Research Article

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Magical Negress: Re-Reading Agent 355 in Brian Vaughan's *Y: The Last Man*

https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2019-0014
Received May 23, 2018; accepted October 26, 2018

Abstract: Be it *Pride of Baghdad* (2006), *Ex Machina* (2004), *Runaways* (2003), *The Private Eye* (2013) or *Saga* (2012), the comic book author Brian K. Vaughan is renowned not only for the scope of the projects in his oeuvre but the nuance with which he portrays his characters, many of which are of types that usually receive less mainstream attention than their white, heteronormative, superhero counterparts. This paper will perform a close reading of Agent 355 as she appears in Vol. 1-10 of *Y: The Last Man*. As an analytical framework through which to parse the character, it will make recourse to the literary, cultural, and theoretical concepts associated with the magical negro. In doing so, this paper will analyse and explore the ways in which Vaughan's writing simultaneously countermands and reinforces these stereotypical stock character arrangements in a precarious balancing act. Strong, intelligent, and determined in her expression and use of agency, 355 often fulfils the function of the magical negro, sanctified, and infused with black girl magic. On the other hand, Agent 355's entire characterisation is also simultaneously circumscribed within the strong black woman stereotype replete with noble suffering and enduring perseverance.

Keywords: magical Negro, *Y: The Last Man*, Vaughan, representation, stereotype, sexuality, race

'Alas, Poor Negress': Introduction

Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerras' *Y: The Last Man* (hereon *Y*) is an Eisner Award-winning American comic book series published by Vertigo (DC Comics) in over sixty issues between 2002 and 2008, garnering both critical and commercial success. Throughout this essay, I will be referring to *Y* as Vaughan's on account of the fact that he wrote every single issue of the series. Set in the present day, *Y* follows a young white American man, Yorick Brown, and his pet Capuchin monkey Ampersand. In the narrative, they represent the last two surviving males on earth following a catastrophic gendercide caused by a mysterious plague that kills all living mammals with a Y chromosome (including unborn embryos and sperm). In the wake of this mass extinction, there is widespread sociopolitical, economic, and cultural turmoil. The remaining female population attempt to cope with their losses as well as find a solution to the apparent inevitability of the extinction of the human race. A member of the U.S. Congress, Yorick's mother, dispatches Agent 355 (hereon 355), a female African-American operative of the Culper Spy Ring to protect Yorick as he attempts to find his girlfriend and fiancée named Beth, an archaeologist who was on a dig when the Great Dying occurred. After a global quest full of humour and heartache, 355 and Yorick eventually travel to Paris, where the latter reunites with his fiancée. Following their initial reconciliation, Yorick becomes aware of his deeper feelings for 355. After the two finally reveal their emotions for one another, 355 is shot and killed.

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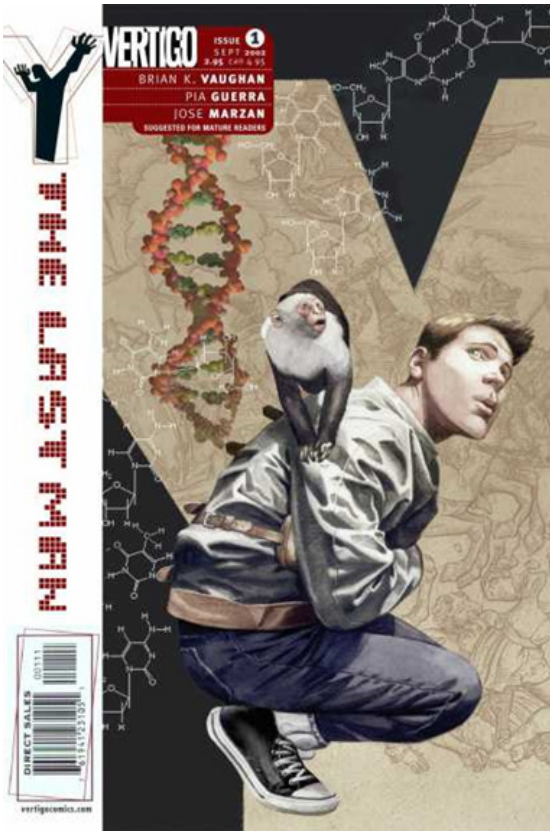

Figure 1. *Y: The Last Man: Unmanned* Vol. 1 (2002), cover by J. G. Jones.

