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The history of the relationship between power and control in the United States cultural and societal context infiltrates every institution present within the country today. As a result, the socialization of persons in a "Western" context has resulted in a (white) man-made original sin, negative biases against Black and Brown bodies, a sin which needs to be addressed to be defeated. Superhuman comics—as they are often traced back to a very particular U.S. origin—and the representations of marginalized persons they offer for visual media, are no exception to this nefarious infiltration. And in our consumption of these works, should be scrutinized from the perspective of the lowest populations represented. This zine will work to identify the phenomena of immense knowledge as a superhuman trait, discuss the cultural implications of giving Black Women physical prowess while addressing the racist archetypes of (white) histories passed, and offer up possibilities of futures-to-come which include character representation founded in intersectional feminism.

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Statement of Responsibility:

The author of this zine was a graduating senior in their undergraduate collegiate career when this was put together. The author identifies as a Non-Binary AMAB (assigned male at birth) person, who was born in the United States to parents who were also born in the United States, who came from a family who was lower-middle class, who spoke English as their first language, and who is white. While the author is continually working through the innate social biases that they have been taught, every opinion, idea, conjecture, that the author makes in this zine will in some way be influenced by these biases.

The purpose of this zine is to bring Black voices into the conversation on Black representation, while serving as a learning experience for the author as well, and at no point in this zine should the opinions of the author be held to a higher prestige than the opinions, thoughts, ideas, dreams, and understandings, of the Black voices highlighted within and which will exist outside of this zine.

The Treatment of Knowledge

It should be no surprise—when looking back on the history of the United States—to witness multiple conceptions of knowledge censorship and control. Whether the control of knowledge is through voter suppression and the elimination of personal opinion, executed by mob violence towards those sharing information deemed inappropriate, or performed in the deliberate sharing of misinformation.

Enter, the Super-Intelligent Black Woman:

Shuri, the little sister of T'Challa, first produced by Marvel in issue #3 of *Marvel Mangaverse* in Aug 2002. Her genius-level knowledge being a result of diligent study and her own human ability. (Note: the image to the right is from her 2018-2019 titular comic series.)



1



"Knowledge is power," is a phrase attributed to many—Thomas Jefferson and Sir Francis Bacon to name a couple. However, it isn't about who is saying it. Knowledge, and the accessibility of knowledge, is a fundamental building block in the arming of marginalized communities with the tools necessary to help create equity intersectionally amongst people in the United States, and in a larger global context as well.

Superhero comics offer an opportunity to showcase the intricacies of human ability and that not only are Black Women capable of being both intelligent and powerful, but that Black Women who are both intelligent and powerful do exist.

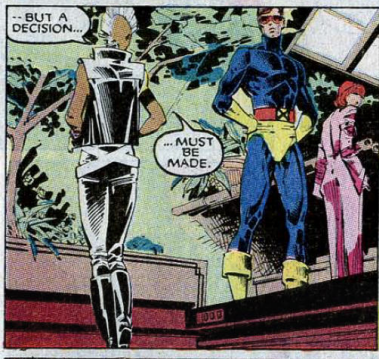
The future of representation within visual culture, is always about looking out for exactly what has been left out up until this point in time and finding the ways in which it can be accurately and equitably portrayed. We saw a development of Black Women represented visually through the introduction and evolution of characters like Livewire and Misty Knight—so the hope is that this development never ends.



2

Livewire, aka Amanda McKeen, first produced by Valiant Comics in *Harbinger* #15, in Mar. 1993. Livewire's abilities have varied since her initial publication—largely as a result of a production reboot which occurred in the 2010s. She has always been regarded as a highly intelligent hero, however, initially in her ability to adeptly lead and strategize, and later as a result of her technopath abilities to understand and interact with technology on a molecular level.

The desire to censor—or selectively allow the dissemination of—knowledge of any kind is seated directly in the understanding that someone's lack of the knowledge will result in a hierarchy of power. How widely known is it that while "Women's Suffrage" was passed in 1920, it wasn't until 1965 that Women of Color throughout the country were allowed to exercise their right to vote with the Voting Rights Act of 1965?³



⁴ Ororo Munroe in 1986 challenging Cyclops to a 1-on-1 duel for the title of leader of the X-Men, which she won.

