

RESEARCH

# Oh My Goddess: Anthropological Thoughts On the Representation of Marvel's Storm and the Legacy of Black Women in Comics

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This study presents a qualitative analysis on the representation of black women in comic books using a sociocultural approach to their production-release background. We study the X-Men mutant character Storm, whose path reinforces and questions the social roles these women enact. We state that the analysis of cultural assets aimed at entertainment, like comic books, helps us consider the relationship between gender and ethnicity in our society.

**Keywords:** Comic Books; Black Characters; Feminism; X-Men; Storm; Ethnicity; Gender; Representation

## Introduction

This study aims at outlining an analysis of the representation of black women in super hero comic books from the publisher Marvel Comics. As the object of study, we used Storm, the code name for the heroine Ororo Munroe, a black woman who is a central character in X-Men stories.

The researcher Iuri Andréas Reblin (2011) attributes the development of comic books to the sociocultural context that surrounds the plot and characters. Among comic narratives, those involving super heroes attract more attention because, according to Reblin, they are more than entertainment for children; they are "an expression of human life: society, values, religion, culture, behavior, beliefs, aspirations [...]" (Reblin 2011: 7).

Selma Regina Nunes Oliveira (2007) also explores the importance of comic books in this social context, stating that the development of a comic book corresponds to "a game of reinventing in which authors reappropriate representations to build an apparently new form of discourse, which, [...] establishes ways of being in the world." (Oliveira 2007: 141). Oliveira concludes that, even if comics artists look for traits that differentiate one character from the other, these representations fall into commonly-held male views of women that combine qualities such as docility, subservience, devotion, and fidelity to a male figure. Although Oliveira's assertion (2007) may be confirmed with a quick look at comics from different time periods, some characters break this rule.

It is important to highlight that, first of all, even if feminism brought benefits to women and reviewed their role in society, this situation did not necessarily include black

women. The hierarchy that the feminist movement tried to eradicate did not only exist between men and women, but also among races within the female gender.

As Lícia Maria de Lima Barbosa (2010) concludes, a black woman has never played the role of the oppressor. As a result, in this social structure, the white man oppresses the white woman, the black man and the black woman. Black men and women are oppressed by white men and women; as a consequence, black women are also oppressed by black men.

Concerning this topic, Barbosa (2010) emphasizes that the inclusion of black women's point of view in the feminist movement contributed to "criticize the racist, sexist, classist hegemony, so that it is possible to foresee and create a counter-hegemony" (Barbosa 2010: 2). These women have been developing their own interpretation in order to interrogate the social construction of the black American woman's thought and identity. According to Barbosa, this thought is based on five principles: the legacy of a life full of struggle and overcoming; oppression by matters of race, gender, and social class; the fight against stereotypes; their engagement as community leaders; and sexual politics.

Black feminist thought intends to offer a new way for women to see themselves, differently from the established social order. For Barbosa, "this is made based on black women's culture and traditions; so, the black feminist thought rearranges the existing awareness. It offers tools for enduring the subservience experienced by African American women" (Barbosa 2010: 4). However, this process can be suppressed by white man's power, as we can identify in the products that comprise media culture.

In this sense, this article discusses the concept of media culture as proposed by Douglas Kellner (2003) to understand how Storm is portrayed in comics as a representative

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black woman, taking into account various claims of black feminism. According to Kellner, the culture of images that explores the senses such as vision and hearing is capable of defining political thoughts, social behaviors, and even an individual's construction of identity, which acts seductively upon the public, leading to a sense of identification with the promoted ideological position.

### **Storm: Oh my goddess!**

Storm gained recognition for being the first black woman to be relevant in a comic book from a renowned publishing house. Storm appeared for the first time in the issue *Giant-Size X-Men #1* from 1975, along with a team composed of new mutant characters, the *New X-Men*. Marvel was aware of the fascination their comic books caused in the average, caucasian, middle-class American; now the idea was to include more diversity in the group and, consequently, attract more readers (and consumers) who could relate to the new characters while also making the stories more contemporary and attractive to their existing public.

