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# The Ages of Otherness: How Superhero Comics Reflect on Systemic Injustice and Racial and Gender Representation

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**Abstract:** Presenting complex worlds where literary narrative, “visual experience”, and “esthetic perception” perfectly mix, comics, especially superhero comics, are an original, compelling, and useful medium for an analysis on otherness and intersectional feminism. Studying the Ages of Comics, the article will underline the evolution of the medium and the fictional and historical fears, prejudices, hopes, and claims of its stories, also revealing the utopian and dystopian grounds of these realities. Behind tight-fitting suits, masks, and superpowers (or super-technology), comics often hide serious, compelling, urgent themes, such as, just to name a few, identity, discrimination, violence, segregation, migration, injustice, racism, misogyny, homophobia, illness, ecology, urbanization, materialism, and many more.

**Keywords:** Otherness; Embodiment; Comics History; Systemic Racism; Intersectional Feminism.

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## 1. Categorizing Otherness

“The category of the Other is as primordial as consciousness itself”<sup>1</sup>, de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*. Philosophically, otherness is the opposite of identity, it is not subjectivity, it embodies the external world, objectivity, the non-ego because “the self is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications”<sup>2</sup>. So, a social group “is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category. Through a social comparison process, persons who are similar to the self are categorized with the self and are labeled the in-group; persons who differ from the self are categorized as the out-group”<sup>3</sup>. Socio-politically and culturally, otherness represents a given element far from the customary and the traditional. “One of the ways cultures differ from one another is the manner in which they relate to other cultures, the kind of view they tend to have of other forms of living than their own. Any culture and

any civilization [has] its own barbarians, heathens, unbelievers, savages, primitives or whatever the specific counter-concepts may be"<sup>4</sup>. Reflecting the separation between two or more categorized entities, the perception of otherness often generates dichotomy, contrast, and rejection. Fear, hate, prejudices, and stereotypes fuel a dystopian and debasing treatment of the "others", limiting their civic participation, personal development, and social behavior, as uncountable and dramatic pages of human history remind us, from Colonialism and Imperialism to Shoah and other attempted genocides, from slavery to Apartheid, from past and actual women and LGBTQIA+ limitation of civil rights (including reproductive rights) to wartime sexual violence, from systemic racism to anti-immigration policies responsible for pushback, violence, detention, family separation, and deaths at the borders. Biopolitical power relations model social and private bodies not only through homologation but also through opposition. According to Foucault, individuals can be considered a "useful force"<sup>5</sup> when they provide a body that is both productive and subjected and that homogeneously fits in the social, economic, ethical, and political standards of society, despite the persistent presence of internal "classification, hierarchization and the distribution of rank"<sup>6</sup>.

Non-aligned, rebellious, and marginalized bodies become a danger, an element of trauma, a factor of crisis, a justification for spatial, linguistic, and psychophysical control and repression. As Bauman affirmed, "to classify means to set apart, to segregate. It means first to postulate that the world consists of discrete and distinctive entities; then to postulate that each

entity has a group of similar or adjacent entities with which it belongs, and with which – together – it is opposed to some other entities; and then to make the postulated real by linking differential patterns of action to different classes of entities"<sup>7</sup>.

And these classes of entities – that can be recognized on several bases, such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, ideology, and health, among others – represent a dangerous, restrained, and excludable otherness. In real (historical and contemporary) societies and in the fictional worlds of dystopian imaginaries, women can also be included in the category of Otherness. Often judging them as inferior but still exploitable and "colonizable", both political power and patriarchy can transform their bodies and their minds in "sites of repression and possession"<sup>8</sup>. Women's social life and private spheres are subjected to several level of pressure, expectations, roles, and norms assigned to them by non-biological factors and systems, including religion and politics. The ideal woman (singular, almost as the gender was a synecdoche, a part for the whole, without different identities), is of the angelic, *madonesque* kind, the perfect embodiment of the "eternal feminine": maternal, beautiful, devoted, kind, pure, contemplative, graceful, polite, innocent, nurturing, passive<sup>9</sup>. She is a weak void to be filled, opposing the strength, the power, and the assertiveness of men (plural, they have the right to individuality).

De Beauvoir affirmed: "For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other"<sup>10</sup>. Luce Irigaray

added: “The ‘feminine’ is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex”<sup>11</sup>. Feminist critique clearly and incisively underlines the fact that women symbolize “otherness”: they are objects of desire, they are needed for sex and maternity but, at the same time, they are feared, rejected, and potentially repressed because they can threaten male control, masculine myths, and patriarchal authority.

## 2. Otherness in the Ages of Comics. The Golden Age between Prejudices and Myths

Presenting complex worlds where literary narrative, “visual experience”, and “esthetic perception” perfectly mix, creating a “successful cross-breeding of illustration and prose”<sup>12</sup>, comics, especially superhero comics, are an original, compelling and useful medium for an analysis of otherness and intersectional feminism. Revealing the utopian and dystopian grounds of their realities, the protagonists of these (often archetypal) adventures are deeply rooted in mythology and folkloric and legendary literary *corpora*: “the ancient gods of Egypt, of Greece and Rome, of the Norse, all still exist – only today they wear spandex and capes”<sup>13</sup>. Superheroes and villains contributed to create a modern mythology, evoking the hero’s journey described by Campbell<sup>14</sup>, underlining the eternal fight between good and evil and contextualizing ancient fears, evils, and struggles to contemporaneity.

