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The Secret Identity of Race: Exploring Ethnic and Racial Portrayals in Superhero Comic Books

Lowery Anderson Woodall III
University of Southern Mississippi

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The University of Southern Mississippi

THE SECRET IDENTITY OF RACE: EXPLORING ETHNIC AND RACIAL
PORTRAYALS
IN SUPERHERO COMIC BOOKS

by

Lowery Anderson Woodall, III

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2010

ABSTRACT

THE SECRET IDENTITY OF RACE: EXPLORING ETHNIC AND RACIAL PORTRAYALS IN SUPERHERO COMIC BOOKS

by Lowery Anderson Woodall, III

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Does race exist in comics? And if so, what do those characters tell us about how one of the largest fiction producing industries in the country has explained minority relationships to its millions of readers? This study took a close look at three of the most successful comic book characters of all time (Batman, Superman, and The Black Panther) and examines how each exemplifies a position that the comic book industry has taken on race over the years. Using a counter-narrative analysis informed by the strategies of Critical Race Theory and post-modernist thought, the racial messages lying beneath the surface in the each of these character's worlds was uncovered. The study took the provocative position that race is discussed in the most vivid and worthwhile terms by characters that are not openly ethnic. The dissertation provides three models of racialized behavior employed by comic book publishers to introduce race and ethnicity into their storylines. Hopefully, this study will act as a first step in shining a critical light on a section of the industry that has thus far been woefully ignored by many critics and scholars.

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A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
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Approved:

____ Dr. Christopher Campbell _____
Director

____ Dr. Andrew P. Haley _____

____ Dr. Fei Xue _____

____ Dr. Kimberly LeDuff _____

____ Dr. David R. Davies _____

____ Dr. Susan A. Siltanen _____
Dean of the Graduate School

December 2010

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife, Dana, for her constant love and support throughout this process.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: EVERY GOOD HERO NEEDS AN ORIGIN STORY

Introduction

In April of 1970, the creative team of writer Denny O’Neil and artist Neal Adams helped usher in the dawning of the Golden Age of American comic books with their collaboration on *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* #76.¹ Adams had previously helped revitalize interest in Marvel superhero series such as the X-Men and a short, but popular run of Avengers comics. O’Neil is largely credited with lifting the Batman series out of its campy 1960s quagmire, reacquainting the Dark Knight with his more macabre sensibilities. But, the *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* team-up represents the most complete expression of the comic book creators’ desire to tread into more socially conscious waters.

Like their previous ventures, DC called O’Neil and Adams in to breathe life back into a series that was very close to being pulled from shelves for lack of sales. The duo began their transformation by stripping Oliver Queen, the Green Arrow of his trust fund wealth. An embittered Queen began to view the world much differently in his poverty stricken state. Slowly his eyes were opened to the deep-seeded sufferings of the working-class. He no longer merely saved an old woman from a mugging and considered his heroly duties complete. He bemoaned his inability to keep that same woman from having to return home that night to tenement housing. The Green Arrow became O’Neil and Adams organ by which to call into question the usefulness of a superhero whose powers

¹ The Golden Age of comics in America runs from roughly 1970 to 1980 and is typified by a push towards more gritty storylines that did not shy away from the social upheavals occurring in the real-world environments that these superheroes inhabited.

cannot eradicate drug addiction, prejudice, and social inequity as easily as a Soviet missile or an errant asteroid.

Queen's ideological antithesis in these often heavy handed debates took the form of Hal Jordan, the Green Lantern. Unlike Queen, Jordan was forced to split much of his time defending Earth and a host of other intergalactic arenas beset with threats of war and famine. Jordan was further removed from his connection to humanity through his allegiance to The Guardians, the mythical council of immortals who bequeathed him the powers of the Green Lantern in the first place. These celestial quasi-deities demanded an un-flapping and unquestioning devotion to their methods of justice. O'Neil and Adams used this religious deference for the instruction of the Guardians as the springboard for quarrels between Arrow and Lantern that reshaped the framework within which the American comic superhero was to be cast, at least temporarily.

Issue #76 introduces this new dynamic when Jordan begins defending the landlord of a broken-down, inner-city apartment complex who complains that his tenants have refused to pay their rent and are now considered squatters. Jordan arrives to assist in shaking the dead-beat residents down for the past due rent or otherwise evict them for breaking the law. He is flabbergasted, however, when his presence is greeted by a hail of refuse streaming down from the windows of the occupied apartments. Before Jordan can retaliate against what he considers the actions of "animals...[and]...anarchists" though, Queen interjects himself into the fray accusing the Green Lantern of being out of touch with the concerns of the disenfranchised.²

² Denny O'Neil and Neil Adams, "No Evil Shall Escape My Sight," in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, April 1970, DC Comics, New York, NY, 4.

Queen proceeds to guide Jordan along a tour of the housing complex and its inhabitants. He points out an old woman who had depended on the petty thefts of her grandson to help make ends meet. Still defensive of his rigid interpretation of justice, Jordan's faith is shaken by an encounter with a homeless African American as he exits the apartments. The unnamed black man hobbles up to the crusader and presents him with the following moral dilemma: "I been reading about you...How you work for the blue skins...and how on a planet somewhere you helped out the orange skins...and you done a considerable [amount of] good for the purple skins! Only there's skins you never bothered with...!...The black skins! I want to know how come?!"³

Jordan shrinks from this critique stammering "I...can't."⁴ This confrontation thus sets into motion the social responsibility allegory which threads through the remainder of the series' run. Arrow and Lantern dedicate themselves to traveling cross-country to uncover the various maladies that threaten to delimit the American dream for those operating outside of the privileged classes.

Although the Adams/O'Neil run of the Green Lantern series was well received by critics netting the pair a Shazam Award for best Individual Story in 1970 and 71, sales of the comic remained timid. When Adams and O'Neil took over the comic in early 1970 the monthly sales figures for superhero titles totaled roughly 2,167,000. By the time DC pulled the plug on the series altogether in 1972 sales had dropped to a low of 1,565,000 units.⁵ The experiment in social consciousness was considered a failure at least for the Green Lantern comic.

³ Ibid, 6.

⁴ Ibid, 6.

⁵ Jonathan Hoyle, DC Monthly Sales Figures 1967-1987, reposted on the Comic Book Resource Forums website by Rob Allen, July 20, 2007. It should be noted when consulting these figures that at this time DC

Critics of the comic book industry would attribute this disappointing return on investment to a fundamental breach in comic book etiquette: comic book readers are not interested in hearing stories about Otherness. For years these commentators have cast blame on a close-minded audience unwilling to hold the hand of the conscientious publisher ushering them along a path of egalitarianism. These critics, like Marvel's Roy Thomas, insist "it [is] hard to get whites to buy comics in which the main character is [a minority]."⁶

Others insist authors like O'Neil and Adams are at fault for the poor handling of race and ethnic issues in comics. They argue that these authors find themselves tethered to a litany of cultural teachings, perhaps the over compensation of social reformist logic, that drown their (often) good intentions in cumbersome waves of euphemism and anachronism.⁷

This debate forms the foundation for the discussion presented in the present text. Why have texts centered on open depictions of racial Otherness so often been met with defeat on comic book stands? There may well be some truth to the argument presented above that traditionally white writing staffs come off as ham fisted when attempting to champion messages of tolerance through openly ethnic characters. And there are undoubtedly some comic readers who hold racist views, just as there are surely some golfers who join country clubs because they see them as bastions of segregation in an evolving world. But proponents of these explanations are oblivious to a basic truth of the comic book industry: race and ethnicity have always been a defining factor of comic

did not publish sales figures for individual comic titles. Instead, the numbers reported here reflect what were referred to as the Red Group of comics which included Green Lantern as well as Superman, Plastic Man and the remnants of the Jungle Comics series.

⁶ Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation* (Baltimore, MD, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 250.

⁷ *Ibid*, 249.

book storytelling, particularly for the superhero genre. I would suggest that the efforts of men like Adams and O'Neil failed mostly because they sought too virulently to fill a gap in comic's social conscience that had been occupied since at least the 1930s with the birth of the last son of Krypton.

This dissertation offers up a new view on the evolution of racial and ethnic imagery in comics. The picture it paints is a comic landscape rife, not just with racially Other characters, but heroes that have spent their entire commercial lives striving for, inculcating and accepting Otherness within themselves. The issue has never been one of the comic audience en masse turning away from titles in droves because they actively rejected Otherness as a basis for comic content. Rather, too many authors, artists, publishers, and critics have underestimated the capacity of readers for deciphering latent messages. Any avid reader of Superman comics will not hesitate to identify him as an alien. Batman readers could easily recite the tragic origin story of Bruce Wayne that left him an orphan. But these background tales expose more than simply what possessed the hero to don a costume and protect humanity. They speak to an isolationist rhetoric; a sense of anomie which readers have doubtless become aware of (even if not consciously) over the years has left their ethnic identities almost as malleable as their secret ones. They cannot only slip out of their street clothes and into capes and spandex suits. They can step into a phone booth as WASPS and emerge minutes later as any number of racial selves.

Very little scholarly research has been dedicated to a through examination of the individual costumed heroes that have been idolized by nearly three generations of Americans. Instead, academic inquiry into the social effects of comic books has tended towards a more holistic expression of their legitimacy as an art form.

And while these were undoubtedly worthwhile scholarly endeavors, they have nevertheless left a significant gap in the extant literature on the subject. By instead focusing my attention on three of the most enduring super hero characters of the 20th century, by following their arcs across the space of several decades, the researcher was able to create a tapestry of the true face of Otherness in comic books. These character studies reveal the three models of racial identity summoned up by the modern American comic book: The Other who desperately wants to be white (as represented by Superman), the person of privileged white decent who wishes he were an Other (as represented by Batman) and the Other who has finally become comfortable in his own skin (as represented by The Black Panther).

In elucidating the racial and ethnic Otherness of these characters that has lain dormant in the scholarly literature on the subject for so long, this dissertation promotes a bold revision of academic understanding on the role of comic books in American society. It is thus worth some effort to re-examine the classic view of comics' scholars on the issue of race. Sadly, very little extant literature exists on this subject. Unlike similar studies in the areas of television, film or print, comic books have been woefully under researched in matters of Otherness. For too long scholars have painted race relations in comic books as one of the medium's most lingering faults. They claim that racial politics in comics are sophomoric and regressive.

In the following pages the researcher utilized a counter narrative analysis to show that this view is inaccurate and incurious. By closely examining the extra-textual meanings and interpretations associated with some of the most popular comic story arcs of the last sixty years, this dissertation provides a new outlook on the portrayals of race.

For the first time the strategies of Critical Race Theory will be applied to one of the fastest growing mass media phenomenons in the United States. This study illustrates that long before television or films were creating meaningful roles for minority characters, the comic book industry provided a powerful outlet of expression for diverse viewpoints. That these radical narrative firsts have gone ignored is a byproduct of their implicit placement in the panels and the lack of critical attention paid to this area of print fiction. As it turns out, the most successful integrations of race into comics have come from characters that did not openly appear to be promoting minority values. It is theorized that such an approach allowed the writers and artists to explore vital racial issues without the intense scrutiny that came with developing openly ethnic characters. By laying out the three main ways in which racial otherness was framed by the two most prominent publishers in the comics industry, a springboard for more detailed and critical analyses of comics within the academic field is provided.

Hypotheses

Comic books have traditionally not been seen as a friendly milieu for discussion of racial otherness. This stemmed from the prevailing belief that many of the stereotypes that have conspired to oppress minorities are a staple of the super hero comic book formula. While the researcher does not deny that like every mass medium, comics have racial skeletons in their closet, affixing the racist motivations of a few writers and artists onto the entire genre is an unacceptable simplification of the industry. The first hypothesis holds that:

H1: Compelling evidence exists that the super hero genre represents a much more diverse and malleable appraisal of the racial condition in America than it has previously been given credit for in scholarly literature.

The underlying theme of hypothesis number one is therefore adaptability. That is, the institutional structure of the comic book industry has allowed for much more efficient implementation of ideological shifts designed to more accurately reflect the values of its readership. This logic leads to the formation of hypothesis number two:

H2: In many cases, super hero comics have augmented their depictions of race relations much more quickly than competing media (i.e., film and television). As a result, the comic book industry has often been more progressive than these media in racial portrayals.

This diversity that is alluded to needs explication to be properly implemented, however. We must uncover a common vocabulary for how to best define the parameters that racial otherness can assume in textual form. Looking back to the work of Ellis Cose, we find the first definition. He described the elements of black culture that has made elements of blackness (if not the physical form itself) so desirable among white males: “We set the standard for style and make concrete the meaning of cool. White men in boardrooms envy [us]... White kids in the suburbs want to talk like us, want to walk like us, want to dress like us.”⁸ Thus the first condition of racial otherness that could be expressed in popular media is the White or Dominant who wants to be an “Other.”

The black studies scholar Frantz Fanon develops an equally interesting theory that supposes many black men would wish to be white. He bases his discussion on the work

⁸ Ellis Cose, *The Envy of the World: On Being Black in America* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2002), 6.

of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and his theory of dialectics. Fanon insists that the goal of any race is recognition. In this case, recognition is meant to mean full citizenship. As Fanon explains: “Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose himself on another man in order to be recognized by him.”⁹ A cross-racial envy is then established between blacks and whites in the black man’s “struggle” to be accepted as a full and worthwhile human being.¹⁰ The distinction is an important one, for just as Cose stated with regard to the previous principle, this is not a case of black men wanting to be white men. Instead, it is a case of black men wanting to adorn the sociological accouterments of white men to be welcomed into the larger society. We can state the principle as “Others” who want to be White.

The final principle is perhaps the oldest as well. As authors Paul M. Sniderman and Thomas Leonard Piazza explain, “the importance of black racial solidarity has been recognized since systematic research on the political beliefs of black Americans first got underway.”¹¹ They classify several philosophical arenas that work in concert to establish the full nature of black pride in an individual (shared fate, desire for autonomy, etc.). These will be analyzed in more detail in a later chapter. For now, it is enough to say that the work of these researchers and countless others like them can corroborate the last principle stating that there are “Others” who are content in their “Otherness.” Taking each of these three principles into account the final hypothesis is rendered:

⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1952), 191.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 191.

¹¹ Paul M. Sniderman and Thomas Leonard Piazza, *Black Pride and Black Prejudice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 11.

H3: Super hero comic books explore the full triadic spectrum of racial relationships, each being highlighted by specific characters in the larger universes the writers have created. These are

1. The White who wants to be an “Other” – Batman
2. The “Other” who wants to be White – Superman
3. “The Other” who is content in his/her “Otherness” – The Black Panther

Each chapter of this dissertation explores how a single character in either the DC or Marvel universe represented one of these three ideologies. By examining them individually we are better able to understand the complexity held within each model. We are better able to see how and why certain models work remarkably well while others fail commercially. The conclusion then allows us to draw correlations between the three possibilities and create a reasonable framework that could be adopted by comic book publishers in the future to ensure that more racial diversity is accorded to their titles.

Theoretical Foundation

This study incorporates two related strands of research. Most obviously, the researcher was concerned with representations of Otherness in media. This topic has been tackled by several prominent black scholars including Bell Hooks and Carol Miller Swain. More specifically, this text uses Critical Race Theory (Heretofore referred to as CRT) to explain the “economics, history, context,...[and] unconscious” strategies that lead to the creation of racially charged messages in comics.¹² This relatively new discipline in the world of race studies seems the best approach for studying the topic of “how

¹² Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 3.

society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies” in a highly unconventional medium.¹³

A second and much older tradition has also found its way into my study. The science of hermeneutics or “‘message analysis’ or ‘things for interpreting’” has existed since the time of the Greeks although its modern usage has perhaps been perfected by Jacques Derrida.¹⁴ The importance of interpretation to this study cannot be overstated. In many cases I am exposing, or to phrase the process in a more traditionally hermeneutical fashion, deconstructing the messages woven into these panels. Not unlike theorists who have applied this method to litigious texts, I find myself “ferret[ing] out” the conscious and sub-conscious interpretations lent to the racial debate by the many artists, writers and editors who produced these pop culture snap shots of life in America.¹⁵

A more modern sister theory to the hermeneutic backbone of this research can be found in counter narratives. A relatively new practice in the realms of historical and rhetoric research, this area of scholarship concerns itself with uncovering the “positional” placement of the “dominant [with the] resistant.”¹⁶ This strain of scholarship asks many of the questions that are at the heart of understanding how implicit material might be received by audiences and developed by producers. Among the questions counter narration helps to answer are: “how [do] speakers position themselves in the tales they tell, . . . What can we reasonably expect an anticipated other to be able to hear and what claims might we adjust in their presence?”¹⁷

¹³ Ibis, 3.

¹⁴ Nick Szabo, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Tradition*, accessed on March 3, 2010, www.szabo.best.vwh.net/hermeneutics.html.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Michael G. W. Bamberg and Molly Andrews, *Considering Counter Narratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense* (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2004), x.

¹⁷ Ibid, x.

Interestingly, few of these theories have been used to explore popular culture content. Some like hermeneutics and CRT have traditionally been the province of understanding both ancient and modern law respectively. Counter narration is being applied by academics in various fields when collecting data (as in the case of oral histories) and in the reportage of that data. But many of these theories openly admit that they are highly malleable. Counter narrative theorists, for instance, concede that “the vast potential [for its expansion] is only just being realized.”¹⁸ Meanwhile, CRT practitioners can be found in fields as diverse as “education...political [science]...ethnic studies...[and] American studies.”¹⁹ Hopefully, this study will provide a new avenue for furthering the usefulness of such emerging research. What follows will be more detailed explanations of how each of these disciplines add a layer of theoretical support for the present study.

There have been a host of valuable scholars who have pointed out the continued presence of racialized thought especially amongst white males well into the 21st Century. While these depictions of blackness may not be infused with the naked racism of their forefathers, they exploit the very real potential for extra-textual readings. Perhaps the most important aspect of this tradition as it relates to the current study is how diverse the mediums through which these images may appear can be. Bell Hooks, one of the preeminent scholars in the field of race and gender studies, discusses this very issue. She recounts a story of walking into a restaurant with several white colleagues. The restaurant was prominently featuring “a row of gigantic chocolate breasts complete with nipples.”²⁰ While many of her friends saw the dessert as harmless, even absurd in its allusions to

¹⁸ Ibid, x.

¹⁹ Delgado and Stefanic, *Critical Race Theory*, 3.

²⁰ Bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 61.

sexuality the message was received much differently by Dr. Hooks. She noted in them “a sign of displaced longing for a racist past when the bodies of black women were commodity, available to anyone white who could pay the price.”²¹

This interpretation highlights not only the inescapable nature of racial elements to our cultural products, it introduces the apparatus of counter narration into the everyday lives of black individuals. There are clearly two messages being sent simultaneously with these breasts. What Hooks is able to produce in her reading is an intriguing question I hope to tackle in the world of comics: Was one of these the explicit and the other the implicit message of the text, or were both equally intentional? If for a moment we consider the messages as wavelengths – is it possible that these extra layers are always present but go undetected by whites merely because their cultural radars have not been as finely attuned to the signals being emitted from the texts?

