

Who Gets to be a Hero?

A Collection of BIPOC, Feminist, Superhero Representations in Comic Books

Zuri Eason, '27

White supremacy wants you to believe that there is one type of hero. The lone, rugged white man, often with a military background, a spandex outfit and a mask that shows just a bit of skin so you can be sure of the whiteness behind the mask. And I kick myself for it, but I am super obsessed with superheroes. I love Superman, Batman, and most of all, Spider-Man. I first gained an interest in comic books when I was too young to remember so I am going based off of my mother's retelling. I loved Spider-Man comics that would come in cereal boxes, Tobey Maguire, and pretending that I was saving the city with pretend parkour anytime I managed to jump off of a playset higher than two feet. As a toddler, of course the vivid colors and simplistic storylines of a basic Spider-Man comic is appealing. As I grew older, I struggled to remember materials for exams, however I was able to recall intricate comic storylines that I had read years ago. Through an interest in writing centered around social issues, I delved deeper into specific storylines and character arcs because of the unique moral and philosophical dilemmas they placed.

Since then, I have turned my youthful fascination into passion that continually fuels my academic and creative endeavors, such as poetry, collaging and drawing. In elementary and middle school, I created my own series, "Red Fosner" about two Black sisters who fought against my early conceptualizations of the world's injustices. For me, there has never been anything more amazing than the concept of a superhero. I believe my love for comics where superheroes save the day stems from a lack of control of my own environment as a Black person with mental health issues. My collection reflects the state of a curious, angry Black girl with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) who craved justice and found a recluse from bigotry in the world of teen comics. OCD differs from person to person, but mine intertwines with a deep fixation on comic books and racial justice. In those moments, where I have felt small, knowing that the racists of the world were ignorant and unwilling to shake it, I needed a beacon of hope. My pursuit to seek out storylines that break the barriers of whitestream superhero media is ongoing.

As my comic collection has grown, so has my love for superheroes, and my perception of this modern invention as well. As a young black femme student, my focus of study is on intersectionality and people of color's liberation through literature and creativity. The very reason

why I got into this school was because my common app essay was written about comic books. I want to change the world through my education and writing. After undergrad, I plan to go on to get a PhD in Library Sciences in order to create more opportunities for young Black and brown people to do the same. I consider my collecting habits to be sentimental, anthropological and entertaining. I base what I buy, often off of following specific comic runs, artists, and writers. Local comic and book stores, thrifting, e-bay and most importantly, my mother have been my avenues of collection. I use the library to find new comics, or ask the owners of the stores I frequent, or I'd use my Marvel and DC encyclopedias, and marvelwiki, a platform that unfortunately no longer exists.

The books in this collection are all centered around superheroes of color, women and queer folk, written by underrepresented people. The protagonists of these stories are not lone soldiers. They have teams full of other masked crusaders, or their communities supporting them. When I read the stories in this collection, I remember that heroic action isn't able to happen singularly, but through a collective effort and support. I remember that justice against the slow violence of all the big evils of the world is something that can't be zapped away in an instant with superpowers, but that there is resistance happening all around the world, with marginalized identities at the forefront of movements.

Annotated Bibliography

[WARNING! Anecdotes written below may or may not be critically fabulated, reader, do advise.] *Before I started college, I was in fact a teen superhero. I can't exactly reveal my identity, you know, safety precautions. But trust me, everything in this bibliography can relate to my life pretty accurately, I mean, I may have been a bit better than all of these heroes combined but I don't want to be too presumptuous...*

Bendis, Brian-Michael, Pichelli Sara, "Miles Morales: the Ultimate Spider-Man Ultimate Collection", Vol 1, Marvel Comics, 2014-2015

Growing up in suburban Texas, I had to navigate white supremacist and heteropatriarchal ideals at an incredibly young age. Knowing this, coupled with my love for Peter Parker's Spider-Man, my mother bought me this because she wanted me to see a 14 year old Afro-Latino boy in the role and feel empowered. I was given this volume before I started intermediate school, and to this day, Miles Morales is one of my all time favorite superheroes, and he is most assuredly my favorite Spider-Man. Following the events of a previous "*Ultimates*" comic run, this is a collection of Miles Morales' first solo appearances. When personal tragedy hits in the middle of a universal calamity, he is thrown into a heroic role far before he believes he is ready. However, his courage and faith allow him to do what he initially believes to be impossible... This is the collection that propelled and solidified my interest in comics as a medium. Miles'

character arc is ongoing, but this is the perfect place for anyone who wants to start reading about him. This character is a certified cultural icon and beloved hero.

