indicates, comic shops have long been perceived as hostile to female patrons, no doubt contributing to the genre’s limited female readership. Ultimately this trend was slowly reversed as comics began to appear in libraries, which Danziger-Russell says offer “a gender-neutral space where young people are able to explore comics that they might not have had exposure to otherwise, because of a reluctance to visit specialty stores” (Danziger-Russell 176).

The advent of digital comics reading has also contributed to the bridging of the gender gap, hugely expanding their accessibility and allowing new comics readers to familiarize themselves with the market before risking entrance into the culturally guarded comic shop (Danziger-Russell 199). Now, data shows “that women ages 17-30 appeared to be the fastest-growing segment of the comics market,” and that comic stores’ “newest (and younger) consumers were often women” (O’Leary). According to Graphic Policy, a website which collects demographic data on comic book readers, women now account for roughly 43% of comic book audiences (Schenker). How active they are in purchasing is hard to say, but creators can no longer rely on a male audience to justify objectified representations of females. “Girls are also interested in superheroes and action stories,” assert Anna Jorgensen and Arianna Lechan, in an article advising how to select graphic novels for female library patrons, “and many more might choose this medium if there were more stories in which they could see themselves” (267). Now that there is an

increased awareness that the audience for superhero comics has changed, perhaps it is an appropriate time to make sure that the superheroines have changed, too.

There have already been some improvements in the mainstream comic market. The three titles studied within this work are all excellent examples of titles which have avoided these common pitfalls, and which exemplify the types of qualities we ought to be looking for in our female protagonists. Marvel's recent "Characters and Creators" initiative has foregrounded the importance of a heroine's personality, and editor-in-chief Axel Alonso claimed earlier this year that the new superheroines "are not the big-breasted, scantily clad women that perhaps have become the comic-book cliché. They are women with rich interior lives, interesting careers and complicated families who are defined by many things—least of all their looks" (Tahir, "Marvel Comics"). Certainly *Thor*, *Ms. Marvel* and *Storm* exemplify these qualities, as I will show, suggesting that the mainstream comic industry is finally changing for the better.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### COMICS STUDIES AND GENRE ANALYSIS

In order to best frame the subsequent analyses, it is worth noting that comics studies is always developing, and currently represents an amalgam of theoretical approaches from various disciplines, including literature, art, popular culture and film theory. Though comic studies are working to utilize these theoretical traditions, no other academically studied genre is exactly the same, due to the non-verbal interplay between visual and textual elements within comics. In order to understand comic books and their ideological influence on other aspects of media, theoretical approaches to film and television are often prevalent in academic comic analysis, though supplemented by theory unique to the genre.

Daniel Stein and Jan-Nöel Thon, editors of a text featuring film's contributions to comics in *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*, note that "sequences can be used to show the complexity that multimodality, or the simultaneous communication on verbal and visual tracks, introduces to the building of such a narrative world in graphic narrative" (30). Indeed, the development of both comics themselves and comic book studies owes much to the development of film and television theory, which provided a theoretical predecessor to the study of visual elements like framing and point of view. The infamous Will Eisner, credited with the popularization of the term "graphic novel," is also credited with popularizing the use of cinematic angles and framing in his comics (Peterson 151), two concepts which are integral to understanding the function of comic illustration.

Simply put, framing is a term borrowed from film studies to indicate the chosen perspective of the camera when facing a scene. According to Silke Horstkotte, a contributor to *From Comic Strips*, “frames serve an important emotional function. By setting the mood of a panel, the frame directs the reader’s affective and empathetic engagement with the scene and with the character whose experience it encodes” (39). In other words, framing directs the reader’s perspective and allows the reader to relate to the main character and his or her secondary characters from a variety of different emotional perspectives. What emotional response they elicit depends, according to Mila Bongco, on “his or her positioning as a spectator, so that a scene depicted from above may evoke a sense of detachment—depicted from below, a feeling of inferiority or fear,” while “a narrow panel could trigger a sense of confinement,” and “a wide one inspire freedom or escape” (59). These point of view techniques are common within film production, but are uniquely utilized in a medium that also incorporates text.

Pascal Lefevre’s article “Mise En Scene and Framing: Visual Storytelling in *Lone Wolf and Club*” is a succinct and useful text for examining the similarities and differences between film and comic books. Lefevre’s focus on mise en scene, or the physical setting and decor, and framing allows him to show comic studies’ indebtedness to film production, and also to point out some significant differences. “Contrary to mise en scene and framing in film, in comics these aspects are strongly related, because there is in fact no actual scene that a camera registers” (72). Unlike a director, who has a physical and unchanging set to film, “The [comic] artist has to choose from many options for where and how to position the characters, how to ‘dress’ them, which facial and corporal expressions to use, and which objects and decor to use” (73). In other words, the

comic book artist is not restrained by almost anything in his or her depiction of a scene, because there is nothing physical to film. As a result, every single comic panel represents an intentional choice on the artist's part.

By this logic, the images depicted gain even greater significance. While the artist has an infinite number of possibilities for what to represent and how to represent it, "The [comic] reader does not have any other choice than to view the diegetic world in the way the artist has presented it" (Lefevre 73). Even audiences of film and television can experience these texts idiosyncratically, if they were to choose to focus on the background of each scene, for instance. But the static nature of comic books asserts that every reader will encounter the images in the same form.

As such, Laura Mulvey's assertion of the male gaze—appropriately created for film analysis—becomes even more applicable here. "Each moment depicted in comics is the outcome of a narrative choice which will then set the tone of the narrative, present a privileged angle, or determine the truth and ideological claims in the story being related" (Bongco 63). Since the narrative is frozen in one perspective, most comics betray this to be the perspective of the heterosexual male. The perpetual drawing of women "as parts rather than the active whole," or "in physically impossible positions that manage to display both their breasts and their rear ends," is performed so that the viewer (rather than other characters within the narrative) are getting the most salacious views (Stuller 237). "These characters didn't appear out of thin air one day," points out Laura Hudson: "someone designed them to look the way they look, and designed it for a very specific reason." In this case, the framing of the comic panel, influenced as it has been by framing

within film production, betrays the intentionality with which comic artists have been objectifying heroines for years.

Film studies also contributes useful feminist approaches for evaluating female characters in comics. As already mentioned, Mulvey's quintessential concept of the "male gaze" is significant to any study of women's representation. But film studies has also long utilized the "Bechdel-Wallace Test"<sup>1</sup> to determine whether a narrative represents women and men equally. Though Alison Bechdel first published the test in the comic *Dykes to Watch Out For* in 1985, it has been utilized to analyze film more often than comics. The tri-fold test "requires that the story has: two or more women, that these women talk to each other, and that they talk to each other about something other than men," writes Jennifer Stuller (238). Stuller continues, "This is useful because most stories featuring one or more male characters will have a token female who serves a traditionally feminine, and often less important, role: love interest, damsel in distress, caretaker, family member, or femme fatale" (238). By applying the Bechdel-Wallace Test to comic book studies, as is becoming common practice, analysts have another objective way of determining whether the textual narrative succeeds in an equal representation of females, even if the visual narrative does not.

But despite the way that film studies informs the study of comic books, it cannot fully analyze what is truly an idiosyncratic medium. The "medium uses words and pictures in a way more completely integrated than illustrated or picture books. Reading a

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<sup>1</sup> The Bechdel-Wallace Test was originally known as the "Bechdel Test," after the author of *Dykes to Watch Out For*. In an interview in August of 2015, however, Bechdel indicated that she received the idea from a friend, Liz Wallace, and requested the name be changed to the Bechdel-Wallace Test (Garber).

comic is a complex semiotic process—it involves understanding how the interactions between words and images have been manipulated in order to achieve a story or a joke,” explains Bongco (46). In other words, unlike illustrated or picture books which depict scenes directly from the narrative, comic books have utilized contradiction between textual and visual to create tension or enjoyment for the reader. As Scott McCloud gushes in the conclusion to his seminal *Understanding Comics*, “Comics offers tremendous resources to all writers and artists; faithfulness, control, a chance to be heard far and wide without fear of compromise . . . it offers range and versatility with all the potential imagery of film and painting plus the intimacy of the written word” (212). Though the genre is similar in some ways to film, the audience of a comic book is not given the narrative in auditory format, forcing them to choose between attention on the visual and attention on the textual.

As a result, comic books express a narrative time that does not exist in any other medium. “In cinema and television, where the motion of images is now seen simultaneously with the sound of the accompanying text, the two narrational elements, through the use of sight and sound, may attain a synchronicity of comprehension not available to the medium of comics,” points out Bongco (78). By contrast, the juxtaposition of texts and images in comics requires two types of consumption: consumption of the visual, which progresses quickly, and consumption of the textual, which takes longer. This is somewhat paradoxical, since:

While texts help the narrative to move forward—by providing more information, directing the reader’s attention, bridging gaps in time and movement—the presence of the text itself *delays* the reading of the story.

The duration it takes to read the text already increases the time a reader may spend with one frame rather than if that frame were wordless . . . But more significantly, texts demand that readers process more information, the meaning of words alone, and then in relation with the pictures, which itself initiates further re-thinking . . . (Bongco 75)

Because, as McCloud famously pointed out in *Understanding Comics*, “panels are visible on the page before the reader reaches that point in the narrative, and they remain visible after the reader passes them by,” the comic book audience is capable of imbibing the visual narrative before even beginning the textual narrative, just by flipping through a comic book quickly (57). As a result the reader exists somewhat outside of time, sure to imbibe each text at a rate unique to themselves, and perhaps returning to particular panels more than once. “It is this capacity to communicate on several levels simultaneously that has enabled the evolving segment of comics known as graphic novels to construct complex narratives that, while taking up impulses from literary and filmic storytelling, are less bound to linear restrictions,” explains Horstkotte (45). “At the same time, graphic narrative’s multilayered communication constantly challenges reader’s interpretive choices, and it therefore requires a sophisticated hermeneutics that remains an ongoing task for comics studies” (Horstkotte 45).

Though I cannot claim to know the appropriate solution for the “sophisticated hermeneutics” disclaimed even by contributors to Stein and Thon’s text, my analysis in the following chapters appropriately involves an amalgam of approaches. Like Shirin Edwin, my work is founded in literary analysis, as it is founded in the application of close reading common to textual analysis. It is also influenced by popular culture and media

studies work, which contribute both the justification for studies like these as well as the context, placing comic studies, and particularly feminist comic studies, within the larger study of female representation within media. Of course the plumbing of these texts also owes much to comic study theory, which has itself borrowed from many different theoretical perspectives, particularly film theory, as well as creating unique methods of analysis like Cocca's "Broke back Test," which numerically quantifies objectification. This test in particular has been incredibly useful, and is certainly one of the foremost objective techniques in comic analysis.

Indeed, the "Broke back Test" and the "Women in Refrigerators" project are the only comic-specific studies of female representation in the genre, causing the criteria for positive or negative female representation to be taken largely from other disciplines. The most problematic principles of media objectification outlined in Chapter One help to establish stereotypes we ought to move away from, but comic analysis is fairly limited in its establishment of the positive characteristics we ought to be striving for in our superheroines. Anna Jorgensen and Arianna Lechan, who are librarians, contribute to this very limited work in their "Not Your Mom's Graphic Novels: Giving Girls a Choice Beyond Wonder Woman." Essentially written to assist librarians in the selection of comics and graphic novels for their female patrons, this essay presents ten characteristics for determining positive role models within female comic book characters. Although Jorgensen and Lechan are focused on the characteristics of female protagonists in graphic novels more generally, their ten requirements are useful for an objective study of those in mainstream comics and trade paperbacks as well.

Jorgensen and Lechan propose that: “The female protagonists may be either the main or secondary characters,” that “females take an active role in the development of the story,” that these women “either take on non-traditional roles, or if they are in traditional roles, they are not portrayed as weak,” that “Protagonists do not rely on men to support them,” that “Characters are three-dimensional,” and that women in comics should “Represent different personalities, ages, backgrounds, relationships, and ethnicities” (277-278). They also dictate that female protagonists should “not [be] defined exclusively by their relationships,” that these women ought to “grow in a positive manner and [not] stay dependent on others,” and finally that “Sexual or physical violence against women is not used as a plot device. Sexual/Physical violence must be taken seriously and dealt with thoughtfully” (279-281). As discussed in Chapter Two, this is one of the primary failures of mainstream comics, which “fridges” heroines regularly.

Importantly, Jorgensen and Lechen also demand that “No matter the art’s style, women and girls are not hyper-sexualized. When we discuss hyper-sexualization, we refer to the exaggerated portrayal of a woman’s body, focusing on her breasts, hips, or backside to the detriment of the storytelling. This does not advance the story, and is done to titillate the reader” (Jorgensen and Lechan 282). The image of Angela on the cover of *Guardians of the Galaxy* #7—which I discuss again in Chapter Four—is an excellent example of this hypersexualization, though there are many (see Figure 4.8). By establishing a series of guidelines for positive female protagonists in graphic novels, these librarians do what many comics scholars fail to do, presenting both pitfalls to be avoided and positive characteristics which may be utilized. In my study of *Thor, Ms.*

*Marvel*, and *Storm* these characteristics proved themselves very useful, as guidelines by which to elucidate the positivity of these recent mainstream comics.

In the subsequent analysis I have aimed to give due time to both visual and textual elements of the comics studied, plumbing them for interesting use of framing and mise en scene where doing so informs the portrayal of their protagonists. In each text I have attempted to consider these heroines in light of their relationship to lingering gender and racial stereotypes, as well as to the history of comics more specifically. But in framing my work it must be said that I have accepted some maxims of comic book study and rejected others; I have embraced the concept of genre study as it applies to the tradition of superhero comics, because as Bongco rightly asserts, superheroes have been created and recreated for decades, a fact which has established certain traditions. In order to properly study this type of art, “we are aware of the importance of genre, now not as a set of rules that ought to be followed, but as a framework that is always preset to some degree. All texts are dependent on and grow out of other texts such that all texts are variations of previous models that contain rules, structures, and patterns that make storytelling possible and the stories recognizable” (Bongco 89). In the case of a feminist analysis of mainstream comics, these genre traditions are important because the tradition within the genre has been to hypersexualize and objectify female heroes. From genre studies I also borrow the tendency to look for positive and progressive texts which outclass their peers, as *Thor*, *Ms. Marvel* and *Storm* are exceptional works in a repressive genre.

But I have rejected the notion that comic critics should avoid ascribing intentions to the creative team. Comic scholar Brad Ricca call this “an important [caveat],” that the analyst “avoid guessing what the auteur’s intent was in any given situation” (182). He

explains that “Critics call such guesswork about motives the ‘unintentionalist fallacy,’ and it is frowned upon by academics because it presumes knowledge to the auteur’s state of mind that one could not necessarily access from the works alone” (Ricca 182). In the subsequent chapters I often attribute the visual or textual narrative elements of these comic books to their creators, knowing full well that the creation of a mainstream comic book is an effort more collaborative than many other texts, and that any number of variables, artistic or bureaucratic, may inform their creation. So I continue to ascribe intention and authorship purposefully, for a number of reasons:

First, I have attempted to incorporate into each chapter interviews with the authors and team members. These texts do not exist in a vacuum, and often their creators specifically describe their own intentionality. Second, I only ascribe credit to authors and artists who have already put their name on the work, believing that to produce art is to claim at least some of the responsibility for how it is received. And yet, my third reason for ascribing authorial intention lies in the strongly-held belief that at some extent it does not *matter* whether the author or artist actually intended the meaning her reader gleans from her text, because the way that media largely perpetuate stereotypical approaches to gender, sexuality, and race is irrefutable and only overcome by the antithesis. Beverley Skeggs put it charmingly in her book, *Feminist Cultural Theory*, when she said: “Did a film like *Thelma and Louise* become popular with feminists because Ridley Scott (the director) gave it a ‘feminist message’, or simply because it can be read ‘on behalf of feminism?’”(83). As she implies, there is no perfect answer to this question.

I proceed under the presumption that the intentionality of the creator does not matter quite so much as the message of the created, which brings me to my final justification: in

many ways the conscription of intentionality on the creators involved is, for me, a rhetorical device, utilized primarily to ease communication with the reader.

Finally, this study uses a series of terms to refer to subjects that perhaps needs to be briefly explained. In analyzing these characters I frequently refer to them as female heroes, female superheroes, heroines and superheroines, but rarely as “heroes.” Again this is not an intentional act of diminution, but primarily for clarity. There is certainly a tendency within the genre to still consider “superheroes” as intrinsically male, but within this analysis I have also referred to “male heroes” and “male superheroes” where applicable. The terms “gender transgressive” or “gender atypical,” also appear, merely to mark a separation from the heteronormative “norm,” which persists in many facets of our culture; there is no negative connotation implied. “Atypical” and “transgressive” are exclusively used to denote the ways in which these heroines have grown out of their stereotypical portrayals.

In the following chapters I address wherever possible the most interesting critical questions I have found in recent comic book scholarship. It seems clear that the objectification of these female characters aids in perpetuating certain gender normalization, but it has been argued that the extreme femininity and overt sexuality of superheroines is utilized to balance their masculinized traits to make them more palatable. Is it possible, as Nathan Miczo seems to suggest, that the answer lies in finding a balance between their heightened, stereotypically masculine traits and feminine traits that are not merely physical? “A superheroine can be strong and she can be concerned with her relationships,” claims Miczo, “exemplifying the competencies and practicalities of masculine and feminine values” (177). In other words, would heroines be better

female role models if they were less physically attractive, but more relationally intelligent? Or, does this perspective actually undermine the feminist agenda by folding in the face of overly strict gender binaries, as Jeffrey Brown may be suggesting? According to him, the heroine “does muddy the waters of what we consider masculine and feminine, of desirable beauty and threatening sexuality, of subjectivity and objectivity, of powerful and powerless. Rather than replicating the simplistic binary logic that our society all too often resorts to for interpreting the world around us, the contestability of the action heroine challenges our basic assumptions and may force a new understanding of cultural norms” (9-10). Is it finally time to reevaluate how (and why) we determine “masculine” or “feminine” traits and how we represent this in our media?

I chose to analyze *Thor* because of the protagonist’s assumption of both a man’s name and title, and because of the controversy that arose when she debuted. For a comic superheroine to be discussed on *The View* is rare, particularly if that heroine is not yet a part of a major movie franchise. With each heroine I examine the most recent series for stereotypical or transgressive gender portrayals, informed by the context I have already provided. Virtually no academic work has been submitted on any of these brand-new series, but this study benefits from prior academic approaches to Storm, and other superheroines who have been marginalized in the past.

African American heroes in particular are studied more and more every day. “Most often the topic of blackness in the superhero genre compels discussions over the difficulty white audiences might experience identifying with black superheroes, or knee-jerk criticisms that frame the genre as racially biased,” asserts Adilifu Nama in his work

“Superblack: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes.” Hereafter I attempt to avoid both pitfalls, engaging with Storm’s importance as a Black feminist or womanist figure, particularly in the way her femininity and sexuality are represented.

As mainstream comics command the highest readership in the genre and therefore the largest audience for hegemonic reproduction, it is not surprising that superhero comics “have proven fertile ground for stereotyped depictions of race” (Singer 107). Marc Singer’s recent article, “‘Black Skins’ and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race” calls for an examination of the racial elements in particular in superhero comics, claiming that “some titles reveal deceptively soothing stereotypes lurking behind their veneers of diversity, then others show complex considerations of identity.” Though he is careful to claim that we ought to “[set] aside claims that stereotypes govern readers’ minds,” he affirms that we must also “still [hold] comics accountable for their ideological assumptions” (109). Mainstream comics are no longer characterized by a complete lack of diversity or consistent racial caricatures; as Nama asserts, study of black superheroes evidences “a fascinating racial phenomenon and a powerful source of racial meaning, narrative, and imagination in American society” and “expresses a myriad of racial assumptions, political perspectives, and fantastic (re)imaginings of black identity” (4). Examining influential works of popular culture reveals the ideological temperature, so to speak, of the social waters, and plumbing the depths of the recently released *Storm* reveals some nuanced conversations with current feminist and racial politics.

