CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Fight Like a Girl:

A Qualitative Content Analysis of How Superheroines are Portrayed in Comic Books

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all my real-life superheroes/superheroines who have inspired and supported me throughout my personal, professional, and academic journeys. Without your unwavering support, I would not be where I am today.

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ABSTRACT

Fight Like a Girl: A Qualitative Content Analysis of How Superheroines are Portrayed in Comic

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By

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Master of Arts in Sociology

During the last few decade or so, there has been a growing popularity of the superhero genre, specifically in terms of television shows, box office sales, and rare comic book collections. Comic books that feature superheroes often depict distinct characters and storylines that provide individuals with a unique form of escapism. They are also reflective of perspectives of the era in which they are written, illustrated, and released into circulation for mass consumption. For instance, during times of war and other forms of social adversity, comics have served as ways to both inform the public about the goings on of the day as well as incite a sense of nationalistic pride and widespread community amongst its audiences. Nevertheless, despite their potential for addressing various social issues, the historically embedded gendered messages within comic books can also be construed as being exceedingly problematic in terms of perpetuating heteronormative and ethnocentric ideals. In this regard, a qualitative content analysis of the portrayals of superheroines in popular and more obscure comic books released within the genre in the last 20 years was conducted. By utilizing an intersectional approach, this study highlights the overall depictions of 16 superheroines from marginalized backgrounds and their potential social implications in over 100 comic books. Selection of these female characters was chosen based on the recommendations of comic bookstore workers, the availability of their comics in-store and online, their growing representation in television and film, and finally, how many times some characters have been previously studied in other interdisciplinary studies. Implications of this study highlight the importance of including a diverse representation of female characters with various complex and intersecting identities that are written for (and sometimes by) the very marginalized communities that the characters hail from and represent.

INTRODUCTION

From Dr. Seuss books to JK Rowling's world of wizardry to Disney animated films, children are frequently presented with stories of fantasy worlds in which the main character(s) goes on a brave, yet sometimes humorous, adventure riddled with moral ambiguities, behavioral expectations, and other adult-like themes that are quite dichotomous in nature (i.e., stories of good versus evil). Through these stories, children are presented with a world that is much more black and white and thus, less complicated for them to understand. However, children are more perceptive than we, as parents and adult members of society, give them credit for, especially seeing as they evidently absorb any and all information they come into contact with like little sponges. This is incredibly significant when considering the kinds of visual and verbal cues that children receive from the adults in their lives, combined with that of other societal pressures imposed on them by the broader society at large. These parental, peer, and social messages are about the kinds of toys, clothing, and forms of imaginative play that they must engage in as "good little boys and girls".

As a result, picture books and animated films released by popular entertainment companies, such as Disney/Pixar, often perpetuate gender stereotypes and social expectations, specifically depicting men as strong, independent, and hardworking whilst women are often portrayed as being in need of rescuing, love sick, or as primary caregivers (Chavez 1985; Baker & Raney 2007). Overtime, children become more aware of their identities as either "boy" or "girl" and thus begin to incorporate such rigid gender roles and binary understandings of gender into their everyday vernacular and social performances. Consequently, young people have little to no literary or visual characters to look up to other than those that fall along the heteronormative, White, able-bodied, gender binary. This, in turn, can be exceedingly

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problematic for children who identify as gender nonconforming, LGBTQ+, person(s) of color, or as someone with a disability.

Furthermore, it is important to note that aside from pretending to be princesses or cops and robbers there are other forms of imaginative play and reading materials that have resonated with the young American public for years. For instance, in the years leading up to and during World War II comic book sales skyrocketed. As a result, engaging in "superhero play" has since become an exceedingly popular form of imaginative play that children adopt both at home and on the playground (Liss, Reinhardt, & Fredriksen 1983; Dinella, Claps, & Lewandowski 2017). Whether they are wearing a cape, fighting bad guys, or saving the world from an alien invasion, children emulate their favorite comic book heroes' demeanors, opinions, and storylines in new and elaborate ways.

Nevertheless, even though comic books have frequently been criticized for not being a respectable art form or for (as psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham described in his 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*) corrupting young American minds, it can be said that such stories not only convey the power of words in influencing behavior but rather demonstrate that when coupled with images and dialogue, the literary words and characters on the page evidently take on a life of their own (*Comic Book Heroes Unmasked* 2003). Despite their exceedingly complex storytelling, young boys and girls are still arguably bombarded with very "subtle" gendered displays of what it means to be a superhero and what it means to be a *female* superhero, two similar yet incredibly distinct experiences within the comic book canon, especially when considering the fact that the comic book world constitutes yet another male-dominated environment in which women are not only ignored or are visibly absent from, but which they are also regularly alienated from (Coyne, Rasmussen, Nelson & Collier 2014).

Previous research studies, as will be elaborated on later, have utilized social learning, social cognitive, and cultivation theories to explain the influence that the media has had on how children and young adults consume information (Chavez 1985; Glascock & Preston-Schreck 2004; Baker & Raney 2007; England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek 2011; Coyne et al. 2014; Dinella et al. 2017). Consequently, because the media can influence the ways in which individuals frame their understandings of the world, it is important to acknowledge its ability to inspire audiences to either combat or perpetuate various gender and racial inequalities.

As a matter of fact, female characters have often been depicted in comic books, television, and film in ways that seem to imitate the realities of their responsibilities in the domestic sphere. For instance, research done on the perpetuation of gender inequality in three randomly selected comic strips of the 1980s found that female characters were depicted 54% of the time in stereotypical gender roles within the domestic sphere (i.e., the home) and only 9.5% of the time in a professional work setting compared to their male counterparts (Chavez 1985).

In terms of characters within the superhero genre, however, not only do predominately White, male characters account for 85% of the comic book character population (Facciani, Warren, & Vendemia 2015) but rather they also make up at least 90% of the comic book readership (Avery-Natale 2013). Thus, because they account for the majority of their audience(s), it is inevitable that marginalized populations, like that of women and other racialized minorities, are conveyed in ways that serve to maintain rather than challenge their relegated positions of power within the social order as well as exclude them from another public yet inaccessible forum within society.

Incidentally, the depiction of superheroines with large breasts (43%) and men with exaggerated muscles and other masculine features (75%) are often the norm rather than the

exception (Avery-Natale 2013). Women of color, on the other hand, are often depicted as either asexual, unattractive creatures or as hypersexualized, mystical, and exotic, sexual deviants; both are images that have historically been used to oppress rather than empower racial minorities (Collins 2009; Dalbeto & Oliveira 2015).

Additionally, Baker and Raney's (2007) study establishes that the perpetuation of the "damsel in distress" and "submissive" female narratives in animated children's cartoons are alive and well seeing as images of superheroines in leadership roles have been found to be relatively nonexistent (12.5%) and not only are nearly 50% of them portrayed in male mentor-female mentee positions but rather an astounding 87.5% of them are members of a team and thus are assumed to be incapable of working alone, much less protect themselves in the presence of an imminent threat or physical harm. As a result, such messages are internalized by comic book fans, particularly young boys and girls, to such an extent that they come to define the material, be it comics, television shows, or films, that they ultimately choose to consume and/or exclude themselves from, due to a lack of relatedness or accurate representations (Coyne et al. 2014).

By conducting a qualitative content analysis, this research study seeks to draw attention to how the lived experiences of superheroines are depicted in comic books as well as how such depictions serve to combat and/or perpetuate negative gender stereotypes. Although, analyzing material released within the superhero genre has become a common occurrence in academia, this study's focus on the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality is but a relatively new construct in the literature and thus seeks to pick up where previous researchers have lacked and/or eluded to but have yet to include in their research, specifically with regards to depictions of female empowerment, womanhood, and ability status. This is especially significant with regards to the fact that a majority of characters may have already existed and/or have recently

been introduced as more modern reincarnations of another character with the same superhero mantle. Hence, the reintroduction of previously (and famously) White, heterosexual, and able-bodied protagonists as characters from marginalized backgrounds speaks volumes to the evolutionary and potential transformative nature that the superhero/superheroine genre may have on children and teens well into adulthood.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Emergence of the Superhero Genre of Comics

Although, there remains some contention about when and where comic book strips originated, the use of sequential art to tell a story can be witnessed throughout history (e.g. Egyptian hieroglyphs). During the late 19th century, *The Yellow Kid*, a character by Richard F. Outcault was featured in the *New York World* from 1895 to 1898 (Schoenecke 1996; Pinkley & Casey 2013). This seemingly inconsequential newspaper strip about a young boy from an Irish immigrant family living in New York, served to warn the American public about the dangers of their growing obsession with consumerism. This newspaper comic strip has commonly been dubbed as having been the first American comic and which evidently made way for the creation of the first modern comic book, *Famous Funnies*, which consisted of newspaper comic strip reprints in 1933.

However, it was not until years later that the comic book industry would launch the superhero genre and so-called "Golden Age of Comics" (1938–1945) with the introduction of Superman in the first issue of *Action Comics* in 1938. Even though he may or may not be the first superhero to be introduced, his superpowers and description as the "Man of Steel," immediately made him a crowd favorite and in turn, as previously mentioned, went on to embody the archetype for the superhero form (Stanley 2005; Avery-Natale 2013). Consequently, the emphasis on war bonds and salvaging scrap paper as part of the war effort in the years of World War II were not only mentioned in the comics themselves, but rather made comics from that era rare collectors' items that can be sold for upwards of millions and millions of dollars.

Furthermore, in the years to follow Superman's first appearance, several more action heroes began to hit the newsstands, yet female superheroines were not primarily focused on or

addressed until a psychologist by the name of William Charles Moulton Marston introduced the

world to Wonder Woman, an Amazonian warrior who mirrored Superman's strength but who

also embodied the allure of a beautiful woman, in October of 1941 (O'Reilly 2005; Stanley 2005;

Aiken 2010; Cocca 2013; Brinkman 2014). Her growing popularity, in spite of some very

questionable storylines (i.e., materialism, bondage and discipline, dominance and submission,

etc.), have made her a household name in terms of being a popular television show in 1975 to a

box office sensation as it hit theatres as the first female-led superhero film, starring Gal Gadot,

back in 2017. Since then, the world has seen a growing demand for other female characters to go

from being simply relegated to nothing more than background, supporting characters to

becoming the titular characters of their own films, as seen with the theatrical success of *Captain

Marvel* in 2019 and the highly anticipated *Birds of Prey and the Fantabulous Emancipation of

One Harley Quinn*, *Wonder Woman 1984,* and *Black Widow* films that are set to be released by

DC and Marvel, respectively, in the year 2020.

On the cusp of the Great Depression, the American public, especially young children,

were in desperate need of rescuing and craved a less bleak forecast of what the future had in

store (*Comic Book Heroes Unmasked* 2003). Masked do-gooders in costumes provided the

perfect escape from the realities of everyday social life, seeing as the literature prose in which

these characters fought crime and upheld justice served as a means of creating a world in which

there was always a solution or definitive outcome that favored the good guys and punished the

bad guys.

In *Comic Book Heroes Unmasked*, however, a brief segment of the documentary touches

upon how Dr. Frederic Wertham's work with juvenile delinquents presented the public with a

common denominator for the rising occurrences of abnormal behavior in young people: comic

book readership. According to him, comic books were glorifications of violence and crime that evidently influenced young children and teens to engage in deviant behaviors and developed aberrant interests, such as sadomasochism, sodomy, murder, a blatant disrespect for authority figures, and, above all, homosexual tendencies (Tilley 2012). It is important to note that during the time in which Wertham was writing, homosexuality was seen as being a disease and thus his work, in spite of its overt manipulation of facts and data, convinced parents across America to prevent their children from reading comic books and sought to ban their publications for good.

Such parental concerns led to US Senate hearings that called for the censorship of comics on behalf of the government. Ultimately, this resulted in the creation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954, which allowed publishers to regulate what topics, words, and images could and could not be included in comics that would be purchased and read by their biggest consumers: children. As a result, comic books often provide valuable insight into the time period and current events of the days during which they were written and released into circulation, to be consumed by the American public (Brown 1999; Aiken 2010).

Gender Stereotypes: The Female (Body) as "Spectacle"

Broad shoulders, big muscles, and chiseled torsos. Big boobs, short skirts, and hourglass figures. From these simple descriptions, one can presume that they are reading about the standards of beauty that exist for both men and women within American culture. However, these are also the standards of what constitutes a male or female superhero, as well as what comic book illustrators have in mind when they are creating and recreating some of the most beloved characters of the genre (LeBel 2009; Avery-Natale 2013; Coyne et. al. 2014).

Interestingly enough, for male characters it seems that shifting from their superhero personas and their everyday alter egos, evidently serves to accentuate their masculinities simply

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because their "costume" signifies that they are setting out to accomplish a mission. In contrast, for their female counterparts dissention is frequently frowned upon simply because it can be construed as being "unfeminine" (Weltzien 2005; Avery-Natale 2013). Consequently, women are not commonly portrayed as masked crusaders, but rather are frequently portrayed in little to no clothing and their frequent dress changes can be interpreted as emphasizing certain gender stereotypes, such as a love of fashion or materialism (Avery-Natale 2013).

Furthermore, it can be argued that female superheroines are not only hypersexualized in their skimpy little outfits but rather they are illustrated in unrealistic ways. In other words, their body proportions (i.e., big boobs and a little waist) would make it impossible for them to have a healthy lifestyle, let alone fight criminals on a daily basis (Avery-Natale 2013; Pennell & Behm-Morawitz 2015). Some issues of *Wonder Woman* have even been criticized for their frequent depictions of women as being something to be dominated or owned rather than respected and admired (O'Reilly 2005; Stanley 2005). As a result, the female body is often used as a tool of distraction that slows down the narrative and evidently serves to feed the fantasies and fetishes of the male reader. Additionally, their deaths would often be used to make way for more intense storylines and action sequences for their male counterparts (i.e., the "women in refrigerators" trope) that will then attract a bigger audience and have future issues flying off the shelves (Avery-Natale 2013).

Representation of Marginalized Populations and Women of Color

Black Panther took the world by storm in 2018. It made over $240 million on its opening weekend and received several nominations and accolades, including three Oscar wins for Best Original Music Score, Best Costume Design, and Best Production Design. Although it did not win, *Black Panther* made history not simply because of its predominately Black cast and crew

but rather, it became the first superhero movie to be nominated for Best Picture at the Oscars. This feat was just the icing on the cake for a film that prior to its debut was highly anticipated and evidently became a pop culture sensation in the presence of the political turmoil and other social uncertainties that has grown to define American society in recent years.

Black Panther's theatrical success signified the importance, albeit cultural need, for representation on behalf of more marginalized populations (Palmer-Mehta 2005; McGrath 2007; Scott 2015; Williams 2018). In fact, the significance of this film has found an unprecedented resurgence in the year 2020 in the wake of the peaceful Black Lives Matter protests that have sparked renewed debates on the killing of Black bodies at the hands of police as well as the untimely death of its leading actor, Chadwick Boseman, from colon cancer in late August 2020.

The film portrayed the fictional African country of Wakanda, whose culture, customs, and traditions that were not subjected to Colonization. Instead, the country thrived after having been hit by a meteorite that provided the country with its most valuable weapon and resource: Vibranium, an element with the ability to absorb and contain kinetic energy, and from which Captain America's legendary shield was made out of. In fact, the main conflict in the film was the fact that Erik Killmonger's (T'Challa's cousin) experiences as a Black man in America influenced his desire to aid individuals and other countries in need; an accomplishment that Wakanda could easily engage in but steadfastly chooses not to for the national security of its people against the avaricious hands of other governments around the world. Incidentally, the country of Wakanda, in spite of its technological advances, resources, and intelligence, elects to shield itself from the rest of the world, letting them think that they are a low-rate, underdeveloped country, when in reality they have the power to help their Black brethren in need the world over but refrain from doing so for their own safety (Williams 2018).

In addition, *Black Panther* introduces audiences to powerful Black female characters for girls and young women to look up to. The Dora Milaje is a group of women who serve as an elite group of female warriors and special forces for the country of Wakanda. In the film, the leader of the Dora Milaje, Okoye, is not only depicted as being incredibly loyal to her country and throne, but also is often treated as an equal to her King. Nakia, a former love interest for T'Challa and member of the War Dogs, has openly voiced her opinions about Wakanda's failure to help other nations in need through political and military aid (Allen 2018). Furthermore, Shuri, T'Challa's sister, arguably the smartest character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, is a teenage girl who oversees the creation of all of Wakanda's modern technology and defenses. Consequently, if it were not for Hollywood's adaptations of comic book characters, like those from *Black Panther*, it is quite possible that many of them would remain unknown to the general public.

Consequently, three years prior to the introduction of *Black Panther* (July 1966) to the comic book fandom, the *X-Men* (September 1963) came on the scene. In the presence of quite a tumultuous and decisive time in American history, in terms of the civil rights and gay rights movements (amongst others), the *X-Men* has been described as being an allegory for the plight that marginalized populations have faced historically, both domestically and abroad (Whaley 2016). The X-Men are a group of mutants, or super-powered individuals, whose abilities begin to manifest around puberty. As a result, the X-Men convey the struggles that teenagers, regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, or race, face when seeking to fit in and attain social acceptance. In addition, the way the X-Men are treated, presented, and abused at the hands of the government and media outlets expose how common it is for people to fear and subsequently seek to impede upon the liberties and rights of those who look different than them and whose lifestyles they fail to understand due to their own biases and perspectives of "right or wrong."

Befittingly, the X-Men franchise has had its fair share of television shows and films. When it first began, however, there were only three main and veteran (in terms of their contributions as established members of the team) female characters, one of which was that of Halle Berry's portrayal of Storm on the big screen (Dalbeto & Oliveira 2015). In the film's early stages of development, Berry herself fought to ensure that the depiction of such a strong, African American female character was not only true to the comic book character but rather that she was not underused or underdeveloped. She was also intentional in ensuring her character was relatable to audiences, specifically young women of color (Whaley 2016). In spite of her efforts and those of comic book fans, it can be said that Storm is a highly respected character that has yet to fully receive the consideration and appreciation she deserves on the big screen to the same extent that she has with die-hard fans of the character and/or the genre (Scott 2006). Nevertheless, the *X-Men* comics, as well as its film and television adaptations, effectively demonstrate the value that Americans place on praising individual's unique qualities whilst simultaneously punishing them for being anything other than "normal."

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Previous studies have utilized social learning (Chavez 1985), social cognitive (Baker & Raney 2007; Coyne et al. 2014; Dinella et al. 2017), and cultivation theories (Glascock & Preston-Schreck 2004; Baker & Raney 2007; Descartes, & Collier-Meek 2011; England et al. 2011; Dinella et al. 2017) to explain the influence that the media has on how audiences consume information. According to these studies, the media has quite a significant role in the socialization process of children, especially as it pertains to the perpetuation of various social inequalities as well as gender-specific behaviors and forms of imaginative play, well into adulthood. Utilizing a neo-Marxist framework, Chavez (1985) suggests that such depictions only serve to further maintain the status quo. Furthermore, in line with gender schema theories, children categorize their peers, as well as literary characters, as being right "for them", in the sense that the character's respective gender identities match that of their own (Dinella et al. 2017).

Several of the aforementioned studies referenced cultivation theory, one of many media theories on gender and culture, which suggests that the homogenizing nature of the media evidently serves to perpetuate the idea that we all experience and understand the world in similar ways and thus proposes that depictions of men and women in the media are indicative of reality (Baker & Raney 2007; England et al. 2011; Dinella et al. 2017). In other words, an understanding of the social world is contingent upon the one-dimensional depictions of individuals from different genders, sexual orientations, and race/ethnic backgrounds confirming such stereotypes of masculinity pertaining to traditional gender roles, biology (i.e., testosterone levels), strength, acts of physical aggression, penis panics, and rates of criminality.

Other studies recognize the ways in which portrayals of masculinity and femininity are performances that can further serve to perpetuate gender and racial stereotypes whilst others

suggest that women can reclaim their femininity as a form of empowerment (Brown 1999; Cocca 2013). Thus, in line with Jean Baudrillard's (1995) work on simulacra and Judith Butler's (1999) work on the body, depictions of female superheroines, in spite of often being hypersexualized and overexaggerated, are not only accepted as "real" but rather are demanded by consumers because it appeals to their senses at the risk of distorting their realities (Avery-Natale 2013).

Intersectional Feminist Theoretical Framework

This study, however, seeks to build upon these perspectives on the socialization processes by employing an intersectional feminist approach to address the experiences of discrimination and misrepresentation on behalf of women of color as well as other marginalized groups in the superhero/superheroine genre. Intersectionality, a term first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), was initially used to describe the historical experiences of oppression on behalf of African American women (and by association other women of color and nonheteronormative gender identities) in the United States. As a matter of fact, the experiences of Black women have historically been understood in conjunction rather than in relation to those of White, middle-class women. Therefore, their experiences as women and as members of the Black community have often gone misrepresented and disproportionately overlooked.

Take women's suffrage, for example. Beginning in the 19th century, the Women's Suffrage Movement hoped to challenge the patriarchy and grant (White) women the right to vote. Thus, in spite of being painted in primary and secondary school history classes as a fight for all women, the long battle for women's suffrage was anything but. In fact, White women spearheading the movement often elected to strengthen their feminist cause at the expense of racial equality and privilege (Crenshaw 1989). Similarly, when the ratification of the 15th Amendment awarded African Americans the right to vote, women of color, in spite of their

spirited cries of solidarity, were once again not made privy to such a momentous accolade. Consequently, in both regards the term "citizen" accounted for White women and Black men, respectively, and thus they (and they alone) had the right to political power and participation.

In this regard, intersectionality becomes a powerful theoretical lens from which to recognize this social disjunction to both combat heteronormative assumptions and expectations as well as acknowledge the ways in which cultural patterns of oppression are interrelated and constrained by systems of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Crenshaw 1989). As a result, this study's use of a feminist intersectional approach acknowledges the ways in which social acceptability, as well as media representation should account for people's overlapping identities and unique experiences through recognition and respect rather than judgement and disdain.

Patricia Hill Collins' (2009) work not only highlights the importance of utilizing an intersectional approach but rather strengthens its role in advancing the scope of Black feminist thought, specifically, with regards to describing the complex realities of minority populations. Its emergence provided Black women with a distinctive platform to voice their concerns, reflect on their pasts as a community, and evidently describe their everyday lived experiences in their own words rather than have others, specifically heterosexual, White men, continue to do the talking for them. This is especially important when taking into consideration the ways in which African American women have been historically portrayed as the "Other"; a common social, political, and theoretical practice that dates all the way back to their experiences as slaves. Indeed, this past condition, or rather image, of slavery is often used to justify their relegation to anything less than that of a second-class citizenry (Collins 2009).

Incidentally, such portrayals are central to the development (and propagation) of what Collins (2009) refers to as the controlling images of Black womanhood: the mammy, the

matriarch, the welfare mother, the Black lady, and the jezebel. Such controlling images have historically been used to suppress the kinds of opportunities made readily available to Black women whilst simultaneously blaming them for their lack of "initiative" and "ambition" to elevate themselves beyond their current positions within the social strata.

For example, the controlling image of the jezebel serves to perpetuate stereotypes of Black women as sexually promiscuous and erotic deviants whereas the controlling image of the welfare mother has regularly been used to paint Black women as bad, irresponsible mothers who give birth to more children than they can ever possibly afford to care for. Hence, portraying the experiences of Black women (and by association other women of color) as corrupting and degrading the social order has provided White policy makers and media creators with the platform from which they can (1) control the narrative and (2) portray themselves as the "saviors" of communities of color. The irony here being that their intentions are not so much selfless as they are purposeful. In other words, their actions serve to justify their interference with the daily conditions of these communities out of their own social and political interests by ensuring that the scales remain in their favor and thus result in them being the very same oppressors that prevent people of color from telling their own stories on their own terms.

Such a negatively biased understanding of the unique social obstacles that these women face on a daily basis (i.e., lack of affordable housing, dilapidating living conditions, crime-ridden neighborhoods, low literacy rates/poor quality education, restricted access to medical care, etc.) has evidently served to justify the government's involvement in their reproductive rights. In the past, the government aimed to limit, if not eradicate, their fertility rates before they and their children become nonproductive social, political, financial, and genetically inferior burdens of the state through negative eugenic practices (i.e., involuntary abortions, sterilizations, etc.). This is

often a part of history that is so immorally glossed over or ignored even though the consequences of such practices are still very much alive and well today. The only difference now is that such practices are much more subtle, if not unknown to the public, as they are already systematically ingrained, or embedded, within our social institutions in ways that are perceived as "natural" both those in power rather than discriminatory and prejudiced in exceedingly problematic ways.

In this regard, Black women, and by association their children, have struggled to attain some semblance of legitimacy within society that proves that they not only deserve to be heard but rather that they too, are human beings who should be treated with dignity and respect, both within and outside the realm of academia. As a result, for the first time in history, Black feminist thought presented African American women with a place in academia where they could bring certain issues to the forefront as well as challenge stereotypes that have contributed to their continued oppression. This served to empower each successive generation of African American women so that they could plant the seeds of social change by encouraging small acts of defiance and pursuits of activism, specifically in their children and other intellectuals, both educated and not (Collins 2009).

Therefore, because everyone experiences the world differently, an emphasis on the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality provides a more inclusive perspective from which to understand the ways that individuals interact with the images and descriptions of the world presented to them in comic books. Consequently, this lens acknowledges that an emphasis on rigid dichotomies and stereotypes can be just as empowering as they are constraining (Brown 1999; Avery-Natale 2013; Cocca 2013; Dalbeto & Oliveira 2015; Dinella et al. 2017).

The purpose of this study seeks to look at the potential influence and overall transformative nature of comic books within the superhero/superheroine genre in dismantling or

perpetuating sexist, racist, and heteronormative stereotypes. By integrating the significance of control images to an art form that combines imagery and dialogue, this study can serve to highlight the ways in which superheroines are superficially expected to be portrayed versus how they are actually portrayed in relation to their intersecting identities by comic book creators. Thus, informed by a feminist intersectional theoretical approach, this study acknowledges that the complexity and diversity of the social world we live in places all of us, regardless of our socioeconomic backgrounds and other associated privileges, in increasingly vulnerable positions, particularly when it comes to the types of content and material that the future young minds of America and those living in other countries are exposed to throughout the life course.

Characters represented within the superhero/superheroine genre provide children, teens, and young adults with role models they can relate to whilst simultaneously putting them at risk of internalizing stereotypical gender roles and rigid and binary understandings of the self. This is an outcome that publishers, writers/illustrators, directors, and other key players in the industry must be exceedingly mindful of when creating and recreating various beloved characters now and in the future.

METHODS

Research Questions

Using a feminist intersectional theoretical framework, this research study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How are superheroines depicted in comic books?

2. What kinds of storylines are most common for these characters in relation to their male counterparts?

3. How do such storylines vary when the same character is written and/or illustrated by men compared to when the character is written and/or illustrated by women?

4. What do such depictions say about the given historical context or time period in which a specific comic book issue was released into circulation?

5. What are the (potential) broader social implications for the superhero-superheroine distinction? In what ways are marginalized populations, in terms of race, gender, and sexuality, depicted in both mainstream and more obscure comics?

6. In what ways do such depictions evidently serve to perpetuate or challenge prejudicial and/or discriminatory stereotypes?

Directed Content Analysis

In an attempt to answer these research questions, I conducted a directed content analysis that examines the portrayal of female characters in comic books within the superhero/superheroine genre. Whilst previous studies (Chavez 1985; Larew 1997; Glascock & Preston-Schreck 2004; Baker & Raney 2007; Avery-Natale 2013; Coyne et al. 2014; Facciani et al. 2015) have implemented quantitative approaches to analyzing the images, themes, and

storylines of female and other marginalized characters and superheroes in comic books, television shows, and films, this study utilizes a qualitative approach.

Comic book images, dialogue, and storylines are often up for individual interpretation. Using a qualitative approach to this research accounts for my own experience with analyzing the content, my positionality as a researcher, and allows for flexibility in the data collection process. Qualitative research also provides valuable insight into how such media can be transformed and revolutionized well into the future. Coincidentally, early on in the research process, only one study (Dalbeto & Oliveira 2015), was found to have presented a qualitative analysis of Black superheroines published by Marvel Comics.

According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), a directed content analysis utilizes a more deductive line of reasoning in the sense that a given theoretical perspective, in this case a feminist intersectional lens, guides the categorization of data within a predetermined coding system. In other words, to conduct a directed content analysis a researcher can utilize a theory or past research findings that are pertinent to the subject under study and of which will guide the development of an initial coding scheme (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). Any and all content that does not neatly fall under a given category or theme, evidently presents the creation of a new code, or data point, that will only serve to further augment rather than hinder the data collection process in a different direction than that of which the researcher may have initially anticipated.