Boller, David, St. Pierre, Joe “Spider-Man 2099”, Marvel Comics, 1992

“*Across the Spiderverse*” was released the week before I graduated high school, and I went to see it no less than seven times in theaters with various friends and family members. Shortly after graduation, my parents made a move to a new city, simultaneously while I was navigating college life. While visiting my new and unfamiliar home, I begrudgingly went to an art fair with my parents. However, I was delighted to find a vintage comic stand there, and I found this issue that appeared in the film! A constant whenever I move to a new place is finding a bookstore, a library and a comic book store. The man running the stand smiled at me like he knew he was a sign, from the Spider-Man gods up above blessing this new city I was in, as well as my freshman year at Swarthmore. The highs and lows I experienced that year were not unlike the saga Miguel O’Hara goes through in Spider-Man 2099. He is a very flawed man, and his storylines are a lot darker than a typical Peter Parker comic. Miguel is a former engineer who is battling addiction, extreme PTSD and a guilty conscience from the regrets of his past. He is a realistic anti-hero, one who doesn’t always know the right answer despite truly believing he is doing the right thing. His character arc from working for a capitalist, morally corrupt company to his grim origins as Spider-Man are incredibly unique, and this special edition comic is one of the crown jewels of my collection!

Latour, Jason, Rodriguez, Robbi, “Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted”, Vol 0, Marvel Comics, 2014

In this universe, Gwen is written as more than the boyfriend to Peter Parker, and is reinvented as a young woman who is navigating a tumultuous relationship with her father, and her struggle against authority. She’s in a punk rock band, dyes her hair, and is currently dealing with the insane aftermath of her story from the edge of the spiderverse. With the universe in peril and NYPD cracking down on vigilante justice, Gwen has more battles than any teenager should be dealing with. The art style in this run is watercolored and abstract, and lends well to the new tone of a grungier spider-woman.

Wilson, G. Willow “Ms. Marvel: No Normal”, Vol 1, Marvel Comics, 2014

Ms. Marvel was a close friend, actually, and she definitely is not *normal*. Hailing from the great state of New Jersey, Kamala Khan is a Pakistani-American girl who is, much like me, a huge comic nerd. She writes fanfictions, and is a little *too* into Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel). When she is 16, she finds out she is an inhuman, as her powers are unlocked by the “*terrigen mist*”. On top of her recent superpower development, she is dealing with a crisis of keeping her culture, and navigating bigoted white kids at school. Kamala is an unapologetic nerd, a young woman of color who is embracing her culture. From her costume being a blend of the Mar’Vell mantle she looks up to and her Pakistani roots,

to her two best friends' unique backgrounds and characterization, this volume is the perfect origin story, and sets up one of the greatest new comic characters of the decade.

Wilson, G Willow, “Ms Marvel: Super Famous” Vol 5, Marvel Comics, 2015

Ms. Marvel leaves her beloved Jersey City behind to join what she thinks is the world's greatest superhero team: The Avengers! However, she realizes that being a part of the big leagues may not be all it's cracked up to be. Kamala's ideas are co-opted by a company that then goes on to try and buy out her neighborhood, a community of immigrants and people of color. This volume pulls from real life scenarios of gentrification, and extractivism that happens to women of color's ideas, work and intelligence in a capitalist, racist society. This issue is incredibly impactful, as it deals with Kamala's struggle between staying true to herself, her community and her ambition to protect the world.