Behind tight-fitting suits, masks, and superpowers (or super-technology), comics often hide serious, compelling, urgent

themes, such as identity, discrimination, violence, segregation, migration, injustice, racism, misogyny, homophobia, illness, ecology, urbanization, materialism, and much more. The way plots treat superheroes, mutants, aliens, robots, and many *naturalia* or *artificialia* monstrous characters usually reflects the way society treats the rejected categories of otherness like ethnic or sexual minorities. The way plots treat superheroines, villainesses and damsels in distress usually reflects the way society treats women, from hypersexualization to the purity myth, from victim blaming to sexual abuses.

It is extremely difficult to summarize the representation of otherness and women in the history of superhero comics in few pages. By simplifying, we can affirm that during the Golden Age, the first stage of comics that ran from 1938 to mid- 50s, superheroes were basically white, privileged, and powerful men, the perfect and utopian embodiment of the United States’ ideals and faith, like Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster’s Superman/Clark Kent (first appearance: *Action Comics* #1, 1938), the modern Hercules that canonically opened the superhero eras and “routinely fights for truth, justice, and the American way as the longest running continuously published character in history”<sup>15</sup>, or Joe Simon and Jack Kirby’s Captain American/Steve Rogers (first appearance: *Captain America* #1, 1941), the super-soldier that represented “American strength and valor who carried the banner of American patriotism in World War II”<sup>16</sup>, even punching Adolf Hitler in his first front cover.

Women and minorities in the Golden Age were generally showed in a stereotypical way, and positive discourse about

otherness was more metaphorical than openly and socio-politically sided: superheroes defended the innocent and fought against injustice, greed, and lust for power, but without recognizing or addressing the forces that support unfair and/or repressive systems. Actually, comics of the time frequently ended up supporting racism and misogyny because “associated justice with white figures of authority (and criminality with ethnic minorities, the disabled, and the mentally disturbed)”<sup>17</sup>. The visual representation of minorities was equally discriminatory: black characters, for example, offensively “featured the pitch-black skin, oversized balloon lips, [and] bulging eyes”<sup>18</sup>, like Ebony White (first appearance: *The Spirit* #2, 1940), the loyal and helpful sidekick of Will Eisner’s masked hero The Spirit, Washington “Whitewash” Jones (first appearance: *Young Allies* #1, 1941), one of the young Sentinels of Liberty enlisted by Captain America to fight against Nazi spies; and Steamboat (first appearance: *America’s Greatest Comics* #2, 1942), a food truck owner and “valet” of Captain Marvel, the grown up and superheroic version of a 12-years-old orphan boy, Billy Batson. Lothar (first appearance: *The Cobra*, 1934 – daily story), from Lee Falk’s *Mandrake the Magician* (a superhero prototype fighting supernatural and criminal enemies), was depicted in a slightly less grotesque way. He was presented as one of the strongest men alive and an African royal: he is the Prince of the Seven Nations, a federation of tribes. But, at least during the first decades of publication, he peculiarly wore shorts, leopard-skin top and fez, spoke ungrammatical English and chose “to live in the United States as an ambiguously slave-like servant to a white, orientalist magician”<sup>19</sup>.

Women were commonly weak, screaming, and superficial damsels in distress, in constant need of help and guidance. Also the few female superheroes were mostly “ineffectual”, clumsy and inexperienced figures “inducted into the world of crime fighting by the men in their lives”<sup>20</sup>. They were belittled counterparts of the true heroes, even nominally, since, opposing masculine code-names such as The Owl, Bulletman, Doll Man, The Flame, these comics were full of “girls”: Owl Girl, Bulletgirl, Doll Girl, Flame Girls, and so on. “Weak appendages to the men”, they followed male leadership and had no selfless mission or “inherent desire to do good”<sup>21</sup>, being more interested in love, marriage, and fashion. Although they were not exempt from misogynistic stereotypes, three of the most significant and empowered exceptions of the Golden Age are Miss Fury/Marla Drake (first appearance: *The Black Fury*, 1941, Sunday comic strip), the first strong, fearless, emancipated and not-so-romantic fighter created by a woman, cartoonist June “Tarpé” Mills; Mary Marvel (first appearance: *Captain Marvel Adventures* #18, 1942), the “virtuous helpmate”<sup>22</sup> and sister of Captain Marvel, capable, like her brother, of transforming herself into an adult with divine powers; and the popular Wonder Woman/Diana Prince (first appearance: *All Star Comics* #8, 1941), created by psychologist William Moulton Marston, who described her as a “propaganda for the new type of woman who should [...] rule the world”. For over 80 years, the independent, mighty, smart, and empathic Amazon princess defends peace and justice, openly criticizes patriarchal prejudices, gender roles, and violence, and promotes socio-political, cultural, and

economic equality. She doesn't only protect, inspire, and motivate women, but she also takes stand against intolerance, persecution, and racism<sup>23</sup>.

