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POWER STRUGGLE

An examination of race, gender, and power



Jayla Harris-Hardy



Introduction

The power dynamics that exist within the world today are reflected in the media people consume every day. Comic books especially take part in these social commentaries, whether intentional or not. These power dynamics combined with society norms and pressure tend to make life very difficult for the average black woman. These norms are examined in comics as illumination, representation, and rejection.

This zine will use the Marvel characters Storm and Misty Knight, and the DC characters Nubia and Amanda Waller to first compare how these characters with and without superhuman powers are all empowered in their own manners. Each character faces their own struggle that makes their path to self-empowerment that much harder.

Conclusion

Each character has faced or is facing something that delayed or halted their journey to success and empowerment. Nubia seems to never quite be able to match up to her white twin. Misty Knight lost an arm and her job. Storm battles the pressure of two different identities. Amanda Waller is constantly underestimated and disrespected.

Despite these factors, all four characters do wonderful things for representation, and all illuminate different problems that need be changed in the future.

The bossy black woman narrative only serves to further keep black women out of spaces that they so rightly occupy of their own merit. The trope exists to strike fear into black women wanting to take charge of anything in their lives, and punishes those that do. It is meant to force black women into submission, but Amanda Waller does no such thing. Despite the fact that her character does display some negative aspects, one wonderful thing is that writers never shy away from making sure she stays in charge.



FATPHOBIA SIDEBAR

Was is wrong for newer incarnations of the character to be drawn slender, despite the negative attributions of the original design?

YES.

NUBIA

Nubia was first introduced in 1973 (pre *Crisis on Infinite Earths*) as Wonder Woman's long lost twin sister, making her a direct counterpart to WW. Her backstory reveals that she was kidnapped shortly after her birth by the war god Mars and was thereafter under his mind control until Diana eventually saves her unbeknownst to their relation.



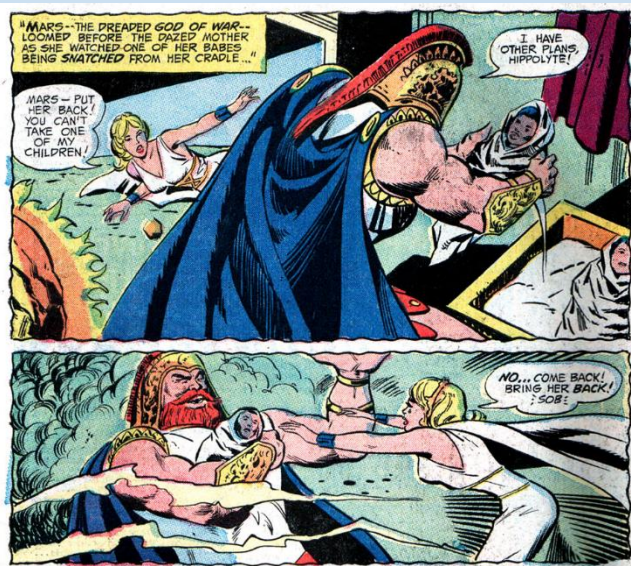
POWERS/ABILITIES:

- MAGIC SWORD
- CREATED BY MARS
- ABILITY TO GLIDE ON AIR CURRENTS
- SUPER STRENGTH
- ALL OTHER AMAZONIAN ABILITIES



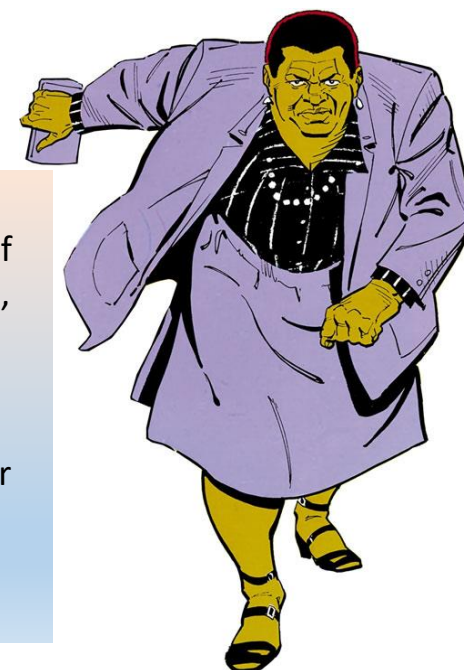
Why was only the black baby stolen? Why did writers feel that Nubia was undeserving of the same gifts that were bestowed to her twin?

Nubia is victimized immediately after her introduction, setting her apart as lesser than Diana, her white counterpart, who then later becomes her savior. She's also made out to be as worthy of the Wonder Woman title because the same gifts that were bestowed to Diana could not be offered to Nubia since this occurred after her kidnapping.



The bossy black woman trope is one that is used against Waller when she's trying to complete a task. The simple fact of the matter is that if Amanda Waller were a white man, he wouldn't be bossy. He would just be the boss.