I accept that my identity as a white female may problematize my ability to fully understand the experience of women of color, but am emboldened by the fact that *Storm* is a narrative written by a Korean American man and edited by a homosexual Korean

American, and that G. Willow Wilson is a white Muslim American woman writing the story of a young Pakistani American. In what follows I attempt to analyze both *Ms. Marvel* and *Storm* with minimal bias as two narratives in conversation with racial formation politics, womanist or Black feminist theory,<sup>2</sup> and stereotypes of “Otherness.” This critique uncovers metaphorical engagement with problems historically relevant to the identities of women of color, such as the persistent stereotype of hypersexuality in Black women. Though Thor could be considered twice an “Other,” segregated from the white male supremacy by her superhuman abilities and her gender, both Kamala Khan and Ororo Munroe experience three types of marginalization, as their femininity, their superhuman abilities, and their racial identities all serve to marginalize them. As such, both *Ms. Marvel* and *Storm* provide interesting source material for analysis of what it means to be a woman of color in modern society, creating an important metaphorical subtext to their cultural success.

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<sup>2</sup>I use both “womanist” and “Black feminist” interchangeably (though primarily “Black feminist”) as Janice D. Hamlet does in “Assessing Womanist Thought.”

PART TWO: ANALYSIS

CHAPTER FOUR:  
THOR, GODDESS OF THUNDER

In the summer of 2014 Marvel released the news that for the first time ever Thor Odinson, son of Odin, would bequeath his magic hammer to a female. Immediately the internet exploded with fan criticism, much of it negative. Many recognized the move as a part of Marvel's initiative to improve the presence of females in comics, both in and outside of the pages; cynically, reviewers like Milo Yiannopoulos claimed such a move was "ruin[ing] a cherished art-form." Reactions like Yiannopoulos' were frequent and far reaching, often angry and misogynistic or referencing the GamerGate controversy.<sup>1</sup> Robert Conway, a writer for reaxxon.com, claims that "My biggest gripe with the new Thor is the fact that it was created to push a political agenda." Perhaps the narrative choice is nothing but a ploy for profit rather than to push for a more equal representation of superheroines: "Thor is now one of Marvel's most popular franchises, and as Marvel have [sic] found a new audience, they have found new ways to make money" (Gilles). Objectively, this last comment is true: in an article published in March of 2015 for the *Huffington Post*, Danielle Henderson pointed out that "The new *Thor* also premiered with crushingly high numbers compared to the premiere of *Thor: God of Thunder*, selling 150,863 copies in October 2014 to [*God of Thunder*]'s 110, 443 in November 2012." It is

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<sup>1</sup>Yiannopoulos himself claims that comic book readers are allowing a shift that video gamers would not stand for: "ordinary gamers, unlike comic book readers . . . stood up to the authoritarian moral panic brigade in the press and their feminist agitator icons and said: no. We don't recognize the world you're sketching out, and we don't want your bizarre and outlandish politics to pollute our hobby."

likely that the controversy over the lead character's gender has combined with the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe to contribute to the boost in sales, but perhaps this is an expression of Trina Robbins' claim that "Girls read comics when there are comics for girls to read" (4). Current market research indicates that females compose a never-before-heard-of percentage of the readership (around 43%), and writer Jason Aaron acknowledges that *Thor* has attracted some of that neglected market (Schenker).

But according to Aaron, this choice was not part of a greater agenda as much as a greater narrative. "I knew when I took over *Thor* that at some point I wanted to do a Beta Ray Bill-style story about somebody else wielding the hammer for awhile [*sic*]. It took me awhile [*sic*] to figure out what kind of story that should be and who the character should be" he explained in July of 2014 (Richards). Beta Ray Bill, an alien superhero who briefly wielded the hammer in *Thor* #337 (1966) is just one of the other temporary wielders of Mjolnir. "When you look back over the history of Thor comics, a lot of different people have picked up the hammer at one point or another and hardly any of them female," Aaron says. He emphasizes that "on the hammer it even says, 'Whosoever holds the hammer, if *he* be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor.' I'm going to flip that on its ear and for the first time see what it's like to have a brand new version of Thor who is female: the Goddess of Thunder" (Richards). Fans across the world have had a split reaction to Aaron's insistence that "she's not She-Thor or Lady Thor. She's not Thorika. She is Thor. This is the new Thor."

In the letters section of the first issue, Aaron further defends himself from hostile (and mostly male) former-readers:

In the pages of Marvel Comics going back to 1962, The Hammer of Thor has always come with a certain inscription, one that makes a very specific promise. The promise of transformation. That promise was first established by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in the pages of *Journey into Mystery* #83, Thor's very first appearance, when a crippled doctor wandered into a remote cave to find a strange stick, a stick that became a hammer when he whacked it on the ground, a hammer that transformed him into the Mighty Thor, "The Most Exciting Super-Hero of All Time!!" . . . many more [stories] over the years have shown the transformative power of Thor's hammer, Mjolnir, in action. . . . Is it exactly the same story as with Donald Blake or Beta Ray Bill or Eric Masterson? No, of course not. If it was, what would be the point in telling it? But is it a Thor story? You bet your ass it's a Thor story. ("Hammergrams" *Thor* #1)

As Aaron maintains, this new female Thor is just another in a long legacy of a superhero who has shared his hammer many times since his inception. "I'm sorry we couldn't keep you on board," Aaron writes to a male reader in issue 6, who claimed to be abandoning the franchise after the Goddess of Thunder was revealed, "but I'm afraid I'm just not very interested in any 'should not' rules like the ones you seem to be laying down here, especially as they relate to a fictional character who has continued to change and develop over the course of 50+ years of publication. . . . this IS a Thor story. It is an evolution of the same story that began with the character's first appearance in 1962" (Aaron, "Hammergrams" *Thor* #6).

Though many readers are upset with the way this particular story appears to be "rolling on," letters from female readers tend to be overwhelmingly positive. "I'm so happy to see a Thor title with a female as the hero," wrote Sarah Jean Maefs in a letter to Aaron and his staff. "This new Thor, she is her own woman, taking on the position of this realm's protector. She will be the Thor this world needs. I feel like this is the start of something amazing, something great. . . . In October I will be in NYCC dressed as Thor, and I won't have to tell people that I'm not Lady-Thor, or Thor who just so happens to be a girl, but that I.AM.THOR.GODDESS.OF.THUNDER." Becky McKercher, who writes in to the staff later, says she is "ecstatic that a woman is wielding Mjolnir now. I am so, so delighted. Delighted for the representation, for the simple change of pace, for the intrigue, for the fun, the wonderment. It's great. Particularly when there is a dearth of well-written, well-rounded female lead books." McKercher's observation is not alone. Indra Yang, a seventeen-year-old reader of the new *Thor*, admires "this strong female comic character. I'm always complaining how there aren't many women in the superhero world, but creating a female Thor brought the light in life!" More than ever Robbin's criticism seems to bear witness here: if women perceive that mainstream comics are changing the way they represent women, they are much more likely to become readers. "She's my role model," says Yang, of Thor. "I don't know if that's weird." With great power—or the ability to inspire and attract women in a way few mainstream titles have—comes great responsibility: how do Jason Aaron and his creative team render a superheroine who has become so important to both female comic readers and the potential future of the market? Does Thor succeed as an autonomous and powerful

woman without being unduly objectified or undermined, as is the norm for mainstream superheroines?

In the aforementioned article, “The ‘Broke Back Test’: A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of Portrayals of Women in Mainstream Superhero Comics,” Carolyn Cocca defines a number of characteristics to objectively quantify the objectification of women in mainstream comics. The characteristics, discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Two, involve the inclusion of the uncomfortable ‘brokeback position,’ as well as overemphasized breasts or buttocks. Cocca, Mike Madrid and Rosalind Gill all note the association of these characters’ sexuality with their physical power, though Madrid appears to regard this positively. In considering the portrayal of the new Goddess of Thunder, it is worth contemplating whether her physical body contributes to (or undermines) the problematic suggestion that women may become powerful by becoming sexy (Gill).

Remarkably, the makers of *Thor* appear to have taken note of the cries against female objectification, at least visually. Artist Russell Dauterman consistently avoids stereotypical superheroine representations in his depictions of the Goddess of Thunder, making her one of the least visually objectified heroines in this study. As Kelly Thompson’s article, “She Has No Head!” asserts, the physical representation of male and female heroes remains truly unequal. The women continue to be primarily rendered “with idealized porn star and supermodel body types,” while the men are drawn as athletes. When comparing heroes in light of Thompson’s four objective characteristics, “body type, clothing, beauty and posing,” the attentive feminist reader is sure to discover athletic men, fully clothed, handsome and heroic, while the women are more likely to

look like models, scantily-clad, and arranged in sexualized positions (Thompson). This is too-common fare for mainstream comic representations of superheroines, and exemplifies exactly the type of stereotypical representation that Dauterman avoids.

In fact, the introductory panel depicting the Goddess of Thunder is perhaps the most sexualized panel of them all (see Figure 4.1). Appearing for the first time on the very last page of issue *#1*, Thor stands with Mjolnir held high and lightning whipping around her. She is slim, white, and beautiful, exemplifying the characteristics of beauty that are still traditional in mainstream comics. Although thin, she has a muscular upper body and her defined bicep muscles will continue to appear throughout the series, sometimes remarkably emphasized. Perhaps the most traditional thing about her introductory image is her stance, a sassy shift of her hips rather than a balanced dispersal of her weight. That being said, the costume design is remarkably positive: Thor wears the traditional black lycra costume underneath a skirt with a long tail, an armored breastplate, helmet, and cape. The curved breastplate and small peep-holes to her upper abdomen are the most sexualized elements of the costume, which is exemplary in comparison with a costume like Star Sapphire's (see Figure 2.15).

Throughout the eight-issue series Dauterman and guest artist Jorge Molina undermine the sexualization of our heroine through strategic visual elements. Thor is seldom, if ever, framed in a way which might emphasize the peep-holes in her costume, and most of the panels featuring Thor are action shots, either from a distant perspective or with her cape whipping around her. Dauterman intentionally juxtaposes these long-distance action shots with close-ups of Thor's face, effectively emphasizing her physical capability in harmony with her personhood (see Figure 4.2). Even in images where

Dauterman depicts Thor from the front or side, he often minimizes the curvature of her breasts by interrupting the image, such as on the cover of *Thor* #2, by cloaking her breasts with her hair, and/or by drawing her biceps as equally prominent. In *Thor* #6, for instance, Thor leaps into the air, offering her readers a full frontal view of her figure (see Figure 4.3). Breaking with tradition, Dauterman under-emphasizes rather than over-emphasizes the gaps in her costume, and her turtleneck-like breastplate is framed by her muscular biceps. Her right arm in particular is straining; we see evidence of a vein bursting from the skin, a traditionally masculine physical trait rarely seen on superheroines. The ferocity of her facial expression matches the physical strength that Dauterman strives to express consistently, coupled with the use of a low-angle perspective to emphasize her greatness over her foe (Bongco 59). In Figure 4.3 she appears physically greater than the intimidating Destroyer, a villain actually several times her size. Similarly, Thor fights her namesake, Odinson, who has become “unworthy” to wield the hammer and is angry about it. The Goddess of Thunder engages with him in battle until he becomes calm enough to discuss things with her rationally. She is never visually undermined by Dauterman’s representation.

*Thor* also depicts other females positively, as emphasized by two particular aspects of the series: first, the representation of the villain Titania by Jorge Molina in *Thor* #5 and second, the inclusion of a great number of Marvel superheroines in *Thor* issues #7 and #8. In issue #5 Thor is battling Odinson’s long-time nemesis, Absorbing Man. Though their conversation is interesting, a fact discussed later in this chapter, visually speaking *Issue* #5 is compelling because of the minimized objectification of Titania in her two-page cameo (see figure 4.4 for page one). First introduced in 1984 in

*Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars #3*, Titania is best known as Absorbing Man's wife and She-Hulk's nemesis ("Titania", Marvel Comics Database). Originally bullied for her small frame, Titania is now considered the strongest human female in the Marvel Universe, with the possible exception of She-Hulk ("Titania", Comicvine.com).

Titania has always been depicted provocatively, with large breasts spilling out of an impractical leotard with a neckline to her belly button (see Figure 4.5) Titania might make an excellent subject for the criticism of David Brothers, who in "Art and Superheroines" criticizes "Imagery that prizes sexualization above all else—especially when that doesn't make sense for the story." While Molina could have rendered Titania in a more traditional form (as in Figure 4.5) he chose to depict her significantly *less* sexualized than she normally appears, a choice consistent with Dauterman's depictions in *Thor* issues 1-4 and 6-8. Though Titania still appears in her traditional purple suit, her breasts are slighter and more covered, and her leotard covers her belly button (see Figure 4.4). In addition, although we briefly see her from behind, her buttocks are not overemphasized or particularly sexy, and the rest of the second page is given over to close-ups of her face, without her breasts in view. To see Molina render such a traditionally sexualized character with such decorum only emphasizes the tact with which all the artists of *Thor* approach the beauty of these idealized women.

This intentionality becomes even clearer later in the series, when Aaron introduces a large cast of supporting superheroines into the narrative. First appearing in *Thor #7*, these women represent almost every person Odinson believes capable of being the mystery woman wielding his hammer. Pictured are Lady Sif, Angela, Idunn, the Black Widow, Karnilla, Kelda, Captain Marvel, Spider-Woman, the Scarlet Witch,

Hildegarde, Brunnhilde the Valkyrie, and Odinson's mother Freyja. All of these women from the Marvel Universe have been depicted in sexualized ways over their history, but not a single woman in this panel is "literally falling out of their clothing," or has breasts larger than her head (Cocca 415). The only possible exception is Kelda, whose costume has always been transparent with a very low neckline (see Figure 4.6) True to Dauterman's consistent tact, he draws her as the most distant figure, cleavage barely discernible.

In *Thor #8* another large panel depicts the group going into battle together (see Figure 4.7). While it might have made more sense for Dauterman to place the Destroyer on the right side, and thereby move his heroes in sync with the page being turned, he stalls the progression of the narrative by having his group move from right to left. This allows the reader sufficient time to process the many women pictured here, but also represents an intentional choice to bring less sexualized figures to the foreground; Brunhilde the Valkyrie is the largest figure on the page, and her breasts are in full armor and partially hidden behind her long, thick braid. Her biceps are prominent and muscular, and her face stern. Behind her to the right and left are Freyja and Spider-Woman with breast-covering armor and lycra respectively. Spider-Woman almost looks flat-chested from this angle, an unheard-of choice in depicting a beautiful superheroine<sup>2</sup>. Had the action been depicted as moving in the opposite direction, Angela, Black Widow, and

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<sup>2</sup>Spider-Woman's costume is new as of December 2014; previously the heroine had been clad in head-to-toe spandex, which writers deemed impractical for a detective. This was the first costume change for Spider-Woman since her inception in 1977, and included a significant reduction in breast size (Whitbrook).

Karnilla would have been featured more prominently, but instead the heroines with the sexiest costumes are placed in the background.

This is an excellent example of the way that the freedom of framing inherent to comic book structure allows artists to choose positive or negative ways of representing their subjects. Dauterman does not shy away from depicting women with impractically sexy costumes, but he does not foreground their sexuality like other artists. Angela of *Guardians of the Galaxy*, for instance, is typically heavily objectified, drawn primarily in bustier and shorts (see Figure 4.8). Both Black Widow's and Karnilla's costumes have been altered to cover their breasts, as the former is usually portrayed with an unzipped costume (see Figure 4.9) and the latter in clothing incapable of even being zipped (see Figure 4.10). While Aaron's narrative gives almost all of the women the opportunity to speak and to be heard, Dauterman's rendering of them is never hypersexualized; instead, he consistently represents the women in action or close up, with bodies appropriately covered (see Figure 4.11). Visually, the eight-issue *Thor* series is an exceptionally strong example of female heroines.

Since comics continue to enjoy an increasing female audience, it is worth comparing the Goddess of Thunder's depiction with the criteria proposed by Anna Jorgensen and Arianna Lechan in "Not Your Mom's Graphic Novels" to evaluate the positivity of female role models in graphic novels. As they assert, protagonists ought to meet ten requirements in order to be considered worthwhile. The tenth and final category addresses physical representation: "No matter the art's style, women and girls are not hyper-sexualized," they demand (282). Although Jorgensen and Lechan concede that "A story might be legitimately sexual in nature," they insist that "focusing on sexual images

rather than on the plot or character development should be avoided” (282). Dauterman and the other artists on *Thor* seem to feel similarly, and take care with the depiction of these heroines.

The other nine characteristics which Jorgensen and Lechan propose in their search for positive role models in graphic novels focus more on females in narrative, the responsibility (in this case) of Jason Aaron. So how do the women of *Thor* measure up to Jorgensen and Lechan’s narrative-based standards? Dauterman and Molina have insured that Thor, Freyja, Sif and the other women depicted are not undermined visually. As a result, what shortcomings *Thor* does have as a feminist series come through the narrative.

For one thing, despite being the title character, Thor does not even appear in a majority of the text. Not present until the final panel of *Thor #1*, Thor and other females only appear in 304 of the 620 panels of the series, or 49% of the work. Instead a great deal of the narrative is concerned with the plight of the unworthy Odinson, who is obsessed with determining the identity of the woman who has taken up his hammer. Although Thor is certainly one of the main characters, the story is primarily developed through Odinson’s desire to determine why he lost his worthiness, coupled with his desire to learn the identity of the mysterious woman who *is* worthy. In the meantime, Thor appears to battle whatever villain is at hand, physically powerful and certainly not “rely[ing] on men,” as Jorgensen and Lechan demand, but not necessarily “three-dimensional,” either. In some ways Thor’s secret identity contributes to her lack of dimensionality; because it is imperative that no one know her true identity, Aaron is limited in his ability to expand her character.

In her article “Victor/VicThoria: Feminism, Personhood, & Hammering Out the Trouble with Thor,” Nyala Ali emphasizes the impact of this predicament. “Masking Thor’s identity (both literally and narratively) means that we never really get to know the heroine we’re supposed to be rooting for as a complex, well-rounded, *humanized* character” (Ali, emphasis in original). Unfortunately, just after Aaron reveals Thor’s secret identity in issue #8, he admits that “this is the last issue of *Thor*,” just as it is getting good (“Hammergrams” *Thor* #8). Aaron is moving on to work on “a brand new series called *Thors*” but fans remain hopeful that the Goddess of Thunder will motivate her own series again (Aaron, “Hammergrams” *Thor* # 8).

Despite these shortcomings, *Thor* remains textually compelling. By studying the voice of Thor in order throughout the eight-issue series, we see a strong new female superheroine develop. Her sense of humor, first apparent in *Thor* #2, humanizes her. “Okay,” she thinks on the second page of issue #2. “So now I’m flying. But...” and then aloud, “How art thou. . . Supposed to steer?” (Aaron, *Thor* #2). The dichotomy between her thoughts and her spoken words indicates that her natural form is much more approachable than the Goddess of Thunder, and this makes sense when Aaron reveals her secret identity in *Thor* #8.

As she learns about her powers and begins to be successful in the face of her enemies, she often expresses confidence verbally that she does not yet feel mentally. “I am . . . the Goddess of Thunder!” she says in *Thor* #2, and then thinks to herself, “I am? Holy Crap.” With this technique Aaron is successful in writing Thor as an everywoman, thereby suggesting that any woman, should she be worthy, might be Thor.

In issue #3, when Thor is separated from her hammer, she wonders about her new identity. “Without that hammer, what can I do?” she wonders, facing enormous frost giants without a weapon. “And how long before I change back to...” in this case, Jane Foster (*Thor* #2). Her identity is not revealed until the last page of *Thor* #8, but Thor—a.k.a. Jane Foster—is actually a woman with advanced breast cancer. If she returns to her human form at this point she will certainly not survive her enemies.

Like Captain Marvel, who is discussed in the next chapter, Thor has taken over the mantle of a successful male hero and has that legacy to uphold or supersede. “Thor would bellow and bluster and rage until they cut off his arms,” thinks the Goddess of Thunder, as Aaron utilizes a bit of dramatic irony to nod to the fact that Odinson actually *has* had his arm cut off, even if Thor does not know it yet (Aaron, *Thor* #1). “And then he would kick the hell out of them. That hammer chose me. That means I’ll do nothing less. No matter the cost” (Aaron, *Thor* #3). Knowing that she might at any moment return to the form of the weakened Jane Foster only suggests that the female Thor is actually showing greater strength of character than the son of Odin. In other words, though Ali compellingly argues that Aaron’s choice to withhold the heroine’s identity weakens her characterization for the reader, the writer’s foreknowledge of Thor’s identity makes a second reading of the series particularly interesting. For a first-time reader, Thor’s separation from Mjolnir merely means she will return to her female form. In light of her secret identity, however, the second-time reader of issue #3 will recognize the mortal danger in which the deathly ill woman finds herself. In short, in Aaron’s omniscience he is not merely suggesting a depowered woman would be out of place on the battlefield, he is actually thinking about a cancer patient fighting frost giants.

