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Black Femininity



By Adelyn Pyatte

In Comics



Editorial Note

After exploring five black female characters of different time periods and conceptions, we can see that there are many commonalities in the way black femininity is and has been portrayed by the world of comics. Specifically in action-based comics, we see strong-willed black women with hard exteriors. They are portrayed as “dramatic”, “sassy”, or “angry”, and the range of personalities do not stray far from those traits. The one-dimensional personality in addition to the objectification of their bodies, big lips, large breasts and small waists have projected a very shallow view of African American women for readers and fans. The other issue of promiscuity, mostly represented by The Walking Dead’s Michonne, can be dated back to the “Jezebel” stereotype used during slavery. Michonne is quite literally representing a modern-day jezebel in the comics, calling for hate for her character among fans. The fact that all of these characters were created by white males suggests that these characters could maybe never be a genuine representation of their culture anyway. Sure, maybe writers are entitled to create whatever character they want in whatever way they want, but when it comes to misrepresenting an entire group to thousands of readers, there are going to be problems. If Kirkman wanted to create a character to get the readers going, he maybe should have chosen that of a different race and gender. Yes, it is impossible to make everyone happy, but to create a black female character than fans claim is a “whore”, a “gimmick” and has a terrible personality was probably not the best choice to misrepresent an entire group of people to both children and adults.

Editorial



Black Femininity in Comics

Challenging stereotypes or encouraging them?

A major step was taken when African American women were put into action-role comics, representing one of the most overlooked groups in America. But have these depictions been helpful or hurtful? Many critics of black superheroines in comics have argued that these characters have been consistently portrayed as one-dimensional, hyper-sexual and overly aggressive.



How are black women misrepresented and why?

Global Opinions Editor Karen Attiah of The Washington Post suggests that white comic writers could be the root of misrepresentation. In her article “Marvels Comics’ Storm and the rise of African American women in American Pop Culture”, she expresses her concern for the writers’ ability to portray Storm in a way that black women and girls can relate to. She argues that the writers’ ideas about sexuality play into stereotypes that black women are “sassy” or “drama queens”.



Shuri



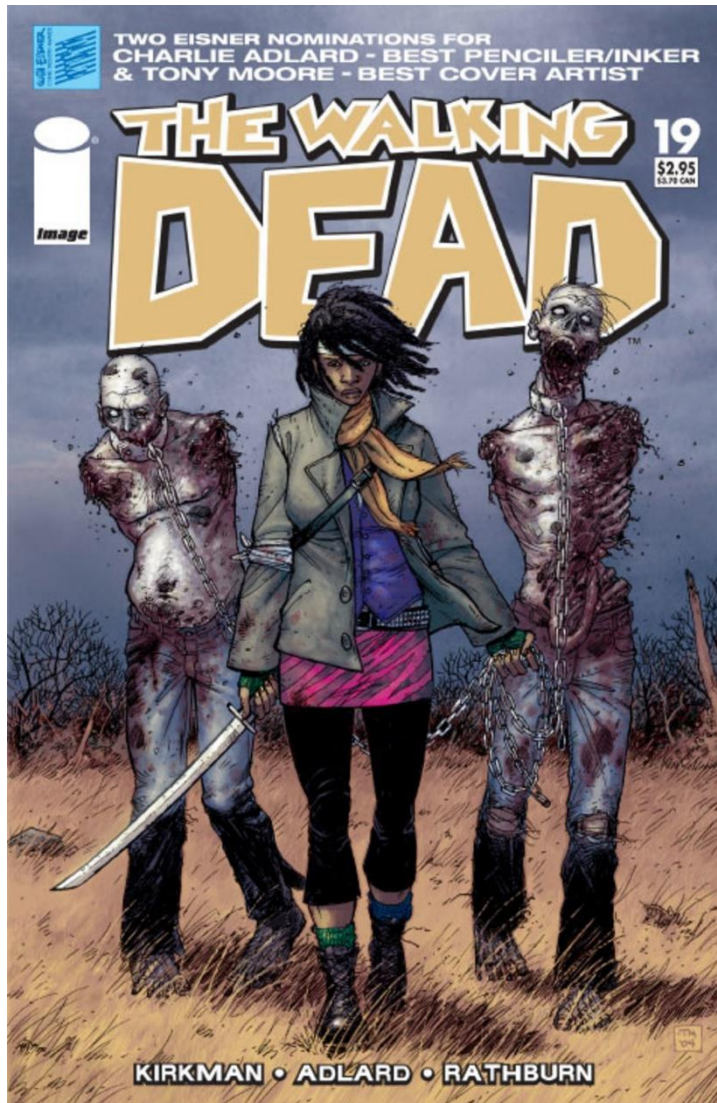
- Supporting character in Black Panther
- Princess of Wakanda
- Leader of the Wakanda Design Group
- An innovator responsible for creating the current generation “Panther Habits”