Agent 355 is portrayed as the most important character in Vaughan's post-apocalyptic narrative. This importance is made clear by the fact that she possesses numerous skills and personality traits upon which the success of Yorick's quest depends. For example, 355 is shown to be proficient in the use of firearms and a collapsible baton and, moreover, in issues No. 21-23 *Widow's Pass* (2004), Vaughan reveals that 355 has a photographic memory. The character's practical expertise and survival instincts exist alongside complex psychological and emotional attributes primarily based on past traumas. For example, in Vol. 7 *Paper Dolls*, No. 41 "Buttons" (2006), it is revealed that 355's parents and sister were killed in a tragic car accident. After being placed in foster care in Boston, she is recruited by an Agent 355 (who held the mantle before her), following an incident in which 355 beats two racist white boys with a baseball bat. At the time the plague strikes, 355 is shown to be on mission in Jordan. Following the plague's onset, 355 spends a total of five years protecting and guiding Yorick. Her death leaves Yorick a broken man for the remainder of his life.

This essay will argue that though Vaughan's characterisation of 355 may seem progressive, the character still represents and reinforces certain stereotypical portrayals of black womanhood. The two stereotypes that I will focus on in this essay are the figures of the magical negress and the figure of the mammy. Using 355 as a case study, the goals of this paper are threefold: 1) provide critical commentary on the existing (academic) discourse on the *Y* comic book series; 2) contribute to current discourse concerning contemporary Western pop cultural representations of black womanhood; and 3) offer close reading of the consequences of Vaughan's ambiguous characterization of Agent 355.

Post-?: Agent 355 and the Post-Sexual in an Unmanned World

> Scholars including Diana Mafe argue that 355 is powerful but vulnerable, intelligent but unassuming, sexual but not hypersexual, familiar but enigmatic, and a black woman who is never defined by her race, gender, or class, 355 is unusual, especially as a comic-book figure [serving] as a nuanced model of black womanhood in an industry where such models are almost non-existent. (Mafe 47)

While my initial response to 355 after reading the series broadly confirmed to Mafe's description of the character, I open this section by acknowledging that my critical position regarding race and gender in *Y* is one of suspicion. My circumspection in this regard is predicated on the ambiguity of the specifically ideological consequences of the gendercide Vaughan imagines in the series. Desiree Khng distils this ambiguity as follows:

> Brian K. Vaughan's post-apocalyptic graphic novel series *Y: The Last Man* paints a poignantly bleak picture of a mono-sex dystopia, an ironic subversion of a feminist's dreamland: patriarchy's roots (men) are terminated and, supposedly along with it, patriarchal norms themselves [however]on closer analysis, patriarchy's shadow remains entrenched in social norms, preserved by women as a means to re-enact pre-dystopian "normalcy." (Khng 167)

The underlying implication of Khng's summary here is that the extinction of all males would seemingly expedite a total eradication of patriarchy. However, the entire narrative of *Y* illustrates that

> patriarchy is so naturalized in social laws that it no longer requires men to be physically present as factors ensuring its dispensation. Post-apocalypse, the female world still centres on patriarchal consciousness, divided on a permanent erasure of the male being and his regeneration for mankind's survival. (Khng 171)

I concede that some aspects of Vaughan's narrative premise can be considered in a positive light, particularly in terms of the narrative's seemingly vested interest in both representation and empowerment of women of every ethnicity and orientation. In this way, many readers would conclude that throughout the series, Vaughan offers interesting re-imaginings of otherwise opprobrious stereotypes of Occidental representations of black womanhood. However, just because there are no more men does not mean that the narrative world Vaughan creates is either post-*White* nor post-*male*. In the series, both the categories of male and white have not been displaced or overcome as universal ideological predicates in the story. As a result, the advent of an apocalyptic plague does not undo or annul white privilege. A close examination of Vaughan's Agent 355 ultimately reveals that the greatest value of the series, in terms of the issues and debates concerning race and gender, centre around the ambiguity between the utopian and dystopian consequences of gendercide.

There has been much critical analysis of race and gender in contemporary comic books, specifically concerning the misrepresentation and/or under-representation of black women (Singer 2002, Jackson 2013, Darowski 2014, Brown 2001, and Nama 2011). Each of these works provides commentary about the role of race, gender, and identity in some, if not all, of the black female comics characters in contemporary mainstream Western comics. While it may appear that the creators of *Y* manage to effectively sidestep the pitfalls of stereotypes of black womanhood by offering a complex and thoughtful portrayal of a black female character, Vaughan's narrative representation of Black womanhood through 355 as a "badass" woman without glamour is coextensive with problematically traditional mainstream comics' representation of black womanhood. Indeed, the two primary Western comics publishers, Marvel and DC Comics, have launched numerous black female characters, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, including Gorilla Girl, Vixen, Danielle Foccart (Computo), Monica Rambeau (Captain Marvel), Amanda Waller, Jet, Silhouette, Voodoo, Pantha, Catspaw, FerAlyce, Rocket, 4D, and Fatality. Furthermore, DC's Vertigo imprint offers the character Boy as part of the critical and cult hit series *The Invisibles* (1994-2000), as well as Dark Horse's Martha Washington in 1991's *Give Me Liberty* miniseries. Despite this seeming diversity and range of representations of black womanhood in the medium and genre, each of the above examples conforms to the tropes of the magical negress and mammy.