From a feminist perspective, the textual choices in *Thor #5* are particularly interesting. Here Aaron appears to break the fourth wall, addressing critics of the “social justice warrior” heroine directly (Conway).<sup>3</sup> The narrative opens with the Abominable Man mocking Thor’s gender, claiming, “Lady, whoever you are, you picked the wrong fella to play dress-up with” (Aaron, *Thor #5*). When Thor identifies herself and refuses to be intimidated, Crusher Creel is flabbergasted: “Thor? Are you kidding me? I’m supposed to call you Thor?” Incredulously, he claims that the “Damn feminists are ruining everything!” (Aaron, *Thor #5*). Aaron obviously delights in voicing the very objections he has received since the inception of *Thor* in 2014: “You wanna be a chick super hero? Fine. Who the hell cares?” cries Creel. “But get your own identity. Thor’s a dude. One of the last manly dudes still left” (Aaron, *Thor #5*).

Next the Absorbing Man attempts to absorb the power of the hammer (as he has before in battles with Odinson), but Thor does not wield Mjolnir like her male predecessor. Subsequently Creel cries, “This ain’t how it’s supposed to work! What the hell kind of Thor are you?” Obviously Aaron is suggesting that Thor is greater in some ways than her male counterpart. “That’s for saying ‘feminist’ like it’s a four-letter word, creep,” thinks Thor (Aaron, *Thor #5*).

When Titania appears in the next few pages she further breaks down the fourth wall. “Thor? Thor’s a woman now? Like the for-real Thor? She ain’t called She-Thor or Lady Thunderstrike or nothing like that?” (Aaron, *Thor #5*). Here Titania is again a

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<sup>3</sup> The term “Social Justice Warrior,” is usually used to refer to journalists and fans who pursue equal representation in forms of media that generally favor white supremacy, males, etc. It is almost always used in a derogatory context, as many people dislike the recent push for equality.

mouthpiece for Aaron, who has consistently maintained that Thor's assumption of the name is important. "I'm standing down," she tells Thor, "Out of respect for what you're doing. . . . But just so you know, this is a one-time girl-power pass" (Aaron, *Thor* #5). Aaron obviously could not resist directly addressing his critics or helping to improve the reputation of the word "feminist." As he claimed in an interview with Today.com before the release of the first issue, "I don't write any sort of story with any sort of agenda. It's not a good way to tell a story. That said, I've never shied away from feminism. It's not a dirty word in my house" (Schindler).

Aaron's critics have not become less critical since the release of *Thor* #5, claiming that his breaking of the fourth wall denotes an obvious agenda for all eight issues of *Thor*. "Congratulations: if you don't agree with feminism, you're a creep," writes Conway. In his next breath he admits that "market research from last year does show that nearly half of comic book readers are women," but still criticizes the series, claiming that "comic book publishers will gleefully bend over backwards for diversity and political correctness, no matter how indifferent or hostile the majority of the audience is to this nonsense." Although readership of comics is quickly equalizing between male and female readers, and though it is clear from research such as Cocca's that strong, female-lead comics are still few and far between, critics such as Conway represent the antifeminist male readers who make it difficult for the comics industry to evolve. In humorously using Thor and Titania as mouthpieces, Aaron attempts to bring attention to this discrepancy.

In *Thor* #6, Aaron introduces Jane Foster, who we learn later to be the new goddess of thunder. With her excellent sense of humor Foster boasts, "I survived trolls,

super villains, civil wars, your brother, your dad. After all that, you think I'm gonna let some little lump in my breast be the thing that takes me down?" (Aaron, *Thor* #6). In retrospect this introduction may make her the strongest of all the females that Odinson considered capable of wielding the hammer during the course of the series, though he makes a list of about fifteen names in *Thor* #5. "You have no idea what it means to wield Mjolnir!" Odinson accuses the Goddess of Thunder in *Thor* #4, before he knows the goddess's identity. "I would *die* for that hammer! I *have* died for it!" (Aaron, *Thor* #4, emphasis in original). Aaron's use of dramatic irony makes these words especially poignant. "We need a god who understands what it means to be humbled. To be mortal," Thor thinks to herself in issue #8. "A god who knows how precious life is. How delicate. A god who struggles every day to live a worthy life. Who suffers so that no one else will have to. A god who loves the earth enough to die for it." As she reveals her identity, she echoes Odinson's earlier words: "I am Dr. Jane Foster, and I will not stop being the Mighty Thor. . . . Even though it is killing me" (Aaron, *Thor* #8). Since Foster is living everyday with increasingly painful terminal cancer—and fighting through it—she ultimately is choosing to die for Mjolnir every moment she wields it.

There are other strong narrative choices in Aaron's work. Although there are not many females in *Thor* until *Thor* #8, Freyja and Thor have large roles and speak regularly and strategically. Many of the issues fail the Bechdel-Wallace Test—which requires that two women hold a conversation together about something other than a man in order for a narrative to be considered equal—but this is largely because Thor is usually in battle and Freyja is often arguing for diplomacy with Odin (Helvie). The scenes between Thor and Freyja shine, however, proving that strong female role models can be written by males.

“No matter your heart or your deeds . . . I fear the blessing of the all-father will not be forthcoming,” says Freyja to Thor in issue #5. “And what of the blessing of the all-mother?” retorts Thor.<sup>4</sup> “I am told the age of the all-mother has come and gone,” says Freyja kindly, “Just as I have been told that Thor cannot be a woman” (Aaron, *Thor* #5). “It would seem,” says Freyja, “neither of us place much faith in what we have been told.” In narrative moments like this Aaron denotes the building of the “personal”—Thor and Freyja’s independent struggles with the men in their respective lives—into the political: the universal female struggle to fulfill their potential in a patriarchal society (Hanisch).

Are there weaknesses in Aaron’s textual portrayal of Thor? Certainly. As Ali argues, “one of the biggest problems is the framing of Thor’s ability to wield Mjolnir as the hammer’s decision.” Thor herself says, in issue #2 (and many times after) that “The hammer chose me.” Ali suggests that this is “a classic case of the character’s superpower being both more important and more interesting than the character herself,” and for the first-time feminist reader, this may read as a lack of autonomy in the assumption. In a similarly troubling narrative choice, Thor does not feel comfortable using the Norse god’s name until Odinson practically forces it on her. And yet, this development was largely positively received; Marley, author of a fan letter printed in *Thor* #6, writes that “I really liked how the passing of the mantel was handled in [*Thor* #5]. The hammer had already chosen Thor. She would have wielded it no matter what Odinson did. But by giving her his name as well—that was a nice touch. Thor doesn’t need his blessing to be Thor but it’s a nice sentiment nonetheless” (Marley, “Hammergrams”). Some critics,

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<sup>4</sup> Prior to the beginning of the *Thor* series, Asgard was ruled by Freyja in her husband’s absence. When the series opens, Odin has just returned to reclaim his throne, refusing to allow his wife to continue ruling.

such as Yiannopolous, suggest that this type of name-swapping may leave “the superheroine being solely defined as a female replacement of the male hero” (Yiannopolous), and Aaron mimics this response in *Thor #5* through the voice of Crusher Creel: “...get your own identity,” he argues. Is Thor’s capability as a female role model reduced by the fact that her name is given to her by a male, and her powers chosen by an inanimate object?

In an interesting episode entitled “Is a Thor By Any Other Name Still Thor?” PBS’s Idea Channel argues that “When Jason Aaron and Marvel say that ‘This **is** Thor,’ I think this is what they mean, that Thor is not meant to refer rigidly to one person, but that it will travel to whatever bundle of characteristics describes its bearer.” This is a significantly more positive viewpoint than Yiannopolous’, which suggests that Thor’s identity is not truly complete until she is given a man’s name. Unfortunately, this video was produced before the release of *Thor #5*, wherein Freyja gives Thor an important call to action. “Do not just be worthy of the hammer,” the all-mother says. “You are not the first to wield it, and no matter your fate, you will not be the last. Be worthy of the name. Long after every hammer in creation has crumbled to dust the name of Thor will echo still. That is the true honor you bear. That is the burden you must carry” (*Thor #5*). To some extent it feels as though Aaron is creating value for Thor out of her ability to avoid dishonoring the powerful legacy that Odinson, the only prior bearer of the Thor name, has created. This may act as a metaphor for Thor’s critical reception; Aaron certainly recognizes that Thor’s battle for critical acceptance will mirror her desire to not “dishonor the legacy of Thor,” but his work would perform better as an accessory to female empowerment if he had better shown how her unique perspective—as a doctor

and a patient as well as woman—make her an exceptional protector of Midgard. Perhaps this will improve as her story unfolds in the Marvel Universe.

Ultimately Aaron’s weakest authorial decision is depicted in *Thor #4*, where Thor and Odinson do battle. Not all is negative: in a transgressive swap of gender roles Odinson is the irrational, emotional figure, and Thor is considerably more reasonable. “Calm thyself down,” she tells him, tapping him on the chest with Mjolnir to keep him out of her personal space. “You. Dare,” he responds, and throws her into a wall (Aaron, *Thor #4*). These panels are also transgressive because Thor is more than Odinson’s equal, and ultimately proves this to him in her handling of Mjolnir. “Odin’s beard...” He exclaims. “I have never seen it...do that before” (Aaron, *Thor #4*). Ultimately her fighting prowess and rational arguments undermine traditional gender roles in this scene, and Odinson becomes calm.

Unfortunately, Aaron undermines the importance of this scene in the conversation that follows. Odinson bemoans the loss of his hammer, and Thor apologizes. “He’s so sad...” she thinks to herself. “I hate to see him like this. I just want to hug him. Do superheroes hug each other?” (Aaron, *Thor #4*) It could be argued that her desire to hug him makes sense within her identity as Jane Foster (*Thor #6*), but it feels insincere; after a lengthy battle with an obtuse and self-righteous deity, the jump to sympathy appears unrealistic and subtly reinforces traditional gender norms. In an even more ridiculous turn two panels later, Thor answers Odinson’s question (“Are you my mother?”) with a kiss that is completely unnecessary. “If this kiss had happened much further into the narrative, so that more tension could be built up between the two (and so that we might hopefully know more about Thor’s personality and motives),” writes Ali, “I might be more

forgiving.” As it stands, the kiss feels forced and subverts the transgressive panels that preceded it, particularly as Odinson appears almost unmoved by a kiss that obviously matters to Thor. Perhaps this is an example of what Kramer identifies as a tendency to undermine the heroine after a particularly transgressive moment. There are many other ways that Thor could have proved to Odinson she was not his mother. For instance: why not use her words?

In most ways *Thor* is an exceptional example of Marvel’s recent attention to strong female characters. She and the other females in her story are not visually objectified to the detriment of the story, and (for the most part) she and her peers are not undermined immediately after empowerment, as Kramer critiques of Kevin Smith’s work. Her desire to avoid hurting Odinson appears to be her most detrimental characteristic, but her adoption of a male’s mantle is not unduly problematic. As such, she successfully meets almost all of the criteria which Jorgensen and Lechan establish for strong female role models in graphic novels, with one exception: diversity.<sup>5</sup>

Truly the most unfortunate thing about the *Thor* series is that it is ending; it is not clear if Thor will ever headline her own series again, and therefore she is unlikely to be present in even 49% of the next title by Jason Aaron, *Thors*. According to Marvel, however, “this...only scratches the surface of the new Thor’s story and is simply the set up that will send shockwaves through the entire Marvel Universe” (Dickey). The Goddess of Thunder has already been featured in other team settings across the Marvel

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<sup>5</sup> To be fair, Jorgensen and Lechan are primarily concerned with the representation of a diverse category of strong female role models within a graphic novel collection, rather than any single title.

Universe, and seems likely to remain in that context, at least. If Marvel's female readers are lucky, Thor's shockwaves will bequeath more superheroines, and the goddess's relegation to a team setting will not decrease her super-feminism.

CHAPTER FIVE:  
THE NEW MS. MARVEL

When Carol Danvers accepted the mantle of Captain Marvel at the time of his death, she gave up a long legacy as Ms. Marvel. First appearing in 1967 and propelled through a series of objectifications in Marvel's comic history, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed superheroine left big shoes to fill both literally and figuratively: her iconic costume featured a pair of thigh-high boots, and her range of superhuman powers might make her the strongest female hero in the Marvel Universe (Dickey). As an Air Force pilot and as Ms. Marvel, Danvers had proven herself an effective heroine, making her an excellent choice to replace the previous Captain Marvel (a white, male alien known as Mar Vell) at the time of his death.

Carol Danvers' "promotion" provided an exceptional (and infrequently utilized) opportunity to Marvel: the chance to introduce an entirely new character. In choosing Kamala Khan, a sixteen-year-old Pakistani American girl from New Jersey, they diversified their catalog in a way they never had before. Sabaar Tahir, a writer for the *Washington Post*, expressed early in 2014 her concerns about the reboot. "When I first read the news about Kamala, I was excited . . . for two seconds. Then my natural paranoia set in. How would Marvel tell this story? Would they overplay the ethnic angles? Would they play it [sic] down? Would they make Kamala ashamed of her background or religion? Would they make her strong and independent enough? Would they stereotype her?" ("Why Does") These equity concerns, coupled with traditional concerns over feminine representation and promotion, epitomize the proto-feminist agenda emerging in mainstream comics. With the Characters and Creators initiative,

Marvel has emphasized the importance of having more women in the production process, and recommitted to producing strong female characters (Tahir, “Marvel Comics”) With *Ms. Marvel*, they accomplish both.

In many ways, the creation of Kamala Khan feels like a direct response to academic criticism of mainstream comics. In his work “Heroines Aplenty,” T. Keith Edmunds criticizes Marvel’s lack of an iconic superheroine, or even a superheroine capable of becoming iconic. As discussed in Chapter Three, many of Marvel’s superheroines were first introduced as members of teams or romantic interests, rather than “realistic individuals with whom readers could more readily identify” (Edmunds 212). Even when women were introduced to the Marvel Universe without a love interest or teammates, they tended to be hypersexualized, which, as Rosalind Gill argues, suggests to real-life women that they may achieve “power by becoming an object of desire.” Though Edmunds’ criticism focuses on Marvel, it aligns with Gill’s criticism of media in general; Michael Kramer’s article, “Empowerment as Transgression,” which focuses on DC Comics; and Gail Simone’s “Women in Refrigerators” initiative, which studies mainstream comics more generally. By first studying the treatment of Kamala Khan in response to these recent academic concerns, and subsequently approaching the treatment of her cultural identity, it becomes evident that Marvel is making strides towards truly feminist comics.

As explained in Chapter Three, Kramer’s article exposes the common practice of undermining comic book heroines after particular periods of strength, as though their success physically must be re-balanced against their feminine vulnerability (Kramer 236). As is true of Black Cat, who succeeded in overpowering Peter Parker in the six-issue

limited Marvel comic series *The Evil That Men Do*, but ultimately was left in “sex crime limbo for three years,” superheroines often move directly from periods of intense strength into positions of intense subjugation (Kramer 240). This certainly violates the principles which Anna Jorgensen and Arianna Lechan set out for positive female protagonists, but more problematically may “strengthen the status quo and further undermine the heroine’s ability to deliver positive gender messages to society” (Kramer 236). Kramer here is emphasizing the negativity of the situations which gave fuel to Simone’s “Women in Refrigerators,” website, where hundreds of superheroine names show a proliferation of violence against female heroes. Though physical violence is traditionally a necessary aspect of superhero comics, both physical and sexual violence are too often utilized against female characters purely as a plot device (Jorgensen and Lechan 274). Edmunds, Kramer, Simone and others have begun to demand evolution from mainstream comics, and Marvel appears to be responding; *Ms. Marvel* is an excellent incarnation of a proto-feminist superheroine as a result, in all of the ways that critics expected and more.

On a narrative level, Kamala Khan was incarnated neither as a love interest for an existing superhero, nor as a member of a team. Edmunds’ plea has been heard: instead, Kamala Khan is presented as a normal American teenager, struggling to find a balance between her parents’ expectations and her developing identity. “Delicious, delicious infidel meat,” she whispers to a BLT in *Ms. Marvel #1*. “Either eat the bacon, or stick to your principles,” her Italian friend Bruno challenges her. “Chow or chow not, there is no smell.” This is just the first expression of many in Kamala’s journey to decide who she is and who she wants to be, expressed in the very first panels of the series. Indeed, Khan’s

classmate Zoe Zimmer is the only character for the first 12 issues to have a boyfriend, and she is represented as an incredibly annoying and ignorant blonde girl. Though Kamala's best friend Bruno obviously has feelings for her, Kamala's lack of interest reinforces her superiority as a single woman, and emphasizes that her value is not determined by relationships.

This idea is further cemented later in the series when Kamala becomes enamored with the son of a family friend. On the surface Kamran is the perfect romantic partner for her: he is Pakistani, he is Muslim, he shares many of Kamala's interests, and he became Inhuman when exposed to the Terrigen gas, just as Kamala did. But her perfect boyfriend ultimately believes he knows better than she does, insisting that Kamala abandon her association with the leader of the good Inhumans, Queen Medusa, in order to join an anarchist group (*Ms. Marvel #14*). He lies to Kamala, kidnaps her, and ultimately attacks her when she attempts to leave. Kamala's physical and emotional success over Kamran is both a relief to the reader and an expression of the ideology of the author, G. Willow Wilson: this superheroine was not created as a love interest, because the new class of mainstream comic heroine does not find her identity in a man.

As Edmunds astutely argues, a superheroine's independence does not necessarily guarantee that she will not be objectified in other ways. "Marvel's heroines tended to be clad in skimpy, highly sexualized outfits, substituting their position of love interest for another character with that of being a love interest for the reader, as it is widely assumed that males account for between 80 and 95 percent of superhero comic readership" (Edmunds 212). Although more recent polling suggests that "women ages 17-30 appeared to be the fastest growing segment of the comics market," the readership is still

perceived to be largely male. Even *Ms. Marvel* issues have advertisements for men's razors, suggesting that while Marvel anticipates an increased female readership, they are still catering to men.

Fortunately, the sixteen-year-old Ms. Marvel is not sexualized for the benefit of her readers. Wilson and *Ms. Marvel's* artists, Adrian Alphona, Jacob Wyatt, and Takeshi Miyazawa, make consistently positive choices about how to portray their young protagonist, even breaking the fourth wall to address *Ms. Marvel's* costumes at the time of Kamala's conversion. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I don't know who I'm supposed to be," she complains to Captain Marvel, Captain America, and Iron Man, who appear in a hallucination brought on by the Terrigen Mist. "Who do you want to be?" asks Captain Marvel, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Carol Danvers, who previously fought crime as Ms. Marvel. "Right now?" asks Kamala. "I want to be beautiful and awesome and butt-kicking and *less complicated*," says Kamala. "I want to be you . . . Except I would wear the politically incorrect costume and kick butt in giant wedge heels" (*Ms. Marvel #1*). Kamala's wish ultimately comes true, and she is transformed into the blonde, blue-eyed Ms. Marvel from whence she takes her name. Later she will realize that she transformed *herself* into a replica of her icon, using her newly activated superpowers.

