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"WHO SAYS STORM IS THE ONLY BLACK SUPERHEROINE?":
AN INTERPRETATIVE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE BLACK SUPERHEROINE

by

GRACE D. GIPSON

Under the Direction of Jonathan Gayles

ABSTRACT

The study examines how race and gender stereotypes in popular culture shape the perception of the Black superheroine. This study also explores stereotypes and gender roles and how they impact Black female and male college students' ages 18-38 and their imagination of the Black superheroine. As the status of popular culture grows, the generation of today's college student still remains regular consumers. Thus it was necessary to use a convenience sample of thirty-two African American male and female college-age students from four African American Studies undergraduate courses at Georgia State University that took part in a Superheroine questionnaire, in which they designed their own Black superheroine. This research employs an interpretative textual analysis research design to collect and analyze the data in which significant themes, phrases, and sentences are extracted.

INDEX WORDS: Stereotypes, Popular culture, Black superheroine, Race, Gender, Black/African American

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AN INTERPRETATIVE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE BLACK SUPERHEROINE

by

GRACE D. GIPSON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2013

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2013

“WHO SAYS STORM IS THE ONLY BLACK SUPERHEROINE?”:

AN INTERPRETATIVE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE BLACK SUPERHEROINE

by

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Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2013

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my two favorite 'superheroines', my Mama Doris Gipson and my Grandma Susie Gipson (RIP). First let me say, Mama thank you for taking this journey along with me!! Your love and dedication is a major part of why I am the budding scholar that I am today. Grandma, you believed in me from day one and made sure to let me know; this I will never forget. Your sweet spirit is a part of what got me through, and I am forever grateful. It soothes my spirit and soul to know that you are looking down on me SMILING!! Even though you are only here with me in spirit, you have never left my side.

As I have matriculated through this program I am strengthening my voice, and as I move forward in my academic career I aim to give a true voice to these Black female superheroines. I also dedicate this to the ancestors whose soldiers, which I stand on. Thank you for your sacrifice, dedication, and commitment, which empowers me day after day. And to the Black women superheroines that exist, and those not yet created…THIS IS FOR YOU!!

"Images and imagery have always played a major role in our lives. What we can imagine, we can often create. What we can imagine ourselves as, we can often become. Everything, even our concept of God, comes from the imagination. But what happens when our collective imagination is limited intentionally or vicariously? What happens when we are unable to see ourselves in the image of a mother, father, doctor, lawyer, plumber, hero, superhero, or a god? What happens when the images to which we are exposed are those that limit our human potential?"

~A New Direction in Original American Mythology (1992)

"Image is what colonizes the mind." ~John Henrik Clark

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I also must give thanks to the following professors/faculty and staff Drs. Akinyele Umoja, Audrea Dunham, Makungu Akinyela, Maurice Hobson, and Lashawnda Pittman your guidance, support and wisdom is priceless!! Thank you to Tiffany Bullock, Marquel Mosby, and Mrs. Belinda Futrell you guys definitely worked many miracles for me, and I am FOREVER indebted to you!! And last, Kaniqua Robinson thank you for taking the time (during your doctoral program) to read and make suggestions to my document, trust me you are a God-send!!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Comic books have often been dismissed as less relevant pop culture texts. However, academic scholars are now re-considering comic books and graphic novels as complex texts deserving of serious scholarly study. Even though specific research on comic book characters has begun to emerge there still remains a need to fill the gap, which includes further examination of the Black superheroine character. These complex characters and their stories offer an opportunity to move beyond the surface narrative of the comic book pages. One might say the most fascinating aspect about the comic book world is that this particular medium has a way of strategically telling a variety of narratives from a diverse group of characters. Furthermore, there is a need for this type of research to take place in order to specifically examine the Black superheroine in comic books. This is the case especially now that recently Black superheroines are slowly becoming specific topics of interest and study.

Background

Superheroes have played a significant role in "presenting idealized projections of ourselves as physically powerful, amazing and fantastic versions of ourselves; as well as serving as a roadway to escapist fantasy or funhouse mirror reflections of our desires to create bigger-than-life personas that can exert our will and power in the world" (Nama, 2009, pg. 134). Overall, the superhero plays a huge role, both positively and adversely, in the formation of our thoughts, beliefs, and ideas within popular culture.

As a life long fan of comic books and superheroes, I have always been eager to see what female (particularly Black) character might grace the cover or be featured in the latest issues of Marvel or DC enterprise. Unfortunately, this does not happen frequently. In spite of this disappointment, it should be noted that there are quite a few Black superheroines who serve as Black female representations. They include such characters as Monica Rambeau ("Captain Marvel II"), Misty Knight, Martha Washington, Raquel Ervin ("Rocket"), and the more popular Storm from the X-Men series. At the very least, focusing on Black women (superheroines) in this study exposes a unique dynamic between race and gender (George, 2004). While

Black superheroines in popular culture may seem like they *'kick an awful lot of butt'* a closer look reveals that their roles have not departed from the typical stereotypes; essentially these characters are at risk of descending into madness, drug abuse, and other social ills as they are fated to navigate the confines of poverty and war with infinite resolve (Saini, 2009). The question is then asked, "What are comic book artists communicating about Black women to younger male and female readers who participate in the cultural universe of superheroes?" So, this research has the potential to expose adherence to or departure from typical racial and gender stereotypes and potentially influence young Black females and males to step outside the "White" mainstream and create alternate viewpoints.

Since the genre's inception, women have always played a role as superheroes in graphic novels and comic books, and simultaneously they have also been constant subjects of controversy. Within the various storylines of these popular comic books and graphic novels, the role of women have primarily been described as supporting characters with limited leadership roles. "They are almost always subordinate to their male counterparts. When in battles, they faint, overexert themselves, and worry about smudging their makeup" (Sievers, 2003, pg. 10). Despite this, there have been some small improvements made in their physical appearance and character portrayal. Because of some of these superheroine characters being physically strong and capable of defeating bad guys, they send the message that women in general are neither weak nor passive. Lavin (1998) and Rimmels (1995) both agree that comics today are showing improvements by including more strong, competent, independent heroines. Consequently, even though these small steps are being made toward more varied representations of the Black female heroine within popular culture, these Black female characters are still depicted through racial and gender stereotypes. Although gender is the most prominent characteristic in analyzing heroines; an additional analysis of race is needed to fully examine the Black superheroine.

So often in today's society Black women have been tagged as 'superwomen'. For example, in Michele Wallace's 1979 iconic and controversial book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman,* Wal-

lace challenges the sexism that Black women face in the Black community and society. It would be one of the first books to critique the interactions between systems of race and patriarchy that were in place. Wallace explains that there is this "intricate web of mythology" that encloses the Black woman. And what emerges is what she describes as:

> "…a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work…the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves…essentially she is a superwoman" (Wallace, 1979, pg. 107).

Because of this limiting image of a strong woman that Wallace describes, it is very difficult to relinquish this myth of the 'superwoman' and just simply be a Black woman. In conjunction with the superwoman status, the strong and sturdy "built Ford tough" archetype has been used as a universal metaphor of Black womanhood (Muhammad, 2012). In a 2009 interview with *The Root*, the late popular feminist writer/author Erica Kennedy once said being a Black woman (feminist) was "tapping into our unique female attributes and living authentically instead of defining ourselves by male standards of success" (pg. 2). This call for self-definition and authenticity, even in 2012, remains an urgent issue in today's popular culture depictions. In addition, this same thought can be applied towards the Black superheroine as this character should not be defined by the norms of White male and female superheroes, nor raced and sexed stereotypes. Instead the Black superheroine character should be given an original and or authentic identity. Cooper (1995) further explains this notion of the Black woman's place in society,

> "In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both woman question and a race problem, and as yet an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both" (pg. 45).

Essentially Black women already have an organically grown, traditional model of female power that they use to move through the world, however the expectations that are placed upon them are often times exhausting (Parks, 2010). Even today, according to Guy-Sheftall (1995) Black women must deal with the simultaneous struggle for not just black liberation, but gender equality as well. "The Black woman needs an analysis. She belongs to the only group in this country, which has not asserted its identity" (Wallace, 1979,

pg. 176). In today's society there is an unfortunate imbalance for Black women to live an original life in the midst of being defined by any and everyone in society, frequently in unpleasant ways (i.e., stereotypes of black women being labeled as fat, unattractive, angry, mean-spirited, broke, uneducated, materialistic, sick, unmarriageable or emasculating).

Such extremes as the superwoman, Jezebel, Sapphire, Mammy, and others are representations of how common stereotypes are turned into archetypes and become the ideas that we learn about regarding contemporary American social structure (Dunne, 2007). As it relates to comic books and graphic novels, they typically consist of a unique blend of complex narratives and visual art, which make them very popular and appealing. However this form of art embeds and reinforces numerous stereotypes about women — stereotypes about the "ideal" feminine body image: long hair, large breasts, thin waist, toned buttocks, and long legs. Unfortunately, these stereotypes are misleading because they are setting a culturally limited standard for beauty in women; and now that superhero characters are being portrayed in Hollywood films, a cult following of readers (both youth and adults) is beginning to emerge and becoming attracted to these comic books. Ultimately over eighty years after the first female appearance in a comic book[1], it is imperative to present more useful, grounded, and humane representations rather than racial and gendered stereotypes. This is especially particular for Black women who are subject to race and gender stereotypes in pop culture representations across genres and in real life.

Problem Statement

For the purpose of this study, popular culture was defined as the collection of arts, entertainment, beliefs and values that are shared by large sections of society. According to Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2005), "everyday behavior becomes the cultural stuff that is mined by Black popular culture and a mass media with an insatiable appetite for new material" (pg. 17). Thus I am led to ask the following

[1] Fantomah not only was she the first female comic character to appear in comic books she would also be

question, *"What would I know about Black women if everything I learned came from popular culture representations and depictions?"* As Singer (2002) indicates, "the stereotypes through which American popular culture often interprets and represents racial identity operate not only as tools of defamation but also as vehicles for far more subtle manipulations of race" (pg. 107). So it is important to understand the impact that popular culture has on how we define ourselves as well as others. More specifically, there has been much discussion on high rates of body image disturbance among Western (including African American) girls and women (ex. Cash & Henry, 1995; Rodlin, Silberstein & Striegel-Moore, 1984) and it is not uncommon for researchers and activist to place at least part of the blame for this discontent on the media and its heavily idealized images of female beauty (ex. Anderson & DiDomenico, 1992; Becker & Hamburg, 1996; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999; Tiggemann & Pickeing, 1996; Wegner, Hartmann, & Geist, 2000).

In accordance with the theme of Black women (gender) in popular culture it should be acknowledged that feminism and feminist media studies tend to privilege gender, White women in particular, over other social categories of experience, such as race and class (hooks, 1990;Dines, 1995; Dines & Humez, 2003). Nevertheless, Black feminist scholars have acknowledged the neglect which women of color, specifically Black women, have experienced through their selective inclusion in the writings of feminist cultural analysis (hooks, 1990; Bobo & Seiter, 1991; Valdivia, 1995). It is from this perspective that we begin our discussion of the Black superheroine representation in popular culture. Scholars have studied black female representation in a variety of media contexts. Meyers (2004) used discourse analysis to examine the representation of violence against African American women in local TV news coverage during "Freaknik," a spring break ritual held in Atlanta, Georgia, throughout the 1990s. This study would conclude that the news "portrayed most of its victims as stereotypic Jezebels whose lewd behavior provoked assault" (p. 95).

Andi Zeisler (2008) co-founder and editorial/creative director of *Bitch: Feminist Response of Pop Culture* magazine further states that popular culture cannot be shelved as just another way to entertain the mass audiences. Furthermore, in popular culture, race and gender stereotypical images overwhelmingly

create unattainable ideals and standards that people cannot possibly hope to achieve. An intervention is necessary in order to create alternative narratives and storylines of the Black superheroine and to bring together Black women's reality—their lived experiences—within their portrayal in popular culture (George, 2004). Thus it is significant to examine the relationship between popular culture images and racial & gender stereotypes. The barrier that once existed between high and low cultures "has been whittled away to the thinnest of shards" and has become a context of not only social, but academic value and influence (Zeisler, 2008, pg. 5). As a result, popular culture provides a domain of analysis for the Black superheroine (DeGraffenreid, 2011).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine how race and gender stereotypes in popular culture shape how the Black superheroine is imagined and understood through an interpretative textual analysis approach. The study explores stereotypes and gender roles within popular culture and how they influence Black female and male college students' perception of the Black superheroine. A qualitative research approach is used to identify participants' physical characteristics of a Black superheroine and discuss their interpretation of these identifiers. Also allowing the students' to speak for themselves, they (students) will be able to explain the origins and significance of their selected superhero characteristics in the context of popular culture. As a result, I hope this study leads to a greater awareness of Black female stereotypes in popular culture as well as advocate present and future scholars to further critique and analyze these images.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies not only in the analysis and critique of popular culture, specifically comic books, and the problematic racial and gender representations in these texts; but rather in its ability to fill a gap in current research specifically about depictions and portrayals of Black superheroines. As a Black, middle class female who is an avid consumer of comic books, graphic novels and superhero culture,

the researcher identifies with the challenges of race and gender roles within today's society. Unfortunately, African American women have been forced to combat dual stereotypes of race and gender (Yarbrough & Bennett, 2000). When these images repeatedly present over-simplified conceptions about social and gender roles, occupational pursuits, or other aspects of life, their influence on human development becomes a cause for concern.

Furthermore, this research explores how representations of racial and gender stereotypes in the media are of great importance because of their impact on the socialization of young adults (Fitzpatrick & McPherson, 2010). Few sources (Inness, 1999; Knight, 2010; Madrid, 2009; Ryan, 2006; Saini, 2009), particularly outside the academy, have specifically addressed the Black superheroine. In many regards, the literature focuses on a select group of male superheroes. And although this serves as an important source of information, it does not tackle the various questions concerning the Black superheroine within popular culture. In addition, previous research on this topic has criticized Black superheroines for being one-dimensional and perpetuating several stereotypes, including that of the mythical superwoman and the hyper-emotional, overly aggressive Black woman (Johnson, 2003).

Finally, despite the fact that there are more representations of African American females available for consumption within mass media and popular culture, the substance of these images has changed little over the past century (Gillespie, 1993; Staples, 1994; Weinberg and Williams, 1988: Wyatt, 1991). Existing research (Inness, 1999; Knight 2010; Madrid, 2009) has not provided a diverse discussion that expounds on the relationship of race and gender as it relates to the Black superheroine in popular culture. The exoticizing of African American women as wild, sexually promiscuous, and amoral continues to be normalized by descriptors that are widely circulated, accepted, and used to frame ideas about this population (hooks, 1992). Exploring these gender and racial roles and stereotypes, amongst college age students will allow for them to either reframe and/or re-examine their perceptions and their influence, within popular culture. Thus, this qualitative study will also potentially offer a unique contribution and discussion to the discipline of Afri-

can American Studies. Further research will add to the discipline of African American Studies as it further explores issues of racial and gender differences and stereotypes in relation to popular culture. This research will also help to identify potential messages and approaches that can be used to educate the dynamics of Black female body images and also demonstrate the importance of examining Black-oriented comic book narratives within popular culture that have been overlooked by the mainstream literature. In addition it takes into consideration the concern and relationship of gender (particularly female) and racial differences, which is seldom addressed in prior research.

Research Questions

1) How is popular culture reflected in the perceptions of the Black superheroine?
2) How do African American male and female college students imagine the Black superheroine?
3) How do racial and gender stereotypes in popular culture shape the creation of the Black superheroine?

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

This research study used sociologist Patricia Hill Collins' concept the "new racism", as a framework, which is introduced in her 2005 text *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. Collins (2005) reminds us of the relationship, for African Americans, between gender and race is deepened, thus producing a Black gender ideology that forms ideas about Black femininity and Black masculinity. With such hypersexual images as hip-hop artist's Nicki Minaj's exposed breasts, thin waist, and large buttocks in the music videos "Beez in the Trap" and Nelly's provocative and controversial "Tip Drill" video, Black women stand at the "crossroads" of derogatory race and gender roles and images. These images are also occasionally used to show that there is nothing about Black women's features that makes them inherently different, more masculine, more sexual, or more abnormal than other women. However, media and popular culture have placed these features under a microscope to be further scrutinized. This is an ideal example of how the intersection of race and gender can outline certain thoughts of what it means to be feminine (and possibly masculine) in relation to African Americans.

Collins asserts that there is a complex interconnection between racism and sexism. As a result of this challenging connection finding solutions has been problematic without seeing both on equal terms. Collins (2005) explains that we are in a post-civil rights era, and sexism is treated as a secondary issue to resolve once the more demanding problems of racism has been solved. As a result, issues of gender have now emerged as a prominent feature of the new racism. Therefore it is crucial to recognize the social, political, and global issues involved in depicting racial and gender roles within pop culture, particularly the Black female (superheroine).

Collins defines the concept of the "new racism" as an issue that deals with gender-specific contours of racism. More specifically, it can be defined as racism, which is based upon cultural rather than biological values with roots in signification, ideas, and mythologies. The new racism is a concept that focuses on African Americans and the relationship between gender and race. Race and gender are two themes frequently discussed within popular culture scholarship. The concept of the "new racism" is applicable to pop culture and the Black superheroine and allows for further examination of the politics of gender-specific experiences and its relationship with racial inequalities. As a whole, Collins (2005) views racism as a "gender-specific phenomenon" in which both racism and sexism have an effect on the other and must be dealt with as a joint effort and not separately. This affects individual's cultural beliefs as well as individual's sense of themselves as men and women.

This concept of the new racism plays a role in how African Americans engage Black gender roles and stereotypes within popular culture as well as social and political issues (both global and domestic) within society. Since this research study sought to examine racial and gender stereotypes as well as explore gender roles impact within popular culture, as it relates to the Black superheroine, this concept spoke to how external images are internalized and acted upon. Using Collins concept of the new racism, I analyzed how popular culture messages, which are communicated as their own reality, impact Black female and male college students' perception of the Black superheroine. Through Collins' concept of the new racism I

describe the attributes of the Black superheroine, and explain the importance of these characteristics in the context of Black women's geo/political/social reality, and explore the significance of these attributes in the contemporary context of the Black female lived experience. Thus asking the following question, "How do Black men and women college students imagine the Black superheroine in popular culture?"

Research has shown that television, particularly entertainment programming, is the most important source of information and socialization for African American adolescents and young adults (Comstock and Scharrer, 1999; Hazel-Ford Tess and Sarvela, 1992). According to Collins (2005), Black popular culture has seen a significant amount of growth within mass media, thus creating alarming gender and racial ideologies. With such celebrities as Jennifer Lopez, Nikki Minaj, Karrine Steffans, Rhianna, and Kim Kardashian appearing in film/television, magazines and music videos their sexualized physicality demonstrates how the concept of the new racism can be seen as subordinate, objectified, limited, and hyper-sexualized standards for women. In essence, the Black superheroine has also been subjected to these same standards, but just in the format of comic books.

It should be noted that stereotypical images of African American women frequently include physical depictions, which provide implied messages about what is considered attractive (Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010). The misrepresentations of Black women, in popular culture, is a long-standing image that has been present since the slavery era and the creation of the Jezebel stereotype of the hyper-sexualized, de-valued black woman. Unfortunately, the Black superheroine has become victim to these gender and racial ideologies that exist within popular culture.

When examining stereotypical images of African Americans, particularly women, the role of economics, politics, demography, class relations, and racist ideologies in the prevalent patterns of stratification; and the role of black leadership and cultural strategies in reducing inequality should be considered. Collins (2005) explains, "globalization, trans-nationalism, and the growth of hegemonic ideologies within mass media provide the context for a new racism that has catalyzed changes within African, Black American, and

African-Diasporic societies" (pg. 54). Popular culture's influence on the self-perception of young women and men is apparent in all cultures; however, the degree to which it affects Black college females and male will be the main focal point for this particular study. Therefore, by moving race and gender into the center of analysis this will highlight African Americans interaction within their communities as well as reveal new angles of vision on popular culture as well as how these systems interconnect (Collins, 2005).

Overall, Collins' work recommends a more progressive type of politics for Black Americans. This includes an honest discourse about the way stereotypical imagery and controlling racist, gender, and sexist ideology have harmed African Americans in the past. This can also lead to a discussion of how African Americans might progress beyond these ideas and their manifestations to become active change agents in their own communities. By using the new racism as a conceptual framework for this study of the Black superheroine, I hope to cultivate a discussion specifically regarding the connection between popular culture and gender and racial stereotypes. Making this connection in conjunction to bridging the inequality gaps could potentially improve the quality of life, and ensure the empowerment of African American to move forward towards a balance between racial and gender equality.

Chapter Summary

This exploratory study sought to answer the central research question of "How are Black superheroines depicted and represented in popular culture?" In order to begin answering the above-mentioned question, race and gender are two key terms that must be examined [along with its potential influence from popular culture] together as it relates to the Black superheroine. Although popular culture and comic book characters are culturally diverse, this research is limited to a focus on the Black superheroine and its connection with popular culture. In Chapter 2 it includes a review of existing literature as it relates to the historical background and significance of comic books and graphics novels; as well as an examination of the relationship between popular culture and the superhero. The literature review also discusses such topics as

Black women (gender) in popular culture, media and racial stereotyping, and the objectifications and mis-representation that can be found within popular culture.

Definition of terms

African American- as used in this research, African American refers to people who live in the United States and who share a biological and cultural heritage that stems from the continent of Africa. It is used interchangeably with the term “Black” or “Black Americans” when the situation dictates. It should be noted that in some cases the term “Black” extends beyond the United States and includes people who were born and/or who live in the Caribbean and England.

Black superheroine-as used in this research, Black superheroine refers to an ideal, fictional woman character who is of African descent and who has distinguished courage and/or ability, respected for her brave deeds and self-sacrificing and virtuous qualities

Comic books- A comic book (often shortened to simply comics) is a type of magazine, which consists of artwork and a creative, oftentimes complex narrative

Graphic novels- The graphic novel represents a more thematically mature body of work than what might be expected from a comic book. It takes the form of a longer format of several stories related to a specific themes bound together.

Heroine-a woman who overcomes adversity with little regard for herself; an unique icon whose distinguishing marks help empower the ordinary masses; an individual who performs a noble deed without false intentions, but with true purpose.

New racism- racism, which is based upon cultural rather than biological values with roots in signification, ideas, and mythologies; as used in this research, the concept new racism refers to Patricia Hill Collins text, *Black Sexual Politics* (2005), "racism and sexism are deeply intertwined, and racism can never be solved without seeing and challenging sexism”

Popular culture- the collection of arts, entertainment, beliefs and values that are shared by large sections of society

Race and gender stereotypes-oversimplifications of people and/or groups based on race and gender that are widely circulated in certain societies.

Superhero- as used in this research, superhero will be defined, according to writer and director of the Institute for Comic Studies Peter Coogan (2009, pg. 30), as "a heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers—extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills, who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume"

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to complete the current study, a review of the existing literature was necessary. This chapter provides an overview of popular culture and its role as it relates to the superhero and in this case the Black superheroine. This review includes a discussion as a whole regarding Black women (gender) in popular culture. Also a brief review of media and racial stereotyping and objectifications and misrepresentations of Black women and the Black superheroine is also included in the review of literature.

