Spring 5-5-2022

With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility: Examining the Power and Privilege of Escapism in Young Adult Literature and its Culture

Stacey Watson
CUNY Hunter College

With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility:
Examining the Power and Privilege of Escapism in Young Adult Literature and its Culture

by

Stacey Watson

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts Literature, Language, and Theory Program, Hunter College
The City University of New York

[2022]

05/05/2022   Dr. Kelly Nims
Date   Thesis Sponsor

05/05/2022   Dr. Janet Neary
Date   Second Reader

ABSTRACT

Throughout their history comic books and Young Adult novels have reflected society as it evolves, in turn not only changing book culture, but popular culture as well. However, these genres have the potential to speak to a more diverse audiences and reflect a modern take on social issues, both has habitually disregarded marginalized characters resulting in fans belonging to those communities feeling excluded. With minorities' representation in Young Adult Literature and comics often feeling like tokenistic gestures instead of nuanced characters; resulting in these communities being rendered invisible by the 'gatekeepers' of these beloved genres. This thesis will explore the systematic biases embedded within these two genres, highlighting the ongoing battle between tokenism and inclusive storytelling. Thesis will also emphasize the importance of these genres, their tight grasp on popular culture, and showcase positive representations introduced by new creators over the years. This project includes franchises such as *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and Marvel Comics and analyzes how they uplifted or silenced the voices of marginalized characters. The purpose of this thesis is to not only showcase the impact of these beloved genres, but also to stage a complex and overdue conversation about for whom escapist literature is made.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Since their creation, comic books and Young Adult novels have provided an outlet for a

younger generation of readers who are constructing their identities, resulting in their voices being

amplified in narratives that reflect them. For that reason, despite the influx of opinions from

literary skeptics or elitist actors negating the validity of these genres, their representative culture

embedded themself into popular culture. Yet, what the elitist point of view fails to see is the

limitless potential that these genres has to reshape the landscape of social representation in film

and literature, while simultaneously addressing systematic issues other genres are too afraid to

acknowledge. This was made clear when the genre underwent a renaissance with J. K. Rowling's

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, which debuted on June 26, 1997[1]; not only did this novel

capture the hearts of the young and the young at heart, but it stressed important themes like

anything is possible as well as the occasional necessity of rebellion. Therefore, books in this

genre like *Harry Potter* are essential because they challenge our preconceived notions of Young

Adult literature and take it to new heights.

However, even though many fans can see their favorite heroes on lunchboxes or

variations of magical creatures in the latest fantasy YA film adaptation, representation of

minorities within Young Adult Literature hasn't always been so generous. Even though the

initial premise of this genre was to represent a more diverse audience and their modern take on

---

[1] While the first novel in the *Harry Potter* series is classified as children's literature, I'm treating the entire series as YA because as it progresses more mature themes are introduced resulting in the series to be classified as Young Adult Literature by the final novel; as a result, its impact on YA and fantasy continues. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* are the first novels in the series to be classified as YA and are major turning points within the series.

social issues, it has habitually disregarded marginalized characters resulting in fans belonging to

those communities feeling excluded. Katie Sciurba's "Journeys Toward Textual Relevance:

Male Readers of Color and the Significance of Malcolm X and Harry Potter" illuminates some of

the ongoing disparities we see with representation in YA literature: "The lack of representation

of Black (and other nondominant) characters and figures in texts for young readers is, arguably,

one of the most pervasive equity problems in language arts/literacy education in the United

States" (373). In a genre that's produced fantastical worlds and relatable characters, we have a

growing list of white authors who habitually prefer replacing marginalized characters with

monsters, caricatures, or magical creatures; moreover, not only does their writing suffer, but the

fans do too. This paper will explore popular genres such as Young Adult Literature, comic

books, and their popular adaptations; I will highlight the disparities in diverse storytelling, and

ultimately representation, in genres geared towards young people constructing their identities. In

my thesis I will examine successful franchises such as *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and Marvel

Comics to analyze the social impact, shortcomings, and successes of popular titles from the

Young Adult genre as well as comic books. In my thesis, I also plan to highlight the ongoing

battle between tokenism and inclusivity within these genres; I want to illuminate a systematic

pattern of authors utilizing caricatures or tokenistic characters instead of storytelling rooted in

authenticity and fresh perspectives—otherwise known as inclusive storytelling. I believe it's

extremely worthwhile to look at how these genres' habitual decision to produce exclusionary

narratives is impacting its new generation of readers who aren't reflected on page or onscreen,

which is a sharp turn given the genre's origins. Furthermore, my thesis is an analysis of the

complicated sense of duality within these popular genres, specifically their ability to balance

between depicting limitless possibilities even while it excludes various communities; therefore, I

must ask: *is escapism is a privilege?* If one's visibility and humanity is consistently erased in these fantastical worlds, what does that do to one's imagination over time? As a result, the questions created by Ashley K. Dallacqua and David E. Low in their essay "'I Never Think of the Girls': Critical Gender Inquiry with Superheroes" holds up a necessary mirror to this genre asking: "Who is represented and who is excluded from the narrative? (Questions of erasure). *How* are they represented? (Questions of authenticity). Who does the representing and who gets to decide? (Questions of power)" (78). These questions will guide me throughout my thesis and provide the tools to reflect on a genre, whose popularity rose due to its representative quality.

Despite these genres' serious issues, Young Adult novels and comic books are crucial for young people constructing their identities; they provide the language for those who struggle to depict their feelings, solidarity for anyone who feels alone, and building blocks for discussing societal issues. Therefore, once authors realize their great social responsibility and commits to inclusivity, instead of *tokenism*, fans everywhere will benefit. Ultimately, I want to use my thesis as a platform to bring attention to the impact comics and YA novels have had on pop culture and book culture; however, to have a nuance conversation I must also discuss the shortcomings of these beloved genres as well as why true change is more than skin-deep.

The Journey of a Genre

Young Adult literature has engrained itself into American and popular culture, ever since

the first ever Captain America comic debuted in March 1941[2], showcasing the first Avenger

striking Adolf Hitler. In addition, the genre's fundamental feature of not only discussing difficult

topics, but embracing them, played a major part in its success; as Michael O. Tunnell and James

S. Jacobs states in "The Origins and History of American Children's Literature": "So-called

"hot" issues have become common topics such as sexual orientation, abortion, and cutting

oneself…are responsible for the "edginess" trend in young adult fiction" (86). Comic books and

Young Adult novels' ability to balance a tightrope between amplifying voices that were often

silenced as well as challenging the societal norm has largely contributed to the genre's success.

This can be seen with the success of popular adaptations within the genre, resulting in

Hollywood's fixation with these lucrative stories that often have legions of devoted fans. Comic

book movies see major success at the box office, with giants like Marvel often releasing their

planned films in phases that can stretch up to ten years at a time. Furthermore, ever since the

adaptation of popular franchises like *Harry Potter*, *Twilight* or *The Hunger Games*, movie

---

[2] While historically, children's literature in different forms existed prior to 1941, in this thesis, I am concerned with the genre of "Young Adult Literature" specifically, which I read more expansively as middle through high school, treating "young adult" readers, whether aged twelve or sixteen, as a young audience hungry for more sophisticated and socially aware/nuanced work. I would not want to infantilize or stereotype middle school readers, for instance, as not being interested in or not "smart" or "mature" enough to handle such themes. I certainly would not want to perpetuate the infantilization/under-estimation of young readers or color, for example, which my project is a testament to. Furthermore, YA and comic books are traditionally separate genres, with the latter commonly taking the form of graphic novels rather than the traditional novel form, both supply what the other lacks. YA novels who prioritize their female readers and centers their stories around the POV of female protagonists habitually struggle with introducing nuanced characters of color. Meanwhile, comic books have struggled with healthy female representation despite their strides with racial representation. Comic books' ability to discuss social issues with diverse characters mirrors a characteristic found in YA literature. Therefore, I'm discussing both genres in this thesis to paint a more nuanced picture and to better comprehend their impact on younger readers rather than perpetuate a sometimes simplistic or sterile binary. Genres often bleed into one another, and literature has demonstrated, over time, a refusal to by contained by our attempts to rigidly "classify" it along unimaginative lines.

studios are hungry for the next big hit adapting Young Adult literature. That's why it's imperative to examine the powerful impact of these genres and why they're needed, but also their harmful shortcomings.

This thesis will highlight the development of marginalized characters in popular titles within this genre, specifically making note of their agency or lack thereof in their respected canons and how ultimately this impacts the quality of inclusive storytelling. The visibility or invisibility of these characters and the communities they represent is extremely important; I will discuss the following features in my argument: racial erasure, caricatures, plus tokenism in *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, the necessity of representation found within Marvel's Black Panther and Miles Morales and the disempowerment/empowerment of Marvel's heroines such as Gwen Stacy, Captain Marvel, and Ms. Marvel.

