Graphic Agency: The Powers of Heroines

Nina Mickwitz

Abstract

This article considers a selection of contemporary U.S. comics featuring young female Black protagonists, written and drawn by Black female creators, and the particular resources for fandom extended by this combination. Taken as a loose grouping, these comics demand attention to issues of textual representation and the creative industries contexts alike, and highlight questions pertaining to both race and gender. Framed by the #BlackGirlMagic online phenomenon and located in a broader popular cultural context, including the 2018 blockbuster movie release of *Black Panther*, the discussion adopts a tri-part approach. First, it will involve attention to the central characters, bringing into view transpacific popular culture influences, certain aspects of the superhero genre, and affinities with Black feminist speculative fiction. Following these textual concerns, attention turns to creators and, after that, to considerations related to readerships and reception. The article posits that these comics perform a re-visioning that challenges dominant representational repertoires. Moreover, they contest entrenched racialized and gendered assumptions regarding comics creators and readerships.

Key Words: comics heroines; Black girl magic; creators; fandoms; cultural imaginaries

Introduction

While Marvel and DC respond to a demand for increased diversity in multiverses historically dominated by White male power fantasies, a distinct category of heroic tales is asserting its presence in North American comics. Brought to life by female Black comics creators, mostly as independent projects, the protagonists featured often boast special powers that enable them to transform and/or fly and transcend dimensions as they engage in epic battles. In other words, their embodiment of magic fulfills reader expectations of superhero comics and fantasy genres

alike. The young heroines in these narratives fundamentally challenge conventions by which Black women have been relegated to supporting roles, fetishized, or outright excluded in comics. Approached as a loose grouping, these works highlight questions pertaining to both race and gender and demand attention to issues of textual representation and the creative industries contexts alike. In short, "representation" will here refer not just to textual properties but also the conditions and contexts of their production.

According to Derek Lackaff and Michael Sales, the "most prominent approach [to Blackness in the comics industry] has been the textual exploration of race as represented in comic books" (65-66; see also Singer 107-19). Jeffrey A. Brown's 2001 *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* instead offers attention to both publishing enterprises and fandom, yet implicitly frames comics as a space that is particularly masculine. Aimed at a wider readership, the seminal anthology *Black Comix: African American Independent Comics Art and Culture* (2010) and its follow-up *Black Comix Returns* (2018), both edited by John Jennings and Damien Duffy, celebrate independent Black comics production in the United States. Separated by less than a decade, the space afforded to women creators significantly increased in the 2018 collection compared to its 2010 counterpart.[1] Yet it would be a mistake to assume that Black women working in comics is a recent development. Deborah E. Whaley's 2016 *Black Women in Sequence* surveys contributions of Black female creators to comics cultures in the United States and highlights a heritage too often omitted or minimally accounted for in comics histories elsewhere. Whaley's discussion of contemporary work by Black American comics artists is, moreover, a crucial touchstone for what follows.

My aim here is to consider contemporary Black female comics protagonists written and drawn by Black female comics creators, and the particular resources for fandom this combination extends. The article's tri-part approach (characters, creators, fandom) is framed by the #BlackGirlMagic online phenomenon and located in a broader popular cultural context that includes the 2018 blockbuster movie release of *Black Panther*. Connections with the superhero genre, transpacific popular culture influences, and affinities with Black feminist speculative fiction, respectively, will be set out in due course.

The creators whose work is examined in this article comprise both artists and writers, all of whom have achieved critical and peer recognition for their work. The examples selected for discussion are Nilah Magruder's *M. F. K.* (serialized online from 2012, print version 2017), *Genius* drawn by Afua Richardson, and *Niobe: She Is Life* (2015); *Niobe: She Is Death* (2017), co-created by Amandla Stenberg and Ashley A. Woods (2008-14), as well as ongoing (at the time of writing) publications such as Mildred Louis's *Agents of the Realm* (online publication from 2014) and *Omni* by Alitha E. Martinez (from 2019). This grouping will allow shared themes to emerge while simultaneously showing a diversity of ap-

1 *Black Comix* (2010) features forty-nine contemporary creators, only seven of whom are women. While Afua Richardson and Ashley A. Woods are included in the section, Creators Introduced, no women are featured in the longer chapters or interview formats. *Black Comix Returns* (2018) recognizes a notably more diverse roster of artists and has a cover drawn by Ashley A. Woods.

proaches. The initial discussion foregrounds the fictional heroines before attention turns to the creators who have brought these characters to life, and the contexts in which they have done so. I conclude by considering fandoms and the significance of having access to images and narratives that allow affirmative self-recognition and assertive imaginaries. These concerns are indeed the central premise of the hashtag phenomenon #BlackGirlMagic that grew to international prominence since 2015.