What is 'Popular Culture' and Why is it Important?

According to Cultural Studies professor John Storey (2009) popular culture can be summarized in the six definitions below:

> 1) A culture widely favored or well liked by many people.
>
> 2) The culture that is "left over" when we have decided what high culture is.
>
> 3) Equates pop culture with "mass culture" and ideas.
>
> 4) As an "authentic" culture of the people (the culture which originates from the people)
>
> 5) As a site of struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups in society and the forces of 'incorporation' operating in the interests of dominant groups in society."
>
> 6) The main point to insist on here is the claim that postmodern culture is a culture, which no longer recognizes the distinction between high and popular culture (pgs. 4-9).

Brummett (1991) also defines popular culture as "involving the aspects of social life most actively involved in by the public. As the 'culture of the people', popular culture is determined by the interactions between people in their everyday activities: styles of dress, the use of slang, greeting rituals and the foods that people eat are all examples of popular culture" (pgs. xxi and 41). Similarly Delaney (2007) describes the term as "the *vernacular* or *people's* culture that predominates in a society at a point in time" (pg. 5). In a sense, popular culture can be defined and influenced by the people within that culture. Additionally, Browne (2004) states, "popular culture consists of the aspects of attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, customs, and tastes

that define the people of any society" (pg. 25). Simply put, defining popular culture in one way is difficult. For the purpose of this study, popular culture is defined as the collection of arts, entertainment, beliefs and values that are shared by large sections of society. Due to the fact that there is not a singular definition of popular, it was important for the researcher to define the term to reflect preceding definitions as well as the complexity of the particular study.

Upon conducting preliminary research, I realized that depending on the particular individual's agenda would also determine how popular culture is defined. However theorists have often questioned the value of popular culture, which is produced for the masses and the fact that it is ultimately created for commercial gain. For example, Arendt (1961) suggests that popular culture is a "market-driven media that would lead to the displacement of culture by the dictates of entertainment"(pg. 201). In addition, MacDonald (1965) argues that "popular culture is a debased, trivial culture that voids both the deep realities (sex, death, failure, tragedy) and also the simple spontaneous pleasures...the masses, debauched by several generations of this sort of thing, in turn come to demand trivial and comfortable cultural products" (pg. 93). Essentially, these theorists view popular culture as inconsequential and lacking significance.

Despite theorists viewing popular culture as irrelevant and of "low culture" there are those who find it quite compelling and acceptable. In the midst of postmodern blurring of boundaries between high and low culture, a greater number of scholars (Modleski, 2008, Ross, 1989, Mukerji & Schudson, 1991) have recognized the importance of studying popular culture in order to better understand our society (Inness, 1999). There are even those who have also studied and offered their critique of the relationship between Blackness with Black Popular Culture. By definition, Stuart Hall explains that Black popular culture is a site for strategic controversy within a contradictory space (Hall, 1996). Further in his analysis, Hall (1996) also agrees that Black popular culture cannot be simplified or explained in binary terms. These binaries include "high and low, resistance versus incorporation, authentic versus inauthentic, experiential versus formal, and

opposition versus homogenization" (pg. 473). Regardless of race and or class, popular culture is definitively a multifaceted and complex term.

In addition, there are those who strongly feel that popular culture does have some type of value and merit within academia. The late Ray Browne, founder of Popular Culture Studies, would explore the idea that "every day culture (popular culture)" could play a positive role in bringing various academic disciplines together to form a popular culture movement (Browne, 2004). As a result of this determination, Browne would develop the Journal of Popular Culture (1967) and the Popular Culture Association (1971). With the creation of an academic journal and a recognized national organization dedicated and influenced by popular culture, this has the potential to bridge the gap between the supposed "high and low" cultures.

Since the existence of popular culture it has over time covered a wide assortment of genres which include, but not limited to, popular music, print, cyber culture, sports, entertainment, leisure, fads, advertising and television (Delaney, 2007). Accordingly, popular culture clearly conveys such great influence impacting everything from fashion to food to media and even academia. As a source of entertainment and information, popular culture has recently been intimately connected with education, mass communication, production and society's ability to access knowledge (Block, Johnson-Woods, & Campbell, 2012). Such information emphasizes how crucial the idea of pop culture, whether entertainment or not, is to understanding how people live in the world (Zeisler, 2008). African American youth, in particular, consume all types of popular culture from television (MTV, BET, HBO), to magazines (VIBE, King, Ebony/Jet), to fashion (Rocawear, True Religion, Polo, Nike) to film. Nevertheless, the consumers of popular culture that are being targeted for this particular study, which are young adult African Americans, "can no longer depend on a deeply textured web of families, churches, fraternal organizations, school clubs, sports teams, and other community organizations to help them negotiate the challenges of social inequality" (Collins, 2005, pg. 122). The significance of mass media as a social institution demonstrates how race, class, and gender are

represented and reproduced into becoming social ideologies (Emerson, 2002). As a result, it is very important to recognize and understand popular culture's role in the lives of today's young adults.

Many of the aforementioned values, beliefs, and brands that African Americans endorse seem to simultaneously encompass everything that they love most about popular culture and everything they fear. As such it is important that we examine and understand why there is this struggle and how it influences individual's perceptions and interpretations. It is important to understand the significant power that visual images possess in our culture; these images can and do conjure a range of emotions, feelings, and associations (George, 2004). As seen above, mass media sources such as music, film, television, radio, video games, and the Internet have become primary sources of popular culture (Delaney, 2007). Allen (2001) suggested that, for African American, mainstream media as well as the Black-oriented media serve as one of the most influential sources of information through which African American concepts and identity are developed and negotiated. Thus, popular culture can be seen as a useful tool to influence the public and potentially shape their collective opinions on a particular subject. Accordingly for the purpose of this study, I am specifically interested in looking at popular culture and how it influences African American male and female college student's viewpoints and interpretations of race and gender, as it relates to the Black superheroine.

Zeisler (2008) further defines popular culture as an inescapable idea that is constantly growing. On a daily basis, we take part as consumers of popular culture. Interestingly, what audiences are primarily most concerned as it relates life experiences is based on the images, symbols, and narratives that are seen or heard on radio, television, film, music, and other media (Brooks & Hebert, 2006). It is a key feature of the leisure interest of many college students, interests that are somewhat manipulated by the media and the local and social environment (Marsh, 2000). Whether it is in the television shows that we watch, the music we purchase and listen to, and the newspapers and books that we read, popular culture surrounds us.

Significance of the Comic Book

Before discussing the actual character of the superhero it is important to discuss the comic books in which these characters play a role. Interestingly, comic books are popular texts that facilitate a reflexive discussion regarding different aspects of the culture in which we live in. Despite having a cultural significance, comic books are largely underestimated and misunderstood. Much like popular culture, comic books have fell victim to the critics, who view these books as trivial and insignificant. However, it is important to realize that even though they have a cultural significance, there is still a gap in the literature across academic disciplines that specifically focus on a more thorough discussion of the comic book.

The introduction of the comic book format would take place in 1933 with a typical reader age of 18-35 and made of predominately white male consumership. According to comic book scholar Scott McCloud (1994), comic books serve a purpose as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (pg. 9). According to feminist Sherrie Innes (1999), "comic books have been and continue to be one of the most marginalized of art forms" (pg. 139). Historically comic books and graphic novels have generally been dismissed as less relevant and inferior pop culture texts. However there are some critics such as Frank McConnell (1992) who argue that within recent years much of the "best and most human fiction" in American and the world has appeared not in a 'novel', but in the form of a comic book.

Many academic institutions across the world, such as University of Florida, University of Toronto at Mississauga, and the University of California Santa Cruz, among others have incorporated comic books (and in some places including graphic novel as well)[2] studies within their curriculums and departments. Alongside formal academic programs and degrees, it is very common to see individual courses, workshops, and seminars dedicated to comics and graphic novels in many educational institutions (University of Flori-

[2]Comic books and graphic novels are mentioned together, because in some cases they are used interchangeably and described together

da, 2010). Interestingly, much of the existing criticism of comic books can be found in the newspapers. *The Guardian*, in the United Kingdom, regularly covers comic books in its Saturday Review section; and in the United States, the *New York Times* run semi-regularly reviews of comic books and graphic novels (Meskin, 2009). For example, in 2002 *The Times* writer Nick Hornsby would publish a review of a number of comic books graphic novels.

In opposition to the view of some writers, research has shown that reading comic books does not replace other kinds of reading (Wertham, 1954). In general, comic book readers, read as much as the non-comic book reader (Witty, 1941; Heisler, 1947; Bailyn, 1959; Swain, 1948). Additionally Krashen (1993) suggests that reading comic books as well as other kinds of 'light reading' may serve as an important bridge from everyday conversational language to what Cummins (1991) terms "academic language." Many comic book texts actually contain more rare words than one might find in an ordinary conversation (Hayes and Ahrens, 1988), as well as case histories of readers who credit comic books with providing them with the linguistic basis for reading more difficult texts (e.g. Mathabane, 1986). Overall, despite these books being viewed as less significant in comparison to the newspaper or traditional novel, comic books and graphic novels are consistently being discussed both in and outside of the classroom. To reject examining comic books is to dismiss the intricate narratives that are enclosed within these texts, as well as the controversy (e.g. the Black superheroine) that exists in today's society in which they are based upon.

Examining 'The Superhero'

In addition to examining the comic book as a whole, it is important to examine the actual characters within these books, the superhero. Whenever the society is under a tremendous depression and there is no chance of getting out of it, these characters [superheroes] provide an outlook of hope and strength to fight against the odds through their various stories. For young Americans, the world of comic book superheroes has been able to provide a sense of justice within popular culture (Vollum & Adkinson, 2003). Moreover, these fantasy characters allow their viewers and readers, for a temporary moment in time, to step away

from their world of reality. Even today, the superhero remains a staple within American fiction. Oftentimes, these characters regularly attract both acclaim and controversy in the ways they influence and address the current social and political issues addressed within their storylines. In and out of popular culture, superheroes have been occasionally attacked as proponents of violent behavior and dissident political and social ideologies; on other occasions, they serve to support and idealize the dominant values of the national culture. According to Sterling North in a controversial editorial excerpt, these superheroes in comics are:

> "Badly drawn, badly written, and badly printed - a strain on the young eyes and young nervous systems - the effects of these pulp-paper nightmares is that of a violent stimulant. Their crude blacks and reds spoils a child's natural sense of colour; their hypodermic injection of sex and murder make the child impatient with better, though quieter, stories. Unless we want a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and teachers throughout America must band together to break the `comic' magazine" (as cited in Coville, 2004, pg. 1)

Much like the critics of popular culture, comic books have been subjected to similar criticism despite them presenting messages of social and political significance.

The cultural phenomenon of the superhero has become a mainstay in the realm of American fantasy and mythology since the arrival of mass media and technology in the early twentieth century (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002). As popular culture draws more attention in society, so does the idea of the superhero and what it has to offer**.** Martin (2007) further points out that the popularity of superheroes is increasing, so has the various media forms through which the lives and adventures of superheroes are disseminated. Superheroes, for the most part, are considered good or bad not because of their use of violence, but with regard to the contexts and motivations that influence their actions (Martin, 2007). Typically, every major superhero has an origin, myth and super powers, and to varying extents within the context of Lawrence and Jewett's (2002) prototype, struggles morally, emotionally and socially in the course of doing good.

According to Chambliss & Svitavsky (2008),"superheroes resemble their pulp forebears in having secret identities, distinctive garb, and special abilities" (pg. 18). Traditionally, superhero comics have always seemed to rely on the notion that a superman (or superwoman) exists inside every man (or woman),

and while readers are well aware of this most fundamental convention, they are also aware that several new an incredibly popular comics are erasing the ordinary man (woman) underneath in favor of an even more excessively powerful and one-dimensional masculine (feminine) ideal (Brown, 1999, pg. 27). And as a result, these superheroes in popular culture have been given a makeover, but not willingly. Even more so is the challenge of how comic book and graphic novel artists and creators construct a superhero of color that fits into this ideal. "The superhero archetype is heavily steeped in affirming a division between right and wrong, thus superheroes operate within a moral framework, however, Black superheroes in American comic books and, to the lesser extent, in Hollywood films and television are cultural ciphers for accepted wisdom regarding racial justice and the shifting politics of Black racial formation in America" (Nama, 2011, pg. 4). Now the role of the superhero as it relates to Black America is more than just fighting various battles and injustices within their narrative, but also trying to fit into a traditional (i.e. "white") superhero prototype.

Female & Black Superheroes: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly…

Historically, female superheroes within comic books and popular culture have typically been portrayed as trivial or vacillating characters. Essentially their superpowers were weaker and they had less control over them, therefore having to be dependent on the assistance of a male hero to guide them in using their abilities (Sievers, 2003). Women were also portrayed as the *girl-Friday*, seductive temptress, or perhaps, the accommodating girlfriend (Lavin, 1998). These stereotypical gender roles were clear obvious: men alone are competent enough to be successful independently along with being courageous, while women were seen as subordinate figures in the background. Much of the current scholarship paints a picture that male heroes are usually presented as being unquestionably more powerful than women. Yet they wear costumes that cover and protect most of their bodies. Women on the other hand, are written as weaker, and presumably less able to protect themselves (Madrid, 2009).

Also Sievers (2003) brings to our attention how "we learn from reading Superman that men are strong, brave heroes and women are emotional and need to be saved. We learn from reading Spider-man

that women can be superficial and greedy. And we learn from reading comics like Catwoman and Wonder Woman, that women look really sexy in spandex" (pg. 6). For example, in the 1910s and 1920s many of the comic book characters such as "Minerva Gump and Ma Feitelbaum" were portrayed as frumpy and domineering housewives; and others as vamps [ex. Tillie the Toiler and Flapper Fanny] (Inness, 1999). Unfortunately, many of these portrayals still exist in today's female comic book characters. Madrid (2009) further points out how women take issue with the inequality in today's society that says a man can wear a sensible suit and shoes to look appropriate within the professional world, while women are expected to wear a form-fitting skirt and heels.

Beyond representations of female body and costume, there are many complex gender issues to be explored in superhero comics' characterizations and storylines (Weida, 2011). Particularly in Inness' book, *Tough Girls in Comic Books* (1999), she addresses different representations of these female characters and how different people might perceive them in different ways. In addition, she repeatedly addresses issues of race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation and provides the opportunity to explore these topics due to the fact that the typical superhero in popular culture is white, male, heterosexual, and middle class which reflects a culture where these are the norms. Inness, unlike prior research, provides a conventional analysis of the typical "boy-rescues-girl" adventure story, leaving us with a detailed explanation that suggests women can be more capable of leading than men are.

Nama (2011) declares that in spite of a symbolic significance of black superheroes in American popular culture, it still remains a topic that is unexamined. In Richard Reynolds' (1992) *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* although it discusses, in very little detail, Black superheroes he makes it known that Black superheroes have very little to offer in the way of ideological meaning. Departing from Reynolds, Bradford W. Wright's (2003) "Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America" offers a discussion on the importance of superhero comic books to American culture, and suitably addresses on race. "Popular culture does not simply reflect women's lives; it helps to create them and so demands crucial

scrutiny" (Inness, 1999, p. 6-7). Even though both Reynolds and Wright address Black superheroes there is still very little discussion of the Black superheroine. As a whole, the Black superheroine still remains a topic that seeks further scholarly research and analysis.

Black Women (Gender) in Popular Culture

Within the African American community, from both adults and youth, popular culture can have an influence on how we think, feel, and act. However, alternately Blacks have consistently yearned to see more accurate depictions of themselves in popular culture considering the distorted stereotypical images that have circulated since antebellum period (George, 2004). Essentially popular culture can be viewed "as a process through which people circulate and struggle over the meanings of our social experiences, social relations, and therefore, our selves" (Byers & Dell, 1992, pg. 191). Thus popular culture has become a constant, debated topic of discussion that will forever leave a lasting imprint.

In previous work, researchers have exposed how the erroneous characterization of Black beauty and culture has created and reinforced this destructive definition of Black beauty that is based on a patriarchal and American/European ideal. Ardener (1975) further suggests that women and men in patriarchal, capitalist societies tend to form two distinct circles of experience and interpretation, one overlapping the other (cited in Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006). The masculine circle converges with the norms of society, providing a masculine signature and overriding the feminine circle. Women can either try to translate their points of view into a masculine mode or try to separate alternate models of communication. Therefore, women's perspectives are often not openly articulated. As a result, their expression is muted (e.g. Orbe, 1998; Collins, 2000).

It should be noted that a preponderance of representations of Black women in popular culture are firmly grounded in the dominant sexist and patriarchal ideologies surrounding Black womanhood in American society. Collins (1991) emphasizes that the continued marginalization of Black women is due to the controlling images, which are ingrained in the upholding of hegemonic power. While the literature is

replete with images of White and even Black male comic book superheroes (Brown, 1999, Singer, 2002, Taylor, 2007, Nama, 2009) there is very little literature that discusses the analysis of race and gender, specifically as it relates to the Black superheroine in comic books. Women as characters in comic books have played many different roles and have been drawn in many different ways. In general, the literature on the representation of women in media/popular culture/comics asserts that besides being underrepresented, women are also objectified and sex-stereotyped (Greenberg & Collette, 1997, Seidman, 1992, Signorielli, McLeod, & Healy, 1994, Vincent, Davis & Boruszkowski, 1987). With popular culture constantly evolving, it is particularly crucial to study the representation of the Black superheroine and the massive influence it has upon American society (Inness, 1999). Although superheroes, both female and male, are becoming more diverse racially and ethnically, the relationship between race and gender becomes another piece of the puzzle that needs to be further investigated.

As for the Black woman, even before the popularity of Marvel Comic X-Men's Storm there was another African woman whose image would be exploited in the public eye. It would in fact be personified in the figure of a single South African woman by the name of Sara Bartmann aka the 'Hottentot Venus'. Giddings (1995) notes "the status of black women had been dramatically etched into the annals of science earlier in the century" (pg. 416). Black women and characters ranging from the 'Hottentot Venus' to Josephine Baker to the contemporary video vixen to even X-Men's Storm, have demonstrated the range of how the Black female body has become a focal point of entertainment within popular culture today. More specifically, "Bartmann's exhibition helped to lay the foundation of Black female commodification as its success depended upon colonial and imperial sexual gaze of White audiences" (Story, 2007, pg. 239). Historically, the Bartmann character provides a real-life image of what is drawn in the comic books.

In examining the Black woman, noted Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1996) seeks to define and specify in scholarly terms a way in which black women can define their own unique experiences. In the scholarly community, there is great debate on which theories best examine the African-American

female experience. Is it womanism (as defined by Alice Walker and/or Dr. Layli Maparyan), Black feminism, or simply part of the greater feminist experience? As Collins (1996) notes, African-American women generally do not see a great distinction between the two terms as both terms are affected by the intersection of racism and sexism. Collins further argues that the debate should shift from issues of naming to how overlapping themes can be used for the greater good of drawing attention to issues concerning black women. Therefore, just as the Black woman experience is faced with how it is to be defined, the Black superheroine character also struggles to be uniquely defined. It is also important to note that the standard of femininity is reinforced through a Western culture lens that is focused on a supposed ideal image of white femininity (Brown, 1999). To such a degree, the Black superheroine is an original character that need not be defined in terms of a White/Eurocentric model. Furthermore, I believe by examining the Black superheroine within popular culture, I can raise issues that are uniquely important to the numerous discussions of race and gender.

After 1965, Black women would face an ongoing battle with sexism within Black Civil Rights organizations. With the publication of the Moynihan Report, and the growing Black Nationalist movement, "Black women underwent an onslaught of sexism at the hands of many prominent Black male figureheads" (Story, 2008, pg. 46). In Toni Cade Bambara's "The Black Woman: An Anthology", she ardently confronts the agency of the Black women and "art, protest, dialogue no longer spring from the impulse to entertain, or to indulge or enlighten the conscience of the enemy; white people, whiteness, or racism; men maleness, or chauvinism: America or imperialism… depending on your viewpoint and your terror" (1970, pg. 7). Furthermore, Collins, as pointed out by Story (2008), articulates that the Black woman's standpoint, as well as the Black Feminist literary tradition in the United States is a valid and necessary form of scholarship that is worthy of critique and research (pg. 52). This idea becomes critical as we examine the interpretations and roles of the Black superheroine in popular culture.

In Orbe and Strother's (1996) semiotic analysis of the biracial title character in Queen, Alex Haley's miniseries, they demonstrated how Queen fell in line with "traditional stereotyping of other bi-ethnic characters as beautiful, yet threatening, inherently problematic, and destined for insanity" (p. 117). Larson's (1994) study of Black women on the soap opera *All My Children* found the show frequently embraced the matriarch stereotype. As a matter of fact, the image of the Black woman as oversexed fantasy object, dominating matriarch, and nonthreatening, desexualized mammy figure remains the most persistent in the media (Edwards, 1993). Just as the news and various television shows play a role in the representation of the Black woman within the media, a same analysis can be conducted with Black superheroines within comic books. Hence there is still a need to include a discussion of the Black superheroine within popular culture. Women of color superheroes, in particular like X-Men's Storm, Michonne, Vixen, Misty Knight, Captain Marvel II along with others are even more rare (Knight, 2010). Overall, although this research study does not deal particularly with feminism in a theoretical sense, regrettably women superheroes still remain extremely under-represented and under-analyzed in a scholarly sense as well as other forms of popular culture.

Despite the variety of sources studied in this work, there is no single book that is able to do full justice to a topic such as the representation of women in popular culture, particularly Black, which permeates American society and societies across the globe. While most college students are familiar with the token female superheroes (primarily Wonder Woman, Storm, and Catwoman) these characters often exist in roles far removed from male counterparts (Weida, 2011). With "tough girls"[3] in popular culture, especially comic books, gradually increasing in the media this offers a great deal about the changing roles available to women in our society. Now that nontraditional roles are on the rise, women are becoming more tolerant to

[3] According to Inness defining 'tough' must be a malleable, flexible, and broad term. She would use two definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) in order to define a 'tough girl/woman' (these are used interchangeably) as 1) "capable of great physical endurance; strongly resisting force; injury, fatigue, etc. not easily overcome, tired, or impaired; hardy, stout, sturdy, 2) having great intellectual or moral endurance; difficult to influence, affect, or impress; steadfast, firm, persistent; also stubborn, obstinate, hardened."

assenting to them (Inness, 1999). “Without pop culture’s limited images of women, many actual women in the real world might not have been inspired to fight for more and better representations of themselves” (Zeisler, 2008, pg. 9). Women are beginning to take action in how they are represented as well as taking ownership of their own agency within today’s society.

Similar to comic books, in some cases Black women’s authorship graphic novels sheds light on issues of race and gender. For example such characters as Rocket and Captain Marvel II, as well as other female characters allow for a space to examine these complex character narratives pertaining to African American women’s roles in history and literature by amending the narrative conventions and relationship of both superhero comics and the classic slave narrative (Ryan, 2006).