In chapter two of my thesis, I will provide some history for Young Adult literature as well as illustrate the successes and social impact demonstrated by the genre. I will examine successful Young Adult Literature franchises such as *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* which, although they have become iconic in the industry, are seemingly hesitant and at times resistant to include inclusive representation in their stories. Therefore, I will be examining these stories for examples unhealthy patterns of racial representation such as racial erasure, tokenism, racial fetishization or stereotyping. I will note how characters of color are represented within these narratives as well as if their voices are uplifted or silenced (Question of erasure).

In chapter three, I analyze the comic book industry who were pioneers of diverse racial representation, which in turn allowed comics to lay the foundation for the Young Adult Literature genre. I will highlight the academic value embedded in comic books and discuss how this underdog genre provides young readers with the tools to discuss and comprehend relevant

political issues. I plan to look at characters such as Miles Morales (Spider-Man) and King T'Challa (Black Panther) both who originated from white male creators (but now have been taken over by creators of color) and breathed new life into the definition of what a hero could be. Moreover, while looking at these trailblazing characters, I explore the dynamic between authenticity and inclusive storytelling (Questions of authenticity).

In chapter four I analyze the storylines of Gwen Stacy, Captain Marvel, and Ms. Marvel to see how they compare to their male counterparts; I highlight the ways gender negatively hinders these characters' development and how they're able to regain their agency. I evaluate female representation within Marvel comics and note how it differs compared to their male counterparts. I examine how sexism plays an integral part in the visibility of these characters and ultimately the invisibility of female fans' agency in the eyes of the comic book industry. I will also examine the dangerous "Women in Refrigerators" trope to see if Marvel's female heroes, who are often tethered to their love interests or physicality, fall victim to this trope. This discussion is meant to illuminate the history of the female heroine in modern age comic books while looking at how cultural biases and systematic practices affect not only these characters, but their female fans (Questions of power). This growing genre, while extremely popular amongst younger readers who are still constructing their identities and those who are underrepresented throughout society, has showcased its difficulty to fully grasp the principle of intersectionality. Fans who have multilayered identities regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, class, etc., are usually forced to choose a character to identify with who often only represents a fraction of who they are. Therefore, questions of erasure, authenticity, and power not only provide the necessary tools to address systemic biases within Young Adult literature and comic books, but also aid the future of inclusive storytelling.

My thesis does not advocate for the dismissal of Young Adult literature or comic books, but instead challenges past, current and future writers of these genres who often act as gatekeepers to consider their privilege as well as the impact their work can have on social issues like racism or sexism. Escapism shouldn't be a privilege and it's worth exploring why a growing number of young readers don't have the same access to escapism through characters that reflect their identity positions. This discussion isn't just imperative for those who are part of marginalized communities, but to ensure all readers continue receiving reflective and nuanced stories, which will benefit both the quality and the future success of these genres. Even though there's a current fixation on diversity within literature, or the lack thereof, my discussion here has been inspired by countless scholars who have devoted their careers to equity in children's literature. In order to have meaningful and nuanced conversations about these genres, their shortcomings as well as their impact on younger readers, it's imperative to explore previous work in the field.

Literature Review

While there are many opinions regarding the necessity of genres like comic books and Young Adult literature, the overwhelming sense from various experts is that not only do these genres have academic value and are needed immensely, but also comic books, graphic novels, and Young Adult novels have an undeniable ethical responsibility. These various types of literature often strive to be more inclusive and mirror the varying social or political dilemmas impacting a diverse younger generation of readers. These works of literature are often utilized as a tool by their readers to breakdown complicated societal issues while acting as bridge between critical thinking in and out of the classroom. However, despite the good intentions of these genres' authors, the often-flawed execution of those intentions is apparent. Forcing readers and fans alike to reconsider what proper representation is, why authenticity is a necessity for diverse storytelling, and how continual erasure of marginalized voices is extremely damaging.

David E. Low's "Students Contesting 'Colormuteness' through Critical Inquiries into Comics" highlights the fact that English teachers across America shied away from discussing race or racism due the topic's difficulty; instead, many prefer the lens of historical racism, which conveniently places racism in the past, prioritizing white comfort over the feelings of marginalized communities. This suppression of race talks in classrooms, which Low dubs as "Colormuteness" (19), unfairly polices the voices and feelings of students of color; Low argues that comic books not only hold a great amount of academic value, but they act as a bridge for students to utilize critical thinking skills to analyze relevant societal biases and various systematic oppressions. Low continues his argument by defending comic books against skeptics who trivializes them and doubt this genre's validity, stating "Perhaps it's *because* comics aren't 'taken seriously enough' that the medium has empowered many writers, readers, and artists to

engage in critical discourses unsanctioned in other forms" (21). With the assistance of comics, students can find ways around their school's reductive attitude towards race while vocalizing their feelings on race, racism, and self-identity.

Whereas Ashley K. Dallacqua's and David E. Low's essay "'I Never Think of the Girls': Critical Gender Inquiry with Superheroes" makes it very clear that although the comic book industry has been very successful in reaching a diverse audience, the execution across its various mediums is at times questionable. Specifically, the genre's habitual decision to tether heroism to white straight men while overlooking their female characters and readers. The essay states: "Marvel has had ongoing problems of representation in both its comic book and cinematic universes. In recent years the publisher canceled numerous "diverse" titles (i.e., comic books not starring straight white male characters, such as *World of Wakanda, Mockingbird, Iceman, America,* and *She-Hulk*), blaming diversity for poor sales (Shepherd)" (77). The comic book giant citing diversity as the reason for poor sales is extremely hard to believe since projects like *Black Panther*, *WandaVision* or *Captain Marvel* experienced huge financial success while having well-rounded female heroes. Noticing the large presence these characters have in their fans' lives as well as in pop culture, this genre has a huge ethical responsibility. Students who read comics must draw upon their own agency, turning into critics and ask necessary questions such as: "Who is represented and who is excluded from the narrative? (Questions of erasure). *How* are they represented? (Questions of authenticity). Who does the representing and who gets to decide? (Questions of power)" (78).

CHAPTER 2

THE MAGIC OF A GENRE

As mentioned previously, Young Adult literature has a long history of trailblazing new pathways in literature as well as uplifting the voices of those often silenced and meeting the moment with political issues. The Young Adult literature genre is continually growing and at times difficult to define. The genre has vast subgenres from fantasy to romance to coming of age and while initially targeting a demographic of readers between 12 and 20 years old, the versality of the genre often attracts readers those outside of its targeted audience. Lisa Buccafusca's "The Potential of Youth: An Analysis of Race and Gender Representations and Their Social Implications in Young Adult Film Adaptations" touches upon this point: "it's almost a cliché at this point to say that teen fiction isn't just for teens anymore. Just last year, the Association of American Publishers ranked Children's/Young Adult books as the single fastest growing publishing category" (11). Due to the fact that there's no specific age range attributed to YA combined with its variety of entertaining and relatable subgenres, readers of all ages are often drawn to this genre whether it be to escape to fantastical worlds or to see their plights reflected on the page. The genre's growing popularity and financial success can be seen with an increasing number of YA texts becoming a common sight on nationally ranked bestseller lists. Buccafusca explains: "in December of 2012 the New York Times Bestseller List broke their original category of "Children's Chapter Book" into "Middle Grade" and "YA," and now includes three separate subcategories of "Young Adult" (hardcover, paperback, and e-book)" (12). However, despite this change the genre was still able gain massive ground. For example, the four *Twilight* books have spent over 235 weeks on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for Children's Books and have consecutively set records as the biggest-selling novels of 2008 on the *USA Today* Best-

Selling Book list; Stephenie Meyer's famous series sold more than 160 million copies worldwide. Not to be outdone, J. K. Rowling's groundbreaking novel *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* spent over 674 weeks on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for Children's Books, with the series selling over 500 million copies (the first novel selling over 120 million alone) making the story of 'the boy who lived' one of the top selling books of all time. The genre's broad appeal and proven financial success, as well as its legions of devoted fans, have made YA texts a popular choice for adaptations amongst Hollywood studios.

