

Misty Knight and “The People’s Literature”: The birth of an icon in the turbulent comic book industry of the 1970s

by Michael Timothy Tune

B.A. in Foreign Language and Literature, December 1999, Middle Tennessee State University

A Thesis submitted to

The Faculty of
The Columbian College of Arts and Sciences
of The George Washington University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

January 31, 2017

Thesis directed by

Erin D. Chapman
Associate Professor of History

© Copyright 2017 by Michael Timothy Tune
All rights reserved

Dedication

To the Baby.

Acknowledgments

My brother, Adam, once asked me, “If you could do anything at all in life, what would you do?” The answer to that question, to study Black history, which he already knew, culminates with this work. I will be forever grateful to him for his not-so-gentle nudge as I faced a cliff, as well as the tools he gave me to survive.

Over the course of this endeavor there have been many who have provided advice, encouragement, a laugh, or simply lent their ear. It takes a village and I am grateful to mine, particularly Paris L. A. Moore, Lauren Pearlman, and Kyla Sommers, as well as the Tune and Shanahan Families. Thank you also to Stirling Snow who helped guide me along the comic book path. Thanks also to my best friends, my sisters, Vicki French and Janin Otwell. I do not exist, nor could I have existed without you.

I also wish to thank the staff of the Special Collections and Archives department at Virginia Commonwealth University. Their Comic Arts Collection contains an incredible archive overseen by a skilled staff, both of which were instrumental in the research process of this thesis. My thanks also to the Serial and Government Publications Division of the Library of Congress who house an immense collection of comic books for the public.

My thanks to Tony Isabella and Arvell Jones for their creation, Misty Knight, and to Chris Claremont for seizing upon what could have been another throwaway character, but instead solidifying her existence in the Marvel canon. A special thank you to Tony Isabella for answering the emails of an unknown student. After reading so many comic books by Isabella, I’ll admit to being a huge fan of his.

I am a proud student of The George Washington University. The Columbian College and its esteemed professors have taught me everything I know about the historical method. In particular, I offer thanks to both Jennifer Nash and Katrin Schultheiss who expanded my skillset in the study of women, gender, and race.

I am also blessed to have worked with Eric Arnesen, a reader for this thesis. I am grateful for his mentorship, his patience, and his helpful advice on comics. He has taught me much about being a prepared and successful historian, providing me with a solid foundation with which to build a future career. He also demands good writing, an endeavor I will spend the rest of my life attempting to perfect.

This thesis is the result of my sitting at the feet of Dr. Erin Chapman. Each school paper, each classroom presentation, and each draft of this thesis was an attempt to make her proud of me. I am so grateful to her for taking a chance on a naïve, unprepared, but passionate student. One could not have asked for a better advisor. I met her at just the right time, and her wisdom continues to shape my thoughts and understanding of Black history. She inspires creativity, and never ceases to amaze me. I will forever remain her student.

Finally, I wish to thank my husband, Richard Shanahan. I thank him for his endless support of me in obtaining this degree. I thank him for reading so many papers and listening to my endless discussion of classes, facts, theories, and books – so, so many books. He is my favorite thing; our marriage is my greatest achievement; his life my favorite pastime. In the words of Jim Henson, “What better place could anything end, hand in hand with a friend.” I’m so grateful to God for creating you – the most important person who ever lived. I love you.

Table of Contents

Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
List of Figures	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Her Industry	9
Chapter Two: Her Issues	24
Chapter Three: Her Men	49
Chapter Four: Herself	67
Epilogue	83
Bibliography	86

List of Figures

Figure 1: Misty Knight in her first comic book appearance	2
---	---

Introduction:

“Hai-Yaii!” A barefoot, Black woman leaped sideways across the frame wearing bell-bottom jeans, a black belt, and a halter-top to cover an hourglass-shaped figure. With this first exclamation, comic book readers were introduced to an angry Misty Knight. Her character apparently had no difficulty kicking and punching the hero in the head, but she ultimately succumbed to his sleeper hold, knocked out within two pages. She would not be out for long. It was 1975.¹

After more than four decades the animated comic book character Misty Knight has not left the pages of Marvel Comics. She was one of the first African American women in comic books to be regularly employed by either of the two largest comic book companies, Marvel and DC Comics.² She was also one of the few to survive.

What follows is a history of how Misty Knight emerged. Looking at the development and early production of Knight provides a window into the mindset and behavior of workers within the comic book industry during the 1970s. With Misty, creator and writer Tony Isabella and writer Chris Claremont applied their understandings of race and gender to comic books at a time when the use of African American female characters was still novel. The character’s creation would prove paramount as comic

¹ The comic books utilized in this paper are dated by publication date. Comic books typically arrive in stores a couple of months ahead of their publication date. Comic books rarely provide page numbers. For Misty Knight’s debut, see: *Marvel Premiere: Featuring Iron Fist*, no. 21 (March 1975).

² For another example of an African American female character, see the intermittent use of the character Claire Temple in the original *Luke Cage* series: *Luke Cage Hero for Hire*, nos. 2-16 (June 1972-December 1973) available in Archie Goodwin, Steve Englehart, George Tuska, and Billy Graham, *Marvel Masterworks Presents Luke Cage, Hero for Hire, Volume 1* (New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 2015).



Figure 1: *Marvel Premiere*, no. 21 (March 1975).

book characters often adhere to a sense of continuity, and this included the ongoing use of Misty Knight.³ With Misty, Tony Isabella provided readers with one of the only instances of a Black American female, thereby helping shape comic books, the readers, and portrayals of Black women in U.S. culture. But Tony and Chris did not work alone. The creative turn by the comic book industry in the 1970s, as well as the industry's financial well-being, dictated much of their product and had a heavy hand in their portrayals of Black women and men in 1970s comic books. This paper will therefore examine what those portrayals were along with the sociocultural significance of the development and portrayal of Misty Knight in conjunction with the historical context of the 1970s comic industry. Black women's representation in comics via Misty demonstrates white supremacist patriarchy among artists, industry, and readers at a time when comic book companies were increasingly turning to the issue of race for both subject matter and principles.

By way of process, the paper further argues for the requirement of four components to properly appreciate comic book character creation and is therefore divided into four parts – the health of the industry, the social issues of the day, the people involved, and the character itself. Chapter One utilizes media reports, revenue numbers, book sales, offices, and employee memory to explore the comic book industry, its business decisions, and how they fared during the time of Misty Knight's origin. Comic book companies held the purse strings and therefore wielded considerable power over their writers and other artists. The chapter asserts that the comic book industry was in

³ For analysis on the types of continuity present in comic books and the role that they play, see: Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 38-52.

such jeopardy that it by and large did not have the wherewithal to create characters for anything other than financial security, distracting and confining them from creating richer representations of Black female and male characters. Most any character or book development by DC Comics and Marvel Comics in the 1970s was based on survival.

Creativity was still an incredibly important component of that survival. Artists devised new characters and fresh storylines to reach their audience, but were constrained by corporate expectations. Chapter Two considers the changing tide of comics in the 1970s as the industry turned increasingly to social issues for exploration in their pages, which helped make Misty Knight possible. The chapter will demonstrate, however, that race and gender were explored as an ongoing means by which to *sell* comic books. Building on Chapter One, it shows that there was no progressive agenda by the companies regardless of a more pronounced use of race and gender exploration in comics. It further argues that white supremacist patriarchy hindered DC Comics and Marvel Comics from realizing the implications of the characters they were producing, and likewise manipulated the medium's critics in their ability to comment on the industry or its one-dimensional portrayals of Black women and men.

Perhaps the most important components of any comic book character are the artists – the writers and illustrators who create and explore the nuances of their ideals, values, and understandings of people and possibility. Writer Tony Isabella created a character that would initially and perpetually represent African American women in Marvel Comics. Chapter Three turns its attention to Tony himself and describes the influence that Tony had on the industry. Ultimately Tony was subject to the financial and social pressures within Marvel, DC Comics, and their readers, yet Tony managed to

incorporate his own understanding of diversity in comics through his writing for Misty Knight and other Black characters.

Chapter Four explores the character of Misty Knight herself. African American portrayals in comic books are what result if one were able to ask *white privilege* to “draw you a picture.” Writers like Isabella and Chris Claremont literally designed a sketch of how they interpreted the intersection of sex, gender, and race. This visual provides an additional perspective when recognizing white concepts of Black women and men in 1970s U.S. society. Utilizing the original comic books from the 1970s as well as interviews with the artists, this final chapter interrogates the character of Misty Knight as the ultimate result of industry business, social values, and independent creativity. Misty Knight was white fantasy incarnate.

To properly interrogate Misty Knight, this paper relies on the methods and theories developed by scholars in the fields of American studies, history, and literature and it is to these scholars that this thesis owes a debt of gratitude.⁴ Properly analyzing a

⁴ Examples of more historical methods of research include Ferenc Morton Szasz, *Atomic Comics: Cartoonists Confront the Nuclear World* (Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2012); Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Jill Lepore more recently made use of original comic book issues of *Wonder Woman* to lend a window to the life of Wonder Woman creator, William Moulton Marston. Lepore’s work provides insight into feminism and women’s rights in the early 20th century. Use of Wonder Woman comics and scope end with Marston’s death and the 1940s. See: Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014). For more on methods of analyzing comics themselves, see Jeffrey A. Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011); Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl, *Comic Book Crime: Truth, Justice, and the American Way* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Brannon Costello, “Southern Super-Patriots and United States Nationalism: Race, Region, and Nation in *Captain America*,” in *Comics and the US. South*, ed. Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 69-71.

comic book also requires utilization of methods and theories developed for other mediums such as music and film.⁵ Just as Hazel Carby observed the importance of the inflection in a jazz singer's voice as she sings specific words, every component of the comic panel must be interrogated: the writing, art, and story, as well as the popularity to the extent that it can be ascertained.⁶

* * *

Comic books themselves remain a unique story-telling device of American culture. In his posthumously published book on atomic energy and comic books, Dr. Ferenc Szasz argued "whoever tells the stories controls the culture."⁷ Today in North America, comic books represent more than a half-billion dollar industry with nearly 100 million books sold each year.⁸ By 2016, characters from these books had been utilized in three of the ten biggest box office blockbusters in American movie history.⁹ In 2009, Disney purchased Marvel Comics for \$4 billion in what has proven an incredibly lucrative

⁵ A gendered analysis of comics is made by applying methods developed from Tricia Rose in her study of hip-hop. See Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994).

⁶ Hazel V. Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 477-479.

⁷ Ferenc Morton Szasz, *Atomic Comics: Cartoonists Confront the Nuclear World* (Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2012), 51.

⁸ "2015 Comic Book Sales Figures," *Comichron*, accessed September 2, 2016, <http://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/2015.html>.

⁹ Including *The Avengers*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*. See worldwideboxoffice.com, accessed September 2, 2016, <http://worldwideboxoffice.com/index.cgi?order=domestic&start=1900&finish=2016&keyword=>.

opportunity for Disney.¹⁰ Though superhero comic books do not sell at the same rate they once did in 1945, theirs is a near 80-year history of influential and recognizable characters the world over.

For comic books in particular, J. Richard Stevens points out that there is a give and take with comic book readers. The readers can therefore directly influence the trajectory and narrative of comic books. It is not only a unique aspect of comic books, but it also “makes the comic text such a source of potential value to historians ... Values, ideals, and even moral codes have adjusted at times to meet the contemporary society’s needs.”¹¹ Read by boys and girls, young and old, this conversation between author and reader, coupled with their relative low cost and their blend of word and art story-form made comics the “people’s literature.”¹²

In many ways, comic book characters adhere to a code of continuity necessary for stories told over multiple decades by numerous people.¹³ The Wonder Woman or Superman character of 1945, for example, can appear very similar to the version seen in comics in 2015. How these characters are created or first developed is therefore critical, especially for those characters that stand the test of time as they set the industry standard for generations of artists and readers to come.

¹⁰ Matthew Ingram, “Six Years Later, Disney’s Acquisition of Marvel Looks Smarter Than Ever,” *Fortune*, October 8, 2015, accessed: September 2, 2016, <http://fortune.com/2015/10/08/disney-marvel/>.

¹¹ J. Richard Stevens, *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence: The Evolution of a National Icon* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 11.

¹² Noted as “the people’s literature” by Dr. Joyce Brothers, “Today’s Comics Aren’t Solely for Children,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 1, 1973, accessed February 2, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

¹³ Stevens, *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence*, 6.

Comic books, a world of writers, artists, readers, and business, provide a lens to better examine portrayals and understandings of African American womanhood and race. The creation and production of Misty Knight helps one comprehend the history of comics, their artists and publishers' priorities, perceptions, and knowledge of African Americans, as well as the views of comic book readers.

In addition, the study of Misty Knight contributes to the exploration of the Black American female form in modern U.S. pop culture. While comics became more mainstream and characters from comics spread into television and cinema, the use of a Black American female character remained scant while the enduring image of Misty Knight remained largely static. In 2016, Misty is included as a central character in the Netflix series, *Luke Cage* where actress Simone Missick plays the role of Misty Knight, a police detective serving her community, though without her trademark bionic arm and sporting a twist-out hairstyle rather than an Afro.¹⁴ Nonetheless, it remains a natural hairstyle for her television debut. She has a tough, street attitude and is employed as a sexual interest for the lead character, incorporating some of the same traits from her early years. Misty Knight, developed by men in the mid-70s set the precedent for generations of storytellers. If “whoever tells the stories controls the culture,” then what perpetual set of representations of Black women persisted through Misty Knight, and where did they originate?¹⁵ As much as one can give agency to a comic book character, this paper *is* Misty Knight, dedicated to a richer understanding of what she represented and represents. This is her story.

¹⁴ *Luke Cage*. 2016 on Netflix.

¹⁵ Ferenc Morton Szasz, *Atomic Comics*, 51.

Chapter One: Her Industry

Things started out well enough in 1978. DC Comics was planning that spring to add ten titles to their roster, including one to star in a new creation: the African superhero, Vixen, which would have been the first Black female superhero to have her own book at a major company.¹⁶ By June there were still plans for the book.¹⁷ Within weeks, however, an implosion at the company ended production of all new titles, which included the unpublished *Vixen*.¹⁸ A Black female with her own book would have to wait.

Though the origin of Misty Knight can be traced to one man, Tony Isabella, comic book characters are by and large not created in a vacuum. To consider the origins of a comic book character one must look beyond her creator to notice all the forces working to control the artist's hand.¹⁹ These comic book industry employees were subject to the priorities, strategy, and environment in which they created. As such, the artist must adhere to the whims of the company; and the industry in the 1970s was in jeopardy.

Comic books have traditionally been a volatile production. Over a near-80 year existence, the modern day comic book has been subject to the heights of a popular fad

¹⁶ Murray Bishoff, "Now What?," *The Buyer's Guide for Comic Fandom* (hereafter referred to as *TBGFCE*) 229, April 7, 1978, 39. For an analysis of Vixen, see Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2016), 111-119.

¹⁷ Murray Bishoff, "Now What?," *TBGFCE* 237, June 2, 1978, 41.

¹⁸ Murray Bishoff, "Now What?," *TBGFCE* 241, June 30, 1978, 32.

¹⁹ This paper uses the term "artist" to represent all comic book crafters including writers, pencillers, and inkers.

and the depths of public ridicule. The companies that produced them were at the mercy of that volatility, causing many to fail.

Two companies emerged as dominant – DC Comics and Marvel Comics. While DC Comics was the industry leader in 1970, Marvel was gaining ground and by 1978, Marvel alone stood at 40%.²⁰ Volatility be damned, these two companies survived and dominated an industry, and many of the most popular comic book characters (though certainly not all) such as Wonder Woman, Superman, Wolverine, and Spider-Man can be placed within one of these two companies. Though other independent comic book companies certainly existed, most held a market share too small and tenure too short to infuse populations across a national scale with characters of significant, long-term influence. As African American Studies scholar Adilifu Nama explains, “Undoubtedly, various underground and independent black comic figures could claim credit for offering a varied type of black superhero, but the black superheroes of DC and Marvel comics speak to a broader audience and reach than those alternative outlets.”²¹ As such, these two publishing houses are arguably representative of an entire industry.²²

Dominance, however, did not equate to resting on one’s laurels. Though their characters brought inspiration and excitement to children (and adults) across America, neither Marvel nor DC was immune to the instability of the comic book market. It was in this market that Tony Isabella would enter, labor, and create Misty Knight. As an

²⁰ For 1978 Marvel figure, see: Leah Rozen, “Marvel Comics Zaps Up Its Readership Statistics,” *Advertising Age*, July 17, 1978, found in *TBGFCF*, 263, December 1, 1978, 30.

²¹ Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 4.

²² In 2015, DC and Marvel held 71% of circulation sales. See: “Comic Book Sales by Month,” *Comichron*, accessed July 23, 2016, <http://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales.html>.

employee, Isabella's work was susceptible to the health of the industry for which he worked. This chapter examines the short history of the comic book industry before and including Isabella's arrival and concludes that up to and including the 1970s, comic book insiders were at war to survive – one cheap pulp throwaway at a time. This history of survival would affect employees and thereby character creation. Public documents suggest that the durability of DC and Marvel was due to their development and adherence to certain strategies. This mode of survival further suggests that comic book characters in the 1970s were created and developed as a means to weather a storm. Black or white, male or female – the details of the character did not matter. Only if it sold.

* * *

Though a small comic book industry had been in formation and production for nearly a decade, it was the creation of Superman in 1938 and the use of superheroes that shot a lightning bolt through comic books and the *Golden Age of Comics*, a period roughly from 1938 to the early 1950s, would stand as the apex in comic book sales.²³ Several books sold millions of copies per title each month – with the *Superman* title at DC Comics being the biggest seller of them all.²⁴ Companies saw few restrictions on content or

²³ For a 20th century history of comic books, see: Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 2-7. For an argument on what defines a comic book and therefore its origin, see Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1994), 2-23.

²⁴ For examples of sales in the 1950s, see Larry Rohter, "Reinventing Superman: He'll be Upwardly Mobile," *New York Times*, June 10, 1986, accessed January 27, 2016, Factiva. See also: "Superman Gets Tough," *Associated Press*, May 10, 1986, accessed January 27, 2016, Factiva.

audience – delivering creative (as well as subpar) comics for women and men, young and old.²⁵

By the 1950s a backlash from parents and influential critics (one in particular, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham) pushed hard against increasing depictions of crime and horror in comic books, thus threatening sales.²⁶ Wertham’s 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, was well publicized and well received by readers and critics alike.²⁷ After a United States Senate subcommittee began hearings on comic book content, the comic book industry quickly reacted to curtail potential restriction by the U.S. government.²⁸ Banding together, the comic book industry published The Comics Code, a self-inflicted set of written standards to address public concern. Near industry-wide use of the code calmed most public concern by 1956, but also turned comics into a medium largely for children. As Bradford Wright argues in his history of the modern comic book, “Reflecting a bland consensus vision of America [with the introduction of the code], comic books now championed without criticism American institutions, authority figures, and middle-class mores.”²⁹ This possibly influenced the drop in comic book sales that

²⁵ For more on comic readers in the 40s, see Szasz, *Atomic Comics*. See also Wright, *Comic Book Nation*.