### 3. The Silver Age: Superpowers, Super-problems and the Beginning of Mighty Inclusiveness

During the Silver Age, from mid 50s to early 70s, especially thanks to writers like Stan Lee and artists like Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, superheroes started to be more or less regular people with both extraordinary and ordinary problems, including personal and social exclusion. Characters like Spider-Man/Peter Parker (first appearance: *Amazing Fantasy* #15, 1962), the teenage superhero with spider abilities that reminds us that "with great power comes great responsibility", or the X-Men (first appearance: *The X-Men* #1, 1963), a group of mutants born with superhuman characteristics that fight for peace, justice and inclusion in a world often dominated by dystopian anti-mutant *bias* and repression, were created as figurative incarnations of a multi-ethnic society, economically and politically divided but still eager for its promised American dream. Silver Age comics represented a "multi-cultural and multiracial America, where isolation and marginalization [were] problems felt since childhood. [...] But success would not have come if the popular nature of these characters had not been associated with a profound mythical inspiration, showing how any American, of any race or social stratum, can become a legend"<sup>24</sup>. This representation was frequently more metaphorical than physical: the aforementioned X-Men, for example, embody a

"feared and rejected minority, opposed to the traditional and prevailing society"<sup>25</sup> but the first five members of the team led by Professor X/Charles Xavier, namely Cyclops/Scott Summers, Marvel Girl/Jean Grey, Beast/Hank McCoy, Angel/Warren Kenneth Worthington III, and Iceman/Bobby Drake, were white young students from middle-upper class.

Nevertheless, during the 60s, there also appeared fundamental characters for the development of an always more positive depiction of racial and ethnic minorities that reflected the fights for civil rights of the time and became "a symbolic extension of America's shifting political ethos and racial landscape"<sup>26</sup>. In 1966, Lee and Kirby created the first popular African superhero, Black Panther/T'Challa (first appearance: *Fantastic Four* #52, 1966), the intelligent and powerful prince of the technological enhanced nation of Wakanda, while, in 1969, Lee and Gene Colan welcomed the first popular African-American superhero, Falcon/Sam Wilson (first appearance: *Captain America* #117, 1969), Captain America's brave and dedicated sidekick (that will significantly inherit his role in 2015). Overall, the Silver Age's protagonists related to otherness were significant agents of cultural and socio-political changes but remained not well deepened and lightly trivialized. Even if Falcon himself often tried to "consciously reject" his dependence on Captain America and "constantly strove to assert his equality"<sup>27</sup>, black superheroes were inextricably linked to the central white superheroes, supported their missions and ideals, and "placed interracial unity above black identity"<sup>28</sup>. The awareness of the societal unbalanced power dynamics was further developed during

the subsequent era of comics, in which the Silver Age's characters evolved into more solid figures, and new more conflictive and attentive protagonists arrived, advocating for a radical remodeling of the concurrent reality.

The same can be said about the superheroines of the 60s: despite astonishing powers and compelling stories, many of them remained blocked within stereotypical dynamics and expectations. Even the Silver Age's Wonder Woman suffered from patriarchal repression, losing her powers from 1968 to 1972. One of the most blatant cases of this debasing tendency was Invisible Girl/Sue Storm (first appearance: *Fantastic Four* #1, 1961), the only woman in the popular super-team called Fantastic Four. Leaving aside the (sadly ironic) symbolic implications of the power of invisibility she possesses, at the beginning of her adventures, she was more of an emotional, submissive, superficial, weak, and nurturing housekeeper than a real superheroine, focused on pleasing her team-mates, especially her genius fiancée and leader of the Fantastic Four, Mister Fantastic/Reed Richards. She was often diminished and paternalized by male characters, even by her partner, who repeatedly "chastised her when her unpredictable feminine nature confounds his rational, scientist's mind"<sup>29</sup>. Trina Robbins and Laura Mattoon D'Amore, quoted by Gavalier, describe her respectively as "a caricature of Victorian notions of feminine" and "the superhero equivalent of the suburban housewife"<sup>30</sup>. As for the characters representing minorities, during the Bronze Age things slowly started to change also for the portrayal of women and super-women.

#### 4. The Bronze Age: The Remodeling of Superheroes and the Empowerment of Otherness

Starting from the 70s, during a period of global protest, superheroes began to be seen as dystopian incarnations of an autocratic (even fascist), reactionary, and egoistic power rather than utopian saviors because, also when protecting the greater and the national good, they "champion[ed] acts of anti-democratically authoritarian violence"<sup>31</sup>. Thus, a remodeling of their figures and their stories was needed to reach again public affection and support. The stories of the Bronze Age, which ended in the 80s, interiorized the demonstrations in the name of integration, emancipation, civil rights, and gender equality of the time, and showed empowered characters clearly belonging to otherness. For instance, new members joined the X-Men team, regardless of gender, from different nations, racial/ethnic groups, and economic backgrounds. "They perfectly embod[ied] the idea of otherness not only conceptually but also visually and historically, promoting alternative models of superheroes"<sup>32</sup>, such as Kenyan-American mutant Storm/Ororo Monroe (first appearance: *Giant Size X-Men* #1, 1975), one of the strongest mutants of all time, capable of control weather, an extraordinary fighter with leadership abilities that also clashes against patriarchy and racism. While some members of the original team are held captive by the living island of Krakoa, she is recruited by Professor X together with other mutants gathered throughout the world, such as Japanese Sunfire/Shiro Yoshida (first appearance: *X-Men* #64, 1970), Irish Banshee/Sean Cassidy (first appearance:

*X-Men* #28, 1967), Canadian Wolverine/James Howlett/Logan (first appearance: *The Incredible Hulk* #181, 1974), Russian Colossus/Piotr “Peter” Rasputin (first appearance: *Giant Size X-Men* #1, 1975), German Nightcrawler/Kurt Wagner (first appearance: *Giant Size X-Men* #1, 1975) and Apache Thunderbird/John Proudstar (first appearance: *Giant Size X-Men* #1, 1975). *Giant Size X-Men* #1 opened a more diverse and inclusive era for the mutant universe, bringing to some of the most renowned moments of the comic history, such as *Days of Future Past*, a storyline presented in *Uncanny X-Men* #141–142 (1981), where the protagonists try to correct through time travels a dystopian future in which the Sentinels, mutant-hunting robots, govern the USA and the mutants are tracked down, sterilized, segregated and/or killed.

In 1972, advocating the Black Power movement and paying homage to the successful cinema subgenre of the blaxploitation, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* #1 became the first comic series with an African-American superhero as protagonist. Carl Lucas, a former gang member from Harlem (New York), gains super-strength, accelerated healing, and steel-hard skin due to a cellular regeneration experiment while wrongly incarcerated, evoking US traumatic problems, such as the racial disparity in the criminal justice system and the unethical medical practices on Black or marginalized citizens, like the Tuskegee syphilis study (1932–1972), the Willowbrook hepatitis studies on cognitively impaired students (1956–1970) and experimentation on prisoners<sup>33</sup>. After escaping from jail (where he also suffered from prison violence by white guards), he returns to Harlem and

starts to work as “a hero for hire”, a mix between a private investigator and a mercenary (even if he ended up making many *pro bono* works), in a degraded, unjust, and brutal reality, which harshly criticizes the systemic racism of American society and clearly related structural injustice, marginalization, discrimination, and violence. Luke Cage is a complex figure, “a black underclass convict” that evolved into “a politicized black antihero on an epic scale”<sup>34</sup>, merging “black self-determination, racial authenticity, political fantasy, and economic independence”<sup>35</sup>. From 1977, Luke begins collaborating with other extremely interesting characters from racial and gender points of view, such as Misty Knight and Colleen Wing. African-American Misty Knight (first appearance: *Marvel Premier* #21, 1975) is a former police officer with a bionic arm. She opens the Nightwing Restorations, a private detective agency together with her best friend Colleen Wing (first appearance: *Marvel Premiere* #19, 1974), a Japanese samurai, trained by her grandfather before moving to New York. The so-called “Daughters of the Dragon” also team up with Iron Fist/Danny Rand (first appearance: *Marvel Premiere* #15, 1974), the Caucasian orphaned heir of the Rand Corporation that learned kung fu in the mystical city of K’un-Lun and obtained the incredible power of the Iron Fist (he can direct his *chi* to his fists, amplifying his force, resistance, and healing abilities). From #50 (1978), Luke Cage’s comic series *Power Man* (a title chosen with explicit reference to the Black Power movement) changed its title in *Power Man and Iron Fist* and also followed the adventures of Danny and Luke as owners of the Heroes for Hire, Inc., an agency that

provides private investigation and protection services. This “fusion” achieved great success due to engaging stories that combined superpowers, blaxploitation, kung fu, crime, and romance, and to characters that reflected an enhanced racial, gender, and economic otherness. The series supported integration and tolerance and promoted resourceful and independent women, also showing one of the first interracial couples of the ninth art: Misty Knight and Iron Fist. The publication ended with #125 (1986), closing one of the longest partnerships in Marvel world.

Despite the undoubtedly empowering narrative of the Bronze Age, some problems of representation persisted even in this era, including in *The Dark Phoenix Saga*, an extended storyline in the X-Men universe written by Chris Claremont, drawn by John Byrne, and published in 1980 (*The Uncanny X-Men* #129-138). Claremont is famous and acclaimed for his creation and depiction of strong female (super)heroines and villainesses, such as Dr. Moira MacTaggart (first appearance: *The Uncanny X-Men* #96, 1975), a Nobel Prize scientist, one of the most prominent geneticist specialized in mutation and a trusted human ally and love interest of Professor X (according to recent retcon, she is a mutant); Psylocke/Betsy Braddock (first appearance: *Captain Britain* #8, 1976), an expert martial artist with telekinetic, telepathic and pre-cognitive powers; Mystique/Raven Darkhölme (first appearance: *Ms. Marvel* #16, 1978), a shapeshifter and bisexual villainess, one of the most powerful and iconic of the Marvel universe; Kitty Pryde/Shadowcat (first appearance: *The Uncanny X-Men* #129, 1980), a young and intelligent Jewish woman with phasing

and intangibility abilities; Emma Frost (first appearance: *The Uncanny X-Men* #129, 1980), a *femme fatale* with telepathic powers and the ability to turn herself into diamond; and Rogue (first appearance: *Avengers Annual* #10, 1981), able to absorb powers, memories and life forces through touch. Claremont also deepened and empowered some already existent characters, including Storm and Jean Grey.