Furthermore, the desire for Young Adult novels is not only felt in book clubs and theaters across the country, but also in classrooms. Barbara G. Samuels' "Young Adult Literature: Young Adult Novels in the Classroom?" addresses the academic potential of Young Adult novels:

> Many teachers said students would not read "good literature" unless it was assigned in school. While ninety percent agreed that young adult novels helped promote lifetime reading habits and teachers agreed that adolescent novels were transitions to adult novels (92%) and to classics (84%), many seemed unwilling to promote that transition. (88)

When utilized in the classroom Young Adult novels can be extremely helpful in assisting students by providing healthy tools to engage in critical conversations, offering templates for understanding their complex identities, and creating necessary building blocks for an appreciation of literature that will last throughout their lives. Despite the many benefits of introducing these novels in the classroom, many English teachers and classic literature snobs are skeptical of the genre, a genre that's often played the part of the underdog, but which often represented the values of a newer generation. Samuels continues:

First, although progress is slow, more young adult novels are appearing in

secondary school English classrooms. The lists of titles required in the schools

revealed broad diversity, representative of the diversity of students we

teach…Teachers familiar with the books often recognize the quality and

sophistication of today's YA novels. (88)

Samuels makes a noteworthy observation because it's extremely crucial for books in English

curriculums to reflect the students who are being taught. Novels that reflect these students'

struggles and social characteristics of race, gender, class, or sexuality will help these students

academically, emotionally, and socially. Moreover, if the YA genre continues to highlight the

voices of young readers, teachers interested in helping their students build those necessary

bridges should utilize this resource.

Yer Privileged Harry

   "There's no such thing as magic!" a statement famously spoken by Harry Potter's uncle

Vernon Dursley in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, demonstrates its dual layers of

consciousness to me every time I watch the film; simply because magic has long felt out of reach

in my community, social class, and ultimately for many of us who experience life in the margins.

As the youngest daughter of a single-parent Jamaican working-class family, some in my family

couldn't fathom why I would go off and seek magic when the real world held an infinite amount

of dangers for young black girls. In order to survive the harsh neighborhoods of East New York

Brooklyn, I was advised to face reality; however, in order to cope I did the exact opposite. From

an early age, I used books and movies to desperately escape to the realms of imagination;

whether on the page or onscreen, fantasy was always a welcome escape. Some of the fondest

days from my childhood were spent looking for golden tickets underneath candy bar wrappers,

secret passageways in magical wardrobes or hoping my kitchen utensils would break out in song.

Even though it constantly eluded me, I needed magic; the realm of the fantastic provided worlds

for my mind and soul to escape the gritty streets of New York, it's in these worlds I found

acceptance and safety, but most importantly hope. When my mother took me to see *Harry Potter*

and the Sorcerer's Stone in the theater, euphoria washed over me in that dark theater. The allure

of the wizarding world captured my heart with its vivid imagery, magical spells, larger than life

creatures, but moreover its main protagonists understood the role of an outsider and still had the

ability to do great things. I saw my own insecurities mirrored in Harry, Ron, and Hermione's

plight; furthermore, I witnessed how their shortcomings over time morphed into their greatest

assets. Although, I hoped fervently to be greeted with a letter from Hogwarts I also hoped to

muster some of the courage demonstrated by the golden trio in my daily life. Whenever the pressing concerns of my household became too big for our Brooklyn apartment and suffocated me, I eagerly escaped to Hogwarts with Harry for our next adventure.

However, my developing dual consciousness as a woman of color soon provided obstacles for my experience as a reader and fangirl; this especially rang true as I grew up with the *Harry Potter* franchise and feeling like Hogwarts didn't see me in my entirety, nor had any desire to. As my experience seeing the first film showed, the wizarding world felt welcoming at first, but as the years progressed the glamour faded, and the dark truth became too hard to ignore. Rowling preferred to cloak messages of racism and classism underneath safe metaphors of pure-bloods/mudbloods, but when it came to her onscreen adaptations of non-white characters they were often stereotyped or silenced. They experienced Hogwarts from the shadows, weren't allowed to contribute to the plot in a major way, and Rowling—who built a franchise on the fundamental principal of accepting everyone's differences—spent over a decade tethering whiteness to the idea of heroism. Even though I still loved characters like Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Luna they were no longer able to reflect my experiences as a young black woman; no amount of Polyjuice Potion would allow me to pass for Hermione if I slipped on a cloak because I was aware that my differences cast me as 'other' both in the real and wizarding world.

The invisibility of characters of color within this successful franchise demonstrated that there was no room for my unique experiences, multilayered identity, and ultimately my blackness at Hogwarts. In Katie Sciurba's "Journeys Toward Textual Relevance: Male Readers of Color and the Significance of Malcolm X and Harry Potter," Sciurba writes about the relationship between equity and children's literature:

books for young readers have either perpetuated stereotypes about people of color or overemphasized the value of White European American lives and identities. Readers of color in K-12 classrooms, as well as their teachers, therefore, are inundated with texts that exacerbate the privilege of Whiteness…All students should have multiple opportunities to 'become an integral and valued part of the mosaic that [they] see around [them],' as Myers (2014) argues, with children's literature as a vehicle to ensure that their lives and stories matter. (374)

Due to privilege, systematic biases and habitual decisions, the main narratives of children's literature have become synonymous with White European-American identity. Therefore, young readers of color who don't fit into that narrative find themselves left out of a genre that initially seemed to offer unlimited possibilities; their identity, culture or ethnicity often diminished to snapshots of harmful stereotypes and caricatures. Just like their white counterparts, readers of color deserve to know that their voices, stories, and experiences are valid. If literature is our ticket to understanding other perspectives and cultures, how exactly are we benefiting ourselves or younger readers by repeatedly regurgitating the same types of narrative? In addition, if fans got the opportunity to the see the humanity in magical beings like Hagrid, Dobby, or Remus Lupin, it's extremely hard to understand why over the course of eight movies the franchise dragged its feet creating a more nuanced picture of the humanity of Asian and Black students at Hogwarts for fans. Not only did fans of color lose out, but so did their white counterparts and the *Harry Potter* franchise as a whole. Nadia Adelia's "Stereotyping and Othering of Non-White Characters in "Harry Potter" Movies" touches upon the experience of characters of color within the *Harry Potter* franchise: "Hogwarts plays hosts to a variety of people of color (The Indian Patil Sisters, Cho Chang, Dean Thomas, Blaise Zabini, Kingsley Shackebolt) but they are, in a

sense, invisible. Their races are so invisible that they become the minor roles." (Shoker, 2013) (15).

Characters of color within the *Harry Potter* series adaptation straddle a tightrope between their race making them invisible in a world where white is the default setting, and those same differences isolating them from their peers. As it's pointed out, their invisibility due to their race or ethnicity not only leads to minor roles, but whatever time they do have on screen is often promoting harmful stereotypes of their communities. Rowling's conscious decision to name a character of East Asian heritage "Cho Chang" while painting Cho as submissive, meek, overly polite and placing her in Ravenclaw, a Hogwarts' house known for its intelligence, showcased how Rowling's own biases hurt her chances at inclusive storytelling. Unlike Hermione or Luna, Rowling emphasizes Cho's 'exotic' culture and creates a caricature instead of nuanced character. We especially see this in the film *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* where characters like Cho and the Patil twins are the only ones wearing clothing related to their ethnicity, Adelia states:

> By wearing the Chinese traditional dress, Cho Chang is shown as different. She has to show her identity as a Chinese woman by the dress she is wearing. The white race is seen as the normal race and being white means "not to have race, therefore they can wear the normal western style dress which does not represent their ethnicity. White culture is the unquestioned standard of behavior and way of functioning embodied by the vast majority of the institution. (20)

Adelia makes a very valid argument because even though Cho and the Patil sisters are British, they wore gowns that represented as well as amplified their ethnicity, which undoubtedly singled them out amongst their peers. Their gowns were a conscious decision to categorize them as

'other' while exoticizing their race. The author continues by noting that, "Fleur, as the guest from France…dressed as normal as the other white people. Despite of her different nationality, she does not look foreign. However, Cho is shown to be the 'foreign' one even though her nationality is British" (20). Fleur Delacour a French student, who attended the Yule Ball in traditional western style attire, demonstrates bias: she didn't have to wear different attire despite the fact that she's actually an outsider. In *Goblet of Fire*[3] the franchise finally recognized Cho, Parvati, and Padma's cultural differences only to then fetishize them, sensualize them, along with highlighting their differences from their white peers. The franchise's ongoing failure to acknowledge their characters of color as three-dimensional figures not only reduces their humanity but exposes how the franchise caricaturizes their racial identity for entertainment. Rowling missed an opportunity to utilize Cho as a platform to have a more heartfelt and authentic conversation with her fans of color; instead, she chose the opposite approach, disregarding her fans' feelings entirely. Moreover, not only are fans of color struggling for agency in reality, but in they're also fighting for agency and equity in the realm of the fantastic.