²⁶ For sales slump, see: Michael Connor, “Wine-sipping Superman Helps Save Comic Book Industry,” *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), Feb 13, 1987, accessed January 27, 2016, Factiva. For more on Fredric Wertham and the Comic Book Code, see: Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998).

²⁷ Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 163-164.

²⁸ Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 165-172.

²⁹ Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 176.

soon followed.³⁰ Nevertheless, submitting to self-restriction the industry kept the code unaltered and adhered to for nearly 17 years.³¹

The code was not the only detriment to comics. To make matters worse for the industry, adolescents were drawn to new forms of cultural phenomenon such as rock-and-roll and television.³² Also the “shift in retailing during the 1950s from family-run stores, key outlets for comic books, to supermarket chains antagonistic to lingering adolescents brought on an industry shakeout.”³³ Sales dramatically dropped from 800 million in 1952 to 350 million by 1962.³⁴ Advertising sales in the comic book *Superman* were decimated, falling from \$1 million to \$176,000 in the same period.³⁵ As one reporter explained, “Where once more than 50 comics publishers prospered, [by 1962] there are less than a dozen publishing houses of any magnitude.”³⁶ The industry witnessed more than half of its revenue, titles, and advertising disappear in a matter of a few years. It was

³⁰ Wright argues that adherence to the Comic Code had a detriment effect on comic sales while Amy Nyberg argues there were “more important influences” in the 1950s that hurt sales, such as distribution changes. Both remark on the rise of television and its harmful effect on sales. See Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 179. See also Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, xi-xiii.

³¹ The code was next altered in January 1971. See Lawrence Van Gelder, “A Comics Magazine Defies Code Ban on Drug Stories,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1971, accessed January 27, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

³² Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 179.

³³ For quote: Michael Connor, “Wine-sipping Superman Helps Save Comic Book Industry,” *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), February 13, 1987, accessed January 27, 2016, Factiva. See also: Saul Braun, “Shazam! Here Comes Captain Relevant,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1971, accessed January 27, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper. See also: “Superman Gets Tough,” *Associated Press*, May 10, 1986, accessed January 27, 2016, Factiva.

³⁴ Peter Bart, “Advertising: Superman Faces New Hurdles,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1962, accessed January 28, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

a business on the brink of collapse, filled with artists – writers and illustrators – losing their jobs.

One of the survivors was Superman’s maker, DC Comics, but its success as a company would continue to ebb and flow after the Golden Age ended. Founded in 1937 and known then as National Periodical Publications, Inc., DC Comics revamped its superhero line with titles like the *Flash* and *Justice League of America* in the mid- to late-50s. The reboot found a growing audience. The largest within the trade at the time, DC Comics went public in 1961.³⁷ Reports show revenue for DC Comics at approximately \$40 million by 1962.³⁸ That revenue inched upward toward \$50 million over the next two years before stalling at \$64 million in 1967, though the company remained profitable.³⁹ In 1967, National Periodical was bought for \$60 million by Kinney National Service, a conglomerate formed in 1966 made up of a car rental and building maintenance company.⁴⁰ Kinney later made an offer for Warner Brothers, which was accepted in February 1969. Warner would spin off Kinney in 1971, but kept DC

³⁷ “Publisher’s Stock on Market Today,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1961, accessed January 28, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

³⁸ “Other Company Reports,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1963, accessed January 28, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper. See also: “Net Loss Reduced by Pan American,” *New York Times*, May 11, 1962, accessed January 28, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

³⁹ “Hormel Earnings Advance Sharply,” *New York Times*, Dec 8, 1964, accessed January 28, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper. See also: “Pepperell Lists a Profit Decline,” *New York Times*, December 14, 1967, accessed January 28, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁴⁰ Clare Reckert, “Kinney to Acquire Big Talent Agency,” *New York Times*, November 13, 1967, accessed January 28, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper. For description of Kinney, see: Alexander R. Hammer, “French May Buy National Kinney,” *New York Times*, March 2, 1974, accessed January 28, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

Comics.⁴¹ In under 10 years, DC Comics went public, proved consistently profitable, stalled in revenue, was purchased, and became a part of Warner Brothers Entertainment. In short, DC Comics found success elusive.

During that same period DC Comics also had to contend with an up and coming player on the market – Marvel Comics. Though Marvel had been around for some time, the 1960s witnessed a Marvel surge as editor Stan Lee took a page from DC and began to create comic book superheroes he thought an audience would appreciate, but with an added twist: Marvel’s newest team, the Fantastic Four were involved in storylines that included the types of experiences that teenage readers might encounter in everyday life such as “acne, dandruff and getting a date.”⁴² While DC Comics did its part in turning comics around in the late-50s and ‘60s with a return to superheroes (rather than stories about romance or crime, for example), Marvel played its own role by providing new superheroes with recognizably human day-to-day problems, while introducing new characters like the Hulk, Thor, and Spider-Man. Creativity was their savior, but it was still questionable as to whether these new characters alone would sustain them.

As the two companies entered the 1970s, they each brought with them a roller coaster history: the highs of the ‘40s, the lows of the ‘50s, and the unsure era of the ‘60s.

⁴¹ For offer, see: “Kinney is Seeking Warner Control,” *New York Times*, January 29, 1969, accessed January 28, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper. For Warner agreement, see: Robert J. Cole, “Warner Backing Bid From Kinney,” *New York Times*, February 26, 1969, accessed January 28, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper. For Kinney spin off, see: Alexander R. Hammer, “French May Buy National Kinney,” *New York Times*, March 2, 1974, accessed January 28, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁴² Judy Klemesrud, “Features,” *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), Feb 2, 1980, accessed January 1, 2016, Factiva.

Even with Marvel's surge against DC, it was still considered the underdog – DC Comics maintained a larger circulation in the 1960s, publishing 48 titles.⁴³

Thus far the two companies had proven to be scrappy and creative: revamping old heroes, creating new big sellers, and somehow enduring as dozens of other comic book houses around them died. The 1970s would come to mark an age of industry dominance by DC Comics and Marvel though that dominance was not a given and their existence was anything but secure. This was the industry Tony Isabella entered when he came to work for Marvel in 1972.

The 1970s

By the 1970s, employees of comics' two major publication houses stood on shaky ground. One of Tony's first assistants, and later writer, Chris Claremont, remembers the turmoil from an employee's standpoint: "When I took over with issue #94 [of *X-Men* in 1975], the presumption was that the industry was dying ... In those days, the presumption was that there wouldn't be a comic book industry in the eighties."⁴⁴ By the 1970s, overall industry sales had dropped again though not as significantly as in the 1950s. In 1971, 300 million comic books were published and 200 million sold each year (down from 350 million in 1962).⁴⁵ Single-issue sales were also falling. *Spider-Man* would

⁴³ Leonard Sloane, "Advertising: Comics Go Up, Up and Away," *New York Times*, July 20, 1967, accessed January 28, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁴⁴ Chris Claremont, interview by Darren, "An Interview with Chris Claremont, Part II of V," *The Movie Blog*, May 19, 2014, accessed March 23, 2016, <https://themovieblog.com/2014/05/20/an-interview-with-chris-claremont-part-ii-of-v/>.

⁴⁵ For published figure, see: Lawrence Van Gelder, "A Comics Magazine Defies Code Ban on Drug Stories," *New York Times*, February 4, 1971, accessed January 27, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper. For sales figure, see: Saul Braun, "Shazam! Here Comes

overtake *Superman* as the biggest selling book each month, not because *Spider-Man*'s sales went up, but rather because *Superman*'s decreased. Murray Bishoff, who wrote a monthly column for the weekly periodical *The Buyer's Guide for Comic Fandom* reported "In the old days *Superman* and other best sellers could easily top the 500,000 copy mark, while today even *Spider-Man* barely crawls to the 300,000 level."⁴⁶ He referred to the period leading up to 1975 as a "ten year slump" as both DC and Marvel reduced titles.⁴⁷ Marvel reduced titles from 60 to 40, while DC Comics dropped to 30.⁴⁸

Yet an apparent volatility continued. In the same year of the reported slump, comics were a 350 million-copy industry – which suggests an increase over 1971.⁴⁹ According to newspaper reports, sales were at least holding steady at 200 million in 1975 compared with 1971.⁵⁰ Meanwhile Marvel continued its climb copy-by-copy in gaining ground against rival DC – more than doubling sales of books between 1971 and 1976, though still half the sales of DC.⁵¹ Marvel was reportedly "consistently profitable"

Captain Relevant," *New York Times*, May 2, 1971, accessed January 27, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁴⁶ Murray Bishoff, "Now What?," *TBGFCF* 89, Aug 1, 1975, 30.

⁴⁷ Murray Bishoff, "Now What?," *TBGFCF* 89, Aug 1, 1975, 30. Circulation figure according to front page, see: *TBGFCF* 103, November 7, 1975.

⁴⁸ Don and Maggie Thompson, "Beautiful Balloons," *TBGFCF* 105, November 21, 1975, 32.

⁴⁹ Pat Colander, "Comic books go legitimate as sales soar," *Chicago Tribune*, December 6, 1974, accessed February 2, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁵⁰ Richard Flaste, "Comic Books: Still With Us, for Better or for Worse," *New York Times*, August 15, 1975, accessed October 6, 2015, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁵¹ Don Thompson, "Marvel Comics: Clean, Integrated," *TBGFCF* 123, March 26, 1976, 27.

between 1975-1988.⁵² While the first half of the decade was looking rough, the second half was looking brighter. The back and forth of decades prior continued.

In the 1970s Marvel Comics appeared a typical place of business, though with workers in casual clothes and drawings of superheroes framed on the walls. The rooms included art boards alongside telephones, desks and papers, printing machines, ink, and file cabinets – all the usual suspects of most any workplace.⁵³ DC Comics perhaps took a step towards a more conventional look. Tony Isabella worked at both DC and Marvel in the 1970s and decided, “[Marvel was] much better. They were cooler. They were more exciting. They had a better connection to reality. They were more fun than DC's often stuffy output. DC editors would lecture readers in their letter columns. Stan [Lee at Marvel] would make friends with us.”⁵⁴ Arvell Jones, a ‘70s freelancer and first illustrator of *Misty Knight*, remembers DC Comics as “businesslike” with men in ties.⁵⁵ “You felt a little uneasy if you tried to just hang out.”⁵⁶ DC Comics was all business.

The office environment at both DC Comics and Marvel in the 1970s exemplified lean costs and leaner workforces. The offices at Marvel, for example, were small. In his description of the offices at Marvel, Isabella admits that things were tight with four to six men sharing offices. He remembers, “it's amazing how many comic books and

⁵² Jonathan P. Hicks, “Marvel Comic Book Unit Being Sold for \$82.5 Million,” *New York Times*, November 8, 1988, accessed January 28, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁵³ Examining images from: Murray Bishoff, “A Photo Tour of Marvel Comics,” *TBGFCF* 143, August 13, 1976, 28-29.

⁵⁴ Tony Isabella, interview with Brett Weiss, “Tony Isabella Interview -- Stan Lee,” *Brett Weiss Words of Wonder* (blog), January 20, 2015, accessed January 24, 2015, <http://www.brettweisswords.com/2015/01/tony-isabella-interview-stan-lee.html>.

⁵⁵ Arvell Jones, interview with Vince Moore, “Standing On the Shoulders of Giants: Arvell Jones,” *CBR (Comic Book Resources)*, February 22, 2006, accessed January 9, 2016, <http://www.cbr.com/standing-on-the-shoulders-of-giants-arvell-jones/>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

magazines came out of offices that were less than half the size of my present house.⁵⁷

Murray Bishoff agrees. In his own report of Marvel Comics' office space, "The office seemed a conservative size considering it is the largest center of comic book publishing in the world."⁵⁸

One reason for the small size was that many if not most of those working at Marvel (and DC Comics) were freelancers.⁵⁹ The employment of freelancers rather than salaried employees was a means for the comic book industry to maximize its profit margins while still employing creative talent. The *New York Times* reported in 1971,

For decades, comic book writers and artists were considered little more than production workers, virtually interchangeable ... nobody in the business has much of a public reputation, and most are poorly compensated. Most are freelancers, paid at a page rate that the various publishers prefer not to divulge. A rate of \$15 a page, however, is said to be not uncommon.⁶⁰

The ups and downs of his employer's success would not have been lost on Isabella. Business decisions were increasingly exposed in the 1970s for all workers, whether an employee like Isabella or a freelancer like Jones. Editor Marv Wolfman described a growing sense of openness about the business side of things by the end of the '70s. Speaking specifically about freelancers he said,

[Nowadays] Marvel has a tendency to be a lot freer [with reporting sales figures to our freelancers] ... We know when our books are doing well. The basic Marvel philosophy has always been if it sells poorly, don't hide it from the writers because they'll change it [and] make it sell. Which is a very logical thing. So we

⁵⁷ Tony Isabella, interview by Jon Knutson, *Random Acts of Geekery* (Blog), July 14, 2005, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://randomactsofgeekery.blogspot.com/2005/07/tony-isabella-interview.html>.

⁵⁸ Murray Bishoff, "A Photo Tour of Marvel Comics," *TBGFCF* 143, August 13, 1976, 28.

⁵⁹ Don and Maggie Thompson, "Beautiful Balloons," *TBGFCF* 247, August 11, 1978, 32.

⁶⁰ Saul Braun, "Shazam! Here Comes Captain Relevant," *New York Times*, May 2, 1971, accessed January 27, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

tend to go over the sales figures quite a bit now. But that has only happened in the last five years.⁶¹

Sales grew worse as the '70s ticked forward and jobs throughout America were in jeopardy as the recession raged. The recession manifested stories and characters in the product, as well. In an issue of the series, *The Champions*, for example, Isabella introduces a new villain – Rampage: “The everyman of supervillains ... the first menace born of the recession.”⁶²

Exclusive contracts for employees were rare. When asked about the job market by decade's end, Marvel editor Jim Shooter gave excuses on why such a contract for artists was so rare, “such a contract doesn't offer that many benefits (a two-week vacation is a main one) and besides, ‘the only security in this business is your talent.’”⁶³ By October 1979, jobs at Marvel were reportedly still scarce though Shooter cried bias on the report.⁶⁴ But Shooter would not have been able to deny things were at a low as the roller coaster of the industry continued. Tony was gone by 1979 and Arvell was too, though their departures might have had something to do with the weather.

By late summer of 1976 Isabella moved from Marvel Comics to DC Comics, but neither company proved immune to the winter weather of 1978, a hard one which disturbed distribution and therefore sales. The events that stemmed from winter would quickly be termed the “DC Implosion.”⁶⁵ Bishoff wrote, “Nineteen titles, all the

⁶¹ Marv Wolfman, interview by Shel Dorf, “Shel Dorf and the Fantasy Makers,” *TBGFCF* 277, March 9, 1979, 8.

⁶² *The Champions*, no. 5 (April 1976). See also Daredevil's comments about inflation in *Daredevil*, no. 119 (March 1976) written by Tony Isabella.

⁶³ Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 285, May 4, 1979, 29.

⁶⁴ Article originally printed in *New York Times*, Oct 13, 1979, referenced in: Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 313, November 16, 1979, 29.

⁶⁵ Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 245, July 28, 1978, 32.

previously announced new issues and every book begun in the last year-and-a-half have been cancelled, plus some other series that will appear elsewhere.”⁶⁶ DC Comics’ attempt at a Black female lead character, Vixen, would be among those cut, disappearing before even the first issue was released. Bishoff explained that the winter prior was “the most disastrous in comics history, and the resulting bad sales certainly contributed to the shakedown at DC this summer. Marvel has now girded itself against another series of bad sales by cancelling its worst selling books.”⁶⁷ As Marvel was not immune, the “Marvel Massacre” as it would come to be called later that year saw Marvel drop from 45 titles to 32.⁶⁸

Bishoff describes the 1978 DC Implosion and Marvel Massacre in his year-end article as the second biggest story of 1978 in comics (the first being the previous winter’s horrid sales). From Mike Gold, the DC Comics PR representative, “We had 41 people on staff here; we now have 35 – a 15% cutback.”⁶⁹ For its part, DC ultimately changed its format: pushing bestsellers only, paying close attention to how many were printed so as to save money by reducing unpurchased books and thus “publishing less material, making work harder to find for the aspiring writers, artists, and freelancers.”⁷⁰ As always, companies had to be creative with how they found money. Marvel found solace through licensing deals – “Copy sales of Marvel’s comics have been slipping, though

⁶⁶ Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 245, July 28, 1978, 32.

⁶⁷ For quote see: Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 265, December 15, 1978, 49. For *Black Panther* being cut, see: Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 269, January 12, 1979, 28.

⁶⁸ N.R. Kleinfield, “Superheroes’ Creators Wrangle: Creators of Superheroes Wrangle Within Marvel,” *New York Times*, October 13, 1979, accessed January 27, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁶⁹ Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 247, August 11, 1978, 32.

⁷⁰ Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 269, January 12, 1979, 32.

licensing monies have ballooned to the extent that they now contribute more revenues than the comics.”⁷¹ Already Spiderman was making appearances on the Public Broadcasting System’s educational program, *The Electric Company*.⁷²

As before, to continue to survive comics would need to break new ground in the 1970s. They would need to find new topics, new characters, and new (and cheap) artists to help write and illustrate their product. Much like their predecessors, writers like Tony Isabella who came to work in this industry in the ‘70s witnessed an unstable atmosphere. This ongoing unpredictability would have made it difficult for staffers, and certainly for freelancers, to feel job security. Any personal agendas from artists would have had their limits.

As the 1970s proved to continue a now decades-long uncertainty in comics, the industry did not have the luxury to create for creativity’s sake. The uncertainty of revenue, their careful spending with employees, and their sense of self-preservation while others failed suggest methods of strategic survival (or luck) and adds nuance to character development beyond mere greed. Part of that survival meant keeping, dropping, transitioning, and marketing their titles, which the companies succeeded in doing. There could be little opportunity for a social agenda on the part of the company.

Nevertheless, a key part of their endurance, as always, was the artist’s creativity. Comic books are a literary art, after all. Though the industry was in flux, the ‘70s would also signal a new age in comics. Though they were not yet aware of it, the people that

⁷¹ N.R. Kleinfield, “Superheroes’ Creators Wrangle: Creators of Superheroes Wrangle Within Marvel,” *New York Times*, October 13, 1979, accessed January 27, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁷² Pat Colander, “Comic Books Go Legitimate As Sales Soar,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 6, 1974, accessed January 2, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

worked in the comic book industry were about to seize upon a new idea to change comics forever. The means for Misty's creation were taking form.