Black Girl Magic: Hashtag and More

The term Black Girl Magic, attributed to CaShawn Thompson in 2013, gradually grew into a widely spread and publicized grassroots movement to counter "the dangers of a culture that recognizes few achievements by black women" (Brinkhurst-Cuff). In the words of Kellie D. Hay, Rebekah Farrugia, and Deirdre "D.S. Sense" Smith, "#BlackGirlMagic is an emerging social movement that provides a contemporary cultural archive as it documents and gives visibility to the complex subjectivity and diverse expressions of young Black women and other women of color." Heavily driven by social media, the hashtag has mobilized many high-profile champions, including Amandla Stenberg, co-author of *Niobe: She Is Life*.

Some aspects of celebrity-activism and the attention economies of online circulation have produced a certain tension with the empowerment agenda of #BlackGirlMagic, as "the term's applicability to—and the extent to which the movement includes—women from diverse socio-economic positions also needs to be explored" (Hay, Farrugia, and Smith). Critics have argued that celebratory representations of Black female strength and beauty, especially in their online expressions, remain limited in terms of challenging social conditions and therefore political potential—especially as they often privilege normative bodies and beauty ideals (Hobson cit. in Davis 13; Jordan-Zachery and Harris 36). Commodification (through image repertoires, but more mundanely in the form of T-shirts and other merchandise) might indicate the project's susceptibility to consumerist mechanisms of recuperation. But, following Julia S. Jordan-Zachery and Duchess Harris, Black Girl Magic is a cultural project with both a past and present that exceeds the hashtag phenomenon associated with its name.

In the late 1980s, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality aligned with a growing clamor of voices critical of Western second-wave feminist movements of the time, for the often unchecked privilege and unconscious bias manifesting as invocations of universalist womanhood. Intersectionality speaks to fundamental societal issues, no less urgent some thirty years later:

> The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences. In the context of violence against women,

> this elision of difference is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. (Crenshaw 1242)

If intersectionality makes visible intersecting pressures of racism, sexism, heteronormativity, economic inequalities, and social hierarchies, "#BlackGirlMagic is a form of critical literacy used by Black femmes, girls, and women" (Jordan-Zachery and Harris 14) in a project of self-determination. Across forms that are visual, material, and symbolic, re-imagining works to counter invisibility—a constitutive aspect of structural violence. Connecting #BlackGirlMagic to Black feminist principles, Jordan-Zachery and Harris identify four constitutive elements and/or practices, the first of which is community building (6). This is followed by "(2) challenging dehumanizing representations via a practice of self-definition; (3) rendering Black femmes, girls, and women visible; and (4) restoring what is sometimes violently taken" (6). The authors point out that the word "girl" here functions as a marker of community belonging and shared experience and, in the context of Black Girl Magic, should therefore not be taken as an indicator of age.

That said, the comics discussed here all feature youthful (often teenage) protagonists, a shared trait that forms a significant part of their address to young readerships. In these comics the compound term Black Girl Magic is thus imagined and personified in ways that are simultaneously embodied, literal, and symbolic.

Transformative Teamwork

Mildred Louis's *Agents of the Realm* is a prize-winning webcomic and a college-years coming-of-age story in the magical girl tradition found in manga, anime, and games. The story begins as five young women, Norah, Adele, Kendall, Paige, and Jordan, meet in their first year at college. Getting acquainted and discovering their special powers, the five protagonists learn of their responsibility to protect not only this world, but also another dimension within which they battle sinister and powerful foes. Their powers and weapons align with the four elements (earth, air, fire, water) and an additional fifth (void), and can be accessed by means of magical amulets. The fights against evil in this story, which presents itself in the tradition of young adults' (graphic) fiction, might seem like a light-hearted distraction from negotiating everyday problems and growing pains. Yet, this device offers an expanded space for Louis's focus on female friendship and what an emerging scholar has identified as "intersectional self-definition" (Yohannes 12). In the FAQ section of Louis's website, the pre-emptive question "is this comic queer/LGTB?" is answered: "The simple answer is Yes. The majority of the cast identifies within the LGBTQ community, but it's not a comic that focuses on that. It's only one small part of who they are as a whole, and is treated as such." Similarly, while the family names of the char-

acters suggest ethnic diversity and Louis's rendering of skin tones encompasses multiple shades, the comic neither discusses race or ethnicity nor deals with such issues through its storyline. Louis's aim is, as she explains, to offer a space of respite from the troubles and pressures that mark the contemporary world through a "story that's fun, sincere, and full of friendship (and some drama)."