Nor is such fetishization limited to edible texts. Hooks points to dancer Josephine Baker as another example of dual messages. Baker’s insistence on emphasizing her butt in many of her routines made “the erotic gaze of a nation move...downward.”²² There is more than a new wrinkle in the repertoire of dance steps being exploited here. This is the opening of a new philosophical debate on the worth of the black female form for Hooks. Tina Turner is yet another example of this type of imagery. Hooks explains that Ike Turner deliberately developed the on-stage persona of Tina “as wild sexual savage...from the impact of a white patriarchal controlled media shaping his perceptions of reality.”²³

Nor is this condition exclusive to black female identities. Hooks explains that the dominant culture perpetuates a vision of black masculinity that “constructs black men as

²¹ Ibid, 62.

²² Ibid, 63.

²³ Ibid, 67.

‘failures’ who are psychologically ‘fucked up,’ dangerous, violent, sex maniacs whose insanity is informed by their inability to fulfill their phallogentric masculine destiny.”²⁴ Hollywood has certainly assisted in the standardization of this phenomenon. It may well be that in attempting to paint a more culturally sensitive picture of the historical negro, many studios accidently created limitations on the kind of man a black male child could reasonably be expected to grow up to emulate. In *Harlem Nights* for instance, Hooks notes that the “black men do not appear as cowards unable to confront racist white males but are re-inscribed as tough, violent; they talk shit and take none.”²⁵ A similar situation persists in Spike Lee’s *Mo’ Better Blues* where she charges that the hero is consumed by a “phallogentricism...[that] has blocked his ability to develop a mature adult identity.”²⁶ Once again, white produced images have contained multiple levels of messages. In this case, they are so intricate that the phallogentric argument may only have been immediately apparent to most male viewers even within the black race.

Hooks further sees the successes of the African American community as an opening exploited by white society to indoctrinate a patriarchal, even white supremacist view of the United States onto black culture. She explains how the change in affordability of access created a more powerful if not quite so palpable racism: “With the television on, whites were and are always with us, their voices, values and beliefs echoing in our brains.”²⁷ Essentially, as media has become a more ubiquitous part of the American way of life, regardless of socio-economic barriers, the value system that it espouses has dulled the senses of a black populace.

²⁴ Ibid, 89.

²⁵ Ibid, 104.

²⁶ Ibid, 105.

²⁷ Bell Hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 110.

Carol Miller Swain warns that a new and potent set of white nationalists presents a unique challenge to further growth in the equal representation of minorities in media. She warns that “when not counterbalanced by a more inclusive moral vision, [this type of energy] has proven itself to be a thoroughly pernicious force in modern politics.”²⁸ As disturbing as this vision of renewed white radicalism might be, Albert Memmi fears such lobbying may not be necessary. After viewing Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*, he too agonized over that controversial trashcan thrown through the pizzeria window. Unlike Lee, he was not torn over white America’s refusal to see Mookie as a complete and worthwhile human being. He feared instead that Mookie was the personification of a new era of “dolorism” among the African American community.²⁹ Dolorism is the condition of “exaggerat[ing] one’s pains and attribut[ing] them to another” which Memmi claims the black community has been taught to do when they encounter resistance to upward mobility.³⁰ He worries that the “tyrant” of the patriarchal culture in America has convinced young blacks that there is futility in fighting the system.³¹ He worries that a flood of television, film and print images have stripped the oppressed of their sense of hope. He warns that these images are “careful[ly] promote[d] distractions” that minorities must keep constant vigil against if they are to overcome its numbing effects.³² These authors are not alone. There are numerous others who have devoted their professional selves to elucidating the negative perceptions of minorities of all kinds through popular culture iconography. This dissertation extends that conversation in new and controversial

²⁸ Carol Miller Swain and Russel Neili, *Contemporary Voices of White Nationalism in America* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), viii.

²⁹ Albert Memmi, *Decolonization and the Decolonized* (Gallimard, Paris: The University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 19.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 19.

³¹ *Ibid*, 19.

³² *Ibid*, 19.

ways into the realm of comic books which have so far been woefully underappreciated by critics and scholars of mass media.

Specifically, this study bases its findings in the CRT scholarship of Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. These researchers helped form the movement after they became disheartened over the lack of change brought about by civil rights legislation. In their primer on CRT, they claim that these legal victories “had stalled and in many respects, were being rolled back.”³³ In their most controversial assertion, Derrick Bell wrote an article published in the Harvard Law Review that claimed white elites had allowed *Brown v. Board of Education* to be judged in favor of desegregation in an effort to improve the position of whites in the eyes of international allies. Bell determined that the Supreme Court had been under considerable pressure to help shift “the loyalties of the uncommitted Third World, much of which was black, brown, or Asian.”³⁴

Although much of what has been written about CRT has been related to the equality of law, many of its guiding principles revolve around the meticulous, often alternative interpretation of texts which could easily be applied as theoretical support for a more representational narrative. Their social construction of race theory, for example “holds that race and races are products of social thought and relation...categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient.”³⁵ The larger issue here is whether or not race and ethnicity are performable. Can someone don a racial identity the way they don a cape or a mask? Much of what follows in the chapters this study has dedicated to individual super heroes operates on the premise that multiple racial/ethnic selves can exist simultaneously in the same person.

³³ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 4.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 19.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 7.

Closely related to this principle is the tenant of “intersectionality” which states that “no person has a simple, easily stated, unitary identity.”³⁶ Critical Race scholars see this phenomenon as one of the most vexing dilemmas faced by those who wish to understand how best to judge a person’s reaction to a given situation (be they judges, attorneys, or researchers). The problem is incurred by the fact that “these [individuals] exist at an intersection of recognized sites of oppression.”³⁷ Is hate speech hurled at a black woman walking down the street because she is black or because she is a woman? This “multiple coconsciousness” illuminates the various social roles we all play from day to day in our lives. Just like law makers, superheroes are placed in a highly stressed negotiation of these competing selves on a routine basis. Much of this dissertation is about uncovering how they deal with some of that intersectionality.

So how do we go about this process of identifying the various parts that make up this intersectionality? The authors suggest a two-part model. We must first concentrate on a “revisionist history” of the documents we encounter for as they so correctly point out, “majoritarian interpretation” has “sometimes suppressed [these voices] in [the] very record.”³⁸ We must encourage the reading of counter narratives attempting to anticipate for the divergent set of “experiences” brought to bear on the text by both its authors and its readership.³⁹ Critical Race theorists see this process as desirable, even noble. They contend that “attacking embedded preconceptions that marginalize others or conceal their humanity is a legitimate function of all fiction” and that counter narration provides one of

³⁶ Ibid, 9.

³⁷ Ibid, 51.

³⁸ Ibid, 20.

³⁹ Ibid, 41.

the most attractive opportunities to “challenge, displace or mock these pernicious narrative and beliefs.”⁴⁰

We have previously established that hermeneutics is the science of interpretation through text. But, we have not tackled one of the fundamental questions surrounding the field which is, “why hermeneutics has a privileged relation to questions of language.”⁴¹ Author Paul Ricoeur answers that hermeneutics is especially interested in studying the “polysemy” of language.⁴² This condition of language postulates that “words have more than one meaning when considered outside of their use in a determinate context.”⁴³ What hermeneutics is accomplishing is identifying the contexts under which the words were read and understood in a particular historical moment. It is also adeptly recognizing that the writer and readers of those words might not be experiencing the same contextual relationship to those words even when they inhabit the same chometric space. The intrusion of differing social, economic, or racial characteristics could play deciding factors in how the information is interpreted. When all four elements (author, reader, text, and context) are properly aligned a critical reading of their value can be discerned.

A second quandary which has plagued hermeneuticians for several years is the question: “how do we know?”⁴⁴ In that absence of a universal methodological construct, how can we as researchers be sure that our interpretations are valid? Some have attempted to rectify the situation by devoting themselves to establishing a clear epistemological solution. Others have clung to complex explanations rooted in the

⁴⁰ Ibid, 42-43.

⁴¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: John B. Thomson [ed., trans.], Cambridge University Press, 1981), 44.

⁴² Ibid, 44.

⁴³ Ibid, 44.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 54.

perceived ontological superiority of their position. I return to CRT for the confrontation of this polemic. Critical Race Theory holds that within counter narration “the storyteller [can be] in a better position to understand the issue at hand because of his or her background.”⁴⁵ This argument is also tied to my selection process in my methodology. As a researcher who has been engrossed in the fictive realities of comic books for more than 20 years now, I am in a unique position to draw conclusions and associations between the various “universes” created by both Marvel and DC Comics. The years I have spent surrounded by these characters is vital to allowing me access to the minds of the readers of these publications. It also plays a strong role in my ability to evaluate the narrative pressures placed on comic writers and artists by readers and their parents.

One final point that must be made about hermeneutics is the science’s fundamental recognition of the effects these interpretations have on readers of the work. As Ricoeur notes “we understand ourselves only by the long detour of the sings of humanity deposited in cultural works. What would we know of love and hate, of moral feelings and in general, of all that we call the self, if these had not been brought to language and articulated by literature?”⁴⁶ This message brings us back to the discussion of racial imagery (or the lack thereof) in popular culture productions. Even though the great thinkers involved in the formation of hermeneutic theory may not have conceived of a day when television, film, the internet, and yes, comic books would act as governing facilitators of cultural understanding, they did recognize the crucial role that such documents play in the formation of our sense of self. They even recognized the possibility of discovering latent consciousnesses within the text as Ricoeur states

⁴⁵ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 91.

⁴⁶ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences*, 143.

“reading introduces me into the imaginative variations of the ego. The metamorphosis of the world in lays is also the playful metamorphosis of the ego.”⁴⁷ I would add to this assessment that in so doing the reader can enact or discover alternative egos within the characters of the story.

Within the framework of hermeneutics and in keeping with the prescriptions of CRT, counter narrative or counter storytelling is defined as “the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives.”⁴⁸ Researchers in the area of counter narratives ask a question central to this study: “How can we make sense of ourselves and our lives, if the shape of our life story looks deviant compared to...the master narrative?”⁴⁹ These authors further tend to agree that the need for the creation of these narratives is strongest amongst those groups within a society who have been told that they represent a minority opinion. Examples of such groups can be found in a number of surprising contexts that transcend any one academic field.

Reiko Tachibana, for example, studies counter narratives in the form of individual memoirs of World War II written by German and Japanese citizens. He concludes that this is a necessary process that allows them to “liberat[e]...[themselves] from a dogmatic perspective on...the legacies of [the war].”⁵⁰ It further allows them for the first time in several years to engage in “an active participation” of memory, reclaiming some ownership over their historical image.⁵¹ Here, as is often the case, counter narration has

⁴⁷ Ibid, 144.

⁴⁸ Bamberg and Andrews, *Considering Counter Narratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense*, 1.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 1.

⁵⁰ Reiko Tachibana, *Narrative as Counter-Memory: A Half-Century of Postwar Writing in Germany and Japan* (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 1998), 2.

⁵¹ Ibid, 2.

been applied less out of choice as a need to fill an otherwise vacuous hole. Such was the case for ethnographers interested in pursuing research in the deaf community according to author Paddy Ladd. She says that the general public's tacit unwillingness to accept the existence of normal, productive, but deaf collectives has resulted in an appalling lack of critical insight into the lives of these individuals. She states "in order to even establish the existence of a Deaf community one has to work one's way through a series of ideological strata which attempts to deny its existence."⁵² The deleterious effects of this paucity on the Deaf community are self-evident. Medical, to say nothing of social, breakthroughs in scientific research that could potentially improve the lives of these people have likely been set years behind by ignorance. Perhaps worse, a measure of citizenship has been stripped from these people based on their disability.

Janice A. Radway found similar use for counter narration in a study on women's perceptions of romance novels. She performed a case study analysis of the reading habits of women in the small town of Smithton. Although the precise location of Smithton is not revealed, it is described as a "Midwestern community...[s]urrounded by corn and hay fields."⁵³ She concerned herself with uncovering the meanings, both explicit and implicit, that these women took away from the literature. Her answers turned out to be as diverse as the women consuming the novels. For some, reading was equated with an act of rebellion (the subject matter of that reading was quite beside the point). For others it brought on escapist fantasies of the sensitive male figures that they so wished to interact with.

⁵² Paddy Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* (Tonawada, NY: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2003), 169.

⁵³ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press 1991), 46.

The basis for these findings was Radway's assertion that "culture is both perceptible and hidden, both articulate and covert."⁵⁴ To Radway anytime a text was exposed to more than one reader, it was subject to more than one interpretation. And while these interpretations might be wildly differentiated from each other, she further reasoned that when "ethnographies of reading" were formed by members of similar social groups a culturally specific message could be gleaned from the text.⁵⁵ Stated in her own words: "similarly located readers learn a similar set of reading strategies."⁵⁶ True, but it would further seem that as hermeneutics has taught us, each woman individualized the books' messages to her specific needs. The characters became shells into which the women could pour their own identities. The readers of comics may in fact be even more likely to invest themselves so heavily in their character of choice as their minds (mostly children) are still in formative stages of cognition. It is this fluidity of persona that makes counter narration such an appropriate choice as a foundation for this study.

Methodology

As a lifelong reader of comics, in a sense, every major superhero comic of the past 60 years deserves a place among the population of this study. Unfortunately, the logistics of including such a huge group of texts would be impractical. Instead, three major strands of the superhero narrative have been identified based on the theoretical foundations of race relations laid out in the previous section. These were also based on the characters that most clearly represented the categories established in the hypotheses developed for this study. Collectively, the three superheroes that make up the population of this study encompass 170 years of comic book writing. In the interest of fairness and

⁵⁴ Ibid, 210.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 4.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 8.

diversity, heroes from both major comic publishers, DC and Marvel, appear in the following chapters. Without question these are the two companies whose stories have shaped the socialization of generations of youth through their multi-arched storylines making them the obvious choices for anyone interested in the social effects of comics on American readers.

I have chosen Superman and Batman to represent the DC Universe. Not only were they chosen for their exceptional ability to express the underlying counter narratives which are the central interest of this research, they also represent the two most recognizable superheroes of the past 60 years. I would suggest that someone who knows next to nothing of comics or their history would still be able to tell you that Superman wears a red cape and flies. Similarly, and thanks in part to the recent popularity of Chris Nolan's film trilogy, the basic tenants of the Batman series have entered into the space of general knowledge. While not as well known as either of these two characters, the Black Panther is the longest running, openly minority hero in either the DC or Marvel archives. His presence is necessary to come to an understanding of why more characters displaying these traits have failed and what it is that made him different. No examination of race in comics would be complete without a thorough entry on the Black Panther.

The process of detailing the ebbs and flows of each issue for the three characters would prove both monotonous and repetitive. It might in fact damage the credibility of the study by making each point offered appear so plodding as to be mundane. It would certainly make the text far less readable as well which would harm cross-disciplinary appeal, one of the primary goals of this research.

How then are we to go about the task of choosing sample issues? Speaking from an empirical position, each comic book character's arc will be broken down into decades. I have selected purposively three comics from each decade for detailed analysis. This provides 18 examples in the Batman and Superman chapters and 15 examples in the Black Panther chapters. I often expand on these examples with brief asides on similarly themed issues surrounding the ones being highlighted. This allows for a through analysis of the topic without treading into redundancy.

I base these figures on the precedent set by authors Bill E. Peterson and Emily D. Gerstein in their 2005 study. Their content analysis of DC and Marvel comics produced from 1978 to 1992 required them to tackle many of the same sampling issues I face now. Realizing that coding every issue of eight separate titles published over 14 years would total roughly 1,400 comics, the authors compromised. They decided that they could obtain a representative sample by only coding the issues published in December for each title. This would mean that when broken down for each title covered, the authors were examining 14 issues for each hero they were interested in studying.⁵⁷ Which is slightly exceeded by this dissertation.

Methodological Tools

I have adopted a post-modernist methodological approach for analyzing the contents of this study. But what is post-modernism? In the spirit of the counter narrative nature of this dissertation's argument, let us examine that question by explaining what it is not. Modern critics would argue that knowledge exists independent of the audience that it addresses. This stretches back to the Enlightenment and a newfound trust in the

⁵⁷ Bill E. Peterson and Emily D. Gerstein, "Fighting and Flying: Archival Analysis of Threat, Authoritarianism, and The North American Comic Book," *Political Psychology*, (2005). 26:6.

truthfulness of science and logic as dictators of action. Post-modernists would instead argue that truth is perceptual. The audience is made an agent in its own education because it is “an information processing system that integrates selectively.”⁵⁸

Post-modernists also accept that many of the same environmental factors act as influencing agents for both producer and consumer. Modernists “compartmentalize...most symbolic forms from criticism.”⁵⁹ This view would complicate the interpretation of a text because it would invalidate the ability of the reader to draw conclusions from the text not specifically identified for them. Lacking the capacity to make shared inferences with the producer, implicit readings would be impossible. By “dissolving” this separation the opportunity for counter narrative interpretations becomes a reality.

Furthermore, the modern critic’s dependence on the opinions of experts creates a finite realm of possible solutions to the world’s problems. Since post-modernism allows for a more equal footing between experts and laymen “human communication” can take on “a series of contradictory orientations” without invalidating either viewpoint.⁶⁰ It is crucial for a study such as this that seemingly oppositional readings be possible from the same base text within a target social group. Such an assumption is made possible through post-modern thought.

Finally, the post-modern critic “emphasizes the uniqueness of each situation” or in this case each character.⁶¹ Essentially, it is argued that various “communities” when presented with a message will read into that message the symbols that are most useful to

⁵⁸ Bernard L. Brock, *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth Century Perspective*, (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1972), 435.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 435.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 436.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 436.

them and their needs regardless of the prescriptions of pre-standing theoretical models for appropriate reactions.⁶² This would indicate that it is possible for Black, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American children to see themselves in comics even when their physical bodies are not directly manifested on the pages laid in front of them. They see themselves because they need to.

This approach seemed the most logical choice as post-modernist critics have expressed the foundational principles on which a study such as this is based. They believe that a newfound emphasis must be placed on not only the cultural productions of our society but the producers themselves. They recognize the institution as “a decisive variable in understanding what the rhetorical process is.”⁶³ It would be impossible to approach a study such as this without accounting for the authors, artists and publishers who helped craft the works before they hit the newsstands.

They also speak commonly of the intrinsic relationship between ideology and criticism. The emergence in recent years of feminism, Latino-Critical Studies and GLBTQ research plants post-modernist criticism as a sympathetic methodology for those looking to make “the ideological dimension of such criticism explicit.”⁶⁴

Finally, the post-modern perspective is one of the few methodologies that creates a satisfactory balance between producer and consumer. A considerable amount of attention is paid to the construction of the text-object as I have already discussed. But, the audience for that message is not painted as passive in their response. The audience is perceived as an agent in their cultural indoctrination. They are “an information

⁶² Ibid, 436.

⁶³ Bernard L. Brock, Robert L. Scott, and James W. Chessebro, *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth-Century Perspective* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 431.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 432.

processing system that integrates selectively, ultimately creating whatever is perceived as information.”⁶⁵ It is essential to the applications of this project that I selected a methodology that allowed the end user this type of freedom. A lesser theory that only supplied agency to the producer would have prevented the complex interpretations of the text that are occurring at for readers helping create the full counter narrative.

