

Christian M. Hines

“I Was Never Meant to Fly”: Exploring the Visual Narratives of Black Girls in Marvel Comics

Introduction

I believe in the power of a story. Tales that define us, that show us who we are, who we aren't, and who we could possibly be. Stories can shape opinions; they can reinforce stereotypes and biases, or they can shatter them and showcase a world never previously imagined, “stories sustain us through oppression, transmit our ancient and precious traditions through all kinds of adversity... stories that move beyond the shadows to become known across the world are always connected to power, positioning, and privilege” (Thomas, 2020, p.2). Stories, reading, writing, creating, and telling are a way of life for me. They are how I make sense of the world around me and how I grow my connection to others. Reading was a way for me to make sense of the world and understand how to navigate it. But one thing I didn't see much of while growing up where characters who looked like me. I understand as a Black woman that it is important for students to see themselves reflected in literature (Thomas, 2019). As an educator putting books in the hands of my students has been some of my greatest moments of joy. Books that reflect them and their lived experiences. Books that allow them to explore new worlds both real and imagined. I am passionate about stories, and I am passionate about students reading stories. Specifically visual stories through the medium of comics and graphic novels.

Graphic novels and comics help to formulate adolescent concepts and constructions of normalcy and acceptability within modern society (Short, 2019), and the ways students make sense of how they navigate their everyday lived experiences. Teaching superhero narratives within comics with a critical lens can challenge racist ideologies that often marginalize students' voices in school. When people of color are introduced in comics, they are generally stereotyped

and lack nuance, they become "tokenized" (Hosein & Clement, 2017). One character of color can become the one point of reference for diversity in comics. Black girl characters are repeatedly neglected, adultified, and written as one-dimensional compared to their male and white counterparts. (Edwards, 2016). Using comics in the classroom to explore intersections of race, class, gender, etc., via a diverse set of characters, illustrates visual representations for youth of color and allows them to examine their world and sociopolitical meanings as they move through panels. A new trend of Marvel comics introduced in 2011 and beyond, included a younger and more diverse cast to appeal to a wide range of readers (Hosein & Clement, 2017). Notably this was the inclusion of Miles Morales, as *Spiderman*, Kamala Khan as *Ms. Marvel* and Riri Williams as *Ironheart*. These stories can be utilized to create discourse on the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, religion, etc., and how those identities navigate "living in a racialized society" (Kirkpatrick & Scott, 2015, p.120). There is a broadening collection of research that interrogates race and positionality within Marvel comics and young adult novels. Works that cover visualizations of the intersections of gender, race, and queerness in Latinx characters such as America Chavez (Jiménez, 2018), and depictions of religion in *Ms. Marvel* (Gill, 2016), bringing into focus that the characters of color are examined under a lens that reflects their cultural heritage and racialized identities while still grappling with everyday issues of adolescence. Heroes of color have to work against a duality of systemic oppression such as "racism and white supremacy" (Torres, 2019, p.166), while they carry the weight of their superpowers and being racialized within their superhero mantles.

Within this study I analyze three collection of comics *Ironheart: Meant to Fly* by Eve Ewing, *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur: The Beginning* by Amy Reeder and Brandon Montclare, and *Shuri: Wakanda Forever* by Nnedi Okorafor that situate Black girls as dynamic and multi-

layered, using two frameworks: Black Girl Literacies (Muhammad and Haddix, 2016) and Critical Race Content Analysis (Perez Huber et al., 2020). I interrogate the use of visual and textual representations to engage readers in viewing the complexities of Black girls' ways of being and knowing. I also advocate for educators to think critically about the way we can center stories of Black girls in comics and their uses in the classroom as counternarratives to combat anti-Blackness. My study revolved around the research questions of:

1. How do writers and/or illustrators [of color] represent the heterogeneity of Black girls in Marvel comics?
2. How does the positionality of these specific Marvel characters recognize, honor, and/or problematize representations of Black girls?
3. How can visual texts highlight and provide insights into Black girlhood?

Frameworks

The Black Girl Literacies (BGL) framework as compiled by Muhammad and Haddix (2016) established that BGL are multiple, tied to identities, historical, collaborative, intellectual, and political/critical, these components make the various ways of knowing for Black Girls. This framework along can be used as a pedagogical tool for how teachers approach various types of texts that can honor and affirm Blackness and Black girlhood in the classroom. This situates a pedagogy that is rooted in being culturally relevant and sustaining (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014) and focuses it specifically on the needs of Black girls and ultimately Black youth as a whole. It can ground educators in the understanding of how important text selection is in not replicating harmful stereotypes about Black girls and women. What is read impacts what is thought and perceived about self in relation to the world around societal contexts. Muhammad and Haddix state that “text selection play[s] a critical role in literacy development among African

Americans historically and as the impetus to their genius” (p. 327). Literature that speaks to the lived experience of Black girls and helps to uplift how they engage with literacy within the classroom is important, Black girls need these spaces to exist to provide more opportunities for literacy learning ways of being (Price-Dennis et al., 2017). Moreover, research affirms that literacy, learning, and meaning making are indeed communal for Black girls (Toliver, 2020). There is a need to see more stories featuring Black girlhood in the mainstream curriculum, as those stories are usually pushed to the margins (hooks, 2014) or not amplified at all.