Building upon previous uses of social learning processes, media theories, and feminist thought, this study not only seeks to focus on how women and other marginalized characters are addressed, represented, or sustained as peripheral characters (i.e., through their exaggerated physical features, cultural backgrounds, the perpetuation of stereotypes in and within their respective storylines, etc.), but also to infer the potential social implications that the usage of

comic books within the superhero genre have as generators of social change that empowers rather than dismisses the voices of female and other marginalized readers. The voices, experiences, and concerns of such readers themselves have historically been ignored and/or included, albeit often controversially, to confirm certain gender, racial, and homophobic stereotypes. As a result, such stereotypes can be used to further some political agenda that, in turn, can result in feelings of indifference to or detachment from the comic book community in its entirety on behalf of readers embedded within one or more marginalized populations (Avery-Natale 2013; Coyne et al. 2014).

Positionality

As a budding sociologist, or rather even before I knew what the field of sociology was, I have always been fascinated with the images that children are presented with and which they evidently utilize to frame the social world around them well into adulthood. In terms of my own childhood experiences with having accessible female role models to look up to (outside of my immediate family, of course), I often struggled with the issue of representation. For example, even though *Pocahontas* had been released the year before I was born, I did not become aware of her and her historical significance until a few years later. Consequently, I was about two years old when I was exposed to the character (and by extension actress) that would change and inspire my childhood well into adulthood: *Mulan.*

As a young, Latina girl from an immigrant family, I longed for the days that I would see a female led cartoon or an animated film that was not simply about a thin, typically blonde and blue eyed damsel in distress who longed to find a prince that would sweep her off her feet and help her escape from the ties that bound her to an often tragic and dreadful family upbringing. *Mulan*, however, had presented me with a warrior princess that I could relate to, not in terms of

her Asian ancestry and saving China from the Huns, but rather, in terms of how her family's emphasis on the importance of family, honor, and sacrifice were all values that were echoed within my own, budding Latino-American family's household. As a result, this film's influence on me as a child would, in a somewhat roundabout yet fateful way, came to inspire the various foci of this study seeing as the actress who voiced the character of Mulan, Ming-Na Wen, would later portray another powerful female character, Agent Melinda May, on ABC's *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.LD.,* a character that has since been incorporated into the comic books after having made her debut in the Marvel Cinematic Universe on television.

Unsurprisingly, shows and films based on popular comic book characters have been a common staple of American history dating back to September of 1952 when the *Adventures of Superman* aired on television. Superman's first television appearance became a historic milestone that came fourteen years after the characters' first comic book issue was released. Superman has since become a character who decades later is still considered to be the quintessential representation of what it means to be a superhero (Avery-Natale 2013). This is a trend that, in spite of a few naysayers' opinions, has withstood the tests of time, as demonstrated by the growing popularity and box office rivalry that exists between the two mainstream comic book publishers, DC Comics and Marvel Comics. However, in addition to these two recognizable names from the comic book industry, this study also seeks to explore more obscure and lesser well-known publishers, specifically as they pertain to characters of different races/ethnicities, genders, and sexualities. Thus, this study places an emphasis on collecting data that also highlights more obscure and lesser well-known publishers, to understand how marginalized identities are represented in comic books.

As a matter of fact, because of my positionality and perspective as a Latina investigator, an effort was made to include material written in either English or Spanish that addresses Latina/o/x characters released both in and/or outside the United States. Coincidentally, the primary focus of this study lies with the content that readers primarily consume and interact with. My identity as a student/researcher, member of the Latin-American community, and fan of the superhero genre was often tested as well as came in conflict with one another throughout the data collection and subsequent analysis process. As a result, my interactions with and explanations of the material can present an insightful reflexive process that can serve to broaden both my perspective as well as that of the broader academic community at large.

DATA SELECTION

With the growing popularity of superhero/superheroine films and television shows, it is quite common that the adaptations of such characters on screen can vary from what has been written (and illustrated) for these characters since they were conceived and evidently introduced into the comic book canon. Thus, comparing such depictions may provide an interesting juxtaposition or perspective with regards to what material publishing companies choose to include in their comics, and by association films and television shows, depending on how they want or believe their audiences will respond in relation to those released by their competitors. With this in mind, this study does not simply seek to analyze the visual imagery and dialogue within comic books, but rather, it also seeks to address the trajectory of the messages that they provide their readers, specifically with regards to the race and gender identities of the writer/illustrator duo.

Even though various institutions within society acknowledge the importance of representing communities and individual experiences as accurately as possible, both male and female writer/illustrator duos (as well as film and television writers/directors) are held accountable to preestablished norms and expectations. This is especially true with regards to the kinds of scenarios, body images, and personality traits that female superheroes can encompass and/or adopt as their own in relation to their male counterparts and associates.

By comparing comics written/illustrated by men and women, this study may provide insight into the institutionalized pressures that they face to grow or maintain certain character storylines at the expense of either gaining a larger audience or losing the one they already had, the latter of which is quite a divisive risk that many writers/illustrators may not be willing to take for the sake of keeping their jobs. Additionally, noting the date of publication or release of these

materials can prove to be beneficial when taking into consideration the influence that real-life social events, as made evident by comic book releases post 9/11 (Stabile 2009), have on the trajectory of a given character's storyline and whether echoing various political sentiments will not only be done in good taste but rather positively received by audiences the world over, for years to come.

However, due to the extremely convoluted nature of comic books, deciding what comic book characters and range of publication dates to include, proved to be this study's first methodological hurdle. In other words, considering that some characters (both superheroes and not) have been used and introduced into other franchises as well as written out of their own universes (either in death or due to a lack of popularity with audiences), gaining access to some comic books themselves could prove to be somewhat difficult.

Furthermore, considering the fact that most media (i.e., television shows, films, broadcasts, digital books, etc.) is often so readily accessible online, the most indeterminate aspect of the current study in lies with accessing actual, physical copies of comic books, specifically with regards to ones that, because of their respective years or places of publication, are either incredibly hard to find and/or extremely expensive. This studies' interest in more obscure publishers and lesser well-known comic book characters establishes a need for a more purposive selection process, particularly with regards to which editions were included in the study. This is especially significant since, despite having a supportive comic book fandom or community presence, physical and/or digital copies of them may be unbelievably scarce or virtually nonexistent. Taking this into account, I researched the availability of each comic book in local comic bookstores/used bookstores, online retail sites like Amazon, fan websites, and, when available, even the publisher's website(s) themselves.

While researching, an emphasis was placed on accessing comics in which these superheroines are either the titular characters of their own comics as well as when they were members of a superhero team-up (such as *Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy* or *Captain America and Black Widow)* or are affiliated with a larger lineup of heroes (such as *The Avengers*, the *Justice League,* or the *X-Men)*. Consequently, seeing as several established comic book characters have had their fair share of revivals, or reincarnations, over the years since their introduction to the comic book canon, it was important to recognize that my selection of a given volume is dependent upon its accessibility and acknowledgement within the comic book fandom.

For this reason, I initially elected to include comic books that were published during or following what is known as the "Golden Age of Comics" (1938 – 1945). As a result, this provided me with 82 years of comic book characters to cipher through. As a fan, this task would be one that I would be more than welcome to accept. As a researcher, however, this may have proven to be too difficult a challenge to rise above, specifically in terms of research practicality, decipherability, and time constraints.

In terms of the selection process, this study utilized a purposive sampling method, in which every subject that was selected for inclusion was based on some predetermined condition and perception of use, particularly in terms of my knowledge of the subjects, in this case characters, under study (Babbie 2016). I selected characters that best exemplified this study's main objective of representing superheroines who were associated with any number of demographic categories (i.e., racial/ethnic minorities, members of the LGBTQ+ community, are disabled, etc.) that did not predominately fit into the conventional mold of what a superhero typically is or looks like. I compiled an initial list of 100 female comic book superheroines on Microsoft Excel (a brief section of which is provided bow), which identified both their alter egos

and superhero monikers as well as brief character details and demographics that qualified them for inclusion in this study. From this list, characters were selected based on my level of access to one or more popular and/or readily available comic books in a series. Coincidentally, an additional element that helped narrow down the number of characters that were included in this study was also derived from my brief knowledge of whether some of the characters on the list had already been examined by previous research studies as well as under what conditions (i.e., theoretical approaches).

Figure 1: Preliminary Character List – History and Demographics (for the rest of the list see Appendix A)

Superheroine/Alter Ego	Brief History/Demographics
Miss America (America Chavez)	Latina (Puerto Rican)/Queer Identity
Black Widow (Natasha Romanoff)	Russian/Heterosexual/Ex-spy for the KGB
Storm (Ororo Munroe)	African American/Married
Cybersix (Adrian Seidelman)	Argentinian/Gender Bender (Male High School Teacher by Day)
Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan)	Muslim (Pakistani-American)/Teenager
Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers)	Caucasian/Former Officer of the US Air Force & CIA Agent
Araña (Anya Sofia Corazon)	Latina (Puerto Rican/Mexican)

As shown in Figure 1, it is important to mention that all of the characters on this list (Appendix A) were introduced to the comic book canon in the years during and after the "Golden Age of Comics" (1938–1945) and that they also do not strictly fall along the heteronormative, White, able-bodied, gender binary identity categories that are typically represented. This enabled me to analyze the changing trajectory of a given character's story arc(s), powers, and the overall presence within the superhero/superheroine comic book genre throughout the years. I also

assessed when old characters were recreated, revamped, or renamed as well as when new ones were ultimately introduced to the canon.

With a prospective publication date period in mind, I made my way to a few local comic bookstores and used bookstores. Upon arriving at each of the stores, I scanned the shelves, playing close attention to the placards along the wall that specified the genres of the comics (i.e., crime, horror, superhero, etc.) as well as their respective publishers (i.e., Marvel, DC, Image, Valiant, etc.). Once I found where the majority of superhero comics were in each of the stores, I began paying close attention to the front covers of each of the comics in order to determine whether or not it was one in which a female superheroine was the titular character and/or referenced as a background character. With that game plan in mind, I was able to acquire a good variety of comics, most of which were released in the last ten to fifteen years and thus included some new adaptations of older and increasingly popular characters as well as the introduction of new ones to the comic book canon.

Moreover, I informed the comic bookstore employees about the purpose of my project and asked them for their recommendations. I was particularly interested in hearing what characters from outside of the universes more well-known publishers, such as DC and Marvel, they would suggest. Luckily, some of the comics they recommended were in stock in their stores but for others they said I would be able to find them online from either the publishers themselves and/or online retail sites, like Amazon.

With a few comic books in hand, I began to read as many of them as possible to determine a baseline of what and how I could approach analyzing my data as well as limiting the parameters of the study. As I began reading through the comics, I made sure to jot down the name of the publisher, writer(s), primary illustrator(s), and year of publication in the same

notebook I used to keep track of any and all information pertaining to character storylines,

graphics/illustrations, superhero abilities, racial or ethnic identities, sexual orientation,

relationship status, etc. that stood out to me for the purposes of this study.

ANALYSIS PROCESS

In terms of the analysis process, a qualitative content analysis was conducted which analyzed the content of literary prose, dialogue, individual character storylines, and visual images within each panel that evidently make up a page or scene of a given comic book as written or illustrated by male or female contributors. All of the codes and themes selected for this study attempted to highlight the fact that when thinking of superheroes, audiences may typically conjure up images of White, able-bodied, heterosexual male characters like that of Superman, Batman, Captain America, Spider-Man, Wolverine, and so on.

Indeed, a quick Google search of the term "superhero" provides the following definition from Merriam-Webster's dictionary, "a fictional hero having extraordinary or superhuman powers." Such a definition encapsulates the superhero role as one that is not distinctly male but rather one that can be employed by and bestowed upon both male and female characters. Nevertheless, audiences are unquestionably inclined to authenticate and legitimize the need for the hero and heroine, superhero and female superhero distinction to eliminate any and all confusion regarding the way such media is interpreted, marketed, and consumed.

Nevertheless, in order to be considered a superhero, a character does not outwardly have to exhibit superhuman strength but may simply be more exceedingly efficient, courageous, or fearless than the average person and who also has a strong proclivity for protecting people from and standing up against injustice. Building upon such definitions, this study aimed to include characters based on their distinguished acts of heroism and who identified, or were written/illustrated, as female.

As previously mentioned, past studies (Chavez 1985; Larew 1997; Glascock & Preston-Schreck 2004; Baker & Raney 2007; McGrath 2007; Avery-Natale 2013; Cocca 2013; Coyne et

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al. 2014; Dalbeto & Oliveira 2015; Facciani et al. 2015) highlight common gendered tropes

presented in comic books (and other media). They also comment on how such depictions have

been received by fans and negotiated by publishers, writers, illustrators, and colorists.

Incidentally, their findings served as an excellent frame of reference from which to build upon in

the latent coding system of this study. A chart of overarching themes and content (as both

derived and absent from the literature) that outline this study's systematic analysis process, is

provided below:

Figure 2: Overarching Themes and Content Analyzed

Themes	Content to be Examined (Questions, Images, Traits, etc.)
The "Hero" vs. "Heroine" Distinction	What distinguishes a superhero from a female superhero?
Oversexualized Depictions of the Female Body	*Costumes:* Typically masked or unmasked? Skintight? Loose? Exposed skin? Practical/impractical? *Bodily contours:* Enlarged breasts? Weight? Height? Muscles (arms, legs, or abdominal region)? Hourglass figure?
Typecasting Females as Weak or Passive	Side kick? In constant need of guidance or assistance from a male mentor (mentee)? Members of a team? Frantic or levelheaded in the face of adversity? Allusions of bondage (BDSM)?
Representation of Minorities (Storylines/Culture)	Family history? Tragic back story? Cultural Distinctions? Country of origin? Poor? Rich? Living conditions (housing)? Quality education? Depictions of cultural customs and traditions?
Powers & Ability Status	*Powers (or lack thereof):* Super strength? Super senses? Agility? Healing? Immortal? Psychic abilities? Invisibility? Elemental/earthly based? Temporal? Trained in combat? Healthy body? Physically fit? Disabled (paraplegic, deaf, injured, etc.)?
Representation as Empowerment	In positions of leadership? Embraces the "mentor" role or primarily prefers to work alone? Supportive of other female characters? Exhibiting traditionally masculine traits? Creative? Self-sufficient? Confident? In control of her own body? Knows her worth? Values her own intuition?
Experiences of Womanhood	Feminine? Courtship? Menstruation? Pregnancy? Motherhood? Educational attainment? Career oriented? Age? Friendship (Solidarity/Comradery)?

When it comes to how the content, themes, and potential pathways of inquiry delineated in Figure 2 were selected and analyzed it is important to note that both were heavily derived from the literature and were subsequently renamed in accordance with what information was found in the content. As illustrated in Figure 2, a focus was placed on the following themes: the oversexualization and exaggerated depictions of the idealized female body (i.e., shape, breast size, costumes, etc.), the perpetuation of the "damsel in distress" and "submissive" female narratives, and the propagation of negative stereotypes about marginalized characters and their respective communities (Larew 1997; McGrath 2007; Dalbeto & Oliveira 2015; Facciani et al. 2015; Pennell & Behm-Morawitz 2015). As for the latter two, an emphasis was placed in the kinds of situations (i.e., storylines) that these characters find themselves in whilst out on a mission, as well as in their "normal", daily activities when they are common citizens, with their own careers, families, and other non-superhero related responsibilities, rather than masked do-gooders or vigilantes in disguise.

I also analyzed content on the basis of three additional codes that were nonexistent in the literature but provide valuable insight when looking at the growing inclusion of superheroines in comic books, television shows, and films in the modern era from an intersectional lens. I also looked at the following: ability status and individual strengths, the portrayal of female characters in positions and/or storylines of empowerment, and finally, images pertaining to both the genuine and/or illusory experiences of womanhood.

Whilst reading through the material, I marked significant illustrations with post-its, chronicled the storylines of each character, highlighted their affective responses (i.e., facial features), and summarized my own interaction with the characters themselves after having read through five to six (or more, depending on their accessibility) comics that they either were the

titular characters for and/or in which they were featured. These notes were abridged, synthesized, and ultimately transferred over to an Excel sheet that made analyzing and comparing the representation of each character in relation to one another much easier to encapsulate. When reading the comic books, I also wrote down the publisher or media franchise, year of publication or release, names and genders of the writers/illustrators (if available), language, and demographic details of the characters themselves, such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, and so on.

Keeping in mind what previous studies explored on the topic of superheroines (Chavez 1985; Larew 1997; Glascock & Preston-Schreck 2004; Baker & Raney 2007; McGrath 2007; Avery-Natale 2013; Cocca 2013; Coyne et al. 2014; Dalbeto & Oliveira 2015; Facciani et al. 2015), I decided to focus on comics written in the last twenty years (2000 – 2020). I elected to concentrate on this time frame for two reasons: (1) there been an extensive discussion about the importance of the representation of female and other minority characters in the media and (2) this date range also corresponds with the growing popularity of films and television shows of the superhero/superheroine genre in the entertainment industry, specifically in terms of the box office rivalry between DC and Marvel. Furthermore, because these comics are more readily accessible and relatively inexpensive than comics that were released over fifty years ago and have thus yet to transition to being rare, collector's items. Concentrating on this 20-year time frame seemed to be the most feasible for this study seeing as this time frame also coincides with major historical milestones, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage, the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, the inclusion of a more diverse population of female representatives in American politics, etc., the influence of such events could mark a significant influence and/or change of how such issues are addressed in the media.

In terms of character selection, I decided to include superheroines that have not only received high acclaim from audiences in recent years in terms of the release of their own films, cartoons, and television shows but that also are indicative of a broad range of unique social experiences for women, people of color, adolescents, veterans, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and people with disabilities. Additionally, some of the characters have been readapted, reintroduced, or rewritten by female writers who in turn have been criticized for including feminist undertones and thus "spoiling" the canon for some followers of character. Figure 3 lists the 16 superheroines included in this study. Figure 3 also shows that due to the issue of accessibility, most of the characters included in this study were released by well-known publishers, DC (25%) and Marvel Comics (50%), but a few of them were from other, more obscure publishers: Valiant Comics, Dark Horse Comics, Somos Arte, LLC., and Aftershock Comics (25%).

Figure 3: Chart of Superheroines Analyzed for this Study

Character Name	Publisher	Demographics/Characteristics
Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers)	Marvel Comics	Caucasian; Ex-Member of the US Air Force; Heterosexual; Half-Kree
Batwoman (Kate Kane)	Detective Comics	Caucasian; Lesbian; Military Brat – kicked out of US Military Academy for violating Article 125 (homosexual conduct)
Miss America (America Chavez)	Marvel Comics	Latina/x (Puerto Rican); Queer; College Student
Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan)	Marvel Comics	Pakistani-American; Muslim; High-School Student; Idolizes fellow superheroine and mentor, Captain Marvel (Carole Danvers)
Green Lantern (Sojourner "Jo" Mullein)	Detective Comics	African American; Bisexual; Works as a peacekeeper in the City Enduring (a planet light-years away from Earth)
Naomi (Naomi McDuffie)	Detective Comics	African American; Adopted – idolizes Superman; High-School Student

Moon Girl (Lunella Lafayette)	Marvel Comics	African American; Inhuman; 9-year-old super genius seeking to attend a "real school"; Is often made fun of at school by her classmates
Ironheart (Riri Williams)	Marvel Comics	African American; Given a scholarship to/attends M.I.T. at the age of 15 (drops out); Witnessed the deaths of her stepfather & best friend; Raised by her single mother; Never met her biological father ("died" before she was born) until recently
Jessica Jones	Marvel Comics	Caucasian; Alcoholic; Suffers from PTSD; Married (Luke Cage); Mother; Works as a Private Investigator
Echo/Ronin (Maya Lopez)	Marvel Comics	Native-American; Heterosexual; Deaf; Savant; Performance Artist; Lost her father and was raised by his murderer (unbeknownst to her)
Silk (Cindy Moon)	Marvel Comics	Asian (Korean American); Daughter of a scientist and teacher; Spent most of her life trapped/living in a bunker; Works as a journalist
Katana (Tatsu Yamashiro)	Detective Comics	Asian (Japanese); Heterosexual: Widowed; Samurai Warrior; Skilled markswoman
Zephyr (Faith Herbert)	Valiant Comics	Caucasian; Plus-sized; Heterosexual; Raised by her grandmother after her parents died in a car accident; Self-described sci-fi nerd and comic book fan; Works as a journalist under her civilian alter ego "Summer Smith"
Empowered (Elissa Megan Powers)	Dark Horse Comics	Caucasian; Heterosexual; Suffers from low self-esteem issues (body image insecurities); Has an active sex life
La Borinqueña (Marisol Rios De La Luz)	Somos Arte, LLC	Afro-Latina (Puerto Rican); College Student – Geologist working on her undergraduate thesis paper; Mother is an OBGYN

My findings pertaining to each theme charted in Figure 2 as well as any additional themes that revealed themselves throughout my data collection and analysis process for these characters (Figure 3) are discussed in the following section.

FINDINGS

Over 100 comic books published within the superhero genre during the last 20 years were read and analyzed for this study (Appendix B). Most of the comic books included in this study were released within the last decade and their creative teams comprised of 43.5% female writers and 30.8% female illustrators, which for the purposes of this study, includes individuals listed as artists, pencilers, and colorists listed on the front cover. Thus, this finding somewhat reiterates what was mentioned in the literature about how comic books are primarily produced by male authors because of the fact that they are predominately consumed by male readers (Avery-Natale 2013). Nevertheless, this study is by no means representative of the industry as a whole, seeing as it is but a small window, or in this case sample, of the thousands and thousands of comic books sold and distributed to audiences, the world over, each year.

Intersecting Identities and Storylines of Superheroines

When it comes to character racial and ethnic demographics, of the 16 superheroines included in this study, 6 were Caucasian, 4 were African American, 2 were Latina, 2 were Asian, 1 was Pakistani-American, and 1 was Native American. Such racial, ethnic, and cultural identities were respectfully handled and were highly significant when analyzing and understanding how their various intersecting identities influenced how the characters approached or handled certain situations. Moreover, most of the characters are presumably heterosexual whereas 4 out of the 16 superheroines examined were explicitly members of the LGBTQ+ community. However, that is not to say that other LGBTQ+ characters were not included. As a matter of fact, many of them were included in minor roles or background characters (i.e., partners, exes, best friends, classmates, acquaintances, etc.) in several comic book storylines.

Furthermore, while she does wear the Hebrew colors of war (red and black), Batwoman's storylines do not address religion to the same extent that those of Kamala Khan, Maya Lopez, America Chavez, and Marisol Rios De La Luz do. In fact, their respective storylines outwardly address or depict religious mythology and practices as being a highly prevalent aspect of their personal identity. It is important to note, however, that while the incorporation of commonly used exclamations, phrases, or cues with subtle religious undertones (e.g., "Oh my God!", "Christ", etc.) were included, their inclusion did not provide definitive insight as to what religion(s) or belief system(s) a given character was intimately affiliated with to the same degree that the aforementioned superheroines did.

Additionally, America Chavez's comics contain several references to her lineage as well as her veneration of and profound desire to connect with her ancestral heritage. Similar to Maya Lopez, Chavez's journey also resembles one of self-discovery but that in this case seems to be more related to her desire to connect with her late mothers to better understand her home dimension, culture, etc. in order to finally find her place in the world, rather than any religious beliefs she may intrinsically hold. Moreover, for Naomi McDuffie, a lack of knowledge about where she comes from leads her to fantasize about sharing a similar adoption (and origin) story as Superman as well as motivates her to ask her parents about any and all information they may have about her biological parents and why they decided to put her up for adoption in the first place. Nevertheless, for some readers, such a deeply personal and spiritual journey can also be perceived as being a religious one just as much as it is a cultural one, but more on this later.

Lastly, only 1 of the characters included, Maya Lopez, was depicted and/or mentioned as having a disability – she was born deaf – that should, on the surface, make it nearly impossible for her to be a superheroine that dedicates her life to fighting crime and protecting less fortunate,

vulnerable, or defenseless others. Nevertheless, her inclusion within the cannon in addition to that of other disabled superheroines, such as Silhouette (*Ironheart*) and Misty Knight (*Jessica Jones*), did not only manage to represent these characters in a positive light but rather portrayed their so-called "disabilities" not as perpetual and inescapable deficits but rather as one of their greatest strengths. In this regard, the very vulnerabilities that their respective disabilities seem to exploit (i.e., loss of hearing, motor or sensory function, agility, strength, etc.) are the very skills that they excel at and that evidently provide them with distinct opportunities that are often taken for granted by their more able-bodied colleagues.

Image 1: Chalice's costume in *Alters #1* (September 2016)

Representation and the Construction of Femininity

With regards to the superhero-superheroine dichotomy, this study found that distinguishing the "male" body from that of the "female" body is essential to determining how the characters themselves presumably understand their own individual identity as well as how the reader differentiates what characters are "for them" based on the gender norms and practices that they embody and which matches that of their own (Dinella et al. 2017).

Image 2: Jessica Jones critiques Emma Frost's costume in *Jessica Jones: Purple Daughter - Issue #1, Chapter 3* (February 2019)

Hence, the characters included in this study were often depicted with different sized breasts, little to no body hair, long and flowy hair, lean (or no) muscles, thicker thighs, and curvier bodies compared to those of their male counterparts. In fact, the costumes of two characters (Chalice and Echo) are not entirely conducive in the sense that parts of their bodies (arms, abdomen, etc.) are exposed and thus could be perceived as a vulnerability that could be exploited by an opponent at any given time (Image 1). The very real possibility of this is something that another character points out to another fellow superheroine when she equates her costume to that of an outfit befitting a prostitute working "on the streets" (Image 2).

Furthermore, another character's (Emp) powers are derived from her incredibly revealing, skintight suit. This, in turn, prevents her from covering up with a cape or else risk being powerless and/or useless in battle (Image 3). Her suits' skimpy appearance and unpredictability are simultaneous costume details that she is acutely aware of and that she herself is often very insecure about. There were often times when the other characters would also make fun of and/or comment on how the tightness of her suit not only accentuates the visibility of her

Image 3: Emp in *Empowered Vol. 1, #24: ""Do-Me"-Riffic!"* (April 2007)

undergarments (i.e., panty lines, bras, etc.) but rather leaves very little to the imagination. In other words, because her suit is so fitted, her nipples and the curvature of her breasts are extremely noticeable and require her to shave her pubic hairs often or else risk being humiliated

at the hands of her fellow colleagues and other wandering eyes while out in public. Thus, in terms of practicality and durability, Emp's costume is anything but (more on that later).

Nevertheless, Emp's frustration over how inappropriate her costume is as well as the amount of times it has put her in awkward and vulnerable situations when in the middle of missions. This ultimately highlights, albeit parodies, the visual exploitation of the female body in ways that appeal to the male reader. Such a portrayal speaks to the realities and struggles of the female reader, particularly in terms of finding clothes that are feminine, comfortable, functional, appropriate, and

Image 4: Naomi shows off her costume for the first time in *Naomi #5* (July 2019)

socially acceptable yet representative of the wearer's actual individual identities, standards, desires, and preferences. Each character's streetwear, in turn, provided them with the distinct opportunity to express themselves respectfully and age appropriately. Naomi, for example, was predominately shone in streetwear up until she discovers and obtains her powers and dons her new costume and superheroine identity in the fifth comic of the first volume of the series (Image 4).

Jessica Jones, on the other hand, was the only character whose past and overall unsuccessful stint as a superheroine is periodically mentioned. However, she is

Image 5: Jessica Jones in Ms. Marvel's costume in *Jessica Jones: Blind Spot – Issue #1, Chapter 1* (July 2018)

never shown wearing her old, let alone a new, costume, except for in pictures and briefly in another superheroine's costume (in Carol Danvers' Ms. Marvel suit) while she is chained up, evades, and ultimately defeats her kidnapper in the first few chapters of the *Blind Spot* comic book storyline (Image 5). Other than that, given the select few comics that I was able to gain access to, she is often seen wearing "normal," everyday clothing while she works as a private investigator who lives in New York City and occasionally uses her powers when necessary, either in self-defense, to avoid confrontation, to investigate a given location, and so forth.

Conversely, Silk's (a.k.a. Cindy Moon) costume, while skintight, does not hypersexualize certain parts of her body to the same degree that Emp's suit does, yet it can be argued that it normalizes perceptions of beauty as they pertain to weight, body size, and body image. The inclusion of Faith Herbert (a.k.a. Zephyr) as a "plus-sized" superheroine into the canon counteracts such common misconceptions about the lack of power, strength, agility, and skill that individuals who are socially and medically labeled as being "overweight" are capable of possessing.

When it comes to her competence and believability as a superheroine, Zephyr's weight is atypical yet very scarcely mentioned, nor does it diminish whether or not she is seen as attractive as it is commonly known and reported in the media (seeing as her ex-boyfriend is currently a reality star) that she has dated fellow handsome, skinny, and chiseled male superheroes. In fact, not only is Zephyr a highly respected and admired superheroine but rather she is equally as attractive as other thinner and thus more "able-bodied" superheroines within the canon.