Chapter Two: Her Issues

Something new was taking place in comic books by the early-1970s, and comic book artists, editors, readers, and critics took note. By 1974 Richard Goldwater, the president of the third largest comic book company in America, Archie Comics, acknowledged the comic book editors' intentional changes in the topics of the books: "What's in today's newspaper is in tomorrow's comic books ... Whether it's pollution, race, crime, boy-girl relationships, the generation gap, or teen-agers [sic] and the community, comic books reflect what's going on in the country – and the world."⁷³ The 1970s were a stark turn for comics and began what is now referred to as the *Bronze Age of Comics* representing roughly 1970-1985.⁷⁴ Though it was not the first time comics ripped their stories from cultural trends – a science fiction craze influenced Superman and Batman, for example – it was the first time in decades that comics began to significantly use social issues, incorporate more controversial topics, and push a semblance of social messaging in their books.⁷⁵ It was in this era that topics such as race and class were utilized as themes, Black superheroes moved to the front of the book, and Misty Knight made her debut. This chapter explores this turn by comic book companies towards topics of race, sex, and gender in the 1970s and argues that the addition of such

⁷³ Pat Colander, "Comic Books Go Legitimate As Sales Soar," *Chicago Tribune*, December 6, 1974, accessed January 2, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁷⁴ A new era of comics commonly referred to as the *Modern Age of Comics* began circa 1985 with the publication of Frank Miller's *The Dark Night Returns* as well as *Watchmen* by Alan Moore in 1986.

⁷⁵ For a discussion of the influence of science fiction on Superman and Batman see: Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones, *The Comic Book Heroes from the Silver Age to the Present*, (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc, 1985), 20-32. Also Ferenc Szasz describes comics as having influence in helping America cope with atomic power and weapons before, during, and after the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. See: Szasz, *Atomic Comics*.

topics was not in and of itself the priority for these companies. The evidence further suggests that industry brass and artists exhibited white supremacist patriarchy in hiring decisions and when introducing these social themes into their products.

* * *

Though no one event defined the period, there were certainly changing forces in comics that marked the 1970s as a new era. One of these forces involved comic books by writer Dennis O’Neil and they suggest the influence that just one writer can have.⁷⁶ The origins of O’Neil’s significance might be traced to a new look for Wonder Woman in 1968 as well as a darker look for Batman in 1970. That same spring he turned his attention to a poignant examination of race when DC Comics decided to put the superhero Green Arrow alongside another in the poorly selling *Green Lantern* series, combining the two superheroes for *Green Lantern* issue #76 in April of 1970. In this issue the Green Arrow teaches Green Lantern about urban poverty and ends with an elderly Black man asking Green Lantern why he does not do more for Black people. This issue would begin a two-year series from O’Neil and artist Neal Adams that looked at several controversial topics including “slumlords ... the plight of the American Indian ... [and] women’s lib” among

⁷⁶ It was O’Neil who wrote *Wonder Woman*, no. 178 (Sept/Oct 1968) where WW was interpreted with new hair, clothes, and fighting style. O’Neil also altered Batman into his original, darker character. His work with Batman began with *Detective Comics*, no. 395 (Jan 1970). O’Neil would write for Batman in 38 issues of two titles, *Detective Comics* and *Batman* over a five-year period, reinforcing a new Batman style. O’Neil also wrote for Batman in the *Justice League of America* series for most issues between Nov 1968-Sept 1970 (issues 66-75; 77-83). O’Neil’s work provided by *The Comic Book Database*. Note: This paper relied heavily on *The Comic Book Database*: <http://comicbookdb.com/> for aid in locating titles, character appearances, and publication dates. Though the site is not 100% accurate, it still proved an excellent resource for comic book identification purposes. For more on O’Neil’s influence and work with Batman, see Glen Weldon, *The Caped Crusade: Batman and the Rise of Nerd Culture* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

others.⁷⁷ In 1975, one reviewer concluded, “These were D.C.’s answer to the emotional masterpieces in Marvel’s Spiderman. No D.C. character before, or since, showed up so beautifully human as this trio.”⁷⁸

That reviewer refers to a storyline found in the *Amazing Spider-Man*. One year after Green Lantern joined with Green Arrow at DC Comics, Stan Lee over at Marvel wrote and published three issues of the *Amazing Spider-Man* which addressed drug abuse – a taboo in comic books as it was in direct defiance of the long adhered to Comics Code.⁷⁹ Up to that point, the code was a near industry-wide agreement adhered to since 1954 in response to public outcry against a perceived danger within comic book content containing gore and crime. Though the heads of both Archie Comics and DC Comics were against Marvel’s move to publish outside the code, the comic issues were well-received by fans, and DC Comics quickly followed suit in their *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* storyline with Denny O’Neil by publishing a drug storyline of their own three months later.⁸⁰

The move made by Marvel perhaps helped force the consideration and ultimate modification to some of the Comics Code’s rules for the first time since its founding in

⁷⁷ Stephan Friedt, “The Reviewer #5,” *TBGFCF* 89, August 1, 1975, 26.

⁷⁸ The word “trio” refers to Green Lantern, Green Arrow, and Black Canary which all appeared in this particular series. See: Stephan Friedt, “The Reviewer #5,” *TBGFCF* 89, August 1, 1975, 26.

⁷⁹ *Amazing Spider-Man*, nos. 96-98 (May-July 1971).

⁸⁰ Lawrence Van Gelder, “A Comics Magazine Defies Code Ban on Drug Stories,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1971, accessed January 27, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

1954, and thus helped usher in a recognizable moment of change for comic books.⁸¹ As Amy Nyberg explains about the era before the 1971 alteration of the code,

Comic book characters lived in a perfect world where good and evil were supposed to be clearly defined and where figures of authority were never corrupt. This vision was not consistent with the social unrest that reverberated through the 1960s, when the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and other issues led some to question the very structure of society. The 1954 code allowed no acknowledgement that the world had changed. To bring an element of realism to comics, the publishers had to go outside the code.⁸²

Stan Lee recognized the growing adolescent market for comics and *The Amazing Spider-Man* was “extremely popular among high school and college students.”⁸³

Changes in the code represented an opportunity for industry to stretch their minds and their characters into uncharted (or long abandoned) territory and to better engage with their growing, more mature audience. As part of this moment of change, in 1973 the *Amazing Spider-Man* artist team would kill off Spider-Man’s girlfriend, Gwen Stacy.⁸⁴ For the first time readers saw that even the sudden death of a major beloved character was not out of reach.⁸⁵ Companies were getting creative again.

The turn was not going unnoticed by the public. “More than 200 million comic books were sold in the United States in 1972,” writes Dr. Joyce Brothers.⁸⁶ Though she

⁸¹ Lawrence Van Gelder, “A Comics Magazine Defies Code Ban on Drug Stories,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1971, accessed January 27, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper. See also Amy Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 140.

⁸² Amy Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 139.

⁸³ Lawrence Van Gelder, “A Comics Magazine Defies Code Ban on Drug Stories,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1971, accessed January 27, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁸⁴ *Amazing Spider-Man*, nos. 121-122 (June-July 1973). Story written by Gerry Conway.

⁸⁵ Arnold T. Blumberg, “The Night Gwen Stacy Died: The End of Innocence and the Birth of the Bronze Age,” *Reconstruction* 3, no. 4 (Fall 2003), accessed September 7, 2016, <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/Issues/034/blumberg.htm>.

⁸⁶ Joyce Brothers, “Today’s Comics Aren’t Solely for Children,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 1, 1973, accessed February 2, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

devotes most of her article to the comic strip, Brothers observed, “Now, in the 1970s, we find a new thrust is beginning for some minority groups – women, blacks, Indians ... The American comic takes its soundings from the cultural mainstream and is shaped by the myth and legends of the American dream.”⁸⁷ However, creativity or the exploration of social themes for their own sake was never the point. Marvel’s circulation reportedly “doubled” in the early ‘70s, suggesting that its turn to controversial storylines such as drug abuse might be working.⁸⁸ And for an industry in constant flux, sales were priority number one.

Though some comics would tackle race head-on in the ‘70s as part of their turn to real world issues, Black characters in and of themselves were not new to comics; they were simply seldom utilized and left unexplored. African American characters made their introduction to mainstream press comic strips in 1968 with strips like *Dateline: Danger* and *Peanuts*.⁸⁹ Not all African American readers were necessarily happy with the results. The strip *Dateline: Danger* employed a Black consultant rather than hire a Black staffer. And speaking to the claimed “universality” of the Charlie Brown strip when Charles Shultz introduced a Black character, one fellow comic strip creator, Luther

⁸⁷ Joyce Brothers, “Today’s Comics Aren’t Solely for Children,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 1, 1973, accessed February 2, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁸⁸ Pat Colander, “Comic Books Go Legitimate As Sales Soar,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 6, 1974, accessed January 2, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁸⁹ *Dateline: Danger* was a comic strip with both a Black and white lead. Charles Schulz began utilizing the semi-regular Black character Franklin in *Peanuts* in 1968. And the makers of the comic strip *Tarzan* utilized the Black tribes of the jungle for something other than being the bad guy. See: David A. Andelman, “Comics Find Negro Heroes,” *New York Times*, September 22, 1970, accessed October 6 2015, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

Brumsick Brandon, Jr. replied, “‘Yes, ‘Peanuts’ enjoys a universality among the white community ... But to the black community [Charlie Brown’s] a little white boy.’”⁹⁰

Independent publishers meanwhile attempted to fill the void that Marvel and DC Comics continually left open. For example, “Blackman ... soul wonder of the world ... the super black champion sworn to rid the universe of poverty, crime and racial bigotry” was created in 1972.⁹¹ This was not the first time a Black male lead was developed by a small independent comic book business. Among others, an earlier book, *The Challenger*, which included both Black and white characters and was described as the “only anti-racist comic book in the nation” was distributed in 1946.⁹² However, the editor for *The Challenger* reported that at least from his point of view the book was blocked from wide distribution due to “pro-fascist forces.”⁹³

Black consumers of comics had long existed as well, and the use of their likeness meant something to them. Though surveys of comic readers by race in the 1970s are not known to exist, by the early ‘90s *Black Enterprise* magazine estimated that 30% of the comic book industry was made up of Black readers.⁹⁴ Said graphic artist Omar Bilal recently, “It does something if you don’t see yourself in a book about heroes ... Even as

⁹⁰ David A. Andelman, “Comics Find Negro Heroes,” *New York Times*, September 22, 1970, accessed October 6, 2015, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁹¹ Michael Culbert, “Black Comic Book Taking Place of Superman and Green Lantern,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, March 25, 1972, accessed January 13, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁹² “Editor Charges Pro-Fascists Block Anti-Racist Comic Book, *Afro-American* (Baltimore), May 11, 1946, accessed January 13, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper. For more on *The Challenger*, see Richard Dier, “New Comic Book Battles Hate and Intolerance, *Afro-American* (Baltimore), June 15, 1946, accessed January 13, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁹³ “Editor Charges Pro-Fascists Block Anti-Racist Comic Book, *Afro-American* (Baltimore), May 11, 1946, accessed January 13, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁹⁴ “The New Adventures of Blacks in the Comic Book Business,” *Black Enterprise*, November 1994, 88, accessed January 13, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

a kid, if you don't read the words, you see the pictures.”⁹⁵ This was certainly true in the *Golden Age of Comics*. In the 1940s, local members of an interracial program for school children in New York and Philadelphia known as Youthbuilders Citizenship Clubs made vocal demands concerning a comic book character within *Captain Marvel* by the name of William Steamboat:

Thick-lipped, kinky-haired, with ape-like stance and moronic drawl, Steamboat was a colored stereotype tending to magnify race prejudice ... The editor countered that white characters were also distorted for the sake of humor. But the kids had a snappy comeback – white [characters] were both hero and villain; Steamboat, a buffoon, was the only colored character in the strip. One boy drew an enlarged portrait of Steamboat and added, ‘This is not the colored race, but your one and a half million readers will think it is.’⁹⁶

The editor pulled the character.

Just prior to the Bronze Age, Black characters made increasing, though still limited appearances. The first Black male character to be published on a regular basis, Gabe Jones was in *Sgt Fury and His Howling Commandos* beginning in 1963. The first regularly published Black female character was Valerie Smith of *Josie and the Pussycats*, published by Archie Comics between 1969-1982.⁹⁷ The first African American male *superhero* was the Falcon who joined Captain America in 1969.⁹⁸ The first African

⁹⁵ Jayson Blair, “X-Ray Vision Is Needed to Find Black Superheroes,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2002, accessed January 11, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁹⁶ Quote from Fern Marja from *New York Post* reprinted: “Kids Win War on Comic Book’s ‘Ape-Like Villain,’” *Afro-American* (Baltimore), May 5, 1945, accessed January 13, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper. See also: “Negro Villain in Comic Book Killed By Youngsters,” *Chicago Defender*, May 5, 1945, accessed January 13, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper. For efforts to combat racial stereotypes and description of Youthbuilders see also: Richard Dier, “Kids Crusade to Eliminate Stereotypes,” *Afro-American* (Baltimore), September 8, 1945, accessed January 13, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

⁹⁷ “Josie and the Pussycats Cartoon,” *The Museum of UnCut Funk*, accessed January 20, 2016, <http://museumofuncutfunk.com/2009/09/06/josie-and-the-pussy-cats/>.

⁹⁸ *Captain America*, no. 117 (September 1969).

American male superhero to be published from a major publishing house with his *own book* was Luke Cage, *Hero for Hire* in 1972.⁹⁹ However, the first Black male superhero was the Black Panther who could be found in the pages of *Fantastic Four* in 1966.¹⁰⁰ The Black Panther would make regular appearances as a member of the *Avengers* in the early 1970s and by 1973 was receiving star billing in the series, *Jungle Action*. He would receive his own series in January of 1977.

The Black Panther in particular provides a window into the attempts by industry in the 1970s to utilize the social theme of race, as well as the industry's use of Black artists. The pejorative title of the series, *Jungle Action*, is both racially and sexually suggestive. Black comic book writer Christopher Priest referred to the series as "Jungle Bunny" as he felt the "title was incredibly patronizing."¹⁰¹ Because *Jungle Action* was read and appreciated by a Black audience, Marvel caused a ruckus when it summarily axed *Jungle Action* and its Black writer Don McGregor.¹⁰² Referring to the *Jungle Action* series which would end with issue #22 in 1976 just as *Black Panther* was set to make its debut, columnist Murray Bishoff reported: "That transition proved somewhat

⁹⁹ *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire*, no. 1 (June 1972). Though another character is recognized as the first black *character* (as opposed to *superhero*) to have his own comic book: *Lobo*, no. 1 (Dec 1965) published by Dell Comics was a western. It ran for two issues. Both issues of *Lobo* are available at the Library of Congress. The story of its publication is included in the documentary: Jonathan Gayles, *White Scripts Black Supermen: Black Masculinities in Comic Books* (San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 2011), DVD.

¹⁰⁰ *Fantastic Four*, no. 52 (July 1966).

¹⁰¹ Zack Smith, "Priest on Black Panther, Pt. 1: 'Everyone Kind of Forgot Who Panther was,'" *Newsarama*, August 10, 2015, accessed August 3, 2016, <http://www.newsarama.com/25496-priest-looks-back-at-black-panther.html>.

¹⁰² See writer Dwayne McDuffie's memories of *Jungle Action* quoted in: Gary Dauphin, "To Be Young, Superpowered & Black," *The Village Voice*, May 17, 1994, accessed January 13, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper. Notably Christopher Priest did not read the series. See: Zack Smith, "Priest on Black Panther, Pt. 1: 'Everyone Kind of Forgot Who Panther was,'" *Newsarama*, August 10, 2015, accessed August 3, 2016, <http://www.newsarama.com/25496-priest-looks-back-at-black-panther.html>.

difficult, since the first Kirby issue [of *Black Panther* #1] was finished before the last McGregor-Graham [issue of *Jungle Action*] was begun.”¹⁰³ Marvel did not appear to care where McGregor was taking the story. As Marvel owned and controlled their characters, they had moved forward with another artist for *Black Panther*, and for the character’s use in another series, irrespective of McGregor’s work. Bishoff later reported from Comicon in NYC:

Noisy, outspoken, and domineering, Mr. McGregor made people notice him. He spoke freely about his work, declaring *Killraven* and *Black Panther* really were comics, despite what some editors said. He showed definite hostility over losing the *Black Panther*, even though in his hands that became Marvel’s worst selling comic. He claimed he ‘had been told’ he was ‘too close to the Black experience’ and thus made the series unnecessarily hot. Regardless of that, sales deemed it necessary to either cancel the book or give it to someone else. Probably the fervour [sic] of the moment prompted Mr. McGregor’s tone, but he still showed his personal zeal which comes out in his stories.¹⁰⁴

Marvel was interested in innovation as well as new audiences, but its treatment of McGregor and the *Jungle Action* series suggests the priority was for a larger audience or, revenue, rather than necessarily Black artists or particular “Black” storylines. It further suggests the company maintained particular standards regarding their racialized characters and storylines that McGregor did not adhere to.

In describing general employment practices in 1991, Chris Claremont described the relationship between the company and artists rather remorselessly as “masters and slaves.” Applying racial signifiers to all, he explained:

It’s a plantation mentality to the extent where, when a senior marvel official was accused of having a plantation mentality, his response was, “Well, I have no problem with that.” That’s the way of life you buy into. If that’s the only way of life you have available to you as a creator, at some point I would think a

¹⁰³ Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 139, July 16, 1976, 28.

¹⁰⁴ Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 141, July 30, 1976, 42.

tremendous frustration and bitterness may possibly set in as you look back over your life.¹⁰⁵

In regard to race in the 1970s, this could be especially true. Freelance artist and the first illustrator for *Misty Knight*, Arvell Jones, an African American Detroit native, remembers of the period that “[r]acism was there, but not the kind you would think. People were trying to be very open minded, but they only could draw on what they knew.”¹⁰⁶ The McGregor saga therefore also suggests a certain amount of racial insensitivity within the industry. The result was Black characters dictated by a company controlled by white men. Artists – writers and illustrators – designed a series on what Marvel understood race to be. With the death of *Jungle Action*, Marvel more than allowed white interpretations of Black characters; it insisted on them.

McGregor was not alone in feeling racial tension as others felt the pressures of being Black in the industry as well. Grass Green – a Black artist – had once worked with longtime and respected white editor Roy Thomas before Roy was at Marvel, and Roy helped Grass get work at Marvel. The reporter records of Grass’s struggle:

In an almost totally white industry, Grass began to feel the subtle prejudices that kept him from the big time. He felt it at Charlton [Comics]. He was dropped by the faltering company after a brief period. He felt it it [sic] at Marvel Comics, where through Thomas’s influence he drew one story. It was never published. Looking back on it, his anger has cooled somewhat. ‘If you want something bad enough,’ he muses, ‘You just overlook that kind of stuff and keep truckin’.’ Ron Foss [his high school friend] had a similarly discouraging experience with pro

¹⁰⁵ When the interviewer pushed back on Claremont’s analogies, Claremont insisted upon them. Chris Claremont, interview by Kim Thompson, “Cog in the Wheel,” *Comics Journal* 152, August 1992, 78, accessed February 22, 2016, Underground and Independent Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels, Provider: Alexander Street Press, Library of Congress (hereafter referred to as LOC).