Fans of the franchise are left craving these characters' backstories, narratives, and agency; this has exposed various gaps in Rowling's critically acclaimed vivid imagination. In Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination From Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, Thomas addresses reoccurring imagination gaps within fantasy, despite the genre's portrayal of endless possibilities:

---

[3] It is imperative to mention *Goblet of Fire* because this novel engages with death, intense situations, romance and most importantly Harry is coming into his own as a teenager. While fifteen may be young for a YA protagonist, he's still a YA protagonist nonetheless.

Although a sense of the infinite possibilities inherent in fantasy, science fiction, comics and other imaginative genres draws children, teens and adults from all backgrounds to speculative fiction, not all people are equally represented in these genres. This problem of representation has created discord in the collective imagination. (3-4)

Generations of readers have been drawn to comics and Young Adult literature for these genres' allure of endless possibilities as well as amazing fantastical elements. However, despite the endless possibilities that are found in fantasy or comics everyone isn't being represented. If readers of today are able to read about a talking racoon whose best friend is a talking tree or a magical and loyal house-elf, there isn't *any* excuse why readers of all backgrounds can't see themselves in their favorite books. If we don't push for inclusivity in our storytelling, we subconsciously tell children who belong to marginalized communities that fantasy is a privilege; ultimately, if you don't fit a certain aesthetic, you're excluded from experiencing the joy of escapism. Thomas continues:

This imagination gap is caused in part by the lack of diversity in childhood and teen life depicted in books, television, and films. When youth grow up without seeing diverse images in the mirrors, windows, and doors of children's and young adult literature, they are confined to single stories about the world around them and, ultimately, the development of their imagination is affected. (6)

For readers of all ages literature acts as a window, pulling back the curtain on lives and worlds different from our own. It's such a profound moment for any child to look on a page, a screen or a stage and see a character who looks them take agency within their own narrative while bravely

facing any obstacle in their path. These representations showcase to readers that their experiences, identity, and struggles are valid; in addition, by including the voices of those often dismissed we gain fresh perspectives, a more well-rounded story, and a more inclusive story. However, when children grow up without that kind of representation their imaginations are limited; ultimately, believing that the few stories they see around them is the scope of what they can achieve. If children belonging to marginalized groups are restricted in both the real and fantastic worlds, over time this will have an impact their imagination as well as their self-motivation. As Thomas rightfully adds: "What about our dreams? What happens to the fantastic when the implied reader is White, but the *actual* reader is not? Can all points of view be taken into account in the waking dream of the fantastic?" (167). Young Adult literature nor fantasy belongs to only one group; if authors continue to ignore, erase, and dismiss the voices of those often deemed voiceless, escapism will become another privilege for those with systematic advantages. Escapism, which is a coping mechanism for many children of color, will eventually be out of reach for those who desperately need it. This genre whose versatility is one of its biggest strengths, thrives on fresh perspectives and new voices. Ultimately, if people of color have been historically assimilating into white spaces and white culture, was a black Hermione Granger in 2001 really too intimidating for white audiences?

A Tale As Old As Time

The *Harry Potter* franchise sadly isn't the only Young Adult franchise to struggle with racial representation and inclusive storytelling. Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Saga became a pillar within the YA genre and while her extremely successful film adaptations solidified Meyer as a household name, it wasn't without valid criticism. On the surface Meyer's *Twilight* seemed to be an answer to those hungry for variety within Young Adult literature; Meyer not only reimagined the vampire genre, but she did so with a lead female protagonist, strong supporting female characters, and diverse characters all while catering to teenage girls' fantasies. As someone who watched Meyer's novels become a phenomenon in real time and was so enamored about a girl from Forks that she saved her money to buy her first YA novel, *Twilight* means a lot to me. Yet, as I got older I realized this innovative tale is built upon tired and harmful stereotypes of Native Americans; these racist stereotypes which have only flourished through centuries of colonization, genocide, and systematic racism, only found a more modern approach. Throughout four novels, Meyer paints a story of a love triangle between an atypical protagonist named Bella Swan, the Euro-American vampire Edward Cullen, and the Quileute Tribe member/werewolf Jacob Black. As legions of girls obsessed over Edward's sensitivity and angelic like beauty, Meyer introduced Jacob Black as a hypersexualized alternative to contradict the well-mannered, wealthy, and cultured appeal of Edward as well as his adoptive family the Cullens. Jacob Black whose bronze body is constantly underdressed, chiseled chest often bare, and who has long dark hair is presented as aggressive or emotionally unstable at times, yet is the embodiment of teenage girls' 'tall, dark, and handsome' fantasy. From *New Moon* onward Jacob Black occupies the space of the fetishized Other, this role that's also consistently exoticized and which constrains this character to straddle between savage beast and brave love interest, a dance which over time

turned this character into a harmful stereotype known as the 'Romantic Savage.' In Brianna Burke's "The Great American Love Affair: Indians In The *Twilight* Saga," Burke sheds some light on this topic: "In *New Moon*, [Jacob] relentlessly declares his affection for Bella and continues to pursue her well into *Breaking Dawn*, frequently claiming that she loves him, she just does not know it yet. Compared to Edward's inhuman emotional control, Jacob is more than just a hotheaded impulsive teenager…his passion literally changes him into an *animal*" (209). Burke makes a valid point as she highlights this harmful stereotype; when juxtaposed to Edward, Jacob's polar opposite blatant display of emotions casts him in a feral light, a fact heightened by his transformation into an actual wolf. Meyer tethered Jacob's identity to a hypersexualized racial fantasy of the 'bad boy.' Despite the fact that Jacob's pursuit of Bella from *New Moon* to *Breaking Dawn* placed him centerstage, it felt at times that Jacob was only introduced only to be a foil for Edward. When put side by side the two male love interests are polar opposites of one another and illustrate different versions of masculinity heightened by racial stereotypes.

However, despite his bad boy allure Jacob's character exists in a predominantly white space which demands him to be exotic and exciting while exhibiting morals at the same time. Unlike a lot of the vampires in the *Twilight* saga Jacob doesn't have the freedom nor the luxury to commit morally questionable acts, he has to be perfect. Burke writes: "He is morally good, always taking Bella into consideration first, and then his fellow pack members, before himself. He is endlessly vulnerable because he loves too much, which forces him to return to Bella time and again even though she continually turns him away and thus makes him the object of desire— as well as pity—for viewers and readers" (210). Jacob is without a doubt a morally good character. We see this when he takes care of his disabled father, steps up to become alpha in *Breaking Dawn* to protect the Cullens from both his own pack as well as the violent Volturi

coven, when he volunteers to fight Victoria in *Eclipse*, and ultimately by his habitual choice to put Bella first. His unwavering urge to protect Bella not only places him at odds with some of the Cullens, but also ostracizes him within his own community at times. Meyer constructs an unselfish character who—for the sake of love—doesn't mind being emotionally vulnerable and utilize his extreme physicality for Bella; although, he wasn't good enough for Bella's love, he is worthy enough to be objectified as well as pitied by fans of the saga.

Moreover, Jacob's shapeshifting abilities allow him to add another layer to the dangerous romantic savage stereotype. Burke writes:

> Jacob's ability to turn into a wolf contributes to the romantic stereotype in two ways. First, it reinforces the ideology that Indians live in harmony with nature and have a "natural" existence….In fact, Jacob and his Indian brethren are so close to nature that they can *transform into it*. As (were)wolves, they become part of nature itself, conforming to the laws of wolf behavior and pack mentality. Jacob, in particular, is closer to nature than the rest of his pack, since he leaves them for a while and literally lives in his wolf form, eventually becoming the Alpha male (although he is always the *Beta* in Bella's affections). In *Breaking Dawn*, Jacob acts like a fully feral animal when he hunts deer with Leah and rips the animal apart with his teeth. Meyer's version takes the stereotype of the "nature-loving Indian" to a whole new level, portraying Jacob as a part of nature itself and controlled by the natural laws of the animal kingdom. (209-210)