In naming the above characters, my contention here is that there is an unbroken line between the earliest DC and Marvel Comics black female characters and Agent 355. While early examples of black womanhood in mainstream comics such as Wonder Woman's black twin Nubia introduced by DC in 1973 appear as progressive efforts at representational inclusivity in a troublingly mostly white male industry, such examples are still undermined by the retention of problematic adjectives and terminology including terms like "savage," and their latently pejorative connotations and racist subtexts.

Figure 2. *The Uncanny X-Men* "Life-Death II," Vol. 1, No. 198 (1985), cover by Barry Windsor-Smith.

Figure 3. Y: The Last Man Vol. 10, No. 58 (2007), cover by Massimo Carnevale.

One direct example of the manifestation of these problematic holdovers in Vaughan's characterisation of 355 pertains to the character's physical similarities to Marvel Comics character Storm, as illustrated by Figures 2 and 3 above. Not only are there physical similarities between 355 and her black female predecessors, but there is also a collection of problematically racialised personality traits that circumscribe Vaughan's depiction of 355. These stereotypes of psycho-emotional nature, colloquially known as the so-called

"angry black woman," form the basis of 355's personality for the preponderance of the series. To make this connection, I apply the following critical insights concerning the contextual framework circumscribing the representation of Storm noted by Clark (2013) to Vaughan's characterisation of 355. As Clark notes,

Wonder Woman's sister Nubia, who is angry with everyone, has to be tamed of her savage ways. Storm briefly loses her mutant powers, reverting back to her youthful days as a Cairo street thief. Dressed in leather and a mohawk, she becomes a rebellious punk-Hip Hop hybrid bad girl. Frank Miller's Martha Washington is ghetto-anger personified, making Rambo and the Terminator combined look like pansies. This angry black persona surfaces most often in how these characters deal with bigotry. They often strike out blindly in acts of vengeance: as if somehow never before having experienced racism in their black lives. (Clark)

Like many of her forebears, 355 is raised in a loving, supportive, and stable home in Detroit. However, the death of her family precipitates a psychological, emotional, and physical *nigredo*—an alchemical term which refers to a process of decomposition, and, in analytical psychology, refers to a moment of extreme despair necessary for personal development (Jung 497). During this process, 355's non-stereotypical traits are eschewed in her transition into a so-called angry black woman, whose violence and rage as are subsequently exploited by the State for the purposes of furthering white male agendas. In this way, even the *potential* of the black woman's anger is circumscribed within the exploitative power relations that exist between Magical Negresses and the white saviours they are stereotypically bound to serve and protect. Therefore, despite Vaughan's seemingly progressive representation the character as guide, mentor, teacher, surrogate mother, and forbidden love interest, 355 ultimately still fulfils the role of the Magical Negress in that her role and function as "the hero role of a 'guardian angel' [while constituting] the centre of a narrative" conforms to the tropes and qualities of the Magical Negress (Mafe 47).

On the Paradoxical Relationship between Agent 355 and the Concept of the Magical Negress

In this section, I will analyse the ways in which 355 conforms to and disrupts the trope of the Magical Negress more closely. To do so, I need first describe the term itself. The Magical Negress/Negro is a controversial stock character that has appeared throughout the history of American popular culture. In various aesthetic and narrative forms, the primary function of the Magical Negress/Negro is aid the white protagonist(s) of the narrative in which she or he appears. He or she is often depicted as saintly, benevolent, patient, good humoured, wise, nurturing, sexless, and docile (Smith 10). Cerise Glenn and Landra Cunningham (2009) describe the magical Negro as "the noble, good-hearted black man or woman whose good sense pulls the White character through a crisis" (Glenn and Cunningham 137-8). As a secondary persona whose individuality is eschewed in favour of being regarded as a repository of ameliorative attributes, the Magical Negro is ultimately reduced black individuality to a white *resource* (Farley 2007). This resourcefulness often permeates the boundary between the possible and the impossible. As Marvin Jones (2005) notes, in certain cases, the Magical Negro is possessed of a special insight that verges or permeates the natural/supernatural dialectic (Jones 35).

