

# Diveristy, Political Correctness and Social Justice in Contemporary Marvel Comics

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**SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU  
UČITELJSKI FAKULTET  
ODSJEK ZA UČITELJSKE STUDIJE**

**DOMAGOJ KOSTANJŠAK  
DIPLOMSKI RAD**

**DIVERSITY, POLITICAL  
CORRECTNESS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE  
IN CONTEMPORARY MARVEL  
COMICS**

**Zagreb, rujan 2018.**

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**UČITELJSKI FAKULTET  
ODSJEK ZA UČITELJSKE STUDIJE  
(Zagreb)**

**DIPLOMSKI RAD**

**Ime i prezime pristupnika: Domagoj Kostanjšak**

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and Social Justice in Contemporary Marvel Comics**

**MENTOR: doc. dr. sc. Krunoslav Mikulan**

**Zagreb, rujan 2018.**

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*Zahvaljujem se Marvelu na nadahnuću za pisanje ovog diplomskog rada te inspiraciji iz djetinjstva.*

*Veliko hvala mom mentoru doc. dr. sc. Krunoslavu Mikulanu na pomoći u izradi diplomskog rada. Također, duboko se zahvaljujem i profesorici Nadi Kujundžić na pruženoj podršci i produktivno utrošenom vremenu u razgovoru i istraživanju te bratu Juraju na brojnim idejama i raspravama.*

*Najveće hvala mojoj obitelji, a posebno roditeljima Majdi i Mariju na potpori tijekom mog cjelokupnog obrazovanja.*

## SAŽETAK

U ovom diplomskom radu prikazuje se utjecaj političke korektnosti, socijalne pravde i raznolikosti na Marvelove stripove suvremenog doba. Glavni dio rada podijeljen je na dva dijela: Analiza tradicionalnog i suvremenog prikaza manjina i žena u Marvelovim stripovima.

Prvi dio bavi se vremenskim razdobljem od osnutka industrije pa sve do 2011. godine koja se uzima kao početak velikih promjena na stripovskoj sceni. U tom dijelu analiziraju se stripovi prvog afroameričkog superjunaka Black Panthera te stripovi koji su se bavili prikazom prvih manjina u društvu (nazivani "mutantima") popularno zvanih kao X-Men.

Proučavaju se načini na koji je Marvel prikazao te likove i kakvu su ulogu isti imali u zajedničkom svijetu u kojem su stvoreni. Kako bi se detaljno analizirale njihove karakteristike i važnosti tih junaka pobliže se analiziraju neki od njihovih prvih, ali i kasnijih stripova. Također je u obzir uzeta i poruka koja je poslana čitateljima.

Na isti način ustrojen je se i drugi dio diplomskog rada koji se bavi suvremenim prikazom superheroja u Marvelovim stripovima. Kreće se od 2011. godine pa sve do danas te se analiziraju velike i iznenadne promjene koje su se dogodile na sceni te se objašnjava kakvu je ulogu u toj promjeni igrala politička korektnost, odnosno socijalna pravda. Analiziraju se stripovi Thora, Iron Mana i Americe Chavez te njihov odmak od ključnih i iskonskih vrijednosti s kojima je industrija procvatila.

**Ključne riječi: politička korektnost, socijalna pravda, raznolikost, Marvel, stripovi**

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis shows the effects of political correctness, social justice and diversity on contemporary Marvel comics. The main part of the work is divided into two parts: The analysis of the traditional and the contemporary presentation of minorities and women in Marvel comics.

The first part deals with the time of the inception of the industry to the year of 2011 which marked the beginning of big changes in the medium. Comic books like the Black Panther, the first African American superhero, and the X-Men, the first minorities (called “mutants”) were analyzed.

The ways Marvel presented those characters, as well as their roles in the shared Universe they were in, are studied. In order to fully analyze their characteristics and importance, some of the more prominent, both early and newer comic books, are looked at in depth. The message they sent to the reader is also taken into consideration. The second part of the thesis follows the same pattern. Comic books from the year of 2011 and up to the present day and all the sudden changes prompted by political correctness and social justice are analyzed.

The comic books studied are Thor, Iron Man and America Chavez.

**Key words: political correctness, social justice, diversity, Marvel, comics**

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

„To say that graphic novels, sequential art, comics, photo-novels, graphics, paperback comics novels (whatever name one wants to use) have become a major part of popular culture in the first part of the 21st century would be an understatement.“, says Robert G. Weiner in his *“Graphic Novels and Comics in Libraries and Archives”* (Weiner, 2010, p. 5). It is an appropriate statement, and one that definitely tackles the current state of the comic book industry and its market. Comic books quickly went from being a side-thing, a pastime or a hobby you were so embarrassed about, to a global sensation, a dominant medium, and nowadays even, a part of the so called “mainstream” among the young, and the old(er) alike.

In the contemporary society, we are seeing a huge expansion in graphic novel production – whether it is through digital content or the more traditional paperback approach (which is definitely in decline), comics have established themselves as a big part of our library, and of the academic world.

But, can comics actually be interpreted as some kind of art? Or even more so, can we say that comic books are literature? Many theorists might say that they are, in fact, not literature and would gladly reject this notion or this view. There are arguments for both sides of this coin. After all, comics are based on textual as well as visual components, they are often taught in literature classes, and you can sometimes even find them in some academic journals that are indeed devoted to literature. But to strictly call all comics art or literature would be a stretch. Still, disregarding the core values that a “simple” graphic novel has would also be plainly wrong. For example, how can you compare a comic book to a great work of literature? We can do it by dissecting it to smaller, simpler parts like “are comics well-written, do they have depth of characterization or moral seriousness or are they creative, original, well-structured” (Meskin, 2009, p. 220) and so on. The simple answer to most of these questions is – yes. When you analyze it like that, comics do share some similar values as other great works of art and literature. After all, there have been instances when comic books were even awarded for their ingenuity and quality. For instance, Moore’s *Watchmen* was named as one of the top 100 English-language novels since the founding of *The Times*, who also gave it that honor. Some, like Spiegelman’s *Maus*, even won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992.



On the other hand, much of the contemporary criticism of graphic novels has come from the media itself, mainly through newspapers. *The Guardian*, for instance, regularly covers comics in its review sections, similarly as *New York Times* does in its own. Aaron Meskin notes, in his own review of “comics as literature” that “But for the most part superhero comics are not especially rich in theme, characterization, language, or sophisticated plotting. I suspect it is this fact – that superhero comics (and perhaps, daily newspaper comics strips or “funnies”) do not generally possess much in the way of literary or artistic values” (Meskin, 2009, p. 222).

So it is difficult to categorize this medium as pure art or literature, but saying it is definitely not art, and definitely not literature would be wrong. Meskin concludes that comics are somewhere in-between – he calls them “hybrid art form that evolved from literature and a number of other art forms and media.” (Meskin, 2009, p. 219)

Comics as we know them did not become popular or important until the end of World War II. Even in the first years after the War, they were mostly viewed as pastime and cheap fun. Not to mention that their target audiences were only kids and teenagers, and adults never even considered buying one, not for themselves at least. That was during a time when comics were considered a “bad influence” or something that will ruin a child’s education. Little did they know what the future of that medium had in store for them. Somewhere around the 1940s and the 1950s things suddenly turned around – authors were starting to get free from those forced limits and made progress simply by trying to better themselves in terms of form, telling a story, drawing the best they can, and “spicing up” a young mind. It was not all planned, but comics became a huge influence in everything we do.

In our contemporary society we have found use for comic books outside of just fun and entertainment, especially with the increase in visual stimuli in everyday surroundings. Children can still be the focus of this medium but to a much higher extent than ever before. Graphic novels are even being included in library collections and school curricula more frequently as time passes (Ellis & Highsmith, 2002). This is mostly due to the rapid changes students are experiencing with receiving and interpreting new information. They are certainly constantly exposed to TV, personal computers and other kinds of gaming (and other) consoles. Because of that, it is

extremely more difficult for them to focus solely on one thing, which is exactly what their standard text only books are offering at the moment. Those are unfortunately becoming more obsolete as time passes since they do not appeal to children in any way. Robert G. Weiner says that comics, on the other hand, “are a good way for reluctant readers to ease into more advanced reading” (2010, p. 9).

Comics also have some “hidden” values which make them much more important than first meets the eye. Jeff McLaughlin even goes as far as to say that comic books, or graphic novels, have a philosophical approach. He notes that, as we read comics, we actually make a series of aesthetic and philosophical choices (McLaughlin, 2005). Granted, most of these are usually made completely subconsciously but they are still our own and very much real decisions that we face when reading a comic book. This, however, can be applied not only to comic books but also to other works of art and literature. Coincidentally, this also gives comics a deeper value, and raises a fairly good point about them being literature in the first place. From the very foundation of this medium – going from the language itself and how we understand it, comics are rife with philosophical questions.

One other important thing to note, however, is that comics are mostly full of supernatural things, parallel universes, superheroes and other beings that do not exist in real life. However, just by analyzing some of their features, one can easily discover that their narrative arcs, storylines, and even drawings can have deeper meanings. For example, DC’s *Crisis on Infinite Earths* focuses on there being multiple parallel universes, and as such, there is always more than just one iteration of a certain hero. Thus, superheroes like Superman, Batman or the Flash meet their “other” selves. While this might seem like an ordinary thing in comic books, it is, however, a big thing in real life. The theories of multiple realities do exist, and are still being researched but with no real breakthrough. The reader, in this case, is subconsciously or maybe even fully consciously, faced with a barrage of questions and possibilities. This can also help the reader understand that there can always be different ways of looking at the world, not only to question whether we live in the best one. The connection between this particular comic and the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz is as clear as it can be – a few hundred years before DC published its work, Leibniz was asking the same question: “Is the world that we live in with all its grief and pain the best one that God

could have created?” (McLaughlin, 2005, p. 12) He guessed “Yes” but also questioned the possible existence of other, different worlds, maybe more or less perfect than the one that we have. In this way, by actually second-guessing everything we know, we expand our minds, and comics help us achieve that.

The value of comic books ranges from pure entertainment, escape from the real world and also dealing with the troubles of the real world to difficult philosophical aspects. The times of “funnies” are long gone, and comics nowadays help reach new heights in numerous spheres of our society. Apart from the mentioned uses in education, entertainment and philosophy, comic books are also often used to connect people of different cultures, different races and religions. As a medium, comic books are not judgmental – there are heroes and villains of all kinds, ranging from white males to African American females. Differences do not exist in such a world of fantasies, and that is why they are appealing to everyone around the globe.

However, we live in a contemporary society that has been caught in a new storm called “political correctness” and it often associates itself with the term “social justice” in order to properly promote diversity. Diversity in comic books is not a new thing. It has been present since the early days of all the biggest graphic novel producers and the titans of this industry. However, as the tides shift, and language, culture and behavior are “attacked” by this new propaganda, comic books also suffer.

This work aims to shed some light onto the movement that has changed comic books radically in the past years, specifically Marvel comics. What started as a pure hearted attempt to show respect to the minorities has since become nothing more than a propaganda that has disregarded the founding principles of this medium in exchange for a bigger voice through comic book pages. Instead of fun, entertainment and other values, comic books are nowadays used to spread political stances, “justice”, and all that by sacrificing the core values of what people used to love and buy comics for. Political correctness is not inherently a bad thing, but when it is used in a wrong, forceful way, the end result cannot be good.

In order to analyze the effects of political correctness this paper will be divided into two main parts. The first one will analyze the traditional presentation of minorities and female characters in Marvel comics – the way they were introduced, when, and how,

what roles they had, etc. The second part will analyze the same things, only in contemporary time, starting with the important year of 2011, and leading up to Marvel's big event called *All New All Different Marvel* (2015) which saw the revolution truly begin under the influence of political correctness and social justice warriors up until today.

## **2 HISTORY OF MARVEL COMICS**

Marvel Comics is an American media and entertainment company that was born in the late 1930s and has since been regarded as one of the biggest comic book industries in the world. It has developed into a multidimensional, interconnected arena of adventure, intrigue, and action.

In the following chapter, I will give an in depth chronology of Marvel comics from the very creation of the company to its contemporary days according to Adam Bray's *Ultimate Marvel* (2017).

The whole Marvel Comics timeline can be divided into six different eras of its history, and each of those has a landmark event including a host of both heroic and villainous characters. The eras include: The Golden Age, The Atlas Age, The Marvel Age, The Bronze Age, The Modern Age and The Heroic Age. Marvel's latest endeavor has seen them shift into something commonly known as the *All New All Different Marvel*, which will also be at the core of this thesis.

Marvel Comics' original name was Timely Publications and it entered the burgeoning comic book market in 1939 (1939 – 1950). It was founded by Martin Goodman who started his career in publishing with a Western pulp magazine *Western Supernovel Magazine* in May 1933. In 1939, with comics starting to finally break to the scene, Goodman contracted with Funnies, Inc. and published a test comic book that simply called Marvel Comics #1. That was the beginning of the concept of interconnected, realistic heroes who were, at first, highly popular because of the Word War II. Their first superheroes were Carl Burgos' android superhero the Human Torch, and also Bill Everett's anti-hero Namor the Sub-Mariner. It was at that time that Goodman hired one of the true icons and legends of Marvel – Stanley Lieber, pseudonymously known

as “Stan Lee”, who was brought in to replace Timely Comics’ first real editor, writer-artist Joe Simon.

The company started to become a real hit, especially with the introduction of one of the first patriotically themed superheroes - Captain America in 1941. Goodman, seeing how much of a success this has brought him, decides to begin with regular comic book publishing and forms Timely Comics, Inc. It was not until years and years after that he formally adopted the name of Marvel Comics, but has since used it on the covers of his comic books. Examples include Marvel Mystery Comics in 1944 or All Surprise Comics in the winter of 1946/47, which were both labeled “A Marvel Magazine”. Some of those also marked the introduction of Timely’s first Super Hero team in 1946. They were called the All-Winners Squad and were comprised of Captain America, Bucky Barnes, the Human Torch, Miss America, Namor the Sub-Mariner, Toro, and Whizzer. Their first ever mission was to discover the identity of the mysterious Isbisa, who was trying to steal a nuclear bomb. At that time, most of the superheroes were fighting either the Nazis or the Japanese even before the United States entered World War II.

Soon afterwards the War ended, and superheroes suddenly started to fade in popularity. By the end of the decade, they were all but gone from the scene which was then filled by Westerns, spy, detective, and supernatural stories. The public started to question the effects comics may have had on impressionable young minds. Reacting to the sudden drop of interest, Goodman completely redefined his industry – apart from switching to the before mentioned genres, he began a new era of Marvel Comics in 1951 which was commonly known as the Atlas Age (1951 – 1959).

The name itself was taken from the logo which was, at that time, the globe. He was still publishing comics through various sources and companies. One of those was Kable News which continued to distribute his comics in 1952. Atlas’ superheroes were no longer those distinguished and distanced from others types of heroes. They reverted to the long standing, proven formula of popular trends that could have been seen on television, and in the movies. Those so called “human-scale heroes” included Two-Gun Kid, Combat Kelly, Jann of the Jungle and Milie the Model. In the mid-decade, somewhere around 1953 to mid-1954 Atlas tried to rekindle the nation’s love of

patriotic supermen amidst an anti-communist scare with the reintroduction of Namor, Human Torch and Captain America. Alas, it did not work, and the company was still on a great downfall, but Stan Lee, and artist Jack Kirby successfully turned the business around with their new kind of all-action, comic book experience and cheap production with passable quality.