Jacob's ability to transform into a werewolf not only reinforces the ideology of a harmful stereotype, but it also challenges this character's humanity and agency; he is eternally tethered to

this wild side of him, and he does not have a choice in the matter. Throughout the *Twilight* Saga, Jacob has showcased his ability to silently walk through a forest or see in the dark, at times preferring to be in his werewolf form for periods; all of these factors assist in illustrating Jacob as a "nature-loving Indian." This is capitalized by accompanying factors like the pack members' portrayal of being highly violent or emotional, severely underdressed and having a lot of their conversations taking place telepathically, which leads to their humanity being eroded at times. This is unfortunate since Native Americans have a long history of being underrepresented, silenced and essentially invisible in popular culture; *Twilight* could've been a start to prioritizing authenticity in Native American narratives instead of repeating the same racist caricatures. Jacob was reduced to a hypersexualized, exoticized fantasy of stereotypical perceptions of Native American culture. Like Rowling, Meyer inserted recycled, dangerous tropes instead of doing the work and prioritizing inclusive storytelling. This is personified in the novels' adaptations where Taylor Lautner, a white actor, portrays Jacob Black who is Native American. While Lautner has stated in interviews that he discovered he's "part Native American . . . on my mother's side" (213), discovering one's ancestry doesn't equate to fully understanding the culture or obstacles associated with the community. Burke adds:

> Having Native blood in one's ancestry and being culturally Native American are
> not synonymous, and claiming ancestry is a learned, distinctly *American* response
> that displaces white guilt for domination and genocide and works to reshape our
> historical narrative. Taylor Lautner may not have known it, but in accepting the
> role of Jacob Black he joined a long line of those who have "played Indian" for
> commercial success. (213)

Throughout the four novels, Meyer actively obsessed over and fetishized Jacob's body by way of Bella's commentary; whether it was pointing out his long black hair, red skin or just the extreme physicality of this character, Meyer not only classifies him as an exoticized Other, but Jacob's race also contradicts the glaring whiteness inscribed in these novels. However, despite the fact that Meyer made Jacob's race and skin color a relevant subject matter, the casting directors still chose a white actor to portray this major Native American role in the popular film adaptations. Although there might've been varying factors that went into the decision to cast Taylor Lautner as Jacob, it doesn't speak well of the production that we see their ability to find talented Native American actors for roles of the other pack members, almost all of whom have drastically smaller screen time. Taylor had to discover his Native American ancestry, but the experiences and struggles of being Native American aren't something you can learn; you can't fully grasp the varying nuances of Native culture from a quick research into your family's ancestry. It's clear the franchise chose the 'safe' route and picked an actor whose Caucasian features allow him to be worthy of desire while not appearing too foreign; this is extremely ironic given the fact that in the novels Jacob is constantly alienated due to his race/skin color, even if it is coming from a place of desire. Moreover, while Taylor was roughly a teen himself when he was thrust into this franchise, he now belongs to the long list of white actors who occupied roles meant for people of color for commercial success. Performances like this not only invalidates the experiences of people of color, but also irrevocably erases the voices of those who already struggle to be heard. Often when white authors or directors tell the stories of people of color they erase much needed context and validity found within our experiences, generally contributing to the lack of authenticity in these stories. If white actors continue to see the lives of people of color as an opportunity to play dress up and experience the sensationalized stereotypes of our culture within

the safe margins allowed by white privilege, characters of color like Jacob, will always be limited to existing as caricatures. Inclusive storytelling starts when authors like Meyer avoid stereotypes as well as take the time to consider these communities' nuanced layers and not just prioritize shock value.

Meyer's *Twilight* saga could've been a great way to explore the economic, political, or social issues plaguing Native American reservations to this day. Yet she glides over the higher rates of health problems as well as poverty that affects countless Native Americans, not to mention the higher rates of sexual violence experienced by Native American women; instead Meyer treats La Push, which is a real reservation, as an escapist fantasy for Bella and readers alike, despite the real problems it may face. Burke adds:

> [Though] Bella remarks several times that the Black house is small, and Jacob's room is tiny, there is never any acknowledgment of the political realities of *why* this might be. In fact, although Indians in this novel are useful as romantic love interests, Meyer is completely dismissive of the lived realities of Native peoples, perhaps because "admitting genocide would not be good box office." (214)

Both Bella and Meyer struggle to see the fleshed-out lives of the residents of La Push, instead only seeing underdeveloped pictures of this community through the lens of racial stereotype. Summit Entertainment and Stephenie Meyer have made an enormous profit off of La Push as well as Quileute tribe merchandise, yet, unlike those commodifying off their culture, actual residents of La Push did not profit. Due to the exposure from Meyer's novels, the now famous reservation has become overwhelmed by endless tourism. Meyer chose not to acknowledge the real lives, struggles and humanity of the community she profited off of greatly, resulting in the

lives and stories of Quileute losing their authenticity while becoming a passing moment in the timeline of popular culture due to Meyer's appropriation of their culture. Truly, what makes Meyer's portrayal of Native Americans extremely dangerous was her decision to dress up old racist stereotypes for a newer generation of readers as well as her choice to fetishize the physicality of Native men. The constant dance between good vs. bad or vampires vs. werewolves/Natives subconsciously implies that Native Americans, along with their struggles, are as magical and fictional as the creatures in Meyer's novels. These novels, which all have stellar moments, without a doubt sparked a cultural reawakening within literature and showcased the unbelievable heights YA novels can go. However, Meyer is failing her young readers if every time they open one of her novels they're fed dangerous racial ideologies supported by recycled stereotypes and fantastic fantasies while alluding the very real problems faced by actual Native Americans. This erasure while convenient for Meyer's commercial success, is just the latest chapter in a long history of systemic racism, colonization and genocide experienced by Native Americans.

CHAPTER 3

AGENCY, ESCASPISM AND VISIBILITY

"I've waited my whole life for this"- Erik Killmonger in *Black Panther*

I vividly remember seeing Marvel's *Black Panther* opening weekend and feeling washed

over by an intense wave of emotion in my seat; huddled shoulder to shoulder with fellow movie

goers, my life was greatly impacted in that intimate dark theater. It's not an exaggeration when I

say I've waited my entire life for that moment, because it's the literal truth: for decades black

comic book fans have settled for seeing the fantastic realm through the eyes of white characters.

Even though comic books are pioneers in racial representation within Young Adult literature, for

the majority of the history of their popular adaptations they've struggled with equity and

inclusive storytelling. Black comic fans have gotten used to seeing heroes who look like them be

sidelined and habitually occupy the role of witty sidekick, or at times be a part of a large

ensemble while forced to share crucial screen time with their fellow team members. While there

have been anomalies like Marvel's *Blade* or DC Comics' *Static Shock*, the hard truth is that for

years the comic book entertainment industry failed to push movies led by characters of color due

to a bigoted belief that movies led by non-white characters wouldn't sell well or wouldn't be

relatable to the general public. However, in 2018 Marvel dared to challenge the status quo with

Black Panther, then followed by *Spider-man: Into the Spider-Verse*; both of these films not only

acquired huge commercial success plus critical acclaim, but their amazing success showcased

why the comic book industry should be including marginalized voices, instead of leaving them

out. *Black Panther* didn't consist of tokenistic characters or racially ambiguous actors who fit

Hollywood's preferred aesthetic, instead the film illuminated the rich nuances and complexities

of the black experience while tethering the film to authentic storytelling. I was emotional in my seat because on that big screen I witnessed dark skinned black women not being the butt of a joke nor their hair under constant scrutiny, I watched them embody agency, a sight I had waited over two decades for. Moreover, as I was emotional because this film breathed new life into the definition of what a hero could be, forever challenging the notion that heroism was synonymous with whiteness.

The Black Panther that many comic book lovers have gotten the chance to know and love, especially after the 2018 hit movie, didn't emerge fully formed in his initial appearances. Unlike many of his superhero peers that debuted with their quirks and specialty themes already in place, more or less, Black Panther was different. Yes, the central ideas for this character were already there when by introduced Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1966: T'Challa is the king of Wakanda, an African techno-utopia that has evaded colonialism and he has superhuman abilities plus a connection to a panther god. However, the rich intricacies of Wakanda's history and beloved supporting characters, all of which are now engrained into the character's core premise, was a gradual evolution of ideas over the span of fifty years. Altogether with the fact that Black Panther who originated from white male creators and their perceptions of black culture, throughout the decades have been adopted by black creators who as a result, injected authenticity into the narrative. Marvel's first black superhero, an event generations in the making, couldn't have come any sooner because since the birth of this nation, black children have often felt like outsiders in a country their forefathers built; this married with the racial tensions in the civil rights era fueled a desire to feel seen and heard. There was a visceral call for more diverse and well-rounded representation, especially regarding the black community, and Marvel answered the call. Even though Black Panther is the embodiment of themes like black unity and black

pride, we didn't get there without a few hiccups. Douglas Wolk talks about Black Panther's first

appearance in *All of the Marvels*:

> The story itself is problematic in fascinating ways, a mixture of racist tropes and
>
> ingenious inversions of them….Readers' first view of "the Wakandas" is in some
>
> ways an agglomeration of "deepest darkest Africa" and "Africa is a country"
>
> clichés, with spear-carriers and ceremonial dances and awkward Westernisms.
>
> (209)