Waller's original character design gave way to a sort of warped Mammy caricature, lacking only the warm and friendly demeanor. While the white creators who designed Waller's character had no ill intentions when crafting her, the image is there, nonetheless.



Other characters often call Amanda Waller “The Wall”, both a testament to her strength, stubbornness, and power, and a harmful commentary on her weight. Waller’s size is meant to be intimidating. Even for the context of the actual character, she doesn't want her body sexualized or objectified (like any human being really) and benefits from the intimidating aura of her visage.



It's important for young black girls who aren't as small as society may call for to see a fat black woman living a powerful life, and who even Batman is scared to cross. When media gives representation to those demographics that rarely have any it can give the consumer hope that they can be successful if they try to be.

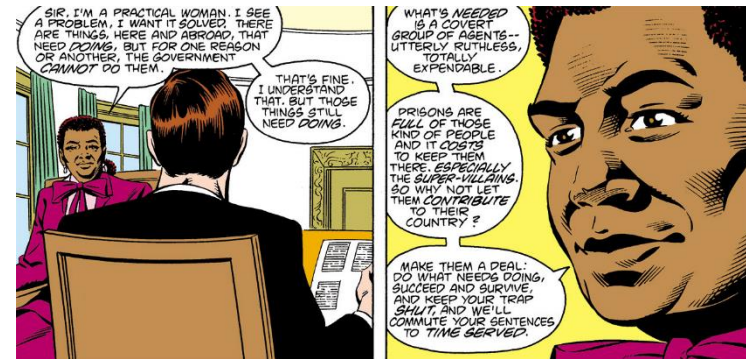


Despite the simple fact that Nubia is the same as Diana is almost every single way, she is the only one that calls herself Wonder Woman. She presides over a secret island of men, similar to Themyscira.

After the comic event *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was published in 1985, Nubia was one of many characters to be comics erased, and her story was reimagined. Post-*Crisis* Nu'bia was changed to be just another Amazon on Themyscira. She is still denied the title of Wonder Woman despite having won the "Tournament of Grace and Wonder" as Diana did apparently many years after her. Diana is Wonder Woman and Nu'bia is not.



In this new incarnation of the character also came with more special abilities and gifts that even Diana does not possess including: a special magic armor that allows her to travel between realms and the "Cold Sight" gifted from the Gorgons.



Amanda Waller is powerful because of the genuine influence she has over so much of her section of government, especially reforming the Suicide Squad. She's even more powerful because she practically willed herself to have such power after mourning so many senseless deaths in her life. No one gave her the power she has, and she knows it.



AMANDA WALLER

Amanda Waller is a force not to be reckoned with. Her character was first introduced in 1986 and hasn't stopped running things since. Waller got into politics after dangerous crime killed her two oldest children and husband. After studying for her degree in political science, she made her way through the US government as the toughest and smartest of the bunch. No one does anything before going through her.



ABILITIES:

- MILITARY TACTICIAN
- ESPIONAGE
- POLITICIAN
- PSYCHOLOGICAL MANIPULATION
- SKILLED WITH VARIOUS FIREARMS

Nubia's character is full of victimization from the moment she was born, and never quite earns the respect of being called Wonder Woman despite her equality to Diana. Her plight reflects that of too many black women who have already dealt with their own hardships and came out the other side whole. Black women are put down at every stage in their lives by a hateful society, like Nubia, and survive it just to work twice as hard for half the amount of advantages and respect as white women.



RACISM SIDEBAR

How much more racist is her name after being changed from Nubia to Nu'bia? Take a moment and discuss!

*(The answer is **a lot** more!)*

MISTY KNIGHT

Mercedes “Misty” Knight kicked into her first appearance in 1975 leaving readers wanting more. Introduced as a former NYPD officer who lost an arm in a bomb explosion, her bionic arm helps her continue fighting crime NYC as a private investigator and hero for hire.



Storm's character is constantly at odds with her African and American identities and expectations. This imbalance is so common for black people in America, especially in a society where vividly expressing blackness is still not incredibly safe. Expressing blackness is not always safe in the workplace, for instance. Some racist enough employers will reject an applicant for ethnic hairstyles, fashion, or names just for the existence of it. She embodies the struggles of embracing culture and total assimilation.

RACISM SIDEBAR

How much of African and/or black culture should be accepted by mainstream society?

*The answer is **all** of it! All. Of. It.*



On multiple occasions that Storm loses her powers and more than one of them has been at the fault of a male character. Men genuinely make her lose her powers, and therefore, a large portion of her identity.

(The instance below would be when her current love interest, a fellow mutant, is the mastermind behind the weapon that was used to take away her powers.)