The implementation of this methodology occurs in a four-stage process for each character being reviewed. The first step involved identifying “the strategies contained within an author’s original work.”⁶⁶ This is a somewhat lengthier process for this study then it might be in more traditional forms of research because the institutional structure of the narrative requires a number of authors to be examined. For one issue of a Batman comic there are at least three authors operating at any one time, all of which have a tremendous impact on the final product – the writer, the artist, and the publisher (usually represented by the editor). Each of these individuals exerts a unique set of “experiences and understandings that shaped the original work.”⁶⁷ This step helps me establish the existence of competing narrative threads at the production level.

Next, the historical and cultural context under which each narrative was constructed was identified. This involved explicating the “roles, tones and moods as well as the dichotomies, values, attitudes, and language choices” that exemplify the era of the text’s creation.⁶⁸ These factors take on considerable importance for comics analysis because unlike television shows or films they exist in a longitudinal system of ideas. They must be re-tooled at various stages to more accurately reflect the society they are

⁶⁵ Ibid, 435.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 438.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 438.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 438.

supposed to mirror without nullifying the original values that were imbued to the character in his origin story.

Relatedly, in the third step, the intended audiences for each comic was identified. Like all mass media products, comics are designed to be sold. By identifying concerns encountered by writers or editors or controversies stirred by angry parents or advocacy groups, a more accurate picture of how a particular racial identity was developed, exalted or undermined for a specific character.

Finally, identification was made of the “political or power relationships [and how, over time, those] shift...toward a system of mutual sharing, respect, and equal decision making and action.”⁶⁹ It is here that the expression of counter narratives and counter storytelling strategies became fully apparent. By continually monitoring the alignment of the ideological, social and economic needs of the producer and consumer, I mapped the historical path taken by each character portraying their intended self and their perceived racial self. Only by closely observing the co-ordination of each of these four steps could the racial identities of the comics characters be properly appreciated. It should be noted before moving on that these steps are repeated several times throughout the course of a given chapter. As the cultural climate around a character changes, his perception and identity as a minority is also compromised. The methodology is one of constant evaluation and re-evaluation which is why experience and prior knowledge play such a key role in correctly assessing the position of the characters in their comic environments and in the minds of fans.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 438.

Dissertation Outline

Each chapter in this dissertation deals with a different iconic superhero and where better to start than with the mild-mannered reporter for the Daily Planet that reinvented the path comics would take over the next sixty years, Superman. Clark Kent and his Kryptonian alter-ego represent the most profound example of an Other attempting to assimilate into an Earth-like routine, which for the publishers and readers of the Man of Steel meant becoming the consummate white male.

Despite hailing from another planet, indeed another galaxy, Kal-El⁷⁰ has consistently exhibited a desire to take on the Mid-Western American values of his adoptive Earth parents. Recognizing Superman's status as an immigrant is not especially new ground in academia. Other researchers have noted that the Superman narrative speaks to an orphaned aesthetic both paternally and geologically. This chapter seeks to expand on and elucidate this vein of scholarship by addressing a more pertinent question: at what point during the assimilation process does Superman become the disguise and Clark Kent the more complete person?

If Superman is truly a tale of an immigrant Other slowly peeling away the layers of his ethnic self in favor of a more Americanized ideology, then the text can be seen as the emergence of Clark Kent not the Man of Steel. This reframing of the mythology to provide a more appropriately significant interpretation of the Kent character invests the text with a far more powerful commentary on the nature of immigration and cultural imperialism.

A second issue brought to bear deals with the underlying intentionality of the character's ethnic sensibilities. What did Joe Shuster and Jerry Seigel hope to achieve by

⁷⁰ Superman's birth name on his home planet.

fashioning a character engrossed in the immigrant experience? This chapter posits that Clark Kent and Superman act as pedagogical tools devolved in part to inculcate a set of American beliefs into the minds of young readers. Seigal and Shuster were themselves the product of Jewish immigrants and understood all too well the challenges of adapting to the social norms of a new country. By presenting Kent/Superman as a model they may well have hoped to save other young immigrants some of the growing pains of positioning oneself between two cultures.

The second chapter focuses on the incorporation of racial undertones into the Batman comic series. While Bruce Wayne appears to be the epitome of white wealth and privilege, I argue that this racial coding does not necessarily extend to his costumed personae. In fact, it may be his intimate acquaintance with upper-class white society that propels him towards a radical appropriation of racial Otherness as part of his crime fighting.

Put more simply, this chapter argues that Batman comprises the first instance of a mainstream African American superhero. This position is built off of extant literature that insists Bruce Wayne and Batman occupy separate psychological planes. Since race is arguably as much a psychological as a physical manifestation, I contend that Batman amounts to Wayne's inborn desire to deny his racial heritage.

It would not be enough, however, to merely indicate that Bruce Wayne might be capable of juggling multiple racial selves. The chapter must ask why a man who seemingly every conceivable convenience and luxury already available to him would want to don a second skin. By examining the cultural forces acting upon creator Bob Kane during his formative years, I attempt to explain how and why latent traces of

African American sensibilities were threaded into the fabric of the character from the earliest issues.

The final chapter deals with the emergence of The Black Panther as the first truly successful iteration of a minority superhero. Unlike the men discussed in the preceding chapters, the Panther cannot recede from his racial self when convenient. More than any other character discussed he openly has to address and confront issues of racial Otherness.

While Stan Lee attempted to portray the Panther as a proud black man, there are interesting questions that need to be addressed before accepting this as the message that was consumed by young readers, black and white. He was the ruler of a fictitious African kingdom. Could it be that this geographic distancing allowed white children to feel less threatened by the hypermasculinity of a black superhero? Does his refusal to take up residence as a U.S. citizen create a false impression that black people do not deserve super powers (or wealth, or social mobility) because unlike their white counterparts they can not be trusted to use it responsibly (i.e. to protect the interests of white people)? Was the selection of such a controversial name for this groundbreaking character an attempt to undermine his position within the Marvel Universe? No critical researcher has ever addressed any of these questions. If this study achieves nothing else, it will still have shed the first significant academic light on the Black Panther character in over 50 years.

Comic Book Readership

One of the most stunning and unfortunate facts of comic book research is how little empirical data has been collected over the years. Comic book publishers seem to have had a down right aversity to surveys and demographic polling of their audiences. A

careful analysis of Pew Research statistics going back to 1935 shows absolutely no questions ever asked to respondents that specifically named comics as a topic of conversation. The closest any poll ever came to doing so was a group of questions from 1946 that were designed to test for opinions on juvenile delinquency. The study named poor reading materials as one of the influences on such hoodlumistic behavior. Presumably, one could reason that in an era of Comic Book Codes and congressional hearings, a rolled up copy of a Superman story might have fallen into the prevue of poor reading habits.

What can be gleaned from the small number of statistical studies done on the comic book industry over the past sixty years or so is this: the fan base appears to be historically diverse. On December 27, 1943 the Market Research Company of America published findings that indicated “95 percent of all children ages eight to eleven read comic books regularly.”⁷¹ Those figures only dropped off slightly when the age range was raised to 12 – 17 (84%). Even adult readers (18 – 30) admitted to picking up comics although at a much lower rate (34%).⁷² From these statistics it seems reasonable to at the very least accept that minority children in the earliest age range must have been heavily exposed to comics. Based on population statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau there were 13,454,405 respondents to the 1940 census that identified themselves as a race other than Caucasian.⁷³ If we assume that the population does not grow at all between 1940 and 1946 and then assume conservatively that only 30% of those 13 million people are children, we come up with a figure that is roughly 4 million minority children in the

⁷¹ Matthew Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 27.

⁷² *Ibid*, 27.

⁷³ “United States Census Bureau, United States – Race and Hispanic Origin: 1790 to 1990,” accessed on April 14, 2010, www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/twps0056.html

United States at the time of this report. Ninety-five percent of 4 million would 3.8 million minority children who would have been consuming comic books as early as the late 1940s. That number would mean that the amount of minority children reading comics in the 1940s almost outnumbered the total audience for the Lone Ranger (4.2 million viewers) which would premiere on ABC only four years later.⁷⁴

But what was drawing these children to comic books over competing media? Author Matthew J. Pustz notes that audiences made a very “direct identification” with these masked avengers.⁷⁵ In a culture where many of these minority children were told didn’t belong in society, it became comforting to “imagine that their...everyday existence was merely a lie hiding a heroic, powerful interior” just as Clark Kent’s glasses betrayed his role as Superman.⁷⁶ Cartoonist Jules Fieffer also uses this logic to explain why so many boy-heroes of comics’ early heyday fell flat with audiences. Much as I argue, openly racialized heroes failed because a racial line already threaded through many issues of popular comics. Fieffer insists that comic book producers misunderstood what drove so many children to voraciously consume their products. Children weren’t interested in these younger heroes (Robin, Bucky, etc.) because it prevented them from living the fantasy of the hero. They could dream of growing up to be as strong and powerful as Batman or Superman but they could look at themselves in the mirror and see that they lacked the prowess and skills of one of these sidekicks that were usually right around their age. From this standpoint, the superhero acts as a covenant with the minority reader,

⁷⁴ “TV Ratings 1950 – 1951,” accessed on April 14, 2010, www.classictvhits.com.

⁷⁵ Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*, 27.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 27.

presenting a “version of...[him/herself] in the future.”⁷⁷ It is something to be strived for, a promise of a better, less racist world ahead.

Many adult African Americans were likely introduced to the world of comics through their participation in World War II. I will discuss the efforts of comic book writers and illustrators to encourage enlistment by minorities in the chapter on the history of the comic book industry. For now it is enough to say that military personnel became intimately familiar with comics during their tours of duty. Officials liked the books because they provided “lightweight entertainment.”⁷⁸ By the war’s end, over “two-thirds” of all soldiers reported reading comic books as a regular leisurely activity. According to the National Archives “over 2.5 million African-American men registered for the draft, and black women volunteered in large numbers.”⁷⁹ Many of these soldiers would bring their new habits home with them creating increased demand in later decades for more adult fare on newsstand shelves.

Another study done during the formative years of comic books reveals several traits of the average comic reader that could easily be applied to minority readerships. Katherine M. Wolf and Marjorie Fisk’s 1949 article, “The Children Talk About Comics” indicates that reading of comic books is often associated with feelings of social isolation and alienation. For example, in their study “52 percent of children short for their ages had become fans.”⁸⁰ Socioeconomic status also played a roll in their findings as “54 percent of children” with parents in “nonprofessional” positions became comic book fans.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Ibid, 28.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 31.

⁷⁹ “National Archives, Pictures of African Americans During World War II,” accessed on May 1, 2010, <http://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/ww2-pictures/>.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 34.

⁸¹ Ibid, 34.

Pairing an economically disadvantaged childhood with a sense of personal distance from one's peers would certainly have described children of most minority backgrounds in the 1940s and 50s well.

There is also a considerable amount of anecdotal data that would seem to suggest comic fandom reaches minorities. In his book, *Comic Book Culture*, Matthew Pustz identifies a wide variety of comic book enthusiast categories. There is the fan boy who obsessively purchases each issue of a comic even if he or she is unsatisfied with the direction the comic is taking. The weekender who browses through comic book shops reminiscing over favorite characters. The collectors who hoard special edition issues in the hopes they will one day be worth money. With so many different classifications, Pustz explains that researchers can not help but be struck standing in a comic shop by the “variety in this popular culture audience...[and the]...diversity among mainstream readers.”⁸² In the end, like any mass medium comics have come to represent an important part of the popular culture narrative in the United States. Just as diverse groups of individuals are drawn to movie theaters and living room television sets, a wide range of readers have found comfort and enjoyment out of superhero comic adventures over the years.⁸³

⁸² Pustz, *Comic Book Culture* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 66.

⁸³ For more information on minority readership of comics I encourage readers to examine the following resources: The Museum of Black Superheroes at www.blacksuperhero.com, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics and Their Fans* by Jeffery Brown, *Finding Other Heroes: African American Comic Book Creators, Characters, and Archetypes* by John Jennings and Damian Duffy, www.comicbookresearch.org, *Inks: Cartoon and Comic Art Studies* edited by Lucy Shelton Caswell, *The International Journal of Comic Art* edited by John Lent, *The Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* edited by David Huxley and Joan Ormrod, *SIGNS – Studies in Graphic Narratives* edited by Fabio Gadducci, *Studies in Comics* edited by Julia round Chris Murray Dean Chan and M. Thomas Inge, Personal correspondence with Dr. Jeffery A. Brown established via interview that he firmly believed minorities read comics regularly. He was also able to establish that little to no statistical information had been collected on this subject in any known database.

CHAPTER II

BACK ISSUES: A SHORT HISTORY OF THE COMIC BOOK IN AMERICAN CULTURE

Origin Stories: Before There Were Superheroes

The comic image captured the public imagination long before costumed heroes became the staple of the industry. As early as the 1890s newspaper audiences were being introduced to a colorful cast of, mostly ethnic, characters. Editors of competing publications were using them to fuel an addiction to the increasingly mass medium. Newspaper moguls had determined that the key to long-term success was “habit formation” among readers.⁸⁴ Many audiences at this time lacked the media literacy forged from hours of television consumption and web page views. These characters would “achieve celebrity status” by providing a “continuing cast” of characters whose adventures could be followed week in and week out.⁸⁵

But if the comic strip was born of economic shrewdness, it was nurtured by adaptability. Author Ian Gordon notes that “polysemic characters” populated many of the most popular early comic strips.⁸⁶ Dating as far back as the Yellow Kid, audiences seemed most attracted to characters whose racial or ethnic background could be manipulated. According to Gordon, audiences often would take these white ethnic characters and “through a reading other than the author intended” craft a new racial identity for them.⁸⁷ In the case of the Yellow Kid, he was originally drawn to represent an Irish immigrant. His author and illustrator, Richard Outcault began receiving letters from

⁸⁴ Ian Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture: 1890-1945* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 34.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 34.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 62.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 62.

fans identifying him as Chinese. Presumably, this had something to do with his “bald” head, “jug ears, and buck teeth” which set against a bright yellow nightgown gave some readers the wrong impression.⁸⁸ Outcault quickly capitalized on the misrepresentation, however. When Chinese General Li Hung Chang visited New York City in September 1896, *The New York World* featured a one panel cartoon of him being led in a parade down the city’s streets by the Yellow Kid. Similarly murky racial coding could be found in another of Outcault’s creations, the Hogan’s Alley Gang and Rudolph Dirks’ Katzenjammer Kids.

While newspapers around the country had “transformed a particular type of urban imagery into a national commodity” they were not comfortable affording African American characters the same polysemic latitudes. Most black characters became variations on the “single stereotypical image of Sambo.”⁸⁹ Although most comic strips “represented a negotiation among artists, syndicates, and readers over commerce..., identities and their construction” there was little doubt where were black characters fit in this hierarchy – dead last.⁹⁰

This stubborn refusal to incorporate more polysemic imagery into the comic strips seems to have turned many readers away from even the most historically iconic examples from the medium. Outcault had one of his first commercial busts with the introduction of the New Bully in the *New York World* in February 1898. The knife wielding Bully was depicted as a cutthroat savage without an ounce of intelligence or leadership to his name. He maintained his position at the top of the gang’s food chain by brute force alone. The strip was cancelled after only one month.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 29.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 60.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 60.

Outcault's second attempt at an African American character was still more deplorable. Pore Lil' Mose first published in 1900, was Outcault's take on the Zip Coon image. The Zip Coon was an offshoot of the coon stereotype popularized in minstrel shows. He represented the Post-Reconstruction black who "did not know his place...[who] thought he was as smart as White people; however his frequent malapropisms and distorted logic suggested that his attempt to compete intellectually with Whites was pathetic."⁹¹ Worse yet, the strip perpetuated the notion that Reconstruction had effectively ended all problems faced by the black community. Outcault was feeding into the perception that "African Americans lived in some version of Arcadian paradise and wanted for nothing."⁹²

Outcault can not take credit for creating the lasting image of African American culture in comic strips, however. That dubious honor goes to William Marriner who designed the Sambo and his Funny Noises strip for the T.C. McClure newspaper chain. The strip centered around Sambo's altercations with the Tank Brothers. The white siblings would constantly dream up schemes to tease, torture or humiliate Sambo by outsmarting him. Many of the early strips relied on a single gag. They would find some way of demonstrating how hardheaded Sambo was. He would hide under a bowler hat that the brothers would encourage people to kick or eggs would be cracked over his skull. This was of course another attempt to solidify the intellectual inferiority of the black race through popular culture.

⁹¹ David Pilgrim, *The Coon Caricature, The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*, Ferris State University, accessed on June 12, 2010, <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/coon/>.

⁹² ⁹² Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture: 1890-1945* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 65.

Oddly some scholars have read the Sambo comic as a progressive text. On many occasions throughout the strip's history, Sambo would seemingly outsmart the brothers. These instances of retribution often "reassert...stereotypes...because they result from either dumb luck or childlike innocence."⁹³

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Sambo's life did not end on the printed page. He became one of the first black characters in an animated short feature. Thirteen episodes of the Sambo cartoon were produced before the character was dropped after his illustrator Pat Sullivan left the project to pursue a job working with Charlie Chaplin. Despite his short tenure on screen, Sambo⁹⁴ remains a pivotal character in cinema history. Not only was he one of the first black animated characters, he is widely believed to have been the inspiration behind the much more popular Felix the Cat series.

In fact, many of the early cartoon images of race took their cues from newspaper comics who "by the time animated cartoons made their debut in the second decade of motion pictures...had already imbued black characters with negative and degrading racial stereotypes."⁹⁵ The replication of this imagery seemed almost impossible to avoid since many of the early animation artists "were recruited from the ranks" of newspaper cartoonists.⁹⁶ Originally, black characters became popular among animators from a purely aesthetic point of view. Many early cartoonists found they "made depicting motion easier."⁹⁷ Their representation on screen quadrupled in the twenties and thirties as

⁹³ Ibid, 68.

⁹⁴ Who was renamed Sammy Johnsin in the films to avoid a lawsuit.

⁹⁵ Henry T. Sampson, *That's Enough Folks: Black Images in Animated Cartoons, 1900 – 1960* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1998), 1.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 1.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 2.

animators became enamored with “exploit[ing] the extraordinary popularity of black music” following the sound revolution in film.⁹⁸

One of the most iconic black characters to emerge from this era was Bosko the Talk-Ink Kid. Hugh Harman and Rudolph Ising were hired by Warner Brothers to head a new division in animation called Loony Tunes aimed at competing with Disney. Their flagship series starred the amorphous Bosko and his girlfriend Honey. Each episode of the series was intended to highlight new tracks from the “Vitaphone song catalog.”⁹⁹ While the “minstrel show routine and southern accent” employed by the characters “clearly identified them as black stereotypes” many reviewers failed to even recognize them as human beings.¹⁰⁰ Critiques of the first two Loony Tunes features named them alternately as “monkey [and] mutt.”¹⁰¹ Animation scholars have referred to him as “an elastic, black golliwog.”¹⁰² Even a fellow animator who worked for Harman and Ising admits “I never knew what Bosko was.”¹⁰³ Be that as it may, a peek inside the recording studio would have revealed a much more definitive response. Rochelle Hudson and Carmen Maxwell would often wear blackface makeup while recording their dialog for the episodes.

Lil’ Eightball picked up where Bosko left off. Only there were no debates over what Lil’ Eightball was meant to represent. Animator Walter Lantz had created “a stereotypical black boy” so patently racist that “many historians would prefer to forget”

⁹⁸ Ibid, 2.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 11.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 12.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 12.