As a series created by American white men, Black Panther at times has been more about Western

perceptions of Africa or blackness; that's to be expected when individuals attempt to tell stories

depicting a community that they essentially know little about. As a result, we receive narratives

based upon foreign experiences and at times stereotypical perceptions. Thus, Marvel's decision

to involve black creators as well as root authentic storytelling in the series' renovation during the

70's and later on in the 2018 film adaptation was an imperative decision. Wolk discusses the

turning point otherwise known as *Jungle Action #10*:

> This is one of those moments where it's worth thinking about who's telling the
>
> stories in these comics, and how much "telling these stories" means (or doesn't
>
> mean) the same thing as "writing." There's one version of Black Panther's history
>
> where the character spends his first thirty-three years in the hands of white
>
> writers, being entirely the product of white Americans' ideas about Africa, and
>
> very often the vehicle for their stories about American Blackness….There's
>
> another way to look at the character's history, though, where this 1974 issue is a

turning point for Black Panther, the first time one of his stories had a Black

cocreator. (213-214)

Wolk voices the same questions of authenticity previously highlighted in Ashley K. Dallacqua and David E. Low's essay, "'I Never Think of the Girls': Critical Gender Inquiry with Superheroes." It's not only necessary to think how certain characters are represented, but it's also worthwhile to ponder *who* is writing these stories; if agency is found in the writer's room, but this space doesn't reflect the marginalized voices found in its stories, then how can these narratives accurately capture our experiences? Fully comprehending the gravity of topics like grappling with one's racial identity or black pride doesn't happen from mere observation, but from experience. This turning point for Black Panther was not only necessary for the series' longevity, but also for the legacy of this iconic character. The results showcased why it's crucial to have creators whose own experiences not only reflected in the narrative but authenticated the experience for readers who waited generations for Black Panther. As a series centered around a black protagonist now being taken over by black creators, it feels like it's undergoing a rebirth. From director Ryan Coogler insisting on an all-black cast for the successful 2018 adaptation to political essayist Ta-Nehisi Coates' yearlong takeover of the *Black Panther* storyline challenging Wakanda's dated notion of hereditary monarchy, these changes illuminate the important dynamic between inclusive storytelling and authenticity.

Characters of color like King T'Challa or Miles Morales are paramount when considering the undeniable grip comic books have on young readers, because for so many of them those panels are their only exposure to different cultures and a chance at feeling seen. We need characters like them and then some because they assist younger readers who are still constructing

their identities while providing an open forum to discuss systematic issues like racism, poverty, or sexism: a luxury that's becoming scarce to find in American schools. This medium, which is often looked down upon by literature elitists, hosts great academic value and provides children with essential tools to breakdown as well as challenge societal issues. David E. Low's critical essay "Students Contesting 'Colormuteness' through Critical Inquiries into Comics" valiantly argues for the academic value embedded in comics, plus how they act as a bridge for students to utilize critical thinking skills to analyze relevant societal biases and various systematic oppressions. Low's essay highlights the fact that English teachers across America shied away from discussing race or racism due the topic's difficulty; instead, many preferring the lens of historical racism which conveniently places racism in the past, prioritizing white comfort over the feelings of marginalized communities. He states: ""Even though race and ethnicity pervade every aspect of our daily lives, many of us become deeply uncomfortable when the conversation turn to those topics" (3). He continues, that "[f]or many predominantly white Americans, and ELA teachers, it may feel less difficult to discuss race through the lens of historical racism—a calamitous (but bounded) time we've overcome enroute to a 'post-racial' or 'colorblind' era" (19). This suppression of race talks in classrooms that Low dubs "Colormuteness" (19), unfairly polices the voices and feelings of students of color; therefore, Low argues that comic books not only hold a great amount of academic value, but they act as a bridge for students to utilize critical thinking skills to analyze relevant societal biases and various systematic oppressions. This occurs even though many skeptics trivialize comic books. Low argues that the genre's consistent role as the underdog has led to its overwhelming popularity:

> The notion that comics are equated with lightness belies the weighty social
>
> critiques that are frequently borne out through the medium, and it may be the

exclusion of comics from academic spaces imbues comics with power to be

employed in subversive ways. Perhaps it's *because* comics aren't "taken seriously

enough" that the medium has empowered many writers, readers, and artists to

engage in critical discourses unsanctioned in other forms…comics may be

employed to critique the power structures that undervalue them. (21)

Low argues that the exclusion of comics from academic spaces and the habitual snubbing by

adults is what help fuel their undeniable following and enable their critique of dominant values

systems. Adults don't have to understand comics because they weren't made with them in mind;

they're meant for young individuals at a critical point in their lives trying to understand their

complex identities. With the assistance of comics, fans and creators are able to criticize the same

institutions that ignored their voices to begin with. In addition, with the assistance of comics,

students of color can find ways around their school's strict attitude towards race while vocalizing

their feelings on race, racism, and self-identity. Unlike the historical novels found in schools'

curriculums nationwide, comics don't shy away from uncomfortable topics such as racism nor do

their storylines prioritize white comfort over nuanced characters. Many of their protagonists

tackle societal issues because many of their readers are experiencing those same exact issues; as

a result, this empowers these young readers to be the change they want to see and face these

issues head on. Equally important, just seeing the mere humanity of these characters and

witnessing them exist in a space that they're habitually excluded from, normalizes these groups

to even the youngest reader. By putting a marginalized character centerstage it often normalizes

their struggles, experiences, and culture which dominant society would otherwise label as other.

This especially rang true when in 2011, Marvel made headlines by replacing their beloved Peter

Parker (Spider-Man) with an 11-year-old Afro-Latino from Brooklyn named Miles Morales. This

led certain comic book readers, usually older white men, who deemed themselves the gatekeepers of comic book culture to demand an answer to the infamous question: 'when did superhero comics get so political?' In actuality they were demanding an answer from Marvel as to how they could insert an Afro-Latino protagonist in a space that's been solely dominated by white men since the character's conception. Despite the fact that Miles actually represents the diversity in the city he's devoted to saving or the simple fact that legacy characters aren't uncommon within comic books, many have attributed whiteness to the idea of heroism, including those who need these characters the most. Low gives his thoughts on a student who didn't not know Miles Morales existed, but who also didn't know of any black superheroes either:

> Although it surprises me that Kyrie went three years without noticing Miles Morales, his shock that a Black Spider-Man could even exist is nevertheless powerful….As Olivia Cole writes: White men are Superman....Our imagination and subconscious are so saturated with white supremacist notions of goodness, beauty, and heroism, that when confronted head-on with an image of a Black man who is brilliant and kind and normal and who saves the day, we transform into robotic versions of ourselves: Does ... not.. . compute. Hero. . . must... be…white. (22)

Low makes a valid point. It's immensely overwhelming to hear a teenager say he's unaware of the existence of superheroes who look like him. Yes, the *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man* is still fairly a new series and yes we have made obvious strides in the right direction, but we still have miles to go. Every black superhero has to be phenomenal by default; they act as vehicles taking

their race to new heights while chipping away at any biases white America might have and simultaneously winning skeptics over. At the same time, they actively remind readers heroism isn't synonymous with whiteness and they act as representatives for their communities in an industry that has habitually overlooked them; forcing the privileged gatekeepers as well as the comic book industry to acknowledge the changing times. As previously mentioned, *Black Panther* and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* not only blew me away but also made me emotional when I realized I had waited my whole life for this moment. I'm elated to see that 2018 wasn't a singular moment, but instead it's building momentum and challenging how we're represented in comics. Projects like *Ironheart*, *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, *Black Panther 2* as well as *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*, signal a shift in comic book culture. To see a black kid from Brooklyn as Spider-Man felt amazing likewise, it feels amazing to know that generations to follow won't wonder what it's like to have a hero that looks like them. As one enthusiastic student remarks about Miles's vital appeal in Low's essay: "He's like me…a genius . . . the smart one. . . . He's a new legacy!" (22).