¹⁰⁶ Arvell Jones, interview with Vince Moore, “Standing On the Shoulders of Giants: Arvell Jones,” *CBR (Comic Book Resources)*, February 22, 2006, accessed January 9, 2016, <http://www.cbr.com/standing-on-the-shoulders-of-giants-arvell-jones/>.

comics. He was given one assignment by Marvel Comics and then nothing. He finally gave up altogether.¹⁰⁷

Meanwhile another Black artist, Trevor Von Eeden was also summarily dismissed from working at both DC and Marvel.¹⁰⁸ Von Eeden drew the original issues of *Black Lightning* for DC Comics, their first Black title character. After his run on *Black Lightning* ended with the book's cancellation, Von Eeden joined Marvel in November of 1978 to work on their Black character, Power Man (Luke Cage).¹⁰⁹ However, by the following summer Marvel editor Jim Shooter "said [Von Eeden] was 'pretty good, but relatively inexperienced, and *Power Man* is not a strong enough title for on-the-job training."¹¹⁰ Von Eeden was replaced by Kerry Gammill, a white male and "a commercial artist from Texas who has done several unpublished back-up stories for Marvel."¹¹¹ However, Gammill too had limited publishing experience with comics at that time according to the online database, Comicbookdb.com.¹¹² Von Eeden's experience as a Black man drawing Black characters was not enough to keep him from being replaced by a white artist with questionably limited experience. Though it had been three years since McGregor was removed from writing for the Black Panther, Marvel's interpretation of the Black male superhero still held absolute. Replacing both of these Black artists with white artists further suggests that their experience as Black men countered Marvel's goals.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas D.N. Zaenger, "Comics & Music Add Up to Wild Grass," *The News Sentinel* [Fort Wayne, IN] *Roto Magazine*, Saturday, November 18, 1978, 6, reprinted in *TBGFCF* 275, February 27, 1979, 31.

¹⁰⁸ Von Eeden has since had a long career in comics.

¹⁰⁹ Murray Bishoff, "Now What?," *TBGFCF* 261, November 17, 1978, 49.

¹¹⁰ Murray Bishoff, "Now What?," *TBGFCF* 297, July 27, 1979, 29.

¹¹¹ Murray Bishoff, "Now What?," *TBGFCF* 301, August 24, 1979, 31.

¹¹² *The Comic Book Database*: <http://comicbookdb.com/>.

Comic book critics largely ignored race. One of the most popular and enduring news sources for comics in the 1970s, *The Buyer's Guide for Comic Fandom* included many lines across several issues concerning the work of film director Ralph Bakshi, including a reprinted review of his controversial blaxploitation film, *Coonskin* in 1975.¹¹³ However, any references to his work appear to be due more to his use of animation or the topic he chose to explore such as his “Lord of the Rings” live-action/animation combo. Outside of one reprinted, unoriginal article (to *The Buyer's Guide*) on racial discord concerning *Coonskin*, there was no other commentary on the topic. Yet Bakshi’s work in general was discussed again and again in the pages of *The Buyer's Guide*.

Veritably, *The Buyer's Guide* largely ignored most *any* social issue. The rare occasion that *The Buyer's Guide* chose to look at a social issue like race therefore makes those instances all the more illuminating. One reader of *The Buyer's Guide* wrote in:

I can't believe that E. Nelson Bridwell considers 'I Am Curious ... Black' a classic.¹¹⁴ This story, as well as those famous Green Lantern tales from [*Green Lantern/Green Arrow*] #71-82 were written for mere greed. Relevant stories were big then and DC just cashed in like everybody else. Comics on the whole have never been kind to minorities. Comics have always portrayed Blacks and Hispanics as rebels, bandits, lazy, villains, or idiots (Steamboat Willie, Baba Louie [Quick Draw McGraw's side-kick]). The best of what the commix medium has done in the portrayal of minorities in comic books has always come out like tepid sewer wastes. The worst offender being DC and, on many occasions, Marvel. Blacks lately have had a break from the typical stereotype minority story (mainly from Marvel), but Orientals and Hispanics still suffer.¹¹⁵

The response to this letter by contributors Don and Maggie Thompson represents both the acknowledgment of a lack of Black characters alongside a defense of the industry and a justification that things have improved. It is included here at length:

¹¹³ *TBGFCF* 121, March 12, 1976, 29.

¹¹⁴ Referring to an issue of *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* when Lane became Black for a day. See: *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane*, no. 106 (Nov 1970).

¹¹⁵ See letters printed in “Beautiful Letters,” *TBGFCF* 105, November 21, 1975, 27.

“Comics have *not* ‘always portrayed Blacks ... as rebels, bandits, lazy, villains, or idiots.’ Maybe the comics *you* have seen have done so, but there have been a lot of comics published through the years.”¹¹⁶ This answer attempted to disqualify the concerned writer’s viewpoint and excused the lack of characters as little more than his reading the wrong books. The Thompsons further excused any racism inherent within comic books as not racism, but ignorance:

We don’t really think there’s much operative bigotry in the writers and artists in NYC’s comics world – we think it’s mostly an overriding lack of familiarity with honest-to-goodness varieties of ethnic groups. If they ever really thought there was a thrust towards negativism towards a race in Marvel’ mags, you’d shortly see a clutch of *heroes* from that race to make up for the earlier fault. And they probably wouldn’t be any better done than the villains of the earlier batch ... %%[sic] The flaws in the stories you object to probably come more from simple inept writing than deliberate denigration of specific groups. %% Nor do we think that all comics readers (or even a sizeable number of comics readers) are so dimwitted as to accept a couple of slanted stories as an accurate view of a race. (Especially when the child is also viewing a vast number of TV shows with a variety of types in each racial/social groups. Gee, can you imagine the effect if, only watching COLUMBO shows, a child figured that every single rich family, famous TV star, and creative genius was harboring guilty secrets from this or that murder?) %% All of which is not to say that comics have done their part to promote equality. But we think most of the stereotyping is done out of ignorance ... Doesn’t make it a good thing – maybe it’s been more difficult to correct than deliberate maliciousness would be.¹¹⁷

This is one of the only instances where a staffer or frequent contributor for *The Buyer’s Guide* addressed race head-on in the 1970s. This quote perhaps encapsulates the overarching feeling within the industry at the time: They were not maliciously doing anything harmful; looking at race misses the point; and racism was not present.

¹¹⁶ Emphasis original to text. See: Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 105, November 21, 1975, 27.

¹¹⁷ This entire quote including percentage symbols is exactly as it appears in the original. Italicized words were originally underlined. See: Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 105, November 21, 1975, 27.

However, as scholar Martin Berger has argued in his book, *Seeing Through Race*, ignorance plays into racism in the form of white privilege. Berger interrogates the well-known photos of the modern Civil Rights Movement to open readers to an alternative understanding of not only the photos themselves, but of the producers and first-readers responsible for their popularity. Berger reads the images – the ignored actions within the photo, the manipulation of images by white newspaper editors – and notes the ways that Blacks used the white publications for short-term success in spreading news and obtaining recognition of struggle. Berger is also able to distinguish how white shame allowed liberal whites to believe they were aiding in advancing the civil rights movement, bestowing charity upon “victims” rather than power to equals. The result, as Berger shows, potentially hindered full civil and equal rights for African Americans. In a similar way to the northern liberal press of the 1960s and ‘70s, the Thompsons seem unable in 1975 to see that a lack of Black characters, or the production of the limited Black characters that did exist, should much matter to Black readers. Further, the production of Black characters in this particular form was not harmful, nor cause for concern to the Thompsons. For *The Buyer’s Guide*, (or at least for the Thompsons) as long as the industry did nothing with malicious intent, there was no need for concern. In short: Ignorance was bliss just as it had served the creators of the Steamboat character in the 1940s.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Notably, the contributors for *The Buyer’s Guide for Comic Fandom* made no reference and exhibited no evidence of direct influence from the Civil Rights Movement. Though the recent and ongoing Civil Rights Movement no doubt impacted the industry and artists’ use of race in comics in the late-60s and early-70s, when asked about the impact of the changing social and cultural era regarding race and gender in America, Tony Isabella replied, “I can’t recall any conversations about race or gender while I was working in the Marvel offices.” Tony Isabella, interview by author, August 2, 2016.

Months later Don Thompson would defend Marvel once again, writing “[Stan] Lee’s comics also are integrated: Negro characters appear frequently and the squad of soldiers who comprise the *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* comic book includes a Negro, a Jew and an Italian among other ethnic groups’ representatives.”¹¹⁹ The presence of a character was enough for Don.

Editor of *The Buyer’s Guide* Murray Bishoff was not completely oblivious to race, though. He mentioned in one of his articles that he has a collegiate sociology background, wrote a paper about stereotypes, and read Malcolm X’s *Autobiography* thereby suggesting a self-perceived qualified opinion to discuss racial topics. His eventual point in the piece was that some stereotypes are real, and for readers to take “a real good look” to understand not stereotypes, but rather the people themselves. He uses as his example a Black man shining shoes – though a stereotype, there were some Black men who did indeed shine shoes and therefore reality existed within a stereotype. He posited that “comics can really strike at stereotyping ... with the help of the comics industry we can eliminate [stereotypes] much faster.”¹²⁰ This suggests that Bishoff, too, was excusing comic industry behavior in its use of stereotypes within their characters, while acknowledging race as a social issue comics could engage with. This was also one of the only instances that Bishoff ever commented on race in his monthly column.

Reviews of comic books that utilized Black characters or explored topics of race were few and far between in the news as well. Murray Bishoff often mentioned the latest in comic news – books ending and coming, including *Black Panther*. “The Black Panther

¹¹⁹ Don Thompson, “Marvel Comics: Clean, Integrated,” *TBGFCF* 123, March 26, 1976, 27.

¹²⁰ Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 193, July 29, 1977, 44.

will survive in his own book, beginning with number one, in a totally revised version from Jack Kirby.”¹²¹ This sentence is in the middle of a paragraph about several other titles, signifying nothing special about *Black Panther* itself. The topic of race, the significance of a Black superhero with his own book, simply did not register as worthy to note in their editorials or discussion pages.

The same proved true for the *Black Lightning* series, DC Comics’ first attempt at a lead Black character. When *Black Lightning* was nearing its debut, Bishoff wrote of the upcoming comic book,

Black Lightning, DC’s first Black superhero, debuts in January after a long cautious developing period. Mike Gold [PR rep for DC Comics] told me DC wanted more than another stereotyped ethnic hero, and rescheduled *Black Lightning* until he met standards for uniqueness ... Mr. Gold noted ‘This is a risky time to start any new superhero’ because of a ‘very limited market,’ so DC will not bury us in ethnic heroes now that they’ve entered the field.¹²²

Besides showing a concern by the industry for strategic avenues of revenue, not only was a discussion of race left out of the column, assurance was provided that DC would not flood the market with too many “ethnic” characters, suggesting either an observed or presumed fear among readers.

The other key publication on comics during the 1970s, the *Comics Journal* wrote about the upcoming *Black Lightning* as “DC’s first major entry into the black costumed hero market.” It otherwise talks about the plot, not the race angle.¹²³ Once *Black Lightning* finally appeared, it received a scathing review in the *Comics Journal*. Gary Groth took creator and writer of *Black Lightning*, Tony Isabella, to task with: “The story

¹²¹ Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 139, July 16, 1976, 28.

¹²² Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 157, November 19, 1976, 22.

¹²³ “Newswatch,” *The New Nostalgia Journal* 30, 1976, 10, accessed February 22, 2016, LOC.

is just as insipid as it sounds,” he argued. “Only a burned out, over-the-hill hack of a scripter could have fashioned this story, which is redolent with imbecile dialog, pretentious grandiloquence, and portentous [sic] nonsense that means nothing.”¹²⁴ Groth is perturbed by the plot and lead character, perhaps unfairly so.¹²⁵ But nowhere in the review does Groth touch on race as part of his critique. He does not like the costume, for example, but makes no mention of the racial undertones suggested by the mask’s design.¹²⁶

After debut, *Black Lightning* got a short note in *The Buyer’s Guide* of high praise and reportedly good sales, though this report was from Isabella’s apparent admirers, the Thompsons, so their objectivity might be in question.¹²⁷ Otherwise, after 40 years in business the first Black superhero at DC Comics to have his own title went unnoted by the comic press. Likewise the progress of the single comic book issue, *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali*, was often excitably mentioned, while a discussion of race and the book’s significance were ignored.¹²⁸

By examining the pages of *The Buyer’s Guide* one notices an editorial staff of incredibly opinionated individuals, but rarely so on the issue of race. Though they did

¹²⁴ Gary Groth, “Black Lightning Strikes Out!,” *Comic Book Journal* 32, January 1977, 12, accessed February 22, 2016, LOC.

¹²⁵ Groth provides quotes from the first issue as examples of writing he finds so appalling, though the quotes used are not particularly alarming to this reader. Groth’s review almost reads as a somewhat vendetta against Isabella. See Gary Groth, “Black Lightning Strikes Out!,” *Comics Journal* 32, January 1977, 12, accessed February 22, 2016, LOC.

¹²⁶ For the lead male character to become the superhero Black Lightning, he put on an Afro-mask wig. See *Black Lightning*, no. 1 (April 1977).

¹²⁷ Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 167, January 28, 1977, 16.

¹²⁸ For comment example, see Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 197, August 26, 1977, 38.

not shy from chastising and questioning a company decision on raising prices or reducing titles, they rarely put that criticism toward the industry's exploration or use of race or racial topics. The few instances where the topic of race was discussed shows a fandom that assumed either the industry was doing a decent job in that regard or ignorance of any racism present. Race, though omnipresent in the American news of the 1970s with calls for Black Power and battles over school busing and Black unemployment, simply was not on comic fandom's mind to any significant extent.

Comic books in the early-1970s were being taken to a new level of writing, and new writers on the scene such as Tony Isabella would soon be making their own mark in the changing times. The turn, however, appears to be more of a strategic move on the part of comic industry to continue its means of survival rather than necessarily a conscious move toward making social statements about race. Further, those who made their livelihood on critiquing and expounding on the world of comics saw little need to explore or push the industry to move into race in any significant way. Readers' limited attempts to oppose any racism found in comics went ignored. The result would be a people's literature filled with one-dimensional, racialized characters created and produced without benefit of diverse opinions or experiences.

Neither the comic nor the mainstream press ever commented on black female characters, perhaps because both major companies proved inept at producing a long-lasting female lead of any race outside of Wonder Woman.¹²⁹ By 1975, Marvel's Stan Lee proclaimed, "I think the time has come for us to bring out a female heroine which will really catch on, totally different than Wonder Woman, and I have been developing

¹²⁹ For more on the early history of Wonder Woman, see: Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).

one of those.”¹³⁰ Books for women, according to Marvel, traditionally did not sell well and when they sold it was usually to boys who were self-conscious about buying a book they deemed for girls.¹³¹ Over the next five years of the Bronze Age, Stan and Marvel Comics would make an effort.¹³² It was during these years that Marvel’s *X-Men* added a regular Black female character to their group – Storm, a mutant meant to represent Africa.¹³³

According to longtime writer for *X-Men*, Chris Claremont, the concept of Storm originated with Dave Cockrum long before the series debuted with her. In it she had “a shorter cape and an Afro, black hair.” When asked why Storm “looked like a white woman dipped in brown paint” Chris Claremont responded that Cockrum “was trying to [originally draw her] with cat eyes ... he was trying to create someone whose features were not classically black or classically white.” Not only was Storm not created as a multi-dimensional Black female character, she was not even necessarily Black.¹³⁴ Her “cat eyes” suggest an animalization of the Black female. Further, Deborah Whaley notes that placing Storm, as well as other Black female characters such as Nubia and Vixen, as

¹³⁰ Stan Lee, transcribed by Murray Bishoff, “Speaker Man Stan!,” *TBGFCF* 81, May 1, 1975, 41-42.

¹³¹ Judy Klemesrud, “Features,” *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), February 2, 1980, accessed January 27, 2016, Factiva.

¹³² Darla Miller, “Heroines of the New Comics Have Character,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 22, 1979, accessed February 1, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

¹³³ There is a storyline within later issues of *X-Men* that posits Storm as born in the U.S.A. However, when the character originated in 1975 with *Giant Size X-Men #1*, Professor Xavier (for which the X-Men are named) traveled around the world to choose new X-Men to join his team. He brought back mutants from different continents and countries including Canada, the U.S., Japan, and others. From Africa he recruited Storm. In her origin at least, Storm was an African princess, not American. In both storylines she was raised in Africa. See *Giant Size X-Men*, no. 1 (May 1975).

¹³⁴ For quotes see: Chris Claremont, interview by Margaret O’Connell, “Chris Claremont talks about writing for a serialized format ...,” *Comic Book Journal* 50, October 1979, 50, accessed February 22, 2016, LOC.

ethnically African shows “that the ethnic and geographic origins of the characters act as launching pads for a continual process of ethnic extraction from Africa to uphold Occidental or Western conceptions of Africa.”¹³⁵

In 1979, Marvel published *Savage She-Hulk* which reportedly sold well and Marvel planned to introduce another new female title superhero, the Dazzler by 1980 (though it would not appear until 1981).¹³⁶ Neither book lasted beyond a few years, but their publication shows that Marvel had come to a new understanding concerning audiences for their books.

As to why Marvel was making a turn to female superheroes at the end of the ‘70s, Stan Lee responds, “We’ve always wanted to do books about females ... We’re probably the least chauvinistic outfit in the world. You ought to see all the female artists we employ and the women executives we have in high-level positions.”¹³⁷ Though the statement cannot be confirmed without access to Marvel’s human resource files, it at least suggests a company recognizing a potential market. The reason for the change in view, according to Lee is that “three times as many girls are reading comics as did 10 years ago.”¹³⁸ This shift, Lee assumed was because of “the women’s movement ... and with the idea that girls can do a lot more these days than just play with dolls while the boys are out woodworking.”¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels and Anime* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2016), 96.

¹³⁶ Judy Klemesrud, “Marvel Comics Group Publisher Stan Lee Reports the Savage She-Hulk ...,” *New York Times*, January 4, 1980, accessed January 27, 2016, Factiva.

¹³⁷ Judy Klemesrud, “Features,” *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), February 2, 1980, accessed January 27, 2016, Factiva.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Judy Klemesrud, “Features,” *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), February 2, 1980, accessed January 27, 2016, Factiva. See also Lee speaking to the influence of a women’s

Lee's comments suggest a few reasons as to why female superheroes were deemed unpopular and practically nonexistent in their own series. For one, both Marvel and DC Comics were in the business of selling comics in a frustrating market, and if it was believed that the audience was not present, then the company would not branch out. Though girls and women read comics, comic books geared towards women were simply assumed to not sell, or were indeed not selling well enough. The answer is unknown. At the time, the head of Marvel at least believed this true. Also, their understanding of the female audience and their numbers appears lacking. Lee tied any turn to comics for females as being somewhat new as he credited the women's liberation movement while ignoring pre-existing generations of readers or similar women's movements prior. Further, his acknowledgement of female readers seems shortsighted. Heidi MacDonald, editor of a website on comics, recently suggested that "If you look at comics promotions of the '40s, it's clear they were aimed at boys and girls ... This idea that girls don't read comics is purely an invention of the early direct sales market days of the late '70s to about 2000."¹⁴⁰ Girls were reading comics in the 1960s, at least for books like *Lois Lane*.¹⁴¹ And a survey by Marvel in the late-'70s showed 46% of readers were female.¹⁴² Marvel may have been making comics for boys and male college students, but boys had

liberation movement on comics: Darla Miller, "Heroines of the New Comics Have Character," *Chicago Tribune*, April 22, 1979, accessed February 1, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

¹⁴⁰ For quote from MacDonald, see: Michael Cavanaugh, "At Comic-Con 2015, Genders Could Draw Even," *Washington Post*, July 8, 2015.