Ewing, Eve, “Iron Heart: Meant to Fly”, Marvel Comics, Vol 1, 2020

Riri Williams, the fifteen year old black girl who built her own iron-man style suit but better! Riri's family was torn apart by gun violence, resulting in the loss of her stepfather and best friend. This volume of comics sets Riri apart from the “Iron-Man” legacy, and allows her to forge her own path. With “The ten rings” a wicked and powerful crime organization kidnapping people left and right, Riri, with the help of some friends (such as the princess of Wakanda), and the technology she creates, prepares to do what she does best: stop the villains! I love this volume because it gives voice to a wickedly smart young black person dealing with grief while coming of age, and handles it beautifully. Also, fun fact! Eve Ewing sent a signed copy of this Iron Heart collection as a gift from my family friend Waverly Duck. However my parents already knew her from being resident heads of the dorm above hers when she went to University of Chicago. She even babysat my brother, and apparently remembers me as a baby! I don't remember meeting her then, but now that I have gained my consciousness, I can say I did meet her again in high school, and she was as awesome as Iron Heart is.

Wilson, G Willow, “Ms. Marvel: Civil War II”, Marvel Comics, 2017

This run sets forth an intriguing moral dilemma, placing individual liberties and the safety of society at ends. With the world of superheroes being broken up into sides (Iron-Man versus Captain America) and her mentor, Carol Danvers leading a resistance, Kamala Khan has a decision to make. I acquired this when I was in seventh grade, and I had an interest in the larger story but wanted to zoom in on my favorite character's arc through the event that impacted the Earth 616 comic runs at large. What I love most about Ms. Marvel comics is the realistic whimsy, yet this comic tones it down, while still keeping the integrity of Kamala's voice.

Waid, Mark, Ramos, Humberto “Champions: Change the World”, Marvel Comics, Vol 1, 2017

This diverse teen superhero group is made up of a plethora of young, justice seeking characters, such as Viv Vision, Amadeus Cho and the aforementioned Miles Morales, Ms. Marvel and Ironheart! All equipped with an array of intelligence, valor and fighting skills, this group *never* loses. And when the older generation of heroes is battling each other in the unnecessary spectacle of “Civil War I”, this one steps up. Young people are meant to organize against injustice, and this inspiring group creates a new world, and a better future. Through an underground resistance of mutants, inhumans and other outcast super-people, the Champions are able to begin their journey to greatness!

Thompson, Kelly, “Jessica Jones: Purple Daughter”, Marvel Comics, Vol 1, 2019

Jessica Jones is one of the most enigmatic women in Marvel comics history. Her origins began as a best friend to Peter Parker. She is a multifaceted woman, and unashamedly angry, brilliant, and resourceful. Her work as a private investigator is lulled by alcoholism and depression. This volume in particular deals with the aftermath of sexual assault and violence. As Jessica begins her journey of starting her own family despite losing hers, and ending up in an abusive foster care system, she has reality warper induced, vivid nightmare of her young daughter, Danielle having purple skin. The trauma she endured from the mind control powered villain Killgrave aka, the “Purple Man” is dealt with in this poignant, raw comic.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi, Stelfreeze, Brian “Black Panther”, Marvel Comics, Vol 1, 2016

Seeing the film “*Black Panther*” in 2018 in an all black theater in Houston, Texas, is one of my favorite memories. This Ta-Nehisi Coates run was absolutely critical to the new era and resurgence of Black Panther comics that the movie brought forth. In this story, T’Challa is faced with a dilemma of leadership, and his character as a man, not a superhuman, is truly tested. The Wakandan monarchy is put into question, and themes of socioeconomic inequality, Black pride and resistance are all masterfully worked through and set forth in this volume. This was purchased at a local bookstore and has been borrowed by several eager family members since. It currently stays in my Father’s work office, and I think it may be too good for him to give back to me. Fair enough.

Montclare, Brandon, Reeder, Amy “Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur: , Vol 1, 2015.