Another important point to consider in terms of the ways in which 355 conforms to stereotypical racial and sexual tropes used historically in the mainstream media representations of black women is the tension between notions of positivity, progressiveness, and the Magical Negress/Negro her/himself. A cursory glance might lead one to conclude that the Magical Negro trope offers a certain kind of "positivity" in terms of *allowing* for the representation of blacks in popular media *in principium*. However, as Heather Hicks notes the instances and examples of Magical Negroes of mainstream Western media are also typically disabled by the discrimination they suffer, either physically, and/or emotionally (Hicks 33). The implication here is that the experience of the Magical Negro is inextricable from trauma if she/he is to fulfil their function as a white resource. The Magical Negro is also often disabled, in terms of her/his agency and history, in other more insidious ways. The Magical Negro is often typically divested of a past, persona, and character beyond those attributes and personality traits that are serviceable to the white protagonist (Persons 137). Nnedi Okorafor (2004) notes that within the context of the texts in which the Magical Negro appears, he or she is

willing to do almost anything, including self-sacrifice to serve and, if necessary, save the white protagonist (Okorafor 2004).

I acknowledge that when considering the political and cultural tensions between the figure of the Magical Negro, positivity, and progressiveness in the representation of black women in mainstream media, certain complexities emerge. For example, earlier I likened the Magical Negro to stock characters like the *Arlecchino* or *Colombina* of the *Commedia dell'arte* tradition. This is not to say that said archetypes cannot be complex, satirically incisive, or nuanced in their performativity. However, my contention is that the underlying raison *d'etre* of these types of stock characters is predicated on *servitude*. So much so that they are most easily read as void of a purpose other than service. In the case of the magical Negress/Negro, the entirety of their narrative time is reduced to a double function. First, aiding the white protagonist evade trouble. Second, he/she assists the white lead to achieve self-reflection, psychological growth, and emotional maturation (Okorafor 2004). In this sense, the Magical Negro must necessarily be a neutered representation of black agency. While the character may possess at least preternatural insightfulness and wisdom, at most outright magical powers, these must be sequestered to the purpose of assisting and enlightening the typically lost, grace-fallen white male protagonist (Hicks 28). Therefore, at the core of the Magical Negress/Negro's relationship to representation and progress is a paradox. On the one hand, the Magical Negress/Negro is in possession of power the white male protagonist has no access to. However, said power is typically freely and totally given over to the central cause of the redemption of the white male protagonist. What results is the absolute advantage of the said protagonist and the agential disadvantage of the Magical Negress/Negro themselves (Hughey 752).

Figure 4. Y: The Last Man: "Buttons," Vol. 7, No. 41 (2006), cover by Massimo Carnevale.

How does this paradox of impotent power in servitude to a white male protagonist, who is physically and emotionally lesser apply to 355? The paradoxical physical and emotional nature of the Magical Negro in *Y* promulgates a problematic characterisation and subsequent reading of 355. On the one hand, despite the fact that 355 emerges half a century after the Civil Rights Era, the contemporary media landscape is still latently responsible for disseminating circuitous racial stereotypes in a context that paradoxically demands colour-blindness and non-bias. As Hughey notes,

> rather than promote strong black characters previously invisible or marginal in film, or cooperative inter-racial relationships across the color-line, these characters are intimately crocheted with essentialist understandings of race: from visions of exotic Black mysticism and contented servitude alongside tales of White paternalism and Messianic morality. (Hughey 752)

On the other hand, with her skills and abilities, it would seem that 355 is or at least *should* be regarded as one of contemporary mainstream comics' most valuable expressions of positive representations of black womanhood in popular culture. However, I argue that Vaughan's characterisation of 355 unwittingly draws attention to the fact that this sexual and racial paradox still determines the majority of textual representations of black womanhood in contemporary Occidental-Global culture. I describe the attention drawn to these issues as unwitting because Vaughan has expressed a troublingly ambivalent attitude toward the representation of black womanhood in the series. Consider the following exchange between Van Jensen and Vaughan in a 2008 interview for *CBR*:

> Jensen: You've said that Agent 355 had to die (in issue #59) as part of Yorick's story. That surprised and upset more than a few readers. Now that the series has ended, do you want to explain that choice?