Media & Racial Stereotyping

As stated by Crenshaw, “media images provide cues to understanding the ways in which women of color are imagined in our society” (as cited in Cohen, Jones & Tronto, 1997, pg. 554). For centuries, African American women have been the antithesis to White women. While the Victorian concept of “true womanhood” defined White women as possessing unquestionable moral character, African American women would be defined as immoral and sinful. In addition, African American women are forced to combat the dual stereotypes of race and gender (Yarbrough & Bennett, 2000). In order to understand the Black superheroine within popular culture, we must also understand Black women’s relationship to their images in popular culture. We must examine the stereotypes that have been constructed around them. Since slavery, stereotypes particular to African American women have continued to circulate in American culture. Traditionally the most pervasive stereotypes of the Black woman include the Mammy, Sapphire, Tragic Mulatto, and Jezebel. As it relates to comics, Black superheroes have historically been associated with the perpetuation of racial stereotypes (Singer, 2002). Specifically related to women, Wolff (1972) discusses five main stereotypes of women in literature, their origins, and their usage. They are the Virtuous Woman, Sensuous Woman, Sentimental Woman, Liberated Woman, and the American Girl. Recently there have been three types

of portrayals of the Black female superheroine: “the quiet queen” who is seen as the most common image of black women in comic books, “the dominant diva”, and “the scandalous sojourner” (Saini, 2009).

Wolff (1972) argues stereotypes of women are much more offensive than stereotypes of men because, while masculine stereotypes are often fantasies of male supremacy, consequently the feminine stereotypes are used to justify male-dominant behavior. McCaughey also points out, “imagistic discourse suggests that men have bodies that will prevail, that are strong and impenetrable. Female bodies are not represented as active agents in this way, but instead as breakable, takeable bodies” (1997, pg. 37). Throughout comic books, women have been stereotyped in their occupations, behavior, body shape and mode of dress practically since comic books came into existence within popular culture (Sievers, 2003). Inness (1999) further proclaims, “in the first decades of the twentieth century, women were seldom presented as tough and independent. Instead women were apt to require men to rescue them from all sorts of mishaps” (pg. 143). In spite of this, the first female superhero to attract a large following and that challenged the notion the women superheroes had to be subordinate was Wonder Woman. Although Wonder Woman was important comic book character for being able to acquire more autonomy and independence than most female superheroes, as a character she still conforms to many of the traditional norms of how women behave and look (Inness, 1999).

As it relates to the Black superheroine, X-Men’s Storm (aka Ororo which means ‘beauty’) is typically the first and sometimes only character of color that is recognized. The daughter of an African princess she controls the natural elements and is considered a leader in the X-Men. Not until after the African American Civil Rights Movement were there few Black female characters who were present in superhero comics. Perhaps the quintessential superheroine of the 70s and arguably even today Storm would become the first major Black comic book superheroine (Madrid, 2009). She would be one of the first black comic book characters, and the first black female, to play either a major or a supporting role in the big two comic book houses, Marvel Comics and DC Comics (Knight, 2010). Not only does she control the natural elements, but

also she rises to become a leader in the predominately white male group the X-Men. Nonetheless, even with the strength that she possessed, Storm's early representation helped to perpetuate gender stereotypes about the innate femininity of women until the creators began to portray her in a different light (Inness, 1999).

According to Knight (2010), Storm's creation in particular "was during the heyday of Blaxploitation films", in which these films featured, among others, Pam Grier, an African American actress who many have considered a pioneer within female action hero films" (pg. 278, 282). Storm would be portrayed as a tall, stately and elegant, with a mane of long white hair, angular exotic features, and blue eyes. Despite this insatiable appearance some scholars and critics felt as though Storm's appearance did not come off as sleazy or salacious due to her regal air of confidence and power—her allure came from her powerful persona and goddess-like quality (Madrid, 2009, pg. 170). In opposition of this notion was the fact that even with Storm's regal and strength her early representations would facilitate and perpetuate various gender stereotypes about the intrinsic femininity of women (Inness, 1999). Ultimately, Storm's persona would be challenged through her racial identity as a Black, African woman and her social status as a mutant (Knight 2010).

In a historical, qualitative study Bound-Littlefield (2008) examines media as a opposing force in the image of African American women and offer solutions (albeit limited as to how educators can help change this dynamic of the "new racism", a term also coined by Patricia Hill Collins). This new racism assumes that because we have achieved equality in the eyes of mainstream America that issues of racism and sexism are non-existent. Ideas of sexual equality and empowerment are negated by current images of hypersexualized, marginalized African American women. Much like Littlefield, she uses the media (in this study popular culture will be the domain of analysis) as the example of those who perpetuate ideas of race and gender in negative ways along with basing much of her criticism in the theory of Collins' notions and lens of Black feminist dialogue.

In addition, Black feminist author bell hooks (1992) contends that Black female representation in the media "determines how blackness and people are seen and how other groups will respond to us based on their relation to these constructed images" (p. 5). Hudson (1998) and Collins (2000) both advance the notion that media images of black women result from dominant racial, gender, and class ideologies. Furthering hooks' discussion of representation, Hudson (1998) argues "these stereotypes simultaneously reflect and distort both the ways in which black women view themselves (individually and collectively) and the ways in which they are viewed by others" (p. 249). According to hooks (1994), racist and sexist thinking informs the way color caste hierarchies affect black females. She contends:

> "Light skin and long, straight hair continue to be traits that define a female as beautiful and desirable in the racist white imagination and in the colonized black mindset. . . . Stereotypically portrayed as embodying a passionate, sensual eroticism, as well as a subordinate feminine nature, the biracial woman has been and remains the standard other black females are measured against" (p. 179).

Black women in contemporary popular culture are made to look like hyper-sexualized, scantily dressed, exotic objects. Brown further argues that due to the "racist ideological paradox, Blacks in western culture has been forced to shoulder the burdens of the body itself" (1999 pg. 30). Moreover, Scott (2006) explains how "Black bodies are already stories, mythological beasts with epic powers and tragic presaged endings in the faulty perspectivalism of the white supremacist world" (Scott, 2006, pg. 312). In addition, the link between femininity and the female body is an important connection for examining the Black superheroine, and in a parallel form an important point of reference within the stereotyping of Black women (Brown, 1999). Within feminist frameworks comics can be observed in their capacity to address women of color crossing boundaries and undoing caricatures without being "exoticized" (Weida, 2011). It is important to have an understanding of the role that that racial stereotyping plays in examining these Black female characters within popular culture. Singer (2002) explains "any examination of race in superhero comics must consider these innate tensions as the handling of race is forever caught between the genre's most radical impulses and its most conservative ones" (pg. 110). Additionally, images on a page or screen become part

of our common consciousness and the role models, who are presented, provide indirect experiences that teach and shape our perceptions of the world (Bandura, 2001).

Looking at this issue of media representation from a different perspective, educational anthropologist and specialist, Joseph Tobin (2000) offers an examination in his book *Good Guys Don't Wear Hats: Children's Talk about the Media* on how children make sense of media representations of race, sex, violence, and class. He does this through an ethnographic study, which focuses on how children think and talk about media representations of violence, gender, race, colonialism, and social class. Also discussed in the book is the dilemma of middle-class masculinity, along with a discussion of media effects, children's talk, and interpretive methods. By building upon such cutting-edge approaches as post-structuralism, performance theory, and critical theory into his approach, he is able to establish how the meanings children give to media messages depend on the local contexts in which they live. All in all, Tobin challenges the convention that children are easily fooled by the media and suggest instead that they are capable of resistant interpretations of the movies and television they watch. As well as children having an impact from media, these stereotypes often also play a powerful role in the social and gender development of young college age adults (Bandura, 2001). Although middle school age children are used in this particular study, the same analysis can be applied to college age students.

Objectification & Misrepresentation (Depiction & Portrayals)

Although research has been done regarding sexism, racism and stereotypes within in comic books the most relevant articles are at least a decade old. It is quite clear that popular culture and the comic book industry changes quite quickly; Alward (1982) notes whole genres can disappear within less than five years, as did with comics in the late 1970s. Thus it is especially critical to look at what is being produced today. To date, there has been little to no research studies specifically on the relationship between college students' personal attitudes and their attitudes toward superheroes. Although there is much research on the masculinity and femininity, depictions and portrayals of the superhero (Brown, 1999; Singer, 2002;

McCloud, 1994; Stabile, 2009) more research is needed regarding the moral development and potential influence of college student's engagement with superheroes within popular culture (ex. comic books, film, and television). Young adults (college students) may be drawn to superheroes not just because of their powers, but also because of the behavior they promote (Martin, 2007). In Nama's (2011) Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes, he takes on a "critically celebratory perspective" for examining the various expressions of superhero Blackness. Much like what I seek to do with this study, Nama offers a layout and opens a dialogue for researchers to include a more thorough discussion of Black superheroes. Nama (2011) further argues that considering these characters are primarily written and created by white men they can easily be perceived, easily argued, and given clichéd tropes and assumptions which diminish their socio-cultural significance.

Biernat and Sesko (2009) conducted a quantitative study that examined racial and gender stereotyping and prejudice experienced by Black women in relation to the perceptions of White women and Black and White men. This study hypothesizes that Black women are seen as "forgettable" hereby going unnoticed. The study was divided into two parts. The first part included 131 White undergraduates (50 White females) who were shown 56 photos of Black women's headshots. Secondly, participants were asked to distinguish if the photos were old or new. The first part of the study provided evidence that Black women's faces were "forgettable" to White participants, garnering a small percentage of those who correctly identified photos. In the second part of the study, participants were asked to identify "who said what" (pgs. 358-359), which yielded higher errors as Black women in the study were the group most misunderstood among Black male and white male participants. However, Biernat and Sesko would state such limitations as: participants were aware that they were to pay attention to what was said and the definition of "invisibility" may have been too broad. This study is very interesting in that not only did the White students "forget" the Black women, but the Black male students did as well. Maintaining the invisibility of black women and their ideas

has been critical in maintaining social inequalities (Moody, 2011). Thus sparking the question is the Black women “forgettable” even within her own racial community.

Although the above study comes from an advocacy worldview and is considered quantitative, the idea of “invisibility” can still be applied to this particular research study. In reading this study the following questions arose: Are Black superheroines featured in popular culture “invisible” and “unheard”? If so how can they be given a “voice” beyond their physical presence? Is it because of the “Black invisibility” of Black women that Black superheroines in comic books and popular culture have been virtually ignored by mostly male scholars? It is my hope that with this particular research study by presenting personal interpretations and reflections this will give voice, visibility, and identity to the characters that these women portray beyond their stereotypes.

Complementing the above study, professor of Education Policy, Anne Haas Dyson conducted an ethnographic study in an urban classroom of 7- to 9-year olds in her 1997 text, *Writing Superheroes: Contemporary Childhood, Popular Culture, and Classroom Literacy.* Here Dyson examines how young school children use popular culture, especially superhero stories, within their peer social world and in their school literary curriculum. In one sense, the book is about children "writing superheroes" – as well as about children appropriating superhero stories in their fiction writing and dramatic play on the playground and in the classroom. These stories offer children identities as powerful people who do battle against evil and win, but they also reveal limiting ideological assumptions about relations between people - boys and girls, adults and children, people of varied heritages, physical demeanors, and social classes. With the guidance of their teacher, the children became superheroes of another sort who are able to take on powerful cultural storylines. Dyson’s results would reveal an intimate portrayal of contemporary childhood and children’s inclination to interpret and critique popular media and not simply to absorb it. Dyson is able to demonstrate that children are able to interpret, critique, and evaluate popular media portrayals, which include some of their most revered television superheroes. Dyson believed that the issues addressed by the students reflected

larger social concerns regarding gender, race and class. While popular media may play a central role in the children's lives this same thought can be applied to college students as well. While this study deals with adolescents it mirrors the current research study as they both discuss and examines individual's interpretations of the superhero portrayal in popular culture.

Finally, in her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) film theorist Laura Mulvey takes on the shortsightedness of psychoanalytic theory from a gendered perspective. She does this by discussing the gender of the film's viewer using a sequence of "looks" also known as the male gaze. According to Zeisler (2008), the male gaze is simply the idea that when we look at images in art or on screen, we see them as a man might—even if we are women—because the images are constructed to be seen by men; this determines not only the relationship between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. Mulvey suggests that there were two distinct modes of the male gaze of this era: "voyeuristic" (i.e. seeing women as 'whores') and "fetishistic" (i.e. seeing women as 'madonnas'). The female actor is never meant to represent a character that directly effects the outcome of a plot or keep the story line going, but is inserted into the film as a way of supporting the male role and "bearing the burden of sexual objectification" that he cannot (Mulvey, 1975, pg. 835). Mulvey argues that the only way to annihilate the "patriarchal" Hollywood system was to radically challenge and re-shape the filmic strategies of classical Hollywood with alternative feminist methods. This same thought process can be used to reshape the images and roles of the Black superheroine within popular culture. This in turn affects how not only men but women view popular culture as well as how they view themselves, thus playing a role in the interpretation of the Black superheroine. Although this essay deals specifically with portrayal of women in film the same thought process could be applied to the Black superheroine.

Chapter Summary

Overall this literature review encompasses a wide range of theoretical perspectives, research methodologies, and is quite interdisciplinary ranging from academic and social theory to comic book criti-

cism. By having a foundation of the historical significance of comic books and graphic novels we are able to have a better understanding of its significance as well as its connection to popular culture. From the literature, the researcher has gained a tremendous amount of information regarding the image of the 'superhero', in terms of race and gender. Even though current research has taken an initial step in examining gender roles and stereotypes, more specific research is needed. Unfortunately the Black superheroine is still in need of being examined especially now with the past and current misrepresentations, exotic depictions, and hyper-sexualized portrayals that are still prevalent today in popular culture. Chapter 3 discusses the research design, participants, proposed procedure, analysis of data, a brief description of the designed instrument, and a review reliability and validity.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Research Design

The researcher employed a qualitative, exploratory research approach to gather interpretative commentary and gain contextual insight into the research questions. An interpretative textual analysis, in essence, takes the approach of viewing culture as a way to interpret a narrative or story in particular the texts and artifacts which consciously or unconsciously connect themselves to larger stories within society (Reed, 2012). According to McKee (2003), "textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how individuals make sense of the world. It is a methodology - a data-gathering process - for researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live" (pg. 1). Creswell (2007) states that qualitative research is used "to follow up quantitative research and help explain the mechanisms or linkages in causal theories or models" (p. 40). Moreover, an exploratory approach to this study was necessary. Using a qualitative approach is often flexible and can be rooted in pre-existing data or literature. As a result, it seeks to uncover dominant trends within the individual's personal thoughts in order to gain a better understanding of basic underlying principle and motivations.

According to Family Health International (2012) qualitative research consists of the following characteristics:

> 1) Seeks answers to a question
> 2) Systematically uses a predefined set of procedures to answer the question
> 3) Collects evidence/data
> 4) Produces findings that were not determined in advance
> 5) Produces findings that are applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of the study
> 6) Seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the local population it involves.
> 7) Effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations (pg. 3).

This study encompasses several of these characteristics. The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide nuanced and descriptive interpretations of how people experience a given social phenom-

enon. Qualitative methods are also effective in identifying intangible factors, such as social norms, socio-economic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion, whose role in the research issue may not be readily apparent. Overall, this study is meant to describe the relationship between popular culture and its influence on the depictions and portrayals of the Black superheroine. For this study the use of one questionnaire, developed by the researcher, was used. The researcher was the primary instrument of data collection.

Participants

This study recruited thirty-two African American male and female college students from four African American Studies (AAS 1140, AAS 2010, AAS 4000, AAS 4970) courses at Georgia State University. Students ages 18-38 were recruited for this study using a convenience sampling method. This recruitment approach stems from the idea that it is often difficult find individuals who are willing to take a completely random survey, or to find examples of the entire range of experiences within a population (Creswell, 2005). By using convenience sampling, the researcher is essentially aiming to talk those individuals' who are readily available and that may be able to offer insight into the specific study.

Students from Georgia State University (GSU) are specifically recruited for this study based on a sample of convenience as well as GSU being considered a multicultural diverse campus. As an urban campus, "Georgia State University is nationally ranked as one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse campuses in the United States[4]. In particular, the Introduction to African American Studies and Introduction to African American History courses were selected because they are both university-wide courses that can be used to satisfy general education course degree requirements[5]. While this course is designated for African American Studies majors, the majority of the students enrolled in this course are comprised of a variety of majors including but not limited to psychology, anthropology, criminal justice, communication, social work, etc. Consequently, sampling students from this course allowed me to select a diverse cross section

[4] As stated in 2012 by the Women's Studies Institute.
[5] As stated in the 2012 Georgia State University Social Sciences-Core Curriculum

of majors within the undergraduate student population. This diverse population also allows for a plethora of interpretations of popular culture and its influence on African American's creation of the Black superheroine. This provides an opportunity to investigate how popular culture influences the construction of the Black superheroine amongst a various range of academic majors and worldviews.

A screening form was given to all students enrolled in the Introduction to African American Studies classes to determine their interest and eligibility to participate in the study. Once the participants expressed interest in the study, they were given a screening form to identify if they will meet the eligibility criteria. To be eligible participants were:

1) African American,
2) Georgia State University students, and
3) Currently enrolled in an African American Studies course for the Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 semester.

This population is considered best suited for this study because of their proximity to the influences of popular culture and media images and their ability to reflectively articulate their perceptions. According to NY Free Network (2010), pop culture has the greatest impact on young adults because the people that are a part of the culture are essentially the role models after which these young adults mirror their lives. Participants selected for this study each took part in completing the "Superheroine Creator" Google-Doc questionnaire.

In order to obtain a sufficient sample of participants, the researcher distributed postcards within the designated African American Studies classes. The researcher also obtained written consent, to disseminate this research study, from the specific instructors teaching the particular courses within the Department of African American Studies. The researcher also requested time from the instructors to recruit participants. Instructors were given the postcards and letters, which included a brief summary regarding the purpose of the research study along with contact information for anyone who was willing to participate, to distribute in their classes. Participants taking part in this study completed an electronic informed consent form that was

kept in a secure location, along with their responses to the Superheroine questionnaire. The information provided by the participants is included in the results section of this research study using a pseudonym for this study. Participants were not expected to encounter any more risks than they would in a normal day of life.

Procedure

During the Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 semester there are various course offerings of African American Studies courses (AAS 1140, AAS 2010, AAS 4000, AAS 4970). Upon written consent from the specific AAS professors, the researcher came to each class, during a designated class period, to explain the purpose of the study. This took between ten to fifteen minutes. At the closing of the summary of the study, students were informed, by the researcher, of the potential monetary and or academic incentives for completing the study.

Students interested in taking part in the study were asked to complete a screening form. Following the screening form students then completed a sign-in form, which asked for their name, email address, and contact phone number. Individuals who met the inclusion criteria and expressed a desire to participate in the study were invited to do so. Students who do not wish to participate were given an alternative assignment during the class period. Students who elected to participate were emailed a copy of the informed consent form to a designated email address not personally associated with the researcher. After obtaining informed consent, each participant was emailed a direct link to a Google Document so that they may complete a “Superheroine Creator” questionnaire. Once the questionnaire was completed, if there were any questions or further clarification needed, participants were able to contact the researcher via telephone and or email. Participation in this research is purely voluntary. Sensitivity with regards to privacy and comfort of participants will be of the utmost importance for this study. Approval of human subjects was secured by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Georgia State University to ensure that rights and confidentiality was protected and taken into account since human subjects were involved in the study.

The Superheroine Creator was a Google Doc questionnaire, which include prompts and questions that sought to explore how sexual and racial ideologies within popular culture influence college students' interpretation of the Black superheroines that they create. Although the prompts and questions served as a guide for the creation of the character, participants were strongly encouraged to elaborate on their responses. The questionnaire was conducted in an online survey format, and submitted to a designated email address not personally associated with the researcher. All answers were converted into text files to be analyzed using a text recognition software called Dedoose. All hard copy data will be stored in a locked cabinet at the researcher's place of residence. Consent forms were stored separately from the data. The researcher saved all electronic files on password and firewall-protected computers. To ensure anonymity, the researcher used a pseudonym rather than the participant's real name in the study as well as in any subsequent presentations or reports about the study.

Instrument

Participants took part in a study in which they completed a Superheroine questionnaire. This questionnaire asked the participants to create a detailed description of their personal Black superheroine. The questionnaire-solicited data on the attributes needed by a Black superheroine and the geo/political/social context in which she lives that influence the need for such abilities. Demographic questions such as age, gender, ethnicity, student classification, and academic major were determined by self-reporting at the beginning of the questionnaire process. The Superheroine Questionnaire utilized an open-ended essay format to assess perspectives and interpretations of a Black superheroine. Each participant designed and created their own Black superheroine through their own lens using the following descriptive prompts: name, secret identity, character background, hair, skin complexion, weight, height, superpower/powers, story/origin, enemies/arch-nemesis/villains, costume, weaknesses, sidekick, hideout/getaway, love interest, and body type.

Preliminary Data Analysis

This study used an interpretative textual analysis approach to examine how the representations of race and gender stereotypes in popular culture shaped the creation and depictions of the Black superheroine. When researchers perform interpretive textual analysis on a text, “we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text” (McKee, 2001, pg. 9). This analysis also “seeks to go beneath the surface (denotative) meanings and examine more implicit (connotative) social meanings” (Reed, 2012, pg. 1). In this study, the researcher sought to interpret the meanings of college student’s creation of their Black superheroine based on popular culture representations. Also by interpreting the text, the researcher examined the specific perceptions of racial and gender identities. And even though the notion of text is not confined to the written word, participants were encouraged to construct meaning with reference to a wide range of representations. In most cases, doing an interpretive textual analysis primarily leads to a profound awareness that a particular marginalized group (Black college students) cultural meaning system is almost inexhaustibly rich.

As researchers, we want to understand how the messages in popular culture inform and influence the cultural construction of their views of the world. As Kress (2000) argued, especially in the light of the increasingly visual nature of communication, scholars need to reconsider the view in which images are a distraction in the process of making meaning. Thus it is important that there must be a clear understanding of what meanings audiences are making of these artistic expressions (i.e. radio/television programs, films, newspapers, and magazines) (McKee, 2003).

As a result, data collected from the Superheroine Creator questionnaire used a cross-platform application that analyzed the text data, called Dedoose. Dedoose is a research analysis tool and application that has been used for the purposes of “academic researchers collecting, drilling into, and analyzing data collected in long-running projects; market researchers who need to quickly visualize and present research findings” among other things as well ("Qualitative Analysis and Mixed Methods Research in the

Field", 2011). This method is used to provide an opportunity to further examine and interpret the participants' personal perceptions and feelings regarding representations of their configured Black superheroine.

Reliability and Validity

By the participants representing various academic majors within the university and the African American Studies courses, this sought to make certain a sense of reliability was obtained within the sample. Upon completion and review of the questionnaires, the researcher followed-up with each participant to make certain accuracy is taken into account within the data. In Vivo coding was selected in the first cycle of coding to provide integrity and respect to the college student's voices; while at the same time delivering a grounded analysis from their perspectives. This was done by extracting significant phrases and sentences that are directly related and identifiable to the lived experiences of the college students as it relates to the Black female superheroine. Equally, focused coding was used during the second cycle analysis to further dissect the data and develop emerging themes. The resulting themes specifically identified repeating ideas and underlying themes that connected the codes, which were common to all the participants' transcripts. The results were then integrated into an in-depth exhaustive description of the narrative. Once descriptions and themes were obtained, the researcher approached the participants a second time to validate the findings. Any new relevant data that emerged is included in the final description.