Something that also ushered a new era in Marvel was the sudden resurgence of their number one rival company – DC Comics. DC, along with Marvel, is widely regarded as one of the big two publishing names in comic book industry. In 1956 when Marvel, or rather Atlas, was still very much struggling to get going again, DC Comics was booming with their own Silver Age of comics which saw the reintroduction of superhero titles that were a significant success on the market. If that was a battle, DC was certainly winning at that specific point in time.

Entering the 1960s superheroes were back in fashion again, largely due to DC's own achievements, and that year marked the end of Atlas Comics, and forth came Marvel Comics or the Marvel Age (1960 – 1969). Led by a bold new concept by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby which saw costumed champions with revolutionary human foibles enter the scene, Marvel was once more booming. The usual comics concept was pretty simple. It included a superhero fighting a supervillain, and eventually winning. Marvel, however, introduced the aspect of heroes arguing amongst each other which gave them a more relatable, human characteristic. Also it was the start of the creation of the Marvel Universe – a shared, consistent, interlinked place where these new and dynamic heroes and villains can live and interact. Finally, to challenge the new founded success of DC Comics' Batman, Superman, Flash, Green Lantern and other members of the team called the Justice League of America, Marvel followed suit with a household team of its own – The Avengers, Earth's Mightiest Heroes. The Avengers were meant to tackle and fight foes no single hero could withstand on his own. They debuted in 1963 with a conflict with the mischievous Loki, brother of Thor. The initial gathering was between Thor, Iron Man, Hulk, Ant-Man and the Wasp. These new comics were made to not only appeal to child audiences of the medium, but also to some older readers which broke the convention with some long established comic book archetypes of that time. Although outrageous to some extent, this tactic worked and Marvel was flying once more. By developing a reputation for focusing on

characterization and adult issues (holding grudges, domestic problems, real life situations) more than any other company before them, Marvel was starting to gather readers of all age. Soon the pantheon of their superheroes expanded, and characters like the Fantastic Four, Thor, the Hulk, Spider-Man, Iron Man, and Doctor Strange were introduced. By the end of that decade, Marvel became the predominant publisher of comic books in the United States, leaving even DC Comics behind them.

Although the Fantastic Four was the first of its kind when it comes to these new conventions in comic books, Marvel's groundbreaking comic was actually the introduction of The Amazing Spider-Man run. Having a young superhero in Peter Parker who had real life, mundane problems in the form of school, love and self-doubt was something with which many of their readers could identify. Naturally, Spidey comics were undoubtedly Marvel's most successful books at that time. The change in the approach that Marvel has made was later called a "superheroes in the real world" approach which also became the company's trademark ever since.

With the start of a new decade, Marvel also entered what is known as The Bronze Age (1970 – 1985), and it was chronologically the longest era so far in their history. Marvel started diversifying their offerings by creating genre-themed stars for was, Western, science fiction, kung fu, and especially horror fans. At first glance all of these before mentioned genres were, in many ways, incompatible and could barely fit into the well-established universe of superheroes. Nonetheless Marvel scrupulously included them in their shared continuity allowing the Avengers and the rest of their heroes to team up with most unlikely friends and foes. Some examples include the Avengers teaming up with some cowboy champions, and Spider-Man battling Dracula. Soon enough, Marvel was expanding into other areas and superheroes became the basis of it. In 1971 the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare seeing the influence Marvel had on people, approached the company, more specifically, approached Stan Lee, their editor-in-chief, and asked them to make a comic book about drug abuse, and the side effects it has. Lee agreed, and made a story which included Spider-Man explaining that using drugs is dangerous. The story was at first refused by the Comics Code Authority because it included the presence of narcotics, but Stan Lee published it anyway in May-July of 1971. It was a success and saw a decline in drug usage with the market reacting well to Lee's storyline. The Comics Code Authority later on

revised the code in the very same year so comics could be used again for that same cause.

In 1972 Martin Goodman retired, and after a short spell which saw his son Chip take the mantle, Stan Lee was appointed as main publisher and president of Marvel. It was somewhere around that time when Marvel started expanding into the areas of movie and licensed property tie-ins. Some of their characters soon became global sensations the likes of Hulk and Spider-Man emerging on television series. The mutant X-Men's popularity marked the beginning of Marvel's vast crossover events that included many titles at the same time. The first of many was *The Kree-Skrull War* in 1971/ 1972 which saw the combined forces of the Avengers, Inhumans, and the U.S. government take on the alien infiltration of the Skrulls. Proving to be a success, Marvel continued doing these kinds of events with *The Thanos War* (1973/1974), *The First Clone Saga* (1975), *The Korvac Saga* (1978), and many others.

The Bronze Age also saw the departure of Jack Kirby to work for rival DC Comics, but was announced back in Marvel during their first very own comic book convention Marvelcon in 1975. During those times Marvel was already printing in other countries but in 1976 they created a superhero specifically for the British market called Captain Britain who was "a British hero for British people". At the end of the decade Marvel's fortunes were reviving through something called direct-market distribution (selling through same comics-specialty stores instead of newsstands). When the 1980s hit Marvel saw many of their procedural ills cured by a new editor-in-chief Jim Shooter. His era marked a creative renaissance at the company with institutionalizing creator royalties, and launching new lines of publishing called *New Universe*. Even though that was a successful period for the company, it lost ground to DC Comics once again due to their critical sales victories with the publishing of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, total revamp of Superman, and the introduction of the Watchmen.

Following this, Marvel entered something that is referred to as the Modern Age (1986 – 1999). This new era was all about "mega-crossover events" and numerous cosmic threats. It was also a time when unlikely heroes were born. Following the footsteps of Batman's success, who was largely concerned as a darker, more serious character, Marvel started creating their own vigilante heroes such as the Punisher and the Wolverine. Some of the most prominent arcs of that time are *Thanos Quest* (1990) and



*The Infinity Gauntlet* (1991), *The Second Clone Saga* (1994-6), and *Onslaught* (1996). One other important thing that happened which actually shaped the Modern Age was Marvel Entertainment group being sold to New World Entertainment which then re-sold it to MacAndrews and Forbes in 1989. This change actually benefited Marvel in the grand scheme of things because in addition to launching new and innovative futuristic series of comics, they also started selling collectible, limited-series comics, and often featuring variant, gimmick covers, which resulted in a sales boom starting in the early 1990s and onward. Eventually they decided to go back to the old recipe which focused on its core strengths: great storytelling and gripping continuity-based adventures of their superheroes.

One of the reasons, however, for their struggles was the fact that numerous well-renowned artists and writers left Marvel to form their own company (later known as Image Comics). The group included seven big, household names such as Todd McFarlane (Now one of the most famous Image Comics artists, responsible for the birth and publication of *Spawn* series), Jim Lee (Worked on *X-Men* in Marvel), Rob Liefeld (*X-Force*), Marc Silvestri, and many more.

As we approached the late 1990s Marvel and its comics finally stood on firm ground in the financial aspect and established their own rating system, withdrawing from the Comics Code Authority all together. The uprising of contemporary media saw television, and cinema adopt some of the characters and make movie franchises based on them. The first ones were the *X-Men* and *Blade*, and delving more into the 21 century, we got *Spider-man*, which was an instant hit, much like its comic counterpart.

Finally, the Heroic Age started in Marvel's history. It opened in 2000, and is still ongoing. Marvel comics are still in that particular age, as they have been for almost two decades now. There are three main aspects to note in this turbulent era of superheroes: The first one is the birth of the *Ultimate Universe* – a more realistic, toned down, and darker/ gorier version the usually colorful scheme in Marvel. It was described by Marvel as a “continuity-lite” introductory version of their core heroes, and comics for older readers wanting a fresh and more mature take. Meanwhile, the main Marvel Universe or back then known as the *616 Universe* also took a darker tone, opting to make drastic changes to their characters, turning heroes to villains and vice

versa. At this point Marvel was stepping up their game with across-the-board destruction sometimes even on the cosmic scale which finally, resulted in the destruction (or rewriting) of the whole continuity before the whole Universe was gloriously reborn as the *All New All Different Marvel* in February of 2015, which is the second aspect of the Heroic Age.

The third aspect is the one concerning their rights and the start of Marvel's dominance of the contemporary media, especially the cinema. In 2009 Walt Disney Company acquired Marvel Entertainment in a 4 billion dollar deal which saw the company expand its universe and merge it with Disney's. In 2013 they began announcing some joint projects with ABC and Lucasfilm which saw Marvel get back to publishing the super popular Star Wars comics. The company has also seen the revamp of its graphic novel division which eventually established a bigger presence in the bookstore market. Some of the most prominent comics of that time include *World War Hulk* (2007), *Civil War* (2006-7), *Fear Itself* (2011) and *Avengers vs. X-Men* (2012).

Marvel Comics and DC Comics still remain the undisputed titans in the realm of comicbooks, and it is likely that they will still be at the very top in the years to come. Interestingly enough, in 2008 those two companies shared around 80 % of the whole market, proving their dominance to the world once more. Marvel has seen its industry take a slight dip in the last decade but has compensated that through the movie industry, enabling the cinematography to step into the golden age of comicbooks – a revolution led by Marvel. Nowadays, Stan Lee at the age of 95 is no longer present in the company as far a work relation goes but is still an honorable member and their “*Chariman Emeritus*”.

### **3 THE PRINCIPLES OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT**

Before diving into the wide range of aspects concerning political correctness and the aims of its movement, it is crucial to understand that political correctness is not just one thing, and it is especially not a simple concept with a simple history. Political

correctness is an ongoing debate, “complex, discontinuous, and protean phenomenon which changed radically, even over the past two decades” (Hughes, 2009, p. 3). This manifest or propaganda is now part of the contemporary lexicon, and part of the contemporary mind-set, and its effect can be seen in various different aspects of our society as a whole – issues concerning race, culture, both human and animal rights, different reforms, rules and laws.

If we look at the term itself, it first appeared back in 1917 in a Marxist-Leninist vocabulary following the Russian Revolution. Back then, it was mostly used only to describe adherence to the principles of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (the party line), which is the exact reason why Doris Lessing wrote an article for *The Times* in 1992 stating that *PC* (political correctness) is “the natural continuum of the party line. What we are seeing once again is a self-appointed group of vigilantes imposing their views on others. It is a heritage of communism, but they (people) don’t seem to see this.” (Lessing, 1992)

The term we know today began to form during the late 1970s and early 1980s but was still far from its contemporary definition. The start of the 1990s finally saw “political correctness” being used in teaching methods on university and college campuses in the United States which inevitably resulted in it soon being a wide spread phenomenon.

*Britannica* defines it as “term used to refer to language that seems intended to give the least amount of offense, especially when describing groups identified by external markers such as race, gender, culture, or sexual orientation. The concept has been discussed, disputed, criticized, and satirized by commentators from across the political spectrum. The term has often been used derisively to ridicule the notion that altering language usage can change the public’s perceptions and beliefs as well as influence outcomes.” (Roper, 2017)

Political correctness nowadays includes a sense of obligation, and also has an influence on what we regard as acceptable or appropriate to use. To put it in far simpler but nowhere near sufficient enough words – it is “saying or doing the right thing”, and by “right” I mean just and fair to everything and everyone. This definition brings us to

the next term that is in many ways connected to political correctness, and that is social justice.

The roots of political correctness and social justice can be found in different phases in Anglo-Saxon and global culture, but actually date far back in the past. According to Oziewicz the first notions of justice, or at least some form of the term we use in the contemporary day, goes back even to antiquity and then all the way to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. With some fine-tuning in various university campuses during the 1990s, social justice was born (Oziewicz, 2015). Because it is an ever-changing term, the same as political correctness, it is difficult to pinpoint one single definition.

The United Nations say that “social justice may be broadly understood as the fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth” or simply as “equal access to wealth, opportunities and privileges within a society.” (Social Justice Law and Legal Definition, 2016)

The clearest link between those two is actually “equality” but the biggest impact of this movement can be seen in language. Of all aspects of our society, language has been the one affected the most. What started as a new trend in the United States, turned into a far more serious movement that, some might argue, became a major public issue. A whole variety of different academics, intellectuals, journalists and public figures started participating in the debate that was taking the whole country by a storm. They all wanted to weigh in – is political correctness inherently a good or a bad thing? Their answer was far from being simple but its effects were clearly visible and language was their key target.

Linguistically speaking, it all started as an intervention to tone down the language by theoretically suppressing some of its “uglier” features. This was all done with the hopes of improving social relations but turned out to be a major impact in expanding key words in various segments of society’s lexical and speech codes. Language was not the only aspect affected but is definitely the one with the most changes. Ironically, political correctness at its core has actually less to do with politics or correctness than with different notions that will be further explained and discussed as we go down the line in this paper. According to Hughes (2009, p. 5):

“A whole new semantic environment has come into being, through creation, invention, cooption, borrowing, and publicity: a representative sample of this new world of words includes lokism, phallocratic, other, significant other, sex worker, multicultural, herstory, disadvantaged, substance abuse, fattist, Eurocentric, Afrocentric, demographics, issue, carbon footprint, glass ceiling, pink plateau, and first people, as well as code abbreviations like DWEM, PWA, HN, and neocon”

These new words were not simply just new words; they were invented coinages of language. Hughes (2009) even goes as far as to compare that newly found lexic to Orwell’s “1984” and the language that was used in that book. The terms Orwell used, e.g *thoughtcrime*, *joy-camp* and such, are all called “*Newspeak*”. The resemblance between the two are considerable, but not surprising, because although language is something we all have in common, and something that, at least in theory, belongs to everyone, it is mostly changed by a “selected anonymous few” (Hughes, 2009, p. 6).

It suffices to say that we have come a long way from those times when new language was met with resentment, and sudden change was not at all welcomed into the society. Sure, those “hard words”, as they were called in the sixteenth century needed a long time until they were completely accepted, and political correctness is going through a similar phase. The debate is still active, and the general acceptance of the new vocabulary is still not complete.

Clearly, political correctness could also be seen as a movement of sorts, which it definitely is, and as such it could be compared to some, more recent, “linguistic interventions” that prompted change in the society.

The thing that first comes to mind regarding recent movements is actually – the feminist agenda. If we go back a bit and see what kind of an intervention was prompted by those who supported feminism, we can find a connection to political correctness and the movement that is taking place as we speak. Feminists sought to alter or enlarge the stock of personal pronouns and to feminize agent nouns like policeman, chairman and such, in order to diminish the clear dominance of the male gender in the society.

Naturally, such proposal to reconstruct those words that included forms such as she or he were only successful in raising consciousness, but failed to do much more. Speaking long term – the movement remained mostly inefficient. The results were, as is the case with political correctness, mostly divided. While the (most of) women side of the spectrum supported the movement, the rest offered it nothing more than an acknowledgement for its good efforts as most of the newly promoted terms were disregarded and turned into mere satire.

Roger Scruton wrote in his book: “I resent his ideological intrusion and its insolent dealings with our mother (perhaps I should say ‘parent’) tongue,” (Scruton, 1990, p. 118). Of course, the “parent tongue” part was indeed a rather strong response to the attempt of changing the pronouns where they, many argue, needed no change. The same thing can be seen in the movement we are discussing. Nonetheless, it has to be said that feminists did manage to alter some of the language with terms such as *spokesperson* establishing themselves in the contemporary society up to this day.