¹⁰² Charles Soloman, *Enchanted Drawings: The History of Animation* (New York: Wings Books, 1989),

100.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 100.

he ever existed.¹⁰⁴ Even Lantz would go on to publicly apologize for his actions. In a statement to the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1944 he denounced “any...derogatory treatment...concerning the Negro.”¹⁰⁵ He also became a leading member of the Hollywood Screen Cartoon Producer’s Association which named as one of its primary objectives the rectification of “harmful caricatures of minority races of American citizens.”¹⁰⁶

Another Disney competitor, Hanna-Barbera would also take a stab at black characters in their early work. The duo first won fame for their Tom and Jerry cartoons produced for MGM. The caretaker of the home in the Tom and Jerry cartoons was Mammy Two-Shoes, a dim-witted southern black maid. The show utilized “incorrect grammar, and mispronouncing and misusing common words” to indicate to the audience that this woman fit into the dominant white expectations for black success.¹⁰⁷ They further dehumanized her by refusing to show her entire body throughout the majority of the cartoon’s run. Only twice, in nineteen appearances do we see the silhouette of Mammy. The rest of the episodes feature her only from the waist down. Producers feared the images of Mammy so offensive that in later years the cartoons featuring her “were edited to substitute the voice of the stereotypical black maid character with the voice of an Irish woman.”¹⁰⁸

Warner Brothers continued this racist tradition well into the 1940s. As comic books were presenting increasingly liberalized images of black America in an effort to

¹⁰⁴ Sampson, *That’s Enough Folks: Black Images in Animated Cartoons, 1900 – 1960*, 27.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 27.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 27.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 55.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 55.

enlist servicemen, cartoons from the studio were flagrant in their disregard for racial sensitivities. Chief among the authorial voices leading this charge was Bob Clampett Jr. who famously developed two cartoons that the studio later banned from ever airing on any medium again. The first of these, *Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs*, was a caustic reinterpretation of the Snow White mythology from a black perspective. To say the effort was insulting would be generous. In their zeal to top Disney, the company had allowed one of its illustrators to “capitalize...on...vulgar...[and] overt sexuality.”¹⁰⁹ Every character in the tale is abused in ways far more realistic than most cartoons would have allowed. A hit is taken out on Snow White by the evil queen at one point. The Murder Inc. team arrives, kidnaps Snow White, and implies some form of rape only to have her smile and thank them as they leave her stranded in the forest. This is a clear return to the trope of the happy-go-lucky negro.

The second of Clampett’s films *Tin Pan Alley Cats* finds a Fats Waller stand-in spending a wild night at a jazz club. He is accosted by a group of church parisoners singing outside the club who beg him not to enter. They warn of the evil temptations that lurk inside. Their warnings come to fruition when the main character is sent into an alcoholic dream-fantasy in which he encounters a nightmare world. The implication that it is “better to remain within the orderly calm of religion and polite music” clearly creates an impression for the viewer that jazz and by association black culture is the gateway to a life of sadness, regret, and chaos.

The power of these portrayals rests on a foundation of understood cultural capital. Their representations matter because the audiences they are aimed at put so much – often

¹⁰⁹ Terry Lindvall and Ben Fraser, “Darker Shades of Animation: African-American Images in the Warner Bros. Cartoon,” from *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation* ed. Kevin S. Sandler, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 130.

blind – faith in their messages. As Susan Miller and Greg Rode point out “these films...make crucial contributions to our most important discourses of the self.”¹¹⁰ The most valuable arbiters of these contributions are then surely the ones who capture top of mind awareness with their adolescent audience. By that logic, the most important cultural force in animation is unquestionably Walt Disney.

It is striking then to observe the tremendous absence of minority images in Disney films. Taking a queue from their television cousins, “the African American male” vanished from Disney screens for 51 years.¹¹¹ Even then, the only appearance of a black male in any Disney film in those years came in the 1946 scandal that was *Song of the South*, a “semi-animated” conundrum of celluloid that Disney is now embarrassed to release in any country outside of Japan.¹¹² This erasure of blackness as an identity from practically all Disney animated fare has left a gaping hole in cultural understandings for the millions of children who worship at the alter of the mouse every day.

The caricatured visage of Uncle Remus from *Song of the South* has traditionally been vilified by organizations concerned with diversity. The NAACP “called for a total boycott of the film” upon its release and have protested upon its various theatrical releases stretching into the late 1980s.¹¹³ And what was it that black advocacy groups found so distasteful? The neutering of the African American male. The reckless parade of images that seek to “infantilize and emasculate” the struggle for civil rights in America.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Susan Miller and Greg Rode, “The Movie You See, The Movie You Don’t: How Disney Do’s That Old Time Derision,” in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* eds. Elisabeth Bell et. al, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 86.

¹¹¹ Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney* (London: Pluto Press (ha!), 1999), 94.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 94.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 95.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 94.

Still, some authors have found reason to celebrate the performances of James Baskett and Hattie McDaniel in recent years. Douglas Brode insists that Walt Disney “sensed that to utterly abandon the Tom and Mammy icons would disorient a mainstream audience...[so] he retained the myths’ surfaces to subtly subvert them.”¹¹⁵ From this standpoint, Remus becomes a laudable, even groundbreaking character. He is the first African American to ever act as “the narrative voice” for a Disney feature film.¹¹⁶ Where others have identified simplicity, Brode sees Walt’s appreciation of “earthy and unpretentious blacks.”¹¹⁷ He even muses that in some respects Uncle Remus may have been an autobiographical albeit racially confused expression of Disney’s own desire to support the importance of the oral storytelling tradition. He goes as far as to cite a statement released by the NAACP that reversed its position on the film stating that it had “remarkable artistic merit.”¹¹⁸

Regardless of the verisimilitude of this final claim, the film’s forced obscurity nullifies much of its impact on modern audiences. A more powerful example of the Disney racial ideology can be found in films such as *Dumbo* and *Fantasia*, which are, viewed ad nauseum by children around the world thanks to home video libraries. The five black crows that assist Dumbo on his cinematic journey are throwbacks to the minstrel shows. They not only “conform to white audience expectations,” they only decide to assist Dumbo when, shunned by white society he takes on the role of the “flying African ancestor who leaps into the air and so escapes slavery by flying back to Africa.”¹¹⁹ Byrne

¹¹⁵ Douglas Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), 54.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹¹⁹ Byrne and McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney*, 96.

and McQuillan make their opinion of Fantasia much more blunt. The film becomes a clear battle between white and black images in which the audience is asked to “indulge in the infinite codings of race with terror.”¹²⁰

The problem to be confronted here is not whether Walt Disney, Tex Avery, William Hanna or Joseph Barbera are racist. The cultural contributions of these men and ones like them in the comic book industry stretch far beyond their personal ideologies. This is a history instead of the “extracurricular pedagogy” embodied in the timeless texts that have been poured over endlessly by generation after generation of children.¹²¹ It questions the values that were implicitly ascribed into our hearts, our minds, and our souls as we consumed these formative texts and it concludes that comparatively comic books created a much more noble picture of race and ethnicity than their newspaper and animation forefathers ever could.

The Classic View of Race and Ethnicity in Comics

In the long history of comics, scholars have found only one prevailing representation of race: villainous. Sometimes this villainy presented itself figuratively, sometimes as we will see it became much more literal. The critical consensus is one note played long and loud by an industry aimed primarily at children, teaching them that otherness is wrong, scary, un-ideal. I do not dispute that several bruises, mis-fires and poor decisions can be found and magnified throughout the comic book industry on this issue. Portrayals have not always been acceptable or unbiased. I refute, however, that comics as a medium and superheroes as the fixtures of that medium have been wholly

¹²⁰ Ibid, 95.

¹²¹ Miller and Rode, “The Movie You See, The Movie You Don’t: How Disney Do’s That Old Time Derision,” 88.

unsuccessful in developing a variety of viewpoints on a cultural concern as deeply imbedded as the racial debate in America.

In the following pages I have separated the representational codes for Otherness into distinct units. We will examine how the academic world has framed the comic depiction of Asians, African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos and Middle Easterners. The prevailing theme of the critiques in each case is abject failure. Failure on the part of the editors, artists, and writers to create anything even vaguely approaching realistic examples of Otherness for readers. Before going on to discuss the many latent racially charged messages held in these comics, it is vital that we establish firmly the disappointing attitude held by so many commentators on the state of the comic book industry. I have included where appropriate, parallels in representation between the comic world and that of film and television. While these may not be the mediums with which this dissertation primarily concerns itself, it would be imprudent to remove these panels of crime, justice and word bubbles from the historical moments they populated. Indeed, my larger point, that comics provide one of the most nuanced and intricate appraisals of race and ethnicity to be found in American popular culture, is buoyed by comparison to the stagnant images that the large and small screen have presented to viewers.

Among the earliest impressions of African Americans in comics can be found in the derisively named Jungle Comics. Historian Bradford W. Wright identifies the hallmarks of this style to have included a group of “child-like non-white people” who were “above all...stupid” and in need of the council provided by a link to the Western

world to maintain order and the basic tenants of civilized living.¹²² Often this emissary of imperial knowledge with “direct links to the British or French empires” appeared to be far more in touch with the ways of the savage wilderness that surrounded him in spite of his lily-white pigmentation.¹²³ These beneficent messiahs, in the form of Tarzan, Sheena Queen of the Jungle, or one of their brethren, would scold the witless natives for having fallen prey to the tricks and false hope offered by charlatans typically from Eastern Europe or Asia-Minor.

The impact of these comics has been the center of some debate since their publication. Some scholars, like *Commies, Cowboys, and Jungle Queens* author William W. Savage, have maintained that these adventurers offered readers “nothing...[of]...any real bearing on the problems of the day.”¹²⁴ Rather, these were merely fantastical tales of pure escapism designed to titillate the pliable minds of their teenage audience and sell advertising space for everything from chewing gum to x-ray glasses.

The miscalculation in Savage’s judgment of the comics emerges from his overly strict classification schemes. Although he admits that these comics were home to “exotic locales and...characters...[and]...virtually nonstop action,” he fails to recognize in them the trappings of the masked detective stories that captured children’s imaginations ten-fold following the debut of Superman in 1938.¹²⁵ This similarity was not lost on Morton S. Malter whose work, spurred on by the criticisms of Fredric Wertham who accused the comic book industry of infecting the minds of America’s youth with a perverse brand of intellectual malaise, found that the jungle comics were “based on a detective-crime

¹²² Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 37.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 36.

¹²⁴ William W. Savage, *Commies, Cowboys and Jungle Queens: Comic Books and America 1945-1954* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 7.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

theme.”¹²⁶ Malter’s content analysis of the major publishers in the late nineteen forties and early nineteen fifties revealed that even ten years after the arrival of the traditional superhero narrative to comic book shelves, the jungle comic represented 18.8 % of the total publisher revenue.¹²⁷

The steady appetite of the American consumer for this brand of comic adventure alluded to in these figures purportedly gives credence to Wright’s fear that male readers were being exposed to carefully constructed “racist...imperialist...sexual and sadomasochistic...overtones.”¹²⁸ Aside from their obvious allegorical nods to the paternalistic slave/master relationship exhibited in the scolding tone adopted by the white jungle conquerors to their native charges, this comment points to a subtler and damaging form of racist propaganda. The cover of a 1946 issue of Jumbo Comics featured in Wright’s text illustrates an effort to undermine the sexual credibility of black masculinity and the black female form.¹²⁹ By presenting Sheena Queen of the Jungle as a buxom, blonde avenger, Jumbo Comics has begun the job of planting standards of beauty in the minds of its readers. What is the young black man to take away from his experience of watching as a powerful W.A.S.P. model of sexual aggression dominates representations of African male savages in panel after panel? Surely, he can be left with little other conclusion than accepting this woman as an archetype for his own future sexual conquests.

Of course, it is doubtful that the publishers or authors of Jumbo Comics or any of their peers intended to promote interracial relationships with these images. Rather, the

¹²⁶ Morton S. Malter, “The Content of Current Comic Magazines,” *The Elementary School Journal*, 52:9, (1952), 508.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 508.

¹²⁸ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 73.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 76.

implication is one of inferiority. It is a silent reminder to the black adolescent that no matter how prominent a position in the world he attains for himself, there will forever be portions of society, which are closed off to him. Here in a single image lays the artistic representation of the glass ceiling that demanded there be a civil rights movement.

There is also an appraisal of the African American's economic standing to be gleaned from this drawing. The artist has gone to the trouble to paint the Amazonian beauty's toenails. Although this might appear an insignificant detail at first glance, it acts as a reminder of the various luxuries and consumerist impulses that even the most isolated of white women have at their disposal.

The Jungle films of the 1930s, most notably the Tarzan franchise, became a repository for black actors. Unfortunately, much like their comic cousins they did little to advance white mainstream opinion of the place blacks held in society.

We see this same ignominious savage routine played out in *King Kong*. Skull Island is populated by African natives that are worshipful of Kong, but Kong himself represents one of the most famous black characters in pre-war Hollywood cinema. James A. Snead points out that Kong's effectiveness as a film relies greatly on the white male audience member identifying with the gargantuan ape as a second skin that can be temporarily embodied. As he states: "King Kong [allows] the white male to vent a variety of repressed sexual fantasies: the hidden desire of seeing himself as an omnipotent, phallic black male, the desire to abduct the white woman, or the combined fantasy: to abduct a white woman in the disguise of a phallic black male."¹³⁰ But, Snead argues that with the fulfillment of this fantasy comes guilt that must be purged. In the case of Kong

¹³⁰ James A. Snead, "Spectatorship and Capture in *King Kong*" in ed. Valerie Smith's *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 41.

that guilt is expunged through the fatal plummet of Kong from the Empire State Building. The lasting impression being that “oppression of the [Other]” results in a cathartic release and a stifling of social progress.¹³¹

The main characters in these films need not be mythological apes to earn distinctions as monstrous however. In fact, “the overlap between 1930s jungle and horror films...[was] assumed by a number of critics” and, one would assume, audience members.¹³² Few statements could so directly sum up how completely the work a decade earlier of black writers and directors like Oscar Micheaux had been nullified. The black actors populating these fictitious jungles were the equivalent of Michael Myers, Jason Voorhees and Freddy Kruger who would terrorize (mostly white) teenagers on-screen 50 years later.

A cursory glance at some of the superhero fare of the World War II years might give the impression that situations had improved for African Americans in comics. After all, black soldiers were needed to fill out ranks. As a result some popular characters did begin to express more tolerant views. The Green Lantern took up the cause in a 1944 issue. While attending a radio performance of Christmas carols being sung by children of various racial backgrounds, Lantern is shocked at an older woman who accuses the children of not being truly American due to their racial otherness. He barks at the woman: “How dare you talk like that in America!...When you hate a man for his race, creed, or color, you’re just a sucker for those who hate America!”¹³³ Combining “patriotic

¹³¹ Ibid, 41.

¹³² Rhona J. Berenstein, “White Heroines and Hearts of Darkness: Race, Gender and Disguise in 1930s Jungle Films,” *Film History*, 6:3, (Autumn 1994), 314.

¹³³ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 53.

messages with appeals for tolerance” became a common theme for comics publishers.¹³⁴ But the illusion of social consciousness is stripped from the pages when one places them in their proper historical context revealing a far more self-serving motivation.

These equality minded heroes began to spring into action just as African Americans were being asked to participate in the war effort. The comic book industry, a notoriously conservative institution, racked with criticism of its social worth utilized any opportunity to spread government approved propaganda as a means of insulating itself from censorship. If blacks were to be asked to fight for the principles of democracy, they would have to be reassured that they would have an equitable place in that democracy when they returned. Undoubtedly, publishers saw this as a chance to turn their maligned image to their advantage. Appeals to poverty-stricken citizens could not reasonably be made through ventures of high art due to the several impasses that would have blocked access to the material for the intended audience. But, comic books offered an appropriately low-brow instrument of collective agency that could speak directly to the impoverished with idealized images of a more tolerant world at war’s end.

This image was literally and figuratively paper thin, however. Although the occasional storyline would reflect these new interests by and large, DC and Marvel were still invested in a white society. For all their bluster, “there were no African Americans anywhere in Metropolis or Gotham City – as heroes, villains, or even passers-by.”¹³⁵

Similar efforts were being made by the Office of War Information in Hollywood. They helped engineer two all black films that were released in 1943 by major studios: 20th Century Fox’s *Stormy Weather* and MGM’s *Cabin in the Sky*. Other major films

¹³⁴ Ibid, 54.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 65.

received extensive re-writes to comply with a more war-friendly depiction of black/white relations. Some of the most well-known pictures to come out of this period were the result of OWI intervention. The Ox Bow Incident prominently featured a group of white men refusing to allow a black man to be lynched when there was a paucity of evidence to support that he had committed the crime of which he was accused. Crash Dive and Bataan showed black soldiers working arm in arm with whites as equals to defeat German and Japanese forces. This was a highlight for the OWI as it represented “a mythical world [where] blacks [had] a better deal than [they] did [in] real life.”¹³⁶ Joe, one of the characters stranded in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Lifeboat* is infused with this mythologizing power when he is given a chance to vote on the fate of one of the other survivors. And of course, Sam acts as Humphrey Bogart’s faithful and near equal assistant in the classic *Casablanca*.

Still, whatever growth in race relations was intimated by these appearances, it would be inappropriate to judge them as anything more than transitory. The MGM film *Tennessee Johnson*, which relayed a *very* loose historical account of Andrew Johnson’s rise to power, is a good example of the limitations placed on OWI officials. The film made abolitionist Thaddeus Stevens look like “a crippled, demonic figure [who] cajoled the helpless Johnson into drunkenness and even consorted at cards with John Wilkes Booth.”¹³⁷ Although OWI was successful in getting some of the more offensive passages removed from the film, they refused to assert too much control over the film’s themes. Partly this was because the men who ran the OWI were convinced of the film’s historical accuracy. Their “awareness of black history and culture” led them to take a paternalistic

¹³⁶ Integrated army units were still not being used at the time of the film’s release. Ibid, 401.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 394.

view towards slavery¹³⁸. More importantly, OWI's goal was not ideologically devoted to racial equality. It was devoted to "divert[ing] black's concerns into support for the war effort."¹³⁹ No matter how magnanimous the agency's efforts might have appeared on the surface, Koppes and Black remind us that "the war came first" and thus the effects of their presence in Hollywood were transitory.¹⁴⁰

The post-war years brought a slightly renewed interest in social justice comics. DC artist Jack Schiff began regularly featuring popular heroes like Superman in what amounted to PSAs in the backs of issues touting the virtues of tolerance for differences in race and ethnicity. These efforts were quickly shot down by editor Mort Weisinger who warned that such blatant "liberalism was going to get the company in trouble."¹⁴¹ DC later tried to create a white character that would more regularly speak up for the concerns of the disenfranchised. Radar the International Policeman busied himself with protecting America from the evil influence of Communism foreign and domestic. In one issue he stops Communist spies from distributing pamphlets that promote "race, ethnic, and religious hatred."¹⁴² Though well-intentioned, these comics had short shelf lives because they couldn't capture the attention and interest of readers.