In addition to reviewing the questionnaires, the researcher also sought assistance from an outside researcher to review the data and to ensure reliability and validity. In having the outside researcher, any inconsistencies in coding were resolved by consensus between the researcher and the outside researcher.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provides specific information regarding the research method and the use and rationale of an interpretative textual analysis approach for this research study. It also includes a discussion of the population, sample, data collection procedures and data analysis and validity were also considered. The next chapter presents the findings of the study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine how race and gender stereotypes in popular culture shape the depictions of the Black superheroine. In addition, this study also explored the manner in which stereotypes and gender roles have an impact on Black female and male college students' construction of the Black superheroine. The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1) How are Black superheroines depicted and represented in popular culture?
2) How does popular culture influence the perceptions of the Black superheroine?
3) How do African American male and female college students imagine the Black superheroine?
4) How do racial and gender stereotypes in popular culture shape the creation of the Black superheroine?

This study utilized a qualitative design and was conducted during the months of December 2012 and January 2013. During this time, Black female and male college students were recruited from four courses (Introduction to African American Studies, Introduction to African American History, Issues in the African American Community, and African American Popular Culture) each taught in the African American Studies department at Georgia State University. Students were briefly introduced to the topic of study and informed of the criteria before recruitment flyers were distributed to the classroom. Students who were interested in taking part in the study contacted the researcher via email; then they were given a Google Doc link to gain access to the Superheroine Creator.

This chapter has three sections. The first section presents demographic information of the participants. Pseudonyms were used in order to keep the true identity of the participants confidential. The second section presents the study's research questions and the major themes and categories that emerged from the survey questionnaire during the coding process. The final section provides a summary of the chapter.

Participant Demographics

The age of the participants in this study ranged from 18-38, with an average age of 26. There were a total of 24 females and 8 males. The participants' majors represented an array of disciplines. Table 5.1 contains demographic information for each participant.

Table 5.1 Summary of Demographic Breakdown

Character Name	*Participant Name**	*Participant Age*	*Participant Gender*	*Participant Race*	*Participant Major*	*Participant Classification*
Berceau De La Vie	Brian	18	Male	African American	English	FRESHMAN
Sista Soul	Michael	20	Male	African American	Middle Level Education	SOPHOMORE
Shrink	Lauren	18	Female	African American	English	FRESHMAN
Fluoressence	Daniel	20	Male	African American	Psychology Pre-Med	SOPHMORE
MC Soouull	Tiara	20	Female	Black	Film & Video	JUNIOR
Djena	Chloe	23	Female	Black	BBA Economics	SENIOR
Alana 'The Black Warrior Princess'	Angela	23	Female	Black	Biology	JUNIOR
Soul Intuition	Carla	24	Female	Black & Korean	Political Science	SENIOR
AirMags McFly	Zoe	21	Female	Black	Sociology	JUNIOR
Oya Tornado	Kenya	37	Female	African American	Sociology	JUNIOR
Sasha Fierce	Alexandra	20	Female	Black	Political Science	JUNIOR
Tia Tigress	Aisha	19	Female	African American	Film	FRESHMAN
Abebi	Simone	25	Female	African American	Public Relations	SOPHOMORE
Shiloh	Kaya	21	Female	African American	Psychology	JUNIOR
Zeneth	Tanya	35	Female	Afro American	Psychology	SENIOR
Sasha	Amanda	22	Female	Black	Psychology	SENIOR
Rashidah	Nichelle	20	Female	African American	Journalism	FRESHMAN
Unique	Renee	38	Female	Black (Creole)	Journalism	SENIOR
Mother Amina	Liah	22	Female	Black/Filipino	Film	SENIOR
Karma	Martin	25	Male	Black	Broadcasting	JUNIOR
AZA	Brooklyn Marie	20	Female	African American	Public Relations	SENIOR
Vaness Sway	Jenise	22	Female	Mixed Decent	Journalism	SENIOR

Athena	Susie	20	Female	African American	Psychology	JUNIOR
Stormy	Taylor	23	Female	African American	Sociology	SENIOR
Eclipse	Jonathan	22	Male	Black	Political Science	SENIOR
Maji	Jaylla	21	Female	Biracial (Black/White)	Women's Studies	JUNIOR
Cleopatra	Charles	20	Male	Black	Marketing	JUNIOR
Imani Wonder	Eva	21	Female	African American	Journalism	SENIOR
Weavy Wonders	Malcolm	22	Male	Middle Eastern	Sociology	SENIOR
Vrou	Reece	23	Male	Black	Journalism	SENIOR
Serenity	Antonia	21	Female	African American	Interdisciplinary Studies	SENIOR
Oshun Honey (O. Honey)	Cynthia	30	Female	Caribbean/ African American	African American Studies/ Psychology	SENIOR

**Pseudonyms were used in place of the participant's actual name*

Data Analysis

First and second cycle coding methods as described by Saldana (2009) were used in the data analysis process for the survey questionnaire. During the first cycle, In Vivo coding was selected to provide integrity to the participants' voices, while also delivering a grounded analysis from their perspectives. By using In Vivo coding, I extracted significant phrases and statements that would provide a straightforward method that categorizes data on a basic level to allow the researcher an organizational grasp of the study (Saldana, 2009). Focused coding was used during the second cycle analysis to further dissect the data and develop emerging themes. According to Saldana (2009), focused coding is suitable for the elaboration of major categories or themes from the data. Focused coding was used to specifically identify repeating ideas and larger underlying themes that connect the codes. The focus codes were created using recurrent words, thoughts, and phrases. Codes from the first and second cycle of analysis were organized and categorized to develop major themes from the data.

Data analysis revealed four major themes in regards to participants' interpretation of the Black superheroine, a) *controlling images of Black women, b) Black women's bodies, c) Black women's beauty, and d) social and political issues (global and domestic)*. From these four major themes there would four categories of discussion that emerged from the data, the Black Female body, Black women's hair, rape and abandonment inside and outside of the comic book narrative, and the dynamics of Black women's relationships.

Table 5.2 below would provide data on how the proposed research questions would be answered through the specific categories.

Table 5.2 Research Questions and Major Properties

Research Questions	Major Properties
How is popular culture reflected in the perceptions of the Black superheroine?	*HAIR *CHARACTER WEIGHT/HEIGHT *POWERS *SECRET IDENTITY
How do African American male and female college students imagine the Black superheroine?	*WEAKNESS *SIDEKICK *LOVE INTEREST *MAIN ENEMY/ENEMIES *CHARACTER BACKGROUND *SUPERHERO BEGINNINGS *HIDEOUT/GETAWAY
How do racial and gender stereotypes in popular culture shape the creation of the Black superheroine?	*BODY TYPE *SKIN COMPLEXION *COSTUME

Table 5.3 Overall categories that emerged from the data

The Black Female Body
Black Women's Hair
Rape and Abandonment inside and outside of the comic book narrative
The Dynamics of Black Women's Relationships

Although, the researcher examined the participants' responses from the Superheroine Creator as a whole, there would be specific categories that would directly address the research questions. Each of the themes and categories would be guided by the Patricia Hill Collins theoretical concept, "new racism". This concept was used to further examine how the new racism is applied to the Black superheroine from the significant words and phrases from the data that resulted into focus codes.

The first research question that would be asked is, *How is popular culture reflected in the perceptions of the Black superheroine?* Those participants who took part in the study were asked to create a Black female superhero using the following categories: character background, hair, skin complexion, weight, height, superhero beginnings, costume, powers, weaknesses, main enemy/enemies, sidekick,

hideout/getaway, love interest, and body type. From the student's character creations, their responses answered the above research question from the following categories: hair, character weight/height, weakness, powers, superhero beginnings, and secret identity.

Hair

Each character creation offered a wide variety of hair types including style, length, color, and texture. In particular, 5 out of the 8 male participants (62.5%) would specifically create some sort of natural hairstyle for their participants; and 19 out of the 24 female participants (79%) gave their characters some natural hairstyle. Table 5.4 shows the different types of hairstyles and lengths assigned to the superheroine character.

Table 5.4 Different Hairstyles and Lengths

Braids	1
Curls	7
Highlights	2
Locs	4
Afro	1
Coily	2
Half Shaved and Half Locs	1

Short	3
Mid-Length	5
Long	7

Many of these characters present various unique hairstyles. Some of these styles included braids:

> ***"…with long braided hair down to her mid-back. Her braids are locked with stones…"*** *(Berceau de la Vie, Brian: 18)*

Or a 'big hair' style like the one from Air Mags McFly in which:

> ***"She has a natural sandy brown tightly coiled short haired pompadour."*** (Zoe: 21)

Others have textures that appear to be influenced by the Black Panther Party:

> ***"Her hair is the color of dark wool and as kinky as it gets. She wears it in an afro…"*** *(Soul Intuition, Carla: 24)*

One character would offer a creative and unique natural hairstyle:

> ***"One side is of her head is shaved- showing her beautiful black roots. The other side had long blue locs the color of lapis. The tips were white as snow, making her hair look icy against her skin."*** *(Serenity, Antonia: 21)*

All in all, many of the participants would assign their superheroines with some sort of natural hair.

Some characters also took pride in their natural hair like Oshun Honey,

> ***"Her dreadlocks are long enough to drape around her hourglass frame triple time. It is her mane that she holds that powers that be. O. Honey's hair glowed with a healthy sheen that revealed the regimens of her natural hair care."*** (Cynthia: 30)

Then there would also be other styles that might be deemed as 'good hair' such as:

> Stormy, who has ***"long brown hair, very wavy and silky."*** (Taylor: 23)

What would also be interesting is when the hair is in a natural state it would often be described as other than black, for example:

> *Abebi's hair was described as:* ***"dark brown with reddish brown lights, natural kinky curls, loose fro…"*** *(Simone: 25)*

Whereas, those characters who had more traditional styles typically had black hair, this would be seen in the following case:

> ***"Her hair is long, black, and straight, it cascades down her back beautifully…"*** *(Imani Wonder, Eva: 21)*

One character would be described as having short hair, and in conjunction would be associated with a well-known black female actress who wears the same style, for example:

> The character of Sista Soul would have ***"short and black hair like Nia Long in the 90s"*** (Michael: 20), also Cleopatra's ***"hair is jet black in a short hair cut similar to Halle Berry".*** (Charles: 20)

Both of these characters would be created by male participants, thus one might ask the question do black males have a certain hairstyle or look that they desire in a black woman?

The participants through the creation of these superheroines would invoke the natural hairstyle (i.e. locs, braids, afro, kinky curls, etc.) thus challenging the normalization and traditional ways for black women to wear their hair.

As a whole, both male and female participants assigned their superheroine character natural hair styles that were mid-length to long. Each of these various styles seen in the participant's character creations, both male and female participants spoke to the theme of *Black women's beauty*. All in all, for most black women, hair styling is a matter of personal choice in which there are a plethora of options.

Character Weight/Height:

The next category that would speak to the first research question pertained to the character's weight and height.

Table 5.5 Superheroine Weight from Male Participants (n=8)

130	2 (25%)
135	2(25%)
140	1 (12.5%)
150	2 (25%)
155	1 (12.5%)

As it related to weight, the male participants created characters with weights between 130-155 pounds with an average weight of 142 pounds.

Table 5.6 Superheroine Weight from Female Participants (n=24)

96	1 (4.2%)
115	1 (4.2%)
125	2 (8.3%)
130	3 (12.5%)
135	4 (16.7%)
140	2 (8.3%)
145	3 (12.5%)
150	2 (8.3%)
160	2 (8.3%)
165	2 (8.3%)
200	1 (4.2%)
215	1 (4.2%)

When looking at the female responses as to their character's weight, the female participants would assign weights that ranged from 96-215 pounds, with an average weight of 132 pounds. When examining all the participants from both genders, the overall average weight was 139.72, which is less than the average weight of the male participants and higher than the female participants separately. Overall, both genders average weight is smaller than the average weight for a woman, which is 166.2 pounds[6], according to the 2012 Centers of Disease Control (CDC) Annual Report. However, the male participants were closer to the CDC average.

Height ranged from 5'6'' (66 inches) to 5'11'' (71 inches), with an average height of 5'8.8'' (68.8 inches) from the male participants. Female participants had a broader range of heights from 5'0'' (60 inches) to 5'11'' (71 inches), that they would assign to their characters. The average height from the female participants was 5'5.77'' (65.77 inches). After examining both gender's height the average height would be 5'6.2'' (66.2 inches). Taken as a whole, according to CDC (2012) the overall height for a woman is 63.8 inches and the average height for a Black woman is 65 inches. In the case of height, the female participants created heights that were close to the average height for Black women; and both male and female participants had higher heights than the average woman. As a whole for both weight and height, the female participants seemed to create a wider range for their superheroine characters, whereas the male participants were narrower.

Powers

When examining the comic book superhero, it is also important to discuss their super powers. Both male and female participants took an active role in assigning creative powers to their superheroine characters. Intriguingly, of the female (n=20) and male participants (n=6) that gave their character a power, they would both engage in more physical and mental based powers for their characters.

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[6] The measured average weight came from adults 20 years and older

Table 5.7 Types of Powers separated by Gender

Type of Power	Male Participants (n=6)	Female Participants (n=20)
Mental	2 (33%)	5 (25%)
Physical	3 (50%)	10 (50%)
Spiritual	N/A	3 (15%)
Elemental	1 (16.7%)	2 (10%)

These powers provide another branch of their personality and it is also an essential part of what makes them a 'superhero'. As a rule, superheroes generally use their powers to counteract day-to-day crimes, while also battling threats against humanity by super-villains, and/or their criminal counterparts. In many cases, each superheroine would at least have one defining power, such as:

> ***"AZA's power is telekinesis"*** (Brooklyn Marie: 20)

Or in other cases multiple powers, for example Sasha would have the ability of:

> ***"…speed, being able to look into the future, being able to rewind the future, speak ALL types of different languages, the ability to speak to God, invisibility, breathe ice and heat, and fly."*** (Amanda: 22)

And also in the case of Rashidah she would also have a varied selection of multiple powers such as:

> ***"…Memorization, flight, super strength, telekinesis, power sensing, healing, Omni-linguistic, echolocation, sonic scream, superhuman agility, wall crawling, night vision, ability to control and detect true emotions of others, telepathy, time manipulation, plant manipulation and teleportation"*** (Nichelle: 20)

As a whole, these powers were identified as being mental, physical, elemental, or spiritual based.

When the power was mental, there was usually some type of interpersonal connection:

> Shrink had the ***"…ability to read and manipulate minds. She has trained extensively and is able to control the minds that she channels to prevent herself from hearing every mind in a crowd."*** (Lauren: 18)

Those who had a physical power were more often than not trained or skilled in a certain manner:

> ***"Berceau de la Vie is a trained huntress. Her natural skills in the wild make her top dog on the food chain."*** (Brian: 18)

Or having some type of super strength and/or speed:

> ***"Imani (Wonder) is incredibly fast, she moves at the speed of light often so confusing her enemy. Her appearance is soft but she packs a powerful punch."*** (Eva: 21)

The elemental powers consisted of having an emotional, and even environmental connection to weather and nature:

> Karma's powers would include being able to create ***"nature disasters like fire coming from the ground and hurricanes."*** (Martin: 25)
>
> Mother Amina's powers involved, **"controlling all elements of the earth."** (Liah: 22)

In the case of an environmental connection this came from the character Eclipse, she has:

> ***"…has the ability to create, produce, manifest, and control any and all shadows. Even the tiniest of shadows, such as a shadow made from the inside of her sleeve, can be exploited. Eclipse can use virtually any shadow within an area and use it as solid objects. She is able to make offensive weapons, like swords and spear-like shadows, and is able to bind opponents with shadows as well. The shadows are also shown to be extremely durable, even if formed from small shaded areas capable of stopping a moving train in its tracks. She is also able to move the shadows at incredible speeds to completely cover herself in a shadow ball to protect her from harm such as bullets, missiles, and even explosions. Eclipse can also use her shadows to teleport herself or other to any location on the planet as long a shadow is present. Her shadow powers can also be used to suck up or negate other abilities as well. It acts very much like a deep, dark abyss void of any light."*** (Jonathan: 22)

When the power was spiritual, there was typically some ancestral connection:

> The character Tia Tigress had ***"…the ability to call upon the power of spirits and her ancestors; they are the source of her information that allows her to be one step ahead of the enemy. She can also conjure ancient magic to her advantage, some even including the ability to control the four elements around her."*** (Aisha: 19)

There were even be some characters whose creative powers were directly linked to their personalities such MC SOOUULL who is R&B singer and hip-hop lyricist:

> ***"She can easily create very powerful raps that could temporarily mesmerize someone, weaken them, or hypnotize them and cause them to do anything she asked them too."***
> (Tiara: 20)

These superheroines and their powers play multiple roles, healing those who need it and saving the world from evil villains and vicious enemies.

Secret Identity

One important element that is associated with the typical superhero is their secret identity. These identities reveal another of layer of that character's personality. Both male and female participants gave an array of identities to their superheroines. However, neither gender had significant differences in the identity that was presented to their respective superheroines. Many of the characters had significant names that would be influenced by actual movies, comic book characters, and pop recording artists. For example, one participant assigned an identity directly related to a popular shoe, comic book, and movie character:

> AirMags McFly secret identity was, ***"Martii Wayne: named after her mother's favorite movie 'Back to the Future' and her father's favorite superhero 'Batman'"*** (Zoe: 21)

In this particular case both the character name and the secret identity had a direct link to popular culture.

In some situations, the character's secret identity was linked to their life as a student for example, the character of MC SOUULL was a superheroine who lead a double life as a superheroine along with being a student and aspiring hip-hop artist,

> ***"…in her everyday life she is Josephine Abdul or "Joe" to close friends and family. She is a 21 year old Junior at Michigan State University, majoring in Music and minoring in African-American Studies. She longs to be an R&B Singer and hip-hop lyricist. She has a deep rooted love for 90s hip-hop and Motown records,"*** (Tiara: 20)

Another example of this was found in the character Imani Wonder,

> ***"By day this heroine is a college student by the name of Imani Bleu, she studies journalism and the arts. At night her grandmother thinks she has taken a job as a lounge singer to help pay the bills but after Imani realizes her power, she spends her nights fighting crime."*** (Eva: 21)

Then there would be the superheroine-student that could be considered the typical 'working college student',

> ***"By day Tia works at a café as a barista/bartender. She is also a student at a university located near her cafe."*** (Aisha: 19) and,
>
> AZA (also known as Janine Goodman) ***"…is a 20 year old college student and works as a "waitress" at night to support herself."*** (Brooklyn Marie: 20).

In other cases, some participants assigned their characters an identity in which both their normal and superheroine life were fighting for some type of justice. Two characters in particular were identified as a lawyer,

> Sista Soul also known as, ***"Mary Melissa Fisher: single woman, highly successful attorney in Miami, FL."*** (Michael: 20)

And then there is Sasha Fierce whose superheroine title is directly linked to the pop culture star Beyonce', but is also an attorney in her other life,

> ***"Sam Owens: lawyer in a firm in Seattle, one of the top attorneys…Therefore by day she fights crime as well as by night"*** (Alexandra: 20)

Some characters who would be assigned a 'blue-collar job' as their secret identity, for example Oya Tornado,

> ***"Anita Storm works at the Chicago Police Department as a receptionist."*** (Kenya: 37)

Other characters made sure that their superheroine status and their 'cover up' were two very separate lives, for example Shrink,

> ***"…was born Amanda Esme Philip. After marriage, she becomes Amanda Esme Banks and is a Professor of psychology at the University of Maryland as her cover up. Shrink is a superhero that is actually employed by a very, very secret branch of the federal government."*** (Lauren: 18)

One of the participants assigned a very 'high profile' secret identity to their superheroine,

> ***"Nicole by day and Cleopatra by night. Nicole is the forty-fifth president of the United States. Although she has the weight of the world on her shoulders Nicole always keeps composed and professional. Since her inauguration the economy has seen a substantial improvement!"*** (Charles: 20)

This was unique in that the superheroine is the first female president, and that it would come from a male participant.

Not every participant assigned a secret identity to their superheroine. For example:

> ***"If she were to have a secret identity then everyone would know she is a superhero..."*** *(Athena, Susie: 20)*

Others felt that a secret identity was simply just not needed:

> ***"She does not need a secret identity…"*** *(Mother Amina, Liah: 22)*

Not only does the character's secret identity help to answer the question of, "How is popular culture reflected in the perceptions of the Black superheroine?", but it also speaks to the overall theme of social and political issues.

The next research question *"How do African American male and female college students imagine the Black superheroine?".* had the following properties, the character's weakness, sidekick, love interest, main enemies, their background, superhero beginnings and finally their hideout/getaway.

Weakness

The first category addressed by the second research question was the weakness of the superheroine. Each participant assigned creative adversities that challenged their superheroine characters. Examining the superheroine's weakness speaks to the research question regarding how they are imagined, as well as the theme *of social and political issues*. As a result, there were four types of weaknesses assigned to the characters: chemical/natural substance, inventive/outside the box, phobia, and no weakness.

Table 5.8 Types of Weakness (n=32)

Chemical/Natural Substance	8 (25%)
Inventive/Outside the box	11 (34.3%)
Phobia	9 (28%)
No Weakness	4 (12.5%)

The chemical/natural substance sub-category would provide some very intriguing data. For example, Oya Tornado's weakness was:

> ***"Water (while she is invisible) if she is in an invisible state and makes contact with water she will become visible…"*** *(Kenya: 37)* and then the character Shiloh had ***"Milk"*** *(Kaya: 21) as a weakness.*

Simple things that could also be seen as good for you such as water and milk were sometimes used as challenge for the superheroine.

In some cases, the superheroine might have a weakness that was poisonous in nature, whether is came from a plant or some sort of chemical. For example:

> ***"Her only weakness is the nectar of a very poisonous plant often found in the amazon…"*** *(Fluoressence, Daniel: 20)*
>
> ***"Her weakness is citron"*** *(Sasha Fierce, Alexandra: 20)*
>
> ***"Her weaknesses are cadmium and certain dioxins. She also becomes weakened when she inhales certain fumes like those found in nicotine and cigar smoke."*** *(Soul Intuition, Carla: 24)*

There were two specific cases in which a character's weakness was poisonous, and was linked to appearance altering products that are detrimental to Black women's hair or skin.

> ***"Her primary weaknesses are texturizers, hair bleaches, perms, wigs, weaves…"*** *(Weavy Wonders, Malcolm: 22)*
>
> ***"Relaxers, succumbing to mainstream popularity"*** *(Abebi, Simone: 25)*

Interestingly, both responses came from a female and male participant. It could possibly be inferred that both female and male participant, in a very imaginative way, acknowledge the problematic issue of succumbing to western and Eurocentric standards.