The second movement which can, in some of its features, be compared to political correctness is a form of radical political discourse. We are talking about Communist regime, and it is fairly easy to see why these two would be regarded as similar. Just to make a slight sidetrack for a moment – Communism attempted to establish their own ideological discourse by means of new neologisms (proletariat), some semantic extensions (bourgeois) and by importing some co-opted words (imperialist, surplus) (Hughes, 2009). The evidence of that can still be seen in some of the remaining supporters of the regime – after all, they still call each other “comrade”, and instead of regular “workers”, they would use words such as “the collective” or “capital”. All of those are never used by other people, other than maybe, just like the case is with the words forced by the feminist propaganda, in satire.

Those two examples clearly show how political correctness is not just any movement; it is a phenomenon that is changing the sociolinguistic sphere of our society. Maybe it is not imposed by a higher force or a recognized authority, but just as Doris Lessing remarked earlier, it is a “self-appointed group of vigilantes that are imposing their views on others”, and it makes for an equally powerful storm.

It is also very important to note that political correctness does not derive from a specific ideology. Yes, it does focus on certain inequalities or disadvantaged people, and it also forms a censorship but at the end of the day, it is a movement based on a scream of a minority which Hughes (2009) proceeds to call “mysteriously unlocatable”. This “radical call to arms” is not the product of the people it tries to represent – the minorities, or the disadvantaged people who are supposedly in ache of better or rather, proper acknowledgement, (i.e. deaf people, the blind or the crippled) often times do not speak for themselves. Their warriors, their champions are the ones the contemporary society calls “Social Justice Warriors” or simply SJWs, which is a term that is already going through an inevitable transition all movements of its kind have gone through – from a powerful statement to derogatory, and even ridiculed meanings.

As we have already stated, political correctness has spread through the United States, and afterwards, the world, quite rapidly, with most of their “leaders” staying relatively unknown to the public eye. Indeed, there are various people in various companies that operate in different spheres of the society who support such an agenda, but they are silent and more difficult to identify than say those who supported feminism or black consciousness in their own time.

Just to give those words some perspective, Martin Luther King or Malcolm X were sophisticated, well-versed public speakers who fought for what they deemed was right, and their movement was based on rallying their supporters as well as starting a “fire in their hearts” so as to succeed in their attempts. The only fault in their campaign was the fact that they got massively outspoken, just as Susan Sontag or Germaine Greer were in their feminist movement. By contrast, it is difficult to name any SJWs who publicly promote the movement or the work they have done/ are doing in its name. All of this just adds to the well-established fact of political correctness being a far “mysterious agenda” (Hughes, 2009).

I stated that political correctness, ironically, when all is said and done, has little to do with either “politics” or “correctness”. It is a paradox, really, since the movement did not spread through a political agenda but rather through, as we also concluded earlier, university campuses and in free Western societies, with the focus being on American soil, the only country in the world that, at that time, had freedom of speech in their

constitutional right (rights enshrined in the First Amendment of the US Constitution). According to John K. Wilson (1995. p. 1):

“In 1991, a new phrase began to be heard across America. Political correctness, PC for short, quickly became one of the hottest terms in the country, spawning a flood of books, magazine articles, and editorials describing a reign of terror at American universities, led by radical students and faculty and supported by acquiescent administrators. Within the span of a few months, the media produced a barrage of articles, each a variation on a single theme: that leftist totalitarians had taken control of universities and were intimidating professors, censoring conservatives, politicizing curricula, and imposing a new "McCarthyism of the Left" on higher education.”

Wilson first heard about that new and radical phrase that was taking America by storm when he was a senior student at the University of Illinois in 1990. Still, although he did confirm that some leftist English professors encouraged the propaganda, and even going as far as to “ban Shakespeare” in schools, he also states that that was in no shape of form the reality that the media was trying to sell.

In one section of his book he notes:

“As I began to examine the stories about political correctness, I noticed a curious double standard. Whenever conservatives were criticized or a leftist expressed some extreme idea, the story quickly became another anecdote of political correctness. But when someone on the Left was censored - often with the approval of the same conservatives who complained about the PC police-nobody called it political correctness, and stories of this right-wing intolerance were never mentioned in articles and books on PC totalitarianism. My own experience made me question the existence of the "PC fascism" I had read about. And as I began to study the terrifying tales of leftist McCarthyism, I found that the truth was often the reverse of what the media reported. While some stories about PC are true and deplorable, the scale of censorship is nowhere near what most people think.” (Wilson J. K., 1995, p. 15)

So now we can see why the debate we mentioned earlier is still active. How would one judge political correctness as something bad or imposing when the core values of its supporters are, in fact, admirable? It is so difficult to answer such questions because we have trouble defining political correctness in the first place. Most people would say



something along the lines of “justice for all” or “not using offensive words”. Those people would not be wrong, per se, but the definitions mentioned merely scratch the surface.

Hughes (2009) states that the best way to explain PC is to not to give a classic verbal definition but to describe it by showing bad practices, show proper and improper behavior or by identifying role models. This is exactly what we are going to do – identify and analyze a role model in order to see what the epilogue, the end result according to PC supporters should look like.

Geoffrey Chaucer, famously known as the Father of English literature, is widely considered to be one of the greatest, if not the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages. In the General Prologue, which is the first part of his *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer gives us the portrayal of a medieval nobleman who serves as a role model to all with his ideal behavior and his tendencies never to say anything disrespectful to anyone, no matter what situation arises. The knight he mentions is described as: “He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght” (Hughes, 2009, p. 9) which would roughly, but clearly not poetically be translated as “He was a true perfect knight of noble character.”

One other example can be found in an exchange from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* where we see two very different knights having a conversation. One of them is portrayed as idiotic, and the other one is the model we are looking for. The story is set in Illyria, and the characters are discussing Puritans who wished to impose their strict religious regime on others. The idiotic knight shows his clear hatred towards a character named Malvolio (who is a suspected Puritan) by saying “I’d beat him like a dog”, but the other knight, the decent and the “politically correct” one shows tolerance by saying: “For being a Puritan? Thy exquisite reason, dear knight?” (Hughes, 2009, p. 9) Both examples show a clear act of respect, common decency, and above all, social justice. But to understand it more clearly, we have to depict what truly politically incorrect behavior looks like. In order to fully grasp that, below you can find a table that contains “inappropriate” behavior or inappropriate activities. Some are serious, some are mostly trivial and can usually be disregarded, but are, at the same time, crucial in our experiment.

**Table 1 Politically (in)correct activities (Hughes, 2009, p. 11)**

<b>Inappropriate activities</b>	<b>Politically incorrect</b>
Using ethnic slurs	✓
Religious swearing	X
Sexual swearing	?
Pedophilia	X
Rape	✓
Chauvinism	✓
Sexism	✓
Homophobia	✓
Pornography	?
Blasphemy	X
Racism	✓
Domestic violence	?
Cruelty to animals	✓
Smoking cigarettes	✓
Smoking cannabis	X
Wearing fur	✓
Eating veal	✓
Eating beef	X

Hughes (2010) remarks how inconsistent political correctness actually is. With all the allocations presented in multiple categories, ranging from swearing to heavy offenses punishable by law, only some would be categorized as politically incorrect. Even within the same category, using swearing as an example: ethnic slurs are deemed politically incorrect while religious ones generally are not. Sexual swearing is a “no man’s land” as some of those slurs such as: “bitch or cunt” qualify, while others like: “prick or bugger” do not. After all, some celebrities or people of high societal status have formed their whole careers on swearing, i.e. Gordon Ramsay, the world famous, “*swearing-all-the-time*” chef who is especially notorious for his language but is almost never actually confronted for it. Moving on to pornography, which was always a point of interest at one time or another in the contemporary society. Feminists regard it as

demeaning to women while most males simply do not. Blasphemy is another category more discussed than not. Strangely enough, both religious swearing and blasphemy are not considered politically incorrect. A recent survey in that field showed that the name of Jesus was familiar to the majority of British children, but only as a swearword, and recent books or shows that were seen to satirize the life of Jesus did provoke some protests, but not banning. An appeal was given against *Jerry Springer: The Opera* (2005) but the Law Lords ruled the appeal “does not raise an arguable point of law of general public importance” (Hughes, 2009)

It is understandable that some of those depicted categories are gruesome and should be punishable, let alone be politically incorrect, but there are some, like pedophilia, that are ruled out of the category, and quite extraordinarily so. Still, being politically correct does not always mean it is the same as being according to the law. Some of those inappropriate activities are, as was noted earlier, illegal, and some are merely bad manners. For instance, political correctness condemns both smoking in prohibited areas as well as farting in public, although one can be punishable and the other not. According to Hughes (2009, p. 12):

“Political correctness occupies a behavioral space between the two. As has been mentioned, it inculcates a sense of obligation to conform in some areas (such as chauvinism or wearing fur) which, some would argue, should be matters of choice. This creates problems in a free society. At the same time, no one is obliged to be politically correct.”

In its very essence, political correctness is based on their own vision on how society should be run, and how people should behave towards each other. The primary goal is, as was mentioned, that of equality but while we thrive towards that “we are all as one” or “saying NO to racism” assumption, the contemporary society is, now more than ever, made up of individuals and groups, and those groups have different histories, manners, cultures and behavior. Some developed countries such as the United States and the Great Britain, are essentially multicultural. Some, as Japan for example, are not. Promoting things like the “freedom of expression and thought” while robbing people of exactly that is contradictory, and is why political correctness is essentially a “suicide squad”. According to Charlton (2015, p. 7):

“So, political correctness is the ruling ideology of the West, and it is everywhere, so it cannot be attacked or overthrown without attacking and overthrowing pretty much everything. Political correctness is therefore de facto irrefutable, immovable, expansive in tendency... and yet, of course, as we all recognize, PC is self-destructing: achievement of its aims is common-sensically incompatible with its own survival.”

To conclude, we have seen political correctness manifest itself in almost every aspect of our society – from politics to language, through taboos to censorship, through behavior to law. We tried defining it to the best of our capabilities, but the simple truth is that there is no certain definition. One is not possible, so we sought to find it through examples of what is politically correct and, in turn, what is not. But for the most part, political correctness is an “attack” on language – a movement that seeks to downplay engrained differences and exclusivity, and to discourage judgmental attitudes and offensive language. Still, for all the nobility in its cause, it is still raising some serious methodological problems in semantic engineering. It does focus on certain *paroles* instead of the whole linguistic system in an attempt to establish a new polite public discourse but does it go too far? Has it at all succeeded in its attempt and do people use that language and take it seriously? Will PC prevail or is it just going to be one of those “trends” that start high only to fall flat on its face and turn into satires of old? Only time will tell.

#### **4 TRADITIONAL PRESENTATION OF MINORITIES AND WOMEN IN MARVEL COMICS**

The comic book industry has always prided itself on the fact that they were the medium most open to change, most open to accepting everyone no matter who they were, where they came from, or the way they looked. Comics were above any other mainstream media because they were always considered as some kind of a vanguard of progressiveness. When books, and other literature or biggest blockbuster movies and television shows failed to demonstrate diversity in such a magnitude, comics already had an answer.

DC comics had characters like *Oracle*, a wheelchair-bound technology genius super heroine who assisted *Batman* himself and saved him on numerous occasions. Those heroes were a sign that comics truly were a progressive art, way in front of all its competitors. *Marvel* was not far behind, in fact, minorities were not strangers to their spectrum. They had *Black Panther*, one of the first black superheroes to ever grace a comic book panel; they had the *X-Men*, a group of so called “mutants” who, more than anyone spoke to readers from minority groups, and last but not least, they had lead female superheroes in the form of *Captain Marvel*, *Jean Grey*, and *Susan Storm*.

It did not take long for comics to introduce their first minority superheroes, and they gradually became more and more important as time went by. However, Marvel did have some initial difficulties with all of them, especially in the first years of their publication. Getting the character right, and then getting the audience to like them in those turbulent times was a tall task, and one that the company struggled with extensively throughout the years. It was not until the new millennium that they finally grasped the true nature of how to properly represent minorities or superheroines for that matter. Now, in 2018, there are new, and different problems that occur in that same area, but in this chapter, we will take a look at how Marvel handled the integration of minorities in the early days of the industry up to the contemporary times, and the year of 2011.

## **4.2 Black Panther**

The original *Black Panther* is the superhero that was created by writer/ editor Stan Lee and writer/ artist Jack Kirby in the 1960s. He was Marvel's very first black superhero, and he debuted within the pages of Marvel's *Fantastic Four* #52 in 1966, years before the company released others like the *Falcon* (1969) or *Luke Cage* (1972).

The Black Panther was initially an attempt from the comic book giant to even the playing field and answer the critics that sought more diversity in the medium. He was created in the company's initial wave of „*blaxploitation*“ (the exploitation of black people, especially with regard to stereotyped roles in movies, etc.) of heroes (Howard & Jackson, 2013, p. 140) but in the end, he became extremely popular and remained

in the continuity, even becoming one of the most popular superheroes Marvel has to offer.

In short, T'Challa is the wise ruler of a fictional country located in Africa called *Wakanda*. It is a highly technologically advanced nation whose ruler is referred to as the *Black Panther*. The Panther has a mystical connection with their Wakandan God (that is also a panther) that grants the ruler of *Wakanda* superhuman abilities and senses, including but not limited to increased strength, speed, and agility. By the time 2000s arrived, the Black Panther established himself as Marvel's „top gun“, being a crucial part of the teams like the *Avengers* or the *Illuminati*, and also taking part in the industry's biggest events ever since his inception.

The *Black Panther* is explicitly associated with the exotic notions of Africa, nature, wilderness, and mystical treasures of the *Dark Continent*. Although the first iterations of the character did include some “stereotypical question marks”, T'Challa and his ongoing series did portray a step forward to representing Black superheroes and superheroines alike, who are definitely more than just a racial stereotype.

Still, in the 90s *Black Panther* was struggling extremely to make any profit, unlike his predecessors and some of his superhero peers. During that period Marvel managed to sell just four issues of his comic for an entire decade. His solo titles have been cancelled at least six times before finally making a breakthrough in both sales and popularity as the character's importance rose through the ranks.

The first couple of years were really disappointing for Marvel and their first ever black superhero. This was mostly due to the lack of authenticity with the character, states Anderson Woodall III because there is a difference in writing and drawing a black character and white characters. The difference is a fear of judgment:

“When a white writer creates a comic built around overt racial messages, he knows that the material will be assessed based on social responsibility criteria. He knows that potentially prominent voices in ethnic and racial communities will be watching the portrayal closely, scrutinizing dimensions to ensure that they were fully formed. This

level of examination helps create a character that is too diluted to introduce a lasting critique of society.” (Woodall, 2010, p. 153)

The problem with the character was that his writers couldn’t decide how to exactly portray him which resulted in some unwanted questions and messages. As a black character, he was basically forced to live up to the standards of “blackness” set by minority leaders, especially at that particular point in time. Since he was written by mostly white men, they failed to showcase him as the minorities would’ve liked, but still, the sheer complexity of his story was then smothered by trying to compete with racial identities. As Woodall says, „Essentially, he is forever stretched between two polarizing positions: on the one hand he is too black for white audiences to accept and he is never black enough for minority readers.“ (Woodall, 2010, p. 154)

When we first met T’Challa in *Fantastic Four* #52 he was depicted as a cunning, and ferociously independent powerful black man, a ruler, and a wise king to his people. It was a complete novelty at that time, but unfortunately, it did not stick. By the end of this first ever *Black Panther* story arc, the writers simply abandoned that aspect of him in favor of other, already well developed white characters in the *Fantastic Four*. The story itself revolves around T’Challa summoning the *Fantastic Four* to Wakanda for “*The greatest hunt of all time*” (Lee, *Fantastic Four*, 1966) but instead of them being the hunters alongside him, they serve as the prey because he needed one final great test to prove himself to his people as their rightful king. This in itself was already revolutionary since it showcased a powerful black man overwhelming four characters that were at the height of their popularity and one of the pillars of white community. Ben Grimm, or *The Thing*, was used as a contrast to *Black Panther* – one stood for black hyper-masculinity and the other was there to challenge it by showing how whites do not really understand the notions of “blackness”. In other words, Grimm was there to act as a voice for white ignorance. Not only does he dismiss every feat the *Panther* does but also seems to mock it every chance he gets. Upon seeing a technological marvel that was *Black Panther’s* ship, Ben’s remark is “How does some refugee from a Tarzan movie lay his hands on this kinda gimo?” (Lee, *Fantastic Four*, 1966)

As soon as the hunt begins, Panther disposes of the *Fantastic Four* with incredible ease. One versus four like it was a sparing battle, and this was really the moment that

shook the audience. The most beloved white heroes toyed with by a strong, confident, and independent black man. But, it all goes downhill after that. It was like the authors thought this to be too much so they decided to change T'Challa and from this novelty in the first issue, we got a man that was in awe of the *Fantastic Four* in the second one. *The Panther* throws a lavish celebration in the upcoming issue, and gives them several gifts to make up for the past unpleasantness towards them.