This is the origin of Kamala as Ms. Marvel. Because she desires to be Ms. Marvel, she becomes Ms. Marvel, and not only appears to be a blonde-haired, blue-eyed white woman, but is also clad in the sleeveless, turtle-necked leotard for which the previous Ms. Marvel was famous, complete with thigh-high boots (see Figure 5.1). This may not be the most objectified of Carol Danvers' costumes during her time as Ms. Marvel, but it is certainly more "politically incorrect" than her current, full-body costume

as Captain Marvel. Indeed, prior to the high-necked leotard and sash in which Kamala appears, Danvers was rendered in two previous costumes, both cowled and caped, but the first a modified bikini with a great deal of exposed skin. Nathan Miczo includes an analysis of Danvers' costume changes in his article, "Punching Holes in the Sky: Carol Danvers and the Potential of Superheroism." He writes,

Ms. Marvel's original costume was red and black with a yellow star on the chest (reminiscent of Mar-Vell's costume at the time); it was basically a one piece long-sleeve bodysuit with the midsection cut out exposing her navel, complete with gloves, half-high boots, a diamond-shaped mask revealing just her eyes, and a short cape. Her hairstyle was in the fashion of a '70's female tennis player': Thick blond hair cut shorter, parted in the middle, and extravagantly feathered back. That costume lasted for almost twenty issues. (Miczo 174-5) (see Figure 5.2)

Critic Mike Madrid claims that Ms. Marvel's latest costume (the one which first appears on Kamala Khan) "was an attempt to make the character sexier and increase male readership," no doubt because of *Ms. Marvel's* inability to retain readers at the time (176) (see Figure 5.1 and 5.5). In fact, this has been a consistent issue for Carol Danvers (despite the effectiveness of her superpowers) to the extent that when Kelly Sue DeConnick began writing the character in 2012 she did not believe it would last longer than six issues at best (Ching). Perhaps Danvers' new costume was effective in boosting readership, as it was not abandoned until she became Captain Marvel in 2012.

By contrast, it takes fewer than a dozen panels for Kamala to note the impracticality of this popular costume, and only a couple of issues to change it. "This is

what I asked for, right? So why don't I feel strong and confident and beautiful? Why do I just feel freaked out and underdressed?" (*Ms. Marvel #2*). Just as Gill suggests, Kamala has imbibed the media association of female power with its sexualization as "an object of desire." When she literally takes up Ms. Marvel's shoes, however, she discovers that the power will have to be her own, thus making her even more important as a role model for female readers.

Ultimately Kamala realizes that her transformation is connected to her self-consciousness; every time she sees the blonde, American Zoe, she transforms into the blonde Ms. Marvel. "It's almost like a reflex. Like a fake smile. As soon as Zoe shows up I feel...uncomfortable. Like I have to be someone else. Someone cool." Here Kamala expresses what other female comic book readers have also said: the objectification of superheroines' costumes is not always a major distraction for female readers, but sometimes it is. Laura Hudson, a popular voice in the superheroine debate, writes that "part of what got me into comics back in the day was being a 12-year-old girl who looked at strong, beautiful characters like Rogue and Jean Grey and Storm and wanted to be like them in large part because they were so sexy and confident and had exciting romances." Since Kamala's story is a story of identity, it makes sense that she should begin with a role model on her path to embracing herself. Her decision to reject Carol Danvers' old costume and create her own becomes a part of this; ultimately she reflects that "I always thought that if I had amazing hair, if I could pull off great boots, if I could fly—that would make me feel strong. That would make me happy. But the hair gets in my face, the boots pinch . . . and this leotard is giving me an epic wedgie" (*Ms. Marvel #2*). Her focus on her appearance actually detracts from her ability to be effective, just as a focus on

objectifying a superheroine detracts from comic narratives overall. In order to achieve the self-confidence and strength that she aspires to, Kamala develops her own costume, ultimately subverting the objectification of her predecessor.

It should be noted that despite the history of this costume, the rendering in *Ms. Marvel #1* and *#2* by Alphona is tactfully executed. Whether the appropriateness of the costume is due to the female presence on the staff, the age of the character, or some combination of the two, the panels of Kamala in Ms. Marvel's costume are heavily desexualized (see Figures 5.3 and 5.4). As is consistent in the portrayal of Kamala (and, indeed, Captain Marvel when she appears) Kamala/Ms.Marvel is drawn with relatively small breasts and an appropriately low apex, almost as though the superheroine is actually wearing a sports bra. The fact that she stands pigeon-toed in her first panel emphasizes her youth despite her transformed appearance, reminding the reader that she is Kamala, not Carol (see Figure 5.3). By contrast, Carol Danvers of the *Ms. Marvel* series of 2006-2010 was depicted with enormous breasts, and often from angles that emphasized her genitals (see Figures 5.5 and 5.8).

As the story progresses, Alphona does not shy away from depicting Kamala/Ms.Marvel's entire body, but primarily depicts her from the side, making her costume appear much more like a body suit (see Figure 5.4). When she moves into action, he alternates between medium shots of the center of her body and distance shots where her body and facial features are cartoonish, thereby removing a great deal of the potential for sexualization (see Figure 5.6). When the narrative demands that Kamala squat in her impractical costume, as in Figure 5.7, Alphona avoids the opportunity for a sexualized moment, though Ms. Marvel in this costume has not always been so lucky. In

the particularly jarring cover of *Ms. Marvel #5*, produced in 2006, Carol Danvers is shown squatting in almost an identical position, but from a different perspective; from the front her breasts are elevated front and center, and her hips, thighs and genitals are highlighted (see Figure 5.8).

The difference between Alphonso's *Ms. Marvel* and the *Ms. Marvel* of 2006 is an expression of framing, as addressed in Chapter Three. Since there is no actual set, as there is in the production of television or film, the comic artist has full rein over what to depict and how to depict it. "Female characters are only insatiable, barely-dressed aliens and strippers because someone decided to make them that way," critiques Hudson. "In the end, what matters is what you choose to show people and how you show them, not the reasons you make up to justify it." In this case, Kamala rejects the sexy, thigh-high boots in favor of a new costume crafted from a rejected burkini, a modest swimsuit purchased for her by her mother.

The symbolism here—that Kamala's new superhuman identity is still connected to her family and culture—is just one of many ways that Wilson interweaves meaning into this coming of age story. According to Paul Findley, author of *Silent No More: Confronting American's False Images of Islam*, her new costume falls well within respectable Muslim dress. "Muslim women rarely appear in public places with their forearms or calves of their legs bare" (129) One of Findley's interviewees explains that "Islam has never decreed a certain 'traditional' type of dress. Of the costumes you have observed among Muslims worldwide, the common denominator is an absence of excessive, attention-baiting exposure of the body" (Findley 129). The new *Ms. Marvel* costume reflects the modesty that is deeply relevant to Kamala's heritage, but is also

compelling within the context of mainstream comics. In this work, the creators of the new Ms. Marvel have turned the focus away from the female protagonist's sexual value, and towards the development and expression of her personality.

Edmund's final concern, which coincides with the work of both Kramer and Simone, is that strong superheroines be allowed to wield their power responsibly, rather than have it undermined by collateral damage, kidnapping, sexual violence or depowering. Unlike Carol Danvers, who according to *Women in Refrigerators* has been "mind-controlled, impregnated by rape, [and had her] powers and memories stolen," within fifteen issues Kamala is never thusly undermined (Simone). In *Ms. Marvel #14* she is briefly kidnapped by her would-be love interest, Kamran, but she breaks out of her cell upon waking and escapes in issue *#15*. She is not tortured, molested, or held for ransom; in fact, in her final confrontation with Kamran she recognizes the abusive nature of this relationship and acknowledges that she deserves more. "He's going to hit me," she thinks to herself. "He's actually going to hit me. Suddenly, I feel calm. I don't feel ashamed anymore, or guilty. I realize something very important. He might look like a handsome prince, but he's actually a total **buttwipe**" (*Ms. Marvel #15*, emphasis in original). Kamala breaks with a traditional path for female protagonists by recognizing that a relationship will not be the source of her identity: "I gave him power over me. Power over what I do, power over my identity," she thinks. "No More." (*Ms. Marvel #15*). Rather than be undermined by a male character, the new Ms. Marvel overwhelms him, physically defeating Kamran and escaping her attackers.

Kamala even proves herself an asset to Wolverine in crossover issues *#6* and *#7*, taking his advice as an older, more experienced hero but never deferring to his capability

over her own. In fact, she saves his life from a giant sewer alligator, and even gives him a piggy back ride when he is wounded. “Never tell anybody about this, **ever**,” he says. “Sorry, I’ve already pictagrammed this whole sad episode,” she quips in reply (*Ms. Marvel* #7). Ultimately her powers allow the two superheroes to successfully rescue a teenager who has been harnessed as a human battery, something the wounded Wolverine could not have accomplished on his own. As such, her success as an improved cultural and feminist icon in mainstream comics is incontestable.

But Kamala also has worthwhile interactions with other female characters. As the Bechdel-Wallace Test suggests, and as is discussed further in Chapter Three, a narrative ought to only be considered gender-equal if two female characters are able to have a conversation together about something other than a male character. Although *Ms. Marvel* does not achieve this in every single issue, the regular conversations between Kamala and her mother, Nakia, Zoe, Queen Medusa and (both real and imaginary) Captain Marvel balance the narrative so that Kamala is not only concerned with her interactions with men. In fact, these conversations are often the source of Kamala’s most important moments in the formation of her identity; Queen Medusa explains her new, Inhuman identity, and learning to keep her secret identity from her mother, while also telling as much of the truth as possible, exemplifies the development of Kamala’s moral compass under pressure. In the most recent issue of *Ms. Marvel*, Kamala actually revealed her secret identity to her mother, but her mother already knows (*Ms. Marvel* #18). The intelligent women that Wilson involves as secondary characters act as role models for Kamala as she develops into a woman and a superheroine, and inform the way she chooses to treat her multifaceted identity.

Another important part of *Ms. Marvel*'s feminist power is borne out of her religious identity. Her heritage is the most obvious and most commented upon aspect of her character, much more than her existence as an effective young superheroine. The reception has been almost universally positive, especially from other Muslim Americans. "As a Muslim Pakistani-American, it is nigh impossible for me to find a character with my background who wasn't just a throwaway or...something worse," wrote a fan to Kamala's co-creator Sana Amanat via "Holla @ Kamala," the letter section printed in the back of many of the *Ms. Marvel* issues.

The dialogue, the interactions with her parents, the characterization, the thoughts and feelings—I learned some things about MYSELF from reading about Kamala's relationship with her family. . . . In a world where I often feel as though people like me are ignored unless something...terrible happens, Kamala Khan taking up the mantle of Ms. Marvel is a breath of fresh air and an example of diversification done right. She's Pakistani-American and Muslim, yes, but it's not the source of her struggle—it's the foundation of her identity. (Shahbaz)

Shahbaz's letter expresses the feeling of many Muslims, Pakistani-Americans, and underrepresented minority comics readers. Jasmin, a fan whose letter is published in *Ms. Marvel #15*, felt that Kamala Khan represents a positive movement in comics more generally. "Also, as an awkward Hispanic teenager, I'm completely overjoyed when any good character arrives to punch stereotypes in the face. I can relate when Kamala has trouble fitting in with the other kids or when her parents are overprotective" (Jasmin). Yamini Marley, a self-proclaimed "(brown!) daughter of South Asian immigrants who

grew up in Singapore,” explains that “My life was and is a constant battle between the culture of my heritage, and the ‘western ideals’ that seem to be everywhere that isn’t home. So, despite our difference, I relate so much to Kamala. Her desire to fit in, to just be ‘normal,’ like everyone else.” Just as the feminist political movement evolved from the struggle of the white woman into the diverse social-equity movement of the twenty-first century, *Ms. Marvel* is the expression of an evolving feminism in comics.

Tahir’s concern that Kamala Khan’s religious identity be represented positively is understandable. “Let’s be real: The word ‘Muslim’ has certain connotations attached to it. We all know what they are,” she asserts, “and when you say ‘Muslim *girl*,’ you’ve got a whole different set of misconceptions.” However, it appears that the *Ms. Marvel* team has been extremely attentive in their approach, no doubt because both Wilson and Amanat are Muslims themselves. In fact, there are a number of truly compelling ways in which *Ms. Marvel* addresses the complexity of growing up American, female, and Muslim in America.

In a collection of personal essays published in 2011, Maria Ebrahimji and Zahra Suratwala provide a compelling point of connection for the dual identity of American Muslim women. The book, entitled *I Speak for Myself: American Women on Being Muslim*, includes chapters written by Pakistani, African, and Libyan Muslims among others. Time and time again the women’s stories repeat recurring experiences.

“Throughout my life, I have never felt like my ethnicity or my religion clashed with the love I have for America,” writes Yusra Tekbali, a Libyan-American woman born in California (Ebrahimji and Suratwala 5). “My Muslim identity defined half of my personality, character, and individuality, while the other half has been determined by my

experience growing up as an American. The balance of the two makes me who I am,” notes Nousheen Yousuf-Sadiq (22). “This country has witness my birth, shaped my perceptions, and socialized my behavior,” contributes Hadia Mubarak (66). But after 9/11 she and others were ostracized. “Although we had been born and raised in this country and knew no other place to call home, I and other American Muslims came to realize for the first time that we were not perceived as American in the eyes of a large swath of the general public. . . They saw my foreignness before they accepted me as an American” (23). The prejudice against Muslim Americans continues to exist today in both overt and subtle ways, but is not the only struggle that young Muslim Americans face. As a teenager Samaa Abdurraqib recalls being “angry because I wasn’t allowed to attend parties and concerts like the rest of my friends. And I remember thinking how unfair and cruel it was that I wasn’t allowed to have boyfriends . . . So I rebelled in small ways: I cut classes, I skipped school, I lied and I moped” (121). These women reflect on a recurring theme in immigrant narratives: the pursuit of balance. “I found myself having to adjust to American teenage culture while still conforming to the dress code and lifestyle of a conservative Muslim girl” recalls Nyla Hashmi, a Pakistani American (143). Born in the United States, these women express the same culturally informed coming-of-age narrative which Wilson depicts in *Ms. Marvel*.

For instance, Kamala engages with this struggle to find balance over and over again in the text. Sniffing bacon is an expression of this struggle as much as are her more explicit thoughts. Her American friends eat bacon and go to parties while she is forbidden. “It’s just a party,” she complains inwardly in *Ms. Marvel #1* after her parents refuse her request to go. “One party. It’s not like I’m asking their permission to snort

cocaine. I've always done what they ask me to do . . . aren't I allowed to do anything my way? Just once? Why am I the only one who gets signed out of health class? . . . Why am I stuck with the weird holidays? Everybody else gets to be normal." Like the teenage Abdurraqib and Kamala's creator Amanat (who is the source of the bacon-sniffing idiosyncrasy), Kamala feels excluded from her American peers because of the restrictions of her cultural and religious identity. She even complains about her name, which means "perfection," in Arabic (*Ms. Marvel #5*). But "You don't have to be someone else to impress anybody," her father tells her. "You are perfect just the way you are" (*Ms. Marvel #5*).

Wilson reinforces this lesson in the narrative over and over again. When Kamala sneaks out of the house to go to the party, she discovers that her American peers are even more ignorant than they seem. "Oh my God! Kamala! Hi!" says Zoe when Kamala appears. "I thought you weren't allowed to hang with us heathens on the weekends! I thought you were, like, locked up!" (*Ms. Marvel #1*). "Who was I kidding?" Kamala thinks later. "I can never be one of them, no matter how hard I try. I'll always be poor Kamala with the weird food rules and the crazy family" (*Ms. Marvel #1*).

But Kamala learns that she does not have to change in order to be worthwhile. As she stands in the transformative Terrigen cloud and speaks to her hallucinations of the Avengers, she grasps the theme that will continue to pervade the *Ms. Marvel* series: "You thought that if you disobeyed your parents—your culture, your religion—your classmates

would accept you. What happened instead?” asks Captain America.<sup>1</sup>“They—they laughed at me,” Kamala responds. “Zoe thought that because I snuck out, it was okay for her to make fun of my family. Like, Kamala’s finally seen the light and kicked the dumb inferior brown people and their rules to the curb” (*Ms. Marvel #1*). Wilson makes it explicit that this is not what is motivating Kamala, just as none of the contributors to *I Speak for Myself* wanted to completely disown their cultural heritages. Like every adolescent, Kamala and these other Muslim American women express the search for their *personal* identity, in this case a balance between their ancestors and their Americanism. This theme persists throughout all fifteen issues of *Ms. Marvel*, as Kamala struggles to balance her home life, her school life, and her new responsibilities as a superheroine.

Like Wilson, *Ms. Marvel’s* artists consistently portray the balance between her many identities. The cover of *Ms. Marvel #1* (Figure 5.9) shows her carrying school books in a t-shirt—identifying her as both a comic book fan and a student in an English-speaking country, while “the bracelet [is] her name written in Arabic, [and] the scarf around her neck is representative of her culture and faith” (The All-New Ms. Marvel). Since her new costume is actually assembled from the modest Muslim burkini, both outfits visually juxtapose her identity as a “conservative Muslim girl,” with the lightning bolt borrowed from American comic culture (see Figure 5.10). In many panels she appears dressed as any other American teenager, but the artists give equally positive representations of Kamala in traditional Pakistani dress, sometimes with jeans underneath

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<sup>1</sup>As a side note, it is interesting that Wilson allows Kamala to speak for herself here, rather than having Steve Rogers (Captain America) explain her identity. Even as a figment of her imagination he does not dictate.

(see Figure 5.11). These visual transitions reinforce the narrative's message that Kamala's identity is a juxtaposition of influences.

A particularly interesting aspect of the cultural representation in the narrative which might go underappreciated is the representation of Kamala's best friend Nakia. Identified as Turkish by Wilson, Nakia wears a hijab any time she is in public. "Your headscarf is so pretty, Kiki," says the ignorant Zoe in *Ms. Marvel #1*. "But I mean...nobody pressured you to start wearing it, right? Your father or somebody? Nobody's going to like, honor kill you? I'm just concerned." The personal narratives of *I Speak for Myself* express nearly identical experiences. "The cloth I wear on my head is mistaken for an attempt to cling to a foreign cultural tradition paired with a reluctance to assimilate. Ironically, hijab is still not fully accepted in my parents' culture," writes Mubarak (Ebrahimji and Suratwala 68). This is ultimately how Nakia responds to Zoe in *Ms. Marvel #1*. "Actually, my dad wants me to take it off. He thinks it's a phase," she says. Contrary to popular belief, many young Muslim women are discouraged from wearing hijab by their families, and those that do often make the choice as a personal commitment to God. Yousuf-Sadiq, who adopted the practice in her freshman year of college, writes about how wearing hijab became an unexpectedly feminist practice for her:

. . . I literally began to feel my internal qualities being pushed to the fore and my external qualities being tossed aside. This unfamiliar feeling was frightening because, like most young Americans, I had no idea who I was. I truly believed the headscarf, being such a visible marker of my faith, would bring more attention to my physical appearance—not who I was on

the inside. Instead, the opposite occurred. I was forced to discover myself because I was no longer hiding behind a facade of cute clothes and new hairstyles. (Ebrahimji and Suratwala 21)

For many Muslim women, wearing hijab is an assertion of personal power, allowing them to choose who is allowed to see them fully, and when. Since Nakia is actually Turkish, and—as a Turkish Muslim fan pointed out—“the hijab isn’t a part of Turkish culture,” Nakia’s choice to cover her head is reinforced as a personal act of commitment (ilgin).<sup>2</sup>

Wilson’s delicate treatment of this issue no doubt comes from her own Muslim faith. Her choice to include a woman wearing hijab (but not to make it Kamala) was thoughtful: “I’ve been wearing *hijab* for ten years, but I wanted to make her representative of Muslim woman at large, and the majority does not wear *hijab*” (Ali). Muslim women, like all other types of Americans, represent a broad spectrum. “What is the ideal Muslim woman?” Amira Choueiki asks herself (Ebrahimji and Suratwala 140). “I don’t know. Does she cover her hair? Does she date like her friends do? Can she wear what she wants? There’s nothing in the Qur’an that says: . . . ‘Here’s how to grow up in the United States’” (140-1). As these women assert, the fact that Kamala does not wear hijab does not make her any more or less Muslim than Nakia, who does. It just makes them different.

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<sup>2</sup>There may be an interesting comparison to be drawn between the adoption of wearing hijab and a woman’s pregnancy. As some in *I Speak for Myself* have asserted, hijab is a personal expression of faith that becomes public because it is physically obvious. Just as feminists have complained about the public’s assumption that a woman’s pregnancy is suitable for discussion because it is obvious, some Muslim women have objected to comments made about their personal expressions of faith (not to mention associated profiling).