Despite now being important characters for Marvel, the beginning of the *X-Men* was not successful. After 20 issues the comic book started to be released every two months due to its low sales numbers. This situation only changed after the release of the issue *Giant-Size*, which included the new characters Storm, Colossus, Nightcrawler, Banshee, Sunfire, Thunderbird and Wolverine. Each character had a different origin and presented a new cultural view that would be explored in the following issues.

The issue by author Len Wein and graphic artist Dave Crockrum showed an international team that got together with the objective of rescuing the original team that had disappeared during a mission.

It is important to highlight that it is common practice for comics, belonging or not to the super hero genre, to have their characters and plots remodeled in order to adapt to new editorial rules and keep their longevity in the market.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, with every new scriptwriter, some character and plot traits can be altered or realigned so that they fit the new approach. Since it is a product with the main goal of being consumed, the sales numbers will unequivocally determine the comics development; some characters may be given special focus, others may be passed over or, in extreme cases, a comic book may be cancelled. Storm was created in this context. So, even if her origin may be attributed to the sociocultural circumstances of the time, it is impossible to deny that economic implications were crucial to the creation of such a character.

According to Howe (2012), the creation of a multiethnic team of mutant heroes was associated with Marvel's remodeling, aimed at international markets. This decision was made by Marvel's president at the time, Al Landau, who envisioned market possibilities in European and Asian characters.

Oro Munroe was born in New York, the daughter of an American photojournalist and an African princess. When she was 6 months old, she moved with her family to Cairo, in Egypt, where her parents died 5 years later. With no family or money, Oro joined a group of children who

used to commit small thefts in order to survive under instructions of a "master", Achmed el-Gibar. Trained by Achmed, Oro became an extremely skilled thief and his most appreciated pupil.

Years later, the teenager Oro set off on a journey to the south of Africa. When crossing the Sahara Desert alone her powers started to reveal themselves. She can control the weather, including climate change, natural disasters, and even wind control that allows her to float. During her journey she met T'Challa, prince of the African nation Wakanda, for whom she felt a deep attraction. Nonetheless, her journey prevented them from being together.

After reaching the Serengeti plains, in Kenya, Oro found her ancestors' homeland. She belonged to a long ancestry of priestesses whose hair was white and eyes were blue. In this environment, she was welcomed by an ancient woman from the tribe who taught her about the responsibilities of her newly-acquired powers. With her abilities to control the weather, Oro brought rain to an arid area whose means of living depended on agriculture and hunting. So the tribes started adoring her as a goddess, which seriously affected the way she saw herself. Only when Oro was recruited to be part of the *X-Men* did she find out that, in reality, she was a mutant and not a goddess, and that there were others like her. At first she refused to take part in the team, but when she understood that her powers could help other people besides the African tribes, Oro was convinced that she should accept Xavier's proposal, and she became *Storm*.

From her creation up to the most recent editions, Storm has gone through several phases and has been one of the most recurring characters in the X universe, in comic books and other forms of media. She is also one of the most popular and loved characters by the *X-Men* readers.<sup>2</sup>

According to Oliveira (2007), the female characters then existing, such as Wonder Woman, Invisible Woman and Marvel Girl, have attributes that recur in the concept of the "good girl": she is a beauty, characterized by youth and lines that fit mainstream ideas, a caucasian woman, with an attractive body and an angelic face. Femininity and aesthetics are crucial elements in these women. Also, the feminine is represented in the code names the characters adopt: Woman and Girl.

Body image is also a limiting factor for these women. For Oliveira, the female characters "were beautiful and attractive, but they did not have sex appeal. They lack seduction and audacity typical in villains and they are full of prudence and naivety so common in good girls" (Oliveira 2007: 154). This characterization, according to Oliveira, is connected with the social image of women from the 1950s and 1960s - young, frivolous, beautiful and almost childish. However, the feminism based on the anti-racism movements promoted by students in the end of the 1960s and the sexual revolution in the 1970s resulted in a new demand for characters that corresponded to this new reality.

Consequently, multiethnicity, eroticism and physical strength are some of the traits that composed this representation. In this context the mutant Storm was created.