Shuri is possibly one of the most progressive black female characters. She is an integral part of Wakanda, holding many responsibilities and leadership roles. Although we see her to still be fairly sexualized in the comics, we see her sexuality become quite toned down in the 2018 live-action film “Black Panther” in terms of her wardrobe.



Michonne Hawthorne

of the Walking Dead



Shuri

Of Black Panther



Vixen

Vixen is a successful fashion icon, talk show host, animal activist and superhero who is able to channel the powers of any animal that has walked or evolved on Earth through the mystical object given to her ancestor by the god Anansi called the Tantu totem.



Vixen was another result of Blaxploitation, created for her own original series. She was to be the first African female to appear in her own original series, but the series was cancelled, never to be released in 1978.

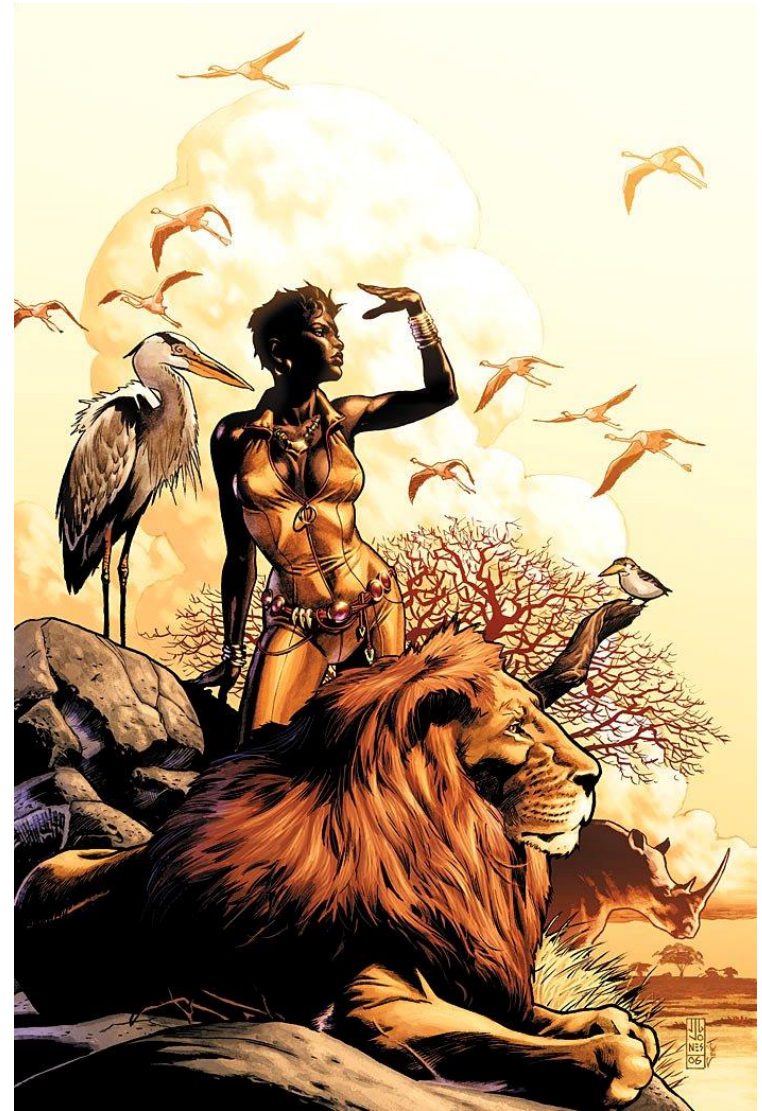
The issues with Vixen are similar to the other black female characters we have explored. We are once again focusing on her appearance. Her career and success as a model is contributed directly to her looks. Not to mention, like most of the other black female superheroes, her breasts are very obviously large and busting out of her clothes, along with a small waist and large rear.