> Vaughan: It's hard. I never like to explain or defend the work. It takes some of the magic out of it. And, in a lot of ways, I don't really know other than, when I came up with the story as a young man, I knew that was important. It was extremely difficult because I love that character so much, and I think she was important to a lot of people. But it was the story that I needed to tell. I think it's more interesting for each individual reader to lay their own interpretation onto it rather than to hear my intent and be stuck with that. It's fine if you don't think she did. It was senseless and tragic and heart-breaking. And if you see it as betrayal, that it's completely meaningless, I wouldn't necessarily disagree. (Jensen 2008)

The underlying issue with Vaughan's views here can be framed as a question: is Vaughan's stance as a white cis male mainstream comics writer of repute using a black female character to tell a story he needed to tell of greater value than the oftentimes problematic representation of said character?

The answer to this question is located in the political and cultural junction between the Magical Negress/Negro and two other stereotypes found in the history of Western mainstream media representation of black women namely the mammy and the Jezebel. The former "stems from the era of slavery to maintain dominant society's control over perceptions of roles for black women [that is, as] the faithful, obedient, domestic servant" (Glenn and Cunningham 139). The mammy is in some ways counter-intuitive. She "loves her White 'family' more than her own. Even though this family may care for her, she never forgets her role as the obedient servant and has accepted her subordination to white male elite power" (Glenn and Cunningham 139). Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (2008) also notes that the term "mammy" reflects a caricatural misunderstanding and misrepresentation in terms of servility and maternalism (Wallace-Sanders 2; 6). I would also add the following description of the quintessential physical and character traits of the mammy figure elaborated by Wallace-Sanders, which ostensibly seem *antipodal* to Vaughan's characterisation of 355 throughout the series:

> the standard, most recognizable mammy character as a creative combination of extreme behaviour and exaggerated features [whereby] Mammy's body is grotesquely marked by excess: she is usually extremely overweight, very tall, broad-shouldered; her skin is nearly black. She manages to be a jolly presence—she often sings of tells stories while she works—and a strict disciplinarian at the same time. First as a slave, then as a free woman, the mammy is largely associated with the care of white children depicted with noticeable attachment to white children. Her unprecedented devotion to her white family reflects her racial inferiority [...] She is typically depicted as impatient or brusque (sometimes even violent or abusive) with her own children, in contrast to her lavish, affectionate patience for her white charges. (Wallace-Sanders 6)

Applying this triadic conceptualisation of the mammy figure as a confluence of appearance, behaviour, and maternalism to *Y*, the mammy's own children can be substituted for 355 and her praxis of concerted self-repression and denial, particularly with her younger self. Yorick can be viewed as the symbolic manifestation of the lavishly adored and cared-for white child. In the last instance, it would seem that the description of Vaughan's characterisation of 355 that opened this analysis should stand as surety *against* the figure of the mammy. However, to me, 355 ultimately falls squarely in the shadow of the figure of the mammy. In fact, I

argue that symbolically, 355 can even be described as her capable yet equally and stereotypically devoted daughter. Despite Vaughan's deft representation of Agent 355 that seemingly escapes the mammy's gender and racially essentialist orbit, 355 still represents many (if not all) of mammy's most ethically, theoretically, and morally problematic aspects. It is in terms of her relationship with Yorick that 355 most represents an extremely compelling, inventive, but ultimately circuitous re-packaging of the mammy. Vaughan putting 355 at the centre of the narrative in this way is also tantamount to "putting her at the centre of a dynamic interracial debate over constructions of loyalty [and] maternal devotion" (Wallace-Sanders 2).

In contrast, the Jezebel inverts the sexlessness of the mammy by representing her as sexually perverse, promiscuous, aggressive, yet also submissive in their desire to please. As such, while the mammy relegates black womanhood to the role of nurturer, the Jezebel sequesters black womanhood to the role of reproduction. Both subject positions were employed as an oppressive shorthand during the era of slavery in America (Glenn and Cunningham 139). When applied to *Y*, nowhere are these paradoxes more evident than in Vol. 7 *Paper Dolls*, No. 41 "Buttons" (2006). Unlike most Magical Negroes who are divested on life histories and/or love interests, Vaughan uses this issue to highlight the origin story of 355. The issue deals with 355's youth and upbringing. Her father, a skilled tailor, is shown to have been hard-working and caring. Consider the following exchange between 355 and her father concerning buttons and blazers:

> 355: How come boys have buttons on one side and girls have buttons on the other side?" Father: Well, ladies used to have SERVANTS who did their fancy dressing for them, so putting buttons on the left made it easier for their right-handed maids. But since men used to carry SWORDS, the left side of his jacket had to close over the right, so he could draw without his blade getting caught in something. 355: That's history, right?
> Father: Nah, that's TAILORING.
> 355: Hey, how come GIRLS don't carry swords?
> Father: Because their daddies do all the fighting FOR them. (Vaughan 5)