Nonetheless, similar to Emp's concerns of deliberate costume "fashion" choices, in the first comic of the second volume of her series, Faith briefly questions whether or not her costume needs to be revamped after one of her male colleagues, who is aware of her identity, suggests

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that her uniform is not "very exciting" and perhaps could benefit from a quick make over. In the following comic, his girlfriend, who ironically commissions superhero costumes for customers attending conventions and/or other fan events, informs Faith that she knows who she is despite of her careful attempts to disguise her identity behind a wig and glasses. While she is not ready to do away with her costume just yet, she recognizes the need to have a variety of options (i.e., costumes that are capable of providing different protections or strengths at different given times) and, in the hopes of ensuring that her costume was not only aesthetically pleasing and modern but rather that it is also functional and practical, is open to the future possibility of change.

As a result, depicting female characters in clothes that accentuate these so-called innate fashion concerns (i.e., too tight, too revealing, too short, too outdated, too plain, etc.) and features (i.e., brassieres, skirts, dresses, crop tops, boots, heels, etc.) can be both extremely problematic in the sense that they highlight Western ideals or standards of beauty and attractiveness as well as emphasizes the needed surveillance of gendered and racialized bodies within society. However, this does not always have to be negative. Green Lantern's costume, for example, is very fashionable in the sense that it accentuates her curves as a young, African American woman but that also does not exploit nor undermine her power and authority in exchange for admiration of her attractiveness and overall expression of femininity by those around her. In other words, her curves

Image 6: Carol Danvers as Ms. Marvel (left) in *The New Avengers #38 (February 2008)* and as Captain Marvel (right) in *Captain Marvel Vol. 8, #1* (March 2014)

(like those of Zephyr, Miss America, La Borinqueña, and Captain Marvel) while highlighted by their costumes were not accentuated to such a degree that their curves distracted from the story itself and/or undermined their perceived ability status and overall believability as competent superheroines.

Incidentally, the character of Carol Danvers provides an interesting juxtaposition to the reification of such standards of beauty. While earlier representations of her past identity as Ms. Marvel often depicted her in a relatively hypersexualized costume, the one she wears as Captain Marvel is arguably more sensible and/or conservative (Image 6). Likewise, in terms of hair length, she is the only character who is intermittently portrayed with short, medium length, and long hair which ultimately demonstrates the ways in which women in positions of power, in this case a superheroine, can change their appearance as well as negotiate various spaces within society as they see fit.

Funnily enough, a focus on hair length was referenced by a male character to their female counterpart. As shown in Image 7, Batman advises Batwoman (a.k.a. Kate Kane) to "do something" about her hair because he perceives it as a weakness that could potentially be exploited, in this case pulled, by an

Image 7: Kate Kane talking with Batman in *"Elegy, Part One: Agitato"* – DC Vol.1, #854 - (August 2009)

adversary she confronts, fights against, and/or disagrees with in the future. According to him, the very possibility of this is heightened if she deliberately continues to favor keeping (or sporting) her long hair given that it may result in her being completely and utterly unable to regain control

of the situation to her own detriment. Having long hair is seen as a vulnerability and costume flaw that Batwoman ultimately uses to her disposal in the sense that it is not actually her hair but is a wig.

In other words, Batwoman has accounted for and benefitted from people feeding into such gendered stereotypes as she is later seen fighting the "High Madame," who is the leader of a supervillain group. During their intense and violent physical encounter, the High Madame grabs at Batwoman's hair in an attempt to exert control and weaken her. Much to her dismay, however, Batwoman is unfazed by this maneuver as her wig serves as the ultimate distraction that allows her to regain control of the situation and back her opponent into a corner. As a result, both cases compellingly highlight the ways in which it does not matter how blatant and adept others perceive a self-identfying woman's so-called embodiments of feminity to be, but rather it is how these women wish to comfortably and freely express themselves, their bodies, and their respective identities that truly matters most.

Image 8: Kamala Khan looking like Carol Danvers in *Ms. Marvel #2* (March 2014)

Contrary to popular gendered beliefs and stereotypes, this focus on the outwardly feminine and fashionable aspect of their costumes was most often the exception rather the norm. Instead, the costumes of some of the superheroines were practical in the sense that they enabled them to successfully maneuver themselves when in use. As

a matter of fact, several of the characters' storylines center around the emulation of a specific superhero or superheroine that came before them. Accordingly, the possibility, albeit the desire and determination, to one day "follow in their footsteps," provided some of the characters the very real possibility of considering what their potential superhero costume would look like, what their powers would be, but most importantly, how would it make them feel.

For instance, whereas characters like Naomi McDuffie idolize male superheroes like Superman because of their shared "origin" histories as adopted children, Kamala Khan admires Carol Danvers' (a.k.a. Captain Marvel, but previously Ms. Marvel) for her consistent demonstrations of sheer will, strength, beauty, confidence, and determination. Perhaps she had this in mind as she goes through the terrigen mist and comes out of the cocoon that evidently awakens her powers; in this moment, Kamala looks just like Carol from when she held the "Ms. Marvel" moniker (Image 8).

In the subsequent pages to follow, Kamala discovers what some of her powers are, saves the life of one of her classmates as "Carol Danvers," and reflects on how pretending to be someone else is not "liberating" per se. While she thought that looking like Carol Danvers would make her feel strong, beautiful, confident, and capable, she was incredibly uncomfortable in her costume but truly found happiness in her newfound ability to help others. In this regard, Kamala, like some of the other characters in this study, found that she did not have to pretend to be someone else. Like them, her powers awarded her with a greater responsibility and heightened awareness of her own strengths and vulnerabilities that also allowed her to accept her new role as a superheroine. In other words, it was a trait that she embodied, long before she acquired her superhuman abilities.

Moreover, their superhero costumes are not only functional but can also be perceived as a source of empowerment for some of the characters for a variety of reasons. Firstly, as inventors, super geniuses, and engineers, Ironheart (Image 9) and Moon Girl not only make their own armor and gadgets, respectively, but rather take pride in their work both in terms of their labs as well as their journeys as superheroines. Secondly, other characters, like Ms. Marvel and Batwoman, were assisted by friends and family members in designing their costumes in ways that

Image 9: Riri Williams fixing damages made to armor in *Ironheart #2* (January 2019)

amplify, sustain, and fortify the full extent of their powers whilst simultaneously allowing them to be in control of them rather than be controlled or weighed down by them.

Furthermore, while capes are a common costume trope associated with the superhero/superheroine genre, less than a handful of the characters had them. Aside from being aesthetically pleasing, capes are often decorative rather than functional but that is not to say that this is always true. For instance, even though Green Lantern's (a.k.a. Sojourner Mullein) cape is very sparingly worn and seems to be purely decorative, it does award her protection from the natural elements

Image 10: Sojourner Mullein in *Far Sector #1* (January 2020)

(i.e., rain) as well as some semblance of authority as it seems to resemble the same look as that

of a police cape, or cloak, that was commonly worn by police officers in the United Kingdom during the Victorian era (Image 10). This visual allusion was not overtly addressed but considering her role as a keeper of peace and protector of the 20 billion inhabitants living in the City Enduring it seemed to be rather applicable.

Batwoman's cape, on the other hand, is bulletproof and its weight evidently allows her to jump off buildings without fear of injury while Chalice, Zephyr, and La Borinqueña can fly. Additionally, their connection to the unpredictability of nature, particularly with regards to their ability to generate wind bursts and control storms, wind, and water (respectively), also means that Zephyr's and La Borinqueña's capes allow them to regulate and sustain their powers in increasingly manageable ways.

Characters like Captain Marvel and Katana also wear what can be described as fashion "accessories" with regards to a red scarf (or sash belt seeing as it is worn on her hips) that seems to be solely decorative and a samurai sword that is used as a protective device when in battle. Kamala Khan's "Ms. Marvel" costume, on the other hand, also consists of a red scarf of sorts that is a throwback to Carol Danvers' days as Ms. Marvel but that also incorporates various aspects of her various intersecting identities. Her costume is actually a modified blue burkini, or modesty swimsuit originally designed for Muslim women, that she adds the Ms. Marvel emblem to and that she pairs with red leggings, blue boots, and a red neck scarf that doubles up as the one and the same headscarf that she uses for prayer or when she enters a mosque. In this regard, such costume modifications allow Kamala to be comfortable in both her superheroine and Muslim identities without fear of undermining, overlooking, disgracing, or disrespecting the other.

Additionally, eye and/or face masks (Image 11) were worn by half of the characters included in this study whereas in the other half that did not, two characters have some sort of

face paint on that was specific to their superheroine persona but not their everyday ones. When it comes to eyewear, particularly in the form of glasses, some characters (3 of them to be exact) wore them for what seems like distinctly different reasons: prescription corrective lenses, stylish, and as part her alter ego disguise, respectively.

Image 11: Cindy Moon in *Silk #1* (November 2015)

The masks, on the other hand, served two distinct purposes in the sense that for some, covering their faces with either a mask or helmet of sorts made it easier for them to protect themselves from physical injuries due to exposure to immediate changes in temperature and/or elevation. For others, wearing a mask allowed them to keep their identities a secret and thus resulted in added protections for both them and their families. Only 25% of the characters included in this study had aliases that were known to the general public. For the remaining 75%, their "secret identities" were only known by themselves and select family members, friends, co-workers, classmates, and other fellow superheroes. Of those characters, only one (Kamala Khan) had their secret identity known to government agencies by means of registration and/or her affiliation with other superhero group entities.

When it comes to the character Zephyr, while her superheroine identity is public knowledge, her actual birth name (Faith Herbert) as well as her alter ego (Summer Smith) are not. Juggling so many different identities is not only incredibly difficult and stress inducing for people in the "real world" but this also presents Faith with plenty of hardship in the form of

interpersonal conflict with her friends and co-workers. After pursuing leads on the whereabouts of various missing persons, she is followed by the very same individuals who have been kidnapping these individuals (all of which are potentials psiots, a subspecies of humans with psychic

Image 12: Kidnappers look for Zephyr at Zipline in *Faith #3* (March 2016)

powers) to her workplace, Zipline (an entertainment blog). The kidnappers threaten her co-workers to find out where she, Zephyr, is (Image 12). As they begin firing shots in their direction to entice them for information, Faith/Summer is forced to shed her wig as well as the rest of her "Summer Smith" disguise to protect her colleagues and in turn revealing that Faith, Summer, and Zephyr were all one and the same. As coworkers and as entertainment reporters, they express their anger, disappointment, and betrayal over the fact that she would keep such a huge secret and major news headline from them. Faith, in turn, apologizes to each of them, stating that she has lost people before and thus believed that by keeping them in the dark of her identity, she was protecting them; she never thought, or at least hoped, that her two worlds would ever collide.

Similarly, maintaining romantic rendezvous and relationships in a timely and honest manner have proven difficult for Batwoman seeing as the women she dates often feel as if she is either too distracted, aimless, and/or emotionally unavailable to have an honest and committed relationship with someone. Cindy Moon/Silk's co-workers also echo such sentiments in the sense that they frequently attempt to get her to go out with them, but she either forgets they have made plans or is too busy to follow through with them. This in turn makes them feel as if she

purposefully avoids spending time with them, when in reality she has a legitimate alibi that is two-fold: playing a "double-agent" so that she can protect the greater good, which includes that of the safety of her co-workers, as well as awards her further information about the whereabouts of her parents. As a result, for many of these characters, such aloofness and/or an inability to successfully negotiate two distinct realities, meaning that of their superheroine identities and that of their "normal" day to day activities (i.e., dating, hanging out, going to work, etc.), is not only difficult but rather paints these characters as being increasingly and problematically antisocial, evasive, selfish, disinterested, and emotionally withdrawn.

Finally, Maya Lopez's stint, or portrayal, as Ronin also provides an interesting narrative with regards to gendered perceptions of what a male superhero is capable of in comparison to their female counterparts. As previously mentioned, Maya's costume as Echo is incredibly feminine and revealing in the sense that various parts of her body are exposed or, for lack of a better descriptive word, "on display."

Maya/Ronin's ninja costume, however, is not only more conservative but rather presents her as being more muscular and thus more masculine both visually to the reader as well as perceptually by some of the comic book characters themselves. This is addressed in the comic when, on the way back from a mission, the other characters mention several male names as they try to determine who she is (Image 13). In other words, it is not so much that she is capable of harnessing different physical

Image 13: Maya Lopez as "Ronin" in *The New Avengers #13* (November 2005)

strengths but that she is perceived as being male. This may, in part, be associated with the fact that her ninja persona (perhaps coupled with the fact that her ninja hood may hinder her ability to successfully read people's lips in order to communicate) is so elusive and enigmatic that her skills are inherently gendered even though there is no real difference in how she employs them when she is identified as female, as "Echo," and when she is perceived to be male as "Ronin."

Manifestations of Powers and Abilities

In addition to focusing on how their costumes accentuate, define, and convey their femininity, acknowledging what their abilities are, as well as how their powers were cultivated and/or received, is crucial to understanding whether or not their inclusion(s) within the canon perpetuate or combat various gendered stereotypes. In terms of possessing powers and abilities that are most often associated with their male counterparts (i.e., superhuman strength, enhanced stamina, hand-to-hand combat, marksmanship, leadership, shapeshifting, energy manipulation, time travel, etc.), as outlined in the previous section, it was refreshing to see that the superheroines included in this study possessed a mixture of both. Although, I acknowledge how problematic it ultimately is to denote a given character's powers and abilities as traditionally "masculine" or "feminine," recognizing its pervasive existence within the superhero/superheroine comic book canon is essential to this study.

The following chart (Figure 4) highlights some of their collective powers and abilities (for a detailed list of each of the characters' powers and abilities, see Appendix C):

Figure 4: Powers and Abilities

Percentage (Number of Characters)	Powers and Abilities
69% (11 out of 16)	Exhibit superhuman strength
44% (7 out of 16)	Power of flight
31% (5 out of 16)	Durability (can withstand extreme temperatures and injury)
25% (4 out of 16)	Healing factor (can recover from bodily injuries at superhuman rates)

18.75% (3 out of 16)	Energy manipulation/generation
12.50% (2 out of 16)	Control over elemental forces of nature (i.e., wind and water)
6.25% (1 out of 16)	Time travel/generate portals for interdimensional travel
6.25% (1 out of 16)	Shapeshifting (can manipulate body size, length, and appearance)

Each of the superheroines included in this study had some form of hand-to-hand combat skills or training, regardless of whether they had superpowers or not. This was incredibly refreshing as well as somewhat promising to note in my data collection process as it provides significant insight into the potential influence that such storylines and characteristics wield. Considering that such powers and abilities, demonstrate an innate sense of control over one's body movements and expressions, perhaps the overall trajectory of the genre (despite its various critiques) is most certainly moving in a positive direction, or at least it is trying to.

While great strides have been made in society, we are still lacking when it comes to increasingly viable, feasible, suitable, and socially necessary solutions to combating issues of gender inequality within the majority of our social institutions. Thus, the very fact that these characters successfully and mightily embodied a strong sense of individual agency and bodily autonomy was particularly empowering to witness in light of the fact that such traits are not frequently awarded to women in the real world, at least not without extreme pushback (i.e., issues pertaining to abortion rights, rigid beauty standards, fashion as a form of individual expression, etc.).

The following chart (Figure 5) lists the roots of each character's power source:

Figure 5: Sources of each Characters' Powers and Abilities

Origins of Powers and Abilities	Superheroine Names
Skills Training (linked to post-traumatic event)	Batwoman, Echo, Ironheart, and Katana
Exposure to Mutagenic Agents	Jessica Jones and Silk

Biological Genealogy	Captain Marvel, Ms. Marvel, Naomi, Zephyr, Chalice, Miss America, and Moon Girl
Nature/Gifted by Gods	La Borinqueña
"Fashion" Accessory	Empowered and Green Lantern + *Ironheart (armor)*
Skills Training (linked to post-traumatic event)	Batwoman, Echo, Ironheart, and Katana

Consequently, it is important to note that 4 of the characters included in this study (Batwoman, Echo, Ironheart, and Katana) are not "superpowered" in the traditional sense of the word. In other words, while these characters possess powers and abilities that award them the "superheroine" title, they were not born with powers or a biological gene of sorts that would enable them to acquire superpowered abilities later on in their lives. Instead, their desire to pursue a life of fighting crime as well as other social injustices stem from their past experiences of familial loss, pain, and trauma. The loss of either a parent, sibling, husband, best friend, or someone else important in their life significantly altered the trajectory of their life course to such a degree that they evidently developed a perpetual and relentless need to protect and make a difference in the lives of others.

Batwoman, for instance, began to don her red and black costume (the Hebrew colors of war) after she was nearly mugged and saved by the caped crusader, Batman, himself. Prior to this experience, Kate Kane's life was at a crossroads. After being dishonorably discharged from the U.S. Military Academy for violating Article 125 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, Kate found herself feeling directionless, emotionally unavailable, and engaging in destructive behavior. However, her near-assault in the dark hours of the night evidently inspired her to travel the world and train in various forms of combat so that she could protect herself as well as the people of Gotham from harm. Together with her father, a Colonel in the U.S. Military, they monitor potential threats and occurrences of criminal activity in the city. As a matter of fact, as Batwoman handles and confronts offenders, her father coordinates her missions from afar,

keeping an eye out for her safety as well as whether or not he needs to call in military reinforcement and/or law enforcement officials, if necessary.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that Kate's origin story as Batwoman was an amalgamation of events that began years earlier. As a young child, Batwoman was kidnapped alongside her twin sister and mother only to later be saved by her father, see their covered bodies as she was carried out the room, bury them, and mourn their deaths for years to then find out that her sister's body was never recovered. Thus, not only is her sister very much alive but rather she and the "High Madame" – the villian who, for months, has been trying to capture and kill her for reasons unknown – are one and the same.

Echo, on the other hand, lost her father at a young age and was raised by the man who killed him, who in turn manipulated her into believing that his nemesis (and who also becomes her ex-lover) had killed him instead. As she is deaf, Echo must heavily rely on her other senses. Her excellent photographic reflexes give her the ability to effortlessly copy her opponent's attacks as well as take advantage of their weaknesses with the same (if not more) refinement and finesse as a "hearing" person. As a result, Echo is an expert marksman, acrobat, and martial artist.

Image 14: Riri meets her biological father for the first time in *Ironheart #11* (October 2019)

Moreover, Ironheart also experienced her fair share of trauma as she witnessed the deaths of

her stepfather and best friend in a drive by shooting in Chicago; this is an event in her life that she displays a tremendous amount of survivor's guilt over. Like Batwoman, Ironheart spent most of her life believing that a significant member of her family, in this case her biological father, had died before she was born; she too comes face to face with him only to discover that he too is now a villain (Image 14). Lastly, while the aforementioned characters experienced a high degree of childhood traumas, Katana's origin story, as we know it, begins much later in life as she begins training in order to refine her sword wielding skills in the hopes of avenging the death of her husband, Maseo. While she is already a master martial artist, Katana builds upon her skills when she begins training under a samurai sensei and becomes an expert swordsman.

This so-called need or public obligation to do "something that matters" is a common trope of the genre that was thus unsurprisingly echoed by each superheroine in this study. However, it was the ways in which such stories exemplified each of the characters' altruistic natures by simultaneously addressing their unresolved trauma and need for closure about who they are and where they would be if they had not gone through said experiences that was truly inspiring. Their tenacity, perseverance, and overall composure in the wake of such experiences serves to not only present the characters as more relatable but rather poignantly mirrored that of how people may respond to such struggles in the non-fictional world (minus the secret life of heroism and/or so-called vigilantism, of course).

Subsequently, of the remaining 12 characters, 2 of them were artificially subjected to mutagenic agents (i.e., chemical spills, radiation, etc.) that significantly altered their DNA. Jessica Jones received her powers after she and her family crashed into a military convoy carrying radioactive chemicals. The impact killed her family and left her in a coma. As a result, Jessica has presumably turned to alcohol to numb the pain and memories of the event in addition

to her experiences of being under Kilgrave's (a.k.a. The Purple Man) mind control and manipulation. Nevertheless, seeing as she does not seem to be entirely fond of her powers and in turn uses them sporadically, her "abuse" of alcohol also has a sort of self-sabotaging element to it in the sense that it inhibits her senses and limits the use of her powers at their full capacity.

This is especially apparent when it comes to how she calculates the amount of force it will take to knock someone unconscious without neurologically damaging and/or killing them. This, in turn, provides an interesting narrative in relation to the use of brute force by her male counterparts. Such a narrative, while central to her storyline and overall sense of self, can be criticized for emphasizing the need for the policing of gendered bodies by individual actors. In other words, while the exertion of her superhuman strength and/or use of excessive force can be perceived as being unnecessary or irresponsible to the same degree as any other superhero/superheroine in the field can be at a given point in time, it is the very fact that she hesitates that ultimately frames her actions within a cloud of shame and doubt that seems to paint her as being undeserving of such abilities to begin with.

Silk, on the other hand, was bitten by the same radioactive spider that bit Peter Parker (a.k.a. Spider-Man) during a school field trip to a public exhibition on the safe handling of nuclear waste materials. As a result of the bite, Silk received all the same spider-like abilities (i.e., organic webbing generation, wall-crawling, reflexes, balance, and can sense immediate danger within her surroundings) as Spider-Man did. Upon discovering her powers, her parents were contacted by a man by the name of Ezekiel Sims, who in turn trained Silk. In the hopes of ensuring her protection, Silk was evidently locked away in a bunker for 10 years, where she remained awaiting the day that her parents found a cure that would "fix" her, but they never came back. Instead, her parents have gone missing, her brother has no recollection of what might

have happened to them, and as a result she started working at Fact Channel News (a news channel in New York City) as an intern in order to use their access to resources and potentially find some insight as to their current whereabouts.

Furthermore, 7 of the characters were born with a biological mutation, lineage, or gene of sorts that allowed their powers to remain dormant for most of their lives until activated and/or perfected at a later date. For example, Captain Marvel was born to a human father and Kree (a race of extraterrestrial beings) mother. The truth behind her genetic makeup/physiology was not known to her until she was exposed to the Psyche-Magnitron, which is a device created by the Kree and that activated her powers. Conversely, Miss America and Naomi were born in a different dimension and planet, respectively; for the latter, this information was not known to her until her adoptive parents informed her of how she came into their lives. Zephyr's latent psiot powers, Chalice's Alter mutation, and both Ms. America's and Moon Girl's Inhuman biology (after going through the terrigen mist, a mutagenic substance) transformed their DNA and ultimately triggered the genesis of each of their powers.

The final 3 characters, however, are a little different. One of the characters, La Borinqueña, received her powers from the Taíno gods of her Puerto Rican ancestors. Marisol, is an undergraduate student, majoring in Earth and Environmental Sciences, at Columbia University. As part of her independent study graduation requirement, she is spending a semester abroad to conduct research on various rock samples from five different caves in Puerto Rico. During her exploration, she intriguingly discovers that she has found crystals that, according to her research, should not be in the caves of Puerto Rico.

When she arrives at the last cave (Cueva Ventana) left for her research project on a dark and stormy night, the crystals begin to glow as she finds the fifth and final crystal. The crystals

come together to form a star that causes Atabex, the Taíno mother goddess, to appear before her (Image 15). Atabex explains that the island and people of Puerto Rico have been suffering for years, and that Marisol has been chosen to harness and protect the light of the star to bring hope to their people. Atabex then summons her sons, Yucahu, spirit of the seas and the mountains, and Huracan, spirit of the storms, to grant Marisol her powers of superhuman strength, flight, and control over the wind. Throughout this process of transformation, her costume is formed from a historically and culturally significant family heirloom: the small piece of fabric that was left over from what Mariana Bracetti used to sew what is now known to be the first flag of Puerto Rico.

Image 15: Atabex appears to Marisol Rios De La Luz, a.k.a. La Borinqueña in *La Borinqueña #1* (December 2016)

Continuing with this brief discussion of costumes, the final two characters rely on what I could only think to collectively define as "fashion accessories" for their powers to effectively manifest themselves. In other words, if the characters do not wear these particular "accessories" as part of their attire, they would not have "superhuman" powers in the traditional sense, but that by no means serves to diminish the other personal skills, talents, abilities, and strengths they possess outside of their superheroine identity.

Following up on the discussion of her extremely revealing costume in the previous section, it is important to note that Emp's powers are active when and only if she is wearing her highly "effective" but often unreliable hyper-membrane costume. While her suit awards her with super strength and is (arguably) bulletproof, it is incredibly fragile in the sense that the smallest nick or tear in the suit immediately weakens Emp's abilities and leaves her vulnerable.

This, in turn, is a running gag throughout the first volume of the series, in more ways than one, as she is often made fun of

Image 16: Emp attempts to bluff her way out of her restraints in *Empowered Vol. 1, #2 "That's What You'd Think"* (April 2007)

by her fellow superpowered teammates as well as some of the criminal adversaries she confronts while out "on the job." In the second story of the series, Emp attempts to bluff her way out of being held captive by goons, who comment and make fun of the fact that her suit is riddled with bullet holes and thus she must be "fresh outta superskills" (Image 16). In an attempt to turn the tables back in her favor, Emp tries to convince them that by shrinking her suit to shreds they have only concentrated the potency of her powers and that they should grant her the privacy of covering up before she gains the upper hand. Upon telling them this, the thugs are not even fazed but rather are more insulted by her lie than anything else.

Additionally, while Ironheart's armor suit could also be a part of this discussion, Sojourner Mullein's, a.k.a. Green Lantern, powers stem from the Power Ring (Image 17). Like her predecessors, Mullein's Power Ring is fueled by the individual willpower and imagination of whomever is wearing it. Thus, the ring itself can do anything and

Image 17: The Green Lantern Power Ring in *Far Sector #4* (April 2020)

everything its handler can think of, which evidently makes it the most powerful weapon in the universe. However, unlike past rings, Mullein's Power Ring has the ability to charge itself whenever it is inactive without needing to be continuously charged through the use of a power battery. This is both a powerful advantage that simultaneously presents a fascinating weakness in the sense that Mullein cannot exert the full force of her ring or else risk completely blowing it out of commission for a total of 5 days before it could recharge to full power.

To compensate for this, Mullein often relies on limiting the use of her ring and instead turn to her social skills of diplomacy and negotiation; skills that she presumably perfected throughout her deployment in the military as well as while she was in the police academy and police force. Therefore, like my earlier discussion of Jessica Jones' drinking, inhibiting and/or restricting the power that both she and the ring wield, Mullein's storyline simultaneously echoes the sentiments of two very contradictory gendered narratives: women *have* more control than men vs. women in (or in this case, with) power *must* be controlled.

Sources of Empowerment

In terms of possessing non-superhuman abilities and preferences that are most commonly attributed to male characters, only two characters – Captain Marvel and Green Lantern – exhibited positions of power delineated with leadership whereas 4 characters – Moon Girl, Ironheart, Echo, and Silk – exemplified high degrees of intelligence and expertise. Additionally, 6 characters exemplified journeys of educational attainment (Moon Girl, Ms. Marvel, Ironheart, La Borinqueña, Miss America, and Green Lantern) and 7 characters were depicted as working in male-dominated office jobs of investigatory law services, journalism, and accounting (Jessica Jones, Zephyr, Silk, and Chalice) and in peacekeeping positions relating to the police force as well as the military (Green Lantern, Batwoman, and Captain Marvel). Such professions are in charge of probing, controlling, disseminating, and producing knowledge.

While adhering to such gendered stereotypes is not entirely conducive in combatting the omnipresent humanistic and highly paternalistic need to categorize and uphold individuals to these gendered stereotypes and expectations, the characters themselves find ways in which they can curtail and redefine such expectations in ways that they are both comfortable with and willing to perform. As a result, female empowerment, on both a personal and communal scale, was quite a significant aspect of each superheroine's individual identities. This is commonly presented through the ways in which each character was able to overcome diversity, support other women along their journeys, and finally, how they were able to accept and/or come to terms with who they are and who they want to be.

The following chart (Figure 6) highlights the prevalence of whether or not the characters were depicted as either working alone, in partnerships, or in teams:

Figure 6: Partnership Depictions

Relationship Type	Percentage (Number of Characters)	

Predominately work alone	75% (12 out of 16)	Three of which were once affiliated with a superhero team and who often begrudgingly and/or reluctantly work with others
Occasional male or female partnerships	35.5% (6 out of 16)	One of which held a "Mentor" position for another female character/superheroine
Previously/currently affiliated with a superhero team	56.25% (9 out of 16)	One of which was shown as currently being contacted by/joining a team

In terms of mentor/mentee relationships, only Captain Marvel was shown as being a mentor to Miss America and Ms. Marvel, who herself also had male mentors (Wolverine) similar to her fellow younger-aged superheroines, Moon Girl (Mr. Fantastic) and Ironheart (Tony Stark). Batwoman, on the other hand, has occasional contact with Batman and works closely with her father, who helped create her costume, trains her, makes gadgets for her, coordinates her missions, and helps keep her "secret identity" a secret. Nevertheless, that is not to say that some of the other characters were not shown with, trained by, or affiliated with other female mentors.