¹⁴¹ Evidence of female readers include this quote on the changing of the times of Superman characters: "Lois Lane, following a series of emphatic protests from girl readers, has modernized her hair-do along Jackie Kennedy lines." See: Peter Bart, "Advertising: Superman Faces New Hurdles," *New York Times*, September 23, 1962, accessed January 28, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

¹⁴² Judy Klemesrud, "Features," *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), February 2, 1980, accessed January 27, 2016, Factiva.

not been the only ones reading them. It appears that the idea that girls were not into comics was an understood *expectation* and that this expectation by the industry changed in the late-70s and early-80s. It also suggests that turns toward these female readers was less about a conscious social change on the part of the industry, and more in response to a need for a “new” and potentially large and lucrative market. It was, as it had been for years, seemingly about survival for these companies.

The turn to female superheroes in the late-‘70s might also have had to do with the new generation in the drivers’ seats. Admits Claremont in reference to women readers: “We’re the only aspect of publishing that, seemingly as a matter of course, automatically writes off the largest segment of the book-buying public.”¹⁴³ A young but busy writer, Chris Claremont was willing to test and play with his female characters. His (and illustrator John Byrne’s) well-known storyline that explored the female X-Men character, Phoenix, is just one example.¹⁴⁴ As another, the *Village Voice* reported, “In 1978, Marvel’s Chris Claremont started inventing female antiheroes whose slide toward evil was telegraphed by their increasingly skimpy garments, and whose audience was big enough to sustain even more radical variations on the action/adventure comic.”¹⁴⁵

For its part, Marvel seemed more concerned than Claremont with a character’s look. Claremont battled with Marvel in changing the costume for one of the characters he wrote for, Ms. Marvel. Their argument showed one had to balance practicality with sex appeal. He explains, “if I were doing what [a female superhero is] doing ... I would

¹⁴³ Chris Claremont, interview by Kim Thompson, “Cog in the Wheel,” *The Comics Journal* 152, August 1992, 84, accessed February 22, 2016, LOC.

¹⁴⁴ *Uncanny X-Men*, nos. 101-108 (October 1976-December 1977).

¹⁴⁵ Carol Cooper, “Women Warriors: Bad Girls in Good Comics,” *Village Voice*, June 3, 1997, accessed January 13, 2016, ProQuest Historical Newspaper.

cover every square inch of my body ... 'Cause scraping bare skin on rocks can be very painful. But again, it's the aesthetic that we want to portray as attractive a physical image as we can."¹⁴⁶ Originally Ms. Marvel was drawn with boots over her calves, but nothing more covering her legs. Claremont provided her with new thigh-high boots. Claremont also replaced her outfit, meant to resemble Captain Marvel's, with a darker blue/black color and a lightning bolt down the front. Her blond hair was lengthened and her trademark scarf was tied around her waist. Her gloves were stretched past her elbows, but her top was now off the shoulders. The result was an outfit that revealed more shoulder, but less thigh.¹⁴⁷ Their argument was clear: Claremont wanted practicality; Marvel wanted to sell books.

Claremont was also known by the 1970s for what was termed the "'Claremont woman' ... a gorgeous, attractive, nonwhite – no, actually, any kind of woman who, at the drop of a hat, will machine-gun the hell out of anyone in her way."¹⁴⁸ Claremont acknowledged that he utilized female characters and was known (at Marvel, at least) as one who could be relied upon to include a female character and develop her.¹⁴⁹

That being noted, Claremont seemed oblivious to the comic reader's interpretation of sexuality or flirtatiousness found within his characters. One interviewer pointed it out to him, even gave examples by using the character of Storm, but Claremont

¹⁴⁶ Chris Claremont, interview by Margaret O'Connell, "Chris Claremont talks about writing for a serialized format ...," *Comic Book Journal* 50, October 1979, 57, accessed February 22, 2016, LOC.

¹⁴⁷ Covers available on *The Comic Book Database*: <http://comicbookdb.com/>. See: *Ms. Marvel*, nos. 18-22 (June 1978-February 1979).

¹⁴⁸ Chris Claremont, interview by Margaret O'Connell, "Chris Claremont talks about writing for a serialized format ...," *Comic Book Journal* 50, October 1979, 57, accessed February 22, 2016, LOC.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

dismissed sexuality in a female character if it was not what was intended by the writer.¹⁵⁰ He complains, “I do not understand, I think, the need, this imperative in readers, that the moment any character does anything remotely kind or reaching out to another character, that it is an instant sexual liaison, emotional liaison.”¹⁵¹ Claremont attempted to exert his control over the sexuality of his character as based on his own concept of what Black female sexuality should look like and how it should be interpreted. Like Marvel, Claremont resisted reinterpretation.

Meanwhile more females began entering the industry, though few if any were of color.¹⁵² Female writers such as Mary Jo Duffy began writing for *Power Man + Iron Fist* with issue #56 in 1978 and she would continue as writer for two and a half years.¹⁵³ At a NYC Comicon in 1976 the newly hired Jenette Kahn, the first female publisher for DC Comics, made “encouraging statements toward hiring more women writers and artists.”¹⁵⁴ But by 1980, there were still only four female characters with their own book and DC Comics claimed only one of those.¹⁵⁵ None were Black. For all the so-called influence of the women’s movement, the increase of influential women in the industry, and a survey showing a large female audience, neither company pushed far into the female arena.

¹⁵⁰ Chris Claremont, interview by Margaret O’Connell, “Chris Claremont talks about writing for a serialized format ...,” *Comic Book Journal* 50, October 1979, 60, accessed February 22, 2016, LOC.

¹⁵¹ Chris Claremont, interview by Margaret O’Connell, “Chris Claremont talks about writing for a serialized format ...,” *Comic Book Journal* 50, October 1979, 61, accessed February 22, 2016, LOC.

¹⁵² Tony Isabella, interview by author, August 2, 2016.

¹⁵³ Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 253, September 22, 1978, 49.

¹⁵⁴ Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 141, July 30, 1976, 42.

¹⁵⁵ Judy Klemesrud, “Features,” *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), February 2, 1980, accessed January 27, 2016, Factiva.

Whatever the priorities might have been for Marvel and DC Comics during this tumultuous time and industry, race, sex, and gender did not make the list. But this should not suggest that the artists did not have their own priorities and at least *some* influence. Chris Claremont has already been shown to exert his views concerning female characters at Marvel. Another of those artists in this industry was Tony Isabella. If “whoever tells the stories controls the culture,” then it is to the storyteller in particular that one should now turn.¹⁵⁶ And Tony was a storyteller.

¹⁵⁶ Ferenc Morton Szasz, *Atomic Comics*, 51.

Chapter Three: Her Men

The company may not have had a social agenda, but this was not true for all of the company's artists – writers and illustrators alike. For some, writing or drawing for a book was their moment to explore a character in a manner they had only dreamed of since childhood. For writers like Don McGregor or Tony Isabella, it meant an opportunity (as much as the company allowed) to assert one's personal ideals. Though Tony was just another white male working in the industry at the time, he wanted to see diversity in comics. In particular, Tony wanted Black audiences to see Black faces. Though he was not alone in that endeavor, Isabella still represents a rare individual in the industry in the 1970s. This was still an age of survival for comic book companies, but also an era for utilizing social topics such as race and sex as a means to explore a character. Unlike the companies he worked for, however, Tony had a socially liberal agenda and he created one of the most enduring Black American female comic book characters in the industry, Misty Knight. Though she would not be the only Black character from Tony making her debut, Misty would become one of the longest running and most utilized Black American female characters in comic books.

Tony Isabella influenced the comic book industry, limited though his influence might have been. While working for both of the major companies in the 1970s and writing for several different titles, Tony contributed to well more than 100 different books during the 1970s alone.¹⁵⁷ Tony brought about a new series for African American superhero Black Goliath. He also introduced DC Comics and its readers to Black Lightning, a comic book character portrayed (and poked fun at) in an early-nineties

¹⁵⁷ For a listing, visit: *The Comic Book Database*: <http://comicbookdb.com/>.

episode of *Saturday Night Live*. The character's comic book can be twice seen in the 2016 episodic drama on Netflix, *The Get Down*. Most recently, his character Misty Knight appears as a leading character in the Netflix drama, *Luke Cage*. Tony's characters continue to make their mark in American culture.

Tony does, too. In a 2011 documentary film on the history of Black superheroes, Tony's was one of the interviews included. Looking at a flyer for the 15th Annual East Coast Black Age of Comics Convention held in Philadelphia in May 2016, one notices photos of 21 special guests.¹⁵⁸ All of the individuals appear Black, but one – Tony.

However, the characters Tony created and wrote for complicate his progressive intentions. This chapter explores the creator of Misty Knight, Tony Isabella, and some of the additional characters under Tony's purview. By examining Isabella's products, one sees an over-reliance on blaxploitation film, which created racist caricatures of African American superheroes that will later be explored with the character of Misty Knight.

* * *

Roy Thomas, the celebrated writer and editor at Marvel Comics and one of Tony's heroes, gave Tony his first break.¹⁵⁹ Tony Isabella moved to New York and began working for Marvel in the fall of 1972, editing comic books that were reprinted for

¹⁵⁸ For the flyer, see: "Flyers," accessed August 24, 2016, <http://ecbacc.com/wordpress3/ecbacc-2016/flyers/>.

¹⁵⁹ Tony Isabella, interview by Jon Knutson, "Tony Isabella Interview," *Random Acts of Geekery* (Blog), July 14, 2005, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://randomactsofgeekery.blogspot.com/2005/07/tony-isabella-interview.html>. For Thomas being Isabella's hero, see: Tony Isabella, interview by JP, "Nerdlocker Interview: Tony Isabella," *Nerdlocker*, September 24, 2014, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://www.nerdlocker.com/comics/nerdlocker-interview-tony-isabella>.

British readers.¹⁶⁰ Born in Cleveland, Ohio on December 22, 1951, Tony connected with comics early.¹⁶¹ He read *Batman* and *Cosmo the Merry Martian*, like most readers not moving into Marvel titles until the 1960s.¹⁶² “I learned to read at a young age by looking at the words when adults read comic books to me. I wanted to read them on my own and bypass the adults.”¹⁶³

Tony was always a writer. An honors student, he graduated from St. Edward High School in Lakewood, Ohio. Tony attended John Carroll University before he dove into a career as a writer by working at a local newspaper, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. But he had begun writing comics by kindergarten, penciling scripts and creating his own characters.¹⁶⁴ He remembers of his childhood, “I couldn’t draw, so I ended up writing all the scripts for our own bimonthly comic book: *Marvel Madhouse* ... We used to send *Marvel Madhouse* to Stan Lee and get these friendly letters back from Flo Steinberg, Roy Thomas, and even Stan himself.”¹⁶⁵

Tony knew he wanted specifically to write comics by age 11, though he ultimately sought gainful experience and employment by writing via other channels

¹⁶⁰ Tony Isabella, interview by Kuljit Mithra, “Interview with Tony Isabella,” *Man Without Fear*, May 1997, accessed January 16, 2016, <http://www.manwithoutfear.com/daredevil-interviews/Isabella>.

¹⁶¹ Tony Isabella, interview by Jon Knutson, “Tony Isabella Interview,” *Random Acts of Geekery* (Blog), July 14, 2005, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://randomactsofgeekery.blogspot.com/2005/07/tony-isabella-interview.html>.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Tony Isabella, interview by JP, “Nerdlocker Interview: Tony Isabella,” *Nerdlocker*, September 24, 2014, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://www.nerdlocker.com/comics/nerdlocker-interview-tony-isabella>.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Tony Isabella, interview by Jon Knutson, “Tony Isabella Interview,” *Random Acts of Geekery* (Blog), July 14, 2005, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://randomactsofgeekery.blogspot.com/2005/07/tony-isabella-interview.html>.

during his early years.¹⁶⁶ He wrote for the school newspaper and radio station.¹⁶⁷ He kept close to his love of comics by writing into fanzines.¹⁶⁸ He remembers,

My first professional sales were to [both] *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* and *The Monster Times*. The first was a daily newspaper whose bias was for the rich and the powerful. The second was a tabloid newspaper whose bias was for the awesome and monstrous. I had much more of an affinity for the latter.¹⁶⁹

Working as a paid writer on both fronts, it was not long before he was ready to make an even bigger leap, leaving journalism and Ohio to follow a lifelong passion.

Tony was first hired as Assistant Editor at Marvel, working with (among others) the famous Stan Lee.¹⁷⁰ In the beginning, Isabella was largely a proofreader, particularly of the black and white issues, “but I also did cover copy and design when Roy was out of the office, as well as some rewriting when it was called for ... I worked on comics written by out-of-town writers and lots of reprint titles.”¹⁷¹

Within a year Tony was writing his own pieces. Working his way up to a cubicle that he shared with two others including his assistant at the time, Chris Claremont, Tony took whatever jobs he was brought, which tended to be horror comics.¹⁷² His first script for Marvel was for one of the stories in *Chamber of Chills* #5. Tony admits, “I may have

¹⁶⁶ Tony Isabella, interview by JP, “Nerdlocker Interview: Tony Isabella,” *Nerdlocker*, September 24, 2014, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://www.nerdlocker.com/comics/nerdlocker-interview-tony-isabella>.

¹⁶⁷ Tony Isabella, interview by Jon Knutson, “Tony Isabella Interview,” *Random Acts of Geekery* (Blog), July 14, 2005, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://randomactsofgeekery.blogspot.com/2005/07/tony-isabella-interview.html>.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ Tony Isabella, interview by JP, “Nerdlocker Interview: Tony Isabella,” *Nerdlocker*, September 24, 2014, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://www.nerdlocker.com/comics/nerdlocker-interview-tony-isabella>.

¹⁷⁰ Tony Isabella, interview by Jon Knutson, “Tony Isabella Interview,” *Random Acts of Geekery* (Blog), July 14, 2005, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://randomactsofgeekery.blogspot.com/2005/07/tony-isabella-interview.html>.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

written some earlier text pieces for the black-and-white magazines, but ‘Haunt [and Run]’ was my first comics story for Marvel.”¹⁷³ This issue was published July 1973. At the same time he also wrote one of the multi-stories in the second issue of *Dracula Lives* entitled, “The Terror that Stalked Castle Dracula” which was published August of 1973. Isabella is quoted, “Everyone was happy with my work on ‘Terror,’ so I started getting more assignments. It was an important story for me.”¹⁷⁴

Quickly Tony became a figure in comics (though not necessarily the most well-known) – invited to speak at conventions, signing autographs for fans.¹⁷⁵ It helped that he was apparently beloved by regular contributors for *The Buyer’s Guide*, Don and Maggie Thompson, who often dropped his name in their column (all three hailed from Ohio).¹⁷⁶

By 1974 Tony had hit his stride. Tony took over writing duties for *Ghost Rider* in spring of 1974 where he would remain for more than two years writing most of the

¹⁷³ Tony Isabella, interview by Jon Knutson, “Tony Isabella Interview,” *Random Acts of Geekery* (Blog), July 14, 2005, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://randomactsofgeekery.blogspot.com/2005/07/tony-isabella-interview.html>.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ For example of Tony and public, see: Martin Greim, “Crusader Comments,” *TBGFCF* 81, May 1, 1975, 26. A survey was conducted by the fanzine, *The Comic Reader* for readers’ favorite writers and illustrators; the results of which were reported in *The Buyer’s Guide*. Among the names listed for 1974 and 1975, neither Isabella nor Claremont were listed. Names included Neal Adams, Roy Thomas, Steve Englehart, Denny O’Neil, Len Wein, and perhaps notably Don McGregor who wrote for *Jungle Action* featuring the Black Panther during this time period. See: Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 123, March 26, 1976, 28.

¹⁷⁶ For examples, see Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 85, July 1, 1975, 73; See also: Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 119, February 27, 1976, 35; Also: Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 123, March 26, 1976, 28.

issues, nos. 6-19.¹⁷⁷ Then in 1975 Marvel wanted to develop a new series involving a super team, originally envisioned to include a Black character. Though it is unclear as to why Marvel ultimately chose to go in a different direction for the characters (sans the Black character), they did choose Isabella as head writer for the series, *The Champions*.¹⁷⁸ Tony wrote for several comic book issues throughout this same time period, but his work on these two series perhaps defined his oeuvre at Marvel and represented the beginning of his peak period while in New York.

Religious themes often found their way into Tony's work, though Tony stopped practicing Catholicism by his 20s.¹⁷⁹ The first issue of his series *Black Lightning* featured a dead Black teenager tied to a basketball goal evoking an image of Jesus hung on a cross.¹⁸⁰ Writing about Jefferson Pierce, his lead character for the *Black Lightning* series, Tony wrote, "Jeff Pierce is a man of faith. He has faith in Jesus, in himself, and in the potential of human beings ... He was a 'liberal Northern Baptist.' He was a man of faith without the bigotry that so often goes hand in hand with so-called Christians."¹⁸¹ Tony understood bigotry as amoral, but did not necessarily tie that in to religion. Tony also hinted at appearances of Jesus in his two-year arc writing for *Ghost Rider*, a story of a motorbike cowboy who helped people, but with powers given to him

¹⁷⁷ For more on his work on *Ghost Rider*, see: Tony Isabella, interview by Jon Knutson, "Tony Isabella Interview," *Random Acts of Geekery* (Blog), July 14, 2005, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://randomactsofgeekery.blogspot.com/2005/07/tony-isabella-interview.html>.

¹⁷⁸ Don and Maggie Thompson, "Beautiful Balloons," *TBGFCF* 79, April 1, 1975, 33.

¹⁷⁹ Tony Isabella, "Alter Ego #137," *Tony Isabella's Bloggy Thing*, January 24, 2016, accessed January 26, 2016, <http://tonyisabella.blogspot.com/2016/01/alter-ego-137.html>.

¹⁸⁰ *Black Lightning*, no. 1 (April 1977).

¹⁸¹ Tony Isabella, "Yet Another Black Lightning Interview," *Tony Isabella's Bloggy Thing*, June 23, 2012, accessed August 14, 2016, <http://tonyisabella.blogspot.com/search?q=%22black+lightning%22>.

by Satan. Tony wrote religious concepts into the series, but contends he kept them separate from his own religion. Speaking to his challenge of religious portrayal in *Ghost Rider* specifically, he wrote on his blog, “Diversity includes a broad spectrum of human beings. Comic books should represent that.”¹⁸²

Even when a writer oversaw a series, however, it was the company that had the last say. Isabella’s controversial use of the suggested-Jesus figure (referred to in the series as “a friend”) was ultimately not included in *Ghost Rider*, but pulled by editor Jim Shooter at the last moment. Shooter altered Isabella’s storyline, making the “friend” not Jesus, but Satan all along. Tony Isabella was furious. He felt he had spent significant time on the series “include[ing] ... more Christian concepts and images into the stories.”¹⁸³ Isabella’s final writing credit for *Ghost Rider* was with issue #19.