Following the death of her parents and sister, Vaughan depicts 355 in a way that appears to be the opposite of anything "mammyish"; a short-haired, androgynous, cigarette-smoking youth. She is shown to be angry, armed and isolated, having to defend herself from the threats and racism of the other wards of the Boston Care Centre for Foster Teens whose placard's "Teens" is spray-painted over with a swastika. She is later recruited by the previous Agent 355 after 355 is held in detention for "beating up white boys in southie," a feat characterised as seemingly supernatural by Vaughan (Vaughan 9). The older Agent 355 knows the younger's past, the death of her family, her father's association with Nixon and the fact that the younger's name came up on the Culper Ring's list of candidates. Unlike the seemingly inert and unthreatening mammy, 355 learns many progressive, feminist self-defence techniques. Central to these is information concerning male and female physiologies, martial tactics, and emotional resolve to serve her in her confrontations with men during her training (Vaughan 12-15).

The paradox of 355-as-Magical Negress here inheres in the seemingly progressive aspects of her representation. On the one hand, in view of 355's array of skills and abilities, she can be read as an icon of strength whose excellence stands as an indelible riposte against sexual and racial stereotyping, colourism, racism, and misogynoir. Here, the characterisation of 355 is ostensibly positive. As Mark Hill (2016) notes, it would seem that through *both* 355 and Yorick's respective characterizations, the former as hero to the latter's non-traditional damsel, Vaughan

> reject[s] comics' indelible hypermasculine, patriarchal heroes in *Y: the Last Man*, with a future absent of hyper aggressive, domineering men - what in the decade since the comic's release has been dubbed "toxic masculinity'" going on to further state that "Instead of the familiar rite-of-passage story, where the inept boy learns to become a heteronormative masculine ideal, Yorick's maturation is marked not only by 'traditional' notions of adulthood (responsibility, assertiveness, and confidence), but also by empathy, sexual submissiveness, and athletic weakness. (Hill 79-80)

On the other hand, however, Vaughan constructs his narrative in such a way that this maturation cannot occur without 355 acting in the capacity of a Magical Negress. While Hill goes on to state that Vaughan's characterisations have lauded as explorations of culturally relevant non-traditional performances of gender, what I disagree with is the fact that commentary and criticism of the series continually overlook the

role of race within the series' extended meditation on gender relations. In so doing, it is clear that Vaughan recirculates the stereotype of the so-called "strong black woman," a trope used to valorise and justify the historical sexual and racial treatment of black women as subhumans capable of surviving horrendous suffering inflicted on them by white men. In this way, discussion of the non-traditional gender role(s) Yorick occupies in *Y* omits analysis of the very *traditional* role 355 plays in relation to Yorick, namely, that of the strong Magical Negress.

On a certain level, analysing 355 as a Magical Negress seems at odds with the intent of Vaughan's series in which one of the primary goals is to empower its main black female character. While the seemingly post-patriarchal ethos is generically true of the series' narrative premise, it still does not nullify the presence of holdovers, traces, shadows, residues of that system. For example, throughout the series, "Yorick's body is called into question, as his physical limitations are continually brought to the reader's attention, both by Yorick himself and the women he encounters. These only underscores how every character in the years immediately after the apocalypse still holds to traditional notions of masculine identity—good men, after all, are strong men" (Hill 84). The fact that Yorick, the last man on Earth, *requires* support in 355 to offset his unreliability in the face of the monumental task of repopulating the Earth is not without problems. As Hill notes, "the underlying impression [...] is that if Yorick, even though he is likeable in a hapless, bumbling way, is our last man on earth, any hope for the species lies in its more competent women," one, in particular, 355 (Hill 83). Hills insights reveal that 355 is the perfect Magical Negress when applied to a critical reading of race and gender in the relationship between 355 and Yorick. The former fulfils the role of a practical and resourceful foil to the comparative incompetence of the latter, whose characterisation reflects the foolishness of his Shakespearean namesake from *Hamlet*. The fact remains that her skill set is put into use in the role and function of protector or, as the previous 355 states, as a shepherd to every lost, broken, and/or helpless character she encounters, male or female, white and non-white alike.