While traveling interdimensionally, Miss America meets Storm and Peggy Carter. Most notably, she had Madrimar, her grandmother who left their Planet Fuertona (their mother planet) when she was born and who watched over her from the Ancestral Plane until she reached out years later, informed her of their familial connection, and offered to teach her about her mothers, their home planet, and the ways of their people. Silk had Spider-Man, Spider-Woman, Ghost-Spider, Spectro, and Mockingbird (a.k.a. Bobbi Morse), a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent who she is working as a double agent for so they could bring Black Cat and her gang to justice. In exchange, Bobbi ensures her safety while on missions, checks up on her brother, and helps her find information about the whereabouts of her parents, all the while leaving the possibility open for Silk to join S.H.I.E.L.D. as an agent herself, whenever she is ready.

Similarly, Captain Marvel, while initially reluctant to, learns how to embrace her partnership with Ms. Marvel (a.k.a. Kamala Khan) in the sense that she both mentors her and allows herself to be mentored by her. Even though she is a seasoned veteran, so to speak, Captain Marvel benefits from Kamala's fresh outlook on life, people, and respecting her own cultural background just as much as Kamala benefits from her experience. Their partnership evidently becomes a friendship built on mutual love and respect for one another that Kamala can turn to whenever she is in doubt of her own capabilities and/or if she is faced with a situation that she feels as if she is not quite prepared to deal with without a little bit of guidance (Image 18).

Image 18: Captain Marvel and Ms. Marvel in *Marvel Team-Up feat. Captain Marvel and Ms. Marvel #5* (November 2019)

Thus, while characters like Kamala Khan and Riri Williams are enthusiastically open to being taken under the wings of veteran superheroes/superheroines in the field, others have their fair share of reservations. Jessica Jones, for instance, occasionally goes out of her way to avoid being commonly associated with other superpowered individuals for fear of welcoming unwanted attention as well as potentially placing others in harm's way. Moon Girl, on the other hand, stubbornly resists Mr. Fantastic's advice and supervision on multiple occasions (as it will be discussed later). She does this because by accepting his help not only does it suggest that she is admitting that he is indeed smarter than her but rather that in doing so she confirms his

assumptions about how her so-called inexperience, incompetence, and child-like demeanor warrants his assistance and expertise in the first place; which according to her, she most certainly does not. Such sentiments in turn reiterate gendered stereotypes regarding the need to police the female body as well as control the behaviors of females from a young age under the false patriarchal assumption that they need to be protected from danger and shown the way.

Additionally, 5 characters had variations of, if not the same, secret identity monikers previously held by male superheroes: Batwoman, Ironheart, Moon Girl, Green Lantern, and Captain Marvel. Maya Lopez, on the other hand, was the first character to assume the "Ronin" identity that would later be passed on to other iterations of "Ronin" with male characters assuming the role. Furthermore, while on the topic of empowerment as well as adopted superheroine monikers, it is important to note that one of the character's names is coincidentally "Empowered." Her superheroine pseudonym is a personal choice that should, by very definition, be empowering for her, but whose unfortunate irony is often thrown in her face by her male and female colleagues alike (Image 19). Whilst there may be a disconnect with the empiric depictions and narratives of empowerment, particularly with regards to the practicality of her costume, Emp's storylines serve to not only portray her as so embarrassingly clumsy and incompetent that even criminals are insulted or ashamed of facing for fear of having their careers tainted, but that also pits two powerful women against each other.

In the tenth story in the comic book series, Emp is once again left powerless and defenseless, tied to a post, and in desperate need of saving. When her Super Homey teammates arrive, the only other female on the team, Sistah Spooky, expresses her bewilderment and disbelief that Emp has once again managed to find herself in a less than opportune situation that is a direct contradiction to her supposed status as a confident and "empowered" superheroine. As

shown in Image 19, Sistah Spooky suggests that Emp change her name because she is the

"weakest, saddest, and most tragically lame member of the team" and that her lack of

accomplishments as a superheroine demonstrate that she is most definitely not the poster girl for

empowerment. In fact, the only talents she has proven good at, are not something to be proud of.

Image 19: Sistah Spooky mocks Emp's superhero pseudonym in *Empowered Vol.1, #10* (April 2007)

In the subsequent stories to follow, Emp is shown crying in front of her teammates and

Sistah Spooky criticizes Emp for "reinforcing offensive stereotypes about female superheroines."

Her male teammates in turn express similar opinions of her and state that she is only on the team

for "gender diversity purposes" whilst one of them attempts takes advantage of her vulnerability

and desire to be fully accepted by the team. In horror, Emp overhears him say that the only

reason he "complimented" her power level was to sleep with her.

Nonetheless, while her vulnerabilities are often on full display for others to see and

critique, Emp perseveres. With the help of her boyfriend, Thugboy, and best friend, Ninjette,

Emp's struggle with low self-esteem is counterbalanced in the sense that she gradually learns to

accept herself, her body, and her less than heroic blunders as being a part of her learning process.

While it does pain her that her colleagues and adversaries perceive her as another "dumb blonde"

stereotype, her support system provides her with another narrative, one of bravery and selflessness in the face of adversity. Framing her experiences through the lens of those who love, respect, and see her for who she really is – a superhero – not only serves to build her confidence but rather empowers her (pun intended) to do what she loves, regardless of what others think.

Chalice's experience, on the other hand, is a bit more complicated seeing as she struggles with disclosing her decision to transition to her family. Her hesitation to do so stems from her fear of burdening them with another significantly life altering change in the wake of her older brother Teddy's worsening symptoms of cerebral palsy. As a transwoman and son to a fairly
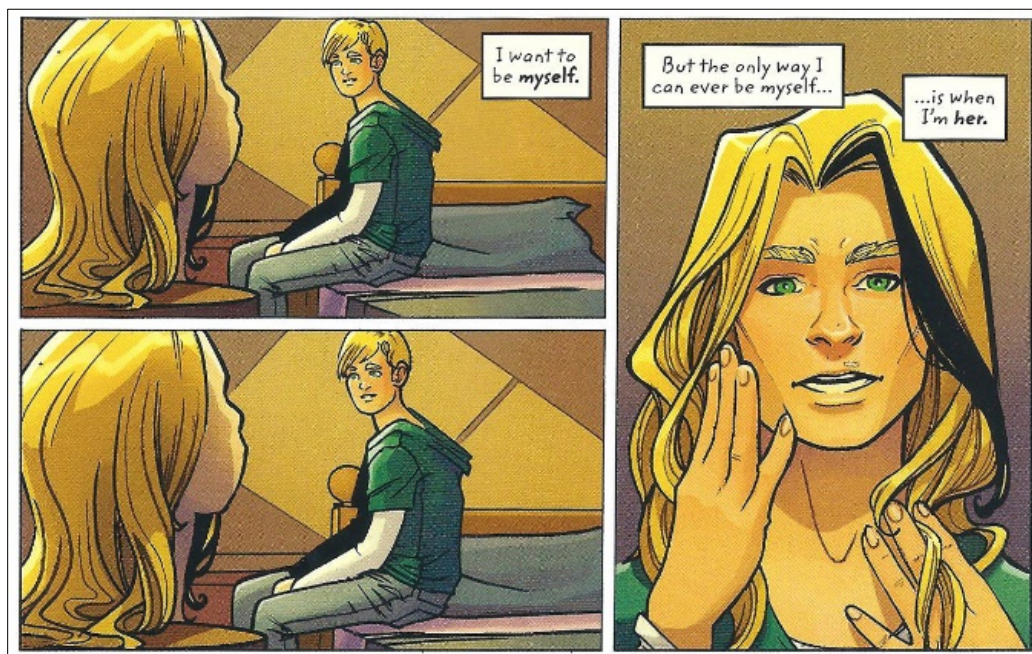
Image 20: Being Chalice allows Charlie to be her true self in *Alters #1*
(September 2016)

conservative father, Charlie fears that her transition will not be well received and that it will lead her to lose her family entirely. Thus, although she has already begun hormone therapy, she bravely but regrettably keeps her decision a secret from her family, friends, and prospective superpowered colleagues. While this omission of information takes quite a significant toll on her both emotionally and professionally, Charlie relishes in the fact that having powers has not only

made her a formidable superheroine but rather has presented her with the perfect opportunity to

fulfill her wildest dreams and finally present herself to the world as her true self and not the

person they want or expect her to be (Image 20). This in turn provides her with a great sense of

happiness and self-respect that awards her the confidence to tell her older brother, Teddy, the

truth about her transition and dual superheroine persona. Much to her relief, her brother is not

only accepting and understanding of her confession but also, reveals one of his own: he too is an

Alter, an emerging group of genetically superpowered individuals (or mutants).

Consequently, having friends, partners, and family members be aware of their secret

identities as superheroines was not a crippling impediment for each of the character's included in

this study (Image 21). Instead, having the opportunity to share such a crucial part of their

identities with their loved ones was an essential part of their personal growth in various aspects

of their lives.

For some, isolating themselves and
pushing others away served as a coping
mechanism to both protect their loved ones
from harm while simultaneously protecting
themselves from internal blame if something
were to happen to them because of their own
mistakes. For others, telling people about their
secret identities and revealing personal details
about their pasts proved to be a cathartic

Image 21: Cindy no longer feels alone in
Silk #19 (April 2017)

experience that taught these characters that they are not alone. They do not have to carry the

weight of the world on their own shoulders but rather they can allow themselves to be vulnerable

and not have it be perceived as a weakness. Following up on this discussion of having healthy support systems in their personal lives, it was refreshing to witness the maintenance and development of such relationships in their professional lives as superheroines as well. Such relationships consisted of women in positions of power combining their shared talents together and supporting each other rather than tearing each other down out of jealousy and/or for having their own faults.

While female tension and "pettiness" was a common conflict between Emp and Sistah Spooky, this was thankfully not a recurrent theme in the content analyzed for this study. In fact, all the characters have significant male and female friendships outside of their superheroine exploits, but more than half of the characters managed to cultivate such friendships with other women within their line of work as well. Whether it is supporting one another emotionally or professionally, knowing that someone has gone through similar experiences as they have ultimately reified their desire to help others as well as provides these characters with a heightened sense of belonging.

For instance, Miss America is best friends with Kate Bishop (a.k.a. Hawkeye) whilst, despite her best efforts of keeping people away from her to protect them, Jessica Jones is best friends with Carol Danvers (a.k.a. Captain Marvel). In this regard, Kate is there for America after her breakup and goes on a road trip with her to get her mind off things. Carol comes to see Jessica in the hospital after she gets shot, comforts her when she feels as if her whole world is crumbling down, reassures her that she is not a bad person, and helps remind her who she is fighting for: her husband and daughter, Dani.

As shown in Image 22, although Jessica refused her help, Carol arrives to congratulate Jessica after she once again came face to face with the Purple Man and defeated him to protect

herself and her family. Jessica in turn returns the favor when she assures Carol's concerns regarding if the Purple Man being alive actually meant that she had harmed an innocent civilian that he had manipulated into being a part of his schemes: it does not. His so-called "death" was just another one of his tricks and although he is alive, she did not throw him nor anyone into the sun definitively killing them. This information brings Carol a great sense of relief and although there is still plenty left to be discussed between the two of them, Carol leaves and as Jessica's husband comments about how brief their encounter was, Jessica states that Carol knows when she prefers not to talk and agrees with Luke when he says "she's a good friend."

Image 22: Jessica tells Carol that the Purple Man is alive in *Jessica Jones: Purple Daughter - Issue #3, Chapter 6* (March 2019)

Thus, unlike common stereotypes regarding strong female friendships, their friendship is not in jeopardy because Carol left so soon or because they did not talk through their emotions but instead did quite the opposite. Such a simple gesture as checking in on Jessica after what was a very difficult and confusing ordeal, no matter how brief, spoke volumes about the state of their friendship as well as the sense of comfort and stability that it provides them. Their quiet understanding of what the other needs in addition to respecting one another's space by very definition represents how important and uplifting their friendship is for both of them.

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Moreover, as someone who did not know much about her biological parents, Naomi always fantasized about her origins sharing a similar connection to that of her idol, Superman. For her, the fact that Superman was adopted and happened to be a superpowered child from outer space evidently made her feel that this too could be true for her. While this simply could be dismissed as being a child's unrealistic pipedream, for Naomi it turned out to be 100% accurate. As she begins to ask more and more questions about her biological parents, her adoptive parents decide to take her aside one night and finally tell her the truth. That night she discovers that her adoptive father is an alien from outer space who arrived in a spaceship, fell in love with her adoptive mother, and broke the rules when he decided to stay on Earth with her. He then reveals that one night he received an alert that he thought came from his superiors who came to either punish him or take him back to his home planet. Instead he witnessed an intense battle take place between several individuals, one of which had fled to Earth with her as a baby to protect her from harm, left her in his care, and he and her mother raised her as their own ever since.

After telling her this, Naomi's adoptive father and mother are by her side when she opens a cube-shaped object with an emblem on it that she was left in her possession when she was a baby. When in her hands, the object begins to glow, and she hears a voice recording (and hologram) of her biological mother. In the recording, her biological mother explains that her hearing the recording is not only proof that she and Naomi's biological father died but rather that Naomi was safe and sound, and thus their deaths were not in vain. She goes on to explain why they could not come to Earth with her and that they hope that she does not feel as if they abandoned her or that she was unloved. In fact, it was because they loved her so much that they had to let her go and hope that she was found by a family that loved her just as much as they did and who would help her harness and cultivate her powers when the time comes. If nothing else,

they wanted her to know that they believe that they were given their powers for a reason and while theirs never revealed itself to them, she hoped that it would for her and that above all else, they wanted her to be "happy, and in love."

Overwhelmed with emotion, Naomi leaves to meet with her best friend, Annabelle, to talk about what had transpired that night. Although rightfully shocked and confused about what Naomi is describing, Annabelle is incredibly supportive and shares in her excitement as Naomi becomes the superheroine that she

Image 23: Naomi and Annabelle in *Naomi #5* (July 2019)

has always known her to be with the only difference being that she now had the superpowers to prove it (Image 23). Annabelle's demeanor evidently helps Naomi makes sense of her powers as well as embrace them rather than fear them. While Naomi is scared that she has brought danger their way, Annabelle and her parents assure her that there is nothing to be afraid of and that, no matter what happens, they will be right by her side to help her figure things out.

Consequently, while Naomi and her best friend, Annabelle, are beyond ecstatic that she gets to follow in her idol's (Superman) footsteps, Ms. Marvel and Zephyr get the opportunity to work alongside their own role models: Captain Marvel and Hadley Scott (an actress who played a cyborg named Unit 517 on the television show "Night Shifters"), respectively. Batwoman, on

the other hand, discovers that her "civilian" cousin, Bette, is also a fellow superheroine who goes under the codename, Flamebird (Image 24).

Additionally, despite originally budding heads when they first met, Riri and Shuri (Image 25) as well as Miss America and the sisters of the Leelumultipass Phi Theta Betas (Image 26) learn to understand and appreciate one another's individual pasts, passions, strengths, and overall approaches to life in order to cultivate an alliance built on mutual and binding respect. As a matter of fact, they set their differences aside so that they can all come together and fight for the people of Wakanda and Maltixa, respectively. This is, as Miss America so eloquently proclaims at the end of the third comic of her self-titled series, "how a chosen family fights." They do so together.

Such authentic portrayals of women of color and their cultivation of supportive and

Image 24: Bette reveals her Flamebird costume to Kate *in "Cutter: Part 3" - Detective Comics #863* (May 2010)

Image 25: Silhouette, Ironheart, and Shuri in *Ironheart #12* (November 2019)

affirming female friendships was incredibly inspiring to note in the comic book content. In light of the common social colloquialisms pertaining to Western beauty standards and hierarchies of success within society, women are often pitted against each other simply for the sake of upholding the status quo. The female characters in this study, however, were not competing for a

man's undivided attention but rather recognition from likeminded others as well as their own self-actualization and self-respect.

As a result, each of these characters learn to embrace their faults, their fears, and each of their individual strengths that they bring to the table. Whether they work alone, with friends, or with a team, what is the most important and empowering element of each of their individual journey's is that they learn to be so unapologetically them. In other words, they do

Image 26: The Leelumultipass Phi Theta Betas come to Miss America's aid in *America #3* (May 2017)

not have to be anyone other than themselves to be a prolific superheroine. In fact, it is because of who they are, where they come from, and what they have experienced throughout their lives which confirms that they are right where they are meant to be.

The characters of Zephyr and Echo provide a compelling contradiction to common stereotypes of what a "typical," able-bodied superheroine evidently looks like. Zephyr, for instance, is a plus-sized superheroine who, superficially speaking, is by no means a stereotypical White, feminine, skinny, blue eyed blonde bombshell one would expect to see as the main protagonist of her own self-titled comic. Similarly, Faith, a self-described fan of comic books herself, is portrayed as a powerful, respected, and attractive woman.

In fact, Faith's weight is never overtly mentioned as being a weakness or unfeminine, let alone as a health concern. In the comics selected for this study, her weight is only subtly mentioned once by her ex-boyfriend's current girlfriend when she rudely suggests that he "traded

up." Regardless of such a statement, Faith does not take offence, nor does she feel as if she is in

desperate need to change who she is because she fully accepts herself and her body for it is. She

does not consider her weight as being a personal flaw or obstacle that prevents her from

succeeding professionally and/or in her personal life. As a matter of fact, she does not think nor

stress about it at all.

Faith is portrayed as being a powerful and

confident superheroine who, although she may be

forced to play up such negative gendered stereotypes

at work or in her daily social interactions as part of

her alter ego, dates attractive men, who also happen to

be fellow superheroes. As shown in Image 27, Faith

even fantasizes about how her celebrity crush, Chris

Criswell, set up a private meeting with her to tell her

how much he respects her as a superheroine as well as

how has fallen in love with her. While some critics of

the comic may see such depictions as being

unrealistic or delusional, it is affirming to see that

Image 27: Faith daydreams about her meeting with Chris Criswell in *Faith Vol. 2, #1* (July 2016)

Faith sees herself as desirable while she simultaneously does not see thin, muscular, and

handsome men as being unattainable and "out of her league."

Nevertheless, such portrayals can be interpreted as being somewhat problematic in the

sense that even though Faith does not outwardly say that she would like to lose weight, some of

the images portraying her daydreams and thus perhaps her innermost desires, could say

otherwise. In her dream sequences, like that of the one shown in Image 27, Faith is a bit thinner

than what she normally looks like in real life. Accordingly, such a discrepancy between her real and imagined selves can indicate that while Faith likes who she is and what she looks like, she may (like most women) feel pressure to buy into Western standards of beauty and in turn feels that by losing some weight she will be seen as more sensual and desirable by men of Chris Criswell's "caliber." However, this was not verbalized nor outwardly addressed in the comic.

Echo's deafness provides an additional layer to this discussion. Knowing that she relies on her eyesight as well as reading lips, her teammates respect her enough to face her when they are speaking to her. Also, like Faith, she too has dated fellow superheroes. Moreover, she is incredibly independent, self-sufficient, and does not depend on anyone other than herself to help her be a productive member of society. Thus, it is the constructive representation of her so-called "disability" in each subsequent comic that truly sets her apart from her hearing counterparts.

Although she does not have superhuman powers, she does have an uncanny ability to copy other people's movements and skillsets. By simply observing someone (adversaries and teammates, alike), she can adopt their talents and utilize them within minutes at an expert level. In fact, because of her photographic reflexes, Maya is a skilled martial artist, marksmen, and acrobat as well as a concert pianist and talented performance artist. This is turn makes her a powerful superheroine and invaluable member of the Avengers.

Image 28: Daredevil commends Echo for performing her stories in *"Echo: Part 5" - Daredevil #55* (February 2004)

Additionally, because of her strong Native American roots, Maya learns to embrace her storytelling ability, not through words, but through movements, shapes, colors, feelings, and silence. After her vision quest, Maya finds peace and personal growth in her experiences of personal heartache, loss, and pain to evidently transform them into a beautiful performance done through sign language, dance, and music. Her ability to transform these stories into art do not only give her a sense of closure but rather contradict common misconceptions of members within the deaf community as not having anything of substance to contribute to society. By turning to the arts, Maya eloquently conveys the beauty and power that lies in and across various mediums, particularly in providing a voice to individuals who go gravely unrepresented. Therefore, as stated by her ex and fellow "disabled" superhero Matt Murdock (a.k.a. Daredevil), Maya's work as a performance artist has enabled her to use her lived experiences and unique perspectives as her "assets and not as her [your] handicap" (Image 28).

Negotiating Paternalism, Stereotypes, and Presumed Weakness

Incidentally, discussing the origins of each characters' powers and abilities also provides some insight into how such external, real-life stereotypes translate over to the fictional world of superhero/superheroine comics. Whether they acquired their powers by design (i.e., ascribed/biological), by mistake (i.e., flukes/accidents), or through extenuating circumstances (i.e., achieved/earned), there is no denying that each superheroine's individual journeys are just as unique as they are inspiring.

Nevertheless, whilst all of the characters are extremely powerful, in terms of their abilities and in their own right, the fact that they are women who fight crime (or who combat various social inequalities and injustices) is not only the first personal attribute that readers see but rather it is often what antagonists and other characters see when interacting with them as

well. Being perceived as weak, passive, in need of protection, or overly emotional are not only common stereotypes associated with women in real-life but rather in the fictional world of comics as well. Thus, it is important to address the role that culture has in emphasizing and perpetuating such perceptions, particularly when it comes to gendered assumptions regarding age, roles, abilities, strengths, and overall displays of emotionality.

As previously mentioned, when it comes to age, there was a fine line between guiding and mentoring younger generations of superheroes and allowing them to learn from their mistakes so that they can come into their own. In fact, seeing as she is the youngest superheroine in this study, Moon Girl's storyline is a perfect illustration of this; in the last two comics of her series, Moon Girl's desire to rely on herself and simply work alone with Devil Dinosaur is infringed upon by Mr. Fantastic.

Considering that she is 9 years old as well as a super genius, Mr. Fantastic expresses paternalistic concerns about the potential consequences of leaving her to her own devices and unchecked ego. Unlike Ironheart's relationship with Tony Stark, Mr. Fantastic feels that Moon Girl's inexperience and stubbornness could lead her to make incredibly irresponsible and dangerous mistakes that she is not equipped to take on, especially not all on her own. However, she continuously states that she has no reason to listen to him because he is not her dad. Instead, she is adamant about not needing anyone to guide her let alone ever needing to ask for his help because she is smarter than anyone ever gives her credit for; which is a personal strength and attribute that she contends he is envious of.

As a result, she challenges him to a competition of various intellectually challenging tasks in order to determine once and for all who is "the smartest there is" (Image 29). This competition kept each of them distracted long enough that it provided the activated Doombot

head she had in her lab, and for which Mr. Fantastic had already scolded her about earlier, ample time to assemble a body for itself out of the spare parts in the lab. While Mr. Fantastic first uses this as the quintessential "I told you so" teaching moment that it is, he also comes to the realization that he must let go of the reins a

Image 29: Moon Girl faces off with Mr. Fantastic in *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur #47* (September 2019)

little bit and finally listen to and trust that Moon Girl's plan will not only save the day but rather do so on her own terms.

After her plan is successfully carried out, Mr. Fantastic admits that he was wrong to not give her the space she had requested, not giving her the benefit of the doubt, and for underestimating her abilities. By stating that Moon Girl is "doing just fine," he ultimately apologizes for attempting to take control of the situation to appease his own ego and expertise as a veteran superhero. He, in turn, acknowledges that, despite her flaws, like his own, Moon Girl is capable of handling things on her own as well as recognizing when she needs to call in reinforcements. In the end, Mr. Fantastic respects her enough to provide her the space to learn the difference.

Such a positive outcome is foreshadowed in the first frame of the comic, when the following quote by May-Britt Moser (a Norwegian psychologist and neuroscientist) is presented to the reader: "Children need teachers who have stars in their eyes themselves and who treat them with respect." Moon Girl reiterates this by stating that she recognizes that, like him, her intellect clouds her judgement sometimes because it leads her to "think too much" and thus she

often takes other people's opinions for granted. Luckily for her, Moon Girl has never been alone throughout her journey as a superheroine because she already has a great teacher, partner, and companion in Devil Dinosaur, who not only lets her be herself but who will always be by her side, flaws and all.

Furthermore, cultural perceptions pertaining to age played a major part in Kamala Khan's origins as Ms. Marvel. On the night that she goes through Terrigenesis, Kamala snuck out of her house to attend a party being held on the waterfront with her classmates. Her parents had forbidden her from going because it would not be safe for her to attend a party, unchaperoned, especially seeing as it would be taking place at night where drunk teenage boys, "thinking God knows what," could take advantage of her.

As an alternative, they suggested that she should stay home and call over her friend Nakia so that they could get a head start on their homework on a Friday night. Her parents tell her that she should be more like Bruno, another one of her friends, who not only works but continues to get good grades in school without complaining. Kamala angrily points out that if she too were a boy, like Bruno and her brother, they would be more lenient and would have allowed her to attend the party, no questions asked. She excuses herself from the table and barges up to her room. She begins to have an inner monologue and rationalizes her decision to attend the party anyways since her parents were being unreasonable. Kamala never asks for much, has always followed their rules, does well in school, and continues to exceed their rigid expectations in spite of the fact that their practices, beliefs, and customs often prevent her from feeling "normal." She deserves this.

Upon arriving at the party, her classmates are shocked that she has been allowed to spend time with them and they offer her a drink of orange juice that they deviously assure her has no

alcohol in it until she takes a sip. Upon hearing that there is indeed vodka in it, Kamala quickly

spits it out and Bruno rushes over to scold the classmates who her offered her the drink. He

escorts her away and asks if her parents knew that she was at the party. When she tells him that

they do not, he suggests that she go home because "the meatheads" become reckless when they

start drinking and he did not want her getting into any trouble. She angrily brushes him off

stating that he was embarrassing her and that, like her parents, he was treating her like a child.

Before storming off, Kamala states that if he were also Pakistani, her parents would be marrying

her off to him if given the chance. As the terrigen mist begins to ascend, Bruno begins calling out

to Kamala to no avail. Kamala, in turn, goes through Terrigenesis, gets her powers, saves a

classmate, and quickly rushes home before her parents realize she was even gone.

When she comes home, she
realizes that the lights in the house are still
on and thus she will need to sneak back
into the house through her bedroom
window. Her struggle to get inside as
quietly as possible is overheard by her
brother, Aamir, who is in the hallway. As

Image 30: Aamir promises to find the so-called perpetrators who hurt Kamala in *Ms. Marvel #2* (March 2014)

he turns on the light, he asks her what she is wearing, and assuming he is referring to Carol

Danvers' blonde hair and Ms. Marvel costume, she quickly assures him that despite her

appearance, she was in fact his sister and that "something weird happened" to her that night that

she now suddenly has shape-shifting powers. Assuming that she was perhaps drugged or that

some other terrible thing must have happened, Aamir reassures her that everything was going to

be okay and that he, along with the brothers from the mosque, will find and punish those

responsible for hurting her (Image 30). When she pushes him away and tells him his assumptions are wrong, he informs her that their parents know that she snuck out because Bruno, concerned for her safety, called her parents to make sure she got home from the party all right. Her parents angrily begin to express their disappointment in her actions and state that she had become a "reckless, disobedient girl" that they no longer recognized. Therefore, she would no longer be allowed to go anywhere other than school until they could trust her again.

Such narratives portray Kamala as being gravely in need of protection, especially seeing as not only was she a teenage girl but rather she was a teenage girl who, according to her family, would not listen to reason. She herself was not entirely clear about what had transpired throughout the course of the night, so she could not quite tell her family the truth about her newfound powers and abilities. Nevertheless, Kamala comes to the realization that this transition awarded her with the very thing that she has been looking for her entire life: the freedom to be a part of something bigger. Despite being told what her place was in the world, Kamala has always idolized Carol Danvers and thus longed for the opportunity to follow in her footsteps in some way or form. Although she was simply a young, teenaged Muslim girl who has had various bodily limitations and gendered expectations imposed upon her, Kamala finally had the chance to prove who she really was and what she was really made of to everyone, but most importantly to herself.

Moreover, when it comes to controlling their emotions, Sojourner Mullein's work in the City Enduring poses quite an interesting juxtaposition to the ways in which her fellow superheroines in this study exhibit and navigate such an essential part of the human experience in their line of work. For Mullein, being assigned as a peacekeeper specifically tasked to counteract an epidemic of emotions in an interstellar city that has maintained peace and prevented the

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prevalence of crime for over 500 years by stripping their citizens of the ability to feel through

what they call, the "Emotion Exploit," is by no means an easy task.

Coincidentally, upon her arrival to the city, Mullein was offered the opportunity to also

have her emotions suppressed. She evidently opted out of it stating that in order to help prevent

people from meddling with the strong (yet extremely fragile) social order if they are violently

protesting about the importance of legalizing "Switchoff," a drug that allows users to feel

emotions, it might be in the city's best interest to allow her to keep her emotions so that she can

better understand an individual's desire to successfully acquire the drug in the first place.