Ultimately Zoe's concern over Nakia's headscarf and her suggestion that Kamala might be locked away from "heathens" on weekends expresses a subtle racism towards Muslim Americans that persists because of ignorance. "Americans seem wont to cite severe discrimination in some Muslim countries as evidence that Islam condones mistreatment of women. Such discrimination . . . exists, but Islamic leaders insist that any form of female oppression violates the doctrines and rules of Islam. Most discrimination arises from brutish customs and male chauvinism, not from the Quran or the Sunnah" (Findley 127). The idea that these women are suppressed because of their religion is a persistent misunderstanding, which the visible aspects of their faith are often seen to represent.

The resounding support for Kamala Khan and the new *Ms. Marvel* series (which has now been nominated for several Eisner awards and remains on the bestseller list) reinforces the fact that although Kamala's cultural background is rarely reflected in mainstream comics, her story is still the story of a misfit American. In the back pages of *Ms. Marvel #2*, Amanat responds to the overwhelmingly positive reception of the premiere issue: "By now you should have realized that this book isn't a marketing ploy, nor does it come with any political agendas. It's just a story about a young girl maneuvering her way to adulthood, who also happens to reflect the changing face of America." America is a melting pot, and her people (almost) all immigrants. As such, Kamala's story is an American story, and her struggle for compromise as much a bildungsroman as it is a metaphor for our country's history. "She's a teenager and she's struggling to find her own path," Axel Alonso said of Kamala (qtd in Tahir, "Ms. Marvel: Why Does"). "She's imbued with great power," and, much like Spider-man and other

heroes before her, “she learns the responsibility that comes with it. That’s a universal story. The fact that she’s female and first generation American, continuously struggling with the values and authority of her parents, gives the story extra nuance, but it’s a universal human story.” Wilson said something similar in her interview with AltMuslim: “This is the story about a Muslim American teen, but also about teens everywhere—trying to figure themselves out, live with their families, trying to manage all of the stuff that comes with being a high school student. It’s a very universal story with superpowers thrown in” (Ali). Although the perspective of Marvel’s creative team might be challenged as merely good PR, the responses from readers act as confirmation. “As to Ms. Marvel, it delights and exceeds my expectations,” wrote Fred Adams, a 66 year old male from Manhattan and lifelong comic fan. “It is at once classic Marvel storytelling in the Peter Parker tradition of relatable teenage angst and something really original for most popular fiction” (*Ms. Marvel #11*). Winston Lake, a “fifty-year-old man who’s been reading comics for at least forty of those years,” claims that “Ms. Khan is the secret to *Ms. Marvel’s* success, and complains that

Too often in super-powered books the power is more interesting than the person. Kamala is an interesting character in her own right. Even without Ms. Marvel’s powers . . . she’d still be smart and funny and geeky. She’d still love her family and be grappling with her identity and her faith. In short, she is an amazing character and I’d read Kamala’s book even if she wasn’t Ms. Marvel. (*Ms. Marvel #13*)

The fact that enthusiasm for the series comes from so many different perspectives and levels of privilege speaks to the success of the series. “Every single one of us, no matter

the categories we've inherited, we must unfold our own myth. And it won't be easy," said Amanat in her TedxTeen talk last year. "We're constantly navigating, reimagining, and reinventing others' expectations of ourselves every day. But with every word we write in the narrative of our own lives we come closer to uncovering what's beneath our own masks." This universal human identity makes Kamala justifiably identifiable to other ABCD's ("American Born Confused Desi's") like Rubi Nicholas, who "grew up the daughter of a doctor in central Pennsylvania with exactly zero other brown kids my age," and claims that "Everything I wanted had to do with popularity and being blonde" (*Ms. Marvel #11*), but also to anyone who has ever felt like an outsider.

Since America is a country populated by people who left homelands where they did not "fit in," it is no wonder that Kamala's tale feels so relatable. The veracity of Kamala Khan's claim to her Americanism is espoused by the ease with which she has become an American hero, and her existence will surely further the feminist desire for equality. At current writing *Ms. Marvel #1* has been reprinted an almost unheard of seven times, and is even more popular digitally (Johnston).

Finally, it is worth measuring *Ms. Marvel's* effectiveness as a whole, a task well accomplished by comparing it with Jorgenson and Lechan's ten criteria for female protagonists in graphic novels, as discussed in Chapter Three. Kamala Kahn is certainly "the main or secondary character," and she certainly "take[s] an active role in the development of the story" (Jorgensen and Lechan 277). As she carries Wolverine to safety and spearheads her own crime fighting, she "take[s] on non-traditional roles," and in her exploration of her identity she represents underrepresented "backgrounds, relationships and ethnicities" (278). By rejecting Kamran, Kamala also proves that she is

“not defined exclusively by [her] relationships,” and her escape from him and his cohorts without aide shows that she does not remain “dependent on others” (279-80). In addition, although Kamala’s foes pose a physical threat to her (as is fundamental to the superhero world), Kamala is never mistreated by sexual violence, and the suggestion that Kamran might hit her is “taken seriously and dealt with thoughtfully” (Jorgensen and Lechan 281). Finally, Kamala is never “hyper-sexualized,” especially in any way designed “to titillate the reader” (282). By all counts, *Ms. Marvel* is a perfect example of a positive protagonist, and worthy of being adopted into the graphic novels collections of librarians like Jorgensen and Lechan.

In light of her success thus far, it will be interesting to see how Kamala Khan emerges from the world-destroying *Secret Wars* event which occurred this summer and continues today; as the title of *Ms. Marvel #1* indicates, Ms. Marvel is “No Normal” superheroine, but if Marvel continues to produce powerful, diverse and unobjectified superheroines, there might just be hope for that to change.

## CHAPTER SIX:

## STORM

One of the most interesting female solo titles to emerge last year was the eleven-issue *Storm*, written by Greg Pak and illustrated by Victor Ibañez, Al Barrionuevo, and Scott Hepburn. Unlike Kamala Khan and the Goddess of Thunder, Ororo Monroe has existed in comics since the 1970s. The *Storm* series of 2014 marked her first appearance in what was planned to be an ongoing solo title, however, and therefore provides an excellent opportunity to examine the character of one of the first Black superheroines in mainstream comics. *Newsarama* called the first volume “a masterpiece of Ororo rediscovering who she is and what she cares about,” but the series also exemplifies encouraging improvements in the creation of both female and minority characters in comic books more generally (Pepose).

As Storm has always been an important minority and feminist figure within comics, her long overdue solo series was greatly anticipated. “[A]ll of her groundbreaking adventures have led her to this,” writes Brett White in an article on *Storm*’s release in April of 2014. “Despite being a massively popular character for almost 40 years, Storm has never had an ongoing series.”<sup>1</sup> Pak told White that “The world is ready and hungry for this kind of book,” ascribing the timing as “a particularly great time for the launch given the success Marvel has had recently launching solo series,

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<sup>1</sup> Since it is true, as Edmunds asserts, that male members of teams such as Captain America and Wolverine are allowed their own series through which to increase their fan base, the fact that Storm has been relegated to team titles since her inception is both unfair and unfortunate, particularly in light of data that shows that Storm “appears in *The Uncanny X-Men* more than any other character other than Wolverine” (Darowski, *X-Men* 67).

particularly with diverse casts and female leads” (White). This last part is certainly true; Marvel has made an obvious effort in the last two years to diversify their solo series, especially in terms of strong female characters. Certainly *Thor* and *Ms. Marvel* are excellent examples of this attempt, and although *Storm* may go no further than the 11 issues published between 2014 and spring of 2015, it also incorporates a number of nuanced females.

A bit of history provides a useful context for the study of Pak’s *Storm*. It is incontestable that Ororo Munroe emerged from a dearth of both Black and female characters at Marvel; the X-Men were originally created in 1963, and the first 66 issues not only featured an all-white team, but also only one female member, Marvel Girl. After the failure of the all-white *X-Men* to create a strong following, Marvel made plans to reboot the series (Darowski, *X-Men 2*). Storm appeared for the first time alongside a new cast of characters in *Giant-Size X-Men #1*, produced in 1975.

As the first female Black superhero to appear in mainstream comic books, Storm represented an important gain for diversity within comics (Knight 278). And she was not the only new minority figure introduced in 1975; Claremont helped to introduce many new characters,

consisting of a teleporting blue German elf (Nightcrawler), a muscular Russian who could transform his body into ‘living steel’ (Colossus) . . . an Irish ex-villain with a powerful ‘sonic scream’ (Banshee), a mutant Apache with speed, agility and tracking skills (Thunderbird—soon killed off), and a psychopathic pint-sized Canadian with unbreakable

‘adamantium’ bones, plus claws which popped out of his knuckles  
(Wolverine). (Reynolds 85)

David Allan Duncan, a contributor to Darowski’s collection of essays, *The Ages of the X-Men: Essays on the Children of Atom in Changing Times*, calls this a “hypercorrection of [the previous] omission of characters of color and Non-American characters” (Darowski, *X-Men* 41). Given that statistical survey of the team proves that it has been constructed primarily of white members for the entirety of its existence, such a hypercorrection seems justified (Darowski, *X-Men* 137).

Claremont’s run on the *X-Men* comics was incredibly successful, and is inarguably responsible for the lasting popularity of the X-Men even today. His work popularized the treatment of the X-Men as a group of outsiders suitable as a metaphor for any number of subjugated social groups. After the “hypercorrection” introducing new minority characters, “The core group quickly became Cyclops, Wolverine, Storm, Nightcrawler, Banshee, and Colossus. Storm was the sole character of color in the group, and Nightcrawler was the first mutant who could not easily pass as a normal human,” due to his blue skin (Darowski, *Ages* 42). Claremont emphasized the way their special abilities engendered fear in and segregation from normal, powerless humans. “[T]he whole theme of the X-Men—the isolation of mutants and their alienation from ‘normal’ society—can be read as a parable of the alienation of any minority,” claims Richard Reynolds, author of *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (79). “To use Martin Luther King’s idea,” Claremont once told *The New York Times*, “judge them by the content of their character, not the color of their skin. . . . Or the number of arms they have” (Foege). The alignment of the X-Men with subjugated groups is easy to spot, particularly in a

moment of American history that emphasized the need for equal rights. “Just think about the variety of racial backgrounds and national origins among mutants,” challenges Jeremy Pierce, a contributor to *X-Men and Philosophy* (187). “Mutants come from virtually every racial background, and thus the group of all mutants is quite diverse genetically. Now add all of the genetic modifications that cause their powers, and you find far more diversity than occurs in any one race” (Pierce 187). For Storm her diversity is complicated also by her gender, so that her identity as a female, an African American, and a mutant represent three intersecting aspects of “Otherness.”<sup>2</sup>

Appropriately, Pak’s *Storm* is a no holds barred, in medias res immersion into the ethically complex balance of Ororo Munroe’s life. Before we even open the graphic novel (which collects *Storm #1-5*), we are met with an intersection of all three aspects of Storm’s “Otherness”: Pak titled the work “Make it Rain,” a clever alignment of Storm’s mutant ability with Black rap culture. The phrase “Make it Rain” is originally attributed to a song by Fat Joe, wherein the speaker “make[s] it rain” money over the strippers in a strip club. This phrase has assumed an overwhelming popularity within youth culture and garnered a positive association with wealth, but Amanda Hess, a writer for the *Washington City Paper*, denotes another possible meaning: the showering of a female sexual partner with semen. With these connotations Pak has introduced a multifaceted analogy for Storm’s power (and by extension, identity): Her mutant ability to control the weather is here aligned with her racial identity vis-a-vis her alignment with a wealthy,

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<sup>2</sup> Here I use “Otherness,” as a reference to white Western male control over the hegemony, and classification of anyone outside of these categories as “Other.” This issue, beautifully articulated by Toni Morrison in *Playing the Dark*, accepts “whiteness” as an unspoken cultural norm. For further exposition of “whiteness” as norm, see Chapter One.

Black rap artist, and the phrase's association with male virility emphasizes her gender by way of transgression. With a few words Pak suggests that the new Storm is an immensely powerful, gender atypical woman with a strong black heritage.

Problematically, this alignment may also contribute to the connotation of black female sexuality with deviance and hypersexuality. This "exoticism" has been discussed at length by scholars such as bell hooks, and Patricia Collins, among others, whom Jeffrey Brown uses to demonstrate that "the power of exoticism is still a dominant trope played out on the body of the female Other, especially in visual mediums, in a manner that reduces her to a racially charged sex object and a readily consumable body" (170). Unfortunately, since dominant ideology has a tendency to cause rippling effects by which females associate socially prescribed gender assumptions in order to "be accepted," such stereotypes have a tendency to persist (Collins 129). Mulvey's 'male gaze' comes into play here, as well as Gill's analysis of sexuality and power.

As discussed in Chapter One, Black rap music culture is one of the worst proponents of this self-perpetuating sexualization. In this case, the hypersexual connotation of Storm "making it rain" suggests that she should be seen as the protagonist of the referenced music video, perhaps claiming to present a "Black wom[an] who [is] sexually liberated," but sourced in a music culture that perpetuates the idea of women as "sexual objects, their bodies on sale for male enjoyment" (Collins 126). Though it is unlikely that Pak fully considered the implications of his witty title when he produced *Storm: Volume 1: Make it Rain*, the title serves here as the reader's first contact with this visual and rhetorical representation of a popular culture icon.

Before analyzing *Storm* for its feminist performativity, which will be approached first visually and second rhetorically, those unfamiliar with the X-Men may benefit from some knowledge of Ororo Munroe's visual and rhetorical history. For one, Storm's sexual identity has developed throughout her existence; when Storm was first introduced, and for a large part of her early appearances, she had no potential love interests, though occasionally she was flirted with by other members of her team. Unfortunately, she did not lack exoticizing. "Asexual (even for a superheroine) she sports perhaps the most revealing and fetishistic black costume of any 1970s Marvel or DC character," criticizes Reynolds (94). Perhaps her narrative characterization as "the least spontaneous and most withdrawn of the X-Men" depicts the efforts of her creators to subvert the hypersexualized stereotypes often ascribed to Black women, even if they were somewhat forced to sexualize her visually per the traditions of the genre.

Certainly in character Ororo has usually been lady-like, which Collins describes as in direct opposition to the idea of the "Black bitch" or Jezebel (138). She does not fall into any of the common stereotypes of "bitchiness, promiscuity and abundant fertility," as Collins describes it (138). In fact, Storm's sense of professionalism and her capability as a leader have always projected her respectability, even if, perhaps, her costume did not. A visual examination of the *Storm* series of 2014 reveals a tenuous relationship between Storm's femininity and power, but also the same positive ideological intentions which have improved the representation of Marvel's females in titles such as *Thor* and *Ms. Marvel*.

But unlike these brand new characters, Storm has a long history that informs her representation today. Since the 1970s she has been depicted in a variety of costumes,

some more positive than others. In the first pages of *Storm #1*, Storm is shown in street clothes, in this case a white skirt, yellow tank top and black jacket. Within moments the need for her to jump into action inspires her to transform her clothing into her new X-Men costume, a body-length black lycra number with cape wings (see Figure 6.1). Except for what is known in the comics industry as a “boob window,” and an equivalently open back, Storm is covered from head to toe (Goodrum 102). The fact that the costume is reminiscent of a tuxedo with white gloves, white chest piece, and white detailing juxtaposes a masculine association with the very present reality of her breasts. “The boob window sexualizes and regulates the way the character is seen,” says Michael Goodrum, who analyzes a similar costume choice for Power Girl. “[W]indows are, after all, meant to be looked through” (103). Since Ibañez’s Storm has again adopted the mohawk for which she became famous in the 1980s, it is possible that this unusual hairstyle is a reflection of a tendency to juxtapose traditionally masculine and feminine traits in heroines? Scholars such as Nathan Miczo have criticized this pursuit of “balance” as one paltry justification for the objectification of women in mainstream comics. In Chapter Two the exploration of Kerri Johnson, Leah Lurye, and Jonathan Freeman’s work betrays a tendency for heroes to change physically when donning their costumes; though Storm’s figure does not appear to become thinner or better endowed when she transforms, the inclusion of a “boob window” in an otherwise modest costume may be a technique to reinforce a traditional femininity in the wake of her increased masculinity.

In comparison with previous manifestations of Storm, Ibañez’s representation of Munroe is unusual. Storm’s first costume, originally created by Dave Cockrum for an African American superheroine named the Black Cat (who was scrapped because of her

resemblance to characters like Tigra), was essentially a swimsuit (Luzifer). Although in some depictions the presence of her poncho-like cape serves to desexualize her costume a bit, artists have always enjoyed the ability to portray Storm naked or nearly naked, with her genitals covered by her hair or the wind she controls (see Figure 6.2). Nudity is chosen often for female characters in comics; in a study conducted of eighteen graphic novels, Jessica Zellers found that “only 6% of all males were suggestively clad, partially clad, or naked; while of all the females, 38% were suggestively clad, partially clad, or naked” (34). In Storm’s case, it is interesting that she was so heavily sexualized for the reader at a time when she refused romantic entanglements. According to Darowski, “Claremont argues that this [nudity] is to honor her African heritage, which has different sets of modesty” (*X-Men* 68). This was a much more effective argument when Storm was first created, as she was brought to America directly from her home in Kenya, where she was being worshipped as a goddess.

As Claremont explained in an interview,

You have this strikingly beautiful woman, but she’s from a totally different cultural and ethnic background thrown into the heart of upper and middle class suburbia . . . ‘Why do I have to wear a bathing suit?’ . . . Part of her is thinking ‘This is really silly’ and then part of her is thinking, ‘Well, I’m in Rome I must do as the Romans do, no matter how absurd it is.’ Again, you think about why one wears clothes, the standard base rationales are as a defense against the weather, the environment. As a reflection of perceived societal rules and modesty. As an expression of character. In Storm’s case the environmental part of the equation isn’t

there [because she is comfortable in all forms of weather] . . . so then it's a matter of a moral choice or a fashion choice, and then what? Because you're talking Northeast Africa versus suburban New York. (Qtd in Darowski 79)

This is a compelling argument for the inclusion of partial nudity, at least in Storm's early experiences as an immigrant to upstate New York. But the validity of her nudity is undermined by the repetition with which Storm's artists return to depictions of her underclothed, suggesting that it functions (at least partially) to entice the reader. Certainly a woman's choice to be naked can be an empowering one, but in some cases hypersexualized images undermine the motion of the narrative. Could this hypersexualized portrayal be, as Edmunds suggests, a move by Marvel to substitute "their position of love interest for another character with that of being a love interest for the reader" (Edmunds 212)? It mars the empowerment of a superheroine that was not introduced as a love interest if her value is still deeply related to her body. Problematically, such depictions also reproduce the aforementioned association of hypersexuality with Black women, as few white superheroines are depicted similarly. As David Brothers criticizes, "Imagery that prizes sexualization above all else—especially when that doesn't make sense for the story—can pull you out of the moment and stop your reading experience dead." Is Claremont's explanation enough to justify the depiction of Storm, nude, in a rain cloud? What, exactly, does that contribute to the story? Do depictions like this help to create a sense of her personal identity? Though the abolishment of the comics code has allowed for increased depiction of nudity, violence,

sexuality, and language in mainstream comics, refraining from an overuse of sexualized depictions allows sexuality to be introduced to the narrative with intentionality.

In some ways, Ibañez and the other artists who produced *Storm* do not succeed at desexualizing the depictions of their protagonist as well as do the artists for *Thor* and *Ms. Marvel*. Perhaps that is partially bound up in her history as an African goddess, as Claremont asserted, and partially a result of her age—criteria that differentiate her from these peers—or due to the fact that most of the visual character design for *Storm* was inherited from work done in 2013. Still, the artists make several excellent contributions in this series. First, they have emphasized the continuing legacy of Storm’s iconic mohawk, which was briefly a part of her character’s identity in the 1980s. Since Storm is re-examining and redefining her identity after the loss and regaining of her powers, a marriage and a divorce, it feels an appropriate time to return to her most wild look.