Louis is of a generation of U.S. comics creators for whom the influences of Japanese popular culture, especially in the form of manga and anime imports, have had substantial and formative impact.[2] The premise for *Agents of the Realm* is acknowledged by its creator as owing an explicit debt to the magical girl / mahō shōjo / 魔法 少女 genre not just in terms of visual qualities but the very concept and overall tone. It follows the premise of the magical girl closely, in particular the idea of *henshin* (metamorphosis or disguise) that is involved when characters transform from their everyday identities to heroic personas and costumes. In Anglo-American terms, this would potentially also suggest superhero tropes of dual identity and outfit changes, but Louis specifically references *Sailor Moon Crystal*, a 2014 animated adaptation of the manga series *Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon*. Transpacific popular culture exchanges, interchanges, transferences, and appropriations have long been multi-directional. The magical girl genres in anime can be traced back to an early prototype in the 1966 animated series *Mahōtsukai Sarī* / *Sally the Witch*, inspired by the American sitcom *Bewitched* (Sol Saks 1964-72) that had been dubbed and televised in Japan around this time (Sugawa).

Cultural exchange tends to involve appreciation (and thus often a valorization) of "the authentic." Yet, a consequence of such appreciation is likely to entail influences and borrowings and result in "cultural phenomen[a] whose meanings are dependent on context" (Denison 2). Both anime and manga are variable phenomena, the meanings and definitions of which are constantly reconfigured through their "(re-)production contexts, [their] distribution and [their] consumption by different sets of audiences" (Denison 2).[3] Despite "a sense of Western yearning for 'Japan'" (Iwabuchi 32), readers bring a different cultural framework to bear on texts, and creators who are inspired and influenced by such readings go on to incorporate and merge elements into their own work. Encounters and multi-directional flows between Japanese and Black American popular culture, involving a range of forms, have been repeatedly recognized by scholarship (Brickler; Condry; McLeod 263; Whaley 121-46).

At this juncture, it is worth reiterating the highly gendered address of Japanese manga publications. Shōnen (targeting a male readership) and shōjo (for a female demographic) manga, respectively stress ideas about gendered difference in terms of both the content and visual style. The focus on romantic and interpersonal relationships in shōju manga suggests an understanding of subject matter predicated on a construction of

2 For an expanded discussion of different sub-categories, see Whaley (154).

3 For a thorough examination of manga in America, see Brienza.

feminine identity and concerns. In stark contrast, shōnen manga's action and techno-fantasies appear unambiguously coded as masculine. Presumably a result of such understandings of gendered preferences, shōju manga and its sub-genres tend to use a soft and wispy line, depicting both male and female subjects as slender, wide-eyed, and delicate figures. Such visually gender-indeterminate characters stand in stark contrast to the determined binary coding of gender throughout Western popular culture, irrespective of whether reader demographics are perceived to be male or female. There are thus particular affordances brought into play as shōju manga is transposed and re-contextualized by Western readerships (Hurford). Shifting frames of interpretation of shōju manga has offered (Western readers in particular) a fertile space for gender ambivalence and openness to non-heteronormative identifications. It is also noticeable that the opening of these spaces has been taken up, creatively asserted, and extended by writers and artists who (whether implicitly or head-on) include in their work critiques of heteronormativity and the queering of conventional gender-based values. Louis's *Agents of the Realm* is but one of many such outcomes and is representative of this phenomenon, as it simultaneously challenges normative Whiteness in popular culture, including (but not limited to) comics and animation.

Cerebral Superpowers in Realist Settings

Like Louis's protagonists (when not venturing into another dimension), Cecelia Cobbina in *Omni* and Destiny Ajaye in *Genius* are embedded in a recognizable and realist setting of the contemporary United States. These two heroines are also gifted with exceptional minds, yet the tone and aesthetic of their stories are starkly different from those about Louis's magical college students. *Agents of the Realm* asserts its representational politics implicitly, but *Genius* quickly becomes uncannily prescient of actual events and issues. Written by Marc Bernardin and Adam Freeman and drawn by Afua Richardson, *Genius* was serialized by Top Cow[4] 2008-2014, when the highly mediatized events in Ferguson, Missouri, unfolded. Following the police shooting of unarmed teenager Michael Brown, Jr., on August 9, 2014, the heavy-handed police response to Black Lives Matter protests developed into something reminiscent of a military siege. *Genius* imagines an urban turf war against the LAPD led by Destiny Ajaye, a seventeen-year-old girl who has grown up fending for herself from a young age, having lost both her parents to police bullets. She also happens to be, as Bernadin's commentary in *LA Times* explains, "a military savant with a once-in-a-generation mind for strategy and tactics. So she turned a bunch of gangbangers into soldiers. She gave them an enemy on which to focus their rage. She declared war. On everyone."