CHAPTER 4

WOMEN IN REFRIGERATORS

As a black woman, it often feels like the dual parts of my identity are consistently at odds with my choice to use comics for escapism. Even though my desire to see my blackness represented introduced me to characters like Luke Cage, Black Panther, Miles Morales, and Static Shock, still these characters only captured half of my identity. Therefore, like many female comic fans I sought after female representation within comics with hopes to see my multilayered identity reflected. While characters like Storm, Mystique and DC's Raven instantly became my favorites, like many female fans I struggled to find more options that I could connect with. At times the portrayal of women in comics feels like a mine-field, with readers often searching through female characters who feel more like vehicles of male writers' perceptions about womanhood and female agency, embodied by the fact that women in comics are depicted in a hypersexualized manner, resulting in their bodies appearing almost mythological. This forces female comic fans to inquire who is representing us and wonder *who are these characters actually meant for?* As Matthew Facciani, Peter Warren, and Jennifer Vendemia states in "A Content-Analysis of Race, Gender, and Class in American Comic Books": "The normative portrayal of women and minorities in comic books has tended to reflect simplified, exaggerated, and immature view of gender norms and race relations, although the trend has seen some improvement into the so-called "Modern Age of Comics." (217) Indeed, in fact over the last two decades successful superhero blockbuster films have become a cornerstone in popular cinema while showcasing characters that might've been overlooked by a new generation of fans. While these efforts have, to an extent, moved the needle for this necessary conversation regarding representation it doesn't erase the fact that we're still *talking* about a solution to this generational

problem. Still as an avid lover of comic books as well as their various adaptations, the underlying

consensus that this industry is built by men for men renders me and millions of other female fans

invisible. This consensus is embedded in the complaints that ensued when Marvel published *Iron*

Man with a black woman protagonist or in the disdain emitted by male fans about the possibility

of Shuri taking up the mantle of Black Panther in the anticipated sequel, despite it being canon.

The fact is that it's never been about 'waiting our turn' or these characters 'ruining' the legacy of

their male predecessors, it's that we were deemed unfit to occupy roles habitually occupied by

men. Moreover, as explained by Ashley K. Dallacqua and David E. Low in their essay "'I Never

Think of the Girls': Critical Gender Inquiry with Superheroes," although the comic book

industry has been very successful in reaching a diverse audience, the execution across its various

mediums is at times questionable; specifically, the genre's habitual decision to tether heroism to

white straight men while overlooking their female characters and readers:

> At the same time, Marvel has had ongoing problems of representation in both its
>
> comic book and cinematic universes. In recent years the publisher canceled
>
> numerous "diverse" titles (i.e., comic books not starring straight White male
>
> characters, such as *World of Wakanda*, *Mockingbird*, *Iceman*, *America*, and *She-*
>
> *Hulk*), blaming diversity for poor sales (Shepherd). Black Widow, one of the
>
> cinematic Avengers' six original—and only female—members, has not received a
>
> solo movie, while four of her male Avengers colleagues have starred in a
>
> combined eleven standalone films. (77)

Although comic books have been trailblazers in racial representation, the comic book industry

has an infamous reputation of blatantly ignoring its growing legion of female fans. These actions

by comic book giant Marvel illuminate a reoccurring issue in this industry, that creators believe that heroism and strength are tethered to straight white men. This biased attitude not only excludes female readers, but also limits the characters within these books and adaptations. The visibility of women in comics, or often lack thereof, is ultimately tied to the creators' fundamental disregard for their female fans' feelings. Since the debut of Dallacqua and Low's essay three years ago, Black Widow *finally* gained her own solo feature film, joining the company of *Captain Marvel* as Marvel's second female-led feature film; however, since 2019 Marvel released three more feature films with a male lead. The comic book giant citing diversity as the reason for poor sales is extremely hard to believe since films like *Black Widow* showcased impressive pandemic-era showing with an opening weekend box office of $80,366,312. Films like *Black Widow*, *Captain Marvel* or *Black Panther* experienced huge financial success by having well-rounded female heroes and not disregarding their female fans. It's normal for young readers to utilize comics as a type of mirror, an instrument that allows them to see not only societal flaws but a clearer picture of their evolving identities; therefore, it's imperative that everyone feels seen.

However, female characters are often used to propel a male hero's story further; as a result, the constant disregard and mistreatment of these characters suggests how the comic book industry views its female readers. Male writers inflict trauma and pain upon female characters such as rape, torture or death, their disempowerment acting as a source of shock value for their readers. This reoccurring trope of the removal of female super heroines' autonomy has been labeled "Women in Refrigerators," referencing the predominance of this trope throughout comic book history. While there are a plethora of examples, its origin is often tied to DC Comics' *Green Lantern* #54 (1994). In the infamous comic, Green Lantern's girlfriend, Alex DeWitt, is

brutally beaten and strangled to death by a villain named Major Force; ultimately, her

dismembered body is discovered in the refrigerator by the obviously distraught Green Lantern.

The panel solely focuses upon Kyle Rayner's (Green Lantern) reaction to this gruesome

discovery, additionally centralizing his trauma while concealing Alex's. Even though this issue

was published over twenty-five years ago, still female comic book readers find themselves

overlooked or invisible like their favorite female heroines, such as Alex DeWitt. In 1999, comic

writer Gail Simone composed a list of female characters who've fallen victim to this

disempowerment trend, moreover the title of this list and popularization of the term "women in

refrigerators" no doubt was greatly influenced by *Green Lantern #54*. In "Fangirls in

Refrigerators: The Politics of (in)Visibility in Comic Book Culture" written by Suzanne Scott,

Scott discusses this trope and what it symbolizes:

> Gail Simone created a list of the disproportionate number of "superheroines who
>
> have been either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the
>
> refrigerator"…Simone concludes that, beyond the potential hostility these
>
> representations might breed for women venturing into their LCS (local comic
>
> shop or store), what is more disheartening is that "there's a feeling of
>
> inconsequence, of afterthought, to these stories." (1,3)

This trope shows that female heroes, women with undeniable agency, aren't above being

dehumanized, mutilated, and disregarded without a second thought. As Simone points out, this

not only creates an aggressive atmosphere for these heroines, but also potentially for the women

who enter these spaces dominated by men such as comic shops or conventions. By treating the

storylines of beloved heroines as an afterthought or tethering their value to solely male

consumers' pleasure, comic publishers lose their chance at inviting more female readers to the genre and risk losing the readers they already have if they keep hindering their heroines.

Sexism in the comic book industry isn't a new topic, and the Women in Refrigerators trope is just another example of systemic biases being enabled by harmful tropes in literature. The character development of several heroines has been hindered due to this trope and ultimately, sexism within the comic book industry; for example, Captain Marvel, one of Marvel's most popular heroines has had some issues with her development. Margaret Robbins's "Female Representation in Comics and Graphic Novels: Exploring Classroom Study with Critical Visual Literacy" highlights the issues that have plagued Captain Marvel's storylines:

> [T]he original Ms. Marvel made a re-appearance in 2006, nearly 30 years after
> she made her original appearance in the Marvel Universe. Within this time period,
> "she had run into many obstacles that prevented her from reaching her full
> potential—rape, amnesia, sexism, alcoholism, and worst of all, bad writing." (13)

It's unfortunate to see, but not shocking, that Captain Marvel one of the most powerful beings in the Marvel Universe has struggled to flourish for decades due to "fridging" and countless other obstacles. Despite the fact she's immensely powerful, she spent years having her agency challenged whether it be through sexual assault or the fact that writers finally dropped the "Ms." thirty-six years after her debut, even though she's an alien military officer. Another example of a female character fading into the background would be the handling of Gwen Stacy's character arc in The Amazing Spider-Man #121 (1973). In this issue, Norman Osborn puts on the Green Goblin costume once again to take out his revenge on Spider-Man for his son's, Harry Osborn, drug use. The Green Goblin kidnaps Gwen Stacy and during the fight between the iconic

adversaries, the Goblin drops Gwen Stacy from the George Washington Bridge. It's left unclear

to readers if Gwen died instantly from the fall or from Spider-Man's webbing during his attempt

to save her. To add insult to injury, Gwen dies just ninety issues after her first appearance in The

Amazing Spider-Man #31 (1965). In Kylee Kilbourne's "With Great Power: Examining the

Representation and Empowerment of Women in DC and Marvel Comics" informs us that Stan

Lee wasn't involved in this decision, but rather it was his succeeding script writer for this series,

Gerry Conway. Kilbourne also sheds light on Conway's decision stating that "Conway found

Mary Jane Watson, the feisty red-head of the series, to be a more exciting love-interest for Peter

Parker"; this, married with Conway's belief that "Gwen didn't have an edge" (31). Essentially

Gwen's main purpose was serving Peter's narrative and when it was believed she could no

longer complete her task, she was disregarded like trash. Gwen like so many other female

characters in comics as well as their fans, were perceived as expendable and treated as such. Due

to fans' wave of disappointment combined with Stan Lee's pleas, later on "Conway revived

Gwen's character in *The Amazing Spider-Man #144* as a clone. But this Gwen is also written out

of existence to allow for Peter and Mary Jane's relationship" (31). This just proves that even in

the afterlife, Gwen's main purpose was serving Peter's narrative.