In an interview Pak pointed out that “The Mohawk makes Storm instantly recognizable. The Mohawk also first appeared during a time when Storm was searching for and reinventing herself. It signifies a certain attitude and unpredictability and drama that I’m definitely inspired by as we launch this book” (White). As Storm thematically engages with the different versions of herself over the years, the mohawk signifies the same ideological wildness that appeared in her characterization in the 1980s. Designed by artist Paul Smith, Storm’s punk look premiered in *Uncanny X-Men #173* after she began spending a lot of time with Yukio, Wolverine’s ninja friend, who returns in Pak’s narrative. Many of Storm’s teammates objected to the new look, feeling that it made her less attractive (see Figure 6.3) Graeme McMillan, a writer for *The Hollywood Reporter*,

explores the evolution and return of Storm's mohawk in the recent article "X-Men: Why Storm's Mohawk Goes Beyond Style." He writes,

eight years into her superhero career, it would have been unrealistic for her to be quite as forgiving and naive about the world as she had been initially, after all, and the second Storm was harder, stronger, and perhaps a little more suspicious of the world than when she first appeared. The mohawk and outfit change [of 1983] was merely a signifier to underscore that this was no longer the character as she had debuted,

and "at least for the remainder of Claremont's time writing *X-Men* . . . when Storm went through a shift in status or personality, her hair would change" (McMillan).

In this case, the return to her mohawk came in 2013's *Wolverine and the X-Men* #24, just after the dissolution of her marriage to the Black Panther. The haircut takes place just before they share their first kiss, and just after her acceptance of the role of Headmistress of the Jean Grey School for Higher Learning. "It represents a huge turning point for this character that's really interesting," Pak said at the New York Comic Con (Pak, "Interview"). The choice to retain Storm's mohawk in her solo series is a visual choice true to the character's evolving identity and distinct from her identity as a typically attractive woman. If anything, the mohawk serves to drastically increase the gender transgressive identity of Storm.

One of the most interesting ways in which the artists desexualize Munroe in *Storm* is her range of facial expressions, which venture surprisingly often into unattractive territory. This is unusual for the representation of any superheroine, but since the mohawk does little to soften Storm's facial features, these images are aggressively

atypical for mainstream comics. Storm is even portrayed in issue #2 speaking with her mouth full of hamburger, forcefully reminding the reader that she is not always an object of beauty (see Figure 6.4) This is especially true in *Storm #4*, which depicts Ororo processing Wolverine's death in a very human (but hardly beautiful) way (see Figure 6.5). Ibañez's work clearly displays her emotions (especially anger and pain), realistically depicting a human ugliness uncommon in the heroine context. Scott Hepburn and David Baldeon, who take over the art in *Storm #3*, achieve a similar effect through caricature-like drawings which make Ororo's mohawk appear even more aggressive. And Barrionuevo, who rather disappointingly begins his run on *Storm* with issue #6 by depicting Storm in the shower on the very first page (see Figure 6.6), later adopts this technique himself, showing Storm at work in several unattractive shots, including perhaps the strangest in the series which appears as the first panel of *Storm #9* (see Figure 6.7).

Since the theme of the series examines the many facets of Ororo's identity and her decisions about who she desires to become, it is important that her emotions are available to the reader in such a way. "There's a tendency in comics—superhero comics in particular—for artists to make female characters *pretty* instead of *interesting*," writes Rachel Edidin in her review of *Storm #4*. "That's not to say a character can't be both—but there are serious limits to what you can do with facial expressions and body language if you're not willing to let women look anything other than model-perfect," (Edidin, "Review"). Ibañez and his peers mostly avoid this common trap, and therefore create effective portrayals of Storm's complicated and varied emotions which encourage the reader to empathize with her as a person, not just as a beautiful female.

Notably, when Storm's figure is featured more prominently, Ibañez and the others artists for *Storm* minimize the sexual value of the images in several different ways. First, the visual team often juxtaposes what cleavage there is against Ororo's strongly emotive and strangely contorted expression (see Figure 6.8). This could be read as an homage to some sort of balance between typical and atypical gender qualities, but certainly serves to desexualize some of the most sexual images in the series. Other sequences which involve a full or partial view of Storm's "boob window" do so at a time when Storm is at the height of her physical and mutant powers, a trick which emphasizes her power and feels natural to the narrative, rather than disruptive to it (see Figure 6.9). Although there are very few images of Storm from behind that do not feature her cape in a retention of her modesty, the one that approaches a sexual depiction is again linked to her extreme power as a mutant (see Figure 6.10). As such it is extremely difficult to find images in this series that could be described as "cheesecake," which Brothers tactfully defines as an image which exists purely "to get your rocks off." Truly, series only falls slightly short of the positivity of *Thor* and *Ms. Marvel* because of a few unfortunate choices on the part of the illustrators.

As already mentioned, the inclusion of a shower scene in *Storm #6* threatens the integrity of the narrative by distracting readers from Storm's thoughts (see Figure 6.6). Other less positive depictions include work by Baldeon and Hepburn for *Storm #3*, which emphasizes the low-rise of Ororo's pants, and the visually jarring images by Ibañez in *Storm #10* and *#11*, where Storm's most powerful foe restrains her in a mass of living flesh reminiscent of forms of Japanese tentacle erotica. Finally, amongst all the images of Storm in the series the most traditionally objectifying image appears on the cover of Issue

#3 (see Figure 6.11). The cover shows a more detailed depiction of Storm's obviously thin costume than is shown anywhere else, but also a more voluptuous Ororo than any of the drawings within any of the issues. This cover art is consistent with the production of mainstream comics more generally; as already noted in Chapter One, CoCCA's survey of comic books found that the rate of objectification in cover art is much higher and much more consistent than that of interior panels. In this case a consideration of Storm on this cover in conversation with the history of Black feminism suggests that the negativity of this portrayal has more significance to a Black female audience than a similar portrayal of a white woman to a white audience. The reason for this lies in the increased size of Storm's features, in comparison with every other visual portrayal. The cover to *Storm #3* emphasizes large chest and backside, a form associated with the black female body and black female sexuality since the ogling of Saartjie Baartman, "the so-called Hottentot Venus," in the nineteenth century (Nash 27). Just as Baartman was used as the foundation for European "science" to explore the perceived physical and sexual differences of Black women, images like the cover of *Storm #3* enter a larger narrative concerned with the representation of Black women historically. Although the portrayal of Storm as a buxom woman could be written as a positive characteristic bound in her athleticism, it is sexualized here where the smaller, less "exotic" figure within each issue is not. Perhaps the fact that only one out of eleven covers of *Storm* (or roughly 9%) depicts her in an obviously objectified way continues to mark an improvement in mainstream comics overall, and perhaps the fact that most of the other visuals ignore her backside altogether suggests that the producers are aware of the social perpetuation of black women's

association with large backsides; either way, the sexualized portrayal of Ororo on this cover is unfortunate in comparison with the unblemished visuals of both *Thor* and *Ms. Marvel*.

It is worth mentioning that the images I have addressed here do not make up the majority of the series. In fact, most of the images of Storm are unequivocally positive, and utilize a number of the same techniques that Dauterman and Alphona and their associates bring to *Thor* and *Ms. Marvel*. For instance, most of Storm's work is shown in distance and action shots (see Figure 6.12 for just one example) or the frames are cropped in ways that leave her attractive form out of them altogether. But the visual team for *Storm* also portrays her participating in difficult labor by hand, even though the narrative never mentions it, contributing to a work that emphasizes her strength and her character rather than her body (see Figures 6.13).

In addition, Storm's body is not "exoticized," (other than on the cover of *Storm* #3) as is common in the visual representation of women of color. As Edidin astutely points out in her review of *Storm* #4, "the adherence to specific and narrow cultural standards for beauty have contributed to the significant problem of whitewashing in superhero books." Fortunately for African American readers, this is not the case with the Storm series. "Her face—and this is a *tremendous* and frustrating rarity for Storm—*isn't anglicized*" (Edidin, "Review"). There is a tendency in Western culture to emphasize the beauty of Black women with light skin tones or Aryan features, while caricaturizing or "wounding" women with darker skin with negative visual representations (Dicker 142).

By depicting Storm as a strong, beautiful, and dark-skinned Black woman, the artists for *Storm* provide a too-rare example of Black as beautiful (but not hypersexual) in popular culture (see Figure 6.14).

“When you are a Black female who has to deal with a greater deal of adversity than a man or a white woman, I love turning to comics to see a woman with brown skin like me kicking ass and taking names,” writes an un-named author in review of Storm on *BlackGirlNerds.com*. “We don’t see find many stories out there that speak to our experiences, and when we do it is empowering and uplifting in every way to our inner core.” It is important that positive minority representations like those in *Ms. Marvel* and *Storm* are perpetuated and reproduced, so that hegemonically subjugated groups can become a greater part of reflective and socializing popular culture.

In depth analysis of Pak’s narrative suggests that he is just as attentive to positively representing Storm’s nuanced identity as are the members of *Storm*’s visual team. That the theme of the book is her search for her identity at this tumultuous moment of her life allows Pak the platform to examine all of the many women that Storm has been since her inception, and to emphasize how her choices define who she is today. When Pak inherited the character in 2014 she had already undergone a series of serious changes, in particular her divorce from the Black Panther, her move from Wakanda back to suburban New York, her acceptance of the role of headmistress, and the cutting of her hair. “I’m writing a story about a divorced woman, and that’s an unusual and totally relevant great thing to be able to write about,” Pak told Edidin (Pak, “Interview”). This is particularly true because the relationship between superheroines and marriage has been troubled since Sue Storm (the Invisible Woman) and Reed Richards (Mister Fantastic)

became the first married superhero couple in 1965 (Edmunds 212). The failure of the Scarlet Witch's marriage was famously used as the foundation for her transition to supervillainy, but less dramatically, marriage has often become a way for female heroes to be sidelined to the domestic sphere, as occurred with both Sue Storm and Spider-Woman at separate times. Storm, who became a supporting figure in the *Black Panther* comics after her marriage, fell prey to the same subjugation; even the story of her introduction to her husband was altered in 2008 to allow T'Challa (the Black Panther) to rescue her, rather than vice versa (Knight 285). An article for *Comicvine.com* in August of 2012 explored the inception, progression, and termination of the marriage and its shortcomings. "What is frustrating isn't just the way their marriage ended but also the events that led up to the end of the only black marriage in Marvel comics. These two could have had a great marriage. They could have worked together . . . This marriage had the potential to succeed and to be strong. It had the potential to flourish and be interesting. It could have been a great example, but in the end it all fell flat" ("Should"). This failure of Marvel storytellers ultimately reinforces Collins' claim that "Black women can never become fully empowered in a context that harms Black men, and Black men can never become fully empowered in a society in which Black women cannot fully flourish as human beings" (7). Instead of emphasizing that their power as a couple was greater than the sum of their individual parts, their marriage as portrayed in *Black Panther* allowed Storm's primary identity to become enmeshed with her role as T'Challa's wife, and her eventual decision to fight on the side of the X-Men – a separation of her identity from their marriage—became T'Challa's motivation for divorce. In other words, this new series reclaims Storm's autonomy.

Pak recognizes that the baggage of her prior position accompanies her into her new role. “As a queen there are certain things you can and can’t do, there are certain restrictions . . . and she was working hard to try and fulfill her responsibilities, but now that she’s free of that . . . What’s she gonna do now that she’s free to cut loose?” (Pak, “Interview”). “She’s in a position where she might actually go whole-hog.” *Storm* depicts an Ororo doing just that.

There are many ways in which this racialized narrative reads positively, both in relation to Black superhero history specifically and to Black literature more generally.<sup>3</sup> First, Storm exemplifies a power level unusual for a minority figure in mainstream comics. Phillip Cunningham points out in his article “The Absence of Black Supervillains in Mainstream Comics,” that “black superheroes are predominantly streetlevel vigilantes,” and “their villains are limited in terms of power and purpose” (53). Cunningham suggests that this limitation in scope is because of the tendency in mainstream comics to utilize minority figures “as a means to address social issues that its primarily white, nigh invulnerable superheroes could not,” especially narratives dealing with the difficulty of life in the ghetto (54). Adilifu Nama agrees: “Whether obscure or prominent, the first wave of black superheroes in DC and Marvel comics drew their *raison d’etre* from racial conflict” (36). In general, black superheroes in mainstream comics were generally focused on small crime within their individual neighborhoods.

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<sup>3</sup> Here and subsequently I reference the “racialized narrative” to denote the “Otherness” inherent in mainstream comics with minority protagonists. I believe this is useful for two reasons, first, to denote the rarity of narratives with a minority protagonist, and second to remind the reader of the author’s identity as a Korean American male, perhaps less excluded from the white male hegemony than the Black female he is writing.

Christian Davenport reaches similar conclusions in “The Brother Might be Made of Steel but He Sure Ain’t Super . . . Man,” where he contrasts the capabilities of the Black Man of Steel with his white predecessor, Superman. “One way of investigating superheroes,” writes Davenport, “is to gauge the variety of these threats: the conclusion being that a superhero’s worth/importance could be gauged by the variety of things confronted” (9). While Superman has obviously battled an extensive repertoire of villains and been involved in any number of fantastic situations, “*Steel* primarily addresses four topics: random violence, guns, drugs, and crime. The black Superman thus addresses problems of general concern to inner city areas, and perhaps the problems most relevant to other individuals of African descent” (9). Both the Man of Steel’s abilities and antagonists are limited in scope in comparison with the white superhero from whom he takes his name, expressing mainstream comics’ consistent subjugation of minority figures, including heroes.

Storm has always broken these molds and continues to do so. “Endowed with phenomenal combat skills and the amazing ability to control the weather, she was among the most powerful of the X-Men,” writes Knight (278). In one of the most famous storylines in X-Men continuity, Storm showed her capability *even without powers* by defeating Cyclops in combat in order to take leadership of the team (*Uncanny X-Men* #201 [Jan 1986]). Like Superman, Storm has battled innumerable villains on earth and in space over her history, even becoming infected with an alien egg and attempting “to commit suicide when she found out that she had been impregnated” (Knight 286). Clearly her history has not been limited to the fates of the other black superheroes, and Pak is true to this anomaly in his series, too.

First, Storm is able to show her powers at an enormous scale throughout the narrative. The opening scene shows her using a series of tornadoes to combat the tsunami approaching the beaches of Santo Marco. “You can’t . . . you can’t stop a *tsunami*,” says her teammate Henry incredulously when he realizes what Storm is about to attempt. “Actually,” she says, “I *can*.” (*Storm #1*). Despite the doubts of her male teammate and the pain it induces in her body, Storm controls a visually stunning series of tornadoes to quiet the waters.

Her amazing power is emphasized often in the narrative, as she tows a sabotaged plane for five hours with a broken ankle (*Storm #6*) and saves the citizens on the Golden Gate bridge from an enormous wave. A particularly impressive display of her power comes in the climax of *Storm #11*, when Storm manages to save her friends from vicious attacks in three different parts of the world: New York City, Mexico, and Kenya (see Figure 6.15). But Pak also pays homage to her history as a character by also showing her as powerful without her powers, particularly when Storm escapes FBI agents in *Storm #6*. “I trained as a master thief in the streets of Cairo,” she narrates as she escapes her bonds. “I freed myself from these manacles five minutes ago. And I learned hand-to-hand combat from the best there is. You can steal my powers . . . break my ankle . . . but unless you kill me, you’ll never stop me” (*Storm #7*). As the story returns to different aspects of her identity, Pak consistently depicts a Black hero of unusual power.

If, as Davenport asserts, it is useful to analyze Storm’s villains in order to gauge her importance, then the fact that she battles a series of villains of different threat levels throughout the eleven issues separates her from predecessors such as the Man of Steel. Though she deals with criminals in *Storm #4* and *#5*, most of Storm’s antagonists are

villains on a global scale, affecting both the relocation of the people of Santo Marco and the attacks on the civilians of San Francisco. The final villain of the series is a part-organic part-inorganic android anomaly of Storm's old student Kenji, who attacked the X-Men in an earlier series. His grotesque form and control over zombie-like monsters across the globe makes him easily of supervillain level, though Storm eventually reaches his good heart and saves him from death.

Another way that Pak's narrative differentiates itself from other mainstream comics is through his success in making racial minorities feel less like minorities within the text. Though it may seem simple, he accomplishes this by including a number of minority supporting characters in Ororo's story. Here Pak succeeds where other X-Men comics have failed. "The [X-Men do] clearly and frequently use the concept of "mutants" to explore issues of prejudice," writes Darowski. "But, in the end, [the series] frequently uses white male heroes supported by female characters to battle racial and ethnic minorities while employing that metaphor. This doesn't necessarily limit the power of the metaphor . . . But it does mean that the literal use of female and minority characters is uncomfortably aligned with old stereotypes" (*X-Men* 155). As Adam Capitanio points out, "*The Uncanny X-Men* was problematic in that it homogenized a set of concerns related to racism and displaced them onto a set of largely white characters, removing the ability of minority characters to take part in their own struggles" (Darowski, *Ages* 153). Though the X-Men have often failed to include interesting and involved representatives of minorities, *Storm*, thankfully, does not.

In *Storm #1*, for instance, Ororo interacts with the people of Santo Marco, and in *Storm #3* she returns to Kenya to help the locals secure water for planting crops. In both

cases Pak's narrative avoids K. Sue Jewell's four stereotypical portrayals of Black women—the mammy, the Aunt Jemima, the Sapphire and the Jezebel (39)—but also avoids what Fredrik Strömberg calls the “seven different basic Black stereotypes that have been established in stories mostly aimed at a white public” (29). Gleaned from a chronological study entitled *Black Images In the Comics*, Strömberg defines these stereotypes thusly:

I might call the first stereotype simply—for want of a better word—the **native**, namely the unflattering portrayal of native aborigines as childish savages both silly and dangerous. Next comes the **tom**, an eternally servile, humble, and forgiving soul who never questions the superiority of the white ruling class . . . The third stereotype is the **coon**—a roguish, comedic figure known for his mischievous pranks and idiosyncratic approach to the English language; the fourth stereotype is the **piccaninny**—a younger version of the coon, prone to leaps of the imagination and “funny” bursts of overenthusiasm. The fifth type is the **tragic mulatto**, particularly common as a topic in films—a person (most often female) sexually torn between Black and white worlds, her sensual nature making her an “acceptable” object for white desire even as her Black legacy dooms her to tragedy. The sixth common stereotype is the **mammy** . . . The seventh and final stereotype, the **buck** is a strong, violent and rebellious “bad Negro”—most often functioning as a cautionary example. (Strömberg 30, emphasis in original)

Unlike these depictions—which date back to the first visual representations of the “Other” in visual culture and which persist in other forms of popular culture today<sup>4</sup>—all of the Black men and women in Pak’s narrative are empowered and intelligent, with the possible exception of the evil leader of the army. In fact, after Storm is unfairly arrested for allegedly endangering a corrupt politician, the people of Santo Marco follow Storm’s incarceration on television and remark on her innocence (*Storm #6*). Similarly, the Kenyan farmer Noah explains how the corrupt political hierarchy in Kenya has resulted in the shut-down of their water lines (*Storm #3*). “Someone slept with the wrong person? Someone stole a cow? Who knows . . . we just have to work out another plan.” In New York a large group of humans protests the capture of Storm and the subsequent manhunt, and the majority of them are Black (*Storm #7*). Of course Storm’s co-workers are not to be forgotten, including the Beast and Nightcrawler, who are both blue, the ninja Yukio, the Native American Forge and the Japanese Kenji. Storm also has a meaningful interaction with the Black female in charge of the FBI, telling her “Let’s work together here, Agent Robertson,” and saying, “You took this job to help people, didn’t you? That’s why I do what I do, too” (*Storm #7*). In *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond*, Jewell claims that negative representations of black women in the media are perpetuating stereotypes that limit the ability of Black women to succeed. As such, she states emphatically that “Sister-helping-sister informal systems must be revitalized,” in order for change to occur (206). The unspoken conversation between these two Black women

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<sup>4</sup> I would argue that Tyler Perry is particularly culpable for reproducing some of these stereotypes, although they persist in many depictions of Black Americans in film and television to this day, particularly in stories which feature a single minority character and either expect them to be representative of their culture as a whole, or to wield some sort of magical power.

in power recognizes their ascension through systems that perpetually undermine them based on their difference from the hegemony, and seems to create a sense of mutual understanding. Agent Robertson ultimately takes Storm's words seriously, perhaps even allowing her to escape. In *Storm #8* she reveals that critical evidence against Storm has been lost, and the conversation implies it may have been lost intentionally: "Yeah, it's weird. No one in the office can find video of anything illegal you allegedly did." Ultimately the interaction of all of these interesting and nuanced minority characters reflects the Black feminist ideal that "African American women, along with others who seek race, gender, and class equality, must embrace the precept that unity does not require uniformity" (Jewell 207).