In this way, her almost supernatural abilities appear deus ex machina-esque and seemingly inexhaustible throughout the series. For example, when the group encounters a Russian secret agent, 355 is able to speak fluent Russian, and later in the narrative, Japanese in Yokogata and French in Paris. She makes an oblique reference to her photographic memory in Vol. 2 Cycles (2003) and expresses not only practical knowledge but a breadth of scholastic readership through certain idioms including "crossing the Rubicon," a phrase associated with military history, in Vol. 1 Unmaned (2003). The suggestion here is that while 355 led a sheltered life unaware of the vast pop cultural texts Yorick is privy to, the difference in their frames of reference for various phenomena is intended to highlight how 355's "limited" socialization through pop culture, in fact, allowed her to develop the requisite skills with which to survive in the post-apocalypse and protect those she chooses to. Ironically, Yorick's skill set, save perhaps his facility with escapology, is completely useless in a post-apocalypse centred on his very survival. In view of the survival limitations of her two companions, their immaturity and constant consternation, 355 has to assume the role of leader of the group. She plans, strategises, and anticipates their needs based on careful surveillance of their respective psychological and emotional statuses throughout their journey. Although these traits seemingly offer a positive example of black womanhood in a lauded contemporary American comic book series when taken together, the *role* and *function* latent within these skills are that of nurturing, supporting, guiding (sometimes mystically) the white protagonist.

While I have suggested above that 355's abilities are so vast and comprehensive as to *seem* supernatural, there is one clear instance in the series where Vaughan's ostensible intent to empower 355 rings with the supernatural abilities of the Magical Negro. Before analysing this moment, I have to isolate the "Magical" half of the phrase Magical Negress for a moment. Bart Bovri states that to many readers, "Agent 355 is the oracle of common sense" (Bovri 37). The term "oracle" here refers back to the latently supernatural abilities all Magical Negroes are intimated to have. As oracular, a supernatural loadstar of reason and wisdom, 355 is indispensable for the serviceability which at once emerges from and resists her status as a Magical Negress. This paradox crystalises in Vol. 4 *Safeword* (2004). In this story arc, Yorick relives the traumatic memories of his childhood associated with his sexuality, his sex, and survivor's guilt in view of the death of 3 billion fellow males. During a mystically charged sadomasochistic suicide intervention conducted between Yorick and Agent 711, one of 355's allies, Vaughan characterises 355 as a type of psychological and emotional

psychopomp or spiritual guide. As the intervention unfolds, Yorick implores 711 to grant his wish of death, and after she agrees, Yorick has a transcendental moment of clarity and realisation, depicted as a mystical acceptance of death. With his face plunged into a bucket of water, Guerra's artwork portrays Yorick's acceptance of death as a physical and emotional submersion in which Yorick perceives himself floating in empty subconscious space, enveloped in soft, warm light. Off-panel, he notices something construed as the *source* of said light, to which he remarks "oh" (Vaughan 64). Commenting on this scene, Brown strangely argues that

> every aspect of this transcendent process emphasizes the mystery and secrecy that are necessary to its success: the intervention remains unexplained; 711 not only refuses to let Yorick tell her what he saw but insists that he keep it to himself; the audience is denied privileged access to Yorick's epiphany; and because the "journey" is specific to the individual, it is doubtful whether Yorick's knowledge would be useful to others, even if he were able to adequately express it. (Brown 15)

Figure 5. *Y: The Last Man: Safeword* Vol. 4 (2004), alternate cover by Aron Wiesenfeld.

From a critical perspective of reading against the problematic sexual and racial characterisation of 355, Brown's conclusion here is simply incorrect. In contrast, I suggest that Yorick's epiphany *is* significant in terms of *who* it was he saw in his near-death experience, namely 355 herself. Her appearance therein suggests that her presence and devotion to him is transcendent, a magical, spiritual force of light that is meant to constantly pull him from the brink of death as a source of renewed life and wisdom (Vaughan 16). Brown goes on to further claim that "355 has forsaken her name and the right to a personal life in order to fight for her country, but 'Safeword' strongly implies that she sets up Yorick's mysterious and intensely local intervention, thereby valuing his specific trauma above the basic mission parameter of keeping him alive for study" (Brown 27). In contrast, however, I contend that she fails to realise that as a Magical Negress, such dedication and concern about Yorick's well-being is still firmly entrenched within the *expected* behaviour of the Magical Negress and her attitude toward her white messiah (Brown 27).