But these astonishing figures are not completely exempt from some kind of bias that links emancipated female sexuality to deviance and evil. Even the tougher and most sensual superheroines tend to embody values from the eternal feminine like kindness, beauty, grace, mercy, and honesty, and they don't explicitly show or enjoy their sexuality. On the contrary, villainesses or antiheroines are generally free to satisfy their desires, even from a physical point of view. In Jean Grey's most obscure and heartbreaking adventure it is possible to recognize a connection with the purity myth. After an accident in outer space, the powerful telepath Jean Grey is possessed by the Phoenix Force (an immortal cosmic force of creation and destruction). After being manipulated by psionic villain Mastermind, she surrenders to the dark side of her power. She also destroys a solar system and its inhabited planet for her hunger for energy, which is described with a language implying that she sexually enjoyed the consumption of the star. Jean goes “from a beloved superheroine to one of the worst villains to ever appear in comics [...] because she wasn't able to control the power that coursed to her body”<sup>36</sup>. The path that brought Jean Grey to Dark Phoenix (passing through the Black Queen of the Hellfire Club phase) and to embrace her



“savage, destructive nature”<sup>37</sup> reveals a parallel between the increase of her power to “a cosmic, almost godlike level”<sup>38</sup> and the liberation of her instincts, becoming “sexually aggressive in her behavior and her dress”<sup>39</sup>. “Her struggle for emotional control can be read as grounded in stereotypical femininity and intimately tied to her sexual awakening”<sup>40</sup>. In the end, Jean sacrifices herself to save the universe from her tremendous power, a power that transforms the superheroine into a monster that “transgresses and undermines boundaries of gender”,<sup>41</sup> threatening (male) order and conformity with her sexuality and abilities. Intended or not, the Dark Phoenix Saga reminds readers that, in fiction and in real life, too often “women’s perception of themselves is inextricable from their bodies, and that their ability to be moral actors is absolutely dependent on their sexuality”<sup>42</sup>.

### 5. The Modern/Dark Age of Comics: The Blurred Lines between Good and Evil

The first part of the Modern or Dark Age, from the mid-80s to the early 2000s, exploited an always more dramatic, extreme, and polemical narrative, characterized by pessimistic, irreverent, and outrageous stories, in which the line between good and evil, utopia and dystopia, monstrosity and similarity, inclusion and exclusion, identity and otherness were not fixed and predictable. The repressive criteria of the Comics Code Authority – which was supervising publications since 1954 (e.g., no horror, no excessive violence, no nudity and obscenity, no “illicit” sexual relations, no positive depiction of criminals, no disrespect for authorities, etc.) – were getting

blurred and 80s and 90s stories managed to promote “a leap in psychological realism and a rejection of the of the Code-mandated triumph of absolute good over absolute evil”<sup>43</sup>. Thus, the heroes fell, they were broken by traumas, interior crisis, and sins. Sometimes they were infected by evil, losing their moral high ground, as in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon’s corrosive masterpiece *Watchmen* (1986), “an insightful homage to the superhero genre, as well as a deconstruction of its clichés, forms, and influences”<sup>44</sup>. Antiheroes that usually want to subvert society instead of protecting the *status quo* arose, including the coldblooded (but sincerely devoted to the greater good) occult detective John Constantine (first appeared: *Swamp Thing* #37, 1985); the ruthless, disfigured, unstable, and humorous Deadpool/Wade Wilson (first appeared: *The New Mutants* #98, 1991); the sentient extraterrestrial symbiote Venom and his host Eddie Brock (first appearance: *The Amazing Spider-Man* #299, 1988); the rebellious hellish warrior Spawn/Al Simmons (first appearance: *Spawn* #1, 1992); and the half-demon Hellboy (first appearance: *San Diego Comic-Con Comics* #2, 1993), an evil creature who should destroy the world and instead chooses to fight for good. The villains showed their scars and their – however mad – reasons, as happened in Alan Moore and Brian Bolland’s *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988), where sadistic and mad villain Joker (first appearance: *Batman* #1, 1940) tries to prove that “all it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy”.

There was a heavy “binary representation on gender”, with “hypermuscular man and hypersexualized women”<sup>45</sup>, both powerful and objectified. Violence was visually

and conceptually exalted, and sexuality was deeply spectacularized, even if sex was generally not explicitly shown. Apart from the mainstream leaders of the industry, Marvel and DC, many independent publishing houses were also founded, including Image Comics (1992) and Milestone Media (1993), which fostered visual and narrative freedom of expression and stories always more critical and incisive.