“This complete 180-degree turn appears to almost completely deflate his original goals and it seems as though Marvel is telling its fans that even the most autonomous and superior of black men can be wowed by the tenacity of white heroes.” (Woodall, 2010, p. 165)

Black Panther went from the personification of what black power stood for to becoming a pawn in the Fantastic Four's expanding circle of costumed companions. (Woodall, 2010, p. 165). The character soon fell in terms of authenticity over the course of only a few issues, and because of the lack of interest, he vanished from both the pages and the shelves of Marvel for the next few years with only an occasional appearance as a guest hero in other comic books. Still, with all the shortcomings, it showed the character's potential with the personification of the black machismo aesthetic which was, unfortunately, underwhelmed by the writers' questioning of the wisdom of introducing their fans to such a powerful model of black behavior, especially one that was, in so many ways, more dominant than some of the white characters.

Then along came the 1970s era which was probably his best one to date, mostly because of Don McGregor, his new author who “was able to provide one of the most thoughtful approaches to the character ever attempted. This vision of the character attempted to return him to the proud black roots of his first appearance.” (Woodall, 2010, p. 171)

Unfortunately, his series only lasted 13 issues because it created too much controversy with its storylines – in more simple words, the Black Panther of the 1970s was deemed too authentic. The end of 1960s saw T'Challa move from Wakanda to the States which inevitably shook everything the character stood for, but McGregor brought him back



and had him leave the *Avengers* because his people needed him. T'Challa was faced with a series of incidents that made him make that difficult choice of abandoning the American superhero team – Wakanda was in trouble, his people were without a leader, and his generals were begging him to return back home. “My people are lost without their prince”, he remarks in Englehart’s “All the Sounds and Sights of Death”, *The Mighty Avengers* #126 (1974).

“He reveals that he no longer believes that his country can remain safe without his presence. The desire to re-establish a balance of atavism in his life is palpable. He clearly feels disconnected from the mythological roots of his ancestry. He is losing his Africaness and it can no longer be ignored.” (Woodall, 2010, p. 182)

This has not just made T'Challa a more approachable character but also showed that his stories have some depth and meaning behind them. Finally, the writers seemed to grasp his true nature, and what made him interesting in the first place. Granted, they were still years away from truly presenting a completely realized black character but some progress was made at that time.

Unfortunately, as soon as his comic books were starting to become a reflection of the real world, and when writers started turning their attention to racial injustice in the States, the whole project was just bound to fail. Issue #21 of *The Panther vs. The Klan* story arc (McGregor, 1976) had T'Challa tied to a burning cross surrounded by Klansmen on its cover. That story arc is simply the one known as one of the most profound and controversial arcs that Marvel would ever publish, probably to this day. All the negative press Marvel received for it led to its cancelation soon afterwards. The timing was also wrong since tensions along racial lines in the United States at that time were at an all-time high. This debacle has gone all the way to the 1990s when Marvel tried revisiting the character but the wounds were still there. Still, they had a solution that eventually worked. For the first time since the character’s creation, *Black Panther* was being written by a prominent black author called Christopher Priest.

At that point everything seemed like it would finally click, but it did not, at least not for a while. There was one little problem with Priest writing *Black Panther*, and that was the fact that he hated the character.

“I was a little horrified when the words ‘Black’ and ‘Panther’ came [up in the conversation]. I mean, Black Panther? Who reads Black Panther? The guy with no powers? The guy in the back of the Avengers class photo...[whose] supporting cast were a bunch of soul brothers in diapers with bones through their noses...Panther was, by most objective standards, dull.” (Priest, 2001)

Still, he took the job but decided to do it in his own way, regardless of what T’Challa was all about in the past, and regardless of what Marvel might have thought about that. He had this idea on how to keep *Black Panther* interesting – he removed him from his own standalone comic book. He oversaw a five part mini-series, and it was not uncommon for him to give T’Challa only a couple of lines per comic. The spotlight was on someone else this time. Everett K. Ross was that someone - a white diplomatic agent for the States, an ordinary guy that could help “deal with reader apathy and resistance to the return of one of Marvel’s least appreciated and dullest characters.” (Priest, 2001)

The Panther suddenly lost his voice, and we were given no indication of what he might be thinking or feeling. The only way to interpret his actions was by watching Ross. T’Challa was back to being the embodiment of black machismo, only this time, some sort of mystification was added to it, as well as reminding us that he is a king, a black man with power in his hands, and the world at his feet. But it was difficult to relate to an African king, so Priest decided to give him a “sidekick”. Enter Everett K. Ross, a comedic relief with whom Priest actually allowed a book about a stoic superhero to be hilarious, and readers could finally relate to it. His run lasted for 62 issues, which was definitely a huge improvement considering all the failures and cancellations *Black Panther* had been through up until that point in time.

When we entered the new Millennium, Black Panther’s sales boosted massively, and Priest’s job was all but done. Still, T’Challa would only occasionally get a solo run but that did not hurt the quality of his story arcs. His first big appearance happened in Marvel’s *Civil War* (Millar, 2006) which saw the American government pass a law stating that all superheroes had to reveal their identities to federal agencies or abandon their vigilante life. If they failed to do so, they were either jailed or worse. Some

heroes, like *Iron Man*, obliged the law, and some others, like *Captain America*, chose not to, which inevitably resulted in an epic battle lasting a whole year, all the way to 2007. *Black Panther* had little interest in it since he never had a secret identity. His suit was a symbol, not a function. He was a king, and that was made clear to the public. Since he could not really be a part of the biggest event at that time, Marvel had to create something different for him, so they found him - a wife:

„Marvel writers realized they needed a neutral ground for the heroes to meet though. They also felt that by the middle of the Civil War arc, fans could use a break from the dense political rhetoric of the storyline. The answer was a wedding, a Wakandan wedding. King T'Challa would take a queen for the first time in his 50-year reign, Storm of the X-Men.“ (Woodall, 2010, pp. 191-192)

This was by far the greatest moment in the characters history (up until that time), and it also marks the first time two black characters of such power have ever married one another. They are both seen as god figures to their respective African nations. It was a huge moment both for the respective characters but also for the characters of color in Marvel. But, shortly after, there was one other story arc which was also a step in the right direction for the company when it came to minorities.

The year is 2009, and *Black Panther* volume 5, issue 1: *Deadliest of Species* hits the shelves, and it features a mildly revolutionary thing – a female *Black Panther* as the queen of Wakanda and the main character of the story.

The events of this story arc take place shortly after the big wedding. T'Challa is left in a comatose state after a sudden attack by Doctor Doom, a prominent Marvel villain, and the whole of Wakanda is in a state of panic. His wife, Ororo Munroe, also known as *Storm of the X-Men*, assumes the role of Wakanda's ruler, but to restore order in her land, she has to appoint a new *Black Panther*, and a potential heir to the throne should T'Challa not make it past his wounds. Shuri, his sister, undertakes the spiritual test to become the new *Black Panther* and succeeds, but not entirely. She easily gets past the physical tests, but the Panther God rejects her due to her hubris, and she is given no powers what so ever. Still, Shuri tries fighting the great enemy of Wakanda, the mystical *Morlun – Devourer of Totems*, and in the midst of the battle, her bravery is

rewarded and she becomes the one true *Black Panther*, and soon, destroys Morlun, saving the day. Sheena C. Howard & Ronald L. Jackson denote it as “a typical superhero story about bravery and self-sacrifice that both utilizes and challenges centuries old stereotypes about Africa and Black women.” (Howard & Jackson, 2013)

The clear presence of dangerous wildlife and voodoo is what aligns Africa and Black superheroines with ideas of Africa as a mysterious and primitive land the most. Shuri receives the powers of the Panther through mystical Gods, and battles the black magic of *Morlun*. Everything basically screams voodoo, and supernatural. But still, this is not something new – voodoo, and magic as such, is not treated as out of the ordinary or as a uniquely African motif. If we tried to analyze what that is, then it would definitely be this depiction of Africa as a dark, mysterious and mystical place, but even that is pretty ordinary for comic book readers.

As for the Black Panther having a costumed identity and powers associated with a wild animal, it is also a common feature in the world of comics. Still, having said that, women in lands like Wakanda are mostly depicted with abnormal, voracious and almost bestial sexuality. Even when we look at the very cover page of *Black Panther: Deadliest of the Species* we can see a pretty clear range of stereotypes about black women as exotic sexual fantasies. Let’s take a look at Shuri on the paperback cover page of that particular issue.



**Picture 1 Shuri (Hudlin, 2009)**

We see Shuri in her Black Panther costume, and her whole body is covered. You cannot see a single spot of naked skin on her but the costume itself seems to be skin-tight and completely made of leather. Besides that, there is only a long necklace hanging across her chest, and a belt around her hips. However, the costume, although even covering her head and face, seems to be simply painted onto her body. In other words, all the curves are therefore emphasized as she leans back against a tree, grabbing a branch with one hand, her head tilted in an inviting pose, and under her other arm we can see a large, muscular black panther.

It is definitely difficult to imagine that Marvel would ever use T'Challa or any other male superhero in this particular pose. No, they would have superheroes in their fashionable heroic poses while the superheroines are far more likely to be drawn like this – in a pin-up or a centerfold pose. Still, this is not used as degradation of women because why shouldn't they be pretty and strong at the same time? Marvel made sure to emphasize that Shuri is not just someone to showcase but also a capable and dangerous fighter. Now, the branches, and the jungle settings suggest that this is a

primitive land, and a savage one at that. The costume that she wears definitely emphasizes her sexuality, but it is the presence of the panther that symbolizes her powers. She has an affinity with nature, and these deadly beasts. The way we see her almost seductively posing with the wild animal just further implies that she may be alluring but threatening and dangerous at the same time. What is also notable is that the writers/ artists used big cats specifically. It goes without saying that a superhero called the *Black Panther* should have powers similar to the animal that got them their name, and this is not something restricted to women or ethnically identified characters. There are more heroes like these: *Spider-man*, *The Falcon*, *Ant-man*, *Batman*, etc.

Shuri as *Black Panther* definitely fits into this cat-like sexual iconography, but that does not have anything to do with her identity as a black woman. It is simply a part of a formulaic convention of the larger superhero genre. Of course, superheroines are often times eroticized but that does not have anything to do with their ethnicity but more so with the genre itself. So yes, they are sexually depicted and attractively illustrated but that is just a marketing trick. If we take a look at the story itself, or the characters' traits within it, neither contains romantic subplots, erotic scenes nor comments on their attractiveness or even a sexist remark. The covers of these comics are definitely pin-up quality, but nowhere in the interior artwork do they overly stress their idealized bodies. Sure, women in comics are often depicted in that way with almost always having near perfect physique but it does not go further than the pure physical look of the characters.

“It would seem logical for these characters to be determined first and foremost by their sexuality. By not over emphasizing Black Panther and Vixen’s sexuality according to centuries old racial stereotypes these stories do not contribute to the accumulative and persistent type of characterization that Railton and Watson argue occurs in other media forms like music videos. Railton and Watson conclude: “through regular and explicit references to the natural and the animal, the black female body and black sexuality continue to be figured as primal, wild, and uncontrollable” (Railton and Watson 2005: 58)” (Howard & Jackson, 2013, p. 146)

Shuri’s *Black Panther* is obviously associated with animals but not exactly in a way that suggests her being primal, wild or uncontrollable in a sexual manner. These stories

tend to exaggerate their looks but they move beyond such simple classification. The covers still do not do them any justice or any good in the progressive sense since they rely on the stereotypical approach to promote the books. However, *Black Panther: Deadliest of the Species* is a prime example of how comics featuring black people or black superheroines even, can be successful without reducing the character to the most sexist and racist stereotypes most commonly associated with black women. But to say that comics are the only medium that suffers from this lack of proper representation would be false. This animal-like sexuality stereotype of black women still dominates other media like film, sports and maybe most of all – music videos. The example of *Black Panther* is just a great indication that there is a real possibility of challenging this one-dimensional logic. At first glance, when you see the covers of those comic books, you may not think that way but the story is what makes it good, and the story sends the real message – a message of heroism and bravery.

### 4.3 The X-Men

The X-Men was first published in 1963 during the *Silver Age*<sup>1</sup> of comics, and premiered with *X-Men* #1 (Lee, X-Men, 1963). What was immediately special about them was that they were envisioned as a team, and created as such. Characters featuring in the original line-up were new to the Marvel universe, and had never appeared outside of the team, at least not at that time. In order to save some time on making up different origin stories for each and every single one of them, Stan Lee decided to take the “easy way”, and said that they would all be considered “mutants” who were simply born with their powers which remained dormant until a certain age was reached, mostly puberty, as that is the time when most changes to the human body occur. Jack Kirby, the co-author of the series and its artist, came up with the idea of the X-Men having a leader called Charles Xavier, also known as Professor X, who would make sure that those young mutants do not turn into criminals but put their powers to good use. And so the team was assembled, and the stage was set for one of the most diverse comic book creations that Marvel had ever made. Or was it?

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<sup>1</sup> There are four major ages in comic books, and they are chronologically ordered: Golden Age (1938 – 1956), Silver Age (1956 – 1970), Bronze Age (1970 – 1985) and Modern Age (1985 – Present day)

The gist of the X-Men is clearly diversity, and promoting the minorities because that is what being a “mutant” meant at the end of the day. They are people who develop special powers because they were simply born different from normal people. Yes, they fight super powered villains, and try to save the world every once in a while, but the real battle, and the real struggle of the X-Men is that against prejudice, hatred, and fear from the normal humans in the Marvel universe. For this very reason, the X-Men are considered one of the most socially relevant and diverse superhero comic book titles (Schedeen, 2011). What also helped differentiate them from other superhero teams is actually a different theme that was central to their story arcs. The Fantastic Four had their family issues, Spider-Man was always broke, Batman could not get over the death of his parents, and the X-Men had prejudice and fear because of what they were – not because of what they chose to be but because of what they were born to be.