The truth of such a controversial decision is revealed by Mullein when she states that she suggested this so-called occupational compromise because she feared that she would "lose such an important part" of herself (Image 31). Mullein's expression of emotions, particularly when in the presence of the city's Council, does not serve to paint her as an overly

Image 31: Sojourner Mullein discusses why she wants to keep her emotions in *Far Sector #4* (February 2020)

emotional Black woman but rather as an exemplar of her "kind," meaning humans. According to

them, the fact that humans rely so heavily on their emotions as a means of expression and social

interaction is in turn precisely what makes them such a primitive and uncontrollable species.

Mullein, disagrees. While it is true that emotions are unpredictable, she believes that they

are necessary and thus she is often critical of the ways in which the Council maintains "order."

Her critique evidently becomes amplified when she discovers that the Council has ignored their

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citizens wishes to bring an end to the Emotion Exploit, not once but 12 times before, "give or take a few false starts," throughout the course of their history. Mullein finds this information to be extremely problematic as the Council has settled for simply "shutting down the agitators" rather than hearing out what they have to say so that they can reach a compromise that the Council and its citizens can both live with.

Although she is ridiculed for attempting to tell the Council members how to do their jobs, she is asked what she suggests that they should do differently. She informs them that it is simple: "stop killing people." As she leaves the room, she goes on to imply that continuously killing people to quell a rebellion is often counterintuitive because it provides protesters with martyrs for their cause, which only serves to escalate rather than deescalate the situation. As the comic ends, Mullein realizes that it may prove to be near impossible for her to make a difference within the year deadline that she was given by her superiors when she was assigned to the City Enduring. A discussion of how N.K. Jemisin's Far Sector provides quite compelling narrative about issues pertaining to the criminalization/legalization of drugs as well as the racialization of emotionality within society will be provided in a later section.

Nevertheless, while Mullein perceives her emotions as being a strength in light of the fact that they are such a rare commodity in the City Enduring, some of the other superheroine's storylines do not provide them with the same sense of assurance seeing as their emotions are sometimes presented as being increasingly overwhelming, debilitating, and harmful to others. For example, Katana's storyline is laden with gendered cultural perceptions that paint her as being unqaulified for wielding the Soultaker sword because she is overly emotional, lacks the

proper training, and because as a woman, she is not meant to master any skills outside of beig a homemaker and a dutiful wife. Such beliefs are actually touched upon in the opening pages of the series, in which it is shown that Katana has been overpowered by Coil and bound by his spiral sword because of her inability to control her emotions (Image 32).

As she screams, Katana acknowledges that Coil will simply use her cries of rage against her, which he evidently does. In the next page, Coil goes on to say that he remembers her being "a loyal wife in Japan. Bowing and shuffling. Kissing and washing your husband's feet.

Image 32: Coil overpowers Katana in *Katana (The New 52) #1* (April 2013)

The joy of servitude in your eyes" and implies that it must have felt liberating to lose everything the night her husband died. Her pain over losing her husband and such statements from Coil become a recurring them throughout the comics that were read for this study.

In the fourth comic of the series, Katana's sword releases the souls of those it was used to kill. As a result, Katana comes face to face with her dead husband, who expresses his disappointment in her inability to move on and states that she should let him go; he was dead and there was nothing she could ever do to bring him back. As he says his goodbyes, Katana begs him not to ask her to find someone else to love and that he should stay with her. Her cries go unheeded as he fades away and she faints presumably out of exhaustion and emotional duress. Katana is disheartened and feels like giving up entirely in her quest to avenge her husband's

death but is inspired to continue on after Shun, an Untouchable whose body is covered with tattoos of prophecies pertaining to different futures, has her foot severed.

In the eighth comic of the series, Katana faces Coil once more, as part of her first test to join the Sword Clan: besting another with a weapon of their choosing. During their confrontation, Katana finds herself bound by Coil's sword once more because once again, (according to him) she is incapable of not letting her emotions "overwhelm" her, particularly when her deceased husband, Maseo, is brought up in conversation (Image 33). Despite his taunts, Katana manages to constrain Coil using his own weapon, definitively besting him in battle. She is then informed that her second test involves finding and killing, Mona Shard, whose soul escaped when Katana's sword was

Image 33: Coil vs. Katana in *Katana (The New 52) #8* (December 2013)

shattered and who now seeks to become the incontestable leader of the Sword Clan.

Unbeknownst to Katana, Mona Shard and the soul of the little girl who cut off Shun's foot in the fourth comic of the series, are one and the same. This is a fact that Mona Shard evidently takes advantage of as Katana assumes that an adult woman has taken over as leader of the Daggers, a cult of assassins. When she arrives on their boat, she demands to know where Mona Shard is as she places herself in between the men and a defenseless "little girl" who she believes they are holding captive. She is wrong. Mona Shard takes this moment to attack Katana from behind. As Katana tells the "little girl" that she was only trying to help her, Mona Shard

responds by stating that she was under the impression that she was there to kill her, thus revealing her true identity. Despite misjudging the situation, an injured Katana manages to escape but is nevertheless stunned that she was sent to kill a child!

Towards the end of the comic, Katana is again shown fighting members of the Daggers clan as Mona Shard taunts her from afar (Image 34). In her taunts, Mona Shard attempts to characterize Katana's principles and code of honor as weaknesses that fundamentally prevent her from harming her, a child. Katana in turn responds by stating that she has sliced dozens of men and would have no trouble doing the same to her. In this regard, Katana's storyline, like that of the rest of the characters in this study is extremely convoluted. Throughout the course of the four

Image 34: Katana vs. Mona Shard *in Katana (The New 52) #9* (January 2014)

comics I was able to access for this study, Katana seems to come to the following realization: while she is expected to adhere to cultural assumptions pertaining to her gender, she is her own individual who has her own strengths, principles, and expectations for herself outside of those that are imposed upon her. This realization alone becomes a crucial aspect of her growth as a person, a woman, a widow, and as a warrior; this understanding evidently provides her with a newfound sense of confidence and empowerment that she has never felt before.

Upon further research, I discovered that Nocenti's run as the head writer of Katana's storyline in *The New 52* series was short-lived and ill-received by fans who did not agree with

her overt inclusion of her left-wing beliefs regarding the status of women within society. In this case, aside from debates about the storylines and artwork, some fans may have had issue with the series because of her problematic yet realistically unnerving portrayals of the cultural expectations imposed on women as well as their overall status within society. This, however, is an unverified assumption made on my behalf.

Nevertheless. Echo's (a.k.a. Maya Lopez) journey conveys a similar sentiment to that of Katana's in the sense that she learns to let go of a childhood riddled with a tremendous amount of lies, pain, trauma, anger, and resentment. After going through her vision quest, Echo realizes that like her father, she is also a storyteller and that she should allow herself to let go of the past, seek greener pastures, and attempt to liberate herself of such debilitating emotions as revenge.

Furthermore, because of their supreme intelligence, both Moon Girl's and Ironheart's parents feared that they would be incapable of relating to others, and while they enjoy their alone time, they are indeed functioning members of society despite these concerns. Ironheart often puts all her energy into her work and pushes people away because she fears losing them. She is continuously shown struggling to come to terms with the deaths of her best friend and stepfather. Ironheart is rightfully traumatized and confused when she comes face to face with her biological father who she believed was dead. She expresses feeling betrayed by the fact that he has been alive all this time and grapples with the knowledge that now that he was a villain, and not simply a victim of circumstance, perhaps she too was capable of doing terrible things.

Similarly, Batwoman and Miss America (respectfully) are also betrayed by family members upon discovering that her father knew that her twin sister was still alive and that her grandmother essentially abandoned her, allowing a scared little girl to fend for herself after both of her mothers died. Coincidentally, for both these characters, such abandonment issues (for lack

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of a better phrase) translate over to their interpersonal relationships in ways that cause them to make irrational and impulsive decisions when overwhelmed with emotions. This tendency to "bottle up" rather than express their emotions in healthy, constructive, and insalubrious ways feeds into negative stereotypes about lesbian characters within a hypermasculine context whilst simultaneously painting them as "hysterical" women.

For instance, after the deaths of her mother and sister, Batwoman's guilt over surviving the entire kidnapping ordeal, on top of being kicked out of the academy (for staying true to herself), not only guided her to want to dedicate her life to make them proud but also has led to several bouts of destructive behaviors when she has fallen short of this objective. In several frames she is shown as being a "womanizer" that is both oblivious to and insensitive towards how her romantic partners react to her indifference towards their relationship as well as engaging in heavy social drinking and subsequently driving under the influence. After being orphaned at such an early age, Miss America's fear of abandonment became a pivotal aspect of some of her storylines, especially seeing as she often has a hard time letting people in. Accordingly, she breaks up with her girlfriend, Lisa, after hearing that she would not be joining or moving in with her as she went off to university. Their break-up causes her to begin acting impulsively at school and cuts off all communication with her ex-girlfriend. Knowing that she is dodging her phone calls, her ex-girlfriend is forced to take extreme measures to get her attention in that she fakes being kidnapped in order to get Miss America to help her "captors," a group of young girls known as the Chavez Guerillas, save the people of their home planet of Maltixa.

Chalice's storyline as both a female superheroine and as a transwoman who presents as male to appease her family's desire to maintain a "normal" life, reveals a dual sense of irony with regards to the use of gendered insults over the so-called intrinsic, biological differences that

exist between the sexes. In the first comic of the series, Charlie's mother asks her about the cuts and bruises on her face. Charlie explains that she got kneed in the face while at Karate. Overhearing this conversation, her younger brother, Brian, begins to tease her, stating that he wagers that she undeniably got "his ass beat" by "some chick." Such comments evidently reproduce various gendered stereotypes about strength and overt masculinity in the sense that the very possibility that Charlie was outclassed by a girl, was something to laugh about and be ashamed of on "his" part. Nevertheless, Charlie takes such comments in stride and seamlessly joins in on this brotherly banter by stating that he wishes to introduce Brian to the "chick" that bested her one day.

Conversely, like Katana's experience with Coil, Chalice's confrontations with Matter Man also exposed her to gendered insults as well as inadvertently led to someone being harmed for her perceived self-centeredness. In the second comic of the series, Matter Man attempts to lure Chalice out of the shadows by broadcasting a nation-wide message in which he reveals that that he has "kidnapped" a child that due to her secrecy over her identity and interference with his work, might just be the next fatality on her hands. Chalice appears behind him and threatens to punch him in the face. Matter Man, in turn, is incredibly patronizing towards her as he states that he likes that she is so "feisty" and judges the superheroine name she has chosen for herself. When Chalice tells him that he will struggle to remember it when she is done with him, he responds by stating "bring it on, then, you little bitch."

As they begin to fight, he laughs at her banter and attempts to provoke her by telling her that he "ate" the baby before she arrived. Chalice grows enraged, which causes Morph (a fellow Alter) to get in the middle of them to deescalate the situation but instead he is gravely injured at

the hands of Matter Man. The injury causes him to revert back to his civilian form in front of millions (on live television), which ultimately puts his life at risk as well as the rest of his family. Matter Man continues to taunt Chalice by stating that she hits "like a girl" and as he fades away, he says the following: "think of me when you dream, Princess" (Image 35). Such gendered insults served to distract and intensify Chalice's emotions to such great heights that she is portrayed as irresponsible, impulsive, and thus a danger to others. Overwhelmed with guilt and blame over ruining a person's life, Chalice wants nothing more than to

Image 35: Chalice vs. Matter Man *in Alters #2* (November 2016)

hide from the consequences of her actions as well as her perceived serious lack of judgment.

Similarly, while gathering information about whether the Purple Man is alive and if he, not her husband, is indeed the father of her daughter Danielle, she gets kicked out of a survivors meeting after she calls out a young girl for lying about her supposed experience with the Purple Man. After the meeting, she follows the girl out of the meeting into an alley. After a quick scuffle, the girl flies away, revealing that she too has superpowers. Later that night, Jones sees reports about the young girl's death by suicide on the news and begins to blame herself for being so "cruel" to her (Image 36). She begins to question why she is the way she is (impulsive, intense, capricious, etc.) and quickly scolds herself for doing exactly what the Purple Man wants her to do: blame herself for carelessly prompting a young girl's regrettable decision to jump off

the side of a building and plummet to her death. Knowing all too well that the girl had the ability to fly as well as how strong the Purple Man's powers of mind control are, Jessica quickly pulls herself together so that she can go after the man responsible.

Image 36: Jessica Jones blames herself for someone's death *in Jessica Jones: Purple Daughter - Issue #1, Chapter 2* (January 2019)

Lastly, Miss America's nostalgia over reuniting with an old flame and Zephyr's dream of meeting her celebrity crush, Chris Criswell, evidently leads both of them to leave their guards down long enough to get drugged and kidnapped. Indeed, perhaps similar to the ways in which Coil was able to gain the upper hand over Katana, several of the other character's storylines also exemplified the "damsel in distress" trope commonly associated with the superhero/superheroine genre. For example, in various comics, Jessica Jones found herself easily being framed for murder and arrested as well as getting injured, shot, and kidnapped herself. In fact, she frequently comments that people often underestimate her strength, as they sometimes target her to rile up her husband or handcuff and shackle her without acknowledging that she could easily protect herself as well as get herself out of her restraints without breaking a sweat if she tried.

Likewise, while working together in the eleventh comic in her series, Ironheart, Shuri, Okoye, and Silhouette are all outnumbered, backed into a corner, and shackled in a few frames

before they are able to break out of their restraints. Empowered, on the other hand, is commonly known for being a clumsy, pathetic, C-list superheroine who because of the unreliability of her suit, regularly finds herself bound, gagged, and in need of saving. This outcome is so routine that her coworkers begin to find it suspicious seeing as she is supposed, albeit expected, to be a competent superhero, after all. Yet, she has repeatedly proven herself to be anything but.

As a matter of fact, this is such a recurring theme in the comic book series that the creator/writer/illustrator, Adam Warren, directly addresses it. In one of the title pages, it is revealed that early on in his career he used to commission "damsel in distress" sketches. Overtime, Warren began questioning their popularity and evidently grew tired of creating such sketches, and thus Emp was born (Image 37).

At first glance, Warren's manga-style comic book series about a highly incompetent superheroine seems to perpetuate such a problematic trope but in reality, it serves as an

Image 37: Emp discusses "Damsels in Distress" trope in *Empowered Vol. 1, #19: "Training Day"* (April 2007)

ironically humorous and emotionally heartfelt commentary of it. As both a woman and as a superheroine, Emp is incredibly insecure about her body despite of the fact that she exemplifies Western beauty standards. She in turn is an exceedingly complex overthinker who, particularly considering how others treat her based on the false assumption that because of her looks everything comes up rainbows for her by design, is also her own worst enemy. In fact, nothing

comes easy for Emp. She constantly second guesses herself, stresses over what people think of her, and ultimately internalizes their negative feedback to her own detriment.

Therefore, while it would be easier for her to simply throw in the towel and move on, Emp continues to place herself in the line of fire in more ways than one in order to better herself both personally and professionally. By addressing the relentlessly agonizing emotional toll that her visible hypersexualization and ineptitude has on her own self-esteem, it is made clear that Emp is more than just another bondage-prone superheroine. Yes, she has her own insecurities but that does not stop her from doing the right thing. When called upon, she runs into the line of fire without a second thought or regard for her own safety. She does this not on impassioned impulse or to feed her own ego but simply because it gives her life meaning.

In this regard, it does not matter if others perceive her to be the quintessential embodiment of a "damsel in distress"; she knows the truth. Despite what people tell her, she is not weak or pathetic and as long as she feels that she has made a positive difference in the world, no matter how grand or inconsequential, she can take comfort in knowing that she is on the right path. Thus, through each successive page, the reader not only witnesses her incredibly relatable journey of self-acceptance and self-actualization, but also learns to acknowledge the person behind the mask for the perfectly imperfect human being that she is. Such a portrayal of female empowerment successfully serves to refute gendered assumptions about women's strengths and weakness, perceived biological inferiority, and their emotional expressions.

Experiences of Womanhood through Roles and Life Stages

Following up on the previous discussions of empowerment as well as how gendered expectations influence each of the characters' sense of self, it is important to note that each of the characters included in this study are much more than just superheroines. They are first and

foremost women; women who have various intersecting roles and identities that at certain points in time are used either frequently or infrequently depending on their location within their own salience hierarchies. In other words, a characters' identity could take precedence over another depending on their commitment to it given the immediate situation (e.g., being a daughter or friend could influence their decision to use their powers to save their loved ones over the greater good). Therefore, their inner callings or so-called vigilante-esque extracurricular activities are often in conflict with their fulfillment of various social responsibilities to themselves, their loved ones, and the public.

The representation of each character's personal lives served as a powerful continuation of their own values within their invariably multifaceted roles as superheroines and as women within society. For example, while some superheroines are daughters, others are also wives, mothers, partners, students, best friends, siblings, employees, and so on. In terms of age, the characters in this study personify experiences ranging from middle childhood, with the youngest character being 9 years old, to early and middle adulthood. This section will elaborate on some critical personal milestones and some of their interpersonal relationships found in the storylines.

References to having occupations outside of their superheroine work center around being full-time students (elementary, high school, college/university) as well as their participation in the workforce. For instance, because of her intelligence as well as the limited resources and opportunities awarded to students within the public-school system, Moon Girl is often bullied at school by her classmates because she is often bored in class and is distant with them. Thus, she hopes to transfer out of that school to one that is more challenging and worth her while.

Similarly, Echo references her experiences in the school system as she was often disciplined by her teachers and perceived as being "retarded" because she was "nonverbal" and

thus could not communicate with others like a "normal" child. It was not until she was enrolled in a "special school" where she was finally recognized as being deaf, learned Native American sign language, and began to blossom. Silk and Jessica Jones were unable to finish high school, whereas Ms. Marvel is currently a high school student, Ironheart is a former M.I.T. student, Miss America is attending Sotomayor University, and La Borinqueña is in the process of writing her undergraduate thesis. In a flashback sequence in *Far Sector #5*, Green Lantern is shown graduating from high school, being accepted to Princeton University, going into the army, back to school, and then into the police force.

With regards to their family life, 6 characters had siblings, with 4 being brothers (1 of which is deceased) and the other two being sisters. Additionally, 6 characters experienced the loss of a loved one and 5 characters were orphaned at a young age, with all of them being adopted with the exception of Miss America. After her mothers' deaths, she came to Earth and was not officially adopted by any one family but several different communities in which "little brown girls blended into the scenery and became part of the family" (Image 38). She would later meet her grandmother, Madrimar, who explains why she had been absent

Image 38: The many "families" of America Chavez in *America #3* (May 2017)

from her life as well as attempts to teach America more about her origins and powers.

Conversely, Zephyr was raised by her grandmother after the death of her parents.

Moreover, while she was incredibly close with her father before his death, it is revealed that Echo's mother abandoned them when she was very little because of her father's criminal activities. Echo does not remember much about her mother other than how she smelled, the shape of her lips, but not what her face looks like. Despite not being fully aware of her father's secret life of crime, Echo shared a great relationship with them, especially seeing as while everyone was painting her out to be a hopeless cause, her father was her greatest defender. He advocated for her and taught her that no matter what people say about her, she has plenty to say about the world around her and that she can provide the world with stories that transcend those told by word of mouth. Similarly, Ironheart's biological father (and namesake) "died" before she was born, and her stepfather died when was 13 years old. In the wake of these events, she was raised by a single mother, who is not only aware of her daughter's newfound superheroine identity but rather is both rightfully concerned about her safety yet still incredibly supportive.

Also, Emp is shown holding back tears while she is on the phone with her mother who is checking up on her as well as ensuring that she is getting along with her teammates whereas Batwoman's father is more hands-on with Kate's career as a superheroine. After she was dishonorably discharged from the academy for refusing to deny her gay identity, Kate feared what her father's reaction would be on both fronts. To her surprise he was not enraged or disappointed but rather incredibly proud of the fact that she refused to deny such a vital aspect of her identity. While initially unexpected, this reaction further served to solidify their relationship and respect for one another.

As a matter of fact, he was the one who figured out that she had taken up a life of "playing vigilante" and who advised her against it until Kate helps him understand that after

losing everything (her mother, sister, ambition, and an overall sense of direction), she has finally found her way "to serve." Upon hearing this explanation, her father comes to understand how important becoming "Batwoman" is for Kate and evidently advises her to begin training (Image 39). After 2 years of training, Kate returns home, and her father reveals the suit and gadgets he made for her as well as the encrypted communication system that they will be using on missions together.

Image 39: Kate and her father in *"Go: Part 3" - Detective Comics #860* (February 2010)

Silk's parents, on the other hand, are also incredibly loving towards her but were initially fearful of her powers so much so that they choose to isolate her from the rest of society by having her live in a bunker for as long as it takes them to find a "cure" for them (Image 40). Before "sending her away," for lack of a better phrase, they attempt to quell any concerns Cindy may have about whether or not a "cure" exists by distracting her with hockey and other family activities. Cindy evidently spends 10 years living in the bunker before rejoining society only to discover that her little brother is mixed up with the wrong crowd of people and that her parents have been missing for quite some time.

Therefore, in an attempt to find them, she begins to work at Fact Channel News and is affiliated with S.H.I.E.L.D. in the hopes that they can provide them with additional information about their whereabouts; she even actively seeks them out while she is in an alternate dimension, she discovers that they are alive but is stunned to her that her alternate self has no

communication with them. Luckily for her, she is reunited with her parents (and her brother) by the end of the series, and while her father was tricked into bringing back the antidote for her powers, he evidently breaks the vile it was in and apologizes for wanting her to be cured so that they could have their "lives back."

A recurring theme was that of depictions of some of the character's occasionally (albeit realistically) contentious but otherwise loving relationships with their parents. This was particualrly true for the younger characters included in this study. For example, because of her intelligence, Moon Girl's parents often have a hard time getting her to

Image 40: Flashback sequence of Cindy Moon and her father, Albert in *Silk Vol 2., #4* (February 2016)

communicate with them because she is always off in her own world, inventing and engineering, without really letting them. She outwardly expresses how unimpressed and unchallenged she is at school, which in turn causes her to lash out at her parents.

As previously described, Ms. Marvel's parents are increidbly strict and overprotective of her because of the clash between their cultural values in relation to those of the West. This is addressed by her mother in the second comic of the series when she angrily blames Kamala's reckless partying and her brother's lack of ambition on the fact that their father had decided to move from their home country to raise their children within the corrupted values of the United States and its social institutions. Her father, on the other hand, is much calmer in his approach as he is deeply concerned about why she has been sneaking out of the house at odd hours of the

night "wearing a disguise." As it happens, she and her father have a heart to heart in the fifth issue of the series, where he expresses his anxiety about the social pressure that is placed on young girls her age to pretend to be someone they are not as well as behave in ways that they do not wish to. He goes on to explain the significance of her name, as it means "perfect" in Arabic, as well as how she was their little miracle baby. Against all odds, she came into their lives and has been perfect ever since. Thus, he advises her to not feel the need to change who she is in order to impress others because she is perfect just the way she is and that he hopes that there will be a time when she no longer feels the need to needlessly push them away.

Incidentally, as the world is coming to end during the *"Secret Wars"* story arc, Kamala feels compelled to tell her mother the truth about her dual identity to only find out that her mother has already known for months. Her mother reveals that she began paying closer attention to Kamala's behavior and that she connected each of the incidences that Ms. Marvel was on the news to the nights that she heard Kamala sneaking back into the house at dawn. As Kamala frantically attempts to make her mother understand what being "Ms. Marvel" has meant to her, her mother soothes her daughter's fears of being in any kind of trouble by unexpectedly

Image 41: Kamala and her mother in *Ms. Marvel Vol.13, #19* (October 2015)

telling her that she was not mad or dissapointed in her for keeping such a secret from them but

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rather that she was quite the opposite: she was proud of her (Image 41). Like her father,

Kamala's mother admits that they have been strict with her because they feared that she would

do drugs and/or develop friendships with the wrong group of kids at school if they were not as

involved and held such high expectations of her compared to her brother. Nevertheless, this

encounter and shared secret provides a mutual understanding of one another's actions and

dissenting views of the world to such a degree that it both bonds them together and aids in

mending Kamala's somewhat strained relationship with her mother.

Furthermore, Chalice's dual identity as both a superheroine and as a young male adult in

the eyes of her family members by day is not only an essential part of her story but in turn results

Image 42: Chalice as "Charlie Young" in *Alters #1* (September 2016)

in an added level of complexity, particularly in terms of identity salience. This internal conflict is

outwardly addressed in some of the first few frames and pages that readers are exposed to when

Chalice, a.k.a. Charlie Young, states that she is "stuck at three intersections" (Image 42). For her,

not being able to tell her parents and siblings about her transition as well as the fact that she is an

Alter evidently forces her to live multiple lives, yet all of which she acknowledges are a crucial part of who she is. Nevertheless, she does not wish to burden her family with news about her ultimate decision to transition both for fear of drastically changing their family dynamic more so than it already had since her brother's diagnosis as well as lead her to lose them forever.

For instance, while she finds the courage to tell her older brother about what she has been going through, this lack of acknowledgement from her parents not only causes her to withhold information from them to keep them safe but rather causes her to frequently butt heads with her father about politics. Her father's critique of the threat that the presence of Alters pose to society results in a heated argument between the two of them when Charlie presents him with a hypothetical scenario about what he, meaning her father, would say if she told him she was an Alter and he responds with the following: "I'd say get out before your family got hurt. That's what any reasonable person would say." This statement ultimately validates her apprehension to divulge either her superheroine identity as well as her gender identity and sexual orientation to her family. Such hesitation to share this information with her loved ones simultaneously echoes real life tensions and anxieties that transgender individuals experience at home, school, work, and other social environments. As she emphasizes and subtly implies in their discussion, Charlie as both an Alter and as a transgender woman did not choose to be "different," she just is and that is nothing to be ashamed of nor is it grounds for completely abandoning people in their time of need. Her father's dismissal of her opinion as being a misguided consequence of her alignment with Liberal views instead of being a good person who thinks for themselves infuriates Charlie so much that she barges out of the room. Upon reading this scene, it is clear that Charlie's anger does not only stem from her father's lack of compassion and humanity for others but rather her sheer and utter disappointment of what his uncensored opinions about people like her would

evidently mean for their relationship if she were to reveal her truth to him and the rest of her family once and for all.

When it comes to the development of platonic and romantic relationships, respectively, some of the characters exemplify the ways in which the development and overall experiences of such relationships can change throughout the life course. Some have friends at work, at school, and childhood friends that they confide in outside of their immediate family unit. For instance, La Borinqueña's best friend, Lauren "La La" Liu, who is Chinese-Dominican and thus exemplifies the representation of the diversity that exists within the Latino community, is her greatest confidant. During one of their conversations together, La La reveals a long-held family secret: their families are so close because Marisol's mother is the reason why she and her mother are even alive. She even quickly recognizes that Marisol is La Borinqueña despite of her disguise/costume because they have known each other their entire lives.

Similarly, Kamala has also known her best-friend, Bruno, since they were very little, and thus he is one of her closest confidants. In fact, before her mother figured it out, he was the only person who knew that Kamala was Ms. Marvel. Upon becoming aware of her superheroine identity, Bruno subsequently conducted experiments with her that allowed her to both discover and practice the extent of her powers as well as helped make modifications to her costume early on in the series as. As the world is presumably ending, Bruno and Kamala reveal their true feelings for one another on the school rooftop. Even though Kamala admits to also loving Bruno, she apologizes for not confessing sooner but that she avoided having this conversation because she did not want their relationship to change, let alone lose him. Her life as Ms. Marvel has not only consumed her life but rather has meant so much to her, especially seeing as she has been able to share it with him (Image 43).

Nevertheless, Kamala does not feel prepared to be "anything else, to anyone else" and tells Bruno that she wants him to be happy, even if it means that she watches him be happy with someone else from afar. Being Ms. Marvel had already led her to neglect their friendship more than she would care to admit, thus she could not bear it if he would grow to resent her for not being the girlfriend that he deserved. To her surprise, Bruno supports her decision and commends her for striving to be the best version of herself that she can be while not allowing what she has experienced have a negative influence on her. Kamala in turn puts her own

Image 43: Kamala and Bruno in *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1, #19* (October 2015)

personal aspirations first and pours her heart and soul into being Ms. Marvel.

In the first comic of the following volume, however, Kamala experiences her first bout of teenage heartbreak when she finds out that Bruno has been dating Mike, one of their female classmates, for the last 6 weeks from her other friends. By this point of the story's timeline, it has been 8 months since they admitted their feelings for one another, and Kamala is both hurt that Bruno had not found the time to tell her that he had moved on and that it had been so soon. Bruno apologizes for not telling her sooner but admits that it was not for a lack of trying, seeing as she has been really busy, and he did not feel it was right to blindside or distract her with such information. If that was not enough, Bruno tells Kamala that she, meaning Ms. Marvel, was there

when he and Mike first met. After Mike pushed him out of the way from a falling school bus, they started spending time with each other, he met her family, and he helped her realize that Ms. Marvel did not need him looking out for her anymore, at least not like he used to.