Concerning the altered storyline and that issue in particular, Isabella explains, “It was arrogant and insulting a move as any I have seen in my four decades in comics.”¹⁸⁴

Ultimately Isabella left Marvel, removing himself from both *The Champions* and *Ghost Rider* to be a writer and editor for DC Comics.¹⁸⁵ Though he asserts that he left for reasons that had nothing to do with *Ghost Rider*, he suggests, “I would have left anyway after Jim Shooter got through butchering what was supposed to be the culmination of a

¹⁸² Tony Isabella, “Alter Ego #137,” *Tony Isabella’s Bloggy Thing*, January 24, 2016, accessed January 26, 2016, <http://tonyisabella.blogspot.com/2016/01/alter-ego-137.html>.

¹⁸³ Tony Isabella, interview by Jon Knutson, “Tony Isabella Interview,” *Random Acts of Geekery* (Blog), July 14, 2005, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://randomactsofgeekery.blogspot.com/2005/07/tony-isabella-interview.html>.

¹⁸⁴ Tony Isabella, interview by Brad Hamlin, “Tony Isabella: An Interview from Mystery Island,” *Mystery Island*, November 2011, accessed January 20, 2016, <http://mysteryisland.net/tonyisabella>.

¹⁸⁵ Bishoff’s report from NYC ComicCon includes mention of Isabella on a panel for DC Comics. This is the first mention in the paper of Isabella working for DC Comics. See: Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 141, July 30, 1976, 42.

two-year storyline [for *Ghost Rider*].”¹⁸⁶ It perhaps helped that the new publisher, Jenette Kahn, at DC Comics was making changes in the company’s typical compensation policy to writers and for new creations. The same article that mentions Isabella’s new position at DC also mentions upcoming money changes expected for artists of DC Comics. With the hiring of Kahn at DC Comics, the article states,

writers [at DC] will receive extra money for original series concepts, and will receive additional money to develop those ideas. Plus the company will pay a reprint royalty to anyone whose work they reproduce in the future ... [DC Comics] also pays a merchandizing royalty to the artists and creators of non-comic book items, such as posters, toys, etc.¹⁸⁷

The new financial structure provided Isabella with an added monetary incentive to develop new, durable characters for DC over Marvel.

Regardless of the company he worked for, Isabella repeatedly stated that writing Black characters was important to him, and his work at Marvel leaves behind several examples.¹⁸⁸ Tony’s work for *Daredevil* included Black characters in the background.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ Tony Isabella, interview by Jon Knutson, “Tony Isabella Interview,” *Random Acts of Geekery* (Blog), July 14, 2005, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://randomactsofgeekery.blogspot.com/2005/07/tony-isabella-interview.html>.

¹⁸⁷ Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGF* 141, July 30, 1976, 42.

¹⁸⁸ Tony Isabella, interview with Jonathan Gayles, *White Scripts Black Supermen: Black Masculinities in Comic Books* (San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 2011), DVD; See also: Tony Isabella, “Yet Another Black Lightning Interview,” *Tony Isabella’s Bloggy Thing*, June 23, 2012, accessed April 30, 2016, <http://tonyisabella.blogspot.com/search?q=%22black+lightning%22>; See also, Tony Isabella, “Black Lightning and Misty Knight,” *Tony Isabella’s Bloggy Thing*, October 29, 2013, accessed Apr 30, 2016, <http://tonyisabella.blogspot.com/search?q=%22misty+knight%22>.

¹⁸⁹ For examples of a background character in books written by Isabella, see: *Daredevil*, no. 119 (March 1975): In the first panel, there are several people watching a scene above them with eyes wide, mouths open in shock. Each is dressed as people on a street might be: t-shirts, blouse, shirt & tie. All except for one man who is wearing a fedora, a loud reddish suit coat, and sunglasses. This particular man is black. The first gentlemen (white) says, “Will you look at that guy? He must be insane!” The black character responds, “Shoot! He ain’t nothin’ but a jive cop in long-johns!” The man to his left

Tony wrote for the *Power Man* (Luke Cage) series (Marvel Comics' first Black superhero with his own book) from October 1974-June 1975. It was there that he rewrote the concept for the Black Goliath character.¹⁹⁰ Black Goliath would soon get his own book in February 1976. Though it only ran for five issues through November 1976, the character is credited in the first issue as being "conceived" by Isabella. Tony only wrote the first one. Chris Claremont wrote the rest.

But Isabella is most famous for creating and writing for the character Black Lightning when DC Comics lured Tony away from Marvel, and they accepted his pitch to create a new Black character.¹⁹¹ The result was the first African American superhero to have his own book at DC Comics, the 1977 series *Black Lightning*.

When asked why he wanted to create *Black Lightning*, he explained, "The first black friends I ever made were comic fans. Very early on it struck me as odd that there weren't more comic characters that my friends could relate to. So while I was working at Marvel I worked on a number of their Black characters... *Black Lightning* was the process I was working toward."¹⁹²

responds with an extreme accent and as though English might not be his first language: "That 'Jive cop' – he save my brother last week, meester." For another background black character, see *The Champions*, no. 7 (August 1976) 23. See also *Ghost Rider*, no. 7 (August 1974), 3; *Ghost Rider*, no. 8 (October 1974), 27-31.

¹⁹⁰ According to the online source *Comicbook Database*, the character of Black Goliath first appeared in *Power Man* nos. 24 & 25 (April & June 1975 respectively) which were written by Tony Isabella. *Black Goliath* no. 1 appeared February 1976 and ran for five issues through Nov 1976. See *Comicbook Database*, accessed April 24, 2016, <http://comicbookdb.com/index.php>.

¹⁹¹ Tony Isabella, "Yet Another Black Lightning Interview," *Tony Isabella's Bloggy Thing*, June 23, 2012, accessed April 30, 2016, <http://tonyisabella.blogspot.com/search?q=%22black+lightning%22>.

¹⁹² Tony Isabella, interview with Emily Taylor, "Indy PopCon Artist Q&A: Illustrators, Animators and Writers Share Thoughts About Their Work, Diversity and Community,"

According to Isabella, as a writer and editor he was perceived as reliable and a multi-tasker, his assignments to books less about his use of race and more about his being a dependable, efficient, and good editor and writer.¹⁹³ However, Isabella acknowledges “another editor once remarked that I was good with black characters.”¹⁹⁴ The comment suggests his colleagues believed Isabella could be counted on to create and write for the type of Black character valued at DC Comics and Marvel.

Isabella certainly used the opportunity to insert race into comics. As editor, Tony assigned work to Black or female artists, though he also explains, “it never struck me as unusual [to do so]. Since I didn’t always have access to more established talents, I was trying to work with and develop new talents.”¹⁹⁵ Yet it was Tony who made these assignments and Tony who chose those particular minority artists for the responsibility. Some of the use of Black characters in the early ‘70s at Marvel was less about Marvel and more about Tony’s interest in adding diversity and seizing the opportunity to do so. Upon reflection, Isabella admits, “I don’t recall any conversations about race or gender while I was working in the Marvel offices.”¹⁹⁶ And Marvel never hired any Black female artists during this time period.¹⁹⁷

While Black Goliath was a character that Isabella molded into a new form, Black Lightning was Isabella’s character from the start, with little help from others. This is not necessarily unusual. Though pencillers, for example, can have some discretion, any input

Nuvo, June 24, 2015, accessed September 6, 2016, <http://www.nuvo.net/indianapolis/indy-popcon-artist-qanda/Content?oid=3276280>.

¹⁹³ Tony Isabella, interview by author, August 2, 2016.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ Tony Isabella, interview by author, August 2, 2016.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

on a character is sometimes dependent upon the writer, editor, issue, etc. Chris Claremont acknowledges the ways that a penciller or inker can alter a book, such as their ability and how long they have until deadline rushes them to finish a page.¹⁹⁸ In the case of Black Lightning, Isabella appreciated the work from new artist, Trevor Von Eeden, but admits that Black Lightning was created before either Tony's entry to DC Comics or Von Eeden ever got a crack at the character.¹⁹⁹ An established writer, Isabella perhaps also played to Von Eeden's strengths when having him work on the character.²⁰⁰ Though Von Eeden helped with the original costume, it was Tony, perhaps along with writer/editor Bob Rozakis, who came up with the Afro-mask.²⁰¹

Writing on his blog about Black Lightning, Isabella explained how the character came into fruition:

DC was planning to launch a book called Black Bomber, featuring a white racist who turned into a black super-hero without either of his identities being aware of the other. It was easily one of the most offensive concepts I'd ever seen...and DC had already bought two really awful scripts for this character. The company wanted me to rewrite those scripts and then continue writing the series. On reading the scripts and seeing the basketball uniform costume which had been designed for the Bomber, I declined. Indeed, I begged DC to write off those scripts and go with a new hero of my creation.

What convinced them was when I asked them if DC really wanted its first headline black super-hero to be a white racist? The company gave me three weeks to come up with something better. Which I did. Without any input from

¹⁹⁸ Chris Claremont, interview by Margaret O'Connell, "Chris Claremont talks about writing for a serialized format ...," *Comic Book Journal* 50, October 1979, 55, accessed February 22, 2016, LOC.

¹⁹⁹ Tony Isabella, interview by Brad Hamlin, "Tony Isabella: An Interview from Mystery Island," *Mystery Island*, November 2011, accessed January 20, 2016, <http://mysteryisland.net/tonyisabella>.

²⁰⁰ For various ways an artist might work with a writer see comments from editor and writer Len Wein: Murray Bishoff, "Now What?," *TBGFCF* 301, August 24, 1979, 35.

²⁰¹ Tony Isabella, interview by Brad Hamlin, "Tony Isabella: An Interview from Mystery Island," *Mystery Island*, November 2011, accessed January 20, 2016, <http://mysteryisland.net/tonyisabella>.

DC.²⁰²

For all his progressive intentions, however, a brief look at *Black Lightning* reveals Tony's understanding at the time of Black men was impaired by racism. In one of the opening scenes, Jefferson Pierce returns to his childhood school as a new teacher. When he notices someone in the halls passing drugs to a kid, Pierce slams the man against the wall and threatens him – an unexpected behavior from any American teacher, but apparently accepted as appropriate by the white principal watching the scene. The principal appears comforted by Pierce's showing of violence as if a violent temper is appropriate for at least this particular Black man. The fact that the principal makes no move to stop the encounter therefore suggests that either the principal expects Pierce to react this way, or expects all Black men to act this way.

Also, unlike many of his white counterparts in the world of comic book superheroes, Jefferson Pierce originally had no superpowers. Instead, he made a costume, altered his speech to the tough, “lower-class urban vernacular” appropriated from blaxploitation film, and put on an eye mask attached to an Afro in order to become Black Lightning.²⁰³ His superpower was “Blackness.” Looking at the character's identity transformation, Isabella believed that by code switching between dialects the character of Jefferson Pierce could become someone heroic rather than simply revered (the respected teacher). Though this particular form of masculinity, one that takes the

²⁰² Tony Isabella, “Yet Another Black Lightning Interview,” *Tony Isabella's Bloggy Thing*, June 23, 2012, accessed April 14, 2016, <http://tonyisabella.blogspot.com/search?q=%22black+lightning%22>.

²⁰³ Amy Ongiri uses this phrase in describing the type of characters created by author Chester Himes – characters later mimicked in blaxploitation film. See Amy Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 7.

law into his own hands, is certainly a typical superhero response, it is noticeably similar to the cultural construct of Black men that was widely employed in late-1960s and early-1970s American film – Tony’s inspiration.

This was not the first time Black comic characters were based on blaxploitation film. Comic books appropriated the popular cultural markers of the era found in blaxploitation film, just as Hollywood utilized these same indicators found in stories by writers such as Richard Wright and Chester Himes from the 1940s, 50s, and ‘60s.²⁰⁴ Luke Cage, the first Black superhero to have his own book at either Marvel or DC Comics, was also based on blaxploitation films as seen and understood by a white writer living and working in New York named Archie Goodwin.²⁰⁵ In discussing Luke Cage, Tony explained,

This was the Seventies, this was the era of *Blacula*, of *Foxy Brown*, of the Black-exploitation films. I used to go to them with friends like Arvell Jones and Keith Pollard, Ron Wilson who drew *Power-Man* when I was writing it. So I knew that there was among, you know, the Black audience there was interest in these films.²⁰⁶

Black interest, however, did not guarantee Black acceptance. Arvell describes his own experience seeing the films. He remembers:

Most of the blaxploitation movies showed black heroes from a stereotypical point of view. I would go to the movies and wonder what I was looking at. I didn't know a (lot of) blacks that acted like what I was seeing on the screen. Hey, I

²⁰⁴ Amy Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

²⁰⁵ See “Introduction” by Steve Englehart in: Archie Goodwin, Steve Englehart, George Tuska, and Billy Graham, *Marvel Masterworks Presents Luke Cage, Hero for Hire, Volume 1* (2015).

²⁰⁶ Tony Isabella, interview by Jonathan Gayles, *White Scripts Black Supermen: Black Masculinities in Comic Books* (San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 2011), DVD.

lived in Detroit, so I knew a lot of brothers. Yet what was on the screen wasn't representing us.²⁰⁷

In her book, *Spectacular Blackness*, Amy Ongiri indicates how blaxploitation film was inspired not only by detective stories of Black urban life, but fueled by the strategic use of visual performance found in the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement. Ongiri explains,

Black Power culture as epitomized by the Black Panther Party would valorize urban identity and street culture as primary expressions of Black authenticity and also resistance. The Black Panther Party's particular fascination with the visual rhetoric of urban culture and its ongoing involvement with African American vernacular style were very much in keeping with the version of African American culture being commodified by projects such as the film adaptation of [the 1970 film written by Chester Himes] *Cotton Comes to Harlem*.²⁰⁸

This commodification by Hollywood was similarly mimicked by the comic book industry with characters like Luke Cage and Black Lightning. Tony Isabella used cultural symbols he found in film meant to represent African American life to define his characters and story and to further his vision of additional Black characters in comics.

While utilizing this popularized blaxploitation Black male as his foundation, Tony created Black Lightning using his own concept of African American men: their concerns, ways of life, experiences, speech patterns, values, and recreation. In one scene a Black kid is killed and hung on a basketball hoop. The stereotype of Black man + basketball is hard to ignore and a remnant of the original concept by DC Comics to place their

²⁰⁷ Arvell Jones, interview with Vince Moore, "Standing On the Shoulders of Giants: Arvell Jones," *CBR (Comic Book Resources)*, February 22, 2006, accessed January 9, 2016, <http://www.cbr.com/standing-on-the-shoulders-of-giants-arvell-jones/>. Comic book writer Christopher Price makes similar statements about Luke Cage. See: Christopher Priest, interview by Zack Smith, "Priest on Black Panther, Pt. 1: 'Everyone Kind of Forgot Who Panther was,'" *Newsarama*, August 10, 2015, accessed August 3, 2016, <http://www.newsarama.com/25496-priest-looks-back-at-black-panther.html>.

²⁰⁸ Amy Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*, 12.

superhero in a basketball uniform. To read *Black Lightning* is to see white fantasy incarnate.

Isabella's early tenure at DC Comics lasted for one year. In that year he created, wrote, and oversaw the first ten issues of *Black Lightning*, but within months of the book's debut something went awry. It was reported, "Tony has been released at his request from his exclusive contract with DC, so his work may pop up from time to time elsewhere. However, he plans to stay with *Black Lightning*."²⁰⁹ Later, Bishoff wrote that Tony "missed his deadline" which required him to be replaced by another writer for issue no. 11.²¹⁰ A "Newswatch" reporter for *Comics Journal* simply wrote, "Tony Isabella couldn't keep up with the pressure of doing a bi-monthly book and has opened a comic book shop in Cleveland."²¹¹ This seems especially harsh given Tony had spent two years writing *two* bi-monthlies back at Marvel in addition to other titles, while at DC Comics his only monthly title was *Black Lightning*. Isabella's end at *Black Lightning* (as well as the series' demise with issue #11) also coincides with the DC Implosion when several series were discontinued, new titles cancelled, and many staffers and freelancers dismissed. Later *The Buyer's Guide* reported a financial disagreement between the two parties. The Thompsons, ever quick to support their friend, came to Tony's defense when his name was 'mistakenly' dropped from the *Black Lightning* title. "Jack Harris, editor of *Black Lightning*, wrote Tony a very nice note of apology, stating it was an accident and promising it would not happen again ... We (and Tony) are satisfied that it

²⁰⁹ Don and Maggie Thompson, "Beautiful Balloons," *TBGFCF* 179, April 22, 1977, 28.

²¹⁰ Murray Bishoff, "Now What?," *TBGFCF* 217, January 13, 1978, 56.

²¹¹ "Newswatch," *The New Nostalgia Journal* 30, 1976, 10, accessed February 22, 2016, LOC.

was an error and an honest error at that and the note from Harris was a sincere apology.”²¹²

DC Comics for its part was apparently dedicated to giving their new character a try even it felt the book itself had to be cancelled. Plans were made for the character to “make a guest appearance on the Super Friends television show in the fall at least once,” reported Bishoff.²¹³ After the *Black Lightning* series ended, DC Comics attempted to release unpublished stories of the character through other books.

After New York:

The Thompsons reported that Tony went back to Marvel, though it does not appear that much came of that return.²¹⁴ Isabella soon left New York and returned to his old stomping grounds in Ohio. He recently wrote of his departure,

My relationship with New York was brief, intense and ended badly. There was chaos in the comics industry. I was robbed and mugged in my ‘penthouse’ apartment. I had met the girl I would later marry [in Ohio] ... I missed her and I thought the relative calm of Ohio better suited me ... I didn’t so much move away from New York as escape from it.”²¹⁵

He remained in the comics industry by running a comic book store, and he reported to the Thompsons that he also “distributed comic books to other stores, and kept writing comics

²¹² Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 239, June 16, 1978, 26.

²¹³ Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 193, July 29, 1977, 40.

²¹⁴ Reporting see Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 227, March 24, 1978, 8. See also: Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 233, May 5, 1978, 49. For lack of books, see *The Comic Book Database*: <http://comicbookdb.com/>.

²¹⁵ Tony Isabella, “Looking for New York,” *Tony Isabella’s Bloggy Thing*, October 9, 2016.

whenever I had a chance.”²¹⁶ He bought Cosmic Comics, Inc., in Cleveland with a partner, and remained a freelance writer. His partner left the store before the year was out.²¹⁷

Ever vocal, Isabella continues in 2016 to review and discuss the comic book industry – he’s actively contributed to his own blog for years. Isabella would go on to have a tumultuous relationship with DC Comics, including a stint as head writer in a rebirth of the *Black Lightning* series in the mid-1990s. He observed on his blog, “The history of comic books in this country is largely a history of hardworking talented creators getting screwed over by publishers, editors and even their fellow creators. Yes, things have gotten and continue to get better for many current creators. But our history is what it is.”²¹⁸ Isabella more recently wrote the *Grim Ghost* in 2011, where he kept a large portion of the writing control.²¹⁹

* * *

In his book on the history of comic books, Bradford Wright referred to Isabella as “one of the few black writers working in the field at the time.”²²⁰ It is a reasonable error.