This touches on another of the mass criticisms wrought on the comic industry, that their fans are fickle and un-inspired to participate in political debate. Comics, it is argued are a means of escape and to introduce social commentary into them will only alienate readership. One of the few companies to sincerely take up the banner of racial equality in the 1950s was EC, a distant third-place finisher in the war for marketplace

¹³⁸ Ibid, 395.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 394.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 395.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 64.

¹⁴² Ibid, 68.

dominance. Unlike DC and Marvel, they focused not on superhero tales but mystery, suspense, horror and crime stories. In an issue of *Shock SuspenStories* they published a short story about a black man wrongfully accused of murder in a “small American town.”¹⁴³ The man is shot by the town sheriff before the true culprit can confess. A letter in response to the morality play read: “This story stinks...I’d like the person who wrote it to sleep, eat, and live with blacks or niggers...I would not care to have a nigger eat at the same table with me, or anybody else with self-respect that I know.”¹⁴⁴

Perhaps fearing such hate-filled responses, television took on a highly conservative perspective on race during the Red Scare. From roughly 1954 to 1967 very few sitcoms or dramas featured black characters in anything more prominent than the occasional guest spot or extra appearance. As tensions in the civil rights movement escalated to untold levels, many television producers simply chose exclusion as the path of least resistance. Like their Hollywood cousins, they could not afford to irritate the sensibilities of Southern radicals nor did they want to lose ratings from liberal Northerners. Though perhaps seen as a cowardly solution in retrospect, cautious networks chose to whitewash their programming and eliminate any presence of blackness from their programming.

For much of the 1950s and early 1960s, comics publishers found themselves in much the same condition. In 1954, the Comic Book Code written by the Comics Magazine Association of America was handed down. The code was the comic industry’s answer to the Hayes Code being used in Hollywood. They hired an outside party (Charles F. Murphy) to lay out a strict set of standards that each issue would be forced to abide by

¹⁴³ Ibid, 137.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 139.

to avoid government-imposed censorship of the medium. Like the Hayes Code, member publishers were not required to alter material to match the code's suggestions, but if a publisher refused they would not be allowed to include the comic's code seal on their cover effectively black balling them from most major retail outlets. The code forbade among other things "the presentation of crime in any manner that created sympathy for criminals...[any mention of] the words horror and terror...on the cover of a comic book...[and] anything that hinted at sex or lust."¹⁴⁵ EC, the only publisher at the time with any real interest in exploring racial issues in their comics, was forced into bankruptcy by the code when they refused to join the CMAA on grounds of moral outrage.

The code was considerably loosened in the late 1960s by Richard Nixon of all people who asked for comic book publishers to help reach the youth market in his crusade against drug abuse. For the first time in years, comics could get away with discussing relevant social issues openly without reprisal from authorities internally or externally. The freedoms they were granted did not result in a mass indictment of civil rights issues, however. In fact, much of the material that came out of publishing houses took on a highly conservative tone. Comic book titans like Spider-Man "made it clear that militant black power was not the remedy for racial injustice."¹⁴⁶

The position taken by the comics industry was very similar to that of early 20th Century black intellectuals such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubious who advocated non-violence and educational enrichment as the weapons to be used against intolerance. Just as these leaders criticized the actions of youthful, energetic leaders like

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p 172-173.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 237.

Jack Johnson, so too did Marvel and DC's costumed heroes take umbrage with vivid protestation of the present condition. Some of the first black superheroes to ever be in major publications like *The Falcon* openly criticized black behavior stating "maybe it's important fo us to cool things down-so we can protect the rights we been fightin' for."¹⁴⁷ Often cases of black militant behavior were revealed to have detrimental consequences. In the case of *The Falcon*, in the issue referenced above, he busts up a militant group that turns out to be working in league with *The Red Skull*, one of Marvel's most notorious villains and a hold-over member of the Nazi party. These sorts of associations drug down whatever positive social commentary was being made by the issues. We have already seen that similar efforts on DC's part with *The Green Lantern* and *The Green Arrow* didn't turn out much better.

Besides *The Black Panther* who will be discussed in detail in a later chapter, Marvel's other significant foray into black superheroes came in the form of *Luke Cage – Hero for Hire*. Unlike heroes that had come before him, or ones that would come after him Cage "was a lower class black man from the ghetto...[with] 'street credibility.'"¹⁴⁸ Like so many other minority hero characters, however, his "morally ambivalent premise" was quickly shelved in favor of more conservative viewpoints when sales dropped off.¹⁴⁹ In fact, Wright notes that "by the middle of the 1970s readers and creators alike seemed to have concluded that...super-heroes ought to spend less time proselytizing and more time punching."¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 238.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 247.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 247.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 245.

By examining the film industry at this time, we see that the criticisms launched at the comic industry may not have been coming only from white voices. Based on the reaction to the Blaxploitation movement in Hollywood, many blacks may have also felt that militarism in comics was a bad message. The movement created a schism in the black community. While some African American opinion leaders championed the strong, proud black figures they saw on screen, others feared that “young blacks would model their behavior after the...sexuality and retaliatory violence” of the films.¹⁵¹

The most famous Blaxploitation film of all time was no doubt *Shaft*. But although the film made a considerable amount of money (thanks in part to an unforgettable score by Isaac Hayes), Reid attacks the film’s ethics. Unlike *Sweetback*, *Shaft* was a hero run through the filter of white Hollywood. He is accused of relaying the message that no one would possibly want to stay in ethnic neighborhoods. Blacks who are successful are much more comfortable associating with whites and middle-class blacks. It is this rejection of urban black culture that leads critics like Reid to renounce the film trilogy as the work of “doll makers who painted Barbie’s face brown...[who] merely created black-skinned replicas of the white heroes of action films.”¹⁵²

The success of the films is further complicated by a minimal understanding of the Hollywood production system by black audiences. Having been shut out of the Hollywood system of so long, audiences unsatisfied with black portrayals in these films often unwittingly ended up blaming the waiter for the cook’s mistakes. Thus, black directors like Gordon Parks and Sidney Poitier were often faulted as the directors of major Blaxploitation features when in fact the white studios producing the pictures might

¹⁵¹ Mark A. Reid, “The Black Action Film: The End of the Patiently Enduring Black Hero,” *Film History*, 2:1, (1988), 29.

¹⁵² Reid, “The Black Action Hero: The End of the Patiently Enduring Black Hero,” 1988, 32.

well have been the cause of the frustration. As Reid points out, these directors suffered intense criticism for “how Afro-American life was reflected” on screen.¹⁵³

The commercial failure of so many black led comics in the 1960s and 70s resulted in a less prominent focus on race and particularly black issues from the 1980s on. Distinctly racialized characters were replaced by a new kind of diversity.

As Marc Singer notes while many superheroes have taken to joining ensemble militias like the Super Friends, Justice League and Avengers, these milieus that appear as a racial menagerie are “actually obscuring any signs of racial difference.”¹⁵⁴ This argument holds that the efforts of comic artists and writers to provide an example of cross-cultural cooperation between heroes merely acts as lip service to a cause many publishers are too frightened or apathetic to engage in with any real conviction. Singer maintains that since the ethnographic origins of practically all non-white characters in the various factions are purely the invention of the writing staff, “the... supposed racial diversity [is] mitigated – if not virtually negated.”¹⁵⁵ Thus, even if a character such as Martian Manhunter, a green-skinned native of the planet Mars, were to relate tales of discrimination suffered on his home planet, their value is muted since the writers are free to skirt around any details of such practices in the real world that they find to be too prickly.

Much of the same evasion tactics can be seen in the depiction of the black superhero. Author Jeffery A. Brown of the *African American Review* provides a somber critique of the injection of the first round of black superheroes into comic book lore.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 34.

¹⁵⁴ Marc Singer, “Black Skins” and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race, *African American Review*, 36:1, (2002), 107.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 110.

Brown contends that African American superheroes have suffered at the cash register because they represent a form of “hyper masculinity” brought about by a combination of the predatory sexuality “already...ascribed” to black males by years of Southern folklore and the glorification of the well-kept male body insisted upon as a genre convention.¹⁵⁶ Fearful of portraying such strong black characters as role models, Brown insists that many early superheroes remain “embarrassing image[s]...characterized [by their]...costumes, street language, and anti-establishment attitudes.”¹⁵⁷ This uber-masculinity is also accused by Brown of resulting in a short series of box office flops wherein the black hero would be cast as a bumbling huckster to appease any social anxiety over the disproportionate strength given to an African character. The recent release of *Hancock*, a film following the exploits of a drunken superhero played by Will Smith, would appear to support this rationale.

Part of the blame for this marginalization, however, can be placed on the shoulders of the all-white fraternities crafting many of these tales. Brown points out that until 1993 and the rise of Milestone Comics, a subsidiary of DC devoted to African American superheroes, there had rarely been a black artist or writer allowed in a major comics company.

Many other minorities found little expression at all in comic book pages. Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans were rarely featured except for specific moments in history when their place in public consciousness was raised to such a high level that publishers felt they had to comment. For Asians, and particularly the Japanese that moment was Pearl Harbor. As Bradford Wright points out comics leapt at this

¹⁵⁶ Jeffrey A. Brown, “Comic Book Masculinity and the New Black Superhero,” *African American Review*, Vol. 33, (1999), 34.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 34.

opportunity to portray the Asian as “a sinister, ugly, subhuman creature who asked for and deserved no quarter.”¹⁵⁸

Where depictions of African Americans might have been contained to some degree by a sense of morality in the artists and authors, the Japanese would be afforded no such luxuries. No degrading image was too vulgar, no horrifying act too depraved to commit against the “ghastly yellow demons” dreamt up by publishers.¹⁵⁹

Every major superhero worth his spandex devoted himself to the eradication of Asian invaders. The usual rouges gallery for Superman, Batman, Captain America and the like temporally took a back seat to Japanese spies and terrorists bent on destroying America. One interesting problem that faced comic creators at this time was how to explain the use of super heroes in the war effort. The average reader of Superman would tell you that it would have taken little more than an hour for him to single handedly dispose of Hitler, Mussolini and the entire island of Japan. So why didn't he? The answer comic writers came up with hinged on the inferiority of the Japanese. They reasoned in story after story that the Japanese had not developed their own weapons for use against the U.S., but rather “used spies to steal [our] technology” then used it against us.¹⁶⁰ Cautious superheroes thus stayed on the home front and fought a host of “fifth column” operatives that threatened the stability of the nation.¹⁶¹ Almost identical tactics were employed later during the Korean War when the Chinese became the enemy. It might be more accurate therefore to view the history of Asian depictions in comics less as an allegory for political alliances and more as a constant relay race in which one Asian

¹⁵⁸ Wright, *Comic Book Nation* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 45.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

culture merely handed off the baton of hatred to another with no perceptible changes in the manner in which the characters would be portrayed.

Some minorities took it upon themselves to create comic spaces of their own when they saw that the major American publishers had little interest in appealing to them as an audience. Anne Rubenstein notes that Mexican readers relied on “producing, distributing, and interpreting words and pictures” to help them come to an understanding of the shifting political economy of a post revolutionary Mexico.¹⁶² In many respects these comics are more risqué than their American counterparts. While Marvel and DC have a history of actively attempting to obfuscate political upheaval, Mexican authorities have “allowed many...ideological positions to come up for debate in order to draw all dissenters into its own ranks and keep them there.”¹⁶³

Looking at one of the most popular Latino comics of all time – Love and Rockets – we see that despite such healthy debates the issues still manage to dredge up many of the stereotypes common in American comics. The Hernandez Brothers (Beto and Jamie) crafted a potent blend of “sexuality and soap opera...[populated by]...realistic...full-blooded Latinas” according to an article in Vibe Magazine¹⁶⁴. And while the characters of Love and Rockets are undoubtedly more three dimensional than anything that has ever appeared in American comics, they are not without their flaws. Much of the appeal to the comics comes from the way they are drawn. Their sexuality is barely contained. As an article covering their careers notes “their character’s skins give off heat, and both men

¹⁶² Anne Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, & Other Threats to the Nation: A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 3.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 4.

and women are often shown flushed with desire.”¹⁶⁵ This is highly reflective of the hyper-sexual imagery of other mediums attributed to Hispanics. By the early 1930s, the Latin Lover stereotype had become quite common in Hollywood. The Latin Lover was a far cry from his greaser ancestor. He was a womanizer with a penchant for American women who “dressed well.”¹⁶⁶ Latin women were also paraded as sensual conquests for white actors.

Several American comics relied on other Hollywood tropes for their depictions. One of Hollywood’s most enduring traditions adopted by the comic industry was for Latin characters to embody the low-level villain. Stephanie Greco Larson describes these so called el banditos as “emotional, irrational, violent and neither very smart nor ultimately successful.”¹⁶⁷ Another stereotype, the greaser, has also found expression in state side comics. Authors Clint C. Wilson and Felix Gutierrez point out that this stereotype originates from much of the Hispanic-related literature circulating in the United States following the Louisiana Purchase that was designed to engender disparaging views of the Latino community in Texas.¹⁶⁸ George Wilkins Kendall, the founder of the *New Orleans Times Picayune*, wrote that their aversion to productivity was so rampant that they would surely soon become extinct.¹⁶⁹ Books and short stories like “The Time of the Gringo”, “The Inroad of the Nabajo,” and “Anthony Adverse” portrayed Latinos as slovenly and disinterested in their personal hygiene.¹⁷⁰ Fredric

¹⁶⁶ Clint C Wilson and Felix Gutierrez, *Race, Multiculturalism, and the Media: From Mass to Class Communication*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 1995), 80.

¹⁶⁷ Stephanie Greco Larson, *Media & Minorities: The Politics of Race in News and Entertainment*, Spectrum series, race and ethnicity in national and global politics (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 59.

¹⁶⁸ Wilson and Gutierrez, *Race, Multiculturalism, and the Media: From Mass to Class Communication*.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 66.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 67.

Whertham actually used an EC comic called “The Whipping” as an example of the “race hatred” taught to children by comics when he testified before Congress in 1954.¹⁷¹ Of course, EC was one of the few publishers that was actually attempting to protect the image of Hispanics by showing the uselessness of racial slurs but this point was lost on the committee and when EC went out of business there were few ready to take its place as defender of the Hispanic market.

The only significant depiction of a Hispanic superhero did not end well. In 1975 Marvel gave us Hector Ayala a.k.a. The White Tiger. Ayala discovered a set of mystical amulets that gave him increased strength. Although he fought for several years alongside the likes of much more popular heroes such as Spider-Man and Daredevil, he only lasted six years before sales of comics featuring him got so bad that Marvel had him retire. He turned over his amulets to a police officer and became a civilian in Spectacular Spider-Man #52 (1981).¹⁷² Easily the most famous Hispanic character ever to appear in an American comic is Bane, one of Batman’s most vicious villains. The personification of the el bandito, Bane has a “listed occupation of ‘professional criminal’” and is not even given a name aside from his alias.¹⁷³

While not technically a superhero, Scrooge McDuck deserves special mention in this section. Chilean writers Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart penned one of the most searing critiques of any comic book series when they accused the Disney comic of propagating support for imperialistic profiteering in Latin American countries. The book, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, was so reviled that

¹⁷¹ ¹⁷¹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 166.

¹⁷² Marvel Encyclopedia Online, White Tiger(Hector Ayala), 2010, accessed on June 18, 2010. http://marvel.com/universe/White_Tiger_%28Hector_Ayala%29.

¹⁷³ E. Paul Zehr, *Becoming Batman: The Possibility of a Superhero* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 221.

Disney actually managed to ban the text temporarily from sale in the United States. The book insists that by having the nephews of Scrooge travel to third world areas to retrieve artifacts, children are being taught that Latin American natives have no proper claim to the resources of their lands. The authors state “unaware of the value of their country’s wealth, [natives] gladly allow the ducks to dispossess them of their riches in return for trinkets.”¹⁷⁴ The nephews, Huey, Dewey, and Louie, are vastly superior in intelligence even to their adult counterparts in Duckberg (i.e., America). The comic therefore creates an empowering narrative of superiority and teaches its readers that the reward for that superiority should be consumption without effort. Author Tom Andrae explains the concept in Marxist terminology: “the value of the products is displaced from the labor that produces them and is thought to emanate from the product itself.”¹⁷⁵ The Latinos become merely a means to an end that they have neither the power or the right to claim as their own.

Native Americans did not fare much better in the comic book world. When the charge for social reform became a mantra of several heroes, it was often lost on Native American citizens. Wright notes that “a recurring theme...urg[ed] American Indians to abandon their traditional hostility towards the United States.”¹⁷⁶ They were, tragically, the ones painted as intolerant and disrespectful of the dominant concerns of white America.

Much of the rest of comic representations for Native Americans can be summed up in the noble savage stereotype. Authors Diana George and Susan Sanders refer to this practice

¹⁷⁴ Tom Andrae, *Carl Barks and The Disney Comic Book: Unmasking the Myth of Modernity* (Jackson, MS: The University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 10.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷⁶ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 54.

as “inferential racism” designed to infuse a vision of the Indian onto American society defined by its savagery.¹⁷⁷ This more subtle form of racism is recognized in the silent declaration that Indians only existed “in a particular time...and of a particular tribe and place.”¹⁷⁸ Thus popular culture is accused of hacking away at and reshaping Indian heritage into an image suitable to be revered and remembered by liberalized White America. The authors point to an episode of *Northern Exposure* in which a main Native American character shows a white, Jewish friend how to construct an ancient flute. The Indian represents, as is so common in these tales, the last of his kind. He is a dying breed. But, when the Jewish man asks him if he is distressed by the fact that soon no one will know how to perform the ritual of making and using the flute, the Indian ponders for a moment and responds, “It’s not so tragic... Things become extinct.”¹⁷⁹ He is resigned to not only his death, it is reasoned, but the death of his way of life because it is the natural order of life that white men should dominate his land and his people.

Attesting the influence of the noble savage on comics, Mark Wald said “I think sadly, everything we know about Native Americans was defined by Tonto.”¹⁸⁰ A slight variation on this theme is that of the mystic, the metaphysically gifted shaman. Timothy Truman states that one reason so many comic book authors have applied this trite

¹⁷⁷ Diana George and Susan Sanders, “Reconstructing Tonto: Cultural Formations And American Indians in 1990s Television Fiction,” *Cultural Studies* 9, no. 3 (October 1995): 428, accessed on July 2, 2010, <http://navigator-millersville.passhe.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=15693009&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 433.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 438.

¹⁸⁰ Emmett Furey, “Native Americans in Comics,” *Comic Book Resources*, 2007, accessed on July 12, 2010, <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=9170>.

convention to their work is that “it’s a way of superficially applying Native traits to a character saving the writer the burden of more thorough research.”¹⁸¹

Much of the nuance that embodies many of the other ethnographic cultures explored by comics publishers since the 1930s falls victim to the same scenarios described in the Jungle Comics examples with minor alterations. When describing the unsatisfactory and often degrading treatment of Arab images in American comics, Jack G. Shaheen laments that many “moderate” Arabs are reduced to figurehead aristocrats forced to place the fate of their crude kingdoms in the able hands of Western warriors.¹⁸²

Still, this depiction appears tame when compared to their criminalization during periods of political unrest. Just as countless comics made ghouls of Germans and Asians during World War II and the Korean War respectively, the *raison d’être* of the Arab became the fiendish extermination of democratic values following a rise in Middle East tensions with the United States before the start of the Persian Gulf War.¹⁸³ Like their Far East counterparts before them, Arabs well into the 1990s have become villainous cannon fodder for righteous indignation of the suddenly patriotic superhero.