**Figure 1:** Storm in her first appearance, *Giant-Size X-Men* #1, 1975:14. Copyright © 1975 Marvel Comics.

In Storm's first appearance, a sexist and stereotypical appeal is noticeable that Barbosa (2010) uses to point out sexual politics as one of the bases for the black feminist movement: despite equally sharing the cover space with her team partners, Storm's breasts are exposed (see **Figure 1**).

The comic exploits Storm's sexuality on several occasions by insinuating the sexual act, showing her using seductive manners or even exposing her body in a way that illustrates Barbosa's argument (2010), but this representation is more connected to gender issues than racial ones. Oliveira (2007) demonstrates that female characters in comics have been displaying an exaggerated sexuality since the 1980s, reflecting the sociocultural changes from the previous decade. Storm forecasts this representation.

According to Oliveira, in spite of some changes regarding the acceptable feminine model, female super heroes were represented as "love dolls" in the 1960s and 1970s; their main goal was to attract teenage male readers' attention with the same concept used in glossy magazines from the period: the domestic heroine. In contrast, Storm refuses these values by rescuing Wonder Woman's amazonism that was freely demonstrated in European publications.

During her stay in the team, Storm becomes friends with Jean Grey. The clash between their two cultures leads us to an ethnocentric interpretation of their relationship. When Storm first arrives in New York, she is still used to her African tribe's behavior. For instance, she cannot understand why she is not allowed to swim naked in the institute's pool. Storm's relationship with Jean helps "civilize" her into acceptable social behavior. The discourse shapes her sexuality to the acceptable model in her new surroundings. Storm is obliged to leave her culture behind and undermine herself with the dominant culture habits in order to be accepted as a member of the group. However, this situation does not last long.

In the following decade, under the command of author Chris Claremont, who was in charge of the X-Men for 10 years and mentioned Storm as his favorite character, she underwent major changes. During a trip to Japan she met

the *ronin* Yukio, with whom she developed a close relationship. Under Yukio's influence, Storm revisited her own attitudes and ended up awakening her wildest side, up to then restrained due to the intensity of her powers. This change reflected in her appearance. Storm adopted a mohawk hairstyle and began wearing leather clothes.

Her change in appearance occurred during a period that Oliveira (2007) describes as one of the emergence of the beauty myth, that is represented by the image of the "slut". According to her, the slut was found in adult-focused publications, exploring sexuality within censorship's limits, but mixing characteristics of the typical villain and the typical heroine, abolishing the Manichean view that had been previously accepted.

Oliveira (2007) argues that Storm's gender and sexual identities are reflected in her haircut. The length of the character's hair reflects her sexuality. For Oliveira, in a stereotypical model, long hair represents femininity while short hair indicates masculinity. Seeing that, individuals who do not identify with these sexual or social behavioral conventions are made uncomfortable when they have to legitimize them. For this reason, Storm's Mohawk hairstyle during this period aroused suspicions of her sexuality - her relationship with Yukio also contributed to the suspicions. Claremont, on the other hand, states that Storm was going through a transitory phase of rediscovery that was visually expressed through her clothing and her hairstyle. Oliveira validates Claremont's view when he affirms that "haircuts that do not fit the fashion rules usually represent a rebellious attitude [...]" (Oliveira 2007: 165)

Neither Marvel nor Claremont made pronouncements to either deny or confirm the speculations around Storm's sexuality. This suspicion could demonstrate an ingrained thought of female subservience to the male figure in 1980s American society, after the feminist movement's achievements. Although women have reached more autonomy in the course 21<sup>st</sup> Century, society in the 80s was more patriarchal. Thereby, to present herself with appearance and attitudes that clashed with these

patriarchal standards, confused some readers already familiar with the social rules.

Barbosa (2010) raises the issue of the leadership of a black woman in her social group. Ororo distinguishes herself as a leader of great influence in several phases of her life. Early in Africa she was the leader of a group of children that accepted her and taught her how to steal. Later, with the manifestation of her powers, she was adored as a goddess in an area regarded as “underdeveloped”. When she joined the *X-Men* she was chosen as the leader of the new team soon after the first mission she participated in and of the teams that were formed afterwards. She conquered the leadership of the *Morlocks* in combat with Callisto, who became the group’s temporary leader when Storm was not present. When she married T’Challa, she became the queen of Wakanda and, along with her husband, she momentarily replaced Susan Storm and Reed Richards in the Fantastic Four command. Storm’s recurring leadership status contradicts the stereotype of subservience and the oppressive background experienced by a black woman, as Barbosa (2010) mentions. Except for the *Morlocks* and Wakanda, Storm leads groups comprised almost entirely of white men. In one occasion, she even won a battle against her partner Cyclops, one of the battles most celebrated by *X-Men* fans (see **Figure 2**).