This is exactly the centerpiece of the X-Men. Darowsky (2014) notes how many comic books creators that have ever worked on the series have acknowledged that they purposefully used the concept of “mutants” to explore how society treats “different people”, or as he calls them “others”, be they racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual. The mutants therefore represent a sort of a metaphor of or analogy to real-world issues. Still, although the idea was fresh, and fairly new to the comic book landscape, it did not sit well with the audience. Since the debut of the series, and up until the 1970s, or 1975 to be exact, the X-Men kind of limped from one issue to the other, and always flirted with cancelation. The sales were so bad that Marvel did not want to pay authors to create new stories for the mutant family but they just decided to scrap it and start anew. Along came the year of 1975 and Marvel completely relaunched the series with some new characters, and new creators in *Giant-Size X-Men #1* (Wein, Giant-Size X-Men, 1975). That was when the X-Men finally gave much better results, and a much more diverse team was introduced.

Initially, the X-Men consisted out of Cyclops, Jean Grey, Beast, Angel, and Iceman with Professor X being the leader, of course. The new team which helped the series further expanded the presence of ethnically and nationally diverse characters as heroic ideals included Storm (African), Colossus (Russian), Nightcrawler (German), Thunderbird (Native American), Banshee (Scottish), and Wolverine (Canadian). Naturally, over the years, the teams swapped their roster and constantly revised it to



include many more nationalities to pursue the goal of diversity even more. For that very reason, the X-Men are popularly perceived as one of the most diverse franchise in the history of the industry. This is true for the most part but it does not mean that Marvel knew how to make it happen right from the very start of the series. If we, however, take a closer look at the group, we can notice that the series is still largely dominated by white male characters, at least on the heroic team, and the most ethnically diverse groups can actually mostly be found with the villains the X-Men battle. This is not surprising when you take into account that the most prominent superheroes are in fact white males, and the comic book industry did not want to abandon its golden goose, but what is surprising is the fact that that was the case with the X-Men franchise since it was supposed to be different than anything we had seen so far. Still, there were some changes as years went by, and it did work out eventually.

The main phrase that made the team what it is now is that they “fight to protect a world that hates and fears them”, and that is exactly what they stand for – bravery, and heroism despite never getting anything in return. In many ways, that is the real picture of the real world out there which is by no means just or grateful:

“Readers coming to the series recognize the echoes of real-world prejudice—racism, homophobia and so on—and that in turn makes the series seem just that little bit more grounded in reality, despite the fact that it’s essentially sci-fi. The difference between mutants and other heroes is that mutants are identifiably a human sub-species, marked by their possession of the X-gene. This provides a narrative rationale both for their solidarity and for the attacks made on them by groups and individuals with an agenda based on the psychology and politics of race hatred.” (Darowski, 2014)

Having a superhero comic which is relevant to the readers by basically mirroring the world the reader lives in was a massive success. As we’ve seen with Black Panther before, if the reader cannot relate to the character in any way, it does not matter how powerful or cool the character is, and it will probably fall flat. That explains the sudden and rapid success of Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four. Their success did not come from their skin color or from their superpowers (mostly) but because of the real-life problems they experienced, and the way they struggled to solve them. This is the so called “Marvel method” which revolutionized the world of comic books. (Bray, 2017)

This went on to be the key to Marvel's success, and X-Men's as well. According to DeFalco (2006):

“The success [of the X-Men], I think, is for two reasons. The first is that, creatively, the book was close to perfect [in the 1970s and 1980s . . .] But the other reason is that it was a book about being different in a culture where, for the first time in the West, being different wasn't just accepted, but was also fashionable. I don't think it's a coincidence that gay rights, black rights, the empowerment of women and political correctness all happened over those twenty years and a book about outsiders trying to be accepted was almost the poster-boy for this era in American culture.”

But this was not only true for being a minority in the contemporary society. Racism, sexism, and homophobia are forms of prejudice that minorities are most often attacked with, but it not “exclusive” to them. In other words, the X-Men franchise did not relate just to people who were different in race, sexuality or religion but to – everyone. Many people sometimes feel alienated from the society without being targets for the before mentioned reasons. The mutant metaphor we talked about earlier in the paper correlates to any specific group of people, and therein lays its true power – it has the ability to find a way for any reader to somehow relate to it. Darowski talked with Fabian Nicieza, a prominent X-Men author in the 1990s who described the franchise like this:

“Mutants” does not equal one specific aspect of societal prejudices, mutants equal ALL prejudice. Be it race, creed, gender, culture, nationality, sexual orientation, the notion of being feared or despised simply because you are “different” is not owned by any one segment of the population, but rather, ironically, owned by all of us at one time or another in our lives, and that is why the X-books always flourished after their relaunch because nearly all readers could empathize with their plight. Even if the “tragedy” you empathized with was because during your teen years you had a lot of acne, it didn't diminish the fact that you still understood what it meant to feel “different.” Of course, people see things through their own eyes, their own experiences, their own pains, and therefore subscribe their own specific interpretations on their entertainment, usually angling it towards a position that speaks to their own needs, but if you take an aerial view rather than a ground level view, you have to realize the concept is an umbrella that covers everything, not just one specific societal group. (Darowski, 2014)

What Nicieza meant was that it is not difficult for a teenager to feel isolated and misunderstood at times. But it was not only that. One other big reason why young readers of all ethnicities related to the X-Men, and that is because the mutant factors usually manifested itself in puberty, and since the main target audience were indeed teenagers, this was a jackpot for Marvel. People who felt “different” could easily find themselves in those comic books because it is in our nature to find relief when we come to the conclusion that we are not alone, no matter how difficult thing get. This, however, slightly removes the concept of “mutants” from the initial metaphor of institutionalized racism or sexism to a more universal appeal to the idea of being different. Nonetheless, it does ensure that the elements of the before mentioned terms can be read into the series. The best thing is that there is no single interpretation for the X-Men comic books. Maybe a specific writer had a specific point of view in mind, but the reader may not share it, and is not obliged to.

One of the best representations of the idea of humanity fearing mutants and creating a genuine threat to the emerging class of those super powered individuals came in the form of the so called Sentinel Trilogy, which spanned from *The X-Men* #14 to #16 (Lee, The X-Men, 1965). Just a few issues earlier we had seen humans not knowing how to react to seeing mutants for the first time, but now, those feelings were clear - fear, prejudice, and hatred, which was at that time cemented as the central theme of the franchise. In the center of the story is Bolivar Trask, a human engineer and scientist who was funded by the government to build hundreds of Sentinels (machines that hunt down mutants) in quick succession so that the world may be rid of all the mutants. He creates the so called Master Mold which allows him to do so, but in the end, Trask realizes that by making his creation he actually created a far more dangerous threat to humanity than mutants ever did. Because of that, he destroys the Mold, but dies in the resulting explosion. This particular series was the facilitator of the X-Men theme that represented the beginning of the conflict between normal people, and everyone who was “different”.

Since, at that time, the Black movements were quite active, and the question of racism was often out in the public, many have actually noted the correlation between the X-Men narrative and American historical events. Moreover, people have started

comparing leaders of the mutant race to civil rights leaders. For example, the most notable comparisons were drawn between Professor X, who preaches peace between the races, and seeks equality, and Martin Luther King Jr. who fought for the same thing, only regarding black people. On the other hand, Professor X's archenemy, Magneto, who sees mutants as superior to all other races, and is more of a supremacist, is often compared to Malcolm X, and his black power movement. They are both two extremely intelligent guys but they have severely different methods of achieving what they want – one is diplomatic, and the other is a conqueror. While some comparisons clearly can be made, and have been in the past, not everyone agrees that this theory is true. Adam Roberts even calls it “dumb”.

“Why is it dumb? Because (and excuse me for stating the obvious) Charles Xavier is not Martin Luther King Jr. He's Charles Xavier. There is one way in which he resembles Dr. King—he has dedicated his life to the peaceful emancipation of his people. But there are myriad ways in which he does not resemble King: he is a bald-headed white cripple with tremendous telepathic powers who lives in an enormous mansion in New York state, is in charge of a school for gifted mutant supermen and is an occasional traveler into outer space. [. . .] Concentrating on the one thing these two people have in common to the exclusion of all these points of difference is plain myopic.” (Wein, *The Unauthorized X-Men: SF and Comic Writers on Mutants, Prejudice, and Adamantium*, 2005)

Roberts does have a point here because mostly all characters change at some point in their comic book continuity, and the main reason for this is the fact that they are written by many different writers in hundreds of different situations. That makes those parallels difficult to observe. For example, when Magneto was first introduced in the 1960s he was a supervillain that was seeking world domination, a conqueror, not a protector of the mutant race. In the more contemporary version of the character, he changes, and becomes more sympathetic and open for everyone; even, at times, humans. Sometimes, you can relate to his motivations while disagreeing with his methods but the original version is far from being a Malcolm X replica. Still, even if we acknowledge that there are some flaws in this comparison theory, we have to admit that certain stories, at specific points in time, do reflect moments in world history, and that can be enlightening and at times almost unavoidable. (Darowski, 2014, pp. 31-32)

An example of a story clearly reflecting moments in world history comes from an arc starting in *The Uncanny X-Men* #150 (Claremont, 1985). Magneto reveals that he is of Jewish origin, and that he was kept in German concentration camps, and that he saw his parents being murdered for being Jews. He proceeds to express his hope that a similar fate does not befall his fellow mutants. This moment is not subtle at all – it clearly shows the state in which the world was during those years. The parallels between the treatment of mutants and Jews are perfectly clear, and unavoidable, but Marvel does not stop there. In *The X-Men* #5 (Lee, The X-Men, 1963) Marvel touches on the surrounding perception of African American athletes from the white fan's perspective. This issue was actually the first instance in the franchise where we see mutants facing the same prejudices an African American in the United States might have faced. In the story, we are introduced to a new evil mutant called the Toad, and Magneto wants him to get recruited by the X-Men so that he might a double-agent that way, and a man on the inside. To draw the X-Men's attention he has Toad enter a track where the mutant uses his powers of leaping ability, and greater agility to perform feats no human could possibly ever do. The plan eventually works as the X-Men immediately suspect that Toad is, indeed, a mutant and rush to recruit him. However, before they do so, the people watching in the crowd also react to Toad's supernatural abilities, and rather than cheering the extraordinary performance they have just witnessed, they start booing him and yelling at him, even threatening to attack him. Luckily for him, the X-Men arrive just in time to save the day.

If we take a closer look at what the people were yelling at Toad, we can see uncanny resemblance with the real world once more. "They're calling him "fake"! They feel it must be a trick of some sort – they want to believe that – it makes them feel less inferior!" (Lee, X-Men, 1964), notes one member of the X-Men team. This argument reflects the way the white society used to react to the rise of dominance of African American athletes in professional sports. When African American people began to outperform white people, the commentators would often find excuses that they were born with more innate talent:

"Thus, if a white athlete won, it was an example of David beating Goliath, whereas if an African American athlete won, it meant he was the benefit of a quirk of nature."  
(Darowski, 2014)

There was also one instance in which Professor X himself is trying to explain human fear of mutants to one of his new students:

“When I was young, normal people feared me, distrusted me! I realized the human race is not yet ready to accept those with extra powers! So I decided to build a haven . . . a school for X-Men! Here we stay, unsuspected by normal humans, as we learn to use our powers for the benefit of mankind . . . to help those who would distrust us if they knew of our existence!” (Lee, *The X-Men*, 1963)

And this was all intentional, as well. Mutants were created for that specific reason – to fight prejudice, and to promote diversity, and help minorities, as Stan Lee remarked in an interview with the *Rolling Stone*:

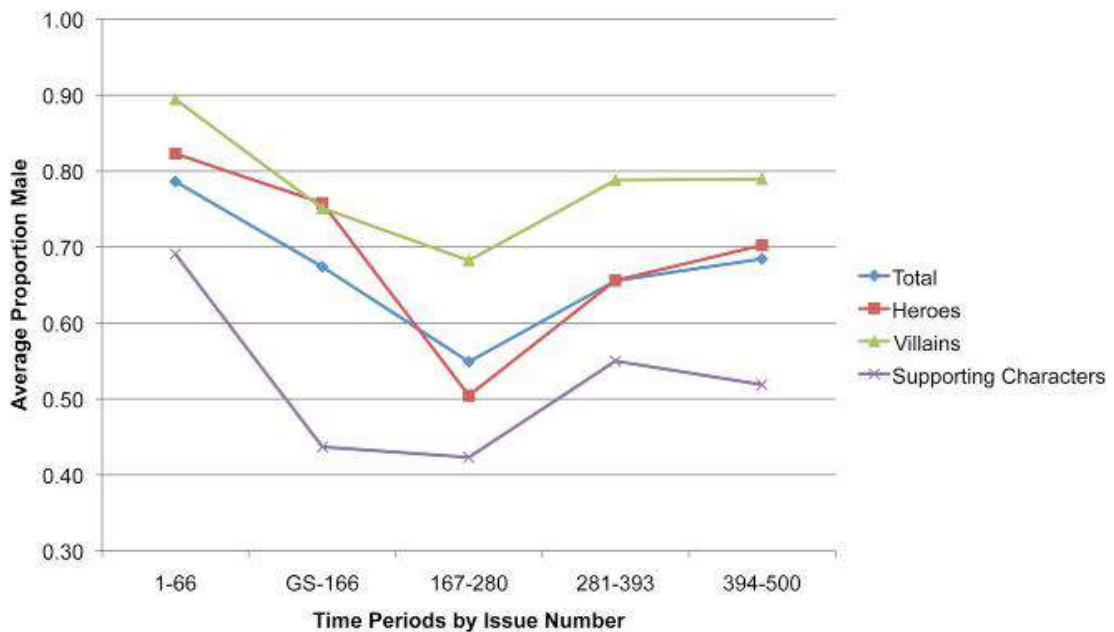
“You know I’m very square and preachy sometimes, but the more I realize that people are to some degree affected by what we write, the more I’m aware of the influence we have, the more I worry about what I write.

[. . .] I think the only message I have tried to get across is for Christsake don’t be bigoted. Don’t be intolerant. If you’re a radical, don’t think that all of the conservatives have horns. Just like if you’re a John Bircher, don’t think that every radical wants to blow up the nation and rape your daughter”. (Lee, *Face Front, Clap Your Hands! You’re On the Winning Team!*, 1971)

At the beginning of the new millennium, the X-Men, among other Marvel’s comic book series, were struggling in the ever-changing marketplace. The problem was well known – they have distanced themselves from that which made the mutants so special – they were always a minority, and were treated as such, and were relatable because of it. But, come the early 2000s and onwards, Marvel was riding the wave of popularity brought in by the franchise and step by step, they were increasing the number of X-Men, and mutants overall, to the point where they were minorities no longer. From their point of view, there were only two solutions to this new problem. One was to bring in a fresh writer, one that was popular, creative, and brave enough to handle such a pillar of Marvel’s universe. The second solution was to make the minority metaphor a higher concern for the series by simply reducing the number of mutants in the universe. That metaphor was really not functioning properly with so many mutants out

there, so Brian Michael Bendis decided to rectify that in a miniseries called *House of M* (Bendis B. M., House of M, 2005). In this story, Magneto's daughter, Scarlet Witch, creates an alternate reality using her rather undefined powers in which her father's dreams of mutant dominance are a reality. Naturally, the heroes discover that the reality they are in is, in fact, fake, and they confront Scarlet Witch. She eventually resets the Marvel universe back to normal but realizes that this war between humans and mutants will never cease. In the final issue of the miniseries, she whispers "No more mutants" (Bendis B. M., House of M, 2005) just as reality is being restored, and as a result, 90-% of all mutants lose their mutations, leaving only 198 identified mutants in the world. One important thing to note is that she did not kill the rest; she simply changed their DNA so that they no longer have superpowers.