Online commentators and fan blogs have drawn attention to the parallels between the emancipatory agenda and military struggle depicted

4 Image Comics brought out collected editions in 2015 and 2018.

in *Genius* and earlier civil rights era fiction (Taylor), as well as the complex relations between the Black Panther movement and West Coast gang culture (Brothers). As a character, Destiny Ajaye's strategic skills and intellect belie gendered expectations and those that are attached to her youth. These qualities are visually underlined by Richardson's depiction of her slight physical frame, yet countered by dynamic battle poses, dramatic angles, and splash pages employing visual language from martial arts cinema. Destiny is also a product of the oppressive and brutalizing societal forces and structures that she is waging her war against, and this is perhaps where the political charge of the comic ultimately lies.

Destiny Ajaye's exceptional cerebral powers are matched by those demonstrated by the protagonist of the *Omni* comics (2019-present), written by Devin Grayson, drawn by Alitha E. Martinez, and published by Humanoids.[5] Yet, the environments and social realities these characters inhabit are worlds apart. Cecelia Cobbina is a medical doctor who has returned to the United States after working for *Médecins Sans Frontières* in the People's Republic of Congo. As the publishers' blurb explains: "A young doctor suddenly and mysteriously acquires superpowers… as do several other individuals on the planet. But only her power can answer 'why.'" These superpowers manifest as seven different kinds of "intelligence" in a move that inherently calls into question conventional understandings and value-systems by which intelligence tends to be measured and captured. Cecelia's thought processes are rendered visible and form an important component of Martinez's art-work. Color-coding these seven aspects of intelligence according to a key (blue for medical knowledge and diagnostic capacity, green for deduction and logic, red and pink for emotional intelligence, purple for linguistic faculties, and so on) allows Martinez to incorporate and superimpose ghostly renditions of seven different iterations of Cobbina, each outlined in a different color, as the character deals with situations and problems she must solve. The simultaneity of these multiple versions of Cecelia Cobbina conjure a heightened version of mental and cognitive multi-tasking that effectively amounts to her superpower. This strategy for visual expression is as innovative as offering a superhero story where no punches are thrown—itself a radical departure.

Destiny Ajaye and Cecelia Cobbina present a vivid contrast to other Black comics heroines, also boasting exceptional powers. In the Frank Miller / Dave Gibbons co-production *Give Me Liberty* (Dark Horse 1990), Martha Washington is a young Black woman from a poor housing project turned into a patriotic superhero and central character. The four-part futuristic comics serial follows Martha's quest to serve a politically rotten and dystopian America and subjects her to a grueling series of brutal experiences that ultimately sees her transform into an emotionally disconnected figure (Sobel). In a similar fashion, the character Michonne in comics series and television adaptation *The Walking Dead* is characterized as emotionally lacking (Johnson 267-68), reduced

5 Humanoids is a California-based independent imprint established in 1998 that grew out of the French Bandes Dessinées publishing house, Les Humanoïdes Associés.

to a weaponized body (Willis 163-68), and re-iteration of the "angry black woman" trope (Abdurraquib). The powers displayed by Martha and Michonne are measured by physical prowess and brute force, in line with graphic depictions of violence stereotypically associated with comic books. As female characters they might break with gendered expectations, and as Black women they might seem to satisfy calls for more diverse representations.

However, the visceral violence metered out by Michonne and Martha is arguably matched by the sadistic treatment they are subjected to (by foes and their creators alike). Their female Black bodies constitute the intersection where graphic violence converges with the attention of readers, in an example of what Moya Bailey and Trudy have termed "misogynoir" (762-63). As encountered by readers, characters (including these) remain open to multiple interpretations. Read against the broader backdrop of racialized gendered narratives and representational tropes, Martha Washington's and Michonne's respective positioning as a powerful Black woman is effectively undermined in the very act of its assertion. As Dominique Deirdre Johnson eloquently summarizes the issue: "certain representational scripts regarding black femininity continue to function and be reproduced even within a context that could completely reimagine the social possibilities for all human subjects post-civil society" (269). In such a context, the cerebral supremacy demonstrated by Destiny Ajaye and Cecelia Cobbina seems a radical departure, and the contrast is made more poignant by their contemporary, realist locations: Destiny's strategic savvy is applied battling the LA police department on the streets of South Central while Cecelia's analytical and diagnostic mastery and lightning speed responses are performed in the institutional settings of healthcare provision. Yet, in the next two comics the magical powers displayed by extraordinary heroines are matched by equally mythical settings, the kinds of fictional landscapes that align with fantasy genres.