Shared social knowledge of others is represented by and located in the ways that groups of people are represented in media. Preceding characters like Misty Knight and Ororo Munroe who appeared in the 1970s as powerful (both in human and inhuman contexts) strategists, adept fighters, and excellent leaders, there existed very concrete archetypes that mainstream culture classified Black Women within. Entirely racist, the four classifications of Black Women stripped them of agency within the written and visual cultures of the United States from before it existed well into the late twentieth century.

Bringing justice to the city's mean streets, bionic detective **MISTY KNIGHT** has reopened the underground mercenary agency *Heroes for Hire*. From her control room, Knight gets the word out to the right people at the right time, so they can do the right thing.

⁵ A panel from page four of *Heroes for Hire* vol. 3 no. 2, a series in which Misty Knight is the key strategist and HQ Controller for the third installment of the team *Heroes for Hire* in Marvel comics.

In comic book representation the audience is offered a unique look into the perceptions of how people are being visually recognized by the authors/artists/illustrators. In the early days of Black Women being represented in mainstream comics, with Misty Knight and then Ororo Munroe leading the helm of representation in the 70s, these were images of Black Women who were powerful justice-seekers.

Knight and Munroe also offered the audiences of the time two unique Black Women perspectives in terms of national origin—Knight being a natural-born U.S. citizen, and Munroe being born in the U.S. but having been raised and spent most of her life in Cairo, Egypt.

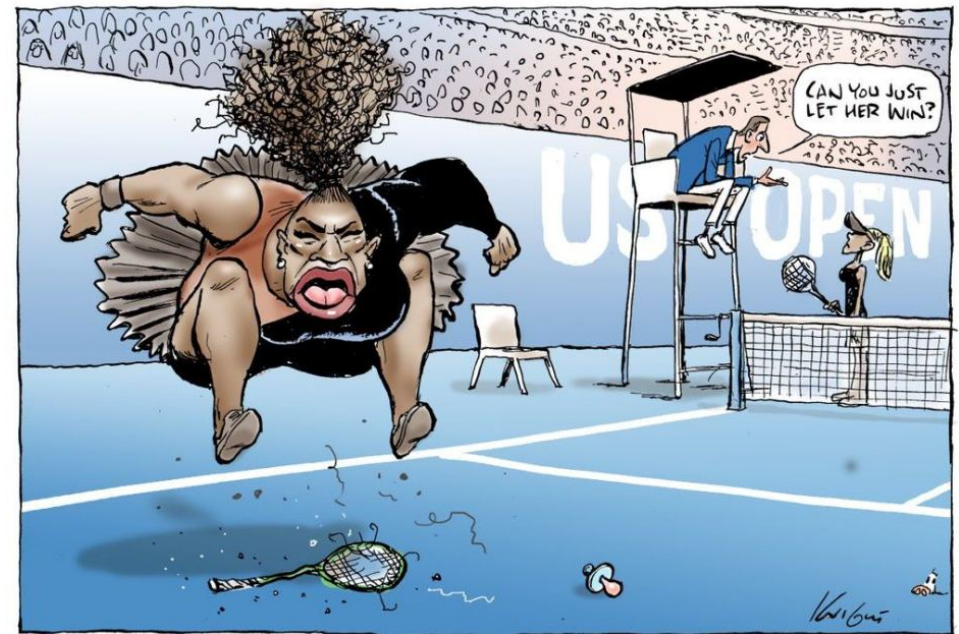
All of the intersections of their identities as Women, weave a narrative of early representation that was hard to match at the time. Yet still, all happening at a time when Blaxploitation—the showing of Black people predominantly in roles of heroism in visual media, while also expressing a disproportionate amount of racialized stereotypes—was developing in the United States.

For example:

Black Women are,

- In half of the country, likely to earn only “48 to 68 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men.”¹⁶
- Experiencing sexual violence such as rape at 22% while the rate for all women is slightly lower at 19%.¹⁷
- Experiencing intimate partner violence at 40% while the rate for all women is at 30%.¹⁷

The push then, to understand that the representation of individuals who hold multiple marginalized identities should be treated with extra care and intention, should be easy to understand. The experiences of Women vary due to the other points of marginalization in their lives.