Looking at Tony’s work and words, it is undeniable he cared about providing Black readers superheroes that looked like them. Tony made use of Black characters – in both

²¹⁶ Tony Isabella, interview by Kuljit Mithra, “Interview with Tony Isabella,” *Man Without Fear*, May 1997, accessed January 16, 2016, <http://www.manwithoutfear.com/daredevil-interviews/Isabella>.

²¹⁷ Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 251, September 8, 1978, 30. For partnership ending, see: Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 263, December 1, 1978, 29.

²¹⁸ Tony Isabella, “How I Do It,” *Tony Isabella’s Bloggy Thing*, January 10, 2016, accessed January 20, 2016, <http://tonyisabella.blogspot.com/2016/01/how-i-do-it.html>.

²¹⁹ Tony Isabella, interview by Brad Hamlin, “Tony Isabella: An Interview from Mystery Island,” *Mystery Island*, November 2011, accessed January 20, 2016, <http://mysteryisland.net/tonyisabella>.

²²⁰ Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 249.

big and small ways – to intentionally increase the diversity found in comic books. But Tony, like others, was subject to the company he worked for. Any leverage Tony had as a writer was limited. He was further limited by both his and the companies' understanding of how best to represent Black women and men in comic books. But to understand the Black form utilized in the books, it is helpful to look at the characters themselves, the pages of the product. It is here that Misty Knight herself becomes most useful, and where we turn next.

Chapter Four: Herself

Misty Knight was created to mimic blaxploitation film, a moderately popular phase of the American film industry during the early-to-mid 1970's.²²¹ Complete with kung-fu skill, a popularized dialect of tough, street sass, and an Afro, Misty Knight provided a means for Tony Isabella to introduce an African American woman to comics. Her initial appearance became the basis for the character that Chris Claremont picked up eight months later for the series *Iron Fist*.²²² Misty Knight, unlike most other Black women in comics at the time, was both uniquely African American and soon to be utilized on a regular basis.²²³ She also provides an excellent example of a major comic book company's foray into race, sex, and gender. It would last for more than 40 years.

This chapter examines the initial appearances of Misty Knight between 1975-1977 to demonstrate the type of racialized representations developed by the comic book industry and its artists Tony Isabella and Chris Claremont. As one of the only Black female characters consistently utilized by the mainstream comic book industry, Misty Knight defined the African American female hero for comic readers in the 1970s and beyond.

* * *

²²¹ Tony Isabella, "Black Lightning and Misty Knight," *Tony Isabella's Bloggy Thing*, October 29, 2013, accessed April 30, 2016, <http://tonyisabella.blogspot.com/search?q=%22misty+knight%22>. For influence of blaxploitation film on American culture, see Stephane Dunn, *'Bad Bitches' and Sassy Supermamas*, 24.

²²² *Iron Fist*, no. 1 (Nov 1975).

²²³ Arguably the most popular Black female character utilized from this time, Storm, was also created in 1975. However, Storm was created as Kenyan. See: *Giant-Size X-Men*, no.1 (May 1975).

Don and Maggie Thompson playfully chastised Tony Isabella in their monthly column penning, “Memo to Tony Isabella ... pay some French student or teacher five bucks to check scripts where you have ... non-French ... We understand how it is for a simple Italian boy from Cleveland. We know the cosmopolitan world of multilingualism is not part of your existence.”²²⁴ The quote represents the only recorded mention of the comic book issue that contained Misty Knight’s debut in the industry’s periodicals of record that year. The character itself was unnoticed.

Misty was introduced in *Marvel Premiere* no. 21 in 1975.²²⁵ This particular comic series allowed Marvel to test the waters with new or past comic characters without necessarily starting a new series each time. If successful, Marvel might spin the character off to its own series. In one particular arc in the mid-70s, Marvel assigned several issues of *Marvel Premiere* for their newest creation, the Immortal Iron Fist, a blonde American white boy who was trained in the art of kung fu at a secret city. Having mastered the power of the “Iron Fist” he travels back to New York at the age of 19 to avenge the death of his parents.²²⁶

Marvel relied on several writers to tell this story. One of them was Tony Isabella. Tony wrote three of the issues, including *Marvel Premiere* no. 20 which mentions a female character’s roommate as being named Misty Knight. In the next issue Isabella devoted two pages to the character’s introduction.

²²⁴ Referring to *Marvel Premiere*, no. 20 (January 1975). See: Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 77, March 1, 1975, 30.

²²⁵ *Marvel Premiere*, no. 21 (March 1975).

²²⁶ *Marvel Premiere*, no. 15 (May 1974), found in Chris Claremont, John Byrne, *Iron Fist Epic Collection: The Fury of Iron Fist Vol. 1* (Salem, VA: R.R. Donnelley, Inc., 2015).

Tony provides two reasons as to why he created Misty Knight. As the series was written in the second-person, Misty afforded the Iron Fist with someone to speak to rather than prolong the continuous narrative written in the second-person style. Further, she supplied a “snarky partner” for the Iron Fist.²²⁷

Misty began to take shape in Tony’s mind upon a trip with friends (including Misty’s first illustrator, Arvell Jones) to see the film “Black Belt Jones.”²²⁸ Tony would later favorably review the movie and its stars in an issue of *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu*.²²⁹ “Gloria Hendry is simply sensational,” he wrote. “She’s the perfect partner to [lead character] Jim Kelly. She’s fast on the verbal comeback, foxy, and an outstanding Kung Fu artist.”²³⁰ Upon seeing the film Tony immediately had designs to put such a character opposite the Iron Fist.²³¹ However, Gloria was not alone. Tony explains:

when I plotted Misty’s first appearance, I was thinking of Pam Grier’s character from *Foxy Brown* and Grier’s physical appearance. I’m pretty sure that was in my plot. However, Arvell remembers that he was thinking of Hendry when he drew her. As both characters had the same smart-ass and tough attitude, I guess we can say there’s something of each character in Misty.²³²

Indeed, the initial image of Misty Knight is very similar to the appearance of Pam Grier found in promotional posters for the movie, *Coffy*.²³³

Movie inspiration was not the only thing driving Misty’s formation. Looking back, Isabella also believes that Misty’s personality traits might have derived somewhat

²²⁷ Quote from: Tony Isabella, interview by author, August 2, 2016; See also: Tony Isabella, “Black Lightning and Misty Knight,” *Tony Isabella’s Bloggy Thing*, October 29, 2013, accessed April 30, 2016,

<http://tonyisabella.blogspot.com/search?q=%22misty+knight%22>.

²²⁸ Tony Isabella, interview by author, August 2, 2016.

²²⁹ *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu*, no. 3 (August 1974).

²³⁰ *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu*, no. 3 (August 1974), 24.

²³¹ Tony Isabella, interview by author, August 2, 2016.

²³² Tony Isabella, interview by author, August 2, 2016.

²³³ Jack Hill, *Coffy*, MGM Studios, 1973.

from someone he once knew. At one point in his early life, before moving to New York, Tony dated a woman who was “funny and smart” and Black who he worked with at the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. He writes, “it’s quite possible there’s some of her in Misty as well.”²³⁴ The visual, however, was all blaxploitation inspiration – Grier and Hendry. “Even then, Grier was such an iconic movie figure that I wouldn’t have had to do more than mention her name for Arvell to know what I was looking for.”²³⁵

Isabella wrote most of his stories either late at night in the office or at his apartment in New York, and it was here, in the final days of 1974 that this African American female character would be conceived.²³⁶ The actual name, “Misty Knight” was long a favorite of Isabella’s, which he invented before moving to New York which suggests the name predated the character itself by more than two years.²³⁷ Writing for *Marvel Premiere* and introducing a new character gave Isabella the opportunity he needed to combine the name with a character. The name was introduced in *Marvel Premiere* no. 20.²³⁸

A few pages into *Marvel Premiere* no. 21, Iron Fist was drawn walking into the home of his new friends where he finds “seven slain assassins of the cult – but no sign of [his companions].” All the victims were men (though one is obscured), and all were drawn with bulging muscles. A voice rings out: “Hold it right there, Killer! ... Hai-Yaiiii!” A barefoot woman with an hourglass figure leaps across the panel. The Iron Fist describes the situation to the reader: “[you] find yourself ducking under a powerfully-

²³⁴ Tony Isabella, interview by author, August 2, 2016.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ *Marvel Premiere*, no. 20 (January 1975).

delivered flying dragon stamp.” He describes her skill: “Her ram’s-head blow and lightning kick are easily blocked. She is skilled ... but anger dulls the keen edge of experience.” When Iron Fist attempts “to reason” with Misty, it “leaves [him] vulnerable.” He then resorts to trick her so that she will listen to him. But when she sees he is vulnerable, she “kicks [him] in the head!” These panels denote that she is experienced, strong, and knows kung fu. She is therefore a well-trained fighter according to this expert – Iron Fist is known as “the living weapon.”²³⁹

Misty’s rhetoric suggests a tough, wisecracking woman:

Misty Knight: “Okay, Zorro!” Alluding to his mask, Misty has apparently knocked all of the other assassins out in the previous room, and is ready for attack.

Iron Fist responds that they have no reason to fight (calling her “Miss”).

Misty Knight: “Bull! You’re not dealing with some dumb street broad, Mister. This is Misty Knight – and nobody messes with her or hers!”²⁴⁰

Iron Fist does not appear to want to fight her. He ultimately trips her and pinches a nerve in her neck knocking her out. With the word “Yowww!” as she falls, this will be the last the reader hears from Misty in this issue.²⁴¹

As Misty Knight lies on the floor, Isabella writes for Iron Fist, “This woman fascinates you. You will have to learn more about her – after you have located your friends.” Iron Fist towers over her, squeezing his fist while he stares at her, both characters suggesting a moment of motionlessness – she is unconscious and he is frustrated that he cannot find his friends and does not know what to do.²⁴²

In these origin panels Misty Knight had large eyes, light brown skin, and wore her hair natural in an Afro though it is a small one. Her lips were full, but her nose was

²³⁹ *Marvel Premiere*, no. 21 (March 1975).

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² *Ibid.*

petite. Her breasts were drawn as round and full. Outside of her hair and skin color, she could perhaps pass as another ethnicity, yet her features were just enough to denote the concept of a Black woman in these frames. From the rear she appeared nude from the waist up aside from the stripe across her back; from the side she appeared to be wearing a bra; from the front the reader could see she was wearing a halter-top. No jewelry was visible outside of a single bracelet on each arm. The narrative for Iron Fist in the second person explained, “You are somewhat amazed to see that she is a woman. A beautiful woman, at that.”²⁴³

Misty was always in a fighting stance in these panels, prepared for battle. She flew at Iron Fist’s head, fist raised, foot perfectly set with the outside heel (the hardest part of one’s foot) aimed towards his head. She was prepared. Misty showed no mercy – not listening to his attempts to stop her, striking him again and again even when he was down.²⁴⁴ Yet, she was also taken out quickly (compared to similar fight scenes against male opponents) as though the hero could not be shown as beaten too long by a woman.²⁴⁵

Misty captivated Iron Fist as a skilled female fighter. The narrative explained, “The females [from where the Iron Fist was schooled] were not trained in the martial arts.” Also, Iron Fist decided she was “beautiful” before he necessarily saw her face, suggesting the fascination came from something other than her “beauty,” such as her race or body’s shape. Further, when Iron Fist later met “The Living Goddesses” in this issue,

²⁴³ *Marvel Premiere*, no. 21 (March 1975).

²⁴⁴ Actual quote reads, “she raises her foot for a second kick.” See: *Marvel Premiere*, no. 21 (March 1975).

²⁴⁵ *Marvel Premiere*, no. 21 (March 1975).

he was not struck in the slightest by their scantily clad bodies or their powers. He stated, “Goddesses do not particularly impress me.”

However, Misty was trying to seriously hurt him and she was obviously capable of such with seven men passed out (or dead) in another room. The Iron Fist noted, “Her fiery disposition has, unbelievably enough, shaken you. You almost stammer out your reply!”²⁴⁶ Though the fascination for Iron Fist most likely comes from a *female* kung fu artist, it is plausible that Iron Fist is also being presented as being captivated by her color as he is under duress and her skin tone is the only identifiable characteristic of Misty Knight that differentiates her from other characters in this issue.²⁴⁷

Her blackness certainly would have been important to Tony. However, race is more than color and her introduction served little purpose in the storyline other than to fascinate Iron Fist – no other racial angle was incorporated or explored. Her color and her character both created for Tony Isabella an opportunity to awaken the senses of the Iron Fist, and to spice up the pages for the reader.²⁴⁸ Tony had original designs for Misty to become a regular character in the series. Rather than a sexual partner, Tony saw her as a “‘big sister’ who gave [Iron Fist] crap but would always have his back.” He explains, “Had my schedule allowed me to remain on the series, that’s the Misty you would have seen.”²⁴⁹

In just two pages and in only twelve panels, Misty’s character was established: smart (“not ... some dumb street broad”), a comic (“killer,” “zorro”), protective (“nobody

²⁴⁶ *Marvel Premiere*, no. 21 (March 1975).

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ bell hooks describes white utilization of Black culture as “spice ... seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.” See bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 21.

²⁴⁹ Tony Isabella, interview by author, August 2, 2016.

messes with her or hers”), exotic (Black in a sea of white).²⁵⁰ She was sexual in that she was moderately clothed. She had very feminine features, not scarred or hard, which is somewhat surprising for someone who recently fought off seven large, trained men. Though the fighting sequence was most likely choreographed by Jones, the character and direction were Isabella’s.²⁵¹

Tony knew he would be on the series for at least three issues and had hoped to stay on further, but his workload proved too much. After *Marvel Premiere* #22 (which did not include Misty), Tony would turn his focus to other issues for Marvel and leave *Marvel Premiere* in someone else’s hand – Chris Claremont. Though Tony intended to write for Misty Knight had he continued working on the series, Chris did not make use of Tony’s new character for the remainder of the Iron Fist storyline within the *Marvel Premiere* series.²⁵² A spin-off, however, was long in the works. After many months of planning, the first issue of *Iron Fist* was published November 1975 – eight months after Misty’s debut.²⁵³ It too was written by Chris Claremont, and though Claremont would flesh out the character of Misty Knight in the months and issues ahead, it was the original Misty Knight, Tony’s initial creation, that Chris Claremont adopted for the new series.

²⁵⁰ Similarly, the origin story of the Batman with the killing of young Bruce Wayne’s parents is told in just 12 panels. Glen Weldon, *The Caped Crusade: Batman and the Rise of Nerd Culture* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 25.

²⁵¹ Tony Isabella, interview by author, August 2, 2016.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ An issue of *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu* advertised the upcoming *Iron Fist*, no. 1 to be written by Isabella (though it would not be) a full year before the actual publication, which suggests problems or a halt in publication. See *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu*, no. 4 (September 1974), 4. A one-page announcement of upcoming *Iron Fist* no. 1 can be found in the same issue on page 41. See announcement of one-month delay (though it would be a year delayed) in *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu*, no. 5 (Oct 1974), 4.

Claremont's work on Misty would little alter the character, though if there was still any doubt of the sexual possibilities with Misty, Claremont quickly put that doubt to rest.

The Assistant

In his early days at Marvel, Tony Isabella hired a young assistant editor by the name of Chris Claremont. Though others at Marvel were not yet convinced, Tony was confident in Claremont's ability and "knew he was the best choice for the job from the get-go."²⁵⁴ Claremont worked for Isabella for nearly a year by proofreading, editing, and writing while Isabella worked on the black and white comics.²⁵⁵ Though Tony does not recall ever giving any direction to Claremont about the Knight character, he is confident that Chris would have at least known Isabella's intent – "Iron Fist's partner and a sarcastic big sister."²⁵⁶

Claremont and artist John Byrne would take Misty Knight and run, making her a regular character in the new series *Iron Fist* which the two men worked on together. Though Isabella credits Claremont and Byrne for developing Misty Knight, the character they utilize is almost entirely based on Isabella's initial design. Chris worked on *Iron Fist* until 1978.²⁵⁷

Chris Claremont and John Byrne would soon be well known from working on *X-Men*, which would become by the 1980s the most popular comic book in the industry. Though by 1979 Claremont had at least made somewhat of a name for himself. In one of his reviews of Comicon, Murray Bishoff, editor of *The Buyer's Guide for Comic*

²⁵⁴ Tony Isabella, interview by author, August 2, 2016.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Murray Bishoff, "Now What?," *TBGF* 225, March 10, 1978, 8.

Fandom, mentions a writing panel at Comicon that included some of the bigger names in the industry such as Denny O’Neil and Lein Wein.²⁵⁸ Also among the panelists was Chris Claremont, which suggests Chris was considered among the more respected writers of the day. Sales of *X-Men* at that point were still relatively small, though it was already seeing a moderate uptick.²⁵⁹ Claremont’s fame and influence would only grow from there. In a 2014 national survey conducted by the website *Comic Book Resources* of the all-time greatest comic book artists and writers, Chris Claremont ranked sixth among writers.²⁶⁰ Stan Lee was fifth.

Born in England but living in America by the age of three, Chris grew up in New York.²⁶¹ Like Tony, he was a lover of science fiction. Unlike Tony, Claremont was also a struggling actor who got a job at Marvel after college.²⁶²

In the same month that Claremont began writing for *X-Men*, he would take over the writing from Tony for *Marvel Premiere* no. 23, finish the series, and immediately

²⁵⁸ Murray Bishoff, “Now What?,” *TBGFCF* 301, August 24, 1979, 35.

²⁵⁹ Though all reported sales numbers from the 1970s by *TBGFCF* are admittedly questionable, paid circulation for *X-Men* in 1975 was listed at 119,231. See: Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 135, June 18, 1976, 27; Sales for *X-Men* in 1978: 130,609. For sales in 1978, see: Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 231, April 21, 1978, 38; Figures in 1978 also reported as average paid circulation of 123,725 for *X-Men*. See: Don and Maggie Thompson, “Beautiful Balloons,” *TBGFCF* 235, May 19, 1978, 33. For comparison, the leading seller is listed here as *Spiderman* at 281,860 in 1978.

²⁶⁰ For rankings, see Brian Cronin, “2014 Top Comic Book Writers and Artists Master List,” *CBR*, December 27, 2014, accessed Jan 22, 2016, <http://goodcomics.comicbookresources.com/category/top-100-comic-book-writers-and-artists/>.

²⁶¹ Darren, “An Interview with Chris Claremont, Part 1 of V,” *The Movie Blog*, May 19, 2014, accessed March 23, 2016, <https://themovieblog.com/2014/05/19/an-interview-with-chris-claremont-part-i-of-v/>.

²⁶² Alec Foege, “The X-Men Files,” *New York Magazine*, circa 2000, accessed August 16, 2016, <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/features/3522/>.

follow it with *Iron Fist* no. 1. In response to a question about his female characters, Claremont described Misty as “probably the most normal person I’ve got.”²⁶³

Claremont put his own stamp on the character, but it was still Isabella’s Misty. Chris would add a bionic arm to “make her partially competitive with Iron Fist”²⁶⁴ Additionally, Claremont’s contribution was to replace the sibling component with a sexual one between Iron Fist (Danny) and Misty. Claremont understood Danny as a “fish out of water,” who would not view his relationship with Misty with the same racial baggage that may have hindered a white character that had been raised in America rather than the mythical land of K’un-Lun.²⁶⁵ The character of Misty Knight herself, however, Claremont largely left untouched. Claremont only acknowledged the sexual tension that Isabella and Jones perhaps inadvertently created within their origin panels.