Courage and Vulnerability in Faraway Lands

The two protagonists encountered next are young female warriors endowed with special powers and an epic fight on their hands. As Deborah E. Whaley argues: "It is indeed in the terrain of the fantastic and phantasmagoria that Black female writers and artists can paint worlds of identification that reimagine the perceived fixed categories of gender, sex, and race that popular culture often relies upon" (161). *Niobe: She Is Life* (2015) was drawn by Ashley A. Woods and was co-written by Amandla Stenberg, known from the *Hunger Games* movie franchise,[6] and Sebastian A. Jones of Stranger Comics. While more likely an indication of the visibility and currency that comes with Stenberg's celebrity profile than a newfound interest in comics advanced by this publication, Janelle Okwodu in *Vogue* online notes that this comic book sold 10,000

6 Based on books by Suzanne Collins, the dystopian action-film *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012), starring Jennifer Lawrence, became an instant box-office hit (swiftly followed by three sequels), in which Stenberg had a supporting role.

copies during its launch and "was the first internationally distributed comic with a black female author, artist, and central character."

The protagonist in this coming-of-age tale of love, betrayal, and sacrifice is an orphaned teenage elf and the would-be savior of the vast and volatile fantasy world of Asunda. Having initially appeared in Jones's graphic novel *The Untamed: A Sinner's Prayer* (2009), Niobe Ayutami and the setting of Asunda were re-worked for serialization in collaboration with Stenberg and Woods. The story engages with profound and large-scale real-world issues, such as structural social inequalities and division predicated on difference and resulting conflict. In the course of her encounters with clashing factions and authoritarian forces, Niobe navigates tests of judgment and other personal growing pains. By the end of the first story arc, her innocence has been shattered but she retains the heroic qualities that make her a power fantasy, offering readers identification with a fictional character wielding agency and capacities that far exceed their own.[7] In *Niobe: She Is Death* (2017), Niobe battles on behalf of victims of human trafficking, effectively taking up the role of a vigilante warrior.

Suspicion and prejudice between different species also play their part in Nilah Magruder's story about Abbey. Published in 2017 by San Rafael's Insight Editions in California, *M.F.K.* (what this acronym stands for remains shrouded in mystery) is set in a desert landscape interspersed with small communities of humans and also inhabited by humanoid beings with special powers. Magruder's aesthetic bears the hallmarks of multiple influences, most notably animation. Her panel compositions and transitions have cinematic qualities, and her characters' large eyes, exaggerated facial expressions, and gender ambiguity evoke influences of anime. Otherwise, sparse and uncluttered settings are presented in rich color and with emphatic use of shade to render the three-dimensionality of form. This, too, echoes the privileging of expression and plasticity over detail in certain animation styles. The story itself references feudal relations as well as magic, creating a medievalism reminiscent of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (Nickelodeon 2005-2008), an influential American animated series set in an imaginary fantasyland with pseudo-Asian characteristics. The location of *M.F.K.*, however, remains undetermined.

In this world, structures of governance have long since disintegrated and relations between different groups are shaped by ad hoc conflict solutions, protectionism, and extortion. The protagonist Abbey, a resourceful young girl with impaired hearing, is on a mission to take her mother's ashes back to her homeland. She belongs to a group of humanoids called the *parasai*. The *parasai* have special powers, but, after abandoning their role as protectors of the small towns and communities, have instead formed bands of marauding tricksters. Because of the threat and stigma attached to them, it is in Abbey's interest to keep her special powers hidden when she arrives in the small community of

7 For a more detailed definition of power fantasy, see Guillaume on Wendy Pini's *Elfquest*.

Little Marigold. As circumstances conspire to keep her from leaving, she gradually develops relationships with some Little Marigold inhabitants. When the community faces an outside threat, Abbey realizes that she is the one who has the capacity to save the community and its way of life. Like Niobe, Abbey is a lone heroine on a coming-of-age journey, and, like Niobe, she is subject to a range of pressures and demands. She must negotiate prejudices, social schisms, and the impetus to stand up to oppressive forces. Both characters, youth and fragility notwithstanding, personify agency and thereby offer a productive space for power fantasy.