Critical Race Content Analysis as Method of Analysis. Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars explicate that race does and always will matter (Bowman et al., 2009). CRT was developed around the thesis that race is a social construct that is prevalent in everyday society. CRT in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) focuses on how race, racism, and oppression was undertheorized in educational contexts. CRT makes use of the ways stories are told and counter storytelling to challenge ideologies about people of color that are universally held by the dominant majority, (Bowman et al, p. 36). analyzing how the intersectionality of race, culture, gender, etc. are interpreted within texts. Analyzing stories using the lens of Counter-storytelling via CRT centralizes how race is portrayed within narratives to examine if any stereotypes, omissions, and distortions appear within that particular story which allots for a critique of that narrative, “CRT values storytelling as a way in which people of color can communicate their stories based on their own experiences. Storytelling also serves to relate stories that the dominant culture does not often hear,” (Moeller & Becnel, 2018, p. 3).

Critical Content Analysis (CCA) of visual images (Short, 2019) looks at how power operates and is illustrated throughout visual text, Critical Race Content Analysis (CRCA)

examines how and provides a methodological framework for how to position CRT to strategically analyze texts. The tenets of CRCA according to Perez Huber et al. (2020), are:

1. Centralizing racism and intersecting forms of oppression in the storylines of books about People of Color.
2. Uncovering ideologies of white supremacy that underlie racist storylines and literacy practices.
3. Centralizing culturally authentic experiences of People of Color in texts/images.
4. Utilizing interdisciplinary knowledge to consider the socio-historical, cultural, political, and economic contexts of the text.
5. A commitment to social justice by challenging and transforming inequity in stories for children

CRCA can be used not only as a tool of analysis but to also cultivate students' racial literacies; the ways on which they study and respond to issues of race and representation (Huber et al., 2020).

Methods

I situated the use of CRCA and BGL as a method of analysis to highlight the ways teachers can use diverse superhero comic narratives to give prominence to BIPOC voices, literacies, and narratives to enhance the learning and literacy practices of students (specifically students of color) in the classroom. I also spotlight the use of comics and graphic novels that features Black girl characters as a tool to resist anti-Blackness in the classroom and as a mirror to reflect and refract the experiences of Black girls both real and fictional.

Text Selection

I selected three Marvel texts due to the popularity and crossover appeal of the Marvel Universe in books, movies, tv, etc. The comics selected also feature a Black girl hero with her own solo storyline where she is the main protagonist. I also center texts that were created or authored by and writer or illustrator of color. These particular comics also provided the foundation to draw on the BGL Framework for texts that represent Black girl literacies as multiple, tied to identity, historical, collaborative, intellectual, and political/critical.

Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur debuted in 2015 and centers on nine year old Lunella Lafayette a young genius who trying to find a way to control her superhero powers by way of her scientific creations. Ironheart featuring fifteen year old tech genius Riri Williams was also created in 2015. Riri is a young girl who admires Ironman and constructs her own Iron suit in her garage from pieces of scrap metal she collects throughout her hometown of Chicago. Shuri received her own solo comic in 2018. She the young sister of popular character Black Panther and is a young engineer working to make the African country of Wakanda more efficient and progressive in both technology and creating an institutional democracy outside of it's current monarchy leanings.

Data Analysis

I performed multiple close readings of texts using the lens of Critical Race Content Analysis (CRCA) to search for emerging themes that centered authentic experiences of Black girls, such as: working in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, working in the community, and constructs of identity development. The CRCA lens was also used to consider stereotypes, omissions, and distortions that appear within the context of a story in relation to Black girls (Moeller, 2018). Additional analysis included reading with the BGL

Framework to identify examples of literacies and meaning making that are illustrated not only within the characters but can also be used as practical applications within a classroom setting.

Findings

Black Girls in STEM

There is an underrepresentation of diversity and specifically Black girls in science, technology, engineering, and mechanics (STEM), which coincides with the stigma of girls in general not being socialized or seen as scientists (Collins et al, 2019). With the proper supports, mentoring and affirmation, Black girls can survive in STEM fields (Young et al., 2017). There is increasing research (King, 2018) on the roles educators can play in challenging these hegemonic practices and nurture the ingenuity of Black girls seeking to gain entry into this profession. The visual images (Figure 1) depict what one of the three heroines Lunella Lafayette looks like thriving within her respective self-constructed laboratory. Lunella who is far more advanced than her teacher and peers, creates her own science lab beneath her school. Lunella created her own safe heave, a respite where she can flex her intellectual muscles and push herself beyond the traditional confines of her classroom. Within each story each one of the main characters grapples with what happens when your environment is only created for you to survive and not thrive.