At only age nine, Lunella Lafayette is the third smartest person in the Marvel Comics Universe. Her brain baffles and delights her loving parents, but her superpowers scare her, and she doesn’t know how to tell them that she’s different, an “*inhuman*” and she especially doesn’t know how to deal with the fact that in spare time she fights crime with an extraterrestrial dinosaur. This story is fun, fresh and was a perfect read for me in fifth grade. She studies the alien race “Kree” relentlessly and is able to

invent a tool that tracks down technology built by them. The technology is set off and a wave of catastrophic events follow, but her new best friend, Devil Dinosaur also comes with it! You can't help but adore her and this story! Another amazing gift by my mother, who was always seeking out the best black stories for me. The importance of a representation for a nerdy young black girl at the age I read this was astounding, and after reading this volume I kept finding more and this quickly became one of my favorite series.

Ewing, Al “Mighty Avengers: Not Your Father’s Avengers”, Vol 3, Marvel Comics, 2014

An all Black superhero team led by Luke Cage, the first black protagonist Marvel created in 1972. Mighty Avengers is, as the title suggests, nothing like “your father’s” avengers. The origins of the “Mighty Avengers” are told in this blaxploitation style issue, with a line-up of some of the coolest black heroes in comic history. Teaming up to fight the street level villains in New York as well as large universal threats, this comic is a prequel to the team Mighty Avengers later becomes in the 2010s.

Ewing, Al “Mighty Avengers: No Single Hero”, Marvel Comics, Vol 1, 2013

The first issue of Mighty Avengers is witty, powerful and full of suspense. With Spectrum, who can move at the speed of light, White Tiger, who draws her powers from an ancient amulet, and Luke Cage at the forefront of leading a new kind of hero team, set to protect New York while the main avengers deal with an Infinity event. While they deal with Proxima, they also have a mysterious threat within their own team that may be their true demise. It's black, it's lively and it is indicative of the 2010s era of visibility of comics written by and for people of color. Also, I once lended this exact comic to a boy I liked in intermediate school and he brought it back to me with a water stain... safe to say the crush dissipated and I resented him for the rest of the year.

Thomas, Brandon “Miranda Mercury Vol 1: Time Runs Out”, Boom Entertainment, 2011, 176 p.

This was found at a library sale. I had never heard of it before, but I saw a black girl on the cover so I took it home for the whopping price of five dollars and twenty five cents. Luckily, my purchase was not in vain, as I found this to be rivetingly afro-futuristic, and I was introduced to the wonderful black author Brandon Thomas. Miranda Mercury, is the universe's greatest adventurer, but unfortunately is succumbing to an illness, and is sure she only has one year left to continue exploring and cementing her legacy. To see a young black woman, who is smart and drawn to be self assured in what her legacy means is revolutionary.

Johns Geoff, Gary Frank “Watchmen: Doomsday Clock Collection”, Vol 1, DC comics, 2020

I saw this at Newbury comics while visiting Boston and it was selling for fifty dollars. As a high schooler and a humble grocery store cashier, I knew this purchase could not be made, so I checked it out at the library once I got home. Upon reading it I realized that this was decidedly “epic”, and I eventually bought

my own copy. It is a crossover with a reimagined Watchmen Universe and Batman . If you know anything about Alan Moore's original watchmen, Rorschach is a canon racist jerk. However this iteration reinvents his arc as a black man who has escaped Arkham and is dealing with mental illness, trauma and now, aiding in the redemption arc of the wholly white, rich, privileged, psychopath Adrian Veidt. It deals with the gray area of good and evil in a spectacular way and blends elements of black history with previously written characters to create something unlike any other comic I've read.

Cloonan, Becky “Gotham Academy: Welcome to Gotham Academy”, Vol 1, DC Comics, 2015

I love Batman, and found this series centering around teen heroes of color set in his city. A mystery set in a prestigious Gotham private school, centering around a young woman, Olive Silverlock, and her unlikely team of outcast students. The secrets of the school and city all lead back to Bruce Wayne, and this issue sets the scene for something much larger at play, while touching on issues of fascism, elitism and conformity.