Jalondra A. Davis posits that, in Black women's sci-fi, young heroines tend to "access their magic not through superhuman gifts, but through otherhuman ontologies, communal resources and exclusion from other forms of power," and that the "magic [of these protagonists] is indelibly connected to their vulnerability" (15). This avoids an ideal (the "strong Black woman") predicated on individual responsibility and affective labor, a criticism that has also been levelled at online manifestations of #BlackGirlMagic (Davis 13-14). In alignment with André M. Carrington's notion of speculative Blackness, Davis's "otherhuman" describes "the being of non-white, non-male, non-property owning, and/or differently abled individuals" (15). The elf-warrior Niobe and *parasai* wanderer Abbey are presented as overtly vulnerable in terms of age, physical slightness, and outsider position.

Their embodiment of vulnerability, and simultaneously of tenacity and strength, seems crucial to the appeal of these heroines. Both resourcefully navigate hostile territories, and, through experience learn to take calculated risks. As importantly, they generate affiliations and social support networks. These are individual quests and journeys of becoming, which makes for a familiar kind of heroic tale, even when invested in and engaging on behalf of a community. More radically, both the Niobe stories and *M. F. K.* engage with and explicitly involve issues of social inequality, exploitation, and structural violence. The cognitive remove offered by their imaginary and fantastical settings facilitates their ability to pursue these topics while maintaining a sense of wonder and excitement.

This introduction of fictional comics protagonists has been informed by wide-ranging cultural and discursive contexts, from shōnen manga to superhero comics and Black feminist and speculative fiction. Shifting our attention to creators will allow the consideration of the professional contexts from which the work has emerged.

Creators in Context

Independent small press publishing and webcomics are both important routes for developing a following and reputation and can also offer avenues for projects that involve risks that larger publishing houses might not be willing to take. As already outlined, Richardson's work

in *Genius* was published by Top Cow, an independent comics publisher founded in 1992. Martinez has published her own works, including the comic *Yume and Ever* (2006) and the illustrated novella *Foreign* (2014), through her own imprint Ariotstorm Production. Like Martinez, Richardson also writes her own material, and this is where a shared interest in "Futurist Fiction & Fantasy" (Rutledge) prominently comes to the fore. Comics publishing, in the United States and elsewhere, comprises a wide spectrum of eclectic genres and a broad range of formats. Realist and slice-of-life genres like (auto)biography, reportage, and documentary have gained mainstream recognition, and graphic novels are now increasingly taken up by mainstream book publishers. Speculative fiction, science fiction, and fantasy, meanwhile, maintain their prominence in small press contexts.

But for creators, small press and self-publishing rarely amounts to a reliable or sufficient income on its own. For many comics creators, carving out a career demands moving between projects, contracts, and contexts in highly agile ways. Woods self-published her action-fantasy webcomic series, *Millennia War*,[8] while still a student. Following the completion of her film and animation degree, Woods spent time in Japan where she exhibited some of her works. The educational backgrounds of both Woods and Louis indicate porous boundaries between comics and animation. Louis originally studied animation, and her CV includes some widely circulated titles such as *Invader Zim* (a Nickelodeon animated dark comedy sci-fi series) and the *Rick and Morty* spin-off *Rick and Morty: Lil' Poopy Superstar*. In 2014, she began to balance freelance work as an illustrator and comics artist with her continued online publication of installments of her *Agents of the Realm* webcomic. Magruder's *M. F. K.* likewise first saw light of day as a self-published webcomic, before it came out in print. But she has also written and storyboarded for DreamWorks and Disney and pursues a career as an illustrator of children's books.

Both Richardson and Martinez have established careers in the U.S. superhero comics industry, and both are known for their work on the Marvel title *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*.[9] That title's 2016-2017 spin-off stories comprised a mere six issues, yet brought different subjectivities to the fore in ways likely to leave a lasting legacy. Written by Roxane Gay and brought to life by Martinez, the story of Ayo and Aneka follows two guardswomen in Black Panther's personal protection squad, the Dora Milaje, as they face challenges that include both personal loyalties and political allegiances. This not only gives center stage to characters who have historically been relegated to supporting roles and turns them into fully developed, rounded, and credible protagonists in their own right. It also is the first instance of a queer African couple starring in a mainstream superhero comic published in the United States (Gipson 35).