Thus, frequently recognizing with dreadful clarity the injustice and the prevarications in the society and exposing its racist, misogynist, and homophobic tendencies, the storytelling of ethnic, cultural, sexual, physical, and economic otherness in comics was exasperated and desperate and the protagonists were often subjected to a theatrical violence, exaggerated deprecation, and tyrannical control, as happened in Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* (1982-1989). Openly attacking Margaret Thatcher's conservative government and the far-right movements of the 80s, the comic describes a dystopian United Kingdom where the Fascist-inspired party Norsefire subjugates, censors, and manipulates its population invasively using fear, hate, surveillance, repression, and brainwashing. The power has abolished human and civil rights and eliminated minorities, oppositions, and dissidents, including sexual and ideological "sinners". This reign of terror is overthrown by V, a disfigured anarchist hidden behind the mask of Guy Fawkes, an English revolutionary involved in the Gunpowder Plot of November 5th, 1605. The protagonist, a Larkill concentration camp survivor, is a theatrical rebel with a disturbingly romantic vision of fight and punishment. His violent actions aim at restoring otherness, knowledge, and

"ambivalence", as Bauman would have said, destroying the Unity, the Purity, the blind Faith imposed by Norsefire. One of the strongest representations of "the other" in *V for Vendetta* is Valerie, a lesbian actress killed in Larkill that wrote her lyrical and painful testament on toilet paper, recalling her love story with Ruth and the governmental repression, inviting to protect that last, vital, small, fragile "inch of freedom" people have in their soul against unjustified hatred. The ultimate goal of this violence isn't murder, it's dehumanization. Authority devastates Valerie's body and the bodies of the other prisoners to annihilate the otherness that they embody, to erase identities that are considered corrupted, to subdue differences and rebellion, leaving nothing but the *status quo*.

Another poignant incarnation of racial, sexual, and economic otherness is Martha Washington from Frank Miller and Dave Gibbons' *Give Me Liberty* (1990), a coming-of-age dystopian story describing the struggling of a disenfranchised black girl to find her place in a grotesque, corrupt, racist, contaminated, and oppressive future ruled by a neofascist capitalism (selling itself as democracy). Recalling X-Woman Storm's parable, Martha "reimagines young, African American women as empowered individuals" and "re-scripts the familiar trope of the white male superhero"<sup>46</sup>. Her journey is epic even if she doesn't have powers: she transforms herself into an almost superheroic figure, that endures a brutal life and a merciless authority and that keeps the fight for justice and equality. Miller and Gibbons visually and conceptually represent her as an African American incarnation of the Statue of Liberty, epitomizing the utopian

values United States were built on and the rights claimed in the Declaration of Independence (1776): “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”.

### 6. The New/Millennial Age: Against Racism and Patriarchy with Intersectional (Super)Bodies

Nevertheless, the last two decades of Dark/Modern Age, that could also be considered a separated era, a “New or Millennial Age”<sup>47</sup>, are witnessing an always more positive characterization of otherness where sexual, ethnic, religious, ideologic, economic, and physical diversity is normalized, empowered, respected, and defended with more optimism and resilience. Dark or ambiguous stories are still very present, as in the completely desecrating *The Boys* (2006–2012) by Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson, where celebrity-superheroes embody the worst human flaws and crimes rather than good, openly and pessimistically criticizing, as Ennis affirms, “corporate corruption of government, abuse of power and abandonment of ordinary people”<sup>48</sup>. But there are many titles that support an inclusive and intersectional vision of others, promoting socio-political participation of readers, merging utopian hopes and dystopian fears. The list of new characters helping to promote otherness is luckily long and praiseworthy and includes groundbreaking characters such as Miles Morales/Spider-Man, America Chavez/Miss America and Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel.

Created by Brian Michael Bendis and Sara Pichelli and first appeared in *Ultimate Fallout #4* (2011), Miles Morales is the Spider-Man of the Ultimate universe

(a different dimension from the mainstream and canonical Marvel reality), the first Afro-Latin to wear the costume of the “Wall-crawler”. Quickly becoming a fan favorite, he had a huge impact inside and outside the inked pages because his story amplifies and empowers the representation of “hybrid racial identities and multiculturalism in America”, also setting “the stage for a subversive political and racially relevant reading of how education, economics, opportunity, and luck are scarce resources”<sup>49</sup> for ethnic minorities.

Created by Joey Casey and Nick Dragotta and first appeared in *Vengeance #1* (2011), America Chavez, aka Miss America, is the first lesbian Latinx superheroine with her own series. “Sassy, smart, and snarky”<sup>50</sup>, she possesses amazing abilities, including, flight, strength, speed, inter-dimensional travelling, and star blast. Novelist Gabby Rivera wrote her first “solo series” *America* modeling a queer coming-of-age adventure able to empower intersecting identities and to discuss about immigration, inclusion, gender, and sexuality: “America is a superhero from a different dimension; however, on earth, her brown skin places her within the marginalized”<sup>51</sup>, as well as her belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community.