While Kamala is heartbroken, she is supportive of Bruno's relationship with Mike because Bruno is happy, and she wants nothing but the best for him. Even though balancing her "superheroing" with that of her family, social, and school life is sometimes challenging, Kamala manages to be a good student, friend, daughter, and sister without ever losing sight of her primary goal: making a difference, no matter how big or small.

Moreover, the act of courting (or dating) and developing romantic (or sexual) relationships with individuals of the same or opposite sex were also examined. Like Kamala, some characters (Maya Lopez and Carol Danvers) were depicted as putting their own needs and aspirations first as well as letting go of their past relationships in order to focus on themselves. Other characters (Kate Kane and America Chavez), on the other hand, had their significant others break up with them in an attempt to compel them to pursue their own personal journeys.

Additionally, whilst Cindy Moon, Sojourner Mullein, Kate Kane, and Faith Herbert were either reunited with and/or in occasional contact with their exes, the latter two were shown as being active in the dating scene. After being such great friends and having great chemistry with one another (as both co-workers and as two single individuals), Faith and Archer go on their first date together (Image 44). Even though their date is rudely interrupted by offenders engaging in criminal activity, Faith and Archer have an otherwise "normal," exciting, and extremely romantic date together. Soon after, they officially start dating and successfully maintain a long-distance relationship via texting and voice or video calling. The fact that they are both superheroes in their own right, makes it somewhat difficult for them to stay in frequent contact

with one another, but they make it work as well as are incredibly supportive of one another's individual professional and personal pursuits.

Last but not least, engaging in sexual intercourse was also mentioned for both opposite-sex and same-sex couples. Empowered, by far, had the most active sex life. Throughout the first volume of the comic book series, there were several references and depictions of her intimate moments with her boyfriend, Thugboy.

While depictions of what being a daughter, sister, student, and friend meant for these characters outside of their roles as

Image 44: Faith and Archer getting ready for their first date in *A&A: The Adventures of Archer and Armstrong* #5 (July 2016)

superheroines were quite common, the experiences of marriage and motherhood were highly prevalent in the storylines for Katana and Jessica Jones, respectively. Katana's story, in the New 52 version of her character, finds her coming into her own as she learns how to prove herself "worthy" of wielding her weapon of choice, a samurai sword called "The Soultaker." What is so significant about the sword, other than the fact that it has the power to extract and contain the souls of those who its handler slays, is that it is actually the weapon that was used to kill her husband, Maseo, and whose death she seeks to avenge.

Although, a time frame as to when her husband's death occurred is not made clear, it is evident that his death has affected her emotionally and that it happened a short while before the events of the first comic in the series ("*Way of the Outsider*") begin to unfold. In fact, because the sword entraps the souls of its victims, Katana often speaks to it (Image 45) as if her husband were sitting in the room with her, consoling her in her darkest moments; a fact that most often paints her as being a mentally unstable widower who is incapable of moving on from her husband's death. While Katana acknowledges how people often mock her so-called delusion, it is a coping mechanism that not only portrays her as human but rather that brings her comfort in an otherwise unfortunate situation and that ultimately fuels her drive to find whoever is responsible for his death and bring him/her to justice.

In contrast to several of the characters mentioned in this study, Jessica Jones' life does not meld well with that of a typical female superhero but that does not diminish how uniquely powerful, complex, and human she is. Her storylines are not only defined by her role as a superheroine but rather as a businesswoman, as an alcoholic, as someone suffering with PTSD, as a friend, as a wife, and as a mother. Each of her storylines

Image 45: Katana speaking to her husband Maseo in *Katana (The New 52) #1* (April 2013)

address how these identities are often in conflict with one another and thus demonstrate the ways in which women negotiate a myriad of different identities and gender roles on a daily basis. Each

of the comics analyzed for this study highlighted the various ups and downs of marriage, as well

as motherhood; all of which made Jessica Jones' character that much more relatable and genuine.

Regardless of if she was written or illustrated by male or female writers/illustrators,

Jessica Jones' storylines exemplify how difficult it is to balance a life as a superpowered Private

Investigator as well as a devoted wife to Luke and loving mother to Dani. Whether it be arguing

with each other (Image 46), planning a birthday party (Image 47), or discussing their daughter's

paternity (Image 48), at the cornerstone of her marriage as well as every action and/or decision

she makes is the tendency to put her daughter's needs and safety before her own. Even if it

means ruining her marriage and thus completely destroying her relationships with any of her

superhero friends because of it, Jessica is willing to risk it all for her daughter, no matter what

the cost.

Image 46: Jessica and Luke as a married couple and as parents in *Jessica Jones Vol. 1, #2*
(November 2016) *(left); Image 47: Jessica Jones: Blind Spot – Issue #1, Chapter 1* (July
2018) *(middle); Image 48: Jessica Jones: Purple Daughter - Chapter 2* (January 2019) *(right)*

One of the first comics I read was that of original creator's Brian Michael Bendis'

(writer) and Michael Gaydos' (illustrator) 2016 run of *Jessica Jones*. As shown in Image 46, it is

revealed that although she has recently been released from prison, Jessica managed to send Dani

away and has kept her whereabouts a secret from Luke which evidently leads to obvious tensions between the two, as expressed by Luke's anger and placing of blame on Jessica for ruining their marriage. Although their disagreement seemed to both realistically and legitimately convey how such a dispute between parents in a similar situation would possibly go, it also felt like a relatively problematic representation of what an interracial marriage looks like within society.

Accordingly, while I came across a similar narrative in an earlier adaptation of the two characters' marriage in another one of Bendis' and Gaydos' collaborations together from February 2008 (*New Avengers #38*), a different one was provided in female writers', Kelly Thompson's 2018 and 2019 runs of the character. In her adaptation, Jessica and Luke still have their fair share of disputes but without the same sense of adverse intensity. Instead, a focus is placed on their day to day interactions as a couple as well as in their constructive relationship as parents. They go on family walks in the park together where they discuss what work needs to be done around the house as well as what decorations they need to get for their daughter's upcoming birthday party (Image 47). When Jessica negatively responds to the purple party decorations that Luke bought at the store, he quickly acknowledges that it must have reminded her of the Purple Man and it must have brought up some very traumatic memories from her past. He apologizes for his grand error of judgement and begins consoling Jessica, all the while reminding her that he is her husband and that she does not have to hide her emotions or vulnerabilities from him; they were in this together.

Unfortunately, their world is further turned upside down when Dani returns home with purple skin, which causes them to question whether or not the Purple Man is really Dani's biological father (Image 48). In the subsequent chapters to follow, both Luke and Jessica grapple with the very real possibility that the entire life that they have built together was built on a lie

that was just another part of the Purple Man's schemes to bring (that is manipulate) Jessica back to his side. Nevertheless, while they take their time to process such a harrowing ordeal apart, they take the time to come together and talk through what they are feeling, both in terms of fearing the truth as well as the love they have for one another, and evidently come out stronger than ever. Such conflicting portrayals, while fictional, felt very real and evidently brought plenty of heart and accountability to the genre's ability to tell authentic stories through the guise of fictional characters.

Most notably, in Thompson's storylines there was a distinguishable difference in how Jessica and Luke's marriage was portrayed compared to her character's earlier adaptations. While they still experienced their fair share of marital troubles together, their relationship was healthier and more egalitarian, specifically in terms of how they communicated with one another in times of adversity. In Bendis and Gaydos' comics, Luke was often painted as being increasingly aggressive and hostile towards Jessica. There were even times when he referenced the fact that their friends and colleagues "warned" him about how she would disappoint him and/or destroy their marriage because of her inability to let people in. In Thompson's comics, however, both Luke and Jessica are more attentive, understanding, and caring towards one another's emotional and personal needs. Not only do they give each other their personal space but their conversations are more open and honest. Their marital disputes and disagreements over decisions concerning their daughter, Dani, were also not as concerning in the sense that they had the potential for ending in domestic violence (as was alluded to in Image 46).

Indeed, this was briefly addressed in Thompson's *Purple Daughter* storyline when Luke is possessed so that he could kill Jessica on behalf of the Purple Man's wishes. As Luke

approaches her, intent to do so, Jessica muses about how she can make sure that any physical altercation they may get into while he is possessed does not end up in either of them getting hurt, let alone her death. Jessica expresses her concerns over avoiding the latter scenario at all costs because Luke would "never forgive himself" for killing her, even if it was against his will. When she successfully accomplishes to stop the Purple Man's

Image 49: Luke wakes up from the Purple Man's mind control in *Jessica Jones: Purple Daughter - Issue #3, Chapter 6* (March 2019)

nefarious plans as well as terminates his hold over Luke, they share an emotionally heartwarming reunion that demonstrates both their love and respect, rather than their contempt, for one another (Image 49). This was an uplifting representation of how a superpowered, interracial couple can overcome negative stereotypes no matter what life throws at them.

Representation of Racial and Ethnic Communities

As previously stated, the characters included in this study represent a wide range of culturally diverse populations. In terms of their respective racial/ethnic identities, the following chart provides a breakdown of the character demographics:

Figure 7: Racial Demographics

Racial Demographics	Superheroine Names
Caucasian	Jessica Jones, Chalice, Zephyr, Captain Marvel, Batwoman, and Empowered
African American	Green Lantern, Ironheart, Moon Girl, and Naomi
Latina/x	La Borinqueña and Miss America

Asian	Silk (Korean American) and Katana (Japanese)
South Asian	Ms. Marvel (Pakistani-American)
Native American	Echo

As shown above, each of the characters included in this study represent a wide spectrum of racial and ethnic identities. While 37.5% of the characters were Caucasian (per category), the remaining 62.5% were not. This section will provide an analysis of the representation of the characters from the other racial/ethnic backgrounds cited in the chart above.

It is important to note that the designation and/or association of any one given racial/ethnic identity were organized in relation to the emphasis that the characters and writers themselves highlighted in the comics selected for this study. This is particularly true for the character of Maya Lopez (a.k.a. Echo) in the sense that her name itself sounds as if she were of Spanish speaking descent and thus it generates assumptions of race. Nevertheless, it is because her Native American background is so heavily emphasized (per her father's side) and that such ancestral information about her mother is scarcely given that, for the purposes of this study, I have elected to solely focus on the former (Figure 7).

When coupled with an age-old tradition of how racialized bodies are negatively portrayed in the media (i.e., television, film, news, etc.), the expression of such adverse emotions as anger, aggression, and doubt are often used to discredit, marginalize, and oppress individuals of color. Following up on what was mentioned about Green Lantern (a.k.a. Sojourner Mullein) in one of the previous sections, the depiction of a strong, passionate Black woman in a position of power that awards her control over the emotions of an entire city provides audiences with a powerful commentary on the use of various racial and gendered stereotypes to justify the inferiority of racial and ethnic minorities.

Incidentally, Patricia Hill Collins' (1986) work on the use of controlling images to police African American women's bodies and thus put them "in their place" brings up a compelling explanation as to why "assertive" women in positions of power are continuously villainized and ridiculed in the media, as well as why women of color do not experience the perks of upward mobility. The inclusion of this particular version of "Green Lantern" within the canon presents a modernized amalgamation and reimagination of the images emphasized within Collins' work (i.e., the mammy, matriarch, the jezebel, etc.). In other words, not only is Mullein a woman of color but she is also in a position of power that awards her the ability to control other people's emotions as well as interact and negotiate with the city's citizens so long as the Council allows her to; a "privilege" that is not often awarded to people who look like her in real-life without a heightened degree of public contention and/or other institutional barriers. Her storyline, in turn, serves as a powerful juxtaposition and extension of Collins' work on such controlling images of African American women as well as the intersectionality of gender, class, and race. Such a portrayal of a strong, independent, emotionally grounded, and passionate female character of color distinctively and eloquently combats such negative stereotypes by depicting the duality and overall complexity of her experiences within the context(s) through which they are embedded. In this regard, having contradictory emotions and impassioned reactions against the infringement of people's rights and freedoms is not a detriment to someone's character, nor is it unique to Mullein (and by extension other people of color) herself. Parenthetically, it is not indicative of a lack of civility and obedience but rather it is simply a part of the human experience that is a (if not the) quintessential component of how we interact, relate, and respond to unknown others.

On this matter, several frames and dialogue sequences in the *Far Sector* series highlight the social consequences of systemic racism and racial inequality as experienced by various

minority populations. This is even briefly mentioned in the fifth comic in the series in a flashback sequence. In it, Mullein remembers her mother being passed along for a promotion at work in favor of a White male colleague who threatened to sue for "discrimination against white men" if she were given the job. She also recalls being racially stereotyped herself when she and her friends are approached by employees and told (albeit warned) that they need to make a purchase or else risk having the police called on them even though they had only been in said establishment (which looks like a coffee shop of sorts) for no more than five minutes!

The sequence goes on to show her questioning her roles as a "peacekeeping" soldier in the army, as a student at Princeton, and as member of the academy and police force. It is also revealed that the night she was offered the chance to join the Green Lantern Corp., she had just been fired from the police force. It is implied that she was fired for turning in her White partner for the use of excessive force but that was discriminatorily justified as being a rightful termination on the basis of a "social media violation" after a Black Lives Matter activist and friend tagged her in a Facebook post (*Far Sector #5*). Her hesitation to act in the moment brings her great shame that not only drove her to turn in her partner but that has provided her with an example of a situation that she never wants to find herself in again. As a result, she carries the experience of this event with her as made evident by how incredibly vocal she is against the Council in her recommendations to maintain rather than hinder the city's chances for peace as well as goes out of her way to listen to the people's wishes in an attempt to broker nonviolent and diplomatic relations between both parties.

Nevertheless, other subtle references to some of the racial injustices experienced by members of the African American community at the hands of government officials were also presented. For instance, the Council's treatment of their citizens' emotional disorderliness and

occurrences of civil unrest mirrors how government's the world over may initially respond to

such occurrences in real-life scenarios. The only difference here being that they have an actual

reset button at their disposal that allows them to erase their citizen's memories and negative

emotions towards them. In other words, not only does the government seek to silence the

dissenting voices by deeming them as being out of control or problematic but rather the drug,

Switchoff, at the center of the protests would evidently allow their citizens to counteract the

Emotion Exploit and effectively "wake up." Such ordinances are similar to those implemented

for when incidences of crime(s) and drug use in underprivileged communities are reported,

handled, and criminalized by both the media and state legislators.

Coincidentally, not only do the effects of the drug mirror those of marijuana (i.e., it provides users with immediate gratification and alters their senses) but the rhetoric used by the peaceful protestors also reaffirms those of which we know all too well as a society: the citizens of the City Enduring would like
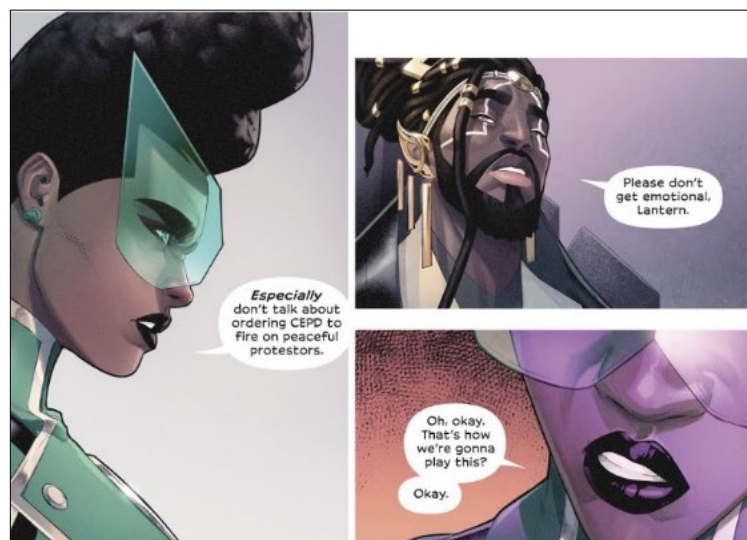
Image 50: Sojourner Mullein in *Far Sector #4* (February 2020)

their wishes to be seen and heard by those in positions of power. However, whether it be

decriminalizing marijuana or protesting police brutality, citizens (like those of the City

Enduring) ask for peace whereas law enforcement officials are often advised to use brute force to

take control of the situation; a tendency that Mullein refuses to uphold (Image 50). In this regard,

civilian protests are perceived as threats to the social order not because of the unruly chaos that

they incite but rather because of the silent fear they instill in those in power behind closed doors, particularly with regards to the unpredictability of dissenting emotions and the actions they may ultimately inspire.

Thus, with regards to the expression of emotions, Green Lantern's character seems to offer a unique paradox to such assumptions seeing as the very fact that she can still feel evidently means that she not only polices the negative emotions expressed by others but rather her own as well. Such impression management or emotional labor can be perceived as being exceedingly problematic, yet Mullein is not just another "hysterically loud," "opinionated," or "angry" Black woman. Instead, she is perceived as being a weak human being, which somehow also serves as another subtle commentary as to how the opinions and experiences of Black women are dehumanized and eroticized within society. Mullein, however, combats such stereotypes by perceiving emotions as being a necessary aspect of everyday life as well as being willing to question and stand up against the decisions made by those in power. Even though some of the Council members perceive her to be stubborn, naïve, or uneducated, Mullein courteously addresses them whilst simultaneously illuminating the ways in which she respects the views that the citizens hold as well as recognizes the power that rests within her to ensure that their wishes are heard.

Similarly, while Mullein is presented as being another "angry" or strong-willed Black woman, it is important to also briefly mention that her male counterparts were not spared of such negative stereotypes. For instance, as shown in Image 46, Luke angrily breaks off Jessica's side passenger door when she denies him information regarding the location of their daughter, Dani, whereas Riri had presumed that her biological father, Demetrius, was dead until she came face to face with him years later (see Image 14). Such portrayals of the "aggressive" and "absentee"

African American male/father, while potentially problematic on the surface, speak to the depth and complexity of the African American experience that so often goes unrepresented or ignored until they are told from the perspective of members within the community itself, as is the case for the female writers of *Far Sector* and *Ironheart*.

Contrary to popular belief, both Luke and Demetrius are incredibly loving and caring husbands and fathers that wish to be involved in the lives of those they love yet who are denied this for two distinctly different reasons. While for Luke it is done for his own protection from the threats that Jessica seeks to shield him and their daughter from (or as shown in another comic book storyline, because they both find themselves on two different sides of a dispute within the superhero/superheroine community), this is not the case for Demetrius. For him, "abandoning" his family was not a conscious or deliberate decision he made with Riri's mother knowledge or on his own accord, but rather was imposed on him by outside forces that perceived him to be a "nobody" that no one would realize had gone missing, let alone care. Desperate for financial stability before Riri's long anticipated birth, Demetrius had enrolled himself in what he believed was a plasma donation program but that instead was a governmental front for secret trial experiments on innocent civilians and who "helped" him fake his own death by kidnapping him.

As a result, Demetrius was held hostage, experimented on, and kept from his family until he managed to escape the facility where he was being held. Unfortunately for Riri and her mother, Ronnie, not only were they falsely led to believe that he had died in a gas station robbery gone wrong but rather he no longer remembers that he had a family who missed him, let alone that they even existed.

Upon discovering that he was alive, Riri expresses her disbelief and resentment towards him for allowing them to mourn his death everyday of their lives since then as well as a fear that she could become just like him. While she did have a male father figure present in her life, it was again short lived when her stepfather, Gary, and her best friend were killed during a drive by shooting when she was 13 years old. Riri was raised by a single mother in the South Side of Chicago, an area that is relatively well known for its poverty-stricken inhabitants and crime riddled streets. Thusly, she is also consciously aware

Image 51: Riri and childhood friend, Xavier, discuss how it has been like growing up in Chicago in *Ironheart #1* (November 2018)

of what her loved ones, including her mother, must feel whenever she dons the Ironheart suit as well as the potential danger that it poses on top of the incidences of crime and deviance that already plague her beloved city (Image 51).

Her story provides a narrative about the realities of what it is like for people of color to live in such underprivileged communities yet find ways to persevere either academically, financially, socially, or personally. For Riri, her decision behind becoming Ironheart somewhat rests in the idea that she no longer wished to live in fear of the past whilst simultaneously suppressing the trauma she carries with her every single day of her life because of it. Nevertheless, unlike common misconceptions of the African American community in addition to

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the presence of her mother as the head of the household (i.e., the black matriarch), neither one serves as a detriment to her successes. In other words, her family structure did not result in a never-ending cycle of chronic ineptness and deviant behaviors. In fact, it did quite the opposite: it made her a superhero. While she does carry the deaths of her fathers every day, Riri does not allow the pain and trauma from those experiences stand in the way of her goals. Instead, they serve as the backdrop as to why she is the most qualified to wear the Ironheart suit and what it represents for her community in addition to how it proves to her that she is not a coward.

Consequently, continuing on with this brief discussion of the family structure for each of the 16 characters analyzed for this study, the following trends were found (Figure 8):

Figure 8: Family Structure

List of Characters	Percentage of Characters	Brief Descriptions of Family Life/Households
Charlie Young Lunella Lafayette Naomi McDuffie Marisol Rios de la Luz Kamala Khan Cindy Moon	37.5%	Live in "stable" households/parents are together (i.e., married, living together, etc.)
Maya Lopez Sojourner Mullein	12.5%	Parents were either separated and/or divorced (both characters are women of color)
Kate Kane Riri Williams*	12.5%	Widowed parents (both characters' parents were remarried but only one was widowed twice*; the latter of which happens to be a person of color)
Jessica Jones Faith Herbert America Chavez	18.75%	Parents either died together and/or around the same time as one another (two characters had parents who died in a car accident whilst the other's parents died of a sacrificial act of love)
Carol Danvers Elissa Megan Powers Tatsu Yamashiro	18.75%	Family status is unknown

Even though, 4 of the characters (Echo, Green Lantern, Ironheart, and Miss America) from marginalized racial/ethnic communities came from what some may define as being "broken homes," another 5 characters (Moon Girl, Naomi McDuffie. La Borinqueña, Silk, and Ms. Marvel) all came from "stable" households. Likewise, several of their parent's occupations serve as a contradiction to false misconceptions regarding immigrants as well as other people of color. For instance, Ms. Marvel's father works in a bank whereas La Borinqueña's mother is revealed to be a doctor (OBGYN) and Silk's parents are teachers (her father) and scientists (her mother), respectively.

In terms of their own educational attainment, several of the characters either are or have attended schools of both lower (elementary, middle, and high school) and higher (college/university) education, with two characters of color (Moon Girl and Ironheart) being young super geniuses. While Ironheart was accepted into M.I.T. at the age of fifteen, Moon Girl not only strives to attend a school with a more rigorous curriculum but rather she is even shown as being a guest speaker at Sotomayor University in *America #2* (Image 52). During her lecture, Lunella expresses her discontent with the "arbitrariness" of systems

Image 52: Lunella's guest appearance in *America #2* (April 2017)

and their rules as well as how they often serve to waste and misappropriate her potential rather

than elevate it. This in turn serves as a good social critique of how the ways in which systems are framed serve as obstacles that for some individuals are nearly unfathomable yet possible to surpass. Also, given that such an observation is being given by a 9-year-old African American girl to a room full of racially diverse college students who agree with what she is saying, speaks volumes to how the expectations imposed on youth of color from both their interactions with family members as well as other social institutions (i.e., school, work, politics, religion, etc.), while perhaps suggested to them with good intentions, can have severe unintended consequences.

As a result, such a broad representation of different types of minority households not only serve to demonstrate the strong sense of community that exists within these communities but rather the work ethic, familial support, and overall expectations they place both on themselves and their children. When it comes to religious and cultural identities, however, there can be a generational disconnect in how an individual prefers to practice their faith in relation to that of their family's wishes as well as how racialized others may perceive (or judge) such practices.

For example, following the events of 9/11, South Asian and Arab Muslim American men and women are often typecast as deviant or threats to national security simply because they are or are perceived to be affiliated with a highly radicalized and anti-feminist set of belief systems (Selod 2019). Additionally, the notion of Islamophobia as well as what is considered "feminine" not only highlight such common misconceptions but rather they are both amplified and justified when government agencies place members of this community on lists that delineate them as being people who need to be watched in the name of the "greater good" as well as other public interests; a trend that is often used to keep track of superpowered people in comics as well.

Kamala Khan's story indisputably highlights the ways in which the state, the family, and public citizens surveil gendered bodies in increasingly problematic and dehumanizing ways. Her brother, Aamir, is often criticized by his parents for his deep affinity and propensity to pray and devote himself to various aspects of his religion rather than concentrate his energy into his education, career, or personal life. Yet, they are more lenient on him compared to Kamala in the sense that they do not want her to be corrupted by her more Westernized classmates, for lack of a better word, as well as have her uphold their family's religious traditions and beliefs to the letter.

Nevertheless, unlike her brother, Kamala often struggles with how to practice her faith in ways that are indicative of her own set of beliefs rather than what has been imposed upon her and unlike her best friend Nakia, Kamala does not wear a hijab on a daily basis nor do her parents pressure her to do so. Nakia, on the other hand, is often advised by hear parents not to wear a hijab in public for fear of garnering unwanted attention and suspicion from strangers. Indeed, as shown in

Image 53: Nakia gets questioned about why she wears a hijab in *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1, #1* (February 2014)

Image 53, she is ignorantly asked if she would be "honor killed[ed]" if she did not wear her hijab while out in public. Such concerns evidently reiterate the ways in which South Asian and Arab Muslim American women who wear hijabs are often wrongly perceived as being oppressed and thus from a Western standpoint both anti-feminine and unattractive (Selod 2019). Kamala and Nakia, however, are both able to stay true to their beliefs whilst simultaneously honoring them in

ways that make them, not others, comfortable as well as allows them to learn how to navigate such spaces.

Moreover, the continued inclusion of historical references to racial discrimination, colonization, the physical displacement of populations, and pop-culture also served to situate (both historically and culturally) various character storylines within the context of real-life events and thus implying that the consequences of such events have and will continue to influence each character's individual sense of self. For instance, brief references to the Trail of Tears as well as her childhood memories of visiting a Native American Reservation, or "Rez," with her father are briefly mentioned by Maya Lopez as she embarks on her vision quest.

Similarly, Marisol Rios de la Luz's storyline also serves to highlight various aspects of her interpersonal identity in relation to the pride she possesses in being an Afro-Latina, Nuyorican superheroine who is a descendant of the Taíno, a group of indigenous people who inhabited the island of Borikén (the original Taíno name given to modern day Puerto Rico). Due to European colonization, the Taíno people encountered Christopher Columbus in 1492 and were subsequently conquered, enslaved, and virtually eradicated seeing as many of them were either killed and/or succumbed to the diseases brought by the Spanish conquistadors. As a result, like Native Americans in the United States, the oral history of the Taíno people was nearly lost as it was frequently undermined and suppressed by the state curriculum and thus made it increasingly difficult for future generations of Puerto Ricans, both at home and abroad to preserve; let alone embrace and propagate it from one generation to the next.

Nonetheless, various aspects of their culture are still prevalent today as made evident by the common use of the demonym "Boricua(s)" when referring to individuals of Puerto Rican descent. For Marisol, her ancestry takes center stage in a variety of different ways, specifically in

terms of references to pop-culture, cultural practices, traditions, cuisine preference, clothing, code-switching, and her superheroine name (Image 54). As a matter of fact, the most prevalent aspect of her identity is how her birth name serendipitously predicted who she would later become: an environmentalist and La Borinqueña. Broken up, her name Marisol is "mar y sol" which is translated as of the "sea and sun," which references her love and care for the environment as well as her elemental based superpowers and is a direct line from the Puerto Rican national anthem, "La Borinqueña," which also happens to be the superheroine name that was given to her by her

Image 54: Marisol wears her name with pride in *La Borinqueña #1* (December 2016)

people and that she symbolizes with "great pride and responsibility" (Image 54).

Incidentally, code-switching, or the practice of alternating between languages, was done in conversation by Maya Lopez, Kamala Khan, America Chavez, and Marisol Rios de la Luz. Whilst in Echo's and Ms. Marvel's comics some words or phrases were intermittently translated from NASL (Native American Sign Language) and Urdu to English in dialogue boxes, respectfully, this was not commonly done in the comics for the latter two superheroines. Thus, considering that both of the writers and/or creators of their series' are both of Spanish-speaking descent themselves, the act of alternating between English and Spanish evidently assumes (albeit hopes) that their readers do not only speak Spanish themselves but rather it is precisely because

they are the population of readers that this comic book series aims to target that a direct translation is not given. This is further reiterated in both of the character's frequent use of expressions that exemplify feelings of elation (i.e., "Wepa!", "Eso!", etc.) as well as a sense of community (i.e., "Mi gente").

Coincidentally, historically significant events that have defined the island's and its people's history and nationalistic pride are also mentioned when Marisol/La Borinqueña is gifted her powers by the Taíno mother goddess, Atabex. In the scene, various images are shown as Atabex alludes to various sociopolitical (expressly the colonization of Taíno lands, the Lares uprising of 1868 (or the "Grito de Lares"), and the 2018 PULSE nightclub shooting) and environmental sufferings (i.e., air pollution, soil erosion, landslides, habitat loss, hurricanes, etc.) that have afflicted the island of Puerto Rico and its people for decades.