Richardson is a prolific cover artist for both Marvel and DC comics, who has contributed to titles including (but not limited to) *X-Men*

8 See Whaley (155, 171-73) for an expanded discussion of *Millennia War*.

9 See Daniel Stein's article in this issue for more.

'92, *Captain Marvel*, and *Captain America*. Beyond the superhero genre, she has also produced a graphic biography (with John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell).[10] Despite her already considerable CV, Richardson continues to be hailed as "a rising star" (Howe; Spirer). Martinez has similarly noted: "I'm considered a 'brand new artist' at every convention I go to. People have no idea. And why would they really?" (Horne). Whether such obliviousness is reasonable can be debated, but it overlooks that Martinez is an industry veteran with more than twenty years' experience. In addition to *Black Panther* and *Moon Girl* she has a list of well-known titles under her belt, including *Iron Man, X-men: Black Sun, Marvel Age Fantastic Four*, *Voltron*, and Archie Comics' *New Crusaders* and *Riverdale*.[11] Martinez can, moreover, lay claim to pioneer status in the comics industry, having started her career in the early 1990s. "When I started, I was a unicorn—there were no other women of color working for the big two in the capacity of penciler, so every book was a new fight" (qtd. in McMillan). But even now, boasting a wide-ranging back catalog, wider recognition seems less than forthcoming. These creators sustain their careers through adaptability, willingly moving across and between contexts. Such creators rarely sit neatly in distinct categories of independent comics and mainstream titles and franchises, but travel between them (and indeed also between comics and other forms, whether live action or animation). All the while, they still manage to maintain commitments to more personal projects to satisfy their own story-telling ambitions.

Digital platforms allow certain opportunities, such as self-published webcomics, but they also foster connectivity through forums for discussion, promotion, and visibility to constitute and support community building. The significance of actual and material (as opposed to projected and imagined) digital technologies for twenty-first-century iterations of Afrofuturism have been noted (Everett 138-40). The internet has enabled a community of Black comics culture to emerge beyond the established industry structures (Lackaff and Sales 73-77), even as many of its key contributors also remain engaged within such contexts. Meanwhile, the online spaces so vital to creator communities also offer the means for dispersed fan-bases to connect.

Readerly Meanings and Fan Communities

Having previously focused on Black female comics characters and their Black female creators, the causality implied by directly continuing to Black female fandoms would be problematic. Fiction offers and allows acts of affective identification; it invites empathy through acts of imagination and the vicarious inhabiting of subject positions that exceed one's lived experience. The absence of empirical inquiry, moreover, places this discussion at odds with what might be considered a fundamental principle of fan studies. Rather more modestly, my intention is

10 *Run: Book One* follows on from the critically fêted trilogy *March* (2016), a chronicle of the Civil Rights movement and graphic memoir by the late Congressman John Lewis. Since Richardson's involvement at an earlier stage, the project was brought to completion with the illustrator L. Fury and published in 2021.

11 Martinez's extensive back catalog is listed under her author profile on the Simon & Schuster webpage.

to connect the comics discussed to the community aspects of the Black Girl Magic project, through some indicative consideration of readers.

For comics readers, initial encounters occur in acts of reading, acts that may take place in highly personal and intimate spaces of engagement. Fandom, however, is an engagement incorporating and constituted by highly social dynamics, and it also holds recognized potential for financial profit. The association between fandom and comics is longstanding; comics publishers have historically encouraged reader involvement and input (for instance, the early adoption of readers' letters sections in serialized print comics), long before "the difficulties to monetize content in digital environments […] put fans at the heart of industry responses to a changing marketplace" (Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington 2). Sci-fi and fantasy genres, and the manga and anime forms, are commonly recognized for generating prolific fan production subcultures and cosplay communities. "While it's all play, there's a power in breaking past rigid identity parameters and adopting the persona of one's favorite hero" (Womack 14). In addition to such opportunities for liberating and playful self-expression, the social, interactional, and community aspects of fandom involve multilateral crossings between physical and digital space.

In 2002, when Anna Everett wrote about Black press properties making the transition to online publication, she remarked on the internet's "expressive, self-fashioning and emancipatory potential" (141) as a space for counter-hegemonic discourse.[12] Arguably, the formation of what Nancy Fraser has named "counterpublics" (qtd. in Everett 141) exceeds news and current affairs to incorporate more encompassing notions of cultural engagement, media consumption, and self-realization. Alfred L. Martin Jr.'s research into Black fandoms underscores this point, as he argues that Black fandoms are dynamically constituted through "the interplay of must-see-blackness, economic consumption, knowledge of the culture industries and fan evangelism" (750). Support for Black projects, cultural producers, and creatives through fandom is also performed with the knowledge that commercially successful products are likely to make further and similar content propositions more viable (749). Martin thus positions Black fandoms, in their vast plurality, as "a form of activism that uses the language of the culture industries (money) to fight for (political) visibility" (751).