The Arab female form shares in much of the demoralizing literature devoted to denigrating black women. Shaheen identifies only two feasible roles for an Arab woman to undertake in the comic realm: harlot or asexual spouse. In either case, the woman is relegated to a narrative position of “insignificance, a total non-entity.”¹⁸⁴

This is the sad, redundant history of the comic book industry’s approach to race and ethnicity according to most of the critics who have tackled the subject so far. Many

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Jack G. Shaheen, “Arab Images in American Comic Books,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 28:1, March (2004), 123.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 123.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 129.

of the most profound commentators on race in academia today have not addressed the comic book world at all, apparently not seeing it as worthy of critical attention. This dissertation helps explain what made the efforts of comic creators who gave us characters like The Black Panther, White Tiger, and The Falcon fail. It defines strategies that have been clandestinely used by major publishers to successfully disseminate racial messages. Most importantly, it is one of the first book-length academic works to critically analyze the true nature of the racial/ethnic problem in comic books and how it is being solved one masked avenger at a time.

CHAPTER III

LEARNING TO FLY: THE PEDEGOGY OF ETHNICITY IN SUPERMAN

The end of the 1930s brought with it the first issue in a bold new mythology that would characterize the American experience in ways rarely matched by any proceeding pop icon. That initial pressing of *Action Comics* #1 in 1938 told of a family in crisis. Alien parents (very much human in appearance) fretted over the fate of their only son, Kal-El. A technological catastrophe threatened to obliterate their entire planet in a matter of minutes. With little time to spare, the child was swathed in garments bearing the emblem of his people and placed inside a small rocket ship. The ship was then programmed to seek out the nearest planet that could sustain life in the hopes that the entirety of a civilization would not be lost.

The planet that careening celestial orb finally selected was Earth where it came to rest rather unceremoniously in a self-made crater just off a dirt-beaten, country road. The pod and its contents were soon discovered by the Kents. Jonathan was a farmer, ferociously committed to the ideals of independence and self-sufficiency, and Martha was his dutiful wife.¹⁸⁵ The pair was immediately taken with the orphaned voyager and promptly adopted him into their care. Thus, Kal-El of the expired planet of Krypton was reborn Clark Kent, all-American boy.

But the last son of Krypton's inter-stellar heritage could not go ignored for long. While most other young men struggled with acne, social awkwardness, and the similar trappings of pubescence, Kent found himself forced to come to terms with x-ray vision, a

¹⁸⁵ The names of Clark Kent's parents have changed slightly over the years. This is the version of their titles I will be using throughout the course of this paper.

seemingly impenetrable epidermis and the power to defy gravity at will. The boy's adoptive parents collaborated on a disguise, an invisible veil to shroud his exceptionalism with mild-mannered affectations and an absent-minded demeanor. Kent's alternate identity was not destined to be forever buried beneath a pair of bifocals and a journalist's notepad, however. The boy who would grow up to be the Man of Steel simply defined specific parameters under which he might reveal his Kryptonian self to the public.

It is this decision to obfuscate Kent's alter ego that has inspired the current study. Why must Superman hide himself from the world save for those moments of utter peril in which his civic duty requires such self-expression? Surely it is not for his own safety. There could conceivably be very little for a man capable of walking away from a nuclear blast to fear from the citizens of Metropolis. It can therefore be presumed that his prolonged bouts in the Kent persona are a matter of personal preference (on one level or another) and not necessity. This paper proposes that Kal-El adopts the Clark Kent identity because he wants, quite desperately, to be like all those nameless faces that populate Metropolis. He wishes he were not from some strange planet that he barely remembers. He wishes he was a normal, God-fearing American just like his adoptive parents.

This logic reorganizes the structure of the Superman mythology. The Man of Steel is no longer the star of his own comic. He is an inconvenient reminder of a past life that is constantly having to be subdued, masqueraded, and hidden. The story of Superman is not just the tale of a super-powered alien saving the world. It is a thoughtful meditation of the meaning of being an alien in America. It becomes an instructional text for the countless young immigrants who are absorbed in its stories month after month. It teaches them how to acculturate themselves into the American lifestyle. It shows them how to

assimilate properly and how to hide their Otherness. It is a dime store classroom with a professor in blue spandex.

This paper proposes that Superman represents the ideal version of racial assimilation. I argue that the text is constructed as a pedagogical tool for young immigrants. It helps teach them the skills they will require to succeed in their new lives as American citizens. This interpretation is built off of a close examination of the sociocultural factors that influenced the lives of creators Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel.

The paper also raises the related issue of how this immigrant narrative alters the central tone of the comic. As Superman strives more and more valiantly to uphold the Mid-Western values taught to him by his adoptive parents, the Kryptonian son becomes less and less directly affiliated with his alien culture. I argue that the comic quickly becomes less about Superman and more about Clark Kent. The “disguise” that Superman dons everyday for work is not only the star of the comic but the person that Superman wants desperately to be. This reinterpretation of the comic begs powerful questions about the impact these stories have on their audiences.

Creating Superman

But why would the writers of Superman be interested in espousing such a message? The answer to that question is informed by the post-modernist methodology described in the introduction. The first step in coming to terms with the counter narrative strategies employed by comic book creators is understanding the influences that played upon their subconscious's when developing the ideas that turned into these iconic characters. As we will see, in the case of Jerry Siegel, one event in particular drives his need to imbue Superman with pedagogical qualities.

A quick history of Superman's creation provides powerful insights into the motivation for his assimilationist ideology. Joe Shuster and Jerry Seigel, two nineteen year old Jewish, friends had the good fortune to live in Cleveland, Ohio, one of the more moderate areas of the United States for immigration pre-World War II. Thanks largely to an "open civil-political climate" and "limited social distance" between Jews and native whites, Cleveland masked much of the ethnic tension that gripped other parts of the country (see: New York and San Francisco).¹⁸⁶ The city was actually so progressive that protests were held in 1920 and 1938 to draw attention to Anti-Semitic comments from Henry Ford and Adolf Hitler respectively.¹⁸⁷ In the midst of such an idyllic milieu what could have shaken the confidence of these creators in their ethnic heritage?

In *Boys of Steel: The Creators of Superman*, Marc Tyler Nobleman and Ross McDonald paint both Joe and Jerry as typical of the qualities many Americans would have associated with the Jew at the time. Jerry Seigel is described as a "short...shy...mousy" child whose intellect and imagination did not lend themselves to sophisticated feats of social interaction.¹⁸⁸ It is quite possible that Jerry sensed his life would have turned out very differently had his family been more cautious with the exhibition of their ethnic identity. While still a boy, Jerry's father, who ran a clothing store in the Jewish community of Cleveland, Ohio "died of heart failure during an after-hours robbery."¹⁸⁹ Lest there be any question as to how deeply this event impacted the psyche of Jerry Seigel, one only need analyze the first page of *Action Comics* #1. The

¹⁸⁶ Ewa Morawska, "Becoming Ethnic, Becoming American", in *Divergent Jewish Cultures*, eds. Deborah Dash Moore and L. Ilan Toren, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 298.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 300.

¹⁸⁸ Marc Nobleman and Ross McDonald, *Boys of Steel: The Creators of Superman* (Knopf Books for Young Readers. 2008).

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*.

origin of the last son of Krypton is condensed to a single two-page spread. In it, a silhouetted Clark Kent is seen in one panel, shoulders slouched, staring down at two headstones. The caption reads: “The passing away of his foster parents greatly grieved Clark Kent. But it strengthened a determination that had been growing in his mind. Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind.”¹⁹⁰

Landing upon the idea of concealing, or better yet augmenting, one’s identity for personal gain may have even been encouraged after this horrific event by the mild stance most Jews in Cleveland took towards matters of ethnicity. The world that surrounded him was one of Jewish newspaper editors who often underreported incidences of Jewish crime or re-spun those stories which could not be avoided out of fear that “the perception of Jews as criminals would fan the flames of anit-Semitism” already simmering in America in the 1930s and 40s.¹⁹¹ Meanwhile, Jewish stars of radio and television relegated themselves to “only the most occasional, coy references to Jewishness” presumably in the hopes of “build[ing] a national following.”¹⁹² Everywhere around him, Jerry Seigel found examples of successful Jews climbing the social ladders of the United States and doing so by compartmentalizing or casting off their ethnic idiosyncrasies.

It is likely that the brutal death of his father jarred Siegel awake. It torn down the curtains that insulated Shuster and himself from the volatile opinions swirling around America in the twenties and thirties about Jewish immigration. After all, if this kind of hate crime could happen in Cleveland, it could happen anywhere. Author Hasia R. Diner

¹⁹⁰ Jerry Seigel and Joe Shuster, “Superman,” Action Comics #1, DC Comics, 1.

¹⁹¹ Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick, *Hollywood, 1930: Jewish Gangster Masquerade, Immigration and American Popular Culture: An Introduction*, (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 37.

¹⁹² J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, *The Media that “Speak Your Language” American Yiddish Radio and Film*, (New York: Princeton University Press, 2007), 102.

notes that this “era saw the peak years of American anti-Semitism.”¹⁹³ Much of this discursive rhetoric was the product of an uncertain economic climate. Diner explains that many farmers blamed the failing agricultural system in America on the Jews. These “Protestant Fundamentalists” were convinced that Jews “conspired to destroy American rural life.”¹⁹⁴ Still others believed that Hollywood producers, many of whom were Jewish, were harming the sociopolitical structure by allowing blacks and Jewish performers to appear on screen together. It was not uncommon to see a Jewish musician or actor “cross the color line” inciting the ire of many conservative Americans.¹⁹⁵ Even universities became sites of contestation. Centers of higher education across the country set caps on incoming freshmen or “devised [other] strategies to limit their Jewish students.”¹⁹⁶

It is also worth noting that this era in American history saw the passage of the Immigration Restriction Act. Although Siegel and Shuster were undoubtedly too young to have been intimately familiar with the law’s details, they would certainly have noticed its effects on their communities. The legislation stipulated that immigration numbers would be constrained to only “2 percent of the number of people from that country who were already living in the United States [as of] 1890.”¹⁹⁷ This meant that by 1933, when Superman was first being conceived and designed, a scant 4,000 Jews were allowed into the country each year.¹⁹⁸ I would suggest that the Superman narrative is designed in its

¹⁹³ Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 208.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 208 – 209.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁹⁷ Rubin and Melnick, *Hollywood, 1930: Jewish Gangster Masquerade, Immigration and American Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 23.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

own subtle way to make such policies unnecessary by reimagining Jewish identity in America.

An examination of the current scholarly literature on Superman supports the notion that Otherness was at the heart of his message. Robert Himmelberg positioned Superman as “a New Deal liberal” beset with the task of standing up for “the downtrodden in general.”¹⁹⁹ For Himmelberg, Superman is more the man *against* steel (or at least the improper use of it) than the man *of* steel. His is a justice of inequity fueled by the perceived moral vacuity of the ruling class. Although plagued by the antiquity of a historical moment the theory supplies one of the essential elements to understanding the Superman character: class struggles. Marshall McLuhan reiterates the tenets of this latter-day Robin Hood mentality (albeit with slightly less approval). Superman is portrayed as the embodiment of knee-jerk restitution found preferable to the “laborious process of civilized life” by readers entrenched in a technocratic world.²⁰⁰ McLuhan envisions Superman as a Viking vigilante referring to his acts of apparent heroism as “immature and barbaric” but nevertheless recognizing his mantle as a champion of the people.²⁰¹

The work of Umberto Eco provides a second pillar to the foundation of the Superman mythology. Eco supplies one of the first scholarly voices to detect the pedagogical possibilities in the comic’s text. He notes that one of the great strengths of the text is its ability to “self-identify” with “the average reader.”²⁰² This is not of course to imply that any statistically significant portion of Superman’s audience could come

¹⁹⁹ Robert F. Himmelberg, *Art for the Millions: Culture in the Thirties, The Depression and the New Deal*, Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 140.

²⁰⁰ Marshall McLuhan, “From The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man,” in *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium*, eds. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 105.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁰² Umberto Eco, “The Myth of Superman,” *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium*, eds. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester [eds.], (Jackson, MS, University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 147.

close to approaching his extraordinary physical skills, only that many aspired to. What's more, Superman symbolized for readers an empathetic visage of their own daily crises. Through a system Eco refers to as temporality, Superman became simultaneously "aware [of] the gravity and difficulty of his decisions" and the necessity of coming to a conclusion for better or worse because no other man held the proper tools with which to decide.²⁰³ While precious few readers were charged with deflecting an incoming missile from the coasts of the United States or saving the love of their life from a vat of molten metal, they could find comfort in a character that dramatized the real-life battle to put food on an empty table or decide which bills could afford to be put off.

Moreover, by crafting a universe in which time becomes contextual (if not altogether meaningless), wherein the events of past issues can be violently altered to accommodate new storylines, Eco argues that the reader is taught that he is "not responsible for his past, nor master of his future."²⁰⁴ This revelation permits the reader to emancipate himself from existing guilt and live in the present moment as it is all that can be controlled or planned for. This is essentially giving the reader permission to let go of the vestiges of their cultural heritage.

Mark Waid, the author of many classic Superman tales provides a slightly less esoteric evaluation of Krypton's favorite son. His diagnosis of Kent's blue, red, and yellow identity is summed up by the title of one of the sub-sections of his essay: "The Need to Belong."²⁰⁵ Waid defers to the work of Marianne Williamson in his reasoning, stating that we as sentient beings can only actualize our self-worth when we participate to

²⁰³ Ibid, 153.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 157.

²⁰⁵ Mark Waid, "The Real Truth about Superman: And the Rest of Us, Too," in *Superheroes and Philosophy*, eds. Tom Morris and Matt Morris, (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 2005), 7.

the fullest possible extent of our abilities with the civilizations we encounter. From this perspective, Superman dons his red cape because in “exercising his distinctive powers [he is] fulfilling his authentic destiny.”²⁰⁶ With this assessment, Waid has come closer than any other researcher in defining the most basic quality that underlies Superman’s appeal, but like the final author to be discussed, he mis-represents Superman’s “authentic” self.

Danny Fingeroth finally hits upon the great truth behind Superman’s appeal. Like Himmelberg before him, he realizes that issues of class lie at the heart of the Superman mythos, but he goes further correctly identifying the specific element of that class commentary as immigration. Specifically, Fingeroth notes “[f]or...many...readers of early superhero stories [who] were children...of immigrants, [Superman was a] symbolic reenactment of their own ambivalent feelings about where their roots lay, and where their lives in America were taking them.”²⁰⁷

Superman is unquestionably an alien. No one could possibly read an issue of the many iterations of the character without assessing that biologically speaking Kal-El is at best a distant cousin to mankind. But even those who write the stories that continue to fuel the mythology concede that biology is almost all that the Man of Steel inherited from his birth parents or his home world. Speaking of the difficulties he encountered re-imagining the Superman tale for modern audiences, Mark Waid wrote: “it occurred to me as I began to formulate *Superman: Birthright* [that Kal-El] would have only some passing familiarity with his origins.”²⁰⁸ This leaves one to wonder, if his natural heritage had been

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 10.

²⁰⁷ Danny Fingeroth, “The Dual Identity: Of Pimpnells and Immigrants from the Stars,” *Superman on the Couch*, (New York: Continuum, 2004), 55.

²⁰⁸ Mark Waid, “The Real Truth about Superman: And the Rest of Us, Too,” 9.

absconded by some immense chemical combustion, where would an alien orphan turn for guidance in the principles by which he would live his life? The same place any orphan would: his adopted parents. The fact that Jonathan and Martha Kent model their behavior after wholesome Mid-Western American ideals then becomes significant to the development of the Superman/Clark Kent character. Superman is rarely seen fretting over disappointing his unknown birth parents with the choices he makes. He does not have the knowledge of Kryptonian moral parameters upon which to base such an assessment of his judgments. But he has lived on the Kent farm for the formative years of his life. He is constantly seen returning there to escape the congestion of Metropolis. If this fact appears frivolous at first glance consider that his natural gifts allow him to dart through the cosmos at blazing speeds. He could effortlessly rise above the ionosphere in the space of time it takes most of us to blink and be rid of any offensive noise, but he chooses as so many children do to seek refuge at his home, his father's farm. It is the inculcation of these values that permits authors like David Hajdu to claim that Superman represents "the American way."²⁰⁹

But to paint Clark Kent/Kal-El as the personification of a corn-fed, God-fearing, Mid-Western product of Americana would ignore his associations with immigration. Bob Oksner who is described by David Hajdu as "a contemporary of [Joel Siegel and Joe Shuster]" remarked of the creation of Superman "There's no question in my mind that Jerry saw Superman as a kind of projection of his own self-image or his own fantasies about himself."²¹⁰ Buoyed by this appraisal, Hajdu states bluntly and without reservation,

²⁰⁹ David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 31.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

“Superman was...Jewish.”²¹¹ This statement provides evidence that the creators of Superman made him as a hero especially if not exclusively for Jewish boys of future generations like themselves. The manner in which themes of Jewish assimilation and (more rarely) resistance are strung throughout the narrative adds another post-modern layer to this mythology.

But even this does not go far enough in its operationalization. Superman is more than just Jewish. He is an amalgamation, a piecemeal facsimile of the whole immigrant experience. The nature of super heroism demands that those heeding the call represent something larger than themselves. This is what Joseph Campbell is referring to when he speaks of the mythical quality ascribed to the various holy figures of the world’s religions. Christ, Buddha, Mohammed, these men capture in their existence the “suggestion of more remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told.”²¹² We do not study the lives of these figures to understand who they were, but to uncover the signposts for a reflection of a better version of ourselves through their archetypical experiences.

Such is Superman...or perhaps I should say Clark Kent. After all, his is the identity of the über-immigrant. Clark is not some costume to be draped on before attending the masquerade of monotony that constitutes day-to-day living. If Superman’s moral compass is so ethically positioned a priori of any Kryptonian influence, then one must presume that Kal-El is more Clark Kent than Superman. Moreover, given his immigrant roots (both narratively and institutionally) and the assimilationist tendencies that spring forth from them, he is becoming more so with each passing issue. In this

²¹¹ Ibid, 30.

²¹² Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Bollingen Series XVII Princeton University Press, 1949), 3.

sense, he is the embodiment of the counter narrative. There is constantly a second layer of meaningfulness attached to each action he takes. There are in essence two stories happening in each issue. Superman's stunts entertain the masses while Clark Kent's lessons inform the Jewish reader.

From a CRT perspective, Kent/Superman represents one of the more compelling cases for the social construction of racial identity. His sense of self is almost completely defined by his experiences living in America. He has little to no memory of his time on Krypton. His identity is the product of learned social behaviors. His meek, bumbling frame forms a quintessential mold for the invisible man motif presented by Ralph Ellison. In his pioneering work, Ellison insists that a persistent climate of racial inequality has rendered those in the privileged classes unable or unwilling to recognize the basic humanity of the ethnic other – effectively excommunicating such persons from civilized existence. Ellison's resolution to this crisis was to inspire the acknowledgment of the ethnic other by those who would deny him by sheer force of affability. "I'd agree them to death and destruction" he muses.²¹³ Ellison's strategy was predicated on a simple directive, "Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement."²¹⁴

At its heart, this is a plea for assimilation as much as it is a non-violent declaration of war. Forcing members of the majority to admit that they share common space, common interests, and perhaps common values with the underprivileged can presumably win small measures of social rights clandestinely. From this perspective, Clark Kent is the conscience of the mythology if not always its focus. Superman gains

²¹³ Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man* (Kingsport, TN: Random House, 1947), 384.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

recognition from all walks of life simply by interjecting himself into a situation. His presence is not to be denied. That Kal-El takes the time to garner the affections of his co-workers is more than a mere ploy to maintain some supposed secret identity, it is an earnest effort at becoming accepted as the man he hopes to be rather than the man he can so easily become.