This is proven in No. 58 *Whys and Wherefores* (2008), where Yorick confesses his feelings for 355 to her. She reasonably asks him how certain he can be about said feelings in view of the fact that throughout the series' 6-month timescale, Yorick does all he can to reunite with Beth. In response, Yorick sites his suicide intervention by 711, stating "what I saw at the end…what made me realise I don't want to die, no matter how miserable life gets? It was you" (Vaughan 13). Consider the Magical Negress undertones pervading the following exchange between Yorick and 355:

> YORICK: At the time, I didn't know what it meant. I… That's not true. I always knew, I just didn't WANT to know […] I knew I wanted to keep living in any world YOU were a part of […] For a million wrong reasons, I needed to believe that BETH was why I kept putting one foot in front of the other. Bit it wasn't who I was marching TOWARDS…It's who was marching next to me every step of the way.
> 355: 'NEXT to'? You were always ten paces BEHIND my black ass" and furthermore when 355 states that he can "can knock off the whole 'three-fifty' thing, you know […] That's over now. You're the one who told me I didn't have to be a number anymore, right? (Vaughan 18)

Ostensibly, this mutual deceleration of love suggests that 355's relationship with Yorick transcends the problematic sexual and racial dynamic it was predicated on throughout the entire series. I maintain, however, that regardless of the fact that the two have mutual feelings for one another, this does not annul the racial politics in the suggestion of their interracial union. Though comparatively mature at the conclusion of the series, Yorick's ignorance of the fact that his status as the last man, a white man, compounds, not solves the pre-existing problem of racial and gender politics which still exist as holdovers of patriarchal sociopolitical power in an ostensibly "post-patriarchal" world remains unchanged. As a result, Vaughan's narrative walks a very thin line between divergence from and re-circulation of the sexual and racial issues concerning black female characters and white male protagonists in contemporary comics specifically, and popular culture more generally.

In the last instance, it is clear that in terms of the political and cultural tensions between racial and sexual stereotypes and representational progressiveness in Western mainstream comics, Vaughan achieves a type of narrative sleight-of-hand, a misdirection concerning the centrality of the characters in *Y*. The narrative concerning the last white man on Earth serves "only as a pretext for writing about 'Other' people, including a black female hero" (Mafe 33). Simple arithmetic would seemingly validate this stance. As Mafe notes, 355 features in all save eight issues of the original 60 issue run. As such, her narrative centrality as a lead character is beyond doubt. However, this centrality is inextricable from the role and function she plays which Mafe also rightly describes as "juggling the roles of bodyguard, mentor, savior, friend, and love interest to the 'protagonist' Yorick" (Mafe 33). While this characterisation might question the roles between the white protagonist and peripheral non-white characters, it certainly does not negate 355's narrative role and function as a capable, obsessive, nurturing, and wise shepherdess, in short, as the story's Magical Negress.

Figure 6. *Y: The Last Man: Girl-on-Girl* Vol. 6 (2005), cover by Massimo Carnevale.

"Oh": Conclusion

In the final issue of the series, Yorick sees 355 in a vision and, realising that he was in love with her all along, simply says "Oh." Vaughan characterises this declaration as quietly surprising to Yorick in the same way that one discovers a simple solution to a complex problem. In terms of the racial and gender relations between Yorick and 355 as above discussed, "Oh" takes on the opposite tone namely, one of deflated disappointment. Here, "Oh" refers to the realisation that 355's paradoxical characterisation, though ostensibly a champion of black female empowerment within the narrow margin of representation, ultimately illustrates that black women still find themselves as Magical Negresses on the pages of highly lauded contemporary Western comic books. In this sense, *Y* exists within a very tumultuous space that has been adopted into mainstream gender politics, where it is "acceptable to be a fan of these 'geeky' intellectual properties [like *Y*], as long as they are still filled with patriarchal ideals" (Hill 81). Despite the fact that there exist numerous "online spaces for geek feminism"[1] (Hill lists Geek Feminism, The Learned Fangirl, Feministing, Feminist Frequency, The Black Feminist Geek), the issues concerning gender, identity, sexuality, and power still persist in their despite (Hill 81). While I admire Vaughan's narrative skill, we, as readers, should not allow admiration to bamboozle us and obfuscate the *fact* of the persistence of problematic and paradoxical representation of black womanhood in contemporary popular culture. As *Y* shows, the troubling paradoxes inherent in the political and cultural tensions between race, sexuality, stereotypes, and representational progressiveness also affect men as well. Like Carnevale's cover for the series' final volume, men, too, remain bound by the fetters of misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and sexual and racial stereotyping.

Figure 7. *Y: The Last Man: Whys and Wherefores* Vol. 10 (2008), cover by Massimo Carnevale.

1 The phrase 'geek feminism' refers to mostly feminist online groups dedicated to supporting, encouraging and discussing issues facing women and nonbinary individuals in geek communities, including science and technology industries

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