There were also weaknesses that were not only extreme, chemical substances, but flammable and dangerous. For example, the character Maji,

> ***"…weakness is fire"*** *(Maji, Jaylla: 21)*

In addition, there would also be one specific case the weakness can be likened to "the cure" from the popular comic book series Marvel's X-Men comics, in which the characters'

> ***"…weakness lies in a vaccination by the name of Aspis…if a person has been vaccinated with Aspis, Amanda cannot read or manipulate their minds within 72 hours…"*** *(Shrink, Lauren: 18)*

Another sub-category, where the participants' assigned a weakness was the 'inventive/outside the box' sub-category. In some cases, the weaknesses would impact them personally, for example:

> Eclipse ***"…only has two weaknesses: her overconfidence and sadistic tendencies. She tends to get carried away in her work which distorts her psyche."*** *(Jonathan: 22)*
>
> Then there is Oshun Honey who ***"her only weakness is love, the very thing that motivates her."*** *(Cynthia: 30)*

And in some cases this personal weakness was attached to a family member, this could be seen in the character of Mysteria,

> ***"her weakness is her son, his energy level matches hers exactly."*** *(Jenise: 22)*

Some characters had a personal weakness related to a personal possession, for example:

> ***"Her primary weaknesses are her shoes. She is completely obsessed with sneakers, so if anyone would just so happen to step on them…she would spontaneously combust, literally!"*** *(AirMags McFly, Zoe: 21)*

Other inventive and 'outside the box' weaknesses included:

> ***"Extremely loud noises…it sometimes is overwhelming and can cause intense migraines."*** *(Cleopatra, Charles: 20)*
>
> ***"Her weakness is if she is seen by someone in public as Vrou…she loses control and seeks out the evil in them…"*** *(Vrou, Reece: 23)*
>
> ***"Her only weakness stems from the book of Ahken. In it details ancient curses that can either weaken or destroy her…"*** *(Tia Tigress, Aisha: 19)*

In one case the weakness had a direct reference to hip hop and pop music culture in the case of MC SOOUULL:

> ***"the sound of auto-tuned voices and degrading lyrics towards women. These cause mental writers block and can also weaken her emotions and strength."*** *(Tiara: 20)*

Typically most comic book characters have some type of weakness or phobia, in the case of these Black superheroine creations they would follow this same path. However, these phobia's had an impact that went beyond the conventional realm. For example,

> ***"Atychiphobia- fear of failure"*** *(Sista Soul, Michael: 20)*
>
> ***"Rhabdophobia- fear of being severely punished or beaten by a rod…"*** *(Rashidah, Nichelle: 20)*

Avoiding failure or punishment was also another form of weakness. Sista Soul's phobia even speaks to the 'superwoman syndrome', this is interesting as this came from a male participant. As it is related to Rashidah's character this phobia may speak to the possibility of being bullied, or even as extreme as a connection to slavery.

> Other characters had mood-related phobia's for example, Karma's weakness is ***"Depression"*** *(Martin: 25).*

And then others that would have to avoid small spaces, such Alana, The Black Warrior Princess who

> ***"…does not like being in small places, and gets nervous when she is surrounded."*** *(Angela: 23)* and Unique who ***"…has a serious case of claustrophobia"*** *(Unique, Renee: 38).*

Two of the characters possessed a phobia that directly impacted their powers:

> ***"Her primary weakness is being dropped or falling from very high places, once she falls she begins to lose her superhuman strength."*** *(Imani Wonder, Eva: 21)*
>
> ***"Beetles because they can at any time make her powers disappear."*** *(Serenity, Antonia: 21)*

Although it is common that superheroes have some sort of weakness, not all of the superheroine's were given a weakness. For example:

> ***"She would not have a weakness"*** *(Athena, Susie: 20)*
>
> ***"She has no weakness, maybe the fact that she is too nice makes people think that she is stupid and she is losing time helping people who won't recognize in the future her efforts."*** *(Djena: Chloe: 23)*
>
> ***"She doesn't have a particular weakness, but she struggles when fighting against technology…"*** *(Mother Amina, Liah: 22)*

In some cases a rational was given, that despite not having a weakness the character did have certain issues that she would still deal with or encounter.

In several of the superheroine creations, the participants assigned some sort of weakness, some superheroines did not have a weakness, and many ways this provided another viewpoint of the character. Even though these are 'superheroes' there is this humanistic quality that is represented. They have fears of

failure, some suffer with emotional battles, others are overconfident, and some deal with obsessions. By looking at the feature of weaknesses, in relation to the Black superheroines depiction in popular culture there would be a range of personalities that appear.

Sidekick

Having a sidekick was not something that was common when considering the characters. Significantly, both male and female participants would not give their superheroine's a sidekick. In general, each of the participants felt that it was not really a mandatory requirement that their character had a sidekick. In many cases, the superheroine did not trust anyone or felt that having a sidekick was seen as someone who just be in the way for example,

> ***"She works on her own, because she trust no one"*** *(Shiloh, Kaya: 21),* or
> ***"…she feels like they just get in her way. Her first and only sidekick died in action…"*** *(AirMags McFly, Zoe: 21)*

Others felt that although a sidekick was not needed, considering a replacement was an option,

> ***"Eclipse does not have a sidekick however she would be interested in a successor or someone to teach."*** *(Jonathan: 22)*

There were some participants who felt that their character did not need or would have a sidekick, but more so a partner or those that aided her when needed. This was seen specifically in the case of Shrink,

> ***"The heroine does not have a sidekick. She works as a partner to her husband…"*** (Lauren: 18)

Or in the case of Athena,

> ***"She wouldn't have a sidekick, but she would have a group of friends that aided her, like people she bounces ideas off of…"*** *(Susie: 20)*

And then some felt their superheroine's just simply needed to work alone,

> ***"No sidekick no friends"*** *(Zeneth, Tanya: 35) or in the case of Weavy Wonders* she is
> ***"…a dominant force by herself. She does not need a sidekick…"*** *(Malcolm: 22)*

For those that did have a sidekick many of them had a familial connection/guide such as Soul Intuition,

> ***"Her sidekick is Black Soldier, who she met as a child…they have had a brother/sister relationship…"*** *(Carla: 24)*

Then there was Berceau de la Vie who did,

> ***"Not necessarily a sidekick, but more of a surrogate mother…"*** *(Brian: 18)*

And Vrou whose,

> ***"…mom, grandma, and great grandma will sometimes come to her aid…"*** *(Reece: 23)*

Not every character that had a sidekick was in human form, some were voices for example Oshun Honey's,

> ***"sidekicks are the voices of the ancestors…"*** *(Cynthia: 30)*

While others were pet sidekicks like in the case of Tia Tigress who had,

> ***"a pet tiger, Nambia, born from creation magic"*** *(Aisha: 19)*

As well as Serenity whose sidekick is,

> ***"a tiger that can shape form and become human when she is in danger."*** (Antonia: 21)

In general, 'working alone' was the most common type of situation amongst both the male and female participants, this also spoke to the theme of *controlling images of Black women*. Various factors were involved as to why the character would work alone, everything from not needing a sidekick, to having trust issues, to potentially preparing a replacement/successor.

Love Interest

Each of the characters had some type of 'significant other', and various dynamics influenced into each of these relationships. In many cases, there were both gender's represented in the different types of love interests. However, this would not be the case with regards to the superheroine having a same sex and or open relationship. This only came from the female participants.

Table 5.9 Superheroine Love Interest (n=32)

Love Interest	59%
Platonic Relationship	12.5%
No Love Interest	15.6%

For some of the characters, the participants had their superheroine involved with another fellow superhero, for example Rashidah,

> She ***"is married to another superhero named Rashad. They live together while in their secret identities, but have agreed to never team up or interfere in each other's superhero business."*** (Nichelle: 20)

This would also be the case for the character, Shrink (Amanda):

> ***"Amanda's husband is a military chemist and also a mutant hired by the very, very secret branch of the federal government. His real name is Dr. Barium "Barry" Michael Banks. His superhero name is Steel. Barry has the ability to manipulate metals. Barry and Amanda met while both of them were graduate students in Massachusetts. Barry introduced Amanda to the very, very secret branch of the federal government and was instrumental in her being hired to work for them."*** (Lauren: 18)

Other characters would also be involved with someone whether they were married, engaged, or dating, for example:

> ***"Jamila X, is happily married to a prominent African American lawyer named Marcus Muhammad."*** *(Weavy Wonders, Malcolm: 22)*

Some of the superheroine's love interests were considered a serious conflict of Interest:

> ***"She is in love with her best friend Samuel, who's the nephew of the King (who executed her parents)…she sometimes feel like she should tell him."*** *(Djena, Chloe: 23)*

Also in the case of Stormy,

> ***"she is in love with her fathers rival countries son, Akeem."*** (Taylor: 23)

Other characters would have to hide their superheroine status from their love interest due to it being a conflict of interest,

> ***"Christopher Silver, son of her arch-enemy Hilary Silver. Chris only knows Imani as his fellow schoolmate and not the target of his mother and vice versa. The two spend time together in between school and fighting crime, Imani wishes she could tell Chris about her identity but it could mean the end for both of them."*** *(Imani Wonder, Eva: 21)*

When dealing with relationships, sexuality also emerged as there were be two specific cases that dealt with same-sex relationships and sexually open relationships, for example Air Mags McFly

> ***"…is in love and her partner is the villainess Atomic orchid or as she knows her as Ash."*** *(AirMags McFly, Zoe: 21) or* In the case of Sasha, ***"she really does not have a sex preference…"*** *(Sasha, Amanda: 22)*

There were also some characters that were be depicted as being in a platonic relationship, or not needing to be in one at all:

> ***"…She would have a positive friendship with a male but it wouldn't be anything sexual."*** *(Athena, Susie: 20)*
>
> ***"She loves no one, her tough life has created a block of her true emotions.*** *(Shiloh, Kaya: 21)*
>
> ***"Nope! She's an independent woman!"*** *(MC SOOUULL, Tiara: 20)*
>
> ***"No love interest, no time for love."*** (Zeneth, Tanya: 35)

Some characters had not made their love interest aware of their alternate identity and superheroine powers. For example:

> ***"He is not aware of her powers, but she has been meaning to tell him for years now, since they've been dating for about 6 years."*** *(Fluoressence, Daniel: 20)*

Also Oya Tornado (Anita Storm) would have a similar situation,

> ***"Anita Storm has been dating Derrick Mitchell, a Chicago detective for the past year. With a past similar to her own, Derrick feels passionate about fighting crime in his native Chicago."*** (Kenya: 37)

It was apparent that many of the characters had a fear of telling their love interest about their 'other life'. This was made evident in the particular case below:

> ***"She does have a developing love interest named Jackson…They have been friends ever since. He falls in love with her and wants to be with her, but she constantly pushes him away emotionally because of her secret powers…"*** *(AZA, Brooklyn Marie: 20)*

Also in the case of Alana, The Black Warrior Princess:

> ***"She has a guy in the neighborhood that she secretly loves, and admires but is afraid to talk to him because of her secret identity."*** (Angela: 23)

In certain situations, both the superheroine and the love interest had to make sure that they kept a low profile due to their respective positions, for example in the case of Cleopatra:

> ***"The superheroine does have a very interesting love life. She's falling for the photographer that works at the white house. He is highly off limits, due to the two different positions that they hold. The president cannot be seen with this young photographer even though they are both falling in love."*** (Charles: 20)

As a whole, both male and female participants provided various types of love interest for their characters.

Main Enemy/Enemies

In order for a superhero to really be a hero, they must have some villain, force that they must fight against or a problem to solve. The participants' assigned creative enemies that had personal vendettas, corrupt government officials, and those individuals or entities that caused hurt and damage to the community.

When specifically looking at the characters who had enemies based on a personal vendetta there would be several different types. Fluoressence's main enemy would surface based on a sibling rivalry,

> ***"One of main rivals actually is her older sister. It's a sibling rivalry that has been going on ever since her older sister was granted her powers."*** *(Daniel: 20)*

Another situation would involve best friend's who are now enemies,

> ***"Her main enemy actually used to be her best friend when they were children. Her name is Shanice Carter. In middle school Sista Soul "stole" Shanice's "boyfriend". In all actuality the boy never liked Shanice and they were never anything more than friends to him. Every since then Shanice has hated everything Sista Soul has become and tries to ruin her law career and put her on blast and get people to believe that Sista Soul is not just a lawyer. Due to the fact that Shanice could not get anyone to believe her, her goal now is to destroy Sista Soul. So she "creates" her own villain by dressing up in her own costume and basically stalking Sista Soul to catch her in the act and prove to people she's a superhero."*** (Sista Soul, Michael: 20)

Some of the characters also had a previous love relationship with their main enemy, but due to certain events their lover became their enemy for example,

> ***"Eclipse has one main enemy. He is nicknamed, "The Prince of Light". He has the ability to become, create, and manipulate light rays. He is her total opposite in almost all aspects however that is what made them much more attracted to each other, both good and bad things. The Prince of Light is the first person to truly accept Eclipse for what she is and not take advantage of her abilities. He also was the one who taught her how to fight and control her powers. They became intimate together and eventually were to married. Their relationship was going well until they both had a fight over how to deal with one of their enemies. Eclipse and Prince of Light caught their culprit and while the Prince of Light wanted to turn him in to the authorities, Eclipse wanted to rid the earth of the evil scum forever since he had caused so much pain and killed thousands of lives and knew that no prison could hold such a powerful person. She was going in for the final strike when the Prince of Light betrayed her and attacked her from behind. While he did that, the culprit had escaped and went on to kill more innocent people. Eclipse has never forgiven the Prince for stopping her from killing him, which would have saved countless of lives. The Prince himself became disgusted by the lengths that Eclipse would go to obtain peace. They then split up and from that point on, Eclipse has continuously tried to track down the escaped culprit by harshly punishing anyone associated with him. The Prince does not approve so he always tries to undermine her efforts which has earned him her greatest disapproval. Eventually Eclipse finds the culprit again and kills him before the Prince of Light has a chance to interfere. When the Prince comes in, he starts to become enraged and gets taken over with revenge and hatred of Eclipse. It happens to be that The Prince did no disclose that this culprit had been the father of the Prince who he has been trying to change and save most of his life. Now that Eclipse has killed him, he becomes her most dangerous enemy, bent on fulfilling the role his father previously had. Eclipse must now be forced to kill not only her greatest foe but also her former love."*** (Jonathan: 22)

Interestingly the abovementioned cases would all come from male participants. Having a main enemy that was driven by a personal vendetta was a common trait that would be found in the male participants superheroine characters. There was one case from a female participant that involved a personal vendetta; this can be seen in the following example:

> ***"Her enemy is a villainess Atomic Orchid who creates chaos around the city and has a personal vendetta against McFly, because she took her spot as the #1 super hero. Mcfly stole her shine so she decided to turn to a life of crime and personally make McFly's life a living hell."*** *(AirMags McFly, Zoe: 21)*

Competition amongst black women was a common theme throughout the majority of the characters, especially from the male participants.

In certain cases, much like in the comic books corrupt government and/or law enforcement officials' play a central role as a character's enemy/nemesis, this would be no different with the following characters:

> ***"Her main enemy is David Boozman, an investigator that works in internal affairs. Although he is hired to expose crooked cops, he actually works on their behalf, he often receives pay from police officers to help cover up their crimes."*** *(Oya Tornado, Kenya: 37)*

In the case of Imani Wonder,

> ***"Her main enemy is a woman named Hilary Silver, she is a world leader responsible for drug trafficking with government funds…"*** (Eva: 21)

One particular character's main enemy specifically dealt with a children's agency:

> Mysteria's ***"…main enemy is the FPA the Foster Parent Association. They are comprised of orphanages and foster parents that just take kids in for extra income."*** (Jenise: 22)

Also the character of Abebi would specifically deal with,

> ***"Corrupted politicians, whose interest is not to better the communities but to keep the rich richer and poor poorer she feels the government is the main machine in the hindrance of her people."*** (Simone: 25)

Some cases would involve enemies who were from outside organizations or individuals, for example:

> ***"The "Spectrum devils" or as she calls "The Powers That Be" also plague her. They consist of The Higher Powers, often called The Illuminati, and stereotype promoting black popular leaders."*** *(Berceau de la Vie, Brian: 18)*

There were even some enemies that were seen as 'ancient forces',

> ***"Her main enemies are the Majestics… an ancient force still thriving in Haiti that has plans to re-enslave every black person on the planet."*** (Tia Tigress, Aisha: 19)

Some of the characters dealt with enemies that specifically dealt with the mistreatment of women and children:

> AZA ***"…does not have any single enemy, but her targets are abusive men, rapists, sexual predators, etc whom she injures while they attempt to commit these crimes against women and children."*** *(AZA, Brooklyn Marie: 20)*

Then there was also the character Unique whose enemies were:

> ***"People who intentionally hurt children. (Child molesters, child abusers, pimps that are prostituting young girls, etc.) They are not people that she knows first hand, but people that have done things to the children that she cares for at the hospital where she works. She goes after them and there ring of goons that help them or are in on their crimes."*** (Renee: 38)

Another enemy would deal more with the assimilation of mainstream popularity:

> ***"Her main enemies are hair dressers… Hair dressers because they perpetuate assimilation to white culture…"*** *(Weavy Wonders, Malcolm: 22)*

Also in this particular case it would address black women problems (as it relates to hair) and how to avoid certain white culture standards.

Then there was the enemy who deals with specific genres of popular culture that can be likened to the 'MC Battle' found within hip-hop culture:

> ***"Sir-Swag-A lot= the souljaboi of the superhero world. Constantly uses the word swag (and many variations of the word). He once battled MC Soouull at the hip hop shot and was effortlessly beat and booed off the stage and asked to never return to the shop. His underground rap group saw video footage of the battle and kicked him out of the group fearing that he would kill their reputation and image."*** *(MC SOOUULL, Tiara: 20)*

Overall, the participants would imagine enemies that were not specific to any one gender (22% female, 28% male, 47% other/general). However, the male participants primarily assigned an individual person as their character's main enemy. Whereas, the female participants were more inclined to give their character's enemies that were part of a collective group and/or agency. In essence, the participants imagined their superheroine characters as Black women that must take up the battle of fighting against criminals whether in the government, workplace, and/or community.

Character Background

When looking at the background of the characters, there were several factors that emerged. These factors included the character's place of origin, their socio-economic status (SES), their family status and make-up, and personal issues/problems. Some key issues that surfaced that should be highlighted include: birthplace, violence/trauma, parental/family status, class status, and issues of abandonment and adoption.

The birthplace is a central component when investigating the character's background; it essentially lays the character's foundation. For the majority of these characters their place of origin was from either the continent Africa or the West Indies/Caribbean. Many of the participants (n=14) created superheroines that were from Africa (n=9) or the Caribbean (n=5). Considering the fact that the questionnaire was described as a "Black Superheroine Creator" the disproportionate number of responses situating their heroines outside of the United States required additional attention. Although the questionnaire was described as a "Black Superheroine Creator", these characters primarily had origins in Africa and the Caribbean.

These origins may speak to a sense of pride or shame in being an African American. An example of this African/Black origin would be seen in the character Oshun Honey as:

> ***"She was born by the Jamaican sea to a beautiful woman who loved her with a love that only a mother and daughter could share. Her father was a handsome and debonair man who was capable of capturing the hearts of everyone he met. Needless to say, our hero was born in LOVE! Her siblings were just as heroic in their own right. The dynamic family you could call them."*** (Cynthia: 30)

However this same origin was sometimes connected to some form of tragedy as found in the following character Berceau de la Vie,

> ***"Victoria Cradle, was born in Rwanda in the Winter of 1995 during the Rwanda genocide. Her Tutsi mother, Sikumbi Saquikiba had her by her Hutu Father, Neku Sakuraba as a result of rape during a violent raid that took place in a raid 11 months prior."*** (Berceau de la Vie, Brian: 18)

Her origins were tainted by the tragedy of rape as a result of an actual event that took place in her homeland. This could be an example of the participant mixing reality with fantasy by making a direct connection to the 1995 Hutu and Tutsi genocide war in Rwanda.

In some cases if the characters were born outside of Africa, their parents were born/from Africa, so there was still this connection to the continent, and this can be seen in the following case:

> ***"Sista Soul is from the Boston, Massachusetts metro area, but her parents are from Africa. Her father is from Sierra Leone and her mother from Ghana."*** (Michael: 20)

Other areas in which these characters came from would primarily include regions of the East Coast (i.e. Brooklyn, NY; South Philadelphia, PA; Washington, D.C.; Boston, MA) and the South (Mississippi; New Orleans, LA; Houston, TX; South Carolina) within the United States.

In spite of these characters being part of a fictional depiction, the violence and trauma that takes place in the real world is also portrayed through the participant's creations. For example:

> ***"Born Rahmatia Tigress; she is from a very prominent, wealthy family in Haiti. They were forced to flee because of a riot that erupted between the government and its people. Her father was accused of conspiracy and leader of the resistance/rebellion. Her family was forced to flee with their lives."*** (Tia Tigress, Aisha: 19)

Such instances like the ones mentioned above fall under the overall theme of being 'bound to reality or real life events' as there is direct influence by such real world events as the Haitian 1991 and 2004 coup involving then president Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Interestingly, many of the characters came from wealthy/elite backgrounds. This was evident in the following cases:

> ***"Her family was one of the first royal/elite families in this region. She was born into wealth, but never used her political powers or status to define herself. He father was a ruler in his country in 200-450 B.C., and her mother reaped the benefits of becoming queen in her country."*** (Soul Intuition, Carla: 24)

Another example is Alana, The Black Warrior Princess:

> ***"Alana Michelle is from Los Angeles, California. She has a mother, father, sister, and two brothers. She has many aunts and uncles & grandparents on both sides. She is the average girl on a daily basis as most people think, but in reality she is so much more! She is an African American girl, and her family is wealthy but not rich! She's lived a good life!"*** (Angela: 23)

Not only did this particular character have wealth, but she was also surrounded by a large and loving family.

In opposition to this, other characters were not so fortunate:

> ***"…born in the vicious streets of Chicago (Southside). Her roots can be traced back to Kenya and the Ivory Coast. She comes from a very impoverished family, and is***

> ***the youngest of 12 children. Despite black single mother stereotypes, Jamila grew up with both parents. They worked countless hours in order to provide for their Jamila and her siblings."*** (Weavy Wonders, Malcolm: 22)

Nonetheless, with the above case the character did manage to have both parents in household, despite the conditions.