Superman in the 1940s

Presumably the 1940s should have been a time of tremendous identification with ethnic heritage for American Jews. But, due to “fears of provoking domestic anti-Semitism” the response to the atrocities of the Holocaust by American Jews was often “lethargic.”²¹⁵ Though it might seem callous in retrospect, many Jews were just recovering from the inflammatory sentiments hurled at them during the Great Depression. The “self-actualization” experienced by several Jews in the war years resulted in a shift in values.²¹⁶ Many decided they would rather be well taken care of and anonymous than take a stand. This standpoint seems to agree in principle with Siegel’s plea for a more assimilated Jewish experience. This communal choice of non-action is the first time historical events begin to inform the content of the comic book. This second step in the post-modernist method reinforces Siegel and Shuster’s desire to portray Kent/Superman as a humble and grateful assimilated alien.

In *Lois Lane Loves Clark Kent*, the reader is given one of the first lessons in assimilation. The writers strike at the issue of intermarriage when Lois Lane sees a psychiatrist after a fainting spell. He advises her that she is suffering from a broken heart because she loves a man (Superman) that she could never have. He suggests that she aim

²¹⁵ Rafael Medoff, *Jewish Americans and Political Participation: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbra, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc, 2002, 46.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, 46.

her advances towards someone more attainable, like Clark Kent. Superman is not unobtainable because of personal distance. He has saved Lois several times at this point in the series. The doctor is referring to the couple's strong ethnic differences, even if he doesn't use the words precisely. As an alien from another world,²¹⁷ Superman's routine is too foreign to that of Lois Lane for the two of them to ever be able to form a meaningful and lasting relationship. From this perspective, Jewish men interested in courting a wider range of women would be well served to leave the artifacts of their heritage at the door.

When the United States went to war, like other super heroes Superman had to stay behind and keep the domestic front under control. In *America's Secret Weapon*, the writers of the Man of Steel found an inventive way to get him involved in the action of war without betraying this unspoken agreement between comic book publishers. The comic explains his absence by having him fail an eye exam as part of his physical when he tries to enter the military. He accidentally reads the eye chart in the next room using his x-ray vision because he is eager to join the army's ranks. Undeterred, he reasons "I could be of more use to my country working right here at home battling the saboteurs and fifth columnists."²¹⁸ Superman visits a U.S.O. camp and participates in a "dress rehearsal" for the real fight in the form of war games.²¹⁹ After Superman's team loses, he announces that it is among the proudest moments of his career for it has reassured him that "American soldiers cannot be defeated by Supermen or anyone else."²²⁰ He explains that the real secret weapon alluded to by the issue's title is the heart of the American soldier, their never say die attitude that will surely lead them to victory. This pandering through

²¹⁷ William Woolfolk, "Lois Lane Loves Clark Kent," *Superman #58* (New York: DC Comics, 1949).

²¹⁸ Jerry Siegel, "Superman Daily Comic Strip," (New York: DC Comics, 1942).

²¹⁹ Don Cameron, "America's Secret Weapon," *Superman #23* (New York: DC Comics, 1943), 150.

²²⁰ *Ibid*, 157.

patriotic propaganda was in line with the Jewish resistance on the home front to taking a stance against the Holocaust as a separate injustice.

Superman in the 1950s

Jews had good reason to distance themselves from their racial heritage as the United States entered the 1950s. The unstable political climate created by the Korean War had made threats of foreign and domestic Communism a very serious topic of conversation for many Americans. The close relationship of Jews to “unions, the civil rights movement, liberalism and civil liberties” accentuated their differences from the dominant class at a time when scrutiny on political grounds could often turn fatal.²²¹

Such was the case in 1950 when Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were arrested on suspicion of committing espionage with the Soviet Union. The debilitating effect their arrest and subsequent execution had on perceptions of Jewishness in America can scarcely be overstated. According to Hasia Diner, “the Rosenbergs...and the anti-Communist crusade...made the Jews exceedingly nervous.”²²² Given the gravity of the ethnic dilemma of the times it is hardly surprising that the assimilationist message of Superman would continue unabated in the 1950s. If Siegel and Shuster had been reluctant to show Superman as audacious in the exhibition of his racial heritage before, this confirmed their worst suspicions. The world was not ready to openly accept Jews in all their ethnic regalia. The need for Superman as a tool for conformist rhetoric was higher than ever.

²²¹ Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 277.

²²² *Ibid*, 277.

In an issue titled *Superman in the White House*, the comic goes to great pains to show Superman as a loyal American citizen that would never misuse his power to harm the federal government. Clark Kent's co-worker and friend Jimmy Olsen has a dream that Superman has been elected president. As the Commander and Chief Superman miraculously performs a number of feats with almost no effort. He balances the budget, for example, by diving to the ocean floor and recovering pirate gold. When Kent discovers Olsen talking in his sleep he declares "he can never write that story! It's impossible for Superman ever to be the chief executive of the U.S."²²³ From a logistical standpoint Kent is referring to the provision in the Constitution that prohibits foreign-born citizens from holding the office. This is also a message that would no doubt be reassuring to conservative Americans.

The idea of allowing an all-powerful foreigner to control the highest office in the country would have been incredibly insensitive within the Red Scare climate of the 1950s. Not only is Superman declaring that he would never run for office, the comic demonstrates that if he were in office he (and by extension Jewish Americans) would not abuse or otherwise misuse that power. This sentiment is incredibly similar in tone to the public demonstrations held by many Jewish groups during the 1950s to declare adamantly their anti-Communist stance.

The issue ends with Kent breaking the forth wall to address his readers directly. With a wink and a nod he explains "yes, Superman could never be president, but Clark Kent could."²²⁴ Even though Kent's joke may be as much a dream as Olsen's vivid fantasy, it speaks to the tenets of CRT scholarship. This would amount to a self-

²²³ Otto Binder, "Superman in the White House," from *Action Comics #241*, (New York: DC Comics, 1958), 32.

²²⁴ *Ibid*, 35.

actualization phase of socially constructed ethnic identity. It implies that an alien could so completely assimilate himself into the fabric of American culture that he would not only cease to threaten the security of its citizens, he could win their respect and loyalty on a massive scale.

An issue covering Clark Kent's years matriculating at Metropolis University provides ample opportunity to show off Kent's ability to hide his superpowers. On his first day of school a group of seniors tosses him a piece of luggage far too heavy for the meek Clark Kent to carry. As the suitcase hurtles towards him Kent decides "it's a custom for upper classmen to lord it over us lowly freshmen...I might as well do as I'm asked without complaining."²²⁵ The language used here is very instructive. It is not always enough to simply hide your ethnic identity, there is an act of submission involved as well. Kent is putting aside his pride for a larger purpose. These actions manifest as an atonement for his Otherness. Certainly many Jewish readers would have related to such a message after assisting the House Un-American Activities Committee ferret out potential Communists.

An even more striking piece of evidence occurs when Kent is hooked up to a lie detector as part of a class experiment. His professor has become convinced that he is secretly Superman. Kent tells him he is not even though he knows that he cannot fool the machine. Miraculously, the lie detector claims he is telling the truth. Dumbfounded Kent realizes that he has succeeded because at that moment he's "not...Superman...anymore."²²⁶ When he is "disguised" as Clark Kent the change is so complete that there is no sub-conscious version of Superman affecting his judgments.

²²⁵ Jerry Coleman, "Clark Kent's College Days," in *Superman #125* (New York: DC Comics, 1958), 160.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

This further indicates that Kent deserves to be viewed as a character of at least equal importance to Superman.

Several issues later, when Superman is introduced for the first time to his Kryptonian cousin Super Girl, the audience is treated to fatherly advice passed down from one alien to the next. Superman explains to Super Girl that she must not expose her powers to “the outside world.”²²⁷ Her first lesson in respecting her new home planet is to mask her ethnic self. When she asks if she can use her powers to help people the way that Superman does, he again asks her to refrain noting, “you’ll need long practice before you can use your superpowers properly.”²²⁸ As a diplomat of his race, Superman is acting in an exceptionally bureaucratic fashion here. He understands that overexposing one’s Otherness, using that identity carelessly could result in longitudinal consequences. He is trying to keep Super Girl from becoming another Ethel Rosenberg.

Superman in the 1960s

The 1960s presented a vexing time for the Jewish population in America. They were caught in a contraction. On one hand, many Jews were professing their faith more publicly than they had ever done before. On the other, they were finding the traditional Jewish lifestyle too constricting for their modern tastes and many younger Jews were leaving the tenants of their faith behind.

Orthodox Judaism became far more common in the 1960s. A special sub-set of this pious class of Jews calling themselves “ultra-Orthodox” began to insist that those truly committed to the Jewish faith renounce American values.²²⁹ These ultra-Orthodox

²²⁷ Otto Binder, “The Supergirl from Krypton,” in *Action Comics #252* (New York: DC Comics, 1959), 386.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 386.

²²⁹ Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 311.

leaders put pressure on Jewish institutions to conform to strict definitions of Jewish law. They pressured Jewish universities to ban gay students and tried to prevent upwardly mobile opportunities for Jewish women.

At the same time, intermarriage rates for Jews rose to untold heights. From 1960 to 1965 studies in national magazines showed that “31.7 percent had chosen a non-Jewish spouse, amounting to an increase of 500 percent” from the previous decade.²³⁰ These numbers indicate a substantial growth in Jews assuming a more moderate interpretation of their faith that would allow them to intermingle with modern society more freely. This alteration resulted in many Jews casting off the most ornate elements of their heritage in favor of American customs. This relaxing of tensions between Jewish and non-Jewish residents clearly finds expression in the Superman comic as the Man of Steel’s true roots are alluded to much more openly.

These changes in attitude can be viewed in the Superman mythology. In some issues like 1961’s *The Death of Superman* the comic’s authors have begun to take a much more direct approach to addressing the immigrant issue. As the title suggests, the issue depicts the funeral procession of the Man of Steel. A jury tires Lex Luthor who is accused of killing Superman. He attempts to bargain for his release but the judge will not stand for it. He compares Luthor’s crimes to those of Nazi General Adolf Eichmann²³¹. Eichmann had been one of the architects of the concentration camps. This comparison marks one of the boldest implications of Superman’s Jewish ties that the comic had undertaken since the outbreak of World War II. Just as Orthodox Jews were beginning to

²³⁰ Ibid, 307.

²³¹ Jerry Siegel, “The Death of Superman,” in *Superman #149* (New York: DC Comics, 1961), 198.

gain confidence in expressing their faith, the Superman comic series saw fit to brand his long-time arch nemesis a Nazi.

Other issues of the era point back to a more subdued version of the character, however. *In The Red Kryptonite Menace* Clark Kent discovers a statue of red kryptonite while investigating a story with Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen. Unlike traditional green kryptonite, the red variety “affect[s]...[Superman]...in many terrible, unpredictable ways.”²³² As he stares at the statue Clark begins to fret that it will alter his body, exposing him as Superman. The panel depicting his fantasy shows Superman with long hair and an unkempt beard with ghoulishly long fingernails. This slovenly image is typical of the caricatures that depicted Jews in political cartoons. The real fear for Kent in this scenario is that the kryptonite will undo all of the hard work he has put in to Americanize himself. The red kryptonite threatens to betray his socially constructed racial identity by exposing his biological features in ways that cannot be suppressed.

Superman’s commitment to his earthly life is reaffirmed in *Superman’s Last Day of Life*. When he falsely believes that he is dying from a rare Kryptonian disease he spends the last bit of his energy soaring to different parts of the world that he wants to see one last time before he perishes. He visits Smallville, his boyhood home. He visits his close friends Batman and Robin, and he visits Lana Lang and Lois Lane, his two greatest loves. Of note for the purposes of this essay is that he never goes back to the Fortress of Solitude. While he can’t physically visit his home planet of Krypton for it no longer exists, he has many of the artifacts from that world stored in his Fortress. That they mean so little to him that he would not even want to glance at them one last time before he died is telling. All of his memories, all of his joy is built around his experiences as an

²³² Unknown, “The Red Kryptonite Menace,” in *Action Comics # 283* (New York: DC Comics, 1961), 218.

American. He has so deeply acculturated himself that the meaning of his existence is bound up in his relationships with the people he has befriended on Earth.

Superman in the 1970s

The 1970s saw Jewish society begin to more directly reflect the leftist ideologies of the larger American community. Age-old traditions began to face new scrutiny as oppressed groups within the Jewish sub-culture of Orthodoxy questioned the rationale for their existence. Jewish women rallied around the larger rhetoric of feminism to challenge Jewish leaders for the right to worship as equals. The Ezrat Nashim, a liberal women's rights coalition, demanded "the elimination of...subordinate treatment of women in Jewish marriage and divorce laws."²³³ They also fought for leadership positions in the synagogues. Sally Preisand's instatement as the first female rabbi in 1972 highlighted this Reform Movement within the Jewish community.²³⁴

This period of reevaluation is mirrored in some of the classic Superman tales from the 1970s. In *Must There be a Superman* the series tackles the issue of social construction of racial memory in inventive new ways. After he is knocked unconscious while diverting an asteroid from entering the Milky Way galaxy, the Guardians, a group of immortal beings that indirectly control much of the universe, nurse Superman back to health.²³⁵ They decide to implant the notion subconsciously in Superman's brain that he may be doing more harm than good for the human race by constantly helping them with their struggles.

²³³ The Jewish Americans, Change in Jewish Traditions, accessed on July 25, 2010, www.pbs.org/jewishamericans/jewis_life/modern_america.html.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ For more on the Guardians you can re-read the introduction to this dissertation where they are mentioned in connection to the Green Lantern.

Superman spends much of the remainder of the issue tormented over whether his presence on Earth is actually interfering with “human social growth.”²³⁶ This presents a fascinating commentary on the nature of social construction of identity. By inserting a single suggestion into Superman’s mind, the Guardians have caused him to question the value of his very existence. While the cultivation of such ideas in the real world may take considerably more time to manifest themselves, the logic is similar. It seems fitting that a character modeled after a minority whose own sense of self was so deeply rooted in the stereotypes developed about them in America would undergo such a crisis of conscience.

In *The Private Life of Clark Kent*, the reader is introduced to one of the few men who knows Kent’s secret identity. A childhood friend from Smallville runs into Kent when he returns home to visit his parent’s old home. The friend, Pete Ross, assumes that Kent has returned home because he is worried that some clue to his identity might be left behind. It is only as he watches how completely Kent lets himself drift away into memories of good times spent with his foster parents that he realizes the home holds sentimental value for him. This appears to floor Ross. How could an all-powerful alien be brought to tears by an old farmhouse? He comes to the same conclusion that this dissertation has argued all along: “Clark Kent [has] become as genuine a human being as Superman.”²³⁷ Reiterating the power of socially constructed racial identities, Ross quotes “a wise man once said, ‘we must be very careful about what we pretend to be because one day we may wake up to find that’s what we are.’”²³⁸

²³⁶ Elliott S. Maggin, “Must There be a Superman,” in *Superman #247* (New York: DC Comics, 1972), 183.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 200

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 200.

One final critique of social construction of race comes in the pages of *I Am Curious (Black)* Lois Lane wants to do an expose on the experience of African Americans living in tenement housing in Metropolis. When no one will speak to her as a white woman, she convinces Superman to fly her to the Fortress of Solitude where he has a device called a Plastimold. The Plastimold is roughly shaped like a mummy's coffin. When someone steps into it they can have their skin color temporarily changed to match the appearance of any race they want. Superman uses the Plastimold to turn Lois black so she can infiltrate the black community and get her story. What is more interesting is that he has had in his possession for years a machine that would allow him to overcome the limits of his alien biology with the flip of a switch. When choosing a disguise he easily could have donned the skin of an African American or a Native American which would have made for a much more convincing costume than a pair of bifocals. That Kal-El chooses for Clark Kent to be white is an indication of how badly he wants to assimilate into the mainstream of American culture. It is also perhaps a sad commentary on how the desire to fit in can effect a person's choices.

Superman in the 1980s

The 1980s are often thought of as "halcyon days" for Jewish Americans.²³⁹ Reagan's efforts to end Communist rule in Soviet Russia was seen as a tremendous victory for Jewry. Much of the credit for freeing Soviet Jews has been given to Reagan who "made [it] a priority at each meeting between U.S. Soviet officials."²⁴⁰ The resulting flood of new immigrants to the States was extraordinary. In 1967, less than eighty Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union, by 1989 following the tearing down of the wall, almost

²³⁹ Ron Kampeas, "Jews Learned Their Power and Limits During Reagan Years," *J Weekly.com*, (2004).

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

thirty-seven-thousand made the trek to America.²⁴¹ Many of these Jews had grown up expressing their faith in vastly different ways from the common practices of American Jews. As a result, Hasin Diner explains that many “federations and...other social service agencies, took on the process of ‘judaizing’ the immigrants.”²⁴² At this point in American history that judaization would have largely been synonymous with Americanizing these Eastern European newcomers. The Superman narratives of the 1980s would spend a considerable amount of time returning to the original message of the text, inculcating values to a new generation of first time Americans. The historical moment had once again called for alterations to the narrative.

In *The Secret World of Jonathan Kent*, Superman’s own adoptive father makes a pilgrimage of his own. He travels back from the grave to see what his son has grown up to become. The writers, playing fast and loose with the Superman canon, inform the audience that many years ago in Smallville, Jonathan was visited by aliens who give him a gift of one wish in reward for taking in Kal-El. The elder Kent’s wish was to see his son one last time after he passed on. In this case, it is Jonathan who is still trying to guide Clark Kent. He presses him to marry Lois Lane declaring that they will “make a perfect match.”²⁴³ This call for intermarriage is a return to form for the series as it once again plants the seeds of assimilationist and universalist rhetoric.

In a tribute issue to Siegel and Shuster, a world is imagined in which Superman never existed. An alien race threatens to take over the world and only two young boys who believe in the power of imagination can save it. Those two young boys are clearly

²⁴¹ Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 317.

²⁴² *Ibid*, 317.

²⁴³ Cary Bates, “The Secret World of Jonathan Kent,” in *Action Comics #508* (New York: DC Comics, 1980), 42.

meant to represent the creators of Superman. Their names are Joey and Jerry. They live in Cleveland, Ohio. The story's strength is its understanding of how much of an effect characters like Superman have on young readers. As the Siegel and Shuster clones hide in a cave to escape the aliens' advance, they begin drawing Superman on a cave wall to take their mind off their troubles. The drawing distresses the aliens. He represents a return to the world of the power of mythology. The children argue with one another over what it is about the drawing that scares the aliens so terribly. Joey claims "They're scared of him [Superman]." ²⁴⁴ Jerry more astutely surmises that they fear the "idea" of him. ²⁴⁵

As the boys run triumphantly through the streets in homemade Superman costumes encouraging their neighbors to help fight off the invading alien horde, the comic reminds of how valuable the core concepts of Superman developed on a drawing table in 1935 still are to the character fifty years later. The Superman of 1984 is still a sly combination of the best traits of Joe and Jerry magnified with super powers sprinkled in. He is still the embodiment of two young Jewish boys from Cleveland. To imagine that this Jewish attitude is not still wrapped up in what Superman represents is to fundamentally misread the message of the Man of Steel.