In *Iron Fist* no. 1, Misty is introduced much as she was in her debut, but with a hit instead of a kick to Iron Fist’s face. Her facial features are only slightly modified. She is wearing make-up now – eye shadow and lipstick; her Afro is still there, but is fuller around the sides. Her nose is still small, but her eyes are elongated with eyeliner and mascara. Her clothing, however, is a complete change. Rather than jeans and a halter-top, Misty wears a long, one-piece pant and turtleneck top. She dons a long coat, boots that work their way up past her knees, and showcases a large “MK” on her belt buckle.

²⁶³ Chris Claremont, interview by Margaret O’Connell, “Chris Claremont talks about writing for a serialized format ...,” *Comic Book Journal* 50, October 1979, 63, accessed February 22, 2016, LOC.

²⁶⁴ Chris Claremont, interview by Margaret O’Connell, “Chris Claremont talks about writing for a serialized format ...,” *Comic Book Journal* 50, October 1979, 64, accessed February 22, 2016, LOC.

²⁶⁵ Bob Leeper, “Chris Claremont Interview (Part III),” *Nerdvanamedia*, March 4, 2016, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://nerdvanamedia.com/comics/chris-claremont-interview-part-iii-on-burroughs-bigelow-idris-elba-iron-fist-and-inhumans/109890/>.

She accessorizes with large hoop earrings instead of bracelets. She is also carrying weapons – a knife and a gun. Just as she was before, she is searching for her friend and business partner, Colleen Wing.

Her tough vernacular is the same – with a touch of blaxploitation common-speak as she invents a new nickname for Iron Fist in each panel: “hero ... tiger ... bright eyes” – are all written within a single page. This is reminiscent of Luke Cage – another mid-’70s character based on blaxploitation film who uses nicknames when talking with other characters. It is also a carryover from Tony’s introduction of Misty where she refers to the Iron Fist as “killer” and “Mister.” This time Misty explains to Iron Fist (and to the readers) that she is not only partners with Colleen Wing (as mentioned in *Marvel Premiere*), but is also “a private cop, specializing in finding people.”²⁶⁶

Hearing gunshots, Misty immediately draws her gun, moves toward the sound and kicks the door open, then runs with her gun pointing out and at the ready for whatever awaits her. Misty is tough, sure of herself, immediately heading towards action – just as Tony designed her. Her playfulness remains, as does her apparent passion for kicking. Her first word is Chiiii-ahh!!, evoking the kung fu scream that Tony wrote in her debut.²⁶⁷ Claremont continues to portray Misty as fearless, courageous, and protective of those closest to her. As she spends more time with Danny, he becomes part of that circle of protection and care.

By issue no. 15, Misty is forced to have a physical, and perhaps sexual relationship with a mob boss (with the sexually and racially suggestive name, Bushmaster) in order to infiltrate a crime ring thus making Misty’s likeness to a

²⁶⁶ *Iron Fist*, no. 1 (November 1975).

²⁶⁷ *Iron Fist*, no. 1 (November 1975).

blaxploitation female star near complete.²⁶⁸ In her book *Bad Bitches and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films*, Stephane Dunn explored the sexual and gender politics within the blaxploitation film craze of the 1970s, interrogating movies like *Coffy* to uncover the use of black women in film. In reading the movie *Coffy*, Dunn argued that the title character played by Pam Grier uses “pussy power” – connoting a woman’s use of sex to control men.²⁶⁹ In *Coffy*, Pam Grier’s character used sex as a trap, luring male victims to exert justice.²⁷⁰ Dunn further argues that the Black female character’s dominance is “undercut” as “the film blatantly positions [her] as a pornographic object even outside the prostitute role performance.”²⁷¹ Similar to this character, Misty uses her body and sex as a means to do her job. While *Coffy* does not seem afraid or bothered by the act itself, the character of Misty Knight in contrast is written and drawn as remorseful for what she is doing. Noticeably, no other characters in the *Iron Fist* series need to use their bodies sexually in order to infiltrate crime rings led by female (or male) mob bosses.

Misty is the only Black woman drawn in the series for the first fourteen of fifteen issues of *Iron Fist*. There are eleven other Black characters utilized in the entire initial series – two black bodies meeting in a crowd, a medic, a doctor, two cops, two villains, a mob boss, and an appearance by Luke Cage and another by Storm. In the final issue, Iron Fist fights the X-Men which includes Storm who is drawn in the group shot on the cover.

²⁶⁸ Misty is drawn as kissing the Black mob boss with a tear running down her cheek as she thinks to herself, “I’m not only inside Bushmaster’s organization, I’m closer to him than any human living ... But at what cost?” *Iron Fist*, no.15 (September 1977).

²⁶⁹ Stephane Dunn, *“Bad Bitches” and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 114-115.

²⁷⁰ Jack Hill, *Coffy*, MGM Studios, 1973.

²⁷¹ Stephane Dunn, *“Bad Bitches” and Sassy Supermamas*, 116.

Otherwise, Misty is the only Black woman to grace the cover. She does so twice – once as a victim and once as helping to control the carnage of a scene.

Misty’s prominence as one of the only Black female characters in the entire run of the series magnified her use as a character within the industry. For example, there are other characters besides Misty that say “gonna” rather than “going to” or “about to.” And some characters in *Iron Fist* were certainly written with richer, more exotic accents than Misty was characterized as having. But as the only African American female character, the words Misty uses represent not just her character, but serve as a stand-in for Black American women in comics. Changes in speech patterns may help differentiate the many white male characters and make them interesting, but one lone Black woman’s vernacular is defining.

With Claremont, Misty edges more toward heroism than before. She even rivals her blaxploitation origins. Dunn writes about Grier’s characters, “Coffy and Foxy Brown present the fantasy of a ghetto-smart black heroine who takes aggressive action against racist and sexist oppressors, yet her revenge is more about personal loss than liberation. She lacks legitimate resources of power.”²⁷² Unlike Coffy or Foxy, Misty Knight is a sideline character, but her new bionic arm makes her, at Claremont’s stated intent, more equal to Iron Fist with her possession of a *superpower*. Undeniably, the blatant racism and sexism in *Coffy*, such as the “pornographic treatment” of semi-nude women in female fight scenes, are not as explicitly expressed in these comic pages.²⁷³ However,

²⁷² Stephane Dunn, “*Bad Bitches*” and *Sassy Supermamas*, 108.

²⁷³ Dunn argues the unique portrayal in *Coffy* (and *Foxy Brown*) of “black female resistance and empowerment primarily through the pornographic treatment of [the] star.” See Stephane Dunn, “*Bad Bitches*” and *Sassy Supermamas*, 111.

oppression is omnipresent in all hero tales – superheroes by definition fight atrocity just as the character of Coffy does.

When given the opportunity to choose a Black female character to continually utilize as superhero, Marvel chose two: Misty and Storm.²⁷⁴ Their use of these characters demonstrates their choice and understanding on how best to portray a Black woman. Both characters were written and drawn for years by Chris Claremont and John Byrne, yet Storm never speaks in blaxploitation rhetoric. And as Deborah Whaley pointed out, Storm displayed Marvel's concepts of Africa.²⁷⁵ Storm therefore represented the African woman for Marvel.

Misty represented the Black American woman. Examining her origin and original use as a character, the reader understands the Black woman through Marvel's eyes. And for Marvel, Misty was defined by her hair, speech, and at times, an arm. In the issue of *Marvel Team-Up* no. 64 published December 1977, Spider-Man asks if he and Misty had ever met before. She responds that they had, and alludes to a scene in a comic book published more than five years earlier (and three years before Tony gave Misty her debut) when Spider-Man and a member of the Fantastic Four saved a Black woman with an Afro from being mugged at Christmas. She was a victim, making no attempt to strike back at her assailants. She makes no statement in blaxploitation style. This was clearly a case of Marvel appropriating a prior scene from a long ago book. Apparently for Marvel

²⁷⁴ It is perhaps noteworthy that the character Claire Temple was utilized in the early Luke Cage series. She was portrayed as a medical doctor without use of Blaxploitation speech. She was not a superhero, but a superhero's love interest. For first appearance, see *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire*, no. 2 (August 1972) available in Archie Goodwin, Steve Englehart, George Tuska, and Billy Graham, *Marvel Masterworks Presents Luke Cage, Hero for Hire, Volume 1* (2015).

²⁷⁵ See page 43 of this thesis for analysis by Whaley.

all one needed to locate Misty was to find a Black woman with an Afro – nothing else was required to define her.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁶ See *Marvel Team-Up*, no. 64 (December 1977) available in Chris Claremont, John Byrne, *Iron Fist Epic Collection: The Fury of Iron Fist Vol. 1* (Salem, VA: R.R. Donnelley, Inc., 2015). See also *Marvel Team-Up*, no. 1 (March 1972).

Epilogue:

For forty years Misty Knight has served as one of the principal tools utilized by comic book artists and Marvel Comics to represent African American women. Since her origin in 1975, Misty Knight has appeared in more than 300 comic books with more than 100 of those instances in the past ten years.²⁷⁷ One of her most recent appearances can be found in the *All-New Captain America* series. Rick Remender's use of the character demonstrates little had changed since the character's origin.²⁷⁸

In 2015 Rick Remender decided to make the longtime Black superhero Sam Wilson the new Captain America, replacing Steve Rogers who held the shield for the better part of 75 years. Remender also chose Misty Knight as a pseudo-sidekick to help Captain America on his mission and stay true to his side. Making Sam the new Captain America proved newsworthy, but utilizing Misty Knight was just another day at the office for Marvel. And though the Captain had changed, Misty had not. Her sass, kung-fu, and Afro remained intact just as they did in 1975.²⁷⁹

The second issue of *All-New Captain America* introduces to the series Misty Knight. In this issue, Sam Wilson finds himself falling through the roof into a dance club filled with criminals. The men within the club were fully clothed. One was in a suit. The drawings of women in these panels are difficult to make out, but it appears that some wore only panties while others were wearing off-the-shoulder outfits or tops with shoulder straps – all showing cleavage and all angled so that it is difficult to necessarily make out any body parts. Except for one: A character is introduced, completely covered

²⁷⁷ See: *The Comic Book Database*: <http://comicbookdb.com/>.

²⁷⁸ *All-New Captain America*, no. 2 (February 2015).

²⁷⁹ *Marvel Premiere*, no. 21 (March 1975).

head to toe in an outfit, however the way she is drawn makes it appear as though her breasts are actually hanging out of her shirt. The way the outfit is fitted tight against her, the two-toned colors denote exposed brown breasts with a hint of nipple. Therefore, though fully dressed she appears to perhaps be the most revealed of the group. This character is later unmasked to reveal Misty Knight and though she has been wearing a helmet over her head at the club to cover her face, her Afro is perfectly intact.²⁸⁰

When Misty took off her mask to reveal who she was, she said to Sam Wilson, “I just came to help, honey.” The choice of words along with her Afro help remind the reader of exactly who this character is – as though her blackness, the speech, and the Afro together make up Misty Knight. She called Sam “Captain Ungrateful” – the Misty Knight trait of being playful. Her portion of their dialogue, “I *was* undercover ... Don’t sweat it” – evokes, perhaps a stylized-’70s speak.

Though depicted with soft facial features (read: pretty) in the introduction of her character along with her “honey” line, Misty was drawn in each subsequent panel with hard features – a dark brown stone of a face. She had a furrowed, angry look to her. Her facial expressions make her appear cautious and perhaps bitter. Large lips remain, now with a larger nose, and an Afro that is at least two-times the size of her face, as though it is *the* identifying mark of Misty Knight and not to go unnoticed.²⁸¹

Rather than develop the comic into a more realistic depiction of African American female and male representation, Marvel utilizes Misty in this series for comic relief and to bolster their male characters. They use Sam Wilson to prop up Steve Rogers’s long tenure as the Captain. The result is a stunted growth of development for African

²⁸⁰ *All-New Captain America*, no. 2 (Feb 2015).

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Americans in comic books, and an audience with little to no understanding of Black American women or men.

In his book on Captain America, J. Richard Stevens notes that certain components of comic book characters stay the same. It is expected that comic book characters operate with some sense of continuity: Superman is recognizable by the ‘S’ on his chest, for example, while Captain America always carries his red, white, and blue shield. Stevens writes, “Through the years, Captain America’s views have changed with the times, but it is a central component of his myth that his character has not changed ... This seeming paradox fits perfectly into the language of comics, where continuity is continually updated to fit the needs of the serialized present.”²⁸²

Looking at Misty Knight’s character in the pages of comic books published in 2015, she seems frozen in ‘70s blaxploitation shtick. Her character is simultaneously what keeps her dated and what keeps her cool. And her body of work represents an industry that wrote decades of stories for American cultural consumption, defining African American women as they were understood by an American industry back in 1975.

²⁸² J. Richard Stevens, *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence*, 3-4.

Bibliography:

Primary Sources

Archives Consulted:

Library of Congress, Comic Book Collection, Serial and Government Publications Division

Virginia Commonwealth University, Comic Arts Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library

Comic Books:

All-New Captain America, no. 2 (February 2015).

Black Goliath, no. 1 (February 1976).

Black Lightning, no. 1 (April 1977).

Chamber of Chills, no. 5 (July 1973).

Dare Devil, no. 119 (March 1975).

Deadly Hands of Kung Fu, no. 3 (August 1974).

Deadly Hands of Kung Fu, no. 4 (September 1974).

Deadly Hands of Kung Fu, no. 5 (October 1974).

Ghost Rider, no. 7 (August 1974).

Ghost Rider, no. 8 (October 1974).

Giant Size X-Men, no. 1 (May 1975).

Lobo, no. 1 (December 1965).

Marvel Premiere, no. 21 (March 1975).

Marvel Team-Up, no. 1 (March 1972).

Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane, no. 106 (November 1970).

The Champions, no. 5 (April 1976).

The Champions, no. 7 (August 1976).

Wonder Woman, no. 178 (September/October 1968).

Film and Television:

Hill, Jack, dir. *Coffy*. MGM Studios, 1973. Accessed via Comcast On-Demand, 2015.

Luke Cage. 2016 on Netflix.

Interview:

Tony Isabella, interview by author, August 2, 2016.

Periodicals:

Afro-American (Baltimore)

Associated Press

Black Enterprise

Buyer's Guide for Comic Fandom (TBGFCE)

Chicago Daily Defender

Chicago Tribune

Comics Journal (also known as: *The New Nostalgia Journal*)
Crain's New York Business
Fortune
Globe and Mail (Canada)
New York Magazine
New York Times
Record (Hackensack, NJ)
Village Voice
Washington Post

Frequently Cited Online Sources

The Comic Book Database
<http://comicbookdb.com/>

Comichron
<http://www.comichron.com/>

Tony Isabella's Bloggy Thing
<http://tonyisabella.blogspot.com>

Isabella, Tony. "Black Lightning and Misty Knight." *Tony Isabella's Bloggy Thing*, October 29, 2013. Accessed April 30, 2016.
<http://tonyisabella.blogspot.com/search?q=%22misty+knight%22>.

Isabella, Tony. Interview by Brad Hamlin. "Tony Isabella: An Interview from Mystery Island." *Mystery Island*, November 2011. Accessed January 20, 2016.
<http://mysteryisland.net/tonyisabella>.

Isabella, Tony. Interview by Jon Knutson. "Tony Isabella Interview." *Random Acts of Geekery* (Blog), July 14, 2005. Accessed January 24, 2016.
<http://randomactsofgeekery.blogspot.com/2005/07/tony-isabella-interview.html>.

Isabella, Tony. Interview by JP. "Nerdlocker Interview: Tony Isabella." *Nerdlocker*, September 24, 2014. Accessed January 24, 2016.
<http://www.nerdlocker.com/comics/nerdlocker-interview-tony-isabella>.

Isabella, Tony. "Yet Another Black Lightning Interview," *Tony Isabella's Bloggy Thing*, June 23, 2012. Accessed April 30, 2016.
<http://tonyisabella.blogspot.com/search?q=%22black+lightning%22>.

Jones, Arvell. Interview with Vince Moore. "Standing On the Shoulders of Giants: Arvell Jones." *CBR (Comic Book Resources)*, February 22, 2006. Accessed January 9, 2016.
<http://www.cbr.com/standing-on-the-shoulders-of-giants-arvell-jones/>.

Smith, Zack. "Priest on Black Panther, Pt. 1: 'Everyone Kind of Forgot Who Panther was.'" *Newsarama*, August 10, 2015. Accessed August 3, 2016.
<http://www.newsarama.com/25496-priest-looks-back-at-black-panther.html>.

Secondary Sources

Blumberg, Arnold T. "The Night Gwen Stacy Died: The End of Innocence and the Birth of the Bronze Age." *Reconstruction* 3, no. 4 (Fall 2003). Accessed September 7, 2016.
<http://reconstruction.eserver.org/Issues/034/blumberg.htm>.

Brown, Jeffrey A. *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001.

Brown, Jeffrey A. *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011.

Carby, Hazel V. "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues." In *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, edited by Robert G. O'Meally, 471-483. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Claremont, Chris, and John Byrne. *Iron Fist Epic Collection: The Fury of Iron Fist, Vol. I*. Salem, VA: R.R. Donnelley, Inc., 2015.

Costello, Brannon. "Southern Super-Patriots and United States Nationalism: Race, Region, and Nation in *Captain America*." In *Comics and the US. South*, edited by Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted, 62-88. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2012.

Dunn, Stephane. "*Bad Bitches*" and *Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

Gayles, Jonathan. *White Scripts Black Supermen: Black Masculinities in Comic Books*. San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 2011, DVD.

Goodwin, Archie, Steve Englehart, George Tuska, and Billy Graham. *Marvel Masterworks Presents Luke Cage, Hero for Hire, Volume 1*. New York: Marvel, Inc, 2015.

hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992.

Jacobs, Will and Gerard Jones. *The Comic Book Heroes: From the Silver Age to the Present*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc, 1985.

Lepore, Jill. *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.
Marston, William Moulton. *Wonder Woman Archives*. Vol. 1. New York: DC Comics, 1998.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1994.

Nama, Adilifu. *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011.

Nyberg, Amy Kiste. *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.

Ongiri, Amy. *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2009.

Phillips, Nickie D. and Staci Strobl. *Comic Book Crime: Truth, Justice, and the American Way*. New York: New York University Press, 2013.

Reynolds, Richard. *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992.

Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994.

Steven, J. Richard. *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence: The Evolution of a National Icon*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015.

Szasz, Ferenc Morton. *Atomic Comics: Cartoonists Confront the Nuclear World*. Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2012.

Weldon, Glen. *The Caped Crusade: Batman and the Rise of Nerd Culture*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

Whaley, Deborah Elizabeth. *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels and Anime*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2016.

Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.