As a rule in most comic book circles, no character comes from a perfect home and lives the perfect lifestyle at the same time. For example:

> ***"Amanda Esme Philip was born on December 3, 1978 to Alexander "Aristotle" and Victoria "Le Roux" Philip in New Orleans, Louisiana. Society viewed Alexander and Victoria as undesirable, fake voodooist's. Both claimed to be not only psychic but also possessive of extensive telepathic powers. Because of their less than stellar occupations, Alexander and Victoria lived a very meager lifestyle and needless to say, could not provide Amanda (Alexander and Victoria preferred to call her Esme) with everything she always needed and wanted. In a dramatic twist of fate, Alexander and Victoria are killed in a car crash, and a 5 year old Amanda is sent to live with her aunt and uncle in Sparta, Ga. Her aunt and uncle officially adopt her less than a year later and her last name becomes Lawson. Amanda's aunt and uncle are the picture perfect American middle class family. Her aunt is a high school literature teacher and her uncle is a successful businessman. Amanda is their only child. The Lawson's provide Amanda with a loving, happy, and privileged lifestyle."*** (Shrink, Lauren: 18)

Even so, many of the characters would come from striving families that included both parents. For example,

> ***"Rashidah is from Mali. She and her family are Muslim. She has two sisters and one brother. One of her sisters is a journalist and the other is a fashion designer, while her brother is a fireman. Both of her parents are alive. Her mother is an attorney and CEO of a law firm and her father is a psychologist and the CFO of an adoption agency. Her parents moved from Mali to the U.S. after their son was born. Rashidah is the youngest and her brother is the eldest. They were middle class is Mali, but have become upper class citizens in the U.S. while maintaining their humility and commitment to serve humanity. They meet up every Friday for a family day of worship, feasting and fun."*** (Nichelle: 20)

However, there were certain situations in which the characters would have to deal with drug or alcohol addicted, and absent parents, for example Zeneth:

> Was an "***Inner city youth who grew up with her mom on drugs and a father she never knew …she grew up shamed and angry at her situation."*** (Tanya: 35)

Others would not only become orphaned, but also have to witness the murder of their parents,

> Djena ***"…is from the royal descendant of Okwowko Kingdom in North Liberia, she sees herself as an orphan who saw her parent died being executed by the actual king of Ankafa."*** (Chloe: 23)

And being orphaned at a young age and forced to fend on their own in order to survive, like the character Shiloh:

> "***She was abandoned at 7 yrs old by her poor family that could not provide for her. Abandoned she learned how to fend for herself, through the trials of living in the retched rain forest."*** (Kaya: 21)

As a whole these are all very unsettling problems that even in reality need to be addressed. This is especially true when examining how the issue of rape is a very prevalent situation that emerged throughout the superheroine's background. Unfortunately, some of these characters were born as a result of rape, or had to escape their original birthplace due to being raped. These issues of rape, abandonment, and poverty-stricken environments speak to the overall theme of the *social and political issues.*

Whether these are fictional characters or individuals who must fight against these injustices in reality, these social and political issues discussed are still being addressed.

Superhero Beginnings

Every comic book superhero has some sort of beginning this usually gives us the story of how it all began. In some instances, this provides an up, close, and personal 'behind the scenes' creation story of the character. *What is it about this Black superheroine that makes her so?* In the case with these creations, the characters 'superhero beginning' several sub-categories emerged, which included inheriting their superhero status, a lab accident/traumatic event, discovering their superhero status, and their superhero status as a gift. The following table 5.10 shows the frequency of the types of superhero beginnings.

Table 5.10 Frequency of Superhero Beginnings by Gender

Type of Superhero Beginning	Male Participants (n= 7)	Female Participants (n= 21)
Inheriting superhero status	2	5
A creation accident/traumatic event	2	12
Discovery of superhero status	2	2
Superhero status as a gift	1	2

With regards to the inherited status, this inheritance might come from magic/sorcery or a mutation glitch. In the case of Tia Tigress, her superhero beginnings would come from inheritance based on magic:

> ***"With her brother's disappearance, Tia enlists in her uncle's help. He is a renowned witchdoctor and summoner/conjurer. He teaches her to use her natural abilities to summon upon the spirit of her ancestors for guidance and powerful magic. This in turn sets her into another world that her family had kept her from. Her brother was taken by the Majestics, an ancient force still thriving in Haiti that covertly operated the government-and Haiti's dictator, their secret figure head. Her brother was investigating the majestics and their parent's disappearance when he himself was abducted. This leads Tia on a path to obtain her brother at any cost, and she in turn learns that the Majestics have bigger plans than she could ever imagine, to re-enslave every black person on the planet. Tia helps those that come into trouble with the Majestics and brings an end to many of the Majestic's evil plots; which in turn, brings her that much closer to her brother."*** (Aisha: 19)

There were characters that simply inherited their superhero status from birth, this could be seen in the case of Sista Soul:

> ***"She was actually born with supernatural powers. Her father comes from a tribe in Africa where there was always a story about how one day young woman born from their tribe but the only way it could happen was for a man from that tribe to find a woman from another tribe. Her father didn't believe the stories but ended up with a woman from a tribe in Ghana. Little did he know that he was the man with the hidden gift."*** (Michael: 20)

When examining the superheroine's beginning, there were some participants who assigned their characters superhero beginnings via a creation accident/mutation, for example the character Shrink:

> Her status and ***"powers are a result of a genetic mutation that was passed down from a gene that both her parents possessed (so her parents did indeed possess extensive telepathic powers)."*** (Lauren: 18)

There was even an example of a creation accident that occurred as a result of a hip hop/rap battle, in the case of MC SOOUULL:

> ***"While attending a rap battle at the Hip Hop shop in Detroit, on her way to the restroom she passed by a door--a door that was usually padlocked and barred shut, was slightly cracked open this time. With curiosity getting the best of her, she enters the room and finds a long staircase leading to apparent darkness. She makes her way down the stairs only to find a group of women standing around a large bathtub full of a deep purple liquid. She overhears one of the women saying, "Now this serum is guaranteed to sharpen our minds and rhythm and make us the best MCs out there--apparently it will give us a boost of confidence and make us feel stronger, invincible with each dose… Just then Joe realized the whole group was staring directly at her, She recognized them all! They'd battle at the shop every week and never win due to the crowd (which was majority men) booing them off stage, uninterested and unimpressed. The girls were good, but not the best, not the sharpest. The girls slowly began to approach Joe, who had never moved from her spot at the foot of the staircase, "Who are you? Who sent you?!" the apparent ringleader yelled. Before she had time to answer, the women were running towards her with their arms reached out--enraged expressions on their faces. Joe ducked, dived, and ran quicker than ever. In an effort to trip her up, one of the women kicked at Joe's feet, causing her to stumble forward uncontrollably. It wasn't until she heard the panicked cries of the women that she realized she was stumbling right towards the huge tub of...whatever the heck that stuff was. Before she could regain her composure, before the girls could reach her and pull her back she fell completely into the tub. Strangely, there was no splash--what she thought was liquid now looked thicker, oily almost. It had no smell, and laying in the tub she didn't feel like she was in anything at all. The substance felt like warm air. She also noticed that she couldn't hear a thing--couldn't see anything beyond the oily substance in front of her eyes. Suddenly she felt an overpowering warmth go throughout her entire body...More shockingly, the words she used to simply asked them what happened came out as a short rap which effortlessly left her mouth without much thought at all. The flow of the words was powerful and beautiful. As the women heard her words, they began to speak uncontrollably. Rattling off their accounts of what happened. It was almost as if her words actually made them speak. It was in this moment that she began to grasp that something strange and abnormal had happened to her…She learned about how to use her powers and was given the name MC Soouull by Madame TooToo due to the soulful lyrics that would often come from her mouth."*** (Tiara: 20)

This specific case has several connections to popular culture (i.e. rap battle, hip hop shop) that influenced the superhero beginnings through a creation accident.

Some participants created stories in which the superhero beginnings were caused by a traumatic or tragic event such as being sexually assaulted or raped:

> ***"One day our hero was spending time with her friends or at least those she considered friends. They decided to go to the river, 2 females and 2 males accompanied her. Unbeknownst to her the 2 females shared a jealousy for our hero so they decided to set a trap for her. They pretended to forget some miscellaneous items back at the ranch so they could leave her in the presence of the men whom they'd instructed to rape her. Unfortunately their plan was carried out. They left her abused body by a bed of rocks. Suffering from the traumatic event our hero fell unconscious. It was then her dream would take place. She heard the voices her ancestors from below the water, they beckoned her to awake and when she did the voices summoned her to cleanse herself in the water, she did as she was told and subsequently received her powers. From this moment the voices would always be with her."*** (Oshun Honey, Cynthia: 30)

Another participant had their superheroine acquire her superhero status after being sexually assaulted:

> ***"Janine had a steady boyfriend in high school, whom she dated for 2 years. On the night of their senior prom, her boyfriend had gotten drunk and attempted o have sex with her. However, Janine was a virgin and had attempted to resist him because he was drunk. But he was much taller and stronger than her, and he was able to overpower her. After he sexually assaulted her, he took her home and threatened that if she told anyone then he would do it again. As she lay in her bed she became overwhelmed with anger and sadness. Somehow, her bed lifted from the floor and all the items in her room began to swirl rapidly around her. Janie was astonished at this, and from then on practiced focusing on manipulating individual objects and controlling her grief. At graduation, she tested the strength of her powers when her ex boyfriend walked up to the stage to receive his diploma, and she caused on overhead light fixture to fall over him, just missing his head. From that point, she decided that she would use her powers to protect other girls and women in her neighborhood from being attacked…" (AZA, Brooklyn Marie: 20)***

These particular cases are significant considering the issue of rape is not common in comic books storylines. Consequently, even in the case of her creation story she is riddled with tragedy and misfortune.

In addition to traumatic events such as rape, some characters became superheroes due to being abandoned or orphaned. In the case of Imani Wonder, she:

> ***"…was orphaned because her mother and father were both intel gone rogue after they discovered government corruption they spent their last days as assassins, crossing off some of the world's most powerful leaders. A car bomb explosion only left one survivor, Imani, from which the radioactive fumes leaked into her car seat." (Eva: 21)***

There were some situations in which the participants created a superhero beginning that involved a discovery of their superheroine potential:

> ***"The fire from her childhood where she lost her family unlocked her powers she was able to escape using her ability to control water."*** (Maji, Jaylla: 21)

> ***"Madison Henry (Vrou) discovered her powers as a little girl when she got to excited playing cops and robbers with the Presidents Staffs Children. A little boy threw a rock at her and she caught it 3mm from her face and threw it back with enormous speed. Her eyes turned into black pools and she spoke the words 'He who casts stones must die by the hands of Vrou'."*** (Madison Henry, Reece: 23)

And then there is the occurrence of unlocking their superhero beginnings by receiving a gift, which launches their superheroine status. And this participant would give their character a supernatural gift:

> ***"She gained her powers and became a superhero when she met the ghost of a young girl that had died in the hospital where she works. She has such a caring heart and did everything she could to comfort her patients, while nursing them back to health. There was a young girl that was being pimped out and when she tried to run away from her pimp he beat her up so bad that she was unrecognizable. When she got to the hospital, nurse Nikki tried to help her but it was too late. Before she passed she placed her hands on Nikki's head and showed her the vision of what happened to her. She also transferred the super powers into Nikki at the same time. Nikki started to notice the difference in her hearing and seeing instantly. She could hear the young girl talking to her all night. The little girls voice lured Nikki to the morgue and the little girls ghost met Nikki there and told her what her calling was. Nikki went after the pimp the next day."*** (Unique, Renee: 38)

Also the following character, Fluoressence became a superhero from a gift of "being a chosen one":

> ***"She got her powers one day when she decided to take a different route home to pick up some massage oils and other things to surprise her fiancé with on his birthday February 21 when suddenly there was someone pulled over on the side of the road screaming and flagging her down for help. She pulls over and the person disappears when she reaches the car. As she inspects the car to find any trace of who or what was there someone comes up behind her whispers in her ear "you have been chosen" and she blacks out after a very bright light flashes from all around her. When she awakes she is floating at one of the highest points of the city and while she figures out how to return home she discovers all of her abilities and immediately knows what she must do. She was later informed that this is how members of her family have been receiving their powers, by showing great acts of kindness the one time the opportunity presents itself this is how they were rewarded. Not all of her siblings got the opportunity and they were very envious."*** (Daniel: 20)

And some superheroines received their status as a heaven sent gift, for example Soul Intuition:

> ***"…As a child, an angel came to her and gave her the power to read into people's souls."*** (Carla: 24)

Reflecting on actual comic book superhero origins, many characters typically fall into one of the abovementioned categories as well. Overall, both genders created characters that either inherited their status, had a creation accident, superhero discovery, or obtaining their status from a gift. However, in the case of the traumatic/tragic event this treatment only came from the female participants. Although, rape and abandonment were be found in only three superheroine characters it is still significant in the fact that it would be acknowledged, which poses a challenging situation in how Black women are treated, as well as this idea of resiliency despite the unfortunate circumstances. These thoughts also speak to the themes of Black women's bodies and social and political issues.

Hideout/Getaway

Most comic book superheroes tend to have some type of hideout or getaway that serves as a seclusion place to gather thoughts, a place to debrief, an escape to either be with family or be alone, and/or a way to escape from the daily stress of being a superhero. For many of the characters there was a common theme of actual real locations and places. More specifically, in some instances, the hideout consisted of their actual home:

> ***"Boat house on the back bays of Delisle, MS"*** (Unique, Renee: 38)
>
> ***"College dorm"*** (AZA, Brooklyn Marie: 20)
>
> ***"A Seattle loft"*** (Sasha Fierce, Alexandra: 20)

In one particular case, the character's hideout was her home, but it was not a secret:

> ***"Eclipse does have a known castle or palace in the mountains that she calls home, secluded form any other contact with people. She does not care that her enemies or foes know where she lives because she believe that no one would be foolish enough to attack her at home. She is very overconfident in her ability, knowledge and influence that he base is actually more protected that it is exposed."*** (Jonathan: 22)

Then some characters were given a hideout/getaway in abandoned and open spaces such as:

> ***"Rainforest in Brazil"*** (Shiloh, Kaya: 21)

Or in the case of Cleopatra,

> ***"The superheroine's getaway place is an abandoned railroad behind Terminal West. This place has been abandoned by humans for years, and she spends a good amount of her time hiding out here."*** (Charles: 20)

Oya Tornado also had an abandoned hideout/getaway place:

> **"What appears to be an abandoned warehouse on the corner of 36th Street and Michigan Avenue is actually Oya's loft where she does most of her investigative work. It's directly across from the police headquarters where she can hear the many conversations that go on in that building."** (Kenya: 37)

In contrast, there was the typical secret getaway with secret entrances:

> A ***"secret lair in a secret part of town"*** (Alana, The Black Warrior Princess, Angela: 23)

Some of the hideout/getaways would have a personal connection to the character Djena, who is a nurse, had her hideout/getaway in a:

> ***"Hospital (very welcoming without judgment)"*** (Chloe: 23)

And with her obsession of sneakers, naturally AirMags McFly would escape to the:

> ***"Sneaker store"*** *(AirMags McFly, Zoe: 21)*

The hideout/getaway also served as a place to not only getaway, but to get advice for example in the case of Mysteria,

> ***"Her hideout is a historic school house where she goes and can get advice from previous scholars, teachers, and advocates for children's rights."*** (Jenise: 22)

And finally due to her love of hip hop, MC SOOUULL's place of solace would be:

> ***"…the basement of the Hip Hop shop…"*** *(MC SOOUULL, Tiara: 20)*

Some getaway places would have an historical connection attached to slavery:

> ***"A cloaked 3-story mansion/plantation next to the White House…"*** *(Vrou, Reece: 23).*

Thus, even in the comic book fantasy, the Black woman cannot escape the plantation.

There were some participants who felt that their character was confident enough that she did not need to hide, for example:

> ***"Weavy Wonders does not have a hideout. Weavy never runs or hides from anybody. She confronts each issue face to face, and will not rest until it is solved. She is blessed with the resilience of her enslaved ancestors, and laughs in the face of adversity. No such thing as a hideout in Weavy's world."*** (Malcolm: 22)

All in all, these various hideout and getaway places would serve as safe space for these characters to go to escape their superheroine work life. In many cases, these hideouts were described as a place to be 'normal' and did not involve saving others. There was also a scenario in which a superheroine had a hideout that did not have positive connection. Both male and female participants would either give their character some kind of hideout, or make sure to identify that the superheroine did not need one. Overall, only 4 out of the 32 participants (2 male and 2 female) felt that a hideout was not needed. These getaway/ hideout spaces included real life spaces that ranged from one's college dorm room, to a hospital, to abandoned railroad stations, as well as other spaces. Each location contributed to how each participant imagined their superheroine.

The final research question, *How do racial and gender stereotypes in popular culture shape the creation of the Black superheroine?* had the following properties: the character's body type, skin complexion, and their costume.

Body Type

Body type was a specific category that addressed each of the four overall themes. When describing their Black superheroine's body type there were various depictions that involved various complexities that had positive and negative connotations. For example Berceau de la Vie would be described as:

> ***"…though she is a woman, it is clear her body has seen trial."*** (Brian: 18) to…

Looking at the character Djena who would be described as a character whose body

> ***"…looks like a guitar which attracts every eye to her'***. (Chloe: 23)

The overall typical response, from both male and female participants, was that they imagined their superheroines as curvaceous and shapely (Male Participants= 75% and Female Participants= 87.5%).

As it relates to body type, each participant would acknowledge various Black women's shapes and sizes versus creating characters that were based on western/European mainstream body standards. For example, Fluoressence was described as having a body that,

> ***"…was shaped perfectly proportional. Some would say she was 'coke bottle' shaped. Others defined it as the ideal body of any woman to walk this earth."*** (Daniel: 20)

Some of the participants stated that their characters maintained a certain public image, for example:

> ***"Imani has a slim yet curvy frame. Very hourglass, yet refined."*** (Imani Wonder, Eva: 21)

Others made sure their superheroine was portrayed in a light that was opposite to the hypersexual images that are present in today's pop culture:

> ***"A BODACIOUS WOMAN I MUST ADD!! But she has the utmost respect for herself. She defies and combats the hypersexual stereotypes associated with black women."*** (Weavy Wonders, Malcolm: 22)

Although the majority of the participants assigned their superheroines with a curvaceous/shapely body, several of the participants would also imagine an alternate body type such as having a sporty and athletic built, for example AirMags McFly:

> ***"…has an athletic body type strictly influenced by her sports activities she did as a youth. She has curvaceous, but muscular thighs."*** (Zoe: 21)

In certain cases, much like the character's hair they would be likened to real-life popular culture figures, both petite and thick, for example:

> Oya Tornado, who was described as ***"hourglass petite, like Toni Braxton"*** (Kenya: 37)

Or just the opposite:

> Having an ***"hourglass shape, similar to Marshia Ambrosia."*** (Rashidah, Nichelle: 20)

Even in the midst of embracing these superheroine curves, there were some participants who did not want to show them, for example:

> Shiloh would have a ***"coke bottle shape from which is hidden from her family members and friends."*** (Kaya: 21)

Others who were trying to make sure to maintain a certain body image, such as Cleopatra who:

> ***"…is constantly working out to maintain her slim athletic physique."*** (Charles: 20)

While the above-mentioned superheroine had curves, many of the other participants recognized in their character's depiction, this would not be the main acknowledgement.

Besides noticing the trends in the various shapes and sizes described, several participants included some type of characteristic regarding butt size despite the fact that this was not asked of them in the Superheroine Creator. In some cases the characters' butt size became a major asset when describing her body type. These characters butt size provided a range in descriptions of certain butt sizes. For example, MC SOOUULL would have:

> ***"…strong thighs, but a modest sized butt."*** (MC SOOUULL, Tiara: 20)

Other participants made it very evident the importance of the woman's backside, especially in the case of Weavy Wonders,

> ***"She is shaped like the finest coke bottle around. Her waist is as thin as a paper clip. However, her backside is voluptuous. Her thighs are sturdy, and she has legs for days... weeks.... years.... decades…She is built like a STALLION!!"*** (Malcolm: 22)

When making mention of the character's butt size these responses typically came from the male participants, which may allude to this fascination of the black women's posterior. Without butt size being a requirement, the participants would indirectly make sure to include this feature as an important asset. All in all, body type along with the superheroine's butt size was a property that had a specific connection with the theme of *Black women's bodies*.

Skin Complexion:

Each character created had a variety of features and shades described, from dark to light, brown and even black skin tone.

Table 5.11 Types of Skin Complexion (n=32)

Light	2 (6.25%)
Medium	13 (40%)
Dark	15 (47%)
Off-Color	2 (6.25%)

These character's skin complexion shades were associated as either being light, medium, dark, and or off-color.

> *Light:*
> ***"Her skin is a beautiful shade of light brown."*** *(Cleopatra, Charles: 20)*
>
> *Medium:*
> ***"She is a caramel complexion"*** *(Alana, The Black Warrior Princess, Angela: 23)*
> ***"Medium golden brown complexion"*** *(Tia Tigress, Aisha: 19)*
>
> *Dark:*
> ***"Her skin is dark brown"*** *(Zeneth, Tanya: 35)*
> ***"Sable"*** *(Berceau De La Vie, Brian: 18)*
>
> *Off-Color:*
> ***"Top Dark brown, Bottom Light brown"*** *(Sasha, Amanda: 22)*
> ***"Her skin is the color of the Morant Bay sun at dusk…"*** *(Oshun Honey, Cynthia: 30)*

Several of the participants described their character's skin complexion in terms that were more than just light or dark. For example, the following character would have a striking type of skin complexion.

> Sista Soul skin was described ***"…with a hint of golden when the light hits her skin."*** *(Michael: 20)*

In the case of Weavy Wonders,

> ***"her skin is flawless, and she takes pride in her dark skin."*** *(Weavy Wonders, Malcolm: 22)*

Soul Intuition's skin,

> ***"… is the color of a penny…Her skin is smooth and shines like a new coin."*** *(Carla: 24)*

And with the character AirMags McFly, her skin complexion was quite distinctive,

> ***"she has a dark brown complexion with a purple, raised scar that runs down the length of the right side of her chin."*** *(Zoe: 21)*

There were characters whose skin complexion would include both ends of the skin color spectrum with Shiloh who has:

> ***"dark mulatto skin"*** *(Kaya: 21)*

Each of these characters demonstrated that not only does the Black superheroine come in all shapes and sizes (as mentioned earlier), but in various shades as well.

Some of the participants also created this mentality in their characters, in which they questioned, "why she looks different" in comparison to other family members. For example, Djena's skin complexion is:

> ***"light skin…However her grandma and cousins are very black, she sometimes wants to ask her grandma why she is different. But she is afraid of grandma's reaction."*** (Chloe: 23)

In some cases, some of the characters had a specific skin color identical to certain popular figures:

> ***"She is brown skinned (like Taraji P. Henson)."*** (Oya Tornado, Kenya: 37)
>
> ***"She has a medium, brownish skin tone, similar to Oprah."*** (Rashidah, Nichelle: 20)

In just these two cases alone there is a specific popular culture influence.

All in all, the majority of the participants chose medium to darker skin complexions (87%) versus having lighter skin (6.25%). There was only one female and one male participant who gave their character light skin. In the case of both male and female participants, "darker skin is in". This particular property would also speak to the theme of *Black women's beauty*.