I Am The (Wo)Man Who Can

Even though some may argue this reoccurring disempowerment trope can be utilized as a source of motivation for a heroine's quest or introduction to heroism, it's used "more commonly, as the driving force of a superman's rage" (Kilbourne 30). The narratives of these characters don't belong to them, or even to their female fans; they belongs to the male writers in charge who are in charge of the future of these heroines. While some of these characters have been revived or revamped, much to the credit of a new wave of women writers, it begs us to ask the question why bother putting these characters through that in the first place? Nonetheless, the survival and reclaimed agency of these characters are attributed to writers who refused to see them remain victims of violence. For example, Gwen Stacy's crucial revival in *Edge of Spider-Verse #2* (2014) showcased her as Spider-Gwen, also known as Spider-Woman. In *Edge of Spider-Verse #2* the roles are switched between Gwen and our neighborhood web slinger; it's Gwen who's bitten by an experimental spider that gave Peter Parker his powers on our planet, Earth-616. The rearranging of the power structure was not only a fresh take, but immensely liberating to this character that was always overlooked. Not to mention, Spider-Gwen's 2015 series written by Jason Latour and Robbi Rodriguez which continued the storyline in Edge of Spider-Verse, combined with Gwen starring in series like *Spider-Gwen*, *Radioactive Spider-Gwen* as well as *Venomverse* showcases the limitless potential of this character. With Jason Latour adding about the heroine's second chance, "It just seemed like there would be a lot of catharsis in Gwen as the hero, instead of the victim" (Kilbourne 35).

Furthermore, Captain Marvel and the new Ms. Marvel have also been empowered greatly in their latest storylines. In *Captain Marvel #1* (2014) Carol Danvers proceeds to tell one of her

male suitors that their relationship is "nobody's business! And I don't want to make a thing out of it until we're sure" (Robbins 13); Carol prioritizing her career over her romantic relationship reflects an experience so many women today are currently going through. By prioritizing her career she's exercising agency, which is a major step for modern portrayal of women in comics. The introduction of Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel in 2014, built upon this momentum and showcased the importance of characters with nuance. Kamala is a Pakistani-American teenager who, like many individuals on and off the comic book page, struggles with the multiple layers of her identity. She struggles to find a balance between her cultural obligations and her duties as a hero. Possessed with the incredible ability to shapeshift, but conflicted about her longing to attain the aesthetic attributed with heroism—cape, tights, blonde hair, whiteness—perhaps the most important message of Kamala's story is self-acceptance. This is felt in the third issue of *Ms. Marvel* when her friend Bruce states: "'Who cares what people *expect*? Maybe they expect some perfect blonde, what I need—I mean, what *we* need—is *you*'" (Robbins 13). Kamala eventually stops hiding behind the face of Carol Danvers and feels comfortable enough in her own skin. Kamala's powers are never sexualized, and she's granted the freedom to be a child. The writers don't prioritize physical looks over her powers; instead, they realize that a powerful heroine's beauty is in her agency. This is a strong departure from the unrealistic supermodel poses fans caught heroines doing mid-battle, Kamala heals faster in her own skin and is more comfortable wearing her own 'face,' illuminating that her agency is tethered to self-acceptance. As Wolk points out: "After all those decades of trying to reconstruct the elusive recipe that had made Spider-Man work…Marvel finally landed on it again with *Ms. Marvel*. Kamala Khan is, effectively, a twenty-first-century Peter Parker" (306). Kamala embodies the underdog story and readers follow along as she attempts to find her place in the world; Kamala wasn't born into

privilege; moreover, she's trying to figure out her dual identity like many of her legions of

readers. Ultimately, she represents a new age hero for a modern age comic reader.

CONCLUSION

In closing, these genres' fantastical elements embedded in their much-needed social commentary has not only made these genres relevant for those inside and outside of their targeted demographic, but their status has evolved from 'underdog' to the strongest pillars in literature. However, if these genres are to continue its longevity those involved in their production need to remove 'gatekeepers' and confront the systematic as well as social biases that have bled into these beloved genres. Authors within Young Adult Literature and comics need to prioritize inclusive storytelling over recycled narratives, caricatures, or harmful stereotypes to evolve with a newer generation of readers. The voices of people of color, women, the disabled and LGBTQIA+ individuals must be included to not only create better art, but also to ensure everyone can enjoy the privilege of escapism: "When readers who are White, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual and able-bodied enter the fantastic dream, they are empowered and afforded a sense of transcendence that can be elusive within the real world" (Thomas 23). These genres has the ability to empower those who normally struggle to achieve agency in the real world due to systemic biases, instead of reinforcing privilege by obscuring marginalized voices. Although, these genres has a long way to go it has made some strides and it's almost unrecognizable from its origins at times. Marvel's upcoming anticipated projects like Diseny+'s *Ms. Marvel* and *Ironheart* series, *Captain Marvel 2*, plus *Black Panther 2* don't erase the abhorrent treatment minorities faced within this genre, but collectively they signal a change; moreover, they rightfully highlight that this generation fights for their seat at the table:

> [F]rom Harry Potter to Hamilton, previously White cisgender heterosexual
>
> characters…have begun to be imagined as Others. The rising generation is not

only inscribing themselves into the narrative but also demanding to be in the

center of all their worlds, textual, visual…and otherwise. (Thomas 156)

Everyone should have the opportunity to experience escapism, to see their experiences reflected

on the screen or on the page and this upcoming generation of readers and creatives are making

that happen.

WORKS CITED

Adelia, Nadia. "Stereotyping and Othering of Non-White Characters in 'Harry Potter' Movies."

Petra Christian University, 2019, https://doi.org/10.9744/katakita.7.1.14-21.

Buccafusca, Lisa, "The Potential of Youth: An analysis of race and gender representations and

their social implications in Young Adult film adaptations", 2015. *Undergraduate Honors

Theses*. Paper 972.

Burke, Brianna. "The Great American Love Affair: Indians in the Twilight Saga." Bringing

Light to Twilight (2011): 207–219. Web.

Dallacqua, Ashley k., and David e. Low. "'I Never Think of the Girls': Critical Gender Inquiry

With Superheroes." *The English Journal*, 2019, pp. 76–84,

www.researchgate.net/publication/333659075_Dallacqua_A_K_Low_D_E_2019_I_neve

r_think_of_the_girls_Critical_gender_inquiry_with_superheroes_English_Journal_1085_

76-84.

Facciani, Matthew, et al. "A Content-Analysis of Race, Gender, and Class in American Comic

Books." *Race, Gender & Class Journal*, 2015, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26505357.

Kilbourne, Kylee, "With Great Power: Examining the Representation and Empowerment of

Women in DC and Marvel Comics", 2017. *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 433.

https://dc.etsu.edu/honors/433

Low, David e. "Students Contesting 'Colormuteness' Through Critical Inquiries Into Comics."

The English Journal, 2017, www.jstor.org/stable/26359458.

Robbins, Margaret. "Female Representation in Comics and Graphic Novels: Exploring

    Classroom Study With Critical Visual Literacy." *Signal*, 2016, pp. 11–16,

    www.researchgate.net/publication/311288511_SIGNAL_Journal_381?enrichId=rgreq-

    f2dfe6ff6dd6c546d0ac9e93e6dd9c44-

    XXX&enrichSource=Y292ZXJQYWdlOzMxMTI4ODUxMTtBUzo0MzQ2MjMyNjA5

    NTg3MjBAMTQ4MDYzMzY2ODY5OA%3D%3D&el=1_x_2&_esc=publicationCover

    Pdf.

Samuels, Barbara G. "Young Adult Literature: Young Adult Novels in the Classroom?" *The*

    English Journal, vol. 72, no. 4, 1983. *Crossref*, https://doi.org/10.2307/817086.

Sciurba, Katie. "Journeys Toward Textual Relevance: Male Readers of Color and the

    Significance of Malcolm X and Harry Potter." *Journal of Literacy Research*, vol. 49, no.

    3, 2017, pp. 371–92. *Crossref*, https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296x17718323.

Scott, Suzanne. "Fangirls in Refrigerators: The Politics of (in)Visibility in Comic Book Culture."

    Transformative Works and Cultures, vol. 13, 2013. *Crossref*,

    https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0460.

Thomas, Ebony Elizabeth. *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to*

    the Hunger Games. NYU Press, 2020.

Tunnell, Michael o., and James s. Jacobs. "The Origins and History of American Children's

    Literature." *The Reading Teacher*, 2013, www.jstor.org/stable/24573537.

Wolk, Douglas. *All of the Marvels: A Journey to the Ends of the Biggest Story Ever Told*.

    Penguin Press, 2021.