This ideology breathes through the interaction of Pak's primary and secondary minority figures, and climaxes in the saving of Kenji. Only by working together and inviting him to be a part of their community are Storm and her friends able to lead him away from evil, literally marking their unity by the touch of their hands. The X-Men are, Bukatman asserts, "something more than a battle unit and clearly [take] the form of an idealized, alternative society—one in which all members, and therefore no members, are outcasts" (73). Pak's involvement of other nuanced minority characters recalls the message of inclusion common to all X-Men comics, is mirrored in the series' theme and the defeat of the final boss, and helps to make *Storm* a particularly effective racialized narrative.

In fact, the Pak's narrative affords Storm the opportunity to consider her role in the perpetuation of and also the undermining of marginalization, both as a woman with superhuman powers and as the headmistress of a school with established practices. Since

their inception the X-Men have had a long history of “blazing in, fixing things according to how they believe things ought to be fixed,” a practice which essentially devalues the often suppressed individuals they aim to protect (Pak Interview). Storm’s new responsibility as headmistress of the Jean Grey School makes her the authority figure, and she struggles between the traditional “X-Men” way of doing things, and her own personal feminist values.

In *Storm #1* this conflict appears after she saves Santo Marco from the tsunami and is effectively thrown out of the country by the local, corrupt militia. Though Storm’s personal values require that she stay and fight an army she could certainly overpower, her responsibility to the Jean Grey school demands that she act politically, instead. Though it frustrates Storm at the time, she ignores it until her student Marisol calls her a “sell-out.” The criticism clearly makes an impact with Storm. When Marisol goes further, suggesting that Storm has acted as a “sell-out” in other ways, she is focused on the way that Storm has supported a suppressive environment: “What right do you have to pull kids out of their homes and communities to bring them here to indoctrinate them in mutant ideology?” she challenges. “The whole thing is framed as people of tremendous privilege gifting things to the poor . . . Is that what Professor Xavier told you? And yet here you are. Years later. Doing whatever they tell you.” Though Marisol’s words are aggressive, her criticism is spot-on: X-Men are often able to convince people of the value of their ideologies, but no one should be forced to accept “help” if they do not want it. In taking up the leadership of the school, Storm has been asked to subjugate her own feminist values.

Ultimately Storm realizes that she does not want to be the type of headmistress who blindly follows the ideologies of her predecessors, and returns Marisol to her family. But as soon as issue #2 she repeats her folly when she attacks Callisto in the subway to “save” a series of “kidnapped teenagers” from her. “Who the hell are you?” demands one of the teenage girls when Storm bursts into their home. “Just leave us alone!” (*Storm #2*). “Don’t you recognize her, Angie?” chides Callisto sarcastically. “She’s Storm. The Goddess. Here to save you. So go on. Follow her back to the surface. And all your problems will magically vanish” (*Storm #2*). Here Storm discovers that she has broken the law—hacking into phone lines and personal records—to track down teenagers who have found a better—if less traditional—life underground. Although it means leaving children in the hands of her enemy, Callisto, Storm again realizes that the ways of the X-Men are not infallible.

Time and time again Pak reiterates this message; Ororo finds herself in a similar situation in her work in Kenya in the third issue. Though she has been asked to come to the aid of the citizens there, the farmer Noah resents her involvement: “So we’ll always have these foreigners here, showing us the way?” he asks Forge (*Storm #3*). Storm’s acknowledgment that “I could never tell you how you should *adapt*,” puts the power back into the hands of the people, and again denounces the impulse to “[fix] things according to how they believe things ought to be fixed.”

Storm’s engagement with these traditional X-Men tactics exposes her search for her own set of values. Pak’s treatment of this ideology is also a return to one aspect of her identity, in this case her origin story as an X-Man. Like Marisol and the others, Storm was removed from her home (where she was worshipped as a goddess) by Professor

Xavier, presumably in the interest of helping her. “Storm does not know she is a mutant and accepts her role as a goddess until Professor Xavier comes and explains to her a reality that replaces her traditional beliefs” (Darowski, *X-Men* 67). Marisol’s judgment in *Storm #1* makes it clear to Ororo that she has taken on the role of Professor X in an aspect of the X-Men’s history that Darowski rightly calls “uncomfortably close to classic imperialism, depicting the natives as an ignorant and naive group with no conception of the modern world” (67). In Storm’s case, “A white man must come in and teach Storm about the world and her place in it,” but in Marisol’s case the effect is the same: someone from outside her community in Mexico has come to inform her that she does not understand her place in the world. In short, Storm has become “the man,” and needs to reassert her value in the equality of all humanity.

When asked point blank if the storylines of these first issues were intended to be distinctly meaningful for Storm as a minority figure, Pak confirmed: “It’s not an accident, in the sense that we pick certain stories to pursue. We could be doing anything. But once you take Storm and have her go back to Kenya, it gives us a chance for her to tackle these things in as nuanced a way as we can accomplish in twenty pages” (Pak, “Interview”). He elaborated to point out that “Storm, a black woman who has a history in both the United States and Africa . . . would have a different perspective . . . than some other heroes might” (Pak, “Interview”). In particular, Storm’s struggle with the longstanding ideology of the X-Men school reflects a dual battle of identity, between her mutant otherness and her responsibilities to that community, and her racial otherness and the ideological resonance of imperialism.

Though these major themes could be enough to garner the narrative a positive review, there are other, smaller inclusions in the work which also speak to its worth. In his introduction to *Black Images in the Comics*, Charles Johnson writes that he

long[s]—as an American, a cartoonist, and a writer—for the day when my countrymen will accept and broadly support stories about black characters that are complex, original . . . risk taking, free of stereotypes, and *not* about race or victimization. Stories in which a character who *just happens to be black* is the emblematic, archetypal figure in which we—all of us—invest our dreams, imaginings, and sense of adventure about the vast possibilities for what humans can be and do. (Strömberg 17, emphasis mine).

Although analysis thus far may make this suggestion feel contradictory, one of the interesting aspects of Pak's storytelling is his ability to both incorporate race positively and simultaneously call little attention to it.

Indeed, although Ororo's racial identity is very much an important part of her positivity as a character, close reading betrays that her skin color is never mentioned in the narrative; the closest Pak comes is his insertion of an old woman on an airplane in *Storm #6*, who adamantly exclaims that she is “not going to fly on a plane with a mutant!” This racism works as subtext to the narrative, but does not reference Storm's Blackness specifically. Similarly, when Forge tells Noah in *Storm #3* that he relates to a resistance to imperialism on the grounds of being Native American, Ororo does not identify by her racial identity—or her identity as the goddess of his country—despite the fact that either of these arguments might defend her involvement in Kenya. Instead she

says, “You’re right—I’m not part of your village” (*Storm* #3). That Pak includes this important aspect of Ororo’s identity but does not rely on it to sustain his narrative allows Munroe to emerge as a hero for many reasons, but in many ways one who just happens to be black.

As Pak succeeds in his portrayal of a Black woman, so also does he succeed in his portrayal of a woman. Just as with *Thor* and *Ms. Marvel*, this new series projects a strong female character who is in many ways transgressive to the mainstream comics community. One simple yet compelling element of Pak’s narrative is his treatment of female communication. As Bechdel’s characters asserted in *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1985), narratives without gender bias ought to “One . . . have at least two women in it who Two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man.” This ought to be particularly true of a narrative framed around a female protagonist, although as the examination of *Thor* in the previous chapter reveals, there is still a persistent tendency in mainstream comics to return the narrative to the action of the men. By contrast, almost every issue of the 11-issue *Storm* (2014) incorporates all 3 qualifications: In *Storm* #1 Ororo has a conversation with her student about whether or not she has ideologically “sold out,” in #2 she discusses runaways with her old enemy Callisto, in issue #3 she speaks with an old Kenyan woman about her time as a goddess, in #4 and #5 she and Yukio discuss the movements of the four criminal clans, and so on. In fact, the only issue that does not feature a conversation between two women about something other than a man is *Storm* #9, where Storm joins her old teammate Gambit to plumb a dungeon that only a “master thief” could survive. Given that there are other speaking, thinking, and feeling females present in that issue, and that Storm is performing some wonderfully

demanding physical feats, the lack of a conversation between two females in #9 does not make the narrative feel overly preferential towards the male characters. As such, *Storm* appears to be one of the most Bechdel-Wallace-positive female solo series produced last year.<sup>5</sup>

Another feminist element of the narrative is Storm's consistent autonomy. As the former leader of the X-Men, Storm has rarely lacked for an opinion, but throughout the eleven issues of *Storm* she refuses to subjugate herself to anyone. Though there are times (as with Yukio in Issues #4 and #5) that this means a difference of opinion between her and another female, most often Storm rejects the ideas of the men around her—Beast, who tries to convince her not to return to Santo Marco; Noah and Forge, who each have their own ideas for how to solve the water crisis in Kenya; and Davis Harmon, who decides to destroy her after she interferes with his business. In each case she refuses to be controlled: she returns to Santo Marco because the citizens need immediate help, she convinces Noah and Forge to work together in order to create a new solution, and she defeats the evil mastermind's plans with a feminist subtext: "This isn't like Santo Marco," Harmon tells her. "You can't get ahead of the wave now. They're all going to die . . . and the headlines will read, 'Storm Kills Thousands.' And I can get back to work in peace." In many ways his glee reads like the chauvinism of a business man who sees equality in the workplace as a hindrance. "Shut up, Harmon. . . ." Storm tells him in response. "I'm working now." Again and again the narrative reinforces her capability

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<sup>5</sup> It may actually be the most Bechdel-Wallace-positive female solo series produced last year, but only an exhaustive study of comics could say.

with little reference to her gender, effectively translating the concept of a superhero who “just happens to be black” to a superheroine who just happens to be a woman (Strömberg 17).

This mirrors Miczo’s expressed concern that “a female superhero [should be able] to stand on her own, [and] reach her potential, without having her femininity become a liability” (171). In particular she should be able to be a hero without being unduly *undermined* by her gender, as Deborah Whaley examines in “Black Cat Got Your Tongue?” and as the “Women in Refrigerators” phenomenon marks as unduly common in mainstream comics. In particular the tendency of writers to put superheroines in traumatic situations unlikely or impossible for male heroes (impregnation, as with Storm, rape and impregnation, as happened to Carol Danvers in the 1980s, sex slavery, as with Red Guardian) marks the limitation of females within the genre. A narrative in which a heroine can be a hero without an overemphasis on her gender is remarkably rare; this is what Pak has accomplished with his work on *Storm*, a story about a hero’s quest for identity *which just happens to include her identity as a woman*.

There are a few possible exceptions to this tendency, however, where Storm’s femininity enters the narrative through her relationships. First, critics have recognized Storm’s assumption of a somewhat maternal role since her inception in the *X-Men*. On the one hand she is deeply connected to Mother Nature, and on the other she left her life as a goddess to take Professor X’s invitation to “a world—and people who may fear [her], hate [her]—but people who need [her] nonetheless” (D’Amore 1241-2). As Laura D’Amore explores in *Accidental Supermom*, “What [Professor X] offered sounded a lot like motherhood, and the love-hate relationship of total dependence between mother and

child,” and her decision to leave her position as a Goddess for a decidedly less attractive offer is somewhat hard to believe (D’Amore 1242). After she is recruited, Ororo’s presence on the team is further maternalized by her peacemaking between Cyclops and Wolverine, for one, and her work as the X-Men team leader and Headmistress of the Jean Grey school both express a certain ‘mother hen’ characterization. Ororo particularly took an interest in the mentoring of Kitty Pride, whom she affectionately called “Kitten” (Mahn 122). Like many aspects of Storm’s character referenced throughout the series, Pak returns to this theme at both the beginning and end of his narrative, depicting Storm struggling with—and finally accepting—her role as a surrogate mother.

Called back from Santo Marco in *Storm #1* for interfering in a politically complicated situation, Ororo is called a “sell-out” by her student Marisol. Angry at her own inability to help the citizens of Santo Marco, and less so at her student for her insubordination, Storm scares the girl. This is an extraordinarily hostile reaction that would never be acceptable in another school environment. By the end of the issue, however, Storm recognizes the validity of Marisol’s argument and the emotion bound up in her critique and apologizes, causing Marisol to blush. This apology changes the nature of their relationship, and Marisol later calls the Jean Grey School in *Storm #9* to check on Ororo. Given that Marisol’s own father is shown debasing Ororo in *Storm #7*, Marisol’s continued loyalty suggests she holds her headmistress in even greater esteem than her father.

Although there are many visual representations of Storm’s maternity, particularly in recurring pictures of her interacting with Black children, she is also shown greeted enthusiastically by her students on her return in *Storm #10*. Her protection of the school

expresses itself in an undeniably parental way, but the climax of this maternalism occurs with the introduction of Kenji in *Storm #10* and *#11*. Although Kenji has previously posed a threat within X-Men continuity, Storm offers him protection and comforts him before bed (see Figure 6.16). When he actually manifests as a villain, Storm refuses to give up on him despite the fact that he threatens her loved ones all over the world, instead using her affection for those people to give him the hope of acceptance into their mutant family. After her initial reaction to Marisol in *Storm #1* Ororo never fights her maternal impulses, thereby showing her acceptance (rather than rejection) of this traditional female role.

The second aspect of Pak's narrative which relies on her gender is her relationship with Logan (Wolverine). Although this relationship certainly should not be dependent upon her sex (and mainstream comics are increasingly incorporating LGBTQ figures into their publications) –and therefore it inserts a heteronormative element into an otherwise desexualized narrative—this relationship also provides a depiction of Storm that is more traditionally feminine than any other part of the series. The opening of *Storm #2* depicts her on a date with Logan at a bar, and incorporates both dancing and kissing. Similarly, she returns to New York at the end of the issue and kisses him on the cheek. In both scenes Logan suggests that Ororo might be a “bad girl,” one of the only places in the series in which her gender is referenced in dialogue. What is interesting about Pak's portrayal of Storm's personal life is that in both scenes she is clearly Logan's equal, sometimes even acting atypically; she asks him to dance, and although he pulls her in for a kiss she surprises him by returning the favor (see Figure 6.17). “Okay, you can go now,” she says. In the case of her return at the end of the issue, she returns from work and

literally knocks his hat off with her power. With subtext presenting a gender-swapped portrayal of a 1950s marriage, Logan is pictured as the one waiting at home, while Storm returns from a job she does not want to talk about. This is far from the unequal marriage she shares with the Black Panther, and is a strong representation of a balanced relationship in general.<sup>6</sup>

Aside from creating a heteronormative atmosphere in which to explore the idea of Storm's identity as a romantically active woman, this relationship is interesting in light of Storm's personal sexual history and racial identity. After their divorce, Ororo's ex-husband T'Challa gave her his blessing to date someone new, but begged her not to date Logan (Aaron and Lopez). Their kiss in *Wolverine and the X-Men #24* began the relationship sustained in *Storm*. Not only is it the first kiss in continuity after Munroe's divorce, this kiss (and the subsequent relationship) with Wolverine depicts the first time that Storm has been in a relationship with a white man; until now Storm's only romantic partners have been Forge, the Native American inventor we see in *Storm #3*, and T'Challa, her African ex-husband. Pak's choice to include this aspect of Storm's identity only compounds her importance as a Black female icon.

Though these aspects of her identity are more directly related to her physical sex, they do not detract from her autonomy. Her willing (and even happy) assumption of the duties at the Jean Grey School at the end of *Storm #11* emphasizes her feeling that "This is where I belong," a suggestion that the maternal aspects of her job are just as important to her identity as is the use of her powers. The fact that she never allows Logan to define what type of "girl" she is echoes this feminist propulsion, which over the course of *Storm*

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<sup>6</sup> The fact that she is almost a foot taller than him is a nice visual addition.

suggests that female heroes *can* exist outside of their traditional gender identities, as Miczo wonders, though not necessarily by ignoring them.

Since Pak utilizes this series to explore the many aspects of Ororo's identity since her inception in 1975, an analysis of the new series issue by issue provides excellent insight into the current impact as a popular representation of Black femininity, particularly as it compares to Storm's legacy overall. Collins writes, "Regardless of race, ethnicity, social class, citizenship status, and sexual orientation, all men and women encounter social norms about gender," but asserts that "For African Americans, the relationship between gender and race is intensified, producing a Black gender ideology that shapes ideas about Black masculinity and Black femininity" (6). By nature of its theme of identity, *Storm* is a conversation about the complicated relationship between gender and race, making a positive representation of each all the more important (Nash). As Nash identifies, Black feminism has consistently identified visual culture as a source of wounding for the Black female body, perhaps one that could be remedied by a "sustained counteraesthetic" (Nash 56). If this is true, stories like Pak's *Storm*, which consistently depicts Ororo Munroe in positive ways in both visual and narrative representation, could be the key to undermining stereotypical representations of Black women in the media.

That hope—that more works like *Storm* could move Western society away from the concept of "Otherness," versus "whiteness" — makes the cancellation of *Storm* the most disappointing aspect of the work. As of this writing the "ongoing" *Storm* series has officially been cancelled, with no plans of reprisal. Unfortunately even the ability of a talented creative team to produce a heroine who has evolved to be unhindered by her

gender and racial identity did not succeed at producing a series commercially viable enough to improve the diversity of mainstream comics long term, which means that *Ms. Marvel* will be Marvel's only minority female solo series on the market next year.

## CONCLUSION

In an interview on the *Women of Marvel* podcast in June of 2015, Sana Amanat, editor of *Ms. Marvel*, and Kelly Sue DeConnick, now leaving her five-year work as the writer of *Captain Marvel*, have an interesting exchange: “When people ask that question . . . obviously that question that we all hate, ‘How do you write a good, strong, female character?’” Amanat says “you just want to shake the person.” In response, DeConnick quips that “My pat answer is ‘Pretend they’re people’” (Stephens et al). After a laugh, DeConnick explores this issue further. She says,

The key to writing any character is to know them. You have to have a sense of who they are, what they want, what are their insecurities . . . I was talking to another person who asked me about writing Carol [Danvers who is Captain Marvel, and I said], . . . if it’s really difficult, if you’re having trouble finding her voice in your head, just write her like Chuck Yeager [a record setting Air Force Pilot] and don’t worry about it. And the question that I got after that was “Well then how am I just not writing a man in drag?” It utterly broke my heart, because there is this notion that as women we are somehow *so different* that there must be some *key*, like ‘Oh, there’s a single expression of femininity, and this is how you write it. But the thing is that there are as many expressions of femininity as there *are women*. And they will know that she is a woman *because she’s a*

*woman*. Don't *worry* about it. . . . Write about what she wants, write about what is important to her, know the individual woman that you are writing.  
(Stephens et al)

The issue that Amanat and DeConnick raise here is a double standard that defines comic production even to this day. In the mainstream comic world, writing a white male is still treated like a baseline which requires no definition. By contrast, women, minorities, and other marginalized social groups are treated as though they can be reduced to a certain list of characteristics, which add up together to create a “strong female character” or a positive representation. But certainly study of comics history shows that few people have volunteered the appropriate recipe for positive representations of female and minority characters. In fact, it is much more common to find criticism, like Jill Lepore’s, which denounces the current state of mainstream comics without recognizing how much they have evolved. There are certainly qualities which are understood as aspects of a positive representation—such as an objectified physical form—which should be included in the intentional drafting of a “strong female character,” but as DeConnick points out, women are not aliens, and ought to be treated like people.

This concept—of treating women ‘like people’ in mainstream comic narratives— informs the entirety of this study. Male heroes tend to be treated like athletes, while female heroes “are regularly subjected to: swimsuits, thongs, strapless tops, tops with plunging necklines, stiletto heels, boob windows, belly windows, thigh highs, fishnets, bikinis, and—apparently all the rage lately—comics unzipped to their stomachs” (Thompson). Though there is nothing wrong with the portrayal of physical beauty,

heroines in mainstream comics are often under formed individuals, merely objects for visual consumption, and victims of sexualization which, as David Brothers claims, “can pull you out of the moment and stop your reading experience dead.” If mainstream comics are to become equal, it might be useful for more writers to imagine their heroines as male, if only so that the final product might help undermine the idea that men and women are inherently different.