In addition, direct references to famous members of the Latina/x community were also made in both Miss America's and La Borinqueña's comics in the sense that the former attends Sotomayor University, named after Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, and whose school motto references one of singer-songwriter's Selena Quintanilla-Perez's song titles/lyrics, "Como La Flor." America's respect and admiration for both women are even addressed in the second comic in the series when a group of cyborgs infiltrate her campus and begin destroying school property. America in turn grows angry as she confronts them for "disrespecting the house that Sonia built" and evidently stops them after having successfully "prayed to Selena" to save the day. As both a Latina and someone who was named after the Queen of Tejano Music, this Easter egg was not only humorous, but the recognition was also much appreciated.

Correspondingly, La Borinqueña's comic references Bomba, a traditional music and dance that is deeply rooted in Puerto Rican history (specifically African slavery) as well as one

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of the most recognizable lyrics from Cuban singer, Celia Cruz, when a man she interacts during a celebration in the streets of Puerto Rico tells her the following: "Oye negrita, tu si que tienes ¡tumbao!." Even though the interaction is somewhat the equivalent to a woman being catcalled while walking down the street (especially when translated literally, or word for word, from English to Spanish), she is not offended by a man calling her by terms that (on the surface) delineate the color of her skin and potentially highlight her curves as "problematic." While that is certainly a part of it, it is important to note that while the Spanish term "negro" (pronounced "neg-row") refers to the color black, in this context the term "negrita" is a slang term commonly used to describe a beautiful girl. When coupled with the word "tumbao" (pronounced "toom-bow"), which roughly translated means confidence, the man's comments are not an insult but rather a compliment that refers to how she exhumes said beauty, allure, self-confidence, and Puerto Rican pride. She in turn emphasizes her strong Puerto Rican identity when she refers to lines from Puerto Rican poet's, Julia de Burgos', poem "Ay, ay, ay de la grifa negra," to refer to her hair Afro-textured hair, lips, and nose as well as her love for dancing Bomba and having a bowl of sancocho, a hearty and delicious soup that is a pinnacle to Puerto Rican cuisine. The chart (Figure 9) below provides two English translation of de Burgos' poem:

Figure 9: Two translations of the opening lines from Julia de Burgos' poem "Ay, ay, ay de la grifa negra"

| Ay ay ay, que soy grifa y pura negra; grifería en mi pelo, cafrería en mis labios; y mi chata nariz mozambiquea. *(de Burgos 1997)* | Ay ay ay, I'm kinky-haired and pure black; proud my hair is kinky, proud of my fierce lips and flat Mozambican nose. *(Santiago 1995)* |

Ay ay ay, que soy grifa y pura negra;	Ay, ay, ay, that [I] am kinky-haired and
grifería en mi pelo, cafrería en mis labios;	pure black; kinks in my hair, Kafir in my
y mi chata nariz mozambiquea.	lips; and my flat nose Mozambiques.
(de Burgos 1997)	*translated by Jack Agüeros (de Burgos 1997)*

In line with the earlier discussion of body positivity in the presence of historically rigid Western beauty standards and ideals, there was a strong depiction of the various hair styles and textures that women of color can adorn in their everyday lives, as well as while working as superheroines. Adopting a body positive narrative is not only an increasingly racially segregated social project but rather it is one that is often gravely misrepresented and/or overlooked. This is especially true when it comes to perceiving women's natural hair styles and textures as not simply being a universal social cue, or sign, that

Image 55: Tatsu Yamashiro getting dressed in *Katana (The New 52) #1* (February 2013)

delineates their gender but rather as an accredited extension of their unique cultural identities. For instance, while Kamala only wears a head covering during religious activities yet wears modest clothing in both her every day and superheroine lives, Tatsu's costume also honors her Japanese culture in quite a similar way. As shown in Image 55, each aspect of her attire, while culturally relevant, are meticulously chosen to double up as weapons of defense. In other words, there is no "right" way to honor one's cultural background but rather there are a plethora of different ways that is unique and personal to them.

Therefore, an acknowledgement of that, no matter how big or small, within such a platform, evidently serves to highlight the stigma, stereotypes, and heightened expectations that people, particularly women of color, face when attempting to adhere to the Western standards of beauty and attractiveness (Image 56). For young girls of color specifically, the inclusion of

Image 56: Front covers from left to right - *Naomi #1* (March 2019); *Far Sector #1* (November 2019); *Ironheart #12* (November 2019)*; America #1* (March 2017)

superheroines from more marginalized backgrounds who speak and/or look like them (specifically in terms of skin color, hair texture, clothing style, cultural customs, etc.) can provide a plethora of opportunities from which they can embody positive rather than negative racial stereotypes pertaining to their embodiment of femininity and exemplification of the "ideal" female body type. Whether it be embracing their curves or, as proudly stated by La Borinqueña, their kinky hair, the growing presence of these characters within the superheroine genre each echo the importance of diversifying character lineups and storylines through both accurate and respectful representations across various mediums.

REFLEXIVITY

As a huge fan of the superhero comic genre, this project in and of itself was very near and dear to me. Throughout the research processs, it was important that I maintained awareness of my own personal biases and positionality throughout every step of the process. To do so, I incorporated an arts-based research approach to reflexivity to describe and commemorate my research process.

This approach makes use of emotional experiences and allows the researcher to produce new ways of understanding the social world around us and create meaning from the research process through artistic expression (Finley 2008). Consequently, arts-based research approaches promote and cultivate creative ways of engaging in critical human inquiry in such a way that reflects an individual's commonplace practices of knowledge production in their daily social interactions and brings them into the realm of academic discourse. Utilizing this approach to reflexivity evidently deviates away from more dominant, colonialized, masculinized, and traditional epistomologies (Finley 2008). In other words, by bridging the divide between science and the arts, this approach makes way for a new tradition of research that is not only more comprehensive but rather more readily accessible to the general public, regardless of their socioeconomic and educational backgrounds.

Therefore, considering that this study involved conducting a qualitive content analysis of comic books from an intersectional lens, it was only fitting to turn to the arts as a way to highlight various aspects of the research process. Such aspects of the research process include, (but are not limited to) my positionality, interpretations, and values as both a comic book fanatic and as a straight, cisgender women of color researcher, as well as any ethical issues that may have arose as I compiled the content examined for this project.

Accordingly, I drew a black and white comic book style poster (a picture of which is provided below in Figure 10) to both highlight my research project's topic and unit of analysis (i.e., female superheroines) as well as to depict my own introspective journey as I interpreted and interacted with the imagery, tropes, and literary prose of each comic book I read.

Figure 10: Arts-Based Research – Comic Book Style Poster
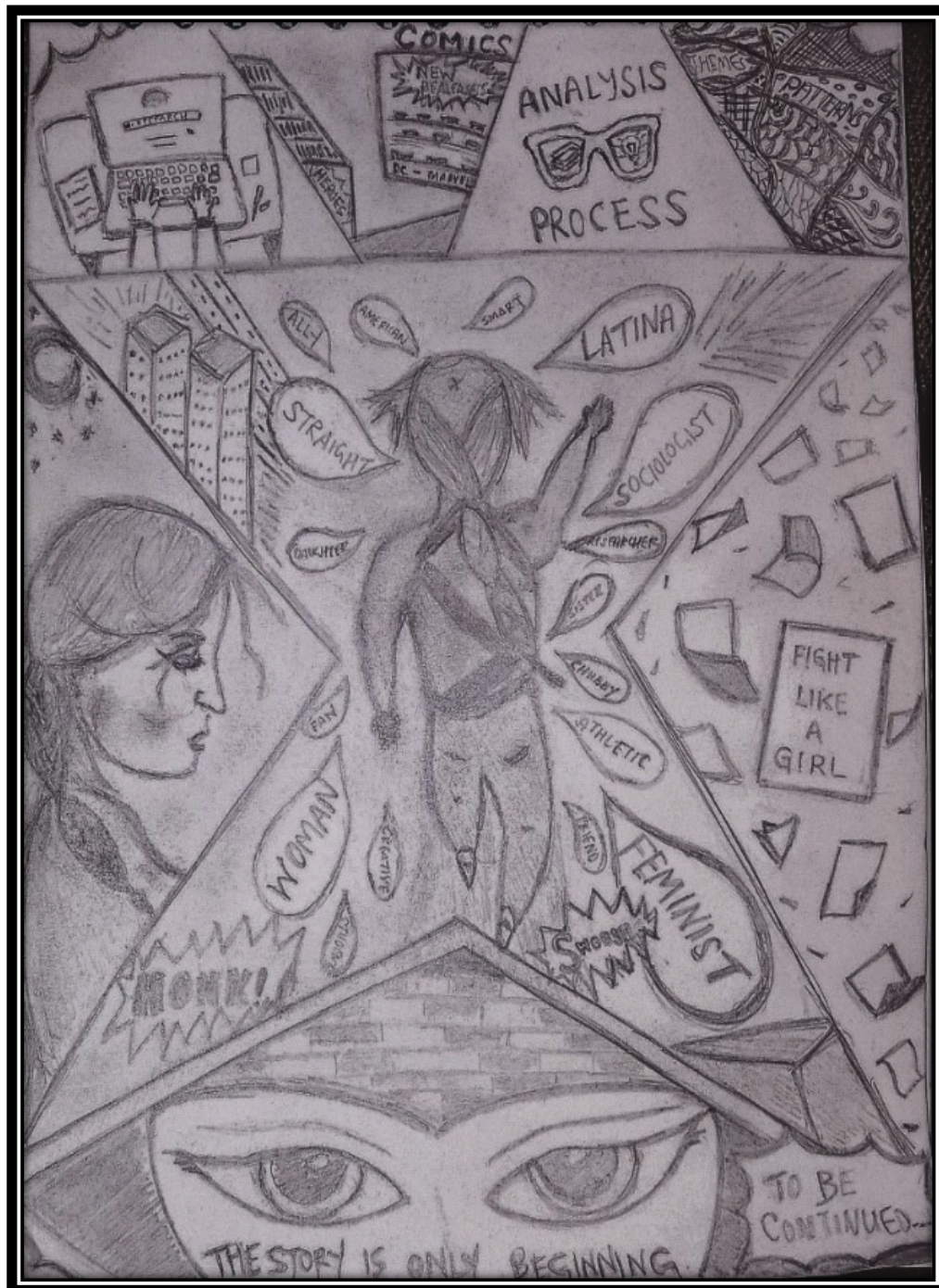
The poster itself is meant to portray me as the superheroine within my own comic book story. The top panel depicts some key elements of the research process starting with selecting my topic and conducting a literature review of previous studies on the subject; the data collection process of researching, scouting for, and purchasing the comic books themselves at local bookstores and online retail sites; and finally, the anaysis process of reading through and interpreting the content for new or common themes and patterns.

Lastly, the second and third panels depict my own personal journey throughout the research process. Inspired by the common trope of superheroes overlooking the city or watching events (e.g., crimes in progress, conversations, etc.) from a higher vantage point (Image 57), I chose to draw myself, as a superheroine (and as a researcher) doing the same. The difference here being that rather than fighting crime or ensuring that events unfold the way I have ensured they will, I am a passionate qualitative researcher who upon completion of her work lies in wait to see how the content I examined fares in relation to my research questions, how my various intersecting identities
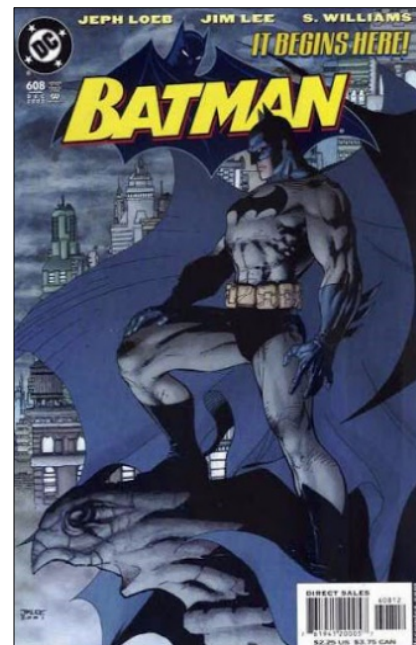
Image 57: Batman overlooking the city in "Hush, Chapter One: The Ransom" – *DC Batman Vol 1, #608* (December 2002)

may have influenced my interpretation of the material, and finally culminating in the uncertainty of how my research findings (and by association, my paper) are evidently conveyed and received by anyone (both academics and laymen, alike) who may come in contact with it now and in the future. The possibitlies of how this paper will be received and/or used within academia are endless and thus the elatedness that I feel upon its completion is but a leap of faith that I for one,

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cannot wait to see where it leads me. This poster in turn serves as both a visual representation and grounded celebration of that. As a result, drawing this comic book style poster was an incredibly therapeutic and cathartic experience that enabled me to situate myself within the context of my research as well as within the pages of each comic book I came into contact with while also contributing to the trustworthiness of the research process.

DISCUSSION

Active Reinforcement and Simultaneous Resistance of Stereotypes

This research study offers some powerful insights about how the representation of superheroines in comic books has been handled by both publishers and fans of the genre during the last couple of decades. In fact, each of the superheroines included in this study were portrayed in rich, multifaceted, and comprehensive ways that served to both reinforce and resist gender stereotypes that justify the subordination of women. Whether they are daughters, sisters, mothers, wives, students, colleagues, girlfriends, or friends, the characters represented are often shown grappling with storylines, gender norms, and other related social pressures that are uniquely distinct from those that define the experiences of their White, able-bodied, heterosexual, male counterparts in progressively adverse and intricate ways.

From the perspective of the male gaze, the very fact that they are superheroines paints them as frequently engaging in self-sacrificing behavior that by very definition requires them to work with others to maximize the efficiency of their results. Nevertheless, each of the characters included in this study actively address, combat, and persevere over such negative gendered assumptions. For instance, they often engage in body positive behaviors that allow them to develop their own personal interests, desires, opinions, and relationships. Most importantly, they learn how to fully embrace their own intersecting identities in ways that effectively redefine what it means to be a woman and superhero in the modern era on their own terms. In doing so, they exemplify what it means to be strong and independent women who are fully secure in their own respective social positions, bodies, expressions of femininity, principles, sexualities, and racial/ethnic identities.

Therefore, by emphasizing superheroines introduced to the canon in the last twenty years, this study not only establishes precedent but rather validates and stresses the significance behind the inclusion of the voices and concerns of individuals who feel as if popular mass media outlets (like comic books) often overlook, discredit, and nullify their experiences altogether. This study noticeably reveals that while an adherence to old and widely debated superhero tropes that distinguish male and female characters (i.e., sexualized bodies, accentuated body features, "damsel in distress" narratives, essentializing women's roles, etc.) from one another still exists, an effort has been made within the industry itself to do away with such antiquated representations of "reality" and diversify their publications and overall roster of characters. Whilst it can be disputed that such efforts are often strategic, misinformed, and outright misleading in terms of being done to boost their popularity and sales through the use of buzzwords (such as first "lesbian character," "bisexual character," "transgender character," etc.) without actually consulting with members of these communities, there is not any doubt that the representation of such characters within these platforms, no matter how big or small, speaks volumes about the trajectory of humanity and social accountability.

As a result, small "Easter eggs," or hidden references and/or throwbacks, like that of the one shown in Image 58 serve as a dual comparison between two characters whose comics were released 76 years apart to the day of one another and simultaneously embody a literal "passing of the torch" of sorts between creative teams and fans of the genre, alike. Thus, the power of comics as a sequential art form, ultimately enable them to become a literary resource that can inspire readers to grow as human beings in addition to being a historical resource that moves beyond simply conveying one-dimensional images and narratives. Instead, they provide a platform for all

women of color to literally burst off the page and shatter every single glass ceiling that for decades have undermined, belittled, and silenced their experiences in favor of the status quo.
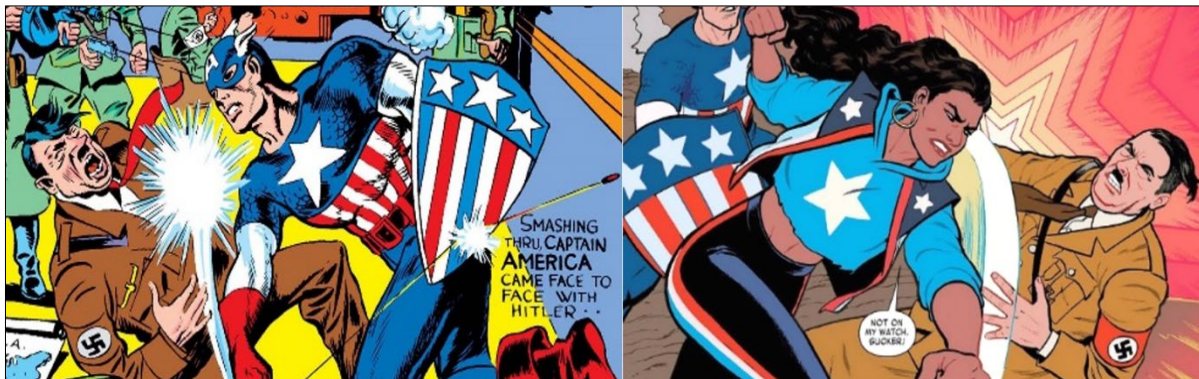
Image 58: Punching Hitler in the face in *Captain America #1* (March 1941) and *America #1* (March 2017)

The Intersectional Identities of the Superheroines' Creative Teams

Despite such historically defining accomplishments, accurately and respectfully representing the complexity of intersectional identities of underrepresented and marginalized communities in the mainstream media can be quite a daunting task. Regardless of how and why such decisions are made, there is no doubt that the representation of such a diverse group of characters within the genre has the ability to broker a common ground of humanity between both the creative teams who make the inclusion of such characters possible and their audiences. The main goal here being the development of powerful coalitions that call for the equal and continued representation of people from all backgrounds across various entertainment mediums for years to come.

For example, the writer/creator of the character Chalice (*Alters*), Paul Jenkins, exemplifies the ways in which superhero comic books themselves are also conveyors of knowledge in the sense that authors and illustrators within the genre must negotiate their accountability to what publishers know will sell with their own moral obligation of ensuring that accurate, truthful, and respectful representations of various diverse populations (in this case,

members of the transgender community) are distributed to audiences around the world. Even though the comic itself is not distributed by a widely known publisher (Aftershock Comics) within the superhero comic book genre, it has gained some traction in the sense that members of the community have slowly but surely become aware of its presence on store shelves and online retail sites.

It is also important to note that in his book, Jenkins outwardly positions and addresses his identity as a White, middle-aged, able-bodied, cisgender male while also informing his audience(s) that his work was inspired by and is not written, illustrated, or colored without consulting members of the transgender community. Starting with his second comic in the series, Jenkins includes an editorial at the end of each of his comics in which he interviews members of the transgender community (who helped him in his research for the book) about their experiences and opinions regarding the representation of transgender issues and individuals in the media as well, as what and how they think his comic book has done right or wrong in terms of addressing this matter the most accurately as possible. By doing so, Jenkins provides another avenue through which the voices of the transgender community are not only included or represented in their own terms (rather than having it done for them under false pretenses) and thus allows them to be seen in unprecedented ways than ever before.

Consequently, the presence of colorists like Tamra Bonvillain (a White transwoman) as well as writers like G. Willow Wilson (a White, middle-class woman from New Jersey who converted to Islam when she was 20 years old) marks a significant shift in the inclusion of a diverse population of women's voices and experiences. In fact, Bonvillain's (*Moon Girl, Alters*) and Wilson's *(Ms. Marvel)* individual projects demonstrate the ways in which individuals who once held a distinct privilege (i.e., White, able bodied, etc.) within society can have their work(s)

questioned and/or criticized for existing because it now comes from someone labeled as a "minority." Nevertheless, despite such pushback, these women have not only solidified their roles as visionaries or pioneers of the genre, but they have also become a part of the solution.

In other words, in addition to women making their voices heard, men should also be (and as shown by those included in this study, ultimately are) dedicated to telling authentic stories rather than one-dimensional, glorifications of reality. For instance, writers like Brian Michael Bendis (*Jessica Jones*), Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez (*La Borinqueña*), or Paul Jenkins (*Alters*) have utilized their platforms to tell some very deep and complicated stories about marriage, trauma, cultural identities, environmental issues, gender dysphoria, and so forth. Others, like Adam Warren (*Empowered*) have utilized humor to outwardly yet subtly address the images and gender tropes that are so frequently used to please the traditional "male gaze" whilst simultaneously criticizing and parodying them for the problematic falsehoods that they are.

Additionally, the experiences of people from all walks of life are both seen and heard when writers like Kelly Sue DeConnick (*Captain Marvel),* Eve L. Ewing (*Ironheart*), Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez (*La Borinqueña*), and Gabby Rivera (*Miss America*) are given the opportunity to tell stories that relate to their own familial, geographical, cultural, and personal experiences as well as those of their characters. As a child, DeConnick's family lived on military bases because her father was in the U.S. Air Force. Ewing was born and raised in Chicago. Miranda-Rodriguez comes from a Puerto Rican family, grew up in the Bronx, and thus considers himself a Nuyorican. Per her Twitter, Rivera is a Puerto Rican lesbian as well as self-described "queer butch" and "loverboi."

Each of these personal experiences and quintessential aspects of their respective identities enable these writers, as well as others like them, to tell stories that are indicative of real-life

scenarios. By doing so, their individual and collective works serve to bridge the divide between the fictional and nonfictional worlds of knowledge creation. Whether they create original characters and/or refurbish old ones, their contributions to the genre provide a glimpse into its overall trajectory. Given that it is more than possible that several of the writers and illustrators are avid readers of comic books themselves, their observations of the published material that came before them coupled with their own personal experiences, make them the most adept to recognize what storylines have not only been unused and/or overlooked in the industry but also what stories still need to be told.

The Role of the Creators: Creating Spaces for Transparency of Intersectionality

This study also highlights that while male writers and illustrators are still predominately contributing material and characters within the superhero genre, various female writers and illustrators have begun to throw their hats into the ring, which (in spite of misogynist and anti-feminist critiques) has positively influenced and redefined the trajectory of the genre itself. Writers like Kelly Sue DeConnick (*Captain Marvel*), Jody Houser (*Faith*), G. Willow Wilson (*Ms. Marvel*), Kelly Thompson (*Jessica Jones, Hawkeye*), N.K. Jemisin (*Far Sector*), Gabby Rivera (*Miss America*), Eve L. Ewing (*Ironheart*), and so on have introduced characters and storylines that are not only empowering in how they address feminist issues but also represent their own experiences as women within society as well as within the communities that they come from.

As a matter of fact, whilst researching each of the authors and illustrators further, I came across the work that many of them have done outside of the superhero genre. For instance, two comics, *Bitch Planet* and *Cupcake Pow!* (by DeConnick and Houser, respectively), stood out to me because of their ability to address various social issues that women from all walks of life

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experience, in addition to highly problematic (and trivial) gendered assumptions about the kinds of creative content that women are meant to consume in relation to men (Image 59).

Image 59: Front cover (left) of *Bitch Planet Volume #1* (October 2015) and *Cupcake Pow!* (top-right) Webcomic (June 2010 – June 2015)

Whilst the former touches upon women fighting back again the constant policing of their bodies in a society that has punished, ostracized, and exiled them for their noncompliance to social norms and gendered expectations, the latter is a commentary on the universality of common interests between the sexes. In fact, Houser's webcomic cleverly plays up the stereotype that women and young girls are solely attracted to cute, adorable, and pink-colored figurines and thus cannot enjoy masculine activities or interests. Such perceptions in and of themselves are so deeply ingrained within our social institutions to such an extent that young children, regardless of their respective gender and racial identities, adopt and internalize these messages well into adulthood (Coyne et al. 2014). Therefore, seeing as children are more perceptive than adults give them credit for, the images and words they consume from animated television shows and literary devices, like comic books, are just as dangerous as those they receive from the people around them.

Significance of Intersectionality as an Analytic Tool

Lastly, as demonstrated throughout this paper, utilizing an intersectional feminist lens made way for an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the superheroines included in this study. This approach asserts that regardless of and in relation to their intersecting identities, women encounter several barriers and systems of oppression in various aspects of their lives.

However, it is how they negotiate such spaces and reclaim both their personal as well as their collective experiences that truly defines their agency and power. Consequently, perceptions and internalized assumptions about issues pertaining to race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and able-bodiedness were at the center of each character's respective storylines in complex and multifaceted ways.

For instance, the hypersexualization of women's bodies as well as the so-called "overexpression" of emotions are often stereotypes used to condemn, belittle, demean, and silence women's concerns, interests, thoughts, feelings, and overall experiences in relation to those of men. For Emp, having blond hair, an hourglass figure, and an exceedingly revealing costume garners her plenty of unwanted attention that in turn amplify her self-esteem concerns whilst simultaneously undermining, criticizing, and parodying them from the perspective of others. Moreover, as characters attain other identities throughout the life course, they become more compounded and constrained by other social, cultural, racial, religious, and familial commitments. Kamala Khan, for example, is a Muslim-American teenager who must grapple with balancing her home life, school life, spiritual life, and "superheroing" life. Coincidentally, stretching herself thin is not only one of her superpowers but it also causes her a heightened sense of awareness about the unique responsibility she possesses as both a protector of the innocent and her loved ones while she continues to learn how to cope with and adjust to her new life's calling within a timeline that is predetermined for her (i.e., by villains, fellow superheroes, institutional policies, etc.) rather than by her.

While such unique demographics and lived experiences could arguably deem these characters superficially "unqualified" for the archetypal title of a "strong," "competent," and skilled "superheroine," the characters included in this study (and by extension their creators)

continuously combat and redefine such gendered stereotypes in ways that not only (1) allow these characters to stay true to who they are as individuals but that (2) are representative of the personal struggles of gendered and racialized bodies in the real world. Their overall inclusion within the comic book canon was not solely tokenistic for the sake of diverse representation. Instead they are a necessary creative decision within a culture of knowledge production that is changing and evolving with the times to condemn negative stereotypes and uplift communities who have felt excluded from various spaces like never before.

Accordingly, the use of an intersectional feminist lens in conjunction with a qualitative content analysis serves to demonstrate the significance behind the multidimensional representation of strong, powerful women from diverse backgrounds pertaining to racial/ethnic, LGBTQ+, and disabled communities within the superhero/superheroine comic book genre. As a society, it is already so common to socialize children to categorize and subsequently "confine" people to their own boxes without fully taking the time to understand the various aspects of people's lived experiences outside of such superficial characteristics as skin color, biological sex, and visible ability status well into adulthood. Doing so not only limits the kinds of media children and young adults are exposed to but rather prevents consumers from witnessing the full extent of their potential outside of what others have designated for them based on such assumptions. Nevertheless, as shown by the characters in this study, such categories can be both redefined and dismantled in ways that empower rather than discourage individual growth as well as highlight the importance of self-acceptance, empathy, and camaraderie within even the most indefinite, antagonizing, and polarizing aspects of the human condition.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Images, just like people, can be agents of socialization to such a degree that the media that we expose children and young adults should not be taken at face value nor taken for granted. This is especially important with regards to how we, as a society, hope to combat various social inequalities well into the future. Be it through the acknowledgment of people's experiences within marginalized communities, the influence that people's intersecting identities have on their attainment of success, emphasizing the importance of advocacy work, and/or the formulation of coalitions of people willing to receive criticism from so-called knowledgeable others (in this case lifelong fans of the superhero genre): the goal is and should always be a willingness to accept and see people for who they are, not who we want or expect them to be. Being our most authentic selves and having a willingness to share our stories with the world is in and of itself a superpower that makes all of us the heroes of our own lives; the literary or public figures we idolize are nothing more than extensions of what we may already know is inside of us, but that because of history and the rigidity of how society is organized, is so often suppressed and gravely un(der)appreciated.

Such narratives, like those written and illustrated by the female comic book authors and illustrators included in this study, help exemplify all the ways in which even the most seemingly perfect and powerful characters are not only human but rather how life itself is so perfectly imperfect. Thus, it is not because a character is male or female, Black or White, rich or poor, muscular or slender, fat or skinny, disabled or able-bodied, that makes them a hero but rather it is the ways in which they take those identities and make meaning out of them (on their own terms) that does.

The growing presence of women from diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds within the comic book industry ultimately provides children and young adults with empowering characters who they can relate to. Accordingly, depicting such a diverse group of superheroines as multidimensional, complex beings can serve to affirm their intersecting identities. Whether through their imagination or in real-life, consumers of such media should be able to see themselves represented in ways that speak to their own realities as well as the changing times. The inclusion of the culturally relevant and positive images presented (i.e., navigating strict parents, struggling in school, forming healthy and supportive relationships, or celebrating one's natural hair, skin color, and curves) can provide audiences with a window into how the world works, as well as how individuals from diverse communities are perceived within the social order. By doing so, not only can those with privilege grow to understand and appreciate how individuals from these communities navigate such obstacles but they can also formulate relationships and alliances that serve to disparage future experiences of systemic oppression and inequality for those labeled as "other" for generations to come.