Apart from the points so far raised, Storm’s relationships attract our attention too. In more than 40 years, she was romantically involved with Forge (of Indian background), Khan (alien), Wolverine (from Canada), Nightcrawler (from Germany) and more recently she married her childhood sweetheart T’Challa (from Wakanda). There were also rumors that she had been linked with Yukio (from Japan) and the *Morlocks*’ former leader, Callisto (unknown origin). It is interesting to notice that none of the men - or the women - represents the average American white man.

Amaro Xavier Braga Jr drew this conclusion when he mapped interracial couples in the Marvel universe. According to Braga, “with more than 60 years of history and 1,000 characters created, there have been only ten interracial couples involving the black identity (and the great majority occurred in the last two decades)” (Braga 2013: 16).

## Conclusions

We should consider that even if comic books are defined as media culture products and, as such, are intended to be sold and bought, Storm’s creation and development has been an editorial decision that has questioned some of the established rules in the way black female characters are represented.

These changes are related to a sociocultural context that, according to the mentioned authors, modified the social role played by women and Black people in the United States and other Western countries.

In spite of Storm having contributed to the deconstruction of several stereotypes concerning black women, the relationship between people from different ethnic groups has not been affected. According to the data Braga (2013) presents, there is a social restraint in American society that is difficult to ease. Even though she has been involved with white men, such as Wolverine, none of them were



**Figure 2:** The Uncanny X-men #201 cover (jan. 1986). Copyright © 1986 Marvel Comics.

American, which leads us to conclude that despite Marvel and the authors’ efforts to approach this topic in their stories such an inter-racial relationship is still a taboo.

Dependence and subservience to a man is not a characteristic in her relationships either. Storm subverts the typical portrayal of female figures in comics as Oliveira (2007) remarks. Apart from refusing the subservience imposed by men, she also has become an important representative in women’s emancipation - white or black. She occasionally has been in sexual relationships, but her core traits are not the expected docility and devotion. She is a leader who demonstrated maturity when she ended her relationship with T’Challa in order to follow her duties in the Serengeti plains and more recently she headed the Fantastic Four team with her husband.

Because they are a consumer product, comics have a social impact in many countries and cultures. The considerations presented here refer to a specific character in key moments of her journey. A critical analysis of comics, and of any cultural asset, is necessary because, as mentioned before, they are not free of ideologies. In fact, even if the representation of black women as strong, independent leaders is an improvement, Storm is subjected to commercial interests that, aimed at consumerism, may be inverted to please and attract readers.

Finally, we can affirm that black women’s identity has been defined by stereotypes along the years in mass

culture. Strength, mysticism, sexuality, and exotic and mysterious beauty are elements that comprise the stereotypical image and also characterize Storm. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that she carries traits that correspond to feminist ideals, such as equality between the sexes, womens' independence and a multidimensional approach to female characters.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Recently *DC Comics* experienced a reboot of the greater part of its publications named *The New 52*. This maneuver resulted in good sales figures that rose considerably in the first year. Influenced or not by its competitor, Marvel adopted a similar strategy for its titles named *Marvel Now*, running now for some months. Differently from *The New 52*, *Marvel Now* does not promote a restart in the stories, but a new start, including new contexts and characters.
- <sup>2</sup> Storm starred in animated cartoons *Pryde of the X-Men* (1989), *X-Men Animated Series* (1992), *X-Men Evolution* (2000), *Wolverine and the X-Men* (2008) and *Marvel Anime: X-Men* (2011). In the cinema she starred in *X-Men* (2002), *X2* (2003), *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009, with a deleted scene in the final cut), *X-Men: First Class* (2011) e *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014). Storm was also a videogame character in *X-Men Legends*, *X-Men Legends II*, *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance*, *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance 2*, among others.

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