Feminists have been fighting this outdated ideology of inherent difference for a long time. In Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, published in 1969, she “attacked social scientists who treat the culturally learned ‘female’ characteristics (passivity, etc) as ‘natural’” (Selden et al 131). Although cultural pressure to increase the availability of minority texts has perpetuated the idea that only members of a marginalized group are truly capable of speaking for that group, the idea that only those “who have undergone those specifically female life-experiences (ovulation, menstruation, parturition) . . . can speak of a woman’s life,” actually limits production of narratives which might help to reset the system (Selden et al 128). “In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes,” writes Audre Lorde in “Age, Race, Class, and Ex: Women Redefining Difference” (114). “Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions” (Lorde 115). Although it is important to encourage equal creative opportunities for representatives of all marginalized groups, the idea that only a member of a particular gender or racial identity can write about that experience contributes to the idea that each

group is too distinct to understand another's experience, but also undermines the concept of the individual as so unique that no one can truly understand their experience. There will never be a universal experience that unites every female, or every African American, though shared experiences of visual discrimination, as discussed in Chapters One and Two, are common to each group. We ought to be pushing for better representations of individuals (with a focus on neglected demographics such as women of color) rather than on trying to typify the characteristics of a "strong female character," or, by extension, a person of color.

And yet, it is valid to suggest that there are techniques which ought to be avoided in the pursuit of positive representations of any character. Certainly visual objectification should be avoided, as it detracts from the narrative and may contribute to the internalization of racism or the male gaze, or both. The exoticization of the "Other," should be carefully examined in any developing narrative, and the depiction of a woman as sexually autonomous ought to be evaluated for its potential to associate female sexual activity with power (Gill). These social assumptions, though not supported by our legislation, perpetuate unconscious ideas which shape the way we interact with each other as well as the way that we tell our stories. Avoiding the common stereotypes and pitfalls outlined in this study will not provide a perfect recipe to a 'strong female character,' as no living and breathing female can be reduced to a neat recipe of "Do's" or "Don'ts," but it could certainly reduce the likelihood of disaster; atypical characters are more likely to be three-dimensional because they cannot rely on tradition.

In the study of *Thor*, *Ms. Marvel*, and *Storm*, for instance, we find examples of strong women and strong women of color, but no examples of narratives which attempt

to speak for every member of a particular marginalized group. Part of each heroine's ideological power lies in their individuality, from the ill Jane Foster (Thor) to the complicated cultural backgrounds of both Ms. Marvel and Storm. All three are American, and all three are female, but though all three fight for justice and for ownership of their own identities, they are all very different. These are the positive female icons that mainstream comics have been lacking for so long, unfettered by the negative stereotypes that have long informed the portrayal of women—and particularly the portrayal of women of color—in the American media. Jason Aaron, G. Willow Wilson and Greg Pak are not all women, nor are they women of color, and yet the stories that they write feel authentic. By examining each heroine as an amalgam of her own personal history, the creators have produced narratives which speak to the human experience at a universal level. If mainstream comics can continue to apply this approach to their representation of marginalized protagonists moving forward, they could reform the genre beyond reprehension, and perhaps contribute to a positive revolution in the media more generally. We want to do more than “pretend” that people from different ethnic, cultural, and gender backgrounds are people. . . and our stories can help us change.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Figures

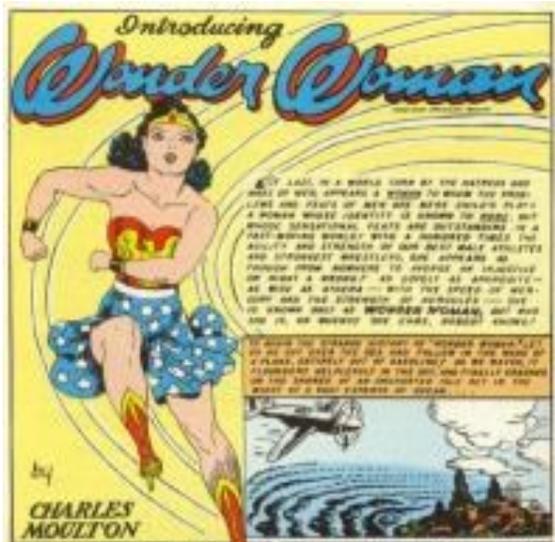


Figure 2.1: Wonder Woman  
All-Star Comics #8. DC Comics, 1941.

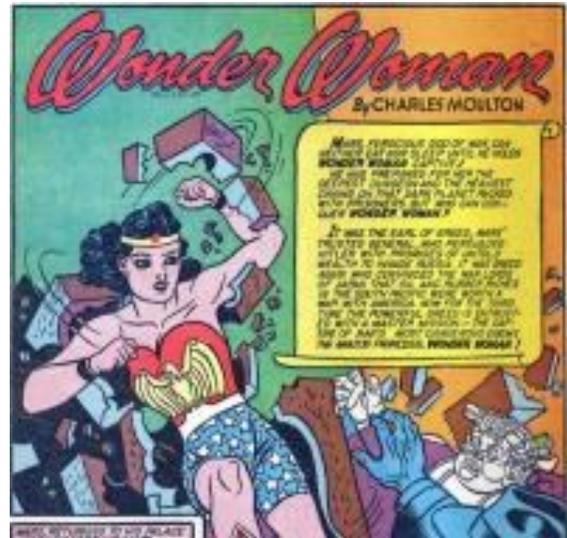


Figure 2.2: Wonder Woman in Shorts.  
Sensation Comics, Wonder Woman #1.  
DC Comics, 1942.

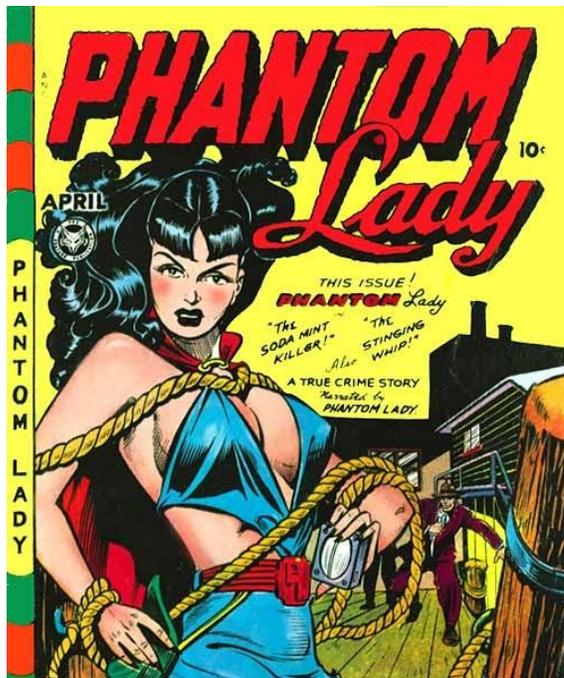


Figure 2.3: Good Girl Art.  
Baker, Clarence. *Phantom Lady* #17. Fox  
Feature Syndicate, 1947.

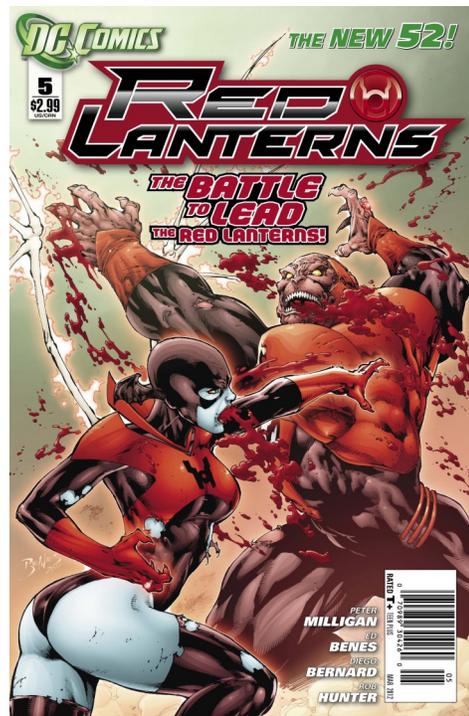


Figure 2.4: Bleez, “Brokeback” position  
Benes, Ed. *Red Lanterns* #5. DC Comics,  
2012.



Figure 2.5: Starfire.  
Rocafort, Kenneth. *Red Hood and the Outlaws #1*. DC Comics, 2011.

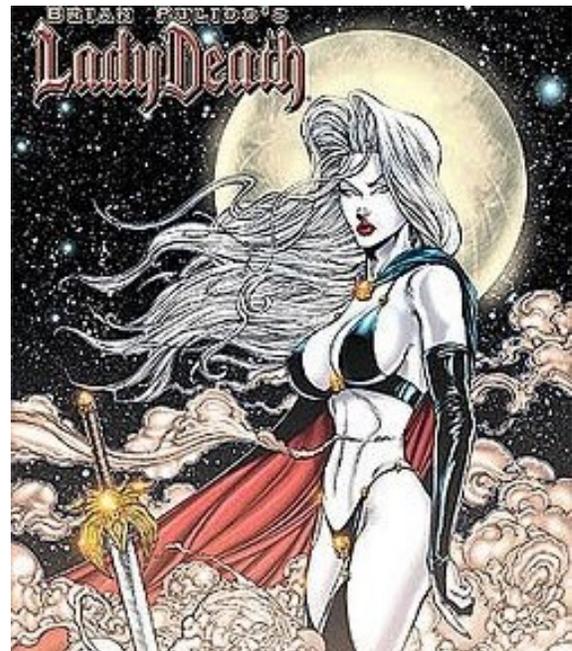


Figure 2.6: Bad Girl Art: Lady Death.  
Martin, Matt. *Lady Death: Dead Rising #1*. Avatar Press, 2004.

Artwork (c) Avatar Press, Inc.



Figure 2.7: X-Men Pool Party.  
Lee, Jim. *X-Men #1*. Marvel Comics, 1991.



Figure 2.8: Psylocke (British).  
Silvestri, Marc. *Uncanny X-Men* #232.  
New York: Marvel Comics, 1988.



Figure 2.9: Psylocke (Asian).  
Lee, Jim. *Marvel Illustrated: Swimsuit Issue* #1. Marvel Comics, 1992.



Figure 2.10: Starfire Initiating.  
Rocafort, Kenneth. *Red Hood and the Outlaws* #1. DC Comics, 2011.



Figure 2.11: Starfire Posing  
 Rocafort, Kenneth. *Red Hood and the Outlaws #1*. DC Comics, 2011.



Figure 2.12 Catwoman's Parts.  
 March, Guillem. *Catwoman #1*. DC Comics, 2011.



Still haven't seen her face

Figure 2.13: Catwoman in Part.  
March, Guillem. *Catwoman #1*. DC Comics, 2011.

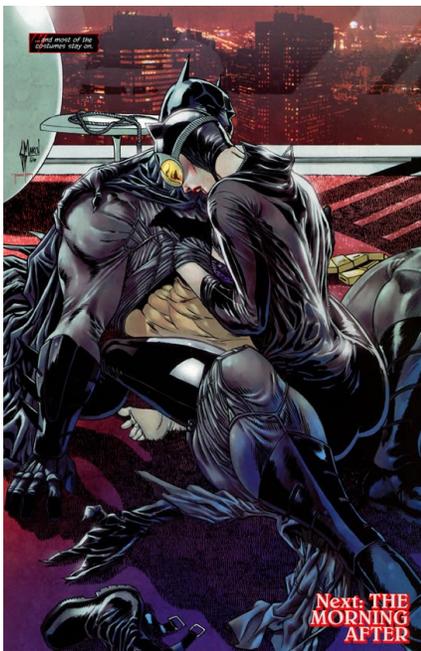


Figure 2.14: Batman and Catwoman.  
March, Guillem. *Catwoman #1*. DC Comics, 2011.



Figure 2.15: Star Sapphire and Green Lantern, cover image. Gibbons, Dave. *Green Lantern #18: Mystery of the Star Sapphire*. DC Comics, 2007.



Figure 4.1: Cover to *Thor #1*.  
Dauterman, Russell. *Thor #1*. New York:  
Marvel Comics, 2014. Print.



Figure 4.2: Page from *Thor #2*.  
Dauterman, Russell. *Thor #2*. New York:  
Marvel Comics, 2015. Print.



Figure 4.3: Spread from *Thor #7*.  
Dauterman, Russell. *Thor #7*. New York:  
Marvel Comics, 2015. Print.



Figure 4.4: Page from *Thor #5*.  
Dauterman, Russell. *Thor #5*. New York:  
Marvel Comics, 2015. Print.



Figure 4.5: Titania from the cover of *The New Fantastic Four*.

Turner, Michael. *The New Fantastic Four Volume One #549*. Marvel Comics, 2007.



Figure 4.6: Kelda.

Coipel, Olivier. *Thor Vol 3 #6*. New York, Marvel Comics, 2008.



Figure 4.7: Page from *Thor #8*.  
Dauterman, Russell. *Thor #8*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2015. Print.



Figure 4.8: Angela.  
Pichelli, Sara. *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 3 #7*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2013.



Figure 4.9: Black Widow.  
Acuña, Daniel. *Black Widow #1*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2010.



Figure 4.10: Karnilla.  
*Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe*  
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Figure 4.11: Page from *Thor* #8.  
 Dauterman, Russell. *Thor* #8. New York:  
 Marvel Comics, 2015. Print.



Figure 5.1: Carol Danvers' Iconic  
*Ms. Marvel* Costume.  
 Cockrum, Dave. *Ms. Marvel Volume*  
*One* #20. Marvel Comics, 1978.



Figure 5.2: Carol Danvers' Original *Ms. Marvel* Costume.  
 Romita, John. Sr. *Ms. Marvel* #1. Marvel  
 Comics, 1977.



Figure 5.3: Kamala, Iconic Ms. Marvel. Alphonso, Adrian. *Ms. Marvel #1*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014. Print.



Figure 5.4: Kamala as Ms. Marvel. Alphonso, Adrian. *Ms. Marvel #1*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014. Print.

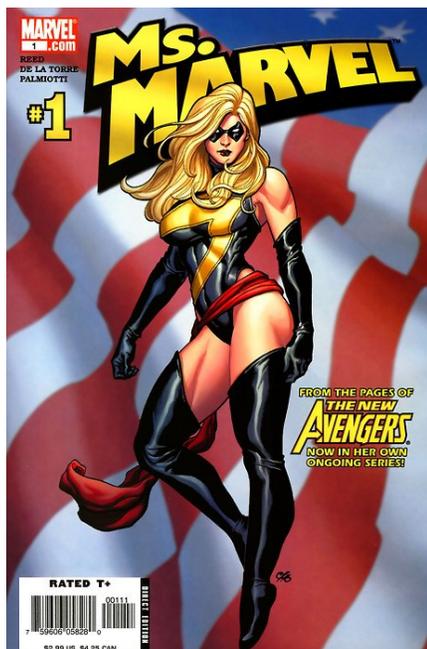


Figure 5.5: Carol Danvers Objectified. De la Torre, Roberto. *Ms. Marvel Vol 1*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2006.



Figure 5.6: Kamala, cartoonish. Alphonso, Adrian. *Ms. Marvel #1*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014. Print.



Figure 5.7: Kamala as Ms. Marvel, squatting.

Alphona, Adrian. *Ms. Marvel #1*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014. Print.



Figure 5.8: Carol as Ms. Marvel, squatting.

De la Torre, Roberto. *Ms. Marvel #5*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2006.



Figure 5.9: Cover of *Ms. Marvel #1*. Alphona, Adrian. *Ms. Marvel #1*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014. Print.



Figure 5.10: The New Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan) in costume.

Alphona, Adrian. *Ms. Marvel #5*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014.



Figure 5.11: Kamala in Shalwar.  
Miyazawa, Takeshi. *Ms. Marvel #14*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2015.



Figure 6.1: Storm costume, first pages of  
*Storm #1*.  
Ibañez, Victor. *Storm #1*. New York:  
Marvel Comics, 2014.



Figure 6.2: Storm naked  
Byrne, John. *Uncanny X-Men #109*. New York: Marvel  
Comics, 1978.

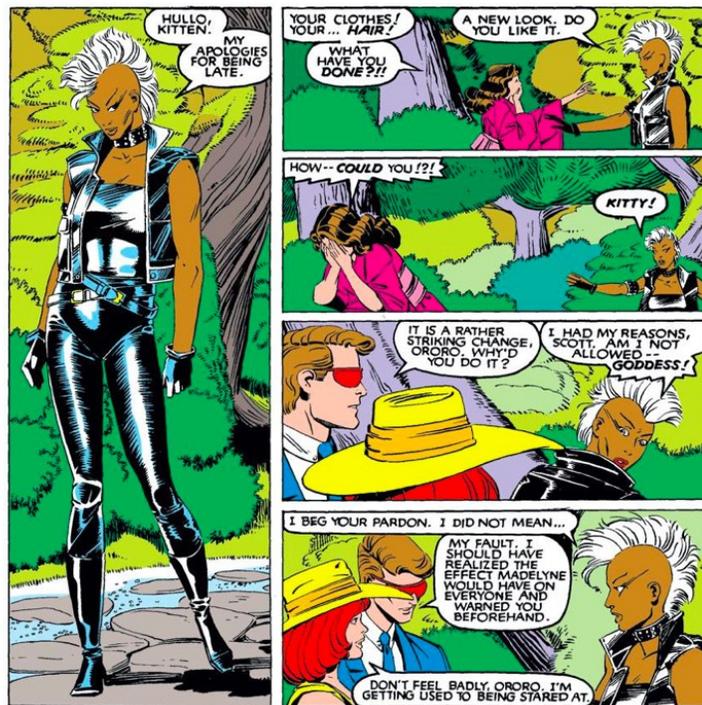


Figure 6.3: Storm's costume change

Smith, Paul. *Uncanny X-Men #173*. Marvel Comics, 1983.



Figure 6.4: Storm eating in *Storm #2*. Ibañez, Victor. *Storm #2*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014. Print.



Figure 6.5: Ororo grieving after Wolverine's death. Ibañez, Victor. *Storm #4*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014. Print.



Figure 6.6: Barrionuevo's First Page,  
*Storm #6*.

Barrionuevo, Al. *Storm #6*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014. Print.



Figure 6.7: Storm's strange faces,  
*Storm #9*.

Barrionuevo, Al. *Storm #9*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2015. Print.



Figure 6.8: Storm's breasts and angry face, *Storm #8*.

Barrionuevo, Al. *Storm #8*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2015. Print.



Figure 6.9: Storm is in control, *Storm* #7.

Barrionuevo, Al. *Storm* #7. New York: Marvel Comics, 2015. Print.



Figure 6.10: Storm's power, *Storm* #5.

Ibañez, Victor. *Storm* #5. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014. Print.

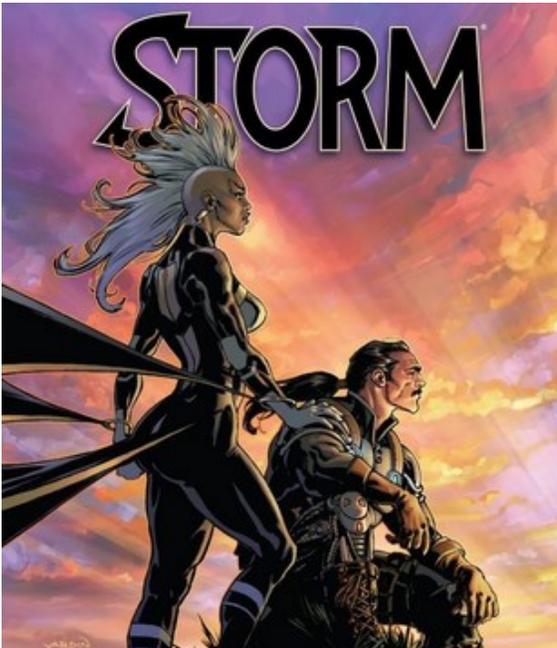


Figure 6.11: Cover of *Storm #3*.  
Yardin, David. *Storm #3*. New York:  
Marvel Comics, 2014. Print.



Figure 6.12: Distance and Action Shots  
from *Storm #2*.  
Ibañez, Victor. *Storm #2*. New York:  
Marvel Comics, 2014. Print.



Figure 6.13: Storm roofing, in *Storm #1*.  
Ibañez, Victor. *Storm #1*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014. Print.





Figure 6.16: Storm comforts Kenji, *Storm #10*.  
Barrionuevo, Al. *Storm #10*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014. Print.



Figure 6.17: Storm steals a kiss.  
Ibañez, Victor. *Storm #2*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2014. Print.