Costume

In comic books, the superhero costume is one of the most vital components that any hero can have; the costume takes on a dual role of masking the character's secret identity, but at the same time showing the world who is the real hero. When looking at the character's costume this provided some further insight to the research question of: *How do racial and gender stereotypes in popular culture shape the creation of the Black superheroine?* As it is related to the participant's superheroine costume each ranged

from having costumes that could be seen as simple and modest, to being very form-fitting and flashy, and then some being exclusive. One of the more modest costumes came from Athena whose costume was,

> ***"…a nice black suit with gold accessories and a bad pair of red bottoms on."*** (Susie: 20)

Another simple and modest costume came from the character Unique,

> ***"Her costume is a red and black, one piece body suit with long sleeves. It is a v-neck front (but not to low because she is conservative)."*** (Renee: 38)

Even though some of the costumes were seen as modest or simple, others would include having the 'finer things in life':

> ***"In order to challenge hypersexual stereotypes associated with black women, Weavy Wonders dresses very modestly. Her attire can be described as business casual meets wonder woman. She wears heels that transform into 9mm pistols (screw the heels off, and it's a gun). She is very fashionable, and wears the latest designer clothing (gucci, prada, etc…)"*** *(Weavy Wonders, Malcolm: 22)*

With this particular case, although the character is seeking to disrupt some of the hypersexual tropes, there still seems to be this struggle between incorporating sexiness and conservatism, but in a tasteful manner.

Although there were characters whose costumes could be described as more simple and modest, I found characters who were the exact opposite with form-fitting costumes that would incite those hypersexual stereotypes. In the case of Eclipse,

> ***"Her costume is a long black slim tight fit dress that starts from her cleavage and drapes down to her feet. It opens up and fluffs out at the end enough to reveal some leg. Her open cut sleeves start a little above her elbow on her triceps, leaving her shoulders exposed while the rest of her sleeves rolls past her hands. She also wears a diamond and gold plated necklace and tiara…"*** (Jonathan: 22)

In one particular case, the participant was very direct in the make-up of their superheroine's costume, Sista Soul would have a,

> ***"Skin tight suit. Two purple stripes and one gold stripe diagonally across her body from top right to bottom left and she had a gold mask that just covered her eyes."*** (Michael: 20)

There were also characters whose costumes may have been form fitting, but yet still simple in form,

> "***Shrink's costume is a very fitted all black armor. No cape. Eye mask. Very simple."*** (Lauren: 18)

Another character would also demonstrate the form-fitting costume,

> ***"Vrou wears an all navy blue patent leather cat suit with exposed midsection and exposed lower back."*** (Madison Henry, Reece: 23)

Some of the characters were depicted in a form-fitting costume, but also had something extra, for example Alana 'The Black Warrior Princess' costume was:

> Her wearing ***"thigh boots that are 6 inch heels. She wears a leather leotard that is black and yellow and the top is v-cut. She wears a chocker and a longed sleeved leather jacket that extends just a little past her thighs."***

In the case of examining the costumes, which were form-fitting and flashy, both male and female participants would take part in ascribing to the hypersexual, highly exposed, and revealing type costume.

In addition to being simple and form-fitting there would be other characters whose costumes would be assigned a certain uniqueness. For example, MC SOOUULL's costume would be reminiscent of 80s/90s hip-hop. Her costume would consist of:

> ***"Black Rayban sunglasses, Black fitted leather Jacket, fitted black shorts that stops mid-thigh, white fitted t-shirt, black combat boots, Gold dookie braid chain, and golden brass knuckles that say 'SOOUL PUNCH'."*** (Tiara: 20)

Another example of this uniqueness came from the character AirMags McFly,

> ***"Her costume consists of black slightly sagging skinny jeans, a red and white African flag sleeveless shirt and a bleached denim vest. Also her signature NIKE AIRMAGS on her feet, which light up. She also wears a gas mask to cover her identity."*** (Zoe: 21)

Her costume, in particular, would be a good example of one that acknowledges various parts of popular culture (i.e. sagging skinny jeans, signature NIKE AIRMAGS) as well as a sense of African/Black pride (i.e. African flag shirt).

Some characters would even have costumes that were both unique and form-fitting, this was seen in the case of Sasha Fierce,

> ***Her costume is hot pink with black accent pieces like black leather gloves, black boots, a black cape and a black leather mask. It's tight fitting and shows all of her curves.*** (Alexandra: 20)

Now not every participant gave their character a costume, there would be some cases in which a costume was not necessary. For example, Oya Tornado:

> ***"…has no particular costume but she is a chameleon, so she uses her ability to morph into other shapes."*** (Kenya: 37)

Fluoressence was another example of not needing a formal costume,

> ***"She doesn't wear any costume, but she does wear the most fashionable outfits. She never wears the same outfits twice and the only thing she repeats is her mask, which is a lavender and white masquerade mask."*** (Daniel: 20)

Overall, the majority of the participants would take part in invoking the Black female body by showcasing them in skin-tight and fitted costumes. Very few cases presented a modest, simple costume, or no costume for the Black superheroine characters. Here the costume also spoke to the themes of *controlling images of Black women* and *Black women's bodies*. In the end, these costumes signified that the characters wear two significantly different outfits to go along with their two identities.

Chapter Summary

Each participant response added to the growing cadre of women superheroines, especially for Black women with their own personal superheroine character creations. Overall, each of the prompts given to the participants yielded important information useful to the research questions: *a) How is popular culture reflected in the perceptions of the Black superheroine?; b) How do African American male and female college students imagine the Black superheroine?; and c) How do racial and gender stereotypes in popular culture shape the creation of the Black superheroine?* The information provided in each prompt presented unique, interesting, and intriguing data.

With regards to the first research question, the participants discussed such topics as Black women's beauty, self-awareness and welcoming the notion that there is not a standard height and weight for the

Black woman, in addition to her dual identity. The second research question presented the superheroine's 'her-story' and beginnings and discussed the character's safe spaces, and the different types of relationships that she may be involved in. The final research question conceptualized Black women's bodies, skin complexion, and the complexities, or lack there of regarding one's costume. In addition, the participants across the board would have characters that discussed each of the four overall themes: 1) controlling images of Black women; 2) Black women's bodies; 3) Black women's beauty; and last 4) social and political issues (global and domestic). All in all, each participant peeled back a layer and revealed the many dimensions that exist regarding the Black female and even the Black community.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The general purpose of this study was to explore the influence of popular culture on college students' and how they imagine the Black superheroine. An analysis of the data revealed four categories that emerged from the participants' interpretation of the Black superheroine. These categories included the Black Female body, Black women's hair, rape inside and outside of the comic book narrative, and the dynamics of Black women's relationships. Each topic of discussion would be interconnected in some fashion to the overall themes that would emerge from the data. Overall, this chapter provides a detailed discussion regarding the studies findings.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of the data, four overall themes were drawn from the findings. These themes are:

a) Controlling images of Black women
b) Black women's bodies
c) Black women's beauty
d) Social and Political Issues (Global and Domestic)

Controlling images of Black women

Myths, stereotypes, and controlling images are embedded in today's culture (Cape, 2003). Historically, Black women have been marginalized and misrepresented by these images, and it is important to further explore these images and their impact within popular culture. In order to continue to dominate and suppress Black women, the concept of controlling images have been used to "justify Black women's oppression" (Collins, 2000, pg. 69). In the case of this study, the participants in this study revealed some of these controlling images in their own characters as well as presenting images that would disrupt these images.

In particular, the Jezebel narrative is an image that has been connected with media and popular culture (Brooks & Hebert, 2006). The jezebel image is typically defined as one of the most overtly sexual images of African American women to have emerged, she is often depicted as a "mulatto" woman with light

skin and long hair (Collins, 1998). She is perceived as seductive, manipulative, and unable to control her sexual drives (Mitchell & Herring, 1998; West, 1995). Most recently there has been a relationship between the jezebel image and hip-hop culture, specifically in music videos. Furthermore, across ethnicities, particularly African American, girls and women are sexualized and objectified through media images **(American Psychological Association, 2007).** In this study, hip-hop culture became a "space" that the participants used when imagining their superheroine character. In the case of the character of MC SOOUULL she was assigned a costume representative of 80s and 90s hip-hop culture that was not seductive or sexualized: ***"black combat boots, Gold dookie braid chain, and golden brass knuckles that say 'SOOUL PUNCH.'"*** This popular style of dress would play a role in the character's portrayal, in addition Hip hop is a culture that is defined by behavior displayed through stylized dress, language, and gestures associated with urban street culture (Wessel & Wallaert, 2011). Neal (1997) also suggested "Hip Hop perhaps represents the last black popular form to be wholly derived from the experiences and texts of the black urban landscape" (pg. 128). Instead of being presented with the sexual and objectifying jezebel image that is normally seen in hip-hop, we have been given an alternative representation.

Interestingly, students are introduced to various cultures in college that often can be differentiated into subgroups sharing distinctive values, attitudes, and norms (Kuh, 1995). Additionally, these controlling images are depicted and portrayed outside of hip hop culture. Recently a new image, "the superwoman," has emerged that may speak to avoiding the negative images of the sexualized jezebel. This image portrays African American women as capable of doing and having it all (Mitchell & Herring, 1998). Current role models, such as Oprah Winfrey and Michelle Obama, epitomize this image. Thus these role models may have played a role in the way the participants imagined their superheroines. For example the character of Rashidah would have both the skin complexion that was ***"brownish skin tone, similar to Oprah"***, and the body type ***"similar to Marshia Ambrosia"*** and then the character Sista Soul would have hair ***"Short and black like Nia Long in the 90s."*** In the case of these three superheroines, there would be a direct refer-

ence to women, within popular culture, that have been portrayed as positive, strong images of Black women without having to be sexual and emasculating.

As Collins (2000) states, these controlling images are "designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (pg. 69). Although there were participants whose characters continue to speak to today's existing controlling images, there were characters who redefined and potentially debunked these images. For example, in the case of Oya Tornado's she was given an unconventional costume, ***"She has no particular costume but she is a chameleon, so she uses her ability to morph into other shapes."*** Thus, it is important that we are aware of the continued influence that these images have on the imagination of today's young adults. According to hooks (1997), awareness allows us to continue the discussion in which we "resist certain types of colonizing images and at the same time create new and exciting representations" (pg. 31). And with these superheroine character creations, the participants have begun to embark in creating these new representations.

Black women's bodies

Even in the 21st century some 400+ years after slavery, Black women bodies still remain on the "auction block" for voyeuristic pleasure. Black women's bodies still remain a highly questioned site of meaning both inside and outside black communities within the twenty-first century (Peterson, 2001). African American women's bodies are representative of the space where racism, classism, and sexism converge (Bordo, 2003; hooks, 1989). This depiction and portrayal of these characters plays a role in the way in which Collins' concept of the 'new racism' exists in the comic book culture. Not only is the Black woman being examined, but more specifically her body. Within popular culture, Black women have been inundated with numerous ideas and messages of how she is to be portrayed and represented. Unfortunately, the Black woman must carry a dual burden with regards to her body. According to Bordo (2003), "by virtue of her sex, she represents the temptation of the flesh and the source of man's moral downfall. By virtue of her

race, she is instinctual animal, undeserving of privacy and undemanding of respect" (pg. 11). This speaks to why the engagement of Collins' new racism concept is important. The body has now become an item that is being objectified and misrepresented. The Black woman's body is being imagined and even transformed into a superheroine character. So when examining the superheroine's body type, I found that many of the participants took part, whether directly or indirectly, in engaging this new racism. An example of this is found when looking at their costumes and the body type.

Many of the superheroines were assigned form fitting and revealing costumes. For example, Imani Wonder wears a ***"royal navy blue catsuit that highlights all of her curves and toned build,"*** then the character Serenity wears a ***"Blue zebra print spandex,"*** and finally the character Vrou would be assigned a costume that was ***"all navy blue patent leather cat suit with exposed midsection and exposed lower back."*** Each of these characters provides provocative and maybe even seductive outfits that possibly even speak to the Jezebel stereotype. After pondering on these participants responses there is this thought with many of the characters of whether having very revealing and form-fitting outfits is celebrating black women's bodies or sexualizing them? As it relates to body size both male and female participants have more than half of their superheroine characters assigned to a curvaceous/shapely body (Male 6 out of 8; Female 21 out of 24). Some studies (Landrine, Klonoff, & Brown-Collins, 1992; Parker et. al., 1995) have found that Black women are more confident of their larger bodies and focus less on projected beauty standards; while other studies (Poran, 2002) have indicated that Black, Latina, and White share dominant standards and definitions of beauty. Despite the above research, the participants assigned more curvy and shapely characters, which speaks to this notion of disrupting mainstream/ European standards, and potentially embracing the Black woman's body.

In addition to specifically looking at body size, the male participants would discuss a particular feature that was not asked of the participants, the superheroine's butt size. Upon reading the many the responses that referenced the superheroine's butt size, my initial thoughts were actually somewhat troubling.

Having a certain butt size and hips is in some cases a highly attractive feature in terms of sexual interest. It has been found that Black men and boys tend to prefer significantly heavier body sizes for women and girls, and they are more likely to prefer larger specific body parts (such as hips, buttocks, and thighs) (Thompson, Sargent, & Kemper, 1996). So it is also quite possible that the female participants in this study internalized the 'male gaze' of the Black female body. However, when not linked to a male gaze, historically the Black woman's posterior further signifies the commodification of the Black body (Brown, 2013). This fascination or maybe even eroticization could be likened to that of the gaze that was shown towards Sarah Baartman (aka Hottentot Venus). In the early nineteenth century, Europeans' fascination with Saartjie Baartman's 'lewd' and 'obscene' buttocks was a harbinger of how black women's bodies became an icon for black women's sexuality in general (Hobson, 2003; Sharpley-Whiting, 1999). Much like how portraits of Baartman's buttocks were put on display, these participants have also displayed their superheroine characters butt size, illustrating this idea of "presenting" to men (Watson, Robinson, Dispenza, & Nazari, 2012). One is led to ask whether the participants continued to be influenced by the historical past; or by certain social aesthetics in the media and pop culture? By creating these Black superheroines, and the fact that each of these participants are African American, there is this double idea of being socialized to what they may see in the latest music video or blockbuster movie; and then the idea of possibly reclaiming agency for the Black woman's body and portraying it in a light that is satisfying for them.

Black women's beauty

As it relates to beauty, Black women, in particular, have been participated in a consumer culture "as a means to recover and restyle themselves as claimants of modernity" (Lindsey, 2011, pg. 98). And hair for Black women has become a dominant beauty feature; this was definitely seen in how the participants imagined their characters. Interestingly enough, "hair is not just hair" for the average black woman; "it contains emotive qualities that are linked to one's lived experience" (Thompson, 2009, pg. 831). Black hair in its natural state is often negatively marked for its difference. For example, Byrd and Tharps (2001) further

argue that, "since the beauty standards in [America] are set according to a White aesthetic—from Miss America to the Barbie doll—Black women are left with precious few places to find an image of beauty that showcases un-straightened tresses and natural styles" (154). Nevertheless, the participants in this study seemed embrace the "un-straightened tresses and natural tresses" look for their superheroine characters. For example, the character of Serenity has ***"One side is of her head is shaved- showing her beautiful black roots. The other side had long blue locs the color of lapis. The tips were white as snow, making her hair look icy against her skin,"*** another character Maji has hair that ***"is jet black, falls just below her bra strap wavy and slightly kinky in texture, big hair."*** These characters may be embracing unique natural styles, or influenced by the socialization of popular culture. Historically, black women have been bombarded with images that normalized black hair is long and straight, whether through weaves and or wigs. However, this normalization of straight black hair would be assigned to other characters such as: Djena who has ***"long black hair…"*** and AZA who ***"has black shoulder-length hair that she straightens,"*** and Imani Wonder whose ***"hair is long black and straight, it cascades down her back beautifully as she jumps from building to building across the skyline."*** In essence, "[hair] is the basic, natural symbol of the things people want to be, and its social-cultural significance should not be underestimated" (Banks, 2000 pg. 7).

In addition to examining the feature of hair, skin complexion was also worthy of discussion as it related to Black women's beauty. According to **Hall (1995),** there is no other individual feature quite as prominent as the actual skin color of an African American. Historically, having lighter skin afforded African American better socioeconomic statuses (Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Neal & Wilson, 1989) and greater educational opportunities than darker skin African Americans. However, in the case of this study the majority of the participants (47%) assigned and embraced darker skin complexions for their superheroine characters. For example, the character Berceau de la Vie was assigned a ***"Sable"*** skin complexion. Other participants also made sure that when assigning their character a skin complexion that there was also an acknowledgment

of her African heritage and roots. This was specifically seen in the case of Eclipse, ***"Nicki West is of African descent, her ancestors can be traced from the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire. Her skin is smooth, dark brown."*** While the superheroine characters in this study represented a variety of skin tones, the participants would share a collective consensus that darker skin is the preferred skin complexion of choice when imagining their superheroine. All in all, skin color still remains a complex issue among African Americans regardless of age (Nassar-McMillan, McFall-Roberts, Flowers, & Garrett, 2006).

Western/European mainstream media has historically placed beauty in a gender and racialized framework that has been impossible to separate and or escape. This has definitely been the case for the Black superheroine. These character depictions still show the back and forth struggle to articulate a positive and sustaining discourse regarding black female beauty that challenges the discourses and enhances their agency and subjectivity (McKay & Johnson, 2008). Although certain representations and portrayals remain constant, the participants have produced what some might see as a new version of the Black superheroine. As a whole, these participants and their superheroine creations have been able to establish inventive female characters & storylines, and potentially redefined the margins of African American female superheroines in comic books.

Social and Political issues (Global and Domestic)

In today's popular culture there are several interpretations of what is taking place in today's society that are current and prevailing. Many of the participants in this study also created characters that would have an influence on certain social and political issues (global and domestic) regarding Black women and relationships. According to Parks (2010), "people see in Black women what they expect to see. Many of the images in the stories have boiled down to stereotype, oversimplified into a code of social shorthand" (pg. 33). And as a result, a common trait that would be found in the data regarding both the superheroine's love interest and sidekick was the prevailing thought of the independent Black woman. This trait is not only found in her personal love relationships, but the superheroine's business and professional life.

What I would find intriguing and some what empowering was that historically characteristics like being strong, working hard, and having a sense of independence were seen as high quality traits, but these same traits would be later used against the Black woman (Parks, 2010). Now the characteristics of being a strong, independent hard working Black woman have become troubling images. When examining the results, although the superheroines engaged in various types of relationships there would some instances in which this would not be case. One character felt her 'tough life' has blocked any love she may have to give, for example Shiloh ***"loves no one, her tough life has created a block of her true emotions."*** And some like MC SOOUULL simply fit into the category of being a strong, independent Black woman ***"Nope! She's an independent woman!"*** In both cases, they have not been assigned a love interest, but is this because she simply chooses to be alone, or have past experiences influenced this decision?

In addition to the exclusion of the love interest this same issue would take place when examining the superheroine's sidekick. Various factors would be involved as to why a sidekick was not needed. In the case of Weavy Wonders, she was described as ***"a dominant force by herself."*** Others felt a sidekick would only be a distraction like AirMags McFly, ***"she feels like they just get in her way. Her first and only sidekick died in action, so she never replaced him."*** Even when fighting the evils of the world, being independent still remains a common trait. Thus, the concept of independence must be put into context regarding relationships. Adults, in general, that pay bills, cook, clean for themselves are all considered independent, however why is the Black woman singled out? The "independent Black woman" status can mean many different things for different people, thus further explorations of this concept is needed to offer more viewpoints to this prevailing issue.

Additional existing issues like rape and abandonment were also discussed in these superheroine characters. Each case came specifically from female participants (n=3). For example, the character of Sasha falls victim to rape as presented in her character background: ***"Unsure where she came from but she has one child by a man who raped her…"*** Other characters like AZA (Janine) encountered rape and

sexual assault on what is seen as one of the happiest events of high school student, their senior prom: ***"On the night of their senior prom, her boyfriend had gotten drunk and attempted to have sex with her. However, Janine was a virgin and had attempted to resist him because he was drunk. But he was much taller and stronger than her, and he was able to overpower her."*** These are both problematic events that not only take place in today's reality, but also through the superheroine portrayals. This is also disturbing since these superheroine portrayals came from only female participants; thus this interpretation could be based off a personal encounter, with rape and sexual assault, or from someone close to them. I also found it interesting that there is very little information acknowledging rape or sexual assault in the actual comics books. The most common case was found in the case of Marvel Comics character, "Ms. Marvel[7]." Discussing rape and or sexual assault is a traumatic experience that is not normally addressed in the comic book storylines. However, these participants stepped outside of that boundary and made it part of how they imagined their superheroine.

The young women and men who participated in the survey questionnaire not only provided alternate narratives for the Black superheroine, but they would also include real life situations and events as part of their interpretations. In the case of Berceau de la Vie, not only was she born during the 1994-95 Rwandan Genocide, but it would be as a result of a rape: ***"Victoria Cradle, was born in Rwanda in the Winter of 1995 during the Rwanda genocide. Her Tutsi mother, Sikumbi Saquikiba had her by her Hutu Father, Neku Sakuraba as a result of rape during a violent raid that took place in a raid 11 months prior."*** The Rwandan Genocide of 1994 was a truly traumatic and horrifying event. This event is arguably one of the most brutal acts of murder ever committed, worldwide. During this time of genocide, much like the character Berceau de La Vie, there would be a reported 20,000 births as a result of rape (SURF, 2011). This particular character can be seen as an example of a change agent that provides a story of survival from this brutal reality. Here is a case where the new racism is identified on a global level.

[7] This would take place in "The Avengers" #200 (October 1980)

Through their tragic narratives these superheroine characters speak to how this new racism reaches far beyond race objectifications. Not only must African American victims of sexual assault face racism and sexism, they must also confront societal images of themselves that not only perpetuate the violence, but also serve as barriers to their recovery.

According to the Black Women's Blueprint (2012) ongoing study 60% of Black girls have experienced sexual abuse before the age of 18. Historically these traumatic events have impacted the Black woman long before 2013 (i.e. slavery), thus these issues continue to be addressed, but now through a superheroine character. The rape of Black female slaves was a commonly utilized form of terrorism during the slave era designed to brutalize and humiliate Black women into submission (Davis, 1971; hooks, 1981). It is unfortunate that rape and abandonment is still a current and prevailing issue for Black women, but these superheroines must experience this same tragedy within a fantasy. Lorde (2004) would describe rape as being "on the increase, reported and unreported, and rape is not aggressive sexuality, it is sexualized aggressions" (pg. 69). Here presents a case in which the concept of new racism can play a role. Not only is the race a factor, but the fact that a "Black woman" is being sexualized.

Another character Tia Tigress was forced to leave her home due to her father being accused of a conspiracy: "She is from a very prominent, wealthy family in Haiti. They were forced to flee because of a riot that erupted between the government and its people. Her father was accused of conspiracy and leader of the resistance/rebellion." Time and time again, we have witnessed a rise in violence against women and girls during conflict (Susskind, 2012). This situation is very similar to that of elected and former Haiti president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. This situation is very similar to that of elected and former Haiti president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. As a whole, standing beside their man, whether husband, child, or father, has been a commitment that women have made for many years. Worldwide, Black women have served as pillars of their families and communities, are particularly targeted in times of conflict.