- First appeared in issue #19 in 2005
- Has the most appearances of any living female character in the comic book
- Was created by a white writer, Robert Kirkman
- Viewed as being a “badass”
- Great fighting skills

How does Michonne's character challenge stereotypes?

- Was a successful lawyer with two daughters before the virus broke out
- Lived in a suburban, middle-class home, practiced weight-lifting and followed football.
- Writer of The Walking Dead, Robert Kirkman mentioned in the Letter Hacks of #49 that Michonne is the strongest character in the comic book.

Vixen



Rocket

Rocket, a sidekick to superhero Icon, was the first **teenage mother** to make an appearance in DC comics in 1993. Rocket also fellow hero Flashback overcome an **addiction to crack cocaine**.



Despite the fact that Rocket challenges the stereotype of women being weak and in non-action roles, her character encourages other problematic stereotypes for black femininity. Her teenage mother status encourages the idea that black women are more commonly teenage mothers than white women. The fact that her name is even linked to a “crack cocaine” addiction is problematic for the stereotype surrounding the black community and crack cocaine or illicit drugs in general. Even in this drawing of her, she is drawn a very sexualized being. Her breasts are basically falling out of her jacket, making them the first thing you look at when you look at her. The objectification here certainly does not seem necessary for comic about superheroes and justice.

How does Michonne’s character perpetuate stereotypes?

- Hard exterior, but hyper-emotional
- Is portrayed as being “promiscuous”, having the most relationships than any other character in the series.
- actually steals a character’s boyfriend (a former NFL player) by performing oral sex on him
- Many sex scenes in the series
- Fans argue Michonne’s character is a “gimmick” with no personality, sleeping with every character that shortly dies afterwards.
- Called a “whore” by fans



This panel shows the scene where Michonne proceeds to perform oral sex on Tyreese, a former NFL player who is already in a relationship with his girlfriend Carol. In the scene, Carol catches them in this act. Carol and Tyreese break up and Tyreese and Michonne become a couple. Carol later commits suicide as a result. This panel paints her as being promiscuous and a “home-wrecker”, causing drama in the series. It is understandable here why fans do not appreciate her character.

Rocket



STORM

- Heir to her royal family, their kingdom residing in the Great Valley Rift of Africa
- Real name is Ororo
- Parents were killed in Cairo, Egypt in an Arab-Israeli conflict
- An orphan who was forced to live in the streets and be well-versed in thievery and combat



First appearing in the 1970s at the height of blaxploitation, Storm has always been a supporting role in the X-Men. Although she was finally given her own solo series in 2014. Even with this cover, we can immediately see that her body has been oversexualized, putting emphasis on her lips, breasts, and small waist.



This scene shows the first time that Michonne and Morgan have sex. Morgan is still upset about his dead wife. Morgan is bitten shortly after they become a couple. Here, it is interesting to notice that while both characters are naked, Michonne's body is the one we see drawn.

Why is Michonne's character problematic for the representation of black women?

After researching fan responses on Comic Fandom, it is no secret that most fans of the comic hate Michonne. Why is this problematic? Many characters in books and comic books alike are hated for various reasons. The reason it is problematic because unlike a white male, black females have been extremely under-represented in all aspects of life, not just comics. For Kirkman to create her as the character she is, an overly aggressive jezebel stereotype has created even more problems for the way black women are portrayed in the media.

Black Women in Action Roles

STORM