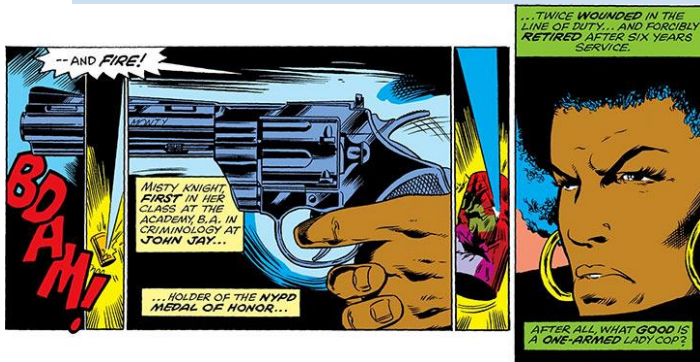
The loss of Storm's powers because of men, and essentially colonialism, perfectly describes the loss of symbolic power black women face while trying to achieve their endeavors. Society has a hard time being okay with women in positions of power, let alone black women. Such power is constantly being tugged back and forth by the people (usually white men) who will not accept even the thought of a powerful black woman.



Towards the beginning of her character, her bionic arm is not so clearly a prosthetic to other characters or to readers. As the comic progress there comes a drastic change to the shiny bionic prosthetic a reader would see today. This was an important shift in the means of representation. It meant that anyone and everyone would see that she is an amputee. It's so vital not only to have this representation in media, but to also not shy away from it in a horrible attempt to hide what was already revealed.



Of course, life isn't perfect either because Knight managed to get a really good prosthetic arm. Readers also see a bit of Misty Knight's feelings about having to leave the police force due to her amputee status. Unfortunately, ableist discrimination happens so much, especially in the workplace, and many people would have the same feelings of sadness and anger that Knight feels.



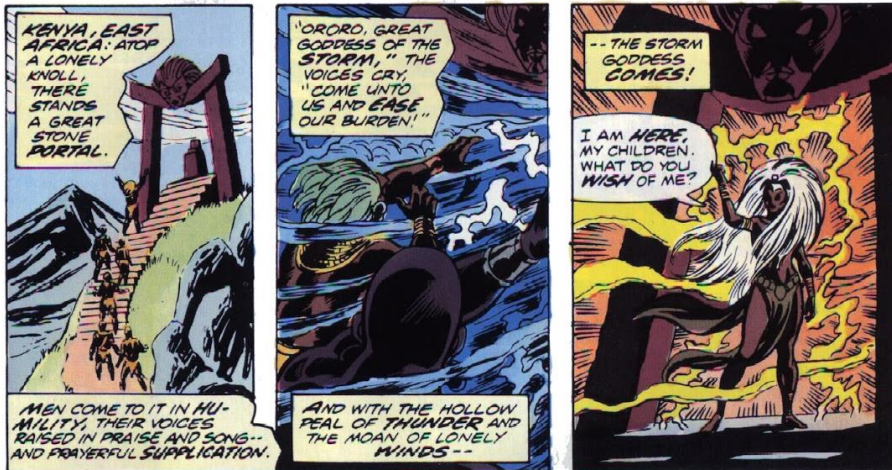
Another important factor in good representation is noting that not everything is perfect. No one is as perfect as their brightly colored personas would have a reader believe and mistakes do happen. Mistakes like Knight not getting a live bomb away from her fast enough, or her bionic arm exploding still attached to her body. Malfunctions happen to normal, everyday prosthetics, and even though Knight's was on a whole other degree, it was still a very normalizing moment.



Storm is constantly battling between the goddess narrative that she is so accustomed to in Africa and the mutant narrative once she reaches western cultures. She's vilified in the west for what made her worthy of worship at home.



The first glimpse of Storm readers have is of her almost completely naked with her hair coincidentally covering the NC-17 bits and being worshipped in the wild by its native people. Her sexuality it extremely exploited in every nearly every frame her adult story before becoming an X-Man (X-Woman?) These frames directly tell the idea that Storm, and everything about her community is uncivilized compared to her later time with the X-Men where she's forced to don a full costume. (Full for a female character, that is. It is still revealing.)



Much of the inspiration behind Misty Knight's character was blaxploitation films, which were very popular at the time.



Her attitude towards crime-fighting and her eagerness to continue with that work after her accident are ideals common in blaxploitation films, as was her initial character design based directly off of several well-known protagonists of the time.

Misty Knight never defines herself by her disability. True, not everyone has rich benefactors making things a little easier for us, but she should still stand as solid representation of disabled black women. She shows that success, quality of life, and freedom are still accessible to her. Despite her roots in blaxploitation, Misty Knight is a great example of a powerful black woman by overcoming her struggles and making them work for her.



ABLEISM SIDEBAR

STORM

While the inspiration for Storm, aka Ororo Monroe, was lackluster, if not completely nonexistent, it did not stop her character from becoming one of, if not the most, powerful character of the Marvel Universe. First appearing in *Giant-Size X-Men* in 1975 as the Kenyan goddess of the storm.

POWERS/ABILITIES:

- CONTROL OF ELEMENTS
- PSIONIC
- HEIGHTENED SENSES
- FLIGHT