Created by Sana Amanat, Stephen Wacker, G. Willow Wilson, Adrian Alphona and Jamie McKelvie and first appeared in *Captain Marvel #14* (2013), Pakistani-American Kamala Khan is the new Ms. Marvel, after the precedent and most famous incarnation of the heroine, Carol Danvers, became Captain Marvel. First Muslim teenager hero with her own series, her powers include shapeshifting, extreme elasticity, and regeneration. Kamala is

“caught between the two worlds of her Pakistani and Muslim family background and her New Jersey teenage peers, thus making the narrative, in part, about issues around assimilation and integration. [...] Kamala is multiply marked as ‘other’, whether that is as a Muslim, a Pakistani, a girl, an Inhuman, a child, or a teenager”<sup>52</sup>. According to Sana Amanat, a Pakistani-American herself, Kamala struggles “with the labels imposed”<sup>53</sup> on her, as Miles and America do. Intelligent, funny, geek, the new Ms. Marvel is, at the same time, a religious – in her own way – young woman, respectful of her traditions and family’s values, and a postfeminist rebel, ready to find her true identity beyond all the categories in which social and personal realities incorporate her.

### 7. A Groundbreaking Case of Study: Jessica Jones and their “Alias”

One of the characters that helped model the transition between the darkest and heavy explicit style of the Dark Age and the less objectifying and more lightheartedly empowering and affirmative tendencies of the last two decades is Jessica Jones. Created in 2001 by writer Brian Michael Bendis and artist Michael Gaydos for *Alias*, the first series of MAX, the R-Rated Marvel’s imprint for an adult target, the “foul-mouthed, drunken”<sup>54</sup>, and traumatized private investigator Jessica is an ambiguous figure, an unusual superheroine with antiheroic traits. Her archetypal hero’s journey, with strength, rebirth, and weaknesses, also brutally and lyrically analyzes the banality of evil and the treatment of otherness.

This is clear in many of her adventures and cases: while looking for missing

teenager Rebecca, for example, Jessica meets a priest that recalls Reverend William Stryker from *X-Men God Loves, Man Kills* (*Marvel Graphic Novel* #5, 1982), a raging antimutant speaker that invokes genocide against humans born with genetic anomalies for religious reasons. As Stryker, *Alias*’s preacher uses misinformation, fear, and hate to promote a “rebellion” against mutants, describing them as monsters, as “an abomination brought on by man’s greed” against “the natural order of things” (*Alias* #13). Even if Jessica is not a religious person, she recognizes the jarring contrast of this vision: the system that supposedly should fight evil is preaching marginalization and violence against minorities using a dystopian and disturbingly sacralized rhetoric that convert religion into a weapon against otherness and discordant bodies. Finally, we discover that Rebecca is not a mutant, she is a lesbian and ran away from prejudices, bigotry, and bullying. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with being a mutant, or Jewish or Black or anything else”, the girl says in *Alias* #14. Rebecca just wants to kiss whoever she wants, to talk about whatever she wants and to express herself without someone making fun of her or asking what’s wrong with her.

Jessica knows exactly what Rebecca means because she also embodies a mistreated otherness and even the title of this first story arc intensely underlines the many identities of her protagonist. She is a woman, a non-normative female figure in a world dominated by hypermasculinity. She has been a daughter and a sister, she is an adopted daughter, she will be a mother of a daughter (*The Pulse* #13), she is a victim and a fighter, she is arrogant and emotional, she is a thousand different

things and yet she appears solid, strong, brave, coherent despite all the scars. “*Alias* as a title for the series as a whole indicates that it is a book about all the people Jessica has been – daughter, orphan, mother, lover, sister, hero, drunk, slut, detective and moral agent; it is a title linked to our discovery of who Jessica actually is. As the title of the first volume, it indicates that she is not who she thinks she is, that she can be more. She can not only return to the person she used to be; she can be better”<sup>55</sup>.

Physically and emotionally speaking, Jessica is not a regular superheroine. She has powers, like superstrength, flight, and fast healing, originated during a toxic accident in which she lost her family, but “most of the time she chooses not to use them”<sup>56</sup>. “She has no codename, no costume, no dual identity, and, since she works as a professional private detective, no selfless mission”<sup>57</sup>. Her body is that of a real woman not of a sexy doll of impossible proportions and she is not erotically objectified despite being shown as sexually active. Gaydos did an excellent work using “strikingly less idealized style than standard superhero comics art, with little or no attention to muscular and sexualization”<sup>58</sup>. He modeled her almost “shapeless”<sup>59</sup>, with “loose fitting civilian clothes that obscure, rather than accentuate her body”<sup>60</sup>, and avoided the *cliché* of a revealing costume because Jessica “is refusing not only to be a superheroine, but also to represent herself in ways that might be consistent with that role”<sup>61</sup>.

Nevertheless, she has been Jewel: her former alter ego was a pretty and shiny fighter with a revealing costume that had to overcome the tragic death of her family and was devastated by Purple Man’s abduction and abuses for 8 months. As we

will discover in #14 of her second biggest story arc, *The Pulse*, she also briefly had another, darker, super-identity: Knightress. She is now a PI that tries to make ends meet, like Misty Knight and Coleen Wing. Since she has superpowers and a traumatic past related to violence and death, she can also be considered a sort of specular, female version of Luke Cage. The “Hero for Hire” himself becomes a central character in Jessica’s life and another reason to connect the heroine with otherness: they initially have a casual sexual relation, shown as explicit and aggressive (even if consensual), but end up having a daughter together and becoming the first “biracial superhero couple” to marry in *New Avengers Annual* #1 (2006). Interracial relationships in comics are “rare” and “controversial”<sup>62</sup>, so their love story is a groundbreaking event in the ninth art that helps to positively address the representation of race and gender.