Nevertheless, because of the controversial perceptions of comic books as rooted in history, misinformation, and advancements in technology and communication systems, they are not often a purveyor of knowledge that people are frequently exposed to unless solely presented to them on a screen in either animated or live-action form. As a result, some voices are bound to be silenced and/or vilified by the mainstream media and unless people are willing to combat such issues as forthright and authentically as possible, such sexist stereotypes and institutionalized racisms will continue to persist. The world is constantly changing and in the case of comic books, it is important to ensure that the introduction of new characters into the canon not only

reflects society and real-life events but also that the comics and characters themselves also change throughout the life course of their audiences.

LIMITATIONS

Despite its various implications, this study was not without its own drawbacks and limitations. As previously mentioned, due to time constraints and the issue of accessibility, I chose to focus on comic books released within the last 20 years which served to limit the scope of this study in exchange for practicality and feasibility. As a result, characters, writers, and illustrators that made such significant contributions to the early phases of addressing the issue of female representation, as well as the authentic portrayals of marginalized communities in such a White, male dominated industry continues to go unrecognized, silenced, and overlooked.

The introduction of one of the first transgender superheroine by a mainstream comic book publisher (DC Comics) and that was written by a transgender woman (Rachel Pollack) during the 1990's, for example, is unfortunately out of the purview of this study. The superheroine, Coagula (Image 60), is a former sex worker who gained her powers of molecular reconstruction
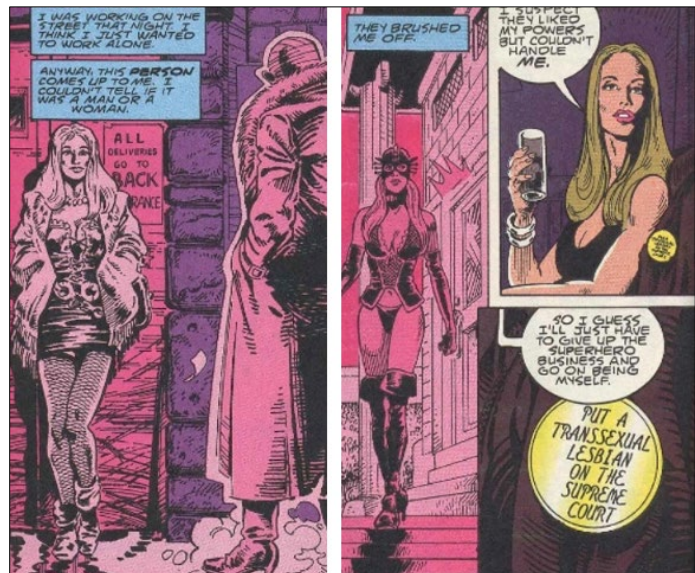
Image 60: Images from Coagula's First Appearance in *Doom Patrol (Vol. 2) #70* (September 1993)

after having slept with a client and who upon discovery of her powers was presumably rejected from joining the Justice League of America for being a transgender, lesbian-identifying activist. The inclusion of this character in this research study could have spoken volumes about the authentic representation of transgender issues as written by a transgender woman herself. Coagula's inclusion may have also presented an interesting commentary on the experiences and

perceptions of sex workers during the period of history that the comic books, in which Coagula was featured, were distributed to the public.

Next, while an attempt was made to include more Latina/x characters written in either Spanish or English as well as released by popular or more obscure publishing companies, this study's efforts in this matter unfortunately fell short due to the issue of publication date and/or accessibility. For example, early in the research process I became aware of an Argentine comic book, *Cybersix*, by Carlos Trillo and Carlos Meglia. The comic book was published in the 1990's and was initially released in Italian, later translated into Spanish, and was eventually adapted into a short-lived animated series. Upon learning of *Cybersix*, I was very excited to obtain a copy of this comic book not only because it was written in Spanish but also because it depicted a superheroine who fights crime by night and whose regular alter ego is a male, high-school literature teacher by day.

As a Latina researcher, I was intrigued to see how such a gender bending character was received by audiences, especially in light of cultural perceptions of gender roles and norms within Spanish speaking communities, in addition to how she was portrayed as the titular character of her own comic book in either language (i.e., Spanish or English). In other words, considering that words and phrases are often lost in translation due to the wide range of idiosyncrasies and variations within the alphabets and rules pertaining to grammar, syntax, semantics, etc. of one language to another, comparing the same comic in different languages could have been quite illuminating.

Regrettably, the comic itself was never released in English and thus, I had to rely on hoping to find a translated version(s) of it online. This was an endeavor that unfortunately proved to be unsuccessful for several reasons. The first being that due to having limited the time frame

of comics that would be analyzed, the entire publication run of the comic itself fell outside of the parameters of this study. Secondly, I was not able to locate the comic in Spanish and while I was able to find an English version of the comic (and animated series) online, I could not have been sure that (1) it (meaning the comic) was complete and that (2) it was translated correctly. As a result, I was forced to exclude this character from my study but found her worth mentioning nevertheless, especially considering that it is important to note how the issue of representation and inclusivity has been addressed in the medium over time.

Moreover, considering that this study heavily relies on my own perspective and interpretation of the material, the broad understanding of what constitutes a "superhero" is but a subjective term and thus could pose a problem with regards to how my research was ultimately operationalized and how it will be received. In other words, seeing as a superhero (outside of the context of the comic book canon) could for many individuals be a family member, a friend, a co-worker, a celebrity, a historical figure, a politician, an activist, etc., focusing on characters who because they were born with or acquired superhuman powers and abilities as "heroes" evidently ignores all those real-life crusaders, in various fields, who even without capes inspire members of the general public and are just as altruistic or heroic every day. Consequently, whilst my study focused on the importance of visibility and representation of marginalized communities within such a distinct literary platform, the portrayal of everyday, "normal" people and their experiences within society could also have been addressed in comic books released outside of our conventional understanding of who these characters are, as well as what they represent within the superhero genre.

Lastly, by addressing the superhero-superheroine distinction, this project itself is at risk of essentializing such corporeal distinctions (i.e., breasts, muscles, genitals, etc.) that delineate

the "male" versus "female" experience within the physical world whilst simultaneously alienating and overlooking the lives of people outside of (or who do not associated with) such a rigid gender binary. Thus, by doing so, this study may evidently reify the abject need within society for the very physical, biological, and so-called "natural" dichotomy of gendered traits and characteristics that it primarily hoped to combat and redefine in the first place. Similarly, whilst this study's focus on marginalized populations is both commendable and telling (in terms of the trajectory of the genre and by extension the medium itself), picking and choosing who, how, when, why, and what voices and/or community members were included in this study could quite possibly be yet another case of art imitating reality.

That is to say that while this study utilized an intersectional feminist approach that aimed to diversify the population of characters personified and analyzed, the issue of representation was limited to the actual presence and inclusion of such characters within the canon to begin with. Therefore, because such a movement is a relatively new concept within the industry, our daily social interactions, and public policies, the fact that most of the superheroines, whose portrayals I examined throughout this paper were Caucasian was not surprising. As a matter of fact, what this finding does is further demonstrate the importance of formulating a study that focuses on one community in relation to another, rather than several communities in conjunction to one another as well as in relation to the dominant group within the broader society at large.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Considering that this study emphasized characters introduced to the canon in the last 20 years, future researchers could pursue several different paths of inquiry to address the influence that comic books have on its audiences throughout the life course. For example, because the categories of interest for this study (i.e., marginalized women) are so broad in scope, future researchers could benefit from narrowing the focus of their studies even further. In other words, as mentioned in the previous section, because a wide variety of demographics were selected for inclusion, the social implications of this research study are endless yet doing so also narrowed its focus. Future researchers could primarily focus on one racial demographic, gender identity, etc. and compare the portrayals of these characters to those characters who are representative of the dominant group within society (i.e., White, heterosexual, educated, middle-class, able-bodied men). Being more specific could be especially beneficial seeing as some characters have either been recently introduced and/or phased out (or killed off) since their initial introduction to the canon. This would not only provide futures researchers with a smaller set of characters to study, but it would also limit the parameters of their study further and allows for a more in-depth analysis of such portrayals.

Moreover, because of the growing popularity of the comic book industry in the mainstream media, it might be interesting to analyze the portrayal, or lack thereof, of certain characters across various mediums (i.e., comics, children's books, young adult novels, television shows, films, etc.). This in and of itself could be very telling seeing as the ways in which society evolves greatly influences the demands made by fans about what characters (both old and new) they would like to see portrayed as well as the kinds of decisions that publishers, writers, directors, and other members of the entertainment industry make in relation to those demands.

Thus, because what characters are evidently represented in mainstream comics, cartoons, and films is so heavily contingent upon what sells in addition to what fans want to see, comparing the frequency, inclusion of, and overall representation of women and other marginalized communities across different mediums could be very insightful in relation to how such images and messages of inclusion are presented to audiences.

Finally, a multitude of different methodologies than (or in addition to) that which was included in this study could be implemented. For instance, future researchers could elect to conduct a mixed methods approach and/or a qualitative content analysis or quantitative content analysis, respectively, of online posts on fan websites or reviews of a given comic book character within the canon. Furthermore, in lieu of conducting a content analysis of comic books, future researchers could decide to conduct focus groups or qualitative interviews with fans and/or contributors (writers, illustrators, colorists, animators, publishers, etc.) of the genre. Interviewees could be selected on a demographic or geographic specific basis and/or at random by either sampling from comic bookstore employees, comic bookstore customers, online comic book communities, and so on and so forth. Utilizing any of these methodologies could provide direct insight into how these characters are introduced to the canon, how they are received by audiences, and how such portrayals change over time in relation to rising or plummeting profit sales within the entertainment industry.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to address the representation of superheroines in comic books distrubuted by popular and somehwat unknown publishers within the genre. Considering the growing popularity of the superhero/superheroine genre within the mainstream media, this research paper has highlighted the importance of representation and inclusion as well as the power that images and words have when it comes to depicting diverse populations and the realities of everyday life within their communities. This is partiuclarly important when considering the fact that when combined with gendered, racialized, classed, religious, and other culural messages of what is considered to be "deviant" behavior in relation to what is "normal," children grow to understand the world around them through an exceedingly rigid, naïve, dichotomous, and essentialized lens that can potentially be problematic when it comes to their everyday social interactions with both themselves and the individualized "other" at home, school, work, and other impersonal public settings.

By utilizing an intersectional feminist lens, this study emphasizes the importance of acknowledging people's intersecting identities to better understand their daily social interactions, degrees of personal attainment, and, finally, how they come to accept who they are in relation to their individual role(s) and location(s) within the social order. Furthermore, the further inclusion of female characters written and illustrated by women within the superhero genre is not only incredibly empowering but rather presents children, regardless of their respecitve racial and gender identities, with fictional and real-life role models to aspire to, both creatively and professionally, well into adulthood. Such a degree of social accountability and sensitivity to acknowledging a diverse scale of social problems and inequalities within the comic book genre is incredibly uplifting and reassuring to witness in the modern era. From the representation of

disparate realities to philosophical muses about the trajectory of humanity as a whole, superhero/superheroine comic books have become crucial disseminators and producers of knowledge that, despite common beliefs about "who" and "what" qualifies one as a fan of the genre, provides audiences from all walks of life a platform from which to be seen, heard, and accepted like never before.

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APPENDIX A: List of 100 Female Superheroines

Superheroine/Alter Ego	Brief History/Demographics
Miss America (America Chavez)	Latina (Puerto Rican)/Queer Identity
Black Widow (Natasha Romanoff)	Russian/Heterosexual/Ex-spy for the KGB
Storm (Ororo Munroe)	African American/Married
Cybersix (Adrian Seidelman)	Argentinian/Gender Bender (Male High School Teacher by Day)
Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan)	Muslim (Pakistani-American)/Teenager
Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers)	Caucasian/Former Officer of the US Air Force & CIA Agent
Araña (Anya Sofia Corazon)	Latina (Puerto Rican/Mexican)
She-Hulk (Jennifer Walters)	Caucasian/Lawyer
Wasp (Janet Van Dyne)	Caucasian/Divorced
Harley Quinn (Dr. Harleen Frances Quinzel)	Caucasian/ Bisexual Character/ Former Psychologist/Spent time in Arkham Asylum
Wonder Woman (Diana Prince)	Sculpted from Clay/Caucasian/Queer Identity
Silk (Cindy Moon)	Asian/Human Mutate
Medusa	Married/Inhuman
Hawkeye (Kate Bishop)	Caucasian/Victim of Rape (storyline)
The Rumor (Allison Hargreeves)	African American/Adopted
The White Violin (Vanya Hargreeves)	Caucasian/Adopted
Jessica Jones	Caucasian/Alcoholic/Suffers from PTSD/Married to a Luke Cage (fellow superhero)/Mother
Misty Knight	African American/Lost arm in a bomb explosion
Jalisco	Latina/Fights crime through folklorico dance
Firebird (Bonita Juarez)	Latina/Religious
Wildcat II (Yolanda Montez)	Latina
The Question (Renee Montoya)	Latina/Lesbian/Police Detective
Dr. Cecilia Reyes	Latina/Trauma Surgeon
Echo/Ronin (Maya Lopez)	Indigenous (Mayan) & Deaf/Performance Artist
Barbara Gordon (Batgirl & Oracle)	Caucasian/Paralyzed
Quake (Daisy Johnson)	Inhuman; Was once the Director of Shield
Melinda May	Asian (Chinese)
Mockingbird (Bobbi Morse)	Caucasian/Divorced
Rocket (Raquel Ervin)	African American

Amanda Waller	African American
White Tiger (Angela del Toro)	Latina
La Bandera	Latina
Vixen (Mari Jiwe McCabe)	African American
Negasonic Teenage Warhead (Ellie Phimister)	Caucasian/Teenager/Lesbian (film)
Okoye	African American/Head of the Dora Milaje
Shuri	African American/Princess of Wakanda
La Boriqueña	Latina (Puerto Rican)
Jubilee (Jubilation Lee)	Asian (Chinese American)/Orphan
Bumblebee (Karen Beecher)	African American
Red Sonja	Caucasian/Warrior
Batwoman (Kate Kane)	Caucasian/Lesbian/Military Brat
Squirrel Girl (Doreen Green)	Caucasian
Katana (Tatsu Yamashiro)	Asian (Japan)/Widow
Spider-Woman (Jessica Drew)	Caucasian
Black Canary (Dinah Drake)	Caucasian
Invisible Woman (Sue Storm)	Caucasian/Married
Zephyr (Faith Herbert)	Caucasian/Plus-size
Starfire (Princess Koriand'r)	Caucasian/Tamaranean
Raven (Rachel Roth)	Caucasian/Cambion (Demon-human hybrid)
Scarlet Witch (Wanda Maximoff)	European
Big Barda	Caucasian/Lesbian
Zatanna	Caucasian
Supergirl (Kara Zor-El)	Caucasian
Red Tornado (Ma Hunkel)	Middle-aged (Mother & Wife)/First cross-dressing superheroine
Elektra (Elektra Natchios)	Greek
Phoenix (Jean Grey)	Caucasian
Kitty Pryde	Caucasian
Aquagirl (Lorena Marquez)	Latina
Tarantula (Maria Vasquez)	Latina
Scream (Donna Diego)	Latina
Mystique (Raven Darkholme)	Caucasian/Bisexual
Rogue (Anna Marie LeBeau)	Caucasian/Married
Acrata (Andrea Rojas)	Latina

Spectrum/Captain Marvel (Monica Rambeau)	African American/College and Police Academy graduate/Human Mutate
Thunder (Anissa Pierce)	African American/Lesbian
Silhouette Chord (Silhouette)	African American/Paraplegic
Crimson Avenger (Jill Carlyle)	African American/Former Lawyer
Skyrocket (Celia Forrestal)	African American/Former Navy Aviator
Ladyhawk (Twin Sisters: Regina & Rosetta Morgan)	African American/Paralyzed (Rosetta)
Chalice (Charlie Young)	Transgender Superheroine/Addresses Gender Dysphoria
Coagula (Kate Godwin)	Queer Transsexual Woman
Domino (Neena Thurman)	Caucasian/Widowed/Mutant
White Tiger (Ava Ayala)	Latina/Family was murdered/Human Mutate
Lady Deathstrike (Ana Cortes)	Latina (Colombian)/Human Cyborg/CEO of the Cortés Syndicate
Slinghot (Yo-Yo Rodriguez)	Latina (Puerto Rican)/Prosthetic Arms
Lightning (Jennifer Pierce)	African American
Spider-Gwen (Gwen Stacy)	Caucasian
Wave (Pearl Pangan)	Filipina/Human Mutate
Atom Eve (Samantha Eve Wilkins)	Caucasian/Genetically engineered weapon for the government
Valkyrie (Brunnhilde)	Caucasian
Thor (Jane Foster)	Caucasian
Gamora Zen Whoberi Ben Titan	Alien: Zen-Whoberis
Nebula	Alien: Luphomoid
Psylocke (Elizabeth "Betsy" Braddock)	European (English)/Human Mutant
Phantom Lady	Caucasian
The Magdalena	Hispanic (Spanish Descent)/Warrior for the Roman Catholic Church
Madame Mirage	Caucasian
La Lunatica	Hispanic (Spanish Descent)
Nubia (Wonder Woman)	African American/Diana Prince's sister
Philippus	African American/Amazonian General
Iron Heart (Riri Williams)	African American/Teenager
Moon Girl (Lunella Lafayette)	African American/9 years old
Ngozi (Black Panther/Venom)	Nigerian/Paralyzed
Risqué (Gloria Dolores Muñoz)	African American and Latina/Human Mutant
Solstice (Kiran Singh)	Asian (India)

Vampirella	Vampire
Empowered (Elissa Megan Powers)	Caucasian/Heterosexual/Suffers from low self-esteem/ Has an active sex life
Naomi (Naomi McDuffie)	African American/Adopted/Biological parents are from outer space, as is her adoptive father
Green Lantern (Sojourner "Jo" Mullein)	African American/Bisexual/Human tasked with protecting civilians of the City Enduring, which is in outer space

APPENDIX B: List of Comic Books included in this Study (Publication Dates, Authors/Illustrators, etc.)

Character Name	# of Comics Read	Publication Year	Writer/Illustrators
Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers)	6	2014	Kelly Sue DeConnick and David Lopez
in The New Avengers #38 (briefly as Ms. Marvel)	0	2008	Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Gaydos
in Jessica Jones in Blind Spot #2 and Purple Daughter #1	0	2018	Kelly Thompson and Mattia De Iulis
in Ms. Marvel #18	0	2014	G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona & Ian Herring
*Ms. Marvel Team-Up**	2	2+C12019	Clint McElroy and Ig Guara
Batwoman (Kate Kane)	6	2009	Greg Rucka and J.H. Williams III
in "Go"	3	2009-2010	Greg Rucka and J.H. Williams III
in "Cuttter"	3	2010	Greg Rucka and J.H. Williams III
Miss America (America Chavez)	1	2017	Gabby Rivera and Joe Quinones
	1	2017	Gabby Rivera and Joe Quinones with Ming Doyle
	1	2017	Gabby Rivera and Joe Quinones with Ming Doyle
	1	2017	Gabby Rivera and Joe Quinones with Stacey Lee
features Kate Bishop, a.k.a. Hawkeye	2	2017	Gabby Rivera, Kelly Thompson, and Ramon Villalobos
	1	2017	Gabby Rivera and Jen Bartel (1-4), Annie Wu (5-9), Ming Doyle (10-14), Aud Koch (15-19), and Joe Quinones with Joe Rivera (20)
Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan)	5	2014	G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona & Ian Herring

features Wolverine	2	2014	G. Willow Wilson and Jacob Wyatt & Ian Herring
features Captain Marvel	1	2014	G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona & Ian Herring
	1	2014	G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona & Ian Herring
	1	2017	G. Willow Wilson and Takeshi Miyazawa (pgs. 1-21) & Mirka Andolfo (pgs. 21 - 30)
	1	2017	G. Willow Wilson and Mirka Andolfo
	1	2017	G. Willow Wilson and Takeshi Miyazawa
	1	2019	G. Willow Wilson, Devin Grayson, Eve Ewing, Jim Zub, & Saladin Ahmed (Writers) Nico Leon, Takeshi Miyazawa, Joey Vazquez, Kevin Libranda, Minkyu Jung, Ian Herring (Illustrators)
*Captain Marvel Team-Up	0	2019	Clint McElroy and Ig Guara
Green Lantern (Sojourner "Jo" Mullein)	5	2020	N.K. Jemisin and Jamal Campbell
Naomi (Naomi McDuffie)	6	2019	Brian Michael Bendis & David F. Walker and Jamal Campbell
Moon Girl (Lunella Lafayette)	1	2015	Brandon Montclare & Amy Reeder and Natacha Bustos & Tamra Bonvillain
	1	2015	Brandon Montclare & Amy Reeder and Natacha Bustos & Tamra Bonvillain
	1	2019	Brandon Montclare and Alitha E. Martinez & Tamra Bonvillain
	1	2019	Brandon Montclare and Alitha E. Martinez & Tamra Bonvillain
shown briefly in Miss America #2	0	2017	Gabby Rivera and Joe Quinones with Ming Doyle

Ironheart (Riri Williams)	1	2019	Eve L. Ewing and Kevin Libranda & Luciano Vecchio
	4	2019 - 2020	Eve L. Ewing and Luciano Vecchio
features Shuri, Silhouette, and Okoye	0	(#9-12)	
Jessica Jones	3	2016-2017	Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Gaydos & Matt Hollingsworth
	2	2018	Kelly Thompson and Mattia De Iulis
features Carole Danvers and Misty Knight	0	BS #2	Kelly Thompson and Mattia De Iulis
features She-Hulk (Jennifer S. Walters)	0	BS #6	Kelly Thompson and Marcio Takara & Rachelle Rosenberg
features Carole Danvers	2	PD #1	Chapter 1 & 2: Kelly Thompson and Mattia De Iulis
	2	PD #2	Chapter 3 & 4: Kelly Thompson and Mattia De Iulis
	2	PD#3	Chapter 5 & 6: Kelly Thompson and Mattia De Iulis, Filipe Andrade & Stephane Paitreau
in The New Avengers #38 (features Carole Danvers, Natasha Romanoff, Maya Lopez, and Jessica Drew)	1	2008	Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Gaydos
Echo/Ronin (Maya Lopez)	5	2003 - 2004	David Mack
in the New Avengers #11/12 as "Ronin"	2	2005	Brian Michael Bendis and David Finch
in the New Avengers #38	0	2008	Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Gaydos
in the New Avengers #39	1	2008	Brian Michael Bendis and David Mack
Silk (Cindy Moon)	1	2015	Robbie Thompson and Stacey Lee
	2	2015-2016	Robbie Thompson and Tana Ford
	1	2016	Robbie Thompson and Veronica Fish

	2	2016 - 2017	Robbie Thompson and Tana Ford
Katana (Tatsu Yamashiro)	2	2013	Ann Nocenti and Alex Sanchez
	1	2013	Ann Nocenti and Cliff Richards
	1	2014	Ann Nocenti and CrissCross & Cliff Richards
Zephyr (Faith Herbert)	4	2016	Jody Houser and Francis Portela & Marguerite Sauvage
featured in A&A: Adventures of Archer & Armstrong #5	1	2016	Rafer Roberts and Mike Norton
	1	2016 (#1)	Jody Houser and Pere Perez, Marguerite Sauvage & Colleen Doran
	3	2016 (#2-4)	Jody Houser and Pere Perez & Marguerite Sauvage
Empowered (Elissa Megan Powers)	36	Volume 1: Stories #1 - 36	Adam Warren
La Borinqueña (Marisol Rios De La Luz)	4	2016	Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez and Emilio Lopez, Will Rosado, Sabrina Cintron, & Eric Jimenez
Chalice (Charlie Young)	5	2016 - 2017 Volume 1: Issues #1 - 5	Paul Jenkins and Leila Leiz & Tamra Bonvillain
Total Number of Comics Read	**144**	2000 - 2020 Majority are from the last 10 years	In this study - Male-Male Duos > Female-Male or Female-Female 10 female writers: 13 male writers 16 female illustrators: 36 male illustrators

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APPENDIX C: List of Powers and Abilities

Character Name	Powers and Abilities
Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers)	Superhuman Strength, Superhuman Stamina, Superhuman Durability, Superhuman Agility, Superhuman Reflexes, Flight, Energy Manipulation, Energy Absorption, Photonic Blasts, Endurance, Cosmic Awareness, Immune to most toxins/poisons/disease, Trained in armed/unarmed combat
Batwoman (Kate Kane)	Extremely disciplined, Highly Skilled in Hand-to-hand combat, Martial Arts & Acrobatics, Gadgetry, Stealth, Forensics & Investigation, Interrogation & Intimidation Skills, Computer Hacking
Miss America (America Chavez)	Superhuman Strength/Speed, Flight, Power Stomp, Star Portal (Interdimensional Travel/Time Travel/Teleportation), Invulnerability (Bullet-proof skin), Bioluminescence, Hyper-Cosmic Awareness
Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan)	Polymorph Powers & Morphogenic Abilities (shapeshifting), Elongation, Accelerated Healing Factor, Size Alteration, Appearance Alteration, Bioluminescence, Superhuman Speed, Superhuman Strength
Green Lantern (Sojourner "Jo" Mullein)	Power Ring, Indomitable Will (ability to control impulses & emotions), Strong, Confident, Vulnerable, Emotional & Impulsive (when necessary), Has a translator that gives her the ability to understand alien language
Naomi (Naomi McDuffie)	Superhuman Strength, Superhuman Durability, Flight, Energy Projection, Energy Blast/Enhanced Strike
Moon Girl (Lunella Lafayette)	Genius Intelligence/Super Intellect/Skilled Inventor & Engineer, Gifted Hacker & Computer Programmer, Enhanced Strength, Neuralkinesis (Consciousness Transferal with Devil Dinosaur)
Ironheart (Riri Williams)	Armor (Flight, Durability, Speed, & Super-strength), Genius Intelligence, Skilled Inventor & Engineer,
Jessica Jones	Flight, Superhuman Strength, Healing Factor, Superhuman Durability, Telepathic Resistance
Echo/Ronin (Maya Lopez)	Deaf (relies heavily on her sight), Multilingual, Photographic Reflexes, Master Martial Artist/Acrobat, Dancer & Concert Level Pianist (Savant), Expert Marksman/Weapons Proficiency
Silk (Cindy Moon)	Eidetic Memory, Spider Physiology (Wall Crawling/Webbing Generation), Superhuman Strength, Superhuman Stamina, Superhuman Speed, Superhuman Reflexes (Silk-Sense), Superhuman Durability, Superhuman Agility/Equilibrium (Balance & Coordination)

Katana (Tatsu Yamashiro)	Martial Artist/Acrobat, Swordsmanship Skills (Samurai Training) - Soultaker Sword, Expert Marksman, Stealth, Agility, Speed
Zephyr (Faith Herbert)	Flight, Telekinesis, Companion Shield (allows her to hold/transport objects and people), Can Generate Wind Bursts, Force Field (shields/moves objects)
Empowered (Elissa Megan Powers)	Hypermembrane super suit: if damaged, weakens her powers (extreme damage, essentially renders her powerless); absorbs/deflects any potential damage ("bullet-proof" in the sense that it keeps her unharmed) and is capable of self-repair; protects Emp from injury, extreme temperatures, exposure to radiation, and keeps her body pressurized; the suit itself can ONLY works for Emp, Enhanced Strength, Invisibility (appears nude), Magnification & X-Ray Vision, Energy Discharges/Blasts
La Borinqueña (Marisol Rios De La Luz)	Flight, Superhuman Strength, Has the power to control storms/the wind/water, Teleportation
Chalice (Charlie Young)	Can Manipulate Gravity/Fly, Strength, Quantum Tunneling, Can sense other Alters (before they transition), Can separate into two entities

APPENDIX D: Findings – Occurrences of Themes (per Character/Superheroine)

Character Name	Intersecting Identities and Storylines (M vs. F Body Distinction)	Representation and the Construction of Femininity	Manifestations of Powers and Abilities	Sources of Empowerment	Negotiating Paternalism, Stereotypes, and Presumed Weakness	Experiences of Womanhood	Representation of Racial and Ethnic Communities
Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers)	X	X	X	X		X	
Batwoman (Kate Kane)	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Miss America (America Chavez)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Green Lantern (Sojourner "Jo" Mullein)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Naomi (Naomi McDuffie)	X	X	X	X		X	X
Moon Girl (Lunella Lafayette)	X		X	X	X	X	X

inclisIronheart (Riri Williams)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Jessica Jones	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Echo/Ronin (Maya Lopez)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Silk (Cindy Moon)	x	x	x	x		x	x
Katana (Tatsu Yamashiro)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Zephyr (Faith Herbert)	x	x	x	x		x	
Empowered (Elissa Megan Powers)	x	x	x	x	x	x	
La Borinqueña (Marisol Rios De La Luz)	x	x	x	x		x	x
Chalice (Charlie Young)	x	x	x	x	x	x	