To presume a given age or gender of readerships would be reductive and misleading; reader identification is not predicated on obvious similarity with the characters that inspire affection. This, however, in no way diminishes the impact of (not) being able to recognize oneself in the repertoire of images and narratives that make up cultural imaginaries. In her book on Black sci-fi and fantasy culture, author and film-maker Ytasha L. Womack vividly remembers dressing up as Princess Leia for Halloween as a girl, but also her yearning to feel included on her own terms in the galactic imaginaries that ignited her imagination (5). In the introduction to Damian Duffy and John Jennings's 2017 graphic novel

12 Everett is, however, acutely prescient about the problematic convergences of expanding media technologies, concentrated ownership, and politics of deregulation that have been increasingly brought into relief over recent years.

adaptation of Octavia Butler's *Kindred,* novelist Nnedi Okorafor likewise draws on personal recollection. In this case, the lasting memory is of a surprise encounter in a bookstore:

> As I strolled through the aisles, something extraordinary caught my eye, something I'd only ever seen once before in the science fiction and fantasy section of a bookstore: a cover featuring a dark-skinned black woman.
>
> I was staring at *Wild Seed* by Octavia Estelle Butler.
>
> There was only one copy of the book there on that fateful day. I grabbed it, clasped it to my chest as if someone was going to snatch it from me, quickly bought it, and ran to my dorm room to start reading. (Okorafor iv)

This recollection captures the significance and formative role of stories and images as resources for self-definition. The expression "you can only be what you can see" offers a vernacular counterpart and corresponds with the foregrounding of role models and pedagogies that Martin (746-47) has observed in Black fandoms.

Octavia Butler, who considered herself as accountable to three readerships (Black readers, feminist readers, and science fiction readers), proposed that "science fiction is not only about the problems of the world, but also about solving the problems of the world" (qtd. in Pough and Hood x).[13] Narratives of agency (following Butler) and Black female protagonists[14] who are simultaneously strong and vulnerable (as described by Davis), become a potent combination for the role model function identified by Martin as valued by Black fandoms. Okorafor's anecdote meanwhile underscores the immediacy of visual representations and speaks to the particular affordances of comics. In comics, such as the ones discussed here and others like them, representations are given tangible graphic form. Destiny Ajaye, Cecelia Cobbina, the friends in *Agents of the Realm*, Abbey, and Niobe thus come to personify a visibility politics (Martin 746, 751). It is also worth recognizing that they contribute to a wider twenty-first-century "surge in fantastic representations of Black womanhood" that encompasses multiple forms and media (Pough and Hood xi). The comics encountered here have in common that they offer "much-needed models of black girlhood as valuable and empowered, yet they do so without dismissing the structural conditions that black girls face" (Davis 27). This posits a long-overdue challenge to popular culture imaginaries still dominated by hegemonic Whiteness, in which token inclusions of Black women are often relegated to supporting roles and/or reduced to narrow meta-scripts (Jordan-Zachery 4-5). The very plurality of narratives, heroines, and genre affiliations is therefore significant.

13 This emancipatory agenda can be applied more broadly to traditions in fiction by Black women that involve revisiting pasts haunted by trauma, but also imagining and envisioning futures, and to critical Afrofuturism, as outlined by Reynaldo Anderson (181-83).

14 Graphic novel adaptations of Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and *Parable of the Sower* (1993) have been published by John Jennings and Damian Duffy in 2017 and 2020, respectively.

Conclusion

Treated loosely as a collective, the comics discussed here tackle head-on the "dearth of young adult (YA) fantasy and science fiction titles in the mainstream where girls of color are the heroes" (Yohannes 6). The varied age range of protagonists suggests different reader demographics, including but not limited to those catered to by children's and YA fiction. Settings also range from imaginary lands to realist depictions of contemporary locations. If one were to adhere to conventional genre distinctions, even the limited sample of works attended to here refuses to fit easily or obviously within a single, distinctive category. Their transformative imaginations and agendas nevertheless connect them. These comics' heroines assert the presence of Black femmes, girls, and women on comics pages in self-defining plurality and diversity. In so doing, they offer resources for fan practices and community building (both online and elsewhere) in alignment with the constitutive aspects of the project of Black Girl Magic (Jordan-Zachery and Harris 6). The protagonists offer symbolic resources of self-determination and re-imagining. This is, in turn, both mirrored and underwritten by their creators, who assert their presence as Black female cultural producers: writers, artists, and publishers. In short, these comics not only challenge historically narrow representational repertoires (notable exceptions notwithstanding), but confound preconceived notions about comics cultures, creators, and readerships. Their transformative imaginaries thus include, and exceed, the images and narratives on their pages.

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