After going through all of this, we can conclude that Marvel has spent a considerable amount of time trying to represent minorities, and females in the right way from the very start of their industry. The X-Men and Black Panther are two of the most prominent examples of that. Still, it has to be noted that that inclusion was not always successful, especially at the very beginning of the company. The X-Men as a franchise is one of the most diverse in all of superhero comics, and Black Panther marks the first time, a black superhero has risen to prominence, and was given a true voice, and meaning in Marvel. However, despite actively embracing minorities, and addressing the issue of diversity, Marvel still remains a comic book universe that is being dominated by white male characters, as can be seen in the following graph:



**Figure 1 Diversity in Marvel (Darowski, 2014, p. 137)**

The table shows the inclusion of both male and female characters in any given time period in Marvel. As can be seen above, the percentage of male characters was very high in all categories, especially in the first one, and then gradually drops lower. However, in every category the percentage of male characters decreased in the second and third periods, and then increased in the fourth and fifth. In each period the villains either have the highest or they are tied with the highest percentage males. On the other hand, the supporting cast has the smallest percentage of male characters of any category in all five periods. In other words, females have the highest personal count in that particular category. The supporting cast is also the only group to have less than 50-% male characters in any period, with sometimes even having more female guest starring. The male heroes begin the series at 80-%, drop to almost 50-% by third time period, and then suddenly spike to almost 70-% in the fourth and fifth. This clearly shows that in spite of all the diversity, the comics were still dominated by white males.

As 2010 loomed, Marvel had different ideas on how to change that, and how to re-approach this problem. The contemporary take on diversity was significantly different from anything that was done before that, but at what cost?



## 5 CONTEMPORARY PRESENTATION OF MINORITIES AND WOMEN IN MARVEL COMICS

Contemporary Marvel is still that same old powerful comic book company that dominates the market and the medium along with its everlasting rival, DC comics. Still, the last decade was the start of the inevitable downfall, both in sales and the sheer quality of the products they have been releasing. The problem is in this new movement that is taking the globe by the storm, inhabiting all the spheres of our society, from law to literature and comic book panels along with Marvel – political correctness.

We have discussed PC in a lengthy manner in the previous chapters, and have come to the conclusion that it is not an inherently bad thing, but since it has started influencing comic books, it has changed the medium from its original concept to a propaganda sharing one. In more simple words, Marvel transitioned from fun superhero adventures to political shilling in matter of years, and the changes in the representation of minorities and females was sudden, abrupt, and poorly done. Whereas past years have been criticized for not being diverse enough or not promoting social justice and equality for all, the new age, and the so called *All New All Different Marvel*, is trying really hard to make amends. So much so that it fails in its attempts, and by doing so, alienates itself from its readers. This sudden transition began in 2011 when the renowned comic book writer Brian Michael Bendis, a Portland resident and rabid left-wing writer, announced the new “half-black, half-Hispanic Spider-Man” in a completely different universe to the one we used to know in Marvel. This new universe would continue to be called the “*Ultimate Universe*” which was separate from the original, known back then as the “616” universe. This new and diverse Spider-Man who would represent minorities brought Marvel Comics the attention of mass media it craved for in order to regain the mantle of that comic book titan it used to be. It worked, sort of.

Where past sales would have approximately around 33,000 units, this new Spider-Man sold more than 89,000 units, and soon became a bestseller by comic book standards. Naturally, when the hype plummeted so did the sales once more. The stories were not as interesting, and the character was not as relatable – it lost the core values Marvel had been proudly presenting all those years before. Today, this Ultimate Spider-Man,

whose alter ego is Miles Morales, stands at approximately 31,000 units sold. It made a full circle and recorded nearly a 10-% drop from when the book last featured its traditional lead Peter Parker. One year after that they went for another marketing trick, and announced their first ever gay marriage among the X-Men. Once more they have seen an enormous boost in sales, and media coverage, but only for a while. *Astonishing X-Men* went from 31,000 units to over 82,000. What happened one more year in the future? The series was canceled due to low interest, and therefore, low sales. More recently, Thor, Marvel's household name, and a member of their "big three" (Captain America, Iron Man and Thor), became a female character, as did Iron Man, who was called Iron Heart for a while, because an African American teenage girl named Riri Williams took the mantle.

Contemporary comic fans and creators are still celebrating Marvel's realism, but this time it was that same desire for realism and modernism that made them tamper with some of their most beloved characters. The results were disastrous to say the least. Social justice warriors were promoting more female and minority roles in television shows, games, and comic books, and Marvel accepted the challenge. The idea was simple – take some of their most prominent characters and change them entirely - from their gender, their traits, religion and ethnicity. Some went through a full-scale change with all of the mentioned characteristic being tampered with, and other had some minor but still significant changes.

This started as a gimmick of sorts, as something to boost the sales, and get some media coverage but as time passed fans stopped caring about those new and diverse characters that were being thrown into the mix. With each new issue the boost would be less impactful or would not last as long as the last one. Despite this, Marvel continues to do the very same thing even today with more of self-proclaimed social justice warriors taking over the company's stories and characters. They have stopped caring all together. They do not care about making profit or about producing quality products; all they care for is promoting the movement, and spreading the agenda. The fans did not care about it – they want substance, not shilling.

David Gabriel, Marvel's VP of sales, acknowledged this "problem" and interpreted low sales as a sign that people do not want more diversity in comic books:

“What we heard was that people didn’t want any more diversity. They didn’t want female characters out there. That’s what we heard, whether we believe that or not. I don’t know that that’s really true, but that’s what we saw in sales. We saw the sales of any character that was diverse, any character that was new, our female characters, anything that was not a core Marvel character, people were turning their nose up against. That was difficult for us because we had a lot of fresh, new, exciting ideas that we were trying to get out and nothing new really worked.” (Gabriel, 2017)

Gabriel stated that the problems were those diversified characters, and in a way they were, but not because they were diverse or because they were more politically correct. The problem was in their writing. Those characters lost any depth, any real value or power in the community because they were only seen through the color of their skin or through their gender, religion or all of that together. Marvel made numb, boring and lifeless characters that were presenting an agenda through their comics, and were not fun or important for any other reason but that. So again, even when acknowledging failure, Marvel completely missed the point.

Marvel’s quality of books and storytelling has dropped significantly since their attempts of “cheap tricks” to push short-term sales came into being. When those gimmicks were being used in company’s story arcs, readers would become aggravated, and feel alienated instead of being able to escape into a world of superheroes. The real problem was that almost every superhero from our childhood was replaced by a minority “knock-off”, as was mentioned earlier in the paper. This was a huge turn off for mostly all of the fans, and rightly so. Multiple comic books shops felt the full results in having to close their stores due to low sales. One comic book retailer in San Francisco Bay Area even said that he went from 48-% to 25 because those new comics did not enjoy the same success as the older ones.

The problem could easily be solved but the process would be rather long. The fans never complained that they do not want an African American hero or a hero who is representing other minorities or females. The proof is visible in the sales of some of the most prominent old-school diversity characters. such as Black Panther and the X-Men who were analyzed in the previous chapter. What fans hate is this tampering with already established, everyone’s favorite characters. Marvel would rather take those heroes that were well written, and already introduced to the community and just swap them with their allegedly more diverse counterparts. It would be a far more difficult

job creating new characters, introducing them to the fans with all those new origin stories, new names, powers and personalities. Fans would be far more accepting of that than of these “knock-offs” that now represent what used to be their favorite superhero. Marvel comics used to be full of humor, romance, adventure, happiness and optimism. Now it is all about pushing an agenda which is becoming more and more palpable.

The whole point and the value of superheroes is that they are fun, cool, relatable and educational. Nowadays, they are neither of those things. Fans like them because of those traits not because of their skin color. When the only thing special about a character or their defining trait is their skin color or sexuality (or both), they lose their attractiveness. It gets even worse when those traits are deliberately highlighted in every single panel of a comic book issue, showing how righteous they are, and that they should be respected and loved because of it. Why does it alienate readers? Because it sends a message that you only matter because you are an African American, a Hispanic or a homosexual. To Marvel, those traits are tools of promoting, not core values, and their new characters are proof of that.

In order to prove that point I will analyze some of the characters that went through a dramatic shift which resulted in the character’s mythos to be completely changed, and its fan base along with its core values – lost.

### **5.1 The Mighty Thor**

Thor Odinson is one of the most popular Marvel characters in the company’s rich history of publication. He was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, and made his debut within the pages of *Journey Into Mystery* #83 (Lee, *Journey Into Mystery*, 1962). Thor as a character is based on the Norse deity that holds the same name, and is the son of the *All Father* Odin, the lord of Asgard and the highest ranked god in their pantheon. For decades, Thor has been the protector of Earth, one of the mightiest heroes and a member of Marvel’s “*big three*” consisting of himself, Captain America and Iron Man. He is the wielder of the mystical hammer called Mjolnir that can be lifted only by those deemed worthy of it. The hammer itself is not heavy, it is enchanted to prevent those who are not worthy of ever being able to lift it. This was Marvel’s proof that Thor is a

pure hearted hero bound to put his life on the line in order to save others. For those same reasons, when Marvel decided to implement its new technique of promoting social justice and made Thor unworthy of being the God of thunder, and gave his mantle to his ex-girlfriend Jane Foster, the community responded with rage.

Jane Foster was Thor's love interest from the early years of his publication but the couple eventually split, and Jane was diagnosed with cancer. She refused otherworldly treatment from the gods but found out that once she became Thor when lifting Mjolnir, her cancer would go away but it would return upon her reverting back to her human form. Her run lasted from October 2014 until June 2018 when Odinson returned as the God of thunder but still unworthy of wielding Mjolnir which was actually destroyed in one of the final issues of Foster's run. (Aaron, *Mighty Thor*, 2016)

There are multiple issues that Thor fans have with this new, politically correct arc that ended poorly but left a huge mark on the mythos of the character. We have already stated how this new characters that are supposedly created to promote diversity fail miserably at doing so mostly because they alienate themselves from the audience. Those new and diverse superheroes (or heroines) simply lack the depth, and the essence that made them likeable and relatable for the reader. Jane Foster is not a likeable hero, nor is she a hero promoting a great cause, she is an agenda driven character that sometimes even feels like she has been written out of spite.

The first and major issue the community has with this story lies in the title itself. Jane Foster is referred as "Thor", and this was stated explicitly by the author when the first issue premiered in October of 2014:

"This is not She-Thor. This is not Lady Thor. This is not Thorita. This is Thor. This is the Thor of the Marvel Universe. But it's unlike any Thor we've ever seen before." (Moss, 2014)

The fundamental issue stems from that very quote of this renowned Thor writer, Jason Aaron. Jane Foster was referred as Thor as that was a title, and not a name. Basically, Thor's ex-girlfriend stole his hammer, and with it his name as if it were something that went straight with the mantle. Thor means thunder in a free, loose translation and it was the name that Odin and Gaea (Thor's mother) have given their child who one day would be powerful enough to take the role of the king of Asgard. This was a true

depiction of pure demasculinization of the character – he could not lift his hammer anymore, lost all his powers and abilities, his name and was then replaced by a better female version of himself, who was, funnily enough, his ex-girlfriend.

As Moss (2014) stated:

“No longer is the classic male hero able to hold the mighty hammer, Mjölnir, a brand new female hero will emerge who will be worthy of the name Thor. The inscription on Thor’s hammer reads ‘Whosoever holds this hammer, if HE be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor.’ Well it’s time to update that inscription. The new Thor continues Marvel’s proud tradition of strong female characters like Captain Marvel, Storm, Black Widow and more. And this new Thor isn’t a temporary female substitute – she’s now the one and only Thor, and she is worthy.”

Thor was from that moment on referred to simply as “Odinson”, which is actually his last name while Jane Foster was known as the only “Thor” in the Universe. This was essentially different than any other instance when other heroes have wielded the mystical hammer Mjolnir. Someone else lifting the weapon is not a novelty in itself but it is in this magnitude. Characters like Captain America, Beta Ray Bill, Superman or even females such as Storm, Black Widow or Wonder Woman did it in the past but none were referred to as “Thor” since that was not a title to be passed on from one to the other when seen fit. Comic books are a medium that changes constantly so the fact that some heroes lose their titles is not uncommon. For instance, there have been multiple Captain Americas but that is a title that can be taken up by someone else. For example, people do not hold a grudge against a “black Captain America” because there is nothing wrong with that. When Sam Wilson, Steve Rogers' good friend who had been fighting alongside him for decades, and who is a hugely important character in the series, deserving of the mantle, replaced the original hero as the new incarnation of Captain America, fans around the world welcomed it because it was warranted. Sam Wilson is African American and of course it did not matter at all. The fans were almost equally happy to see him portray the hero as was the case with a white male “donning the cape”. The problem with Jane Foster was different, and her being the new “Thor” made no sense at all in terms of the history of the character. Picking up the hammer gives the wielder the powers of Thor but it does not transform that person into Thor – it gives you a similar costume as his as well as a certain set of powers and abilities a god of thunder would possess but you get to keep your identity. When Wonder Woman

picked up the hammer, she got a new costume and new powers but remained Diana (1996), the same thing happened with Beta Ray Bill (1983) and Steve Rogers (1988). When Sam Wilson took the mantle from Steve Rogers he was called Captain America but he did not take the name Steve as well.

There have been a total of four cases in which a normal human being such as Jane Foster has wielded Thor's hammer and have literally become Thor Odinson. The four men were Donald Blake, Eric Masterson, Jake Olsen and Red Norvell. The main thing to remember is that, unlike Jane, none of those men became Thor because they lifted Mjolnir. Instead of that, they had become merged with Thor Odinson by various different means. The human form and that of Thor have become one, with the Thor personality only representing itself when the powers were active, meaning, Thor Odinson would be sealed away until Mjolnir was summoned to the wielder, transforming him (or her) into the god of thunder.

Blake was Thor's spirit trapped in a mortal form as a punishment and lesson of humility by Odin. Masterson became Thor only when Odin sealed Thor Odinson into Eric's mind in order to save the human's life. Olsen was possessed by Thor's soul due to manipulations of Hela, the goddess of death, when Jake and Thor were both killed in a battle against the Destroyer. Norvell became Thor when Odin's attempt to save his son from Ragnarok by letting Red die in his place ultimately failed. Jane is the only one that became Thor although she was not supposed to. When wielding the hammer she not only gets his armor and powers but also becomes this blue-eyed, blue-haired character that is simply a flipped version of the original one. In addition to that, Jane suddenly starts speaking the way Thor usually does. Up until that point she was using standard, contemporary English but upon picking up the hammer even her manner of speaking changed to this "old English" or "Shakespearian English" that writers often depict Asgardians speaking. To say that she is the only one and real Thor would be to



ignore the entire character's canon. She is some sort of Marvel's attempt of inclusivity or diversity in comic books, albeit a bad one, but she is not Thor.



Picture 2 Thor (Aaron, Thor, 2014)

This was seen as an ultimate insult to both the character and his fans. The other side of the coin was somewhat understandable but only marketing wise. It would be



difficult to sell, and rather confusing to call a comic book about a goddess of thunder anything other than Thor, but even if had Jane as Thor why would that mean that Odinson loses his name. Why not have two Thors? Marvel has done crazier things than that in the past. To sidetrack for a moment – the only reason Odinson is now unworthy is the because he himself doubts that any of the Asgardian gods are inherently good, and therefore, somewhere deep inside, he feels that maybe he is not worthy at all. This doubt is what unconsciously forces him to drop the hammer, not being able to lift it again ever since. (Aaron, *The Unworthy Thor*, 2017)

Funnily enough it took Thor ages to finally become worthy, and it was not until he willingly gave his life away that Mjolnir was finally his. If we read between the lines, every single good deed he has ever done so far in decades of character's publication, and he has faced some of the most dangerous threats Earth has ever seen, is simply brushed aside. Maybe it would take him some time to rethink his worthiness or even embrace that he is now unworthy but why give up on his name all together?