Riri, Lunella, and Shuri are super geniuses. They excel well beyond a super power. Their initial power is their intellect. They are scientists and engineers by design, highly gifted and lean into multimodal, tactile ways of learning. They create and develop new structures and technologies to enhance the livelihood of the world around them. They are consistently challenged and dismissed by the adults around them, yet they continue to defy assumptions about girls in STEM and Black culture in general. For the most part they are underestimated and

undervalued by the adults in their lives. They sustain their learning on their own and by their own terms.

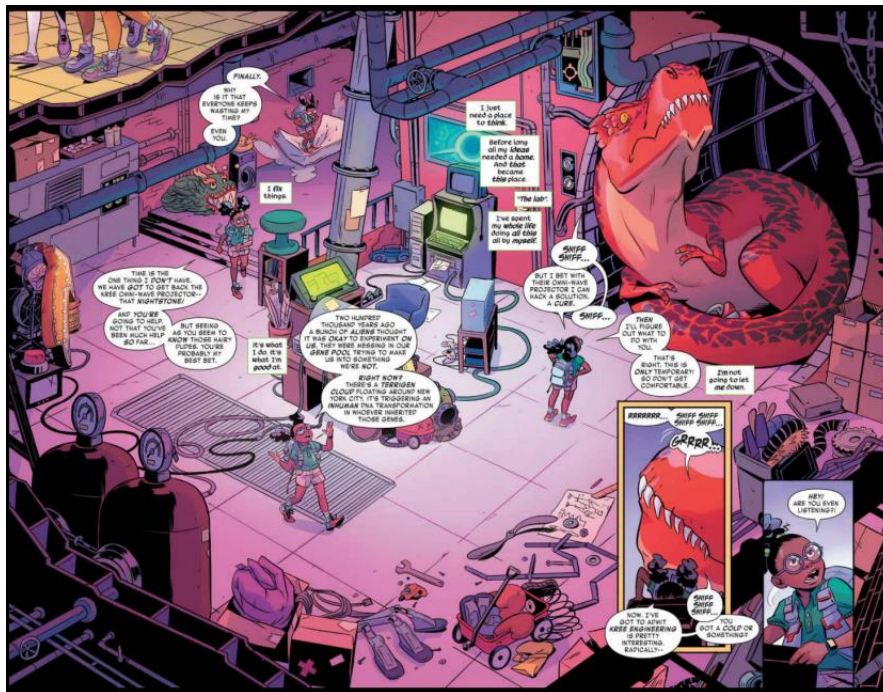


Figure 1. *Moon Girl and*

Devil Dinosaur #3 (2015) by Amy Reeder and Brandon Montclare ©Marvel. All rights reserved.

Community Heroism

For each girl being a superhero is more than just saving the day (Figure 2). They understand that true sustainable heroics in marginalized communities comes in the form of nurturing and aiding in the day-to-day dynamics of their local communities; Riri creates a hands-on learning lab where local kids can come to hang out and develop educational/vocational skills. Lunella begins policing her neighborhood to help lower crime rates. She pushes back on other superheroes causing damage via their heroics but leaving the locals to clean up their mess (Figure 3). Shuri holds the entire history of her nation in her mind. She uses her knowledge and skills to create safeguards around her nation and create a collective modern democracy.



Figure 2. Image from *Ironheart* #9 (2019) by Eve Ewing

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Figure 3. Image from *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* #7 (2015) by Amy Reeder and Brandon Montclare

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Identity

Riri, Lunella, and Shuri define themselves for themselves. They understand that they are more than the societal constraints that are placed on them as Black girls. They continuously disrupt biases, push boundaries, and strive for greatness while still going through the rites of passage of adolescence. Their identity and their literacies are tied to who they are as young Black girls, but they are also collaborative efforts because they characters understand they need community and representation in order to sustain and thrive (Figure 4). Each character “crosses over” or guest stars in the others storyline. Often to aid in assisting on a mission and to add validation and support for what they know they are all trying to accomplish. Even at a young age they understand that they often have to be their own champions, but they collectively come together as a sisterhood to support each other. Their ways of knowing and being disrupt the adultification (Morris, 2007;2018) of Black girls that often portrays them as, angry, volatile, self-serving, and more prone to carceral and punitive punishments.



Figure 4. Image from *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* #15

2015 by Amy Reeder and Brandon Montclare ©Marvel. All rights reserved.



Figure 5. Image from Ironheart #9 2019 by Eve

Ewing ©Marvel. All rights reserved.

Conclusions

Black girls deserved to be represented in their curriculum, literature, and beyond. Educators can work intentionally and strategically to honor and affirm the Black girls they will inevitably come in contact with. Black girls are often the victims of erasure. The representation of Black girls within superhero narratives can be utilized to teach about power, race, class, gender, and privilege. Research indicates that superhero comics are valuable in facilitating critical conversations about gender and power within English classrooms (Dallacqua & Low, 2019). Black girls and all students deserve to read literature that gives them a multitude of Black girls' perspectives. Educators can position these texts as ways to disrupt racialized hegemonic practices within schooling spaces.

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