Rivera, Gabby, Quinones, Joe, “The Life and Times of America Chavez”, Vol 1, Marvel Comics, 2017

America Chavez is a young lesbian Afro-Latina woman, hailing from a utopian parallel universe. To cope with the loss of her family, she travels the multiverses using her portal-punching powers, and revises her own story. Nineteen year old America goes on a cross country trip and finds herself This volume starts with loss, and ends with a young woman reclaiming her power and identity, all while setting the stage for a continuous series, full of familiar characters, romantic endeavors and a fun-loving, confident main character. I found this first volume when I was visiting my Grandma in Dallas!

Thompson, Kelly, Caldwell, Ben “A-Force: Rage against the Dying Light”, Vol 2, Marvel Comics, 2017

The title of this comic is a reference to Dylan Thomas' 1951 poem, and the story that it follows fits well with it. The fight for gender equity and queer rights is one that needs light and hope to stay alive. A-Force is a queer woman led-team that lives in a society free of patriarchal ideals and violence. They are based on the island Arcadia in a matriarchal society, and travel intergalactically to liberate all oppressed people. With Medusa, She-Hulk, Dazzler, Nico Minoru and Singularity, leading the charge against a dragon who attacks a small town, they realize there is a much bigger threat on the way. I found this after reading Runaways and researching the next comics to read due to my interest in Nico Minoru. One of my favorite aspects of this comic is Nico and Singularity's relationship. It's a wholesome and classic black cat and golden retriever love and it represents the love-based praxis of Arcadian society and A-Force as a team.

Vaughan, Brian K, “Runaways: Pride and Joy”, Vol 1, Marvel Comics, 2006

Purchased for me by my mother around sixth grade, at a time where I was very excited to be a teenager, and very certain my life would be dramatically free from my parent's rules. In *Runaways*, a found family is born when six highschoolers become aware of their parents' involvement in a supervillain organization.

This issue begs the question of nurture versus nature, deals with clashes of intersectionality between race, sexuality and gender, and whether or not your destiny is set by biological kin. This is the first volume of what originally was a cancelled run, and eventually was renewed and went on to become a cult classic. It's the perfect angsty, quirky rag tag group of kids that make mistakes, and grow together despite all odds.

Rowell, Rainbow "Runaways: Find Your Way Home" Vol 1, Marvel Comics, 2017

When I read about this on marvel.wiki, I knew I had to find it! Rainbow Rowell writes romantic comedies like she was put on earth to do it. "Find Your Way Home" is a new and improved Runaways that picks up right where the original run ended, with a heartfelt character reunion. The same angst is there, but it deals with the interpersonal relationships and interior lives of the characters outside of their superpowers, much more realistically.

Wilson, G Willow, "Vixen Return of the Lion", DC Comics, Vol 1, 2008

Upon seeing Vixen appear in runs of Batman Beyond and Injustice, I knew that A) I thought her outfit was gorgeous B) I needed to know about her origins. DC Comics is notorious for creating dope-ass black woman characters and then allowing their storylines to die out/never gain recognition. Mari is a metahuman who derives her powers from an ancient totem. In this issue, her animal mimicry is put on full display, and the magic behind how she becomes a superheroine is revealed. This is my most recent addition to the collection, a 2025 Christmas present from my mom.

Wishlist:

Evans, Khari, Daughters of the Dragon, Marvel Comics, 2006

Misty Knight and Colleen Wing are two women of color who are overlooked and not truly given the spotlight, they are often supporting characters and love interests, appearing in Luke Cage, Iron Fist, and Daredevil comic runs, but rarely given their own stories. I have searched high and low for an issue of this comic showing some more of their team-up, but all I could find was their retconned version of Heroes for Hire!

Englehart, Steve, Michelinie, David, Maggin, Elliot, "Starfire", DC Comics, 1976

Some may argue that Tamaraneans are raceless, but I simply can't agree. They have fros and locs and are powered by the sun, resulting in dark skin... So for all intents and purposes, Koriand'r is a badass black woman, not flighty, but she is enthusiastic about justice, being fly and making her place on Earth. There is a theory some have about the atlantic slave trade being related to a journey of an alien, and the way the black body is alienated and commodified diasporically parallels well with Starfire's story.