This is only based off of the context of the comic book, and not analyzing what is happening within the panels, which we will do now. The first thing that is extremely apparent is that the writers are clearly promoting and addressing gender equality. Not that this is a bad thing, as we have already discussed concerning political correctness and Marvel's attempt at diversity, but the ways of doing so completely miss the mark. Not a single issue of Jason Aaron's *The Mighty Thor* run (2014-2018) goes by without addressing this, and literally bombarding the reader with it. Jane Foster echoes all the criticism she (and the writer) is getting and somehow, in what almost feels like breaking the fourth wall, has this urge to justify herself wielding the hammer. This results in continuous "reminders" (which are not really needed) that she is in fact a woman doing everything that Thor usually did, only better. The most blatant example of that gender equality comes from *Thor* #5 (Aaron, *Thor*, 2014) in which Thor faces Absorbing Man, and his wife Titania. Upon seeing that Thor is now a woman, Absorbing Man even remarks how that is really weird and even mocks her by saying "Damn feminists are ruining everything". He goes on dishing more insults until he is eventually knocked out by his very own wife for being too misogynist. What we see there are villains and spouses turning on each other and abandoning their cause because of "women power". This even gets worse when Titania surrenders to Thor because they are both women, and she will give her this "one-time girl-power pass".



This is not the first time Titania has faced a female superhero. She had multiple encounters with She-Hulk for example but has never done anything like this before. In fact, this was never recorded in comic books before

this particular issue because it is so out of character, especially for Titania since she always wants to fight other female heroes to prove herself as the strongest. The authors were just trying to make the new Thor much more of a big deal than she actually is. She is not the first female superhero to hold such a prominent role in a comic universe, and definitely not the last. This was clearly Jason Aaron's way of commenting on the recent hate he was receiving for writing this comic book but also extremely patronizing. Just imagine this scenario occurring with two male characters or a male and a female character.



Picture 6 Thor v. Titania

Picture 5 Thor v. TPicture 4 Thor v. Absorbing Man (Aaron, Thor, 2014)

The Absorbing Man represents the community which is sending the hate, and Aaron interprets them as “sexist fanboys”. Again, Marvel is completely off the mark here, and they still feel the only people who do not like this comic are sexists, chauvinists or just general haters, and they do not care that the comic is just badly written and has nothing to do with gender. The flaws of this comic book would be the same if the new Thor was a male character. This was a way to shield themselves from criticism instead of dealing with the concerns fans actually have. This is also not a one-time only situation in this run. In *Thor* #8 (Aaron, Thor, 2014), which is also the final issue of the first Jane story arc, we see Odin and his brother Cul dispatch the Destroyer, the ultimate Asgardian weapon, to take back the hammer from Jane. However, the All-Mother Freya steps in and protects Jane, and to aid them, they assemble a team of entirely female superheroes. Not a single male hero was called up to help them even though the threat was enormous, and some of the female superheroes were just normal human beings. It did not matter if they were powerful; the only thing that mattered is that they were – women. This highlights the core problem even more – this new Thor is not special because she is Thor, she is only looked at through her gender, and that is the only thing the company is trying to convince us is interesting about the character. This patriarchy-fighting agenda does not stop there, unfortunately.

One other example is in the character’s relations with others. In order to show the new Thor as the real hero, others have to be put down, and portrayed as bad, sometimes even as villains. This is even truer of the All-Father Odin who gets a sudden twist of personality in order to accommodate Jane. Just to be clear – Odin has done some horrible things in his publication history and is not the character of purest heart but in this run he is described as a villain, chauvinist, ignorant, and a misogynistic power hungry tyrant. Through Aaron’s run (2014-2018) Odin goes from caring father figure to enforcing martial law in Asgard, imprisoning his wife because she did not agree with him, and condemning every effort to give the Nine Realms a semblance of unity of democracy. This inevitably results in a conflict between him and Thor, and that fight is another point to make in this weird portrayal of the character. The fight itself takes place in *Thor* #5 (Aaron, Thor, 2014) and is certainly one of the more controversial situations to have happened in the whole arc. Jane, who has been Thor for a couple of weeks or months at best, is shown to be at a stalemate with Odin, and then proceeds to beating the All-Father with relative ease. This feat, mind you, is something Thor has

never ever done in the rich history of his publication from the early 1960s up until this point. At best, Thor Odinson would be able to exchange hits with his father for a while before inevitably falling short to Odin's might. In fact, no god of thunder would be able to do what Jane did in that issue – not Beta Ray Bill, not Thunderstrike (Eric Masterson), not Steve Rogers, and not Odinson. The thing that made this situation even worse is that if there ever was a ranking of all “Thors”, Jane should be at the bottom or near it but not because she is a woman but simply because she is not a warrior. The character of Jane Foster is a nurse who also has cancer, and has almost never fought in her entire life. She heals people for living, she does not fight them, and yet she is portrayed as the most powerful Thor ever. Wielding the hammer gives you special powers and abilities but does not give you warrior-like combat skills, and weapon mastery. Thor acquired that through thousands of years of training and becoming Asgard's best warrior and Jane acquires it by simply being worthy. When Eric Masterson became Thor (DeFalco, Thor, 1988) he was unable to fight the way Odinson fights. He had the power, sure, but was at first not able to utilize it to full effect. Jane remarks that she is able to do what Thor does by observing him back when he held the mantle. This is a clear remark that not only is she Thor now but she is better than he ever was at being – himself. This is not only bad storytelling but it is also bad for the agenda of feminism and social justice that is being pushed. It exaggerates the false conflict between men and women and creates the sense of “us vs. them” instead of promoting gender equality it praises itself of doing with this specific story arc.

Again, Marvel does not realize that these self-righteous new comics do not appeal to the reader – not if you are a minority, a woman or a man, it makes no difference. The community does not hate diversity; it hates the way it is being implemented, and *The Mighty Thor* is one of the best examples of it. Jane is what the community likes to refer to as “*Mary Sue*” – seemingly perfect character with no flaws, and one that is able to perform better at tasks than should be possible given her training, abilities, etc.

## **5.2 Iron Man**

Tony Stark or also known as Iron Man is another pillar of Marvel comics' universe of superheroes. He was created by Stan Lee and Larry Lieber and made his first appearance in *Tales of Suspense* #39 (1963). His first standalone title was published

by Lee in 1968. Tony Stark is a wealthy son of industrialist and weapons manufacturer Howard Stark and his wife, Maria. He is a billionaire, and a genius inventor who made his Iron Man suit in order to escape a warlord Wong-Chu and his troops. His near death experience made him change his lifestyle and devote the suit (and many more new ones to come) to fighting threats to the world. Since then, he has become one of the most popular characters in the industry with one of the biggest character developments among superheroes along with becoming Marvel's household name, both in quality and sales. Unfortunately, he was also a victim of this sudden change by politically correct authors.

The character that took his mantle is a young African American girl called Riri Williams. A genius level intellect child from Chicago that edges out even Tony Stark himself, and who had a difficult childhood which ultimately led to her becoming a different version of Iron Man called Iron Heart. When Stark was left in a comatose state after his fight with Captain Marvel in *Civil War II* (Bendis B. M., *Civil War II*, 2016) someone had to jump in, and that someone was Riri, and that decision left the community undecided to this very day.

Riri's biggest flaw as a character is actually something that plagues almost every single new minority hero that is coming out of *All New All Different Marvel*. When we analyzed Thor we said that she is a prime example of a "Mary Sue" character. Riri Williams has the same problem – her flaw is that she has no flaws whatsoever. From the very first moment we meet this new Iron Man replacement she is showered with praise from every single supporting character in the comic book. No matter what she does or the way she does it, Riri cannot get anything wrong. Marvel used to have a formula for their characters in order for them to develop properly throughout the years. The things that made their heroes unique were struggles of a normal human being or inner struggles that we all experience every once in a while. Riri, or Jane Foster Thor or almost any "other social justice character" for that matter, do not have this. Just as Jane never feels the burden of wielding Mjolnir or being Thor, Riri has no real troubles in her life other than being famous and successful. When we see her in the Iron Man suit for the first time she has little to no trouble figuring out how to control it or use it to fight. In the second issue of *Invincible Iron Man* (Bendis B. M., *Iron Man*, 2016), Tony Stark attempts to train Riri in order for her to be a better successor of the Iron Man suit. What he did not expect is that she would ace the tests almost effortlessly. In

the issue itself we see Tony surround Riri, who is in a suit of her own, with dozens of his older versions of Iron Men. They proceed to engage in combat, and after fleeing for a while, Riri manages to simultaneously beat, and incapacitate all of the suits in one go, and all that without having any previous training or experience in that matter. This, however, is not the only instance of the character being a Mary Sue. In *Invincible Iron Man #3* (Bendis M. B., *Invincible Iron Man*, 2016) Riri and Pepper Potts were ambushed by cyber ninjas and got their armors disabled so they had to fight or flee without their technology. Pepper orders Riri to run while she holds them off, and she does so, stealing a young boy's laptop in the process to call Tony Stark for help. The ninjas catch up to her but she knocks one of them out with a fist, and then uses the fire extinguisher to block their vision. This would not be something impossible if those ninjas were not highly trained professionals fighting a 15 year old girl, who is unarmed, with their laser swords. One other thing to note is that we have seen those ninjas in past Iron Man comic books, and every single time they almost killed Stark or War Machine because of their skill and abilities (Fraction, 2008).

Even when she is faced with those life threatening situations Riri never reflects on what might have been or the sheer danger that she has been through. Her inner struggle is non-existent, and it alienates her from the audience. While a normal human being would be distressed by an assassination attempt or just simply full of adrenaline, Riri can only remark how awesome that was, and how awesome she was. Tony Stark has multiple problems apart from the fact he struggled with certain villains. There was even a nine-issue story arc that was written by David Michelinie in 1979 called *Demon in a bottle* that showcased Stark's alcohol problems and his fight with anxiety. This made the character flawed and therefore more relatable. Other popular characters like Spider-Man or The Incredible Hulk also followed that formula. Peter Parker was always poor, and had trouble getting a steady job while balancing all that with school (Lee, *Amazing Fantasy*, 1962), while Bruce Banner had a difficult childhood with his father beating him and his mother constantly which resulted in the manifestation of the always angry Hulk after being exposed to gamma radiation. (Mantlo, 1985)

Another issue in her run is the origin story itself. In *Invincible Iron Man #8* (Bendis M. B., *Iron Man*, 2016) we get a first glimpse of what Riri's childhood looked like, and what some of the interior motives were behind her becoming Iron Man in the future. We begin the scene in Riri's elementary school in Chicago during what her

teacher calls a “quiet time”, meaning that the students now have to do their work in silence until they are finished. Riri stands up, and tells the teacher that she has finally decided what she wants to be in the future, and says that she wants to be an astronaut. The teacher response is simply – “Great”, to which Riri is left confused, and asks the teacher that is she not supposed to tell her that she cannot be an astronaut because she is an African American girl, and shows her the picture of her idol, an actual African American astronaut woman who was not named in that instance. That particular astronaut became one because everyone told her she could never be an astronaut in the first place. “You’re supposed to tell me nursing and teaching are noble professions and that people like me don’t get to grow up and be scientists.”, said Riri to which the teacher responds: “Yes, that was a long time ago. Things were different back there but because of people like her, a girl like you can do whatever you want, fly anywhere you want and be anyone you want” (Bendis M. B., Iron Man, 2016).

The teacher explains that those times have long passed, and that she can be whatever she wants to be when she grows up. Riri then stares at her teacher for three panels straight which implies that it lasts for a really long time. The teacher realizes that Riri will not stop until she gets what she wants so she thinks for a second and utters the first name that comes to her mind – Tony Stark. “What? Oh, okay... You will never be Tony Stark” (Bendis M. B., Iron Man, 2016). Riri smiles and that was when she decided that she will be even better than him, she will be a better Iron Man, just without that weird beard (Bendis M. B., Iron Man, 2016). This origin story tells us that Riri is a character that became a superhero out of spite. The teacher in this particular comic book is not a bad person, although she is represented as one. She is a white female in a classroom full of African American students, and she has to play the role of a villain and pretend to oppress Riri so she could get her motivation to become an astronaut, or in this case, Iron Man. It has to be noted, however, that this is not the only catalyst in her becoming a better Tony Stark. She was also shown to be a kid from a tough neighborhood, and that she lives with her mom because she lost a father twice – they both died. Her best friend was shot at a church picnic in Chicago, and while she was giving a report to the police, she saw Iron man on TV, and felt really angry that he did not save her friend when he was supposed to. (Bendis M. B., Iron Man, 2016) Soon afterwards she became a stellar Iron Man who could do better.

The main problem is that whenever it comes to an African American superhero in the contemporary age, the writers are too scared to create a character with any flaws. This is mostly because white people are writing a black character so they fear that all the bad things of that character will somehow be passed onto every single African American human and therefore they will be called a racist. Some of the fans started a petition in late 2017 to hire a professional Chicago-based writer and sociologist Eve Ewing to take over from Brian Michael Bendis for his inappropriate representation of historically marginalized backgrounds. This would usually seem like a good answer. Marvel has tried really hard to incorporate many diverse characters into their universe but the same cannot be said for the editorial rooms which are still mostly full of white men. The petition worked, and regardless of the fact that 2 672 out of the necessary 5 000 people signed the petition, Marvel decided to hire Eve. The problem is that the only real qualification that Marvel considered when hiring Eve was that she looked a lot like the character herself, and was an African American woman from Chicago, just like Riri. She had no previous interest or experience in writing comic books but simply because she looked the part, and came from a city connected to the character, she got the job. It is pretty unusual to hire people in such a manner for such an important role in the development of one of the most popular superheroes in the franchise's history. It is true that Marvel lacks diversity in the writer's room, and there should be a change happening pretty soon in that regard but surely there are hundreds of African American writers in numerous indie exhibits to choose from instead of hiring someone because of their looks and place of residency. This brings us to the previous discussion we have had in this paper and that is, again, having a new character that is solely looked upon through the color of her skin, and her gender. Nothing else apart from that will set her apart from everyone else. She is not special for any other reason, and that is a wrong way to represent a minority character. Eve Ewing is a sociology professor at a university, and also the author of two books – *Ghost in the Schoolyard* and *Electric Arches*, which both, granted, deal with racism. Still, the qualification for writing a Marvel's comic book is not there, and aside from the color of her skin and residency, she does not have much in common with Riri Williams. She is not an engineer, and she is not a tech genius, and on top of it all, she has never written a comic book in her career. This propaganda that is being spread by Marvel is highly political if we analyze it more thoroughly. It goes to the extreme left side of the political sphere since you literally have to look the part in order to get the job. Not to mention that some of the



most prominent African American characters were, in fact, created by white men, and some of the most defining moments in those character's histories have been done by white men as well. Black Panther, as we have discussed, was even created by two Jewish men in the 1960s. Even Riri Williams was created by a white man. So what does that tell other people who want to work for Marvel and write professional comic books? It tells them that they have to go through the hard way, unless they look the part. Marvel does not care about sales that much anymore. This gets them good reviews in the *Times* or other newspapers but the comic books shops are still suffering because of sheer lack of quality in their products.