⁶A cartoon published in The Herald Sun on Sept. 10th, 2018, by Australian cartoonist Mark Knight, in response to discourse regarding Serena Williams’s behavior during the US Open the same year. And as the London-based writer Tobi Oredein explained, “‘At the heart of ‘misogynoir’ — because it only affects black women — is a caricature of the angry, black woman,’ she said. ‘And it dehumanizes us, and it stops us showing emotion.’”⁷

The shift, then from racist depictions to uplifting representations of Black Women in Superhero comics, comes when knowledge and intelligence is actually not a trait or result of superhuman ability, but an aspect of their overall power as an agent for justice within her comic universe.



⁸Okoye, featured here in a panel from page 9 of volume 8 of Marvel's *Avengers*, in her introduction as the newly appointed Director of the Agents of Wakanda. A woman with no actual superpowers, yet still more than capable taking on the role of main strategist for the array of metahumans, superheroes, and warriors, that comprise the two teams she takes charge of.

Intersectional Representation

Feminism: "the radical notion that women are people."¹⁵

Intersectionality: The idea that as our personally held marginalized identities overlap throughout the course of our individual lifetimes, they create unique networks of marginalization and oppression for the people that experience them. With this lens, we look at Black Women as simultaneously experiencing marginalization as a Black person and as a Woman—and the information that we are able to then understand is staggering.



These five women—with a varied display of mutant, superhuman, and highly developed natural human abilities—display an interesting cross-section of the representation of Black Women, all centering their stories in their individual and diverse powers as both human beings and highly skilled Black Women. Subverting, and largely dismantling, the racist historic archetypes for Black Women in writing, in their treatment of Black Women with agency—who are encouraged to explore their agency.



Believing Black Women

According to a report published by the Georgetown Law Center, in the United States, adults viewed "Black Girls as less innocent and feminine than all other girls."⁹ So much so, that in 2012 officers in New York City, apprehended and handcuffed a fifteen year-old Black Girl for using a student metrocard—which the officers believed she was too old to be using, despite the age limit being at 19.

The issue, entirely being that this example isn't an isolated incident. Reported on by the Washington Post in July of 2019, it was found that in the United States African American patients reporting pain to their doctors were 22% less likely to receive pain medication--and the rate shot up when the pain was less apparent or invisible to the human eye. Why, might you ask? Well, digging deeper it could be for numerous reasons. The Post listed both the fact that 72% of doctors in the U.S. are white, and that half of the medical students who were surveyed in 2016 for a study on racial biases subscribed to at least one false (racist) ideology relating to racial differences in pain reception.¹⁰

Belief in Black Women then extends to and passed their ability to lead and command. Nobody questioned the racist stereotype that Black Women have a tendency to be loud or controlling when designing the characters which had the opportunity to propel visual representation into the next era—however, in the case of Livewire, and even more specifically in her treatment of the team Secret Weapons, were matched power with compassion. Two attributes which historically have not been represented in the same Black Woman often.

As seen on the page before, Amanda Mckee, Livewire, is using her ability for research and surveillance ultimately using it to send help to a psiot in need. But the development of her team Secret Weapons is founded in her sincere compassion for these misunderstood, and intersectionally marginalized individuals. Their belief in her as their commander, as well as their trust in her as a caretaker, lays the groundwork for conversation on the next set of representational frameworks for Black Women.



13

14



11



11

The disbelief of Black Women is far reaching, and takes no prisoners. Which, in the end, is why the representation that Storm, Misty Knight, Okoye, Livewire, and Shuri, offer as intelligent Black Women who are leaders in their communities is so important.

There is no second guessing of the commander, in a militaristic sense of leadership. When Storm seeks to take over the helm of the X-Men, she challenges Cyclops (the existing Headmaster) to combat in the training simulator as a way to determine leadership and she rightfully wins her crown without the use of her ability to control atmospheric pressure/weather. In Livewire's lifetime, she has been at the helm of multiple teams of superheroes, going so far as to work towards the eventual goal of bringing in the most obscured and hidden away people into the light of super-heroism.

These women, their leadership, the inability to disbelieve them, they offer representation which isn't refutable—a solid fact of the matter, which says, "Black Women can be right."