Further investigation of both issues may provide linkages between sexual violence and abandonment and how they can possibly have a long-term impact on Black women. These Black superheroine's have a story to tell, and in some cases a lesson to learn as well. Participants were not required to include real life events, but to actually step outside their own reality added another layer to these unique characters. Instead of the participants creating completely fictional stories it was as though they were retelling these stories that have already happened, just delivering it through another vessel (the superheroine). Once again even though these are imagined characters, it would be very interesting that these two cases, based off of real tragic and unfortunate life events, were used to describe the character's background. Overall, although these character narratives can be interpreted as tragic and unfortunate, there is also this idea of resiliency in being able to overcome these tragic events and maintain their superheroine status.

Chapter Summary

Not only does the Black superheroine invite a conversation regarding the portrayals and depictions within comic books, but it also continues the many conversations regarding the 'Black body' and the Black woman. Each of these themes and the highlighted categories that emerged would illustrate the importance of Collins' concept the new racism. The fact that many of the continued battles and oppressions still exist in the imagination of these college students', further lets us know that that these global and domestic issues exist or are being experienced towards Black women.

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, STRENGTHS, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

This study sought to examine how popular culture shapes the imagination and creation of the Black superheroine. The study revealed influences of socialization, such as media, iconic figures, fashion, and music culture, which impacted how Black female and male college students created the Black superheroine. It is important that these depictions and portrayals seen within popular culture are not seen at 'face value', but taken seriously and thoroughly investigated. Ideally, the knowledge that was obtained can become part of a growing body of literature that reframes portrayals of Black women and interpretations within the comic book genre and popular culture as a whole. Adding a discussion regarding comic book studies to the discipline of African American Studies can possibly serve as an innovative step in demonstrating a relationship between comic book narratives and real life situations, tragedies, and experiences among Black women and even men.

Implications

As evidenced by several of the participants, there was already an awareness of certain social issues and traumatic events like rape, sexual assault, and abandonment. Thus this demonstrates that students are already aware and knowledgeable of life altering events that can become stumbling blocks; consequently examining comic books can serve as a forum to increase awareness and educate youth and young adults about these existing social and traumatic problems and events. In addition, when examining race and gender, those who are invested in popular culture studies should not limit their gaze to the traditional realms of television, movies, and music; but rather include other domains of popular culture such as comic books.

Limitations

Although the findings from this study were very promising, there are study limitations that need to be acknowledged when interpreting the results. Before creating their Black Superheroine, participants were

asked to provide the following demographic information: classification, collegiate major, race, age, and gender. A limitation that should be addressed is that participants were not asked about their place of origin. Having this information might have provided further insight as to why particular superheroines were assigned certain character backgrounds. Another limitation that should be addressed was a population that was exclusively all African American. The inclusion of other races may bring attention and greater detail to issues of race and gender. Future directions for research should increase the size and age range of participants, because the sample size was an additional limitation of this study. Given the qualitative nature of the study and unequal gender sample size, the results were not generalizable to both genders. Moreover, there was a large range in terms of the participants' age. However, the researcher did not wish to restrict the age range because of the non-traditional campus community setting and to ensure a diverse sample.

Strengths

Although there were limitations involved with this study there would also be strengths. With comic book studies being a fairly new academic field, and African American Studies being an interdisciplinary field, there is potential for continued growth and possible partnerships. Certain aspects of within the field of comic books studies deal with race and gender, which could potentially offer an academic partnership between discipline of African American Studies and even Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. To my knowledge, this study is the first study to qualitatively examine college students' interpretation of Black/African American comic book superheroines, thus this could also serve as another strength. Taking part in this study provided the students an unrestricted opportunity to create a Black superheroine character that they may not otherwise see in today's mainstream comic book characters. Participants from this study could potentially challenge and disrupt existing mainstream depictions and portrayals of their black female characters. Each character creation establishes that the Black superheroine is neither unvarying nor monolithic within popular culture.

Despite the implications and limitations, I feel that important and timely information was garnered in this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study implemented a qualitative methodology in order to facilitate an exploration of the research topic. Based on the research findings, the following recommendations have been proposed for future research:

1) Conduct a study using non-African American/Black populations from non-African American Studies courses
2) Repeat this study using K-8th grade students
3) Use other qualitative methods to further explore the themes that arose
4) Conduct a similar study focusing specifically on the superheroine's backstory
5) Explore homosexual and heterosexual interpretations
6) Repeat this study solely using Black women or Black men

Conduct studies including non-African American/Black populations from non-African American Studies courses

For this study, the sample participants were all African American college students. Using a population that consisted of only African Americans served as a sample of convenience as well as a limitation. To some, it would be assumed that because these students are African Americans enrolled in an African American Studies (AAS) course that they would respond in a particular manner. College students who are African American and enrolled in an African American Studies course are presumably more likely to have been exposed to concepts and ideas related to African Americans, thus influencing their imagination of the Black superheroine. Including other races as well as recruiting students from non-AAS courses may bring attention and greater detail to a varied spectrum of issues regarding race and gender.

Repeat this study using K-8th grade students)

Previous literature (Dyson, 1997 and Tobin, 2000), has explored the relationship between popular culture and comic books using elementary age children. Although using college students provided a convenience sample to the research, further exploration should be reconsidered using a younger age sample.

Younger students tend to have fewer restrictions on their interpretation of what is seen, and are more apt to speak freely without any inhibitions. In many cases if you watch children playing games of pretend and make believe on the playground, they are likely acting out characters from a story they know. In the case of Dyson's 1997 ethnographic study, the children would "write superheroes" in a way that allowed them to interpret and critique popular media and not to simply absorb it. Oftentimes the stories that children watch on television, in movies, or play on their video games become a part of their normal play. Surprisingly, children are very capable of engaging in complicated dialogue that is seen in their regular play. This same study could be created for an elementary or even middle school population and could potentially produce some intriguing data.

Use other qualitative methods to further explore the themes that arose

Using an online questionnaire was an effective tool for initiating a discussion about the Black superheroine. However, confining the participants to a questionnaire limited the amount of qualitative and quantitative data. In addition to having the participants complete the Superheroine Creator questionnaire, following-up with the participants by conducting a debriefing interview could have provide additional, useful and valuable results. By interviewing the participants, this allowed me to answer some specific questions as to why certain aspects and characteristics were assigned to the characters that they created. This also allowed me to further delve into the college students' personal feelings, thoughts, and concepts as it relates to the creation of these superheroine characters. Also if dynamics of the character's creation are further explored this may also provide specific, concrete details to the relationship of popular culture to the comic book superheroine. Furthermore, this information will also contribute to the sparse literature regarding gender and race (particularly the Black female) within the comic book genre.

Conduct a similar study focusing specifically on the superheroine's background

Results from the superheroine's background provided a great deal of provocative data regarding such traumatic and violent acts as rape, assault, genocide, and abandonment. Although there were few

cases that spoke to these specific acts, each of the cases came from female participants. With further examination into specific aspects of the characters creation, this can provide proposed solutions regarding racial and gender objectifications within the comic book culture, and popular culture as a whole.

Explore heterosexual and homosexual interpretations of the superheroine creations

Within comic books, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender characters have been historically omitted or censored from the literature (Nyberg, 1998). With LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) themes in comics books being a relatively new concept, further exploration of these themes can possibly make these narratives a part of existing comic book culture. Queer theorists have noted that LGBT characters in mainstream comic books are usually presented as assimilated ito heterosexual society, whereas in alternative/independent comics the diversity and uniqueness of LGBT culture is emphasized (Nyberg, 1998, Applegate, 2009). For this study, participants were not asked to identify their sexual orientation as part of the demographics section. However, with limited research and literature on LGBT characters in comic books future research may provide a gateway between dominant intersectional forces within both African American and LGBT communities.

Repeat this study solely using Black women or Black men

Unfortunately, the pool of participants in this study was not gender balanced, as there were more female participants than male. This did not allow for an equal comparison of the data across gender. Thus, exploring the responses from one particular gender allows the researcher to focus on the relationship between that gender and their responses. Focusing on one particular gender may also allow for more generalizable results.

Conclusion

Although Black superheroines exist in the worlds of both DC and Marvel comics, there is still a continued history of being misrepresented. The image of hypersexualized, scantily-clad, large breast women, small waist and hips portrayals still remains a subject of criticism from female (and male) readers. East

Coast Black Age of Comics Convention (ECBACC) founder and creator Yumy Odom (2012) said it best, *"Comic books serve as a threefold purpose: first, they are a source of entertainment and a profitable hobby; second, they are a lucrative profession and a multi-million dollar business; and third, they serve as a modern form of myth-making and story-telling with a global impact."* The Black superheroine within popular culture is a character that can cross boundaries; challenges mainstream standards, and shed light on continued issues of racism and sexism. These college students however have offered innovative portrayals of Black superheroines that could possibly be a part of popular culture. Although in certain situations, some participants maintained traditional, yet problematic mainstream standards whether in appearance or character background; many would break the mold and present an alternative representation of an unapologetic Black superheroine.

After reading each superheroine creations, my own notions of what the Black superheroine looked like in popular culture were challenged. I gained new knowledge in that there is not a 'cookie-cutter' image of the female superhero, or more specifically the Black superheroine. More specifically, I found it quite inspirational to see how some participants chose to step away from the mainstream European image and assign their characters a renewed sense of identity with regards to beauty. Beauty as a whole is an idea that is constructed and packaged to determine various gender politics for women, particularly those of color. However, these participants have given their superheroine characters a sense of agency by assigning their superheroine characters non-European hairstyles (such as locs, braids, afros, etc.), creating body types that invoke and maybe even embrace a curvaceous figure, and inventing costumes that are not only memorable but creative and imaginable. These are all things that may not be typically found or encouraged in the traditional comic book pages.

In addition, the participants in this study also demonstrated that through their creations they could imagine various dimensions of how Black women can be interpreted and imagined in comic books and within popular culture. Any prior knowledge, as it relates to Black female stereotypes, that these students

have received may have influenced them to develop counter-images and expose existing images that support truths about Black women in comics and popular culture. Although, there is still more research that needs to be done academically, it is my hope that with more studies of this nature the area of comic book studies and the discipline of African American Studies can continue to expand and critique the politics of both gender and race within popular culture. This research study has been a personal challenge as I dig through several books and articles to bring light to an issue that has received little attention in the academic arena. Nonetheless, it has been a rewarding experience. As student in the African American Studies discipline, this research project is near and dear to me as an emerging scholar and comic book expert. As an avid consumer of comic book there still remains this urge to see a character that looks like me.

I hope that with this study more scholarly work will be produced as it specifically relates to the Black female in comic books. Comic books are still a social act that that exists within popular culture. Through their pages they have the ability to become more than casual reads, but also remind us of the fundamentally social nature of culture (Churchill, 2010) These comic book texts continue to facilitate social, political, and economic discussions which include not just white men, but women particularly black women. From conducting this research project I realize that looking at the world of comic books through a 'gendered and raced' lens provides another outlet to examine these texts as more than just pictures and words on a page. Overall, this analysis has shown me that comic books have the ability to both reflect and shape what we see in society. With each step that I take there is a strong sense of empathy that I continue to have for these Black female comic book heroes. All in all, women have been stereotyped in their occupations, behavior, body type and dress as portrayed in comic books since they came into existence; thus this becomes even more disturbing when Black women characters are addressed. Previous researchers have found these stereotypes to be purposeful and degrading, but further analysis is still needed. Since comic books traditionally have been the reading material of young to middle age males (particularly white males), this is particularly disturbing.

In closing, despite the research that has been conducted on the subject of female stereotypes in comic books, much of the information is several years old and mostly out of date. With this study, many of the participants have created new and iconic characters that could potentially start a brand new cadre of characters in the comic book world. With comic books characters playing a major role in popular culture, particularly in Hollywood cinema, the storylines are still reflecting subtle issues of socioeconomic biases, classism, sexism and racism. Also existing stereotypes in the storylines continue to reflect characters being depicted in a certain way. These college students were not only influenced by various aspects of popular culture, but ultimately these students would envision and create their own Black superheroine characters.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment Announcement

What does the Black Superheroine look like to you?

Calling Georgia State University Students!!

Your participation is requested to take part in a study on…
"**An Interpretive Textual Analysis of the Black Superheroine"**

Looking for male and female participants who have an interest and/or knowledge with popular culture and Black Superheroines.
You are invited to take part in a creative study to give your thoughts and perceptions on the topics of race and gender as it relates to the Black Superheroine.

Participant Qualities Include

-All Undergraduate MAJORS are welcomed
-African American
-Georgia State University student
-Currently enrolled in an African American Studies course for the Fall 2012 and/or Spring 2013 semester
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Students who complete the online questionnaire will be awarded Bonus/Extra Credit points from their instructor!!

If you or someone you know is willing to participate in this study, please contact Grace Gipson at 404-273-9836 or at blacksuperheroine@gmail.com

Appendix B: Screening Form

****The purpose of this screening form is to ask some questions about you, and to understand your exposure to popular culture.**

Please tell me about yourself:

Classification: FRESHMAN SOPHOMORE JUNIOR SENIOR

Are you an African American Studies Major? YES NO

If NO please list your major:_____

Age- _____

Race- _____

Male or Female-_____

1. **Have you read a comic book that included a Black superheroine? YES NO**
2. **Have you watched a film/movie that included a Black superheroine? YES NO**
3. **Please list (if any) as many Black comic book characters that you have seen from comic books, movies, and or television.**

***If interested in participating further in this study please include your email address, and the researcher will contact you with further instructions.

Email Address: _____

Appendix C: Informed Consent

Title: An Interpretive Textual Analysis of the Black Female Superhero
Principal Investigator(s): Dr. Jonathan Gayles, Dr. Sarita Davis, and Grace D. Gipson

I. Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to investigate how racial, gendered stereotypes and roles in popular culture shape the creations and depictions of the Black female superhero. You are invited to participate because you have been identified as an African American college student who is enrolled in AAS 2010 and/or AAS 1140. Overall, the researcher hopes to gain specific information about how popular culture impacts African American male and female college students personal reflections and thoughts as it relates to the Black female superhero. A total of 50 participants will be recruited for this study. Participants will be involved in completing a 'Superhero Creator' survey. This study will require 1 hour of your time in which you will be given a week to complete the survey.

II. Procedures:

If you give your consent to take part in this study you will be directed to a web link to access the "Superhero Creator" form. The researcher will be asking you to create your own version of a Black female superhero. You will be given a week to complete the form and submit your responses back to an email address that is not associated with the researcher. Students who do not wish to take part in the research study will be given an alternate assignment, in which they can do a Chapter Review from the course text that is not being covered on the syllabus. Students will have a week to complete this assignment as well. Those students who wish to participate in the alternate extra credit will need to contact the researcher for further instructions regarding that option. Upon completion of the study or alternate assignment, extra credit (10 bonus pts.) will be given for your participation from your professor.

III. Risks:

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

IV. Benefits:

Participation in this study may or may not benefit you personally. Overall, we hope to gain specific information about racial, gender stereotypes and roles along with how popular culture influences or impacts Black male and female college students perception and depiction of the Black female superhero in comic books.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise allowed.

VI. Confidentiality:

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. The study's main researcher Dr. Davis will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board, the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP). We will use an alternative name rather than your own on study records. Participant responses will be submitted back to an email address/account that is not associated with the researcher. The information you provide will be stored in a secured locked cabinet at the researcher's home. Consent forms will be stored separately from data to protect privacy. The researcher will save electronic files on password and firewall-protected computers. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

VII. Contact Persons:

Contact Dr. Davis at 404-413-5134, aadskd@langate.gsu.edu or Grace D. Gipson at 404-413-5134, ggipson@student.gsu.edu if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study. You can also call if think you have been harmed by the study. Call Susan Vogtner in the Georgia State University Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or svogtner1@gsu.edu if you want to talk to someone who is not part of the study team. You can talk about questions, concerns, offer input, obtain information, or suggestions about the study. You can also call Susan Vogtner if you have questions or concerns about your rights in this study.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject:

This above information has been provided so you know what to expect if you participate in this study. If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please place an 'X' next to the box marked 'Yes I Consent' and type your name.

You will also receive a copy of this consent form to keep.

YES I CONSENT	**YOUR NAME:**	**DATE:**
NO I DO NOT CONSENT	**You will not need to list your name if you are not consenting.**	**DATE:**

Appendix D: Superheroine Creator Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this Superheroine Creator Questionnaire. We want to remind you that your participation in completing this questionnaire is completely voluntary. Also, please know that your responses to questionnaire will be kept confidential and your name will never be reported with any of your responses.

Please tell me about yourself:

What is your classification (Please Select): FRESHMAN / SOPHOMORE / JUNIOR / SENIOR

Are you an African American Studies Major? YES NO
If NO please list your major:_____
How old are you? _____
What is your Race?_____
Are you Male or Female?_____

Please in your own words describe your "idea of a Black female superhero". The following categories will need to be included:

A) Personal Description
- **Character Name**
- **Does she have a secret identity?**
- **Describe your character's background (Where are they from, family background, Socio-economic status)**

B) Physical Description
- **What do they look like physically?**
- **Hair (color, type of hair, length)**
- **Skin complexion**
- **Weight**
- **Body Type (ex. apple, pear, 'coke bottle', hourglass)**
- **Height**

C) Character Make-up, Background and Abilities
- **How did they become a superhero? (Her Creation Story)**
- **Describe their costume**
- **Describe her powers**
- **Describe her primary weakness (ex. Kryptonite, vertigo, claustrophobia, etc.)**

D) Personal Relationships
- **Describe her main enemy or enemies (How did they become enemies? Why? What is the backstory/ and or relationship?)**
- **Does your superheroine have a sidekick? If so, please name and describe the relationship.**
- **Does your superheroine have a hideout or secret location? If so please describe.**
- **Does your superheroine have a love interest? Please describe the relationship.**

Thank you for your participation with this study!! Your responses are greatly appreciated!!

Appendix E: Tables

Table 5.1 Summary of Demographic Breakdown

Character Name	*Participant Name**	*Participant Age*	*Participant Gender*	*Participant Race*	*Participant Major*	*Participant Classification*
Berceau De La Vie	Brian	18	Male	African American	English	FRESHMAN
Sista Soul	Michael	20	Male	African American	Middle Level Education	SOPHOMORE
Shrink	Lauren	18	Female	African American	English	FRESHMAN
Fluoressence	Daniel	20	Male	African American	Psychology Pre-Med	SOPHMORE
MC Soouull	Tiara	20	Female	Black	Film & Video	JUNIOR
Djena	Chloe	23	Female	Black	BBA Economics	SENIOR
Alana 'The Black Warrior Princess'	Angela	23	Female	Black	Biology	JUNIOR
Soul Intuition	Carla	24	Female	Black & Korean	Political Science	SENIOR
AirMags McFly	Zoe	21	Female	Black	Sociology	JUNIOR
Oya Tornado	Kenya	37	Female	African American	Sociology	JUNIOR
Sasha Fierce	Alexandra	20	Female	Black	Political Science	JUNIOR
Tia Tigress	Aisha	19	Female	African American	Film	FRESHMAN
Abebi	Simone	25	Female	African American	Public Relations	SOPHOMORE
Shiloh	Kaya	21	Female	African American	Psychology	JUNIOR
Zeneth	Tanya	35	Female	Afro American	Psychology	SENIOR
Sasha	Amanda	22	Female	Black	Psychology	SENIOR
Rashidah	Nichelle	20	Female	African American	Journalism	FRESHMAN
Unique	Renee	38	Female	Black (Creole)	Journalism	SENIOR
Mother Amina	Liah	22	Female	Black/Filipino	Film	SENIOR
Karma	Martin	25	Male	Black	Broadcasting	JUNIOR
AZA	Brooklyn Marie	20	Female	African American	Public Relations	SENIOR

Vaness Sway	Jenise	22	Female	Mixed Decent	Journalism	SENIOR
Athena	Susie	20	Female	African American	Psychology	JUNIOR
Stormy	Taylor	23	Female	African American	Sociology	SENIOR
Eclipse	Jonathan	22	Male	Black	Political Science	SENIOR
Maji	Jaylla	21	Female	Biracial (Black/White)	Women's Studies	JUNIOR
Cleopatra	Charles	20	Male	Black	Marketing	JUNIOR
Imani Wonder	Eva	21	Female	African American	Journalism	SENIOR
Weavy Wonders	Malcolm	22	Male	Middle Eastern	Sociology	SENIOR
Vrou	Reece	23	Male	Black	Journalism	SENIOR
Serenity	Antonia	21	Female	African American	Interdisciplinary Studies	SENIOR
Oshun Honey (O. Honey)	Cynthia	30	Female	Caribbean/ African American	African American Studies/ Psychology	SENIOR

**Pseudonyms were used in place of the participant's actual name*

Table 5.2 Research Questions and Major Properties

Research Questions	Major Properties
How is popular culture reflected in the perceptions of the Black superheroine?	*HAIR *CHARACTER WEIGHT/HEIGHT *POWERS *SECRET IDENTITY
How do African American male and female college students imagine the Black superheroine?	*WEAKNESS *SIDEKICK *LOVE INTEREST *MAIN ENEMY/ENEMIES *CHARACTER BACKGROUND *SUPERHERO BEGINNINGS *HIDEOUT/GETAWAY
How do racial and gender stereotypes in popular culture shape the creation of the Black superheroine?	*BODY TYPE *SKIN COMPLEXION *COSTUME

Table 5.3 Overall categories that emerged from the data

The Black Female Body
Black Women's Hair
Rape and Abandonment inside and outside of the comic book narrative
The Dynamics of Black Women's Relationships

Table 5.4 Different Hairstyles and Lengths

Braids	1
Curls	7
Highlights	2
Locs	4
Afro	1
Coily	2
Half Shaved and Half Locs	1

Short	3
Mid-Length	5
Long	7

Table 5.5 Superheroine Weight from Male Participants (n=8)

130	2 (25%)
135	2(25%)
140	1 (12.5%)
150	2 (25%)
155	1 (12.5%)

Table 5.6 Superheroine Weight from Female Participants (n=24)

96	1 (4.2%)
115	1 (4.2%)
125	2 (8.3%)
130	3 (12.5%)
135	4 (16.7%)
140	2 (8.3%)
145	3 (12.5%)
150	2 (8.3%)
160	2 (8.3%)
165	2 (8.3%)
200	1 (4.2%)
215	1 (4.2%)

Table 5.7 Types of Powers separated by Gender

Type of Power	Male Participants (n=6)	Female Participants (n=20)
Mental	2 (33%)	5 (25%)
Physical	3 (50%)	10 (50%)
Spiritual	N/A	3 (15%)
Elemental	1 (16.7%)	2 (10%)

Table 5.8 Types of Weakness (n=32)

Chemical/Natural Substance	8 (25%)
Inventive/Outside the box	11 (34.3%)
Phobia	9 (28%)
No Weakness	4 (12.5%)

Table 5.9 Superheroine Love Interest

Love Interest	59%
Platonic Relationship	12.5%
No Love Interest	15.6%

Table 5.10 Frequency of Superheroine Beginnings by Gender

Type of Superhero Beginning	Male Participants (n= 7)	Female Participants (n= 21)
Inheriting superhero status	2	5
A creation accident/traumatic event	2	12
Discovery of superhero status	2	2
Superhero status as a gift	1	2

Table 5.11 Types of Skin Complexion (n=32)

Light	2 (6.25%)
Medium	13 (40%)
Dark	15 (47%)
Off-Color	2 (6.25%)