### **5.3 America Chavez**

The same thing happened with a highly popular contemporary character America Chavez. America Chavez or Miss America is a superhero that was created by Joe Casey and Nick Dragotta in *Vengeance* #1 in 2011. Her most notable appearance before she got her own ongoing series were in the *Young Avengers* (Gillen, 2013) and later on in *A-Force* (Wilson G. W., 2016) and even in the *Ultimates* (Ewing, 2016). She was extremely popular because how well her character had been handled in the past. Chavez possesses superhuman strength and durability, and also the ability of flight, among other things. On top of that, she has the power to open holes in reality, allowing her and her teammates to travel through the multiverse and into other realities.

Because she was so popular throughout the first couple of instances she appeared in Marvel's universe, she eventually got her own solo series in 2017 simply called *America*. The problem was, this time, she was written by a Latin-American LGBTQ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) writer, Gabby Rivera. Again, a writer with no previous experience with comic books was given a tall task to write about a highly popular character of Miss America because she was Latin-American just like the character. One other thing to note is that America Chavez was instantly changed into a LGBTQ superhero just like her author, and she became Marvel's first character of that kind. Inherently there is nothing bad with a character being openly homosexual but a story about a super powerful Latin-American hero suddenly became all about her being LGBTQ and not so much about being a superhero.

As a character America was always depicted as a highly over-powered hero. Basically she is one of the biggest Marvel's heavy hitters in the universe, and what usually happens with those characters is that they soon become too boring if you do not give them a flaw of some kind or a struggle to which the reader can relate to. She is not a badly developed character, which we saw in her previous runs in other big titles, but the poor handling of her in the solo run resulted in poor reviews. Chavez has the ability to time travel, and even in her first issue she went back in time, and fought Hitler in World War II (Rivera G. , 2017). When a character holds that much power what is usually brought into question is should those things even be done, and if so, how do we approach them. Time travel is a highly unstable ability in comics because alternative universes do exist, and so do different time lines. Affecting one time line usually results in a completely different future or a completely different past. Such a burden falling on the shoulders of a rookie, young superhero is something that a good writer would take advantage of. The chances for character development were enormous. Her slow and steady transition from a highly emotional character that is still learning the ropes to a high tier Marvel hero could have been done slowly and steadily while building her legacy. Instead, all of it was discarded because of the same reasons Riri Williams failed to work. She was presented without a flaw, confident, cocky, perfect, all-knowing, and all-powerful because she was a minority. What was the end result? Complete alienation from the character, and eventually – cancellation.

America Chavez's sales started off really well as with any other *All New All Different* superhero. When she debuted in March of 2017 the estimated shipping of her comic books was at 43 592 copies. This plummeted to only 8 360 products shipped in November that same year. (Comichron, 2017) But telling a good story has not been a focus for a very long time now, and Marvel proved that by hiring people of little or no experience in writing a story for this medium. Rivera used this chance to express her political beliefs while sacrificing the character's core values. Not to mention that just by making the character Hispanic made little sense since her origin story focused on her being from a different pocket dimension and a different planet altogether. What really troubled people who were actually Latin-American was also a poor representation of their culture. When Chavez America speaks, she does so in English, most of the time, but every once in a while she would substitute one word in the sentence with a Spanish word instead. Some of the words that she uses are: Oiste,

vivaporu, mammas, cafecito, chancleta, etc. What was pointed out in an angry fan outrage was that those words mentioned were wrongly used in the comic book, and that made Latin-American people furious because by using the words wrongly, the writer was (in)directly insulting their culture.

For a self-proclaimed diversity encouraging comic book industry, Marvel failed to tackle racism. Instead, America Chavez became the very enemy they were trying to destroy. She represents a minority, and does so extremely poorly, but by doing so she creates a rift between those minority groups she represents and everyone else, especially white people. In the first issues of her run (Rivera G. , 2017), Chavez goes to university called Sotomayor University but that seems to be a university strictly for Latin-American students. If you are white, you will get discriminated but if you are one of them, they will recruit you for their own group. The same thing happened when America first arrived at the university. She was instantly jumped by a group of people who call themselves *Leelumultipass Phi Theta Betas*. Inevitably they soon join forces and become friends. White people are portrayed as villains in these kind of stories, and America Chavez is not an exception. The only white friend she has got is the new female Hawkeye, and the rest are either Latinas or minorities. The main villain of her story, however, is a white female surrounded by white men in black suits – completely not stereotypical. Still, what is probably the biggest problem of the series is the constant barrage of LGBTQ content that is being thrown into the reader's face in every single panel. Everything she does is connected to her being a homosexual, and suddenly she becomes a plot device. None of the villains she faces are powerful enough to stop her or to even endanger her because that would be considered sexist. Every other panel in most of the issues of her 2017 run is a constant reminder of her sexuality and Latin-American heritage. Her origin story confirms that. In the first issue we are introduced to her parents, who she calls "mammas" because they come from a planet where only women live, and two women marry and have a child. This is also not explained in its entirety but if the roles were reversed the outrage of the community would be unbearable. The only reason this is so emphasized is because the writer is also openly homosexual. You can see even a LGBTQ rainbow flag on America's house, and scenes of romance which have no other meaning but to remind you that she is, in fact, LGBTQ. For that reason, when Chavez breaks up with her girlfriend in the span of two pages, the reader simply does not care about that relationship because we

were never introduced to her girlfriend, we do not know how long they have been together or any details about them. The reason behind that is simple – we do not need to know because it is not important. What is important is that we were shown that they are homosexual. At the end of issue five of her run (Rivera G. , America, 2017), America is seen flying off with her new girlfriend that she only recently met with the commentary of one other character in the background:

“I’m literally intrigued and in awe of both of them. If this is what it’s like to date other women then I applaud all the women dating women right now because this is incredible. Motorcycle courtship chase? Check. Missiles and explosions? Yup. And now “we’re just flying together in the sky, heading to a giant heart.” I swear, if they come back married I’m going to be jealous. Always the bride’s best archer, never the archer-bride.” (Rivera G. , America, 2017)

Another thing to note is that America Chavez has no male friends, nor is she ever surrounded by them either. The similar thing happened to Riri Williams who somehow manages to have a team consisting of only women, with the exception of a Tony Stark hologram, and Jane Foster assembled an all-women team to fight a potentially world-ending threat. This does not stop there, however. Apart from the occasional Spanish word, the writer also decided to change the suffixes in some of the gender sensitive words and uses X as neutral. So instead of having “amigas” or “Latinas” she uses “amigxs” or “latinxs”, which would make sense when talking about non-binary characters but not in this case.



**Picture 7 Usage of the "neutral X" (Rivera G. , America, 2017)**

Chavez is also written to be arrogant and unlikeable, contradicting everyone and stating how she is right, and they are wrong because she is a minority. The reader is never given a chance to actually start liking the character because the writer compels him to. You are spoon-fed quotes on how America is great, the best, the most powerful, and the most caring superhero you have ever seen without her ever having to prove that to the community. Every superhero has to go through a rough patch that allows them to grow, both as a character, and in the eyes of the reader. America Chavez is praised for everything she does, as was Riri Williams before her, and Jane Foster before Riri. This only forces the reader to either accept it or move on, but as people do not like to be forced to do anything, the sudden drop of sales is not a surprising epilogue.

The last thing that should be mentioned is the art itself. Comic books were always criticized for showing women as too sexualized, and men as perfect, masculine, and tall guys. In the contemporary days, especially since *All New All Different Marvel* has premiered in 2015 the art has changed tremendously. No longer are women depicted as half-naked female characters with overly emphasized body parts, but now, they are depicted as – men. An average female character, especially if it is a superhero, will definitely have some sort of a masculine characteristic. America Chavez is the prime example of that. She is a broad-shouldered female with a big jaw, and huge hands, and legs. Feminine features are no longer visible apart from the long hair, which is also excluded with certain characters, and the constant reminders that she is a girl. As Popoli (2015) puts it:

“Most ‘strong female’ characters observably are not women, they are simply male characters dressed in female suits. They don’t talk like women, they don’t act like women, and when we’re shown their interior monologues, they don’t think like women either. They’re about as convincingly female as those latent serial killers who like to wear those bizarre rubber women suits. They are, in fact, the literary equivalent of those freaks.”

The message that this sends is not that women are given power, or that women are great but in order for them to be perceived as such, they have to act, look, and think like men. Vox Popoli calls them “*Girls in men’s clothing*”. It is not easy to define a strong female character but the essence of the term, and the basic concept of it is false to begin with. These characters that we have analyzed are not convincingly imagined

or portrayed, and at the end of the day they become nothing more than token feminist propaganda devices. The second biggest mistake those writers are doing with strong female characters is that they are introducing nothing either new or interesting. This trope that they are representing has been around for decades now, and by blindly copying the existing portrayal of characters while only changing the gender (or race or sexuality), you easily bore or annoy the reader with it. The third point is the writing itself, which we have already established is done in a way to present women as men – they talk, think, and act as male characters in order to gain the audience’s affection. Ironically enough, this is what women writers tend to do with their characters. In an attempt to make them more powerful or independent and move away from that “damsel in distress” trope, they suddenly masculinize them in order to achieve it. Why do men often tend to write more interesting female characters? Simple, they know what men think like when they are writing about men in women suits, and secondly, and maybe even more importantly, they do not want to make women look like men in women suits because to them that is not appealing whatsoever. Women, on the other hand, write what they imagine the man that is pretending is a woman would think like. Can you imagine if you did not know whether the main character was a man or a woman? That is exactly why those stories never seem to work out.

Shana Mlawski did an interesting research in 2008, and she tried to find the answer to “*Why Strong Female Characters Are Bad for Women*”. She succeeded in telling us exactly what kind of a character should a “strong female” be, and what is (wrongly) perceived as one. The time of the damsel in distress is, for the most part, long gone, and we can all agree that that kind of a character is simply – terrible. Soon after the feminist movement happened, and women in all media started getting a lot of attention and change when it came to the representation of the gender. It took a while but authors, movie writers, directors, and etc. got the idea that there should be more strong female characters with the emphasis on *strong*.

“While these women would still be young and hot, they’d also have one characteristic that made them more masculine. It could be physical strength or a superpower (see Liz Sherman in the first Hellboy movie), the ability to shoot a gun properly (Princess Leia), or something more metaphorical, like being able to out-drink a guy (Marion from Raiders of the Lost Ark). Writers patted themselves on the back, saying, “You wanted Strong Female Characters? Well, now they’re strong.”” (Mlawski, 2008)

The problem with those new characters is that they would still need saving in the final act of the story, only this time, they would be sexy while doing it, as well as being strong throughout the story. She would never get a broken nose or a black eye in the fight because she would not stay pretty that way, and even if she did something powerful and masculine, she would have to look hot while doing it. Her being that way was just to make her an even better “prize” for the hero at the very end. Mlawski says the real problem is that when women said they wanted more “strong female characters”, the male writers misunderstood – they thought women want (strong female) characters, and what they really meant was (strong characters), female. (Mlawski, 2008)

So she concludes that we need more “weak” female characters but not weak as in “damsel in distress” but weak as flawed. This is exactly the main problem we discussed with Thor, Iron Man and America Chavez. Good characters, whether they are male or female, African American or Asian, have goals, and they have – flaws. Any character without those is simply a paper-thin, cardboard cutout which you can depict as being physically perfect but one-dimensional nonetheless.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

Diversity is an interesting phenomenon in comics right now. The contemporary age has brought about a big change in the medium, and a lot of it was truly and inherently good. When the society and the comic book community rebelled against the sudden and abrupt shifts concerning their favorite superheroes, the news outlets, as well as Marvel themselves, branded them racist. What they have concluded is that people who read comics do not like more diverse characters or that they do not want to support those politically correct storylines and social justice warriors. They think that those “racist” fans hate Riri Williams because she is an African American woman or they hate America Chavez because she is a Latina LGBTQ character. That kind of mindset is simply – wrong.

The reason why comic book fans are lashing out against certain superhero characters is because the characters they knew, and were invested in from their childhood onwards, are going away. They are being replaced by paper-thin, new and “diverse”

characters which are supposed to promote social justice but instead they take away the very core value of comic books, and replace it with political agenda. The fans felt cheated because everything they knew – all the history and all that they were invested in since forever was suddenly gone. What we have here is basically a concept of “*forced diversity*” (Jefferson, 2017). Along came these new and diverse characters, they replaced the old ones, and the fans were given no choice – the heroes changed, and you *have* to read the new ones. Marvel is not the only industry that did that same mistake. DC comics did it in 2011 with the event called *New 52*, which is basically their iteration of Marvel’s *All New All Different* event. They canceled every comic except for Batman, and Green Lantern, and replaced them with new versions of those superheroes. What happened was exactly what we discussed with Marvel – sales went up for the first couple of issues, and then dropped massively to the point of DC almost being out of the race with Marvel for the whole year. The same thing is happening to Marvel with the exception of some of the “big guns”. So DC acted quickly and in 2016 reset everything back to normal in an event called *Rebirth*. This brought back all the old characters with their histories but not to replace the new ones but to co-exist alongside them. Readers were then given a choice. You could choose which ones you wanted to read. The end result? DC took the world by storm. Out of top 30 comic books in 2016, only three titles belonged to Marvel. The rest? All DC. (Comichron, 2017)

Jefferson had an interesting point when he said that it is true that the old characters have done it all. Tony Stark’s Iron Man has gone through hell and went back again, was an alcoholic, saved the world a couple of times, was a hero, and a villain. There is not much more you can do with the character. But you do not suddenly get rid of him, and replace him with someone unknown to the audience who is suddenly perfect, and more importantly, emphasized to be better than the original in every imaginable way. That is why the fans of Marvel now feel cheated because they were not given a choice. Marvel sat them down and said: “You have to read this, you have no other option”. (Jefferson, 2017)

Another problem is that those new characters were written as a political propaganda, and mostly out of fear of backlash. What we got were one or two-dimensional characters, perfect in every way, part of a minority group (or female), and on top of it



all, they were representing some of the most important and famous superheroes out there. Instead of being original, interesting and new, they were only the flip side of their previous incarnations. What were they missing? Strength.

It is extremely important that those new female characters or minorities have flaws, goals, and personalities of their own. What flaws can they have? The same ones that all those white male characters before would have. Females do not have to be physically strong, although they *can* be. Strong just means they have their own goals and move beyond those one-dimensional traits they were given. Also, it is alright if the women are good looking. There are so many good looking strong female characters like Storm, Jean Grey, Rogue or Sif. They are all quite attractive but also can fight for themselves, and are completely independent with their own goals, flaws, and origin stories. Once they have some depth, it does not really matter if they are male, female, Latina or an alien from outer space. It also does not matter if the male hero saves them in the end or not because there is nothing wrong with that. Sometimes the tables might turn but the main point is that those characters follow their own codes, their own goals, and missions.

Those characters are palpable to the audience, and as such, they are relatable and likeable. Comic book fans do not hate diversity, they just hate the way it is being implemented, and most of all – they feel cheated. Replacing a household comic book name with a one-dimensional stereotypical character and calling it diverse is wrong.

When you are not given a choice of your own, you rebel, and that is exactly what is happening to Marvel right now.

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### **Izjava o samostalnoj izradi rada**

Ja, Domagoj Kostanjšak, student Učiteljskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, izjavljujem i svojim potpisom jamčim da sam samostalno istražio literaturu i napisao diplomski rad na temu: DIVERSITY, POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN CONTEMPORARY MARVEL COMICS.

Zagreb, rujan 2018.

Potpis studenta: \_\_\_\_\_