Rebel, tough, lonely but ultimately caring, she also recalls the antiheroic male protagonists of the noir and hardboiled novels and movies like Philip Marlowe, the icon character created by Raymond Chandler in the 30s. At the same time, even if she doesn’t use sex as a weapon, she reminds the *femmes fatales* omnipresent in this imagery for her ravaged, dangerous, and violent attitude.

In *Alias*’s present we see a dark Jessica torn between cynicism, guilt, alcohol addiction, anger, and self-destruction, in a world where American dreams are crashed and where superheroes, even the Avengers and the X-Men, have flaws. Jessica’s behavior hides a tremendous trauma: Purple Man/Zebediah Killgrave (first appearance: *Daredevil* #4, 1964), a villain able to mentally and physically control people using pheromones,

kidnapped for months the woman while she was in her Jewels identity and commanded her to do everything he wanted, from bathing him to beat superheroes. He didn't rape Jessica but abused and "humiliated her in every other sexual way possible"<sup>63</sup>, even make her beg for sex. The fact that he didn't violate her, doesn't lighten the story. It broadens the narrative and the analysis about rape culture and underlines the many ways women can be subjected to gender-based violence and the many ways men can exploit various forms of abuses to validate their power and to maintain or obtain control over women. Coercive control, forcible persuasion, debasement, intimidation, victim blaming, and *bias*, among others, serve to gradually deprive women of "personal autonomy and safety"<sup>64</sup>, to put them behind the bars of gender roles, passivity, and obedience, to undermine their possibility of self-construction, election, and independence.

Jessica remains scarred, but she is ultimately able to defeat Killgrave, to overcome her trauma, to create a lovely family with Luke, to act like a good mother for Danielle. Motherhood is another element of instability in her life. She is often concerned about her parental skills, the safety of her child, and the potential monstrosity that her genetics and Luke's could have passed to the baby. She has to balance her superhero activities and potential dangers with her daily routine. But, far from any patriarchal influence, being a mother and a partner helps her to repair her broken self, to create something good out of the destructive violence that shaped her individuality. She is a superheroine also because she is a survivor.

Especially in *Alias*, she feels unworthy, unlovable, and unforgivable and tries to

hide her value, but she always continues to fearless defend the weak and the outcasts because "she is motivated by other people's pain"<sup>65</sup>, has a strong level of empathy and a great sense of justice. She survived to many traumas and now she recognizes those or other traumas in suffering people and she tries to make amends for an unfair, often evil, world, as when she rescues another troubled young girl, Mattie Franklin, the third Spider-Woman (first appearance: *Spectacular Spider-Man* #262, 1998). Until Jessica and Jessica Drew, the first Spider-Woman (first appearance: *Marvel Spotlight* #32, 1977), find her, Mattie is exploited for being both a woman and a mutant: abused, drugged, and forced into prostitution, her blood and flesh are used to deal the Mutant Growth Hormone, a biochemical that gives temporary powers to normal people. And while defending and saving people, she also gradually heals herself. Even if she is broken, Jessica helps people and keeps fighting because she still knows what's right, she recognizes the humanity of otherness and "she subverts expectations about race, class, and gender"<sup>66</sup>.

## 8. Conclusions

This brief and non-exhaustive *excursus* into the immense comic world reminds us that space, embodiment, and narrative were and still remain predominantly linked to a white, male, heterosexual imaginary. There are no comprehensive and definitive data, but, according to Shredunk, in 2017 "only 26.7 percent of all DC and Marvel characters are female"<sup>67</sup>, while, according to Facciani, Warren and Vendemia, analyzing in total 23.243 comic characters published from 1991 to 2005,

men represented 85% of them, white characters reached 86%, and “aliens, demons, and other types of non-human lifeforms were more likely to be represented than all human racial minorities combined”<sup>68</sup>. The tendency is clear. The representation of otherness in comics has often failed – in number and in depiction – to give the appropriate value, respect, and power to “discordant” bodies.

As we saw, however, from the Golden Age to date, the ninth art has also experienced various revolutions that have paralleled the social, political, and historical changes of our world, influencing each other, and many outstanding comics urge their readers to recognize systemic injustice, racism, homophobia, and patriarchy not only in fiction. They are an educational and critical *medium* that can support a real resistance against “bad places” and “villains”, in the utopian name of inclusion and equality. Especially from the 2000s,

there have been an increase in the positive promotion of inclusive and intersectional visions of others and a “decrease in the underrepresentation, sexualization, and objectification of female”<sup>69</sup> and LGBTQIA+ characters, as well as in the prejudicial and racial marginalization of ethnic minorities. Hopefully, this empowering and normalizing path will continue to improve. Superheroes like the X-Men (and X-Women), Martha, Jessica, Kamala, Miles or America help us to see ourselves in the others and to recognize otherness within us, to feel empathy, solidarity, and rage, to stand up and become firsthand defenders. And, maybe, this is their greatest superpower.

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