In *Homeward Bound*, the issue of Clark's double identity again rises to the surface. A grueling battle with one of his foes leaves Superman unable to make it to Jonathan and Martha Kent's anniversary party. As he flies to Smallville to make an appearance, he chastises himself for letting "the Clark side of [himself]" be pushed aside by the needs of Superman. ²⁴⁶ It would be enough to stop here and note that the fact Kal-

²⁴⁴ Marv Wolfman, "If Superman Didn't Exist," in *Action Comics # 554* (New York: DC Comics, 1984), 60.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁴⁶ Marv Wolfman, "Homeward Bound," in *Superman # 430*, (New York: DC Comics, 1987), 121.

El puts so much effort into addressing his persona as Clark Kent shows how much the identity means to him on a personal level. This is not just a name and a face that he holds onto to keep up appearances. He has deep seated investment in the relationships he has fostered as Clark Kent. In many cases they mean more to him than the ones he forms as his alter ego. But Jonathan Kent drives home for readers the value of Clark to the Superman mythology when he states “that rubbish about you not being Clark and only being Superman – that’s all it is – rubbish. You’re one man son.”²⁴⁷ And that one man is the Jewish approximation of a Mid-Western farming family.

Superman in the 1990s

Alex Ross’ vision of an older Superman, a la Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* series, provides a slightly different dimension to the immigrant status of the world’s greatest superhero. *Kingdom Come* pontificates over what happens when the immigrant absorption experience goes awry. The tale imagines that Superman’s boy scout vision of American principles has slowly begun to conflict with the morally ambiguous stance of the average citizen. A country that has lived through Watergate, the Vietnam War, and Columbine challenges his utopian conceptions of justice. Citizens openly accuse Superman of lacking the fortitude to do what must be done when the Joker strides into town and commences with a killing spree. His last victims totaled ninety-two men and one woman – the collective staff of the Daily Planet. Superman demands that he be put through the paces of the traditional judicial system, but before he can make it up the steps to the courthouse, Magog, a new breed of metahuman,²⁴⁸ strikes him down with a blast from his staff. Superman is shocked when a jury refuses to find Magog guilty. The

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 123.

²⁴⁸ The term commonly used in the mini-series to refer to those with superhero-like powers.

public consensus appears to be that he has done the world a long overdue favor. Unable to process the glamorization of such an act, Superman retreats from the outside world not to be seen or heard from for ten years.

During that stretch, he redesigns a room in the Fortress of Solitude to act as an exact replica of his father's farm. The first images of him in the series are a clear intimation of the famous cover from *Action Comics* #1. Only here, instead of lifting a car filled with gangsters over his head, Kal-El balances a tractor with one outstretched arm while carrying a piece of timber into the barn with the other. He is dressed in overalls and perspiring with the sweat of an honest day's work. It is telling that even in a space that is meant to be set aside as a reminder of his home planet, he has seen fit to design a room around his American childhood. The Fortress is a place for holding onto memories, to keep them from fading or being lost. Placing a replica of the family farm here shows how much Kent values his American roots.

One of the more powerful critiques of ethnic/white relations comes in the mini-series *Peace on Earth* also by Alex Ross. The story finds Superman distressed by the fact that so many people around the world will suffer from starvation over the holiday (Christmas) season. In an effort to right this injustice, he requests an audience with Congress. Of course, Superman's powers make it such that he hardly needed the approval of a government body to carry out his moral obligations, but he professes to be "grateful" for "the chance to be heard."²⁴⁹ Unquestionably there is a message here that even those with the power to work outside the laws of the United States should adhere to it as a matter of civic responsibility. Here stretched out across two pages is a single panel showing a god humbling himself before the feet of the American political system. After

²⁴⁹ Alex Ross and Paul Dini, *Peace on Earth*, (New York: DC Comics, 1999).

gaining there permission of the U.S. government to fly supplies around the world for one day, Superman muses regretfully to himself, “I know at best this will provide only a days relief for people who need so much more. But perhaps that’s what’s needed to start the rest of the world thinking about a permanent solution.”²⁵⁰ The writers clearly see the Man of Steel as an instrument for social change in this passage, not just in the pages of the fictive realm of Metropolis, but as an agent of reform in the real-world. In the end, even the mighty Kal-El can not adequately supply the world with the rations it needs. His efforts in unnamed foreign lands are met with political protest, bullets, and in one instance biological warfare. He sits back in his apartment that night wondering “Did I truly think I would be able to succeed? Knowing what I do of human nature.”²⁵¹ In spite of his disappointment, the exclusive interview he gives to Clark Kent for the next day’s edition of the *Daily Planet* quotes the man in blue and red as remarking “Many times I’d considered taking stronger action to help the world, but I realized such measures could be shortsighted and disastrous.”²⁵² Once again the huddled masses are heeded to remain at bay by their stalwart defender assured that with faith in the existing processes of man, progress and prosperity will come when the time is right.

Superman in the New Millennium

In Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely’s *All-Star Superman*, the Man of Steel learns that there are limits to his indestructibility. After flying too close for too long to the Sun on a mission to prevent a space station from being sabotaged, Superman has for all intents and purposes developed skin cancer. Unsure how to deal with the possibility of death, he reconciles to reveal his secret identity to those he most loves in the world. The

²⁵⁰ Ibid,

²⁵¹ Ibid,

²⁵² Ibid,

culmination of this purging of secrets comes in an invitation for Lois Lane to the Fortress of Solitude.²⁵³

Once inside, Superman candidly opens up to Lois on the nature of his dual-identity. But she is incredulous in her assertion that the omnipotent alien she has privately swooned over for years could possibly be related to the sniffing journalist with whom she shares an office. Distressed by her dismissal Kal-El implores her: “Lois please, I AM Clark Kent.”²⁵⁴ The profundity of this statement cannot be overemphasized. This is not merely an admission that Superman and Clark Kent share the same body. It is an epiphany that morally, psychologically, socially and ideologically they are a fused self-conception, a single soul. By being forced to confront the biological determinants of his adopted world, he has become more fully assimilated than ever before.

The need for this conversation to take place in such a protected environment points to the fears commonly associated with immigrants openly identifying with their mother culture. After being given the news, Lois Lane sits alone in a darkened corridor of the fortress. In an extreme close up of her teeth gnashing over one another, she mutters to herself: “What if there really was some part of him that was bumbling, offish Clark Kent? I just don’t know if I could deal with that.”²⁵⁵ Not only does this highlight the all-too-real fear of rejection experienced by many immigrant cultures, it exemplifies the invisible man dilemma. Because Clark and Superman are seen externally as assimilating at different rates, their congealing into a single person causes exceptional distress.

²⁵³ This was a sanctuary for Superman, where he housed many of his other-worldly possessions. The temple was constructed from a hollowed out glacier of ice and introduced as a safe haven for Superman to explore his alien impulses away from the judgmental eye of society.

²⁵⁴ Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely, *All-Star Superman* (New York: DC Comics, 2006), 46.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 49.

In an ancillary story from the same series, a new form of Kryptonite, a black version, is unearthed by probing scientists. When exposed to the poisonous rock, Superman is not drained of his powers as is traditional to the mythology, but rather stripped of his moral code. Kal-El goes on a violent tear through Metropolis with total disregard for the safety of the civilians he so dutifully defends. It might be said that this mineral had exacerbated the negative connotations of the immigrant in Superman.

While affected, he speaks in short, clipped phrases, a possible allusion to the broken English caricatured in visages of Ethnic life in America. Here Superman is seen treating America as a temporary location and not like his home. Once Jimmy Olsen, one of Clark Kent/Superman's oldest friends manages to reverse the effects of the Kryptonite on his mentor, he explains to him: "[he] was everything you're not. A bully, a coward, a liar."²⁵⁶ This is the danger of immigration made manifest when proper inculcation practices are not put in place.

This fear of potential infection from foreign soil is reiterated in Mark Waid's *Birthright*. The story opens with a twenty-something Clark Kent in the midst of an African civil war as a free-lance reporter. The two tribes, the Tubaaba and the Ghuri have entered into a blood-soaked dispute over perceived cultural imperialist tendencies. The Ghuri accuse the Tubaaba (a far more economically prosperous group) of recasting the history of their region in textbooks to turn their children against Ghuri causes. Kobe Asuru, the leader of the Ghuri rebellion tells Kent during an interview, "It is the way of Africa. Divisions are drawn and battles are fought along tribal lines – man...tends to find...ways to discriminate."²⁵⁷ What is particularly interesting here is the confined

²⁵⁶ Ibid, 103.

²⁵⁷ Mark Waid, *Superman: Birthright* (New York: DC Comics, 2004).

nature of the language used. The writers of Superman stories have by the 21st Century so deeply bought into the Americanization aesthetic as a key component in the architecture of the mythology that Superman/Clark Kent is no longer the only voice extolling such virtues. Here, the possibility of such violent conflict is situated as a specific cultural product of the ethnic other. No indication is ever given either by the tribes or Kent's response that such a conflict would be even remotely possible in the heartland of America. That the historical record shows such ideologically based battles have broken out on U.S. soil is ineffectual and unarticulated because it does not match the schemata of American exceptionalism portrayed in the Superman universe. To further drive home this point, during the same conversation, Asuru turns to Kent and asks "So, you're a product of the American heartland?" to which Kent responds "Proudly."²⁵⁸

In this newly re-conceived tale of Superman's origin, a cryptic metallic tablet is placed in his escape pod with him. Contained therein is the collective history and knowledge of the Kryptonian people. We learn within the first several panels that it has taken Clark over two decades of his life merely to learn how to turn the device on. In an e-mail to his mother he writes of the reference tool: "It projects text I couldn't possibly decipher integrated with images of a world I can't at all remember, all barely accessible by buttons and controls completely counterintuitive to *our* way of thinking (emphasis mine)."²⁵⁹ The choice of personal pronoun here is significant in that it confirms Kent's private assumptions about the ethnic lens through which he views himself. Speaking to his mother, he need not maintain such linguistic conventions unless they reflected his true sense of identity. Martha Kent would seem to agree with this analysis based on a

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 38.

²⁵⁹ Ibid, 38

conversation she has with Jonathan later in the issue wherein she states: “Maybe he comes from the stars but...he’s just like you and me.”²⁶⁰

But while Kent is clearly imbued with the values of a Mid-Western upbringing, he still recognizes that his alien status requires him to earn his way into being accepted as a fully-fledged American citizen. A flashback to his days in Smallville²⁶¹ recounts his early friendship with Lex Luthor who would become one of the Man of Steel’s most diabolical enemies. Attempting as best he can to comfort the lonely youth, Luthor offers this advice: “The sad truth is people are afraid of what they don’t understand...or at least, can’t communicate with.”²⁶² This passage extends the notion of otherness beyond external signifiers such as skin color. While Kent may exude the spitting image of American strength, he can still find ways of feeling disconnected from that world.

Conclusion

Determining exactly how effective the narrative devices of immigration reform put into the Superman mythology were on redirecting the ethnic identities of its readers is difficult if not impossible to say. There exists a dearth of empirical research on the social effects of comic book readership and the amount of that attention that has been specifically focused on ethnicity and race in comics is even more barren. There are several stories that attest to the power of the Superman text to affect real-world social change. A popular episode of comic book lore states that Hitler so despised Superman,

²⁶⁰ Ibid, 73.

²⁶¹ The tiny country town in which Kent grows up. As the primary comic became more successful, an ancillary series titled *Superboy* told of the adventures of a much younger Superman stationed in the town of Smallville.

²⁶² Ibid, 179.

who he saw as clearly exhibiting the physical features of a Jew that during the reign of the Third Reich, he banned the magazine from newsstands.²⁶³

Superman also became a famous accomplice for Stetson Kennedy, a correspondent for the *Pittsburgh Courier* in the 1940s. Kennedy joined the Klan's Atlanta Georgia chapter as an undercover agent hoping to use his experience to undermine the Klan's efforts at bigotry and segregation. But once he had secured enough information to become a threat to the Klan, Kennedy soon found that the organization was too "entrenched and broad-based" to be burned by any of his usual contacts.²⁶⁴ Newspaper editors, lawyers, and even the governor of the state seemed patently uninterested in striking a blow to the Klan. So, Kennedy turned to an unconventional ally. He phoned the producers of the *Adventures of Superman*, a popular radio program of the time. The producers agreed to craft stories based on the information Kennedy had collected on secret handshakes and linguistic rituals. When Kennedy attended the next Klan meeting following the initial airing of the Superman radio show, one Klan member complained that he had come home last night to find his own children playing "Superman against the Klan...I never felt so ridiculous in all my life!"²⁶⁵ Within a few weeks of the shows' broadcast, the Atlanta chapter was in diary as Kennedy and Superman had effectively "turn[ed] the Klan's secrecy against itself."²⁶⁶

Some might argue whatever imperatives, moral or otherwise, Jerry Seigel and Joe Shuster imbued Superman with they were negated when the pair were bought out by DC

²⁶³ Nobleman and McDonald, *Boys of Steel: The Creators of Superman*, It should be noted that many historians have claimed that no official evidence exists to support this story, but its persistence surely says something for the strength of the Superman legend.

²⁶⁴ Steven D. Levitt and Steven J. Dubner, *Freakanomics* (New York:, Harper Collins, 2005), 63.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 65.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 65.

Comics for control of the character. If not then, perhaps when Jerry was fired from the company following his copyright lawsuit or when Joe's eyesight became so poor that he could no longer manage to sketch the muscle-bound figure that had brought him world-wide fame. What these critics fail to realize is that the work Seigel and Shuster no matter how short-lived, laid the foundations upon which all other incarnations of the mythology would follow. Even sixty years later, no writer or artist would remove the proto-immigrant leanings of the Superman philosophy from the pages of the text anymore than they would change the name of the planet from which he sailed to Earth or alter the color scheme of his tights. For evidence of this fact, one need only look at the final pages of the *All-Star Superman* series. Morrison and Quietly infuse the last panels of their tale with Norman Rockwellesque energy as Clark Kent chases his dog Krypto through the corn fields of his youth with joyous abandon. He stops and pulls an errant tree from its stump tossing it skyward for the eager pooch. Kent follows close behind and the rambunctious pair end their journey sitting exhausted on the surface of the moon (site of one of man's greatest conquests) staring back at Earth as it from the front porch of their farmland home. No more American image could possibly be imagined nor any single frame that more completely signifies the insider/outsider dichotomy of the Superman mythos be rendered. Here he is not the champion of two planets or the impervious alien that can leap over tall buildings in a single bound. He is merely a boy taking in the world alongside man's best friend.

CHAPTER IV

DARK IS THE KNIGHT: RACIAL CODING OF THE CAPED CRUSADER

By the late 1930s, Superman had helped propel comic book sales into new stratospheres. Titles featuring the Man of Steel were regularly selling upwards of 1,300,000 copies a month, more than double the numbers for any competing magazine of the time.²⁶⁷ Anxious to cash-in on the “gold-rush” period of comics, DC quickly began commissioning their artists and writers to devise the next great star of the crime fighting era.²⁶⁸ Editor Vincent Sullivan turned to up-and-coming artist Bob Kane and his assistant, writer Bill Finger to develop the industry’s next costumed champion.²⁶⁹ But, Bob Kane hardly resembled the youthful optimism encapsulated in Superman’s monthly adventures. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster had crafted a more perfect embodiment of themselves; the way they wished they could be seen. Kane was far more interested in creating a character that would reflect the ills of the larger society.

Our first encounter with the caped avenger of Gotham, for example, comes in the form of a young, innocent Bruce Wayne walking home from the theatre with his parents. The boy stares up at his father, his heart and mind as yet unaffected by the angular shadows that envelop so much of the city he calls home. But, as is so often the case with these stories, happiness turns out to be a transitory state. A common purse snatcher, a man of no exceptional consequence save for the impact he is about to have on this boy’s life²⁷⁰ corners the family as they attempt to cut through a dark alleyway. He demands the

²⁶⁷ Wright, *Comic Book Nation* 2003, 13.

²⁶⁸ Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America*, 34.

²⁶⁹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 16.

²⁷⁰ Tim Burton’s first adaptation of the Batman to screen in 1989 posited that the man who killed Bruce Wayne’s parents would go on to climb the mob ranks of Gotham’s underworld and become the Joker. Although a compelling notion, this storyline is not supported by the original comic narrative.

father's wallet and the mother's expensive looking pearl necklace. Bruce's father protests, stepping in front of his family to try and reason with the interloper, but to no avail. In the space of only a few short panels the heir to the Wayne fortune watches as his parents are both gunned down in an act of random violence. We are told he spends much of the intervening years of his life attempting to find solace by running his family's empire. A far cry from the corn fields of a Kansas farm indeed.

But safeguarding his parent's public image would never be able to satiate the young man's zeal for revenge. He needed to exact a more palpable punishment upon the world than the quiet dignity of his aristocratic position would allow. And so, Kane invites his audience to watch as a fully grown Bruce Wayne sits alone in his palatial study one evening mulling over more gruesome options. In order to "strike terror in [criminal's] hearts" he reasons, "I must be a creature of the night, black...terrible."²⁷¹ This epiphany to become the Batman I would suggest is not merely one of donning cape and cowl to intimidate the underbelly of Gotham, it speaks to Kane's larger agenda of creating a character that could subtly comment on the injustices being perpetrated in the real world. The text could act as a forum for the concerns of a disgruntled youth market whose opinions were muted in other such trade publications. Bruce Wayne, playboy millionaire, unsatisfied with the changes wrought to society through philanthropic channels discovers a way of altering himself so as to confront these societal demons head-on: by becoming the Batman, by becoming black.

In this case, black refers to more than just the armor worn by Batman on his nightly outings. It is a reflection of his sociopolitical identity, a physical manifestation of his emerging psychological values. For all intents and purposes, once Bruce Wayne pulls

²⁷¹ Bob Kane and Bill Finger, *Batman #1, Spring Issue* (New York: DC Comics, 1940), 1.

on his mask each evening and slips into the driver's seat of his custom made mobile, he not only switches occupations but races. The idea of culturally appropriated racial identities is not unique to the Batman character. As will be shown later in this essay, white men have been attempting to absorb traits usually associated through the promotion of stereotypes with African Americans since at least the Civil War through dance, music, and organized sport. This is also in keeping with CRT notions of how race manifests itself. Bruce is socially constructing a new racialized identity for himself. Batman represents the first attempt by the comics industry to apply such a label to a starring character. Granted, for economic reasons this application was performed latently. It would have undoubtedly been no less than fiscal suicide to openly acknowledge Batman's dual race in the comic's panels. As noted by Batman historian Will Brooker, Batman was a marketing success almost instantly for the company yielding ancillary income sources with the sale of "cut-out Batplanes and stick-on transfers" thus "[o]nce the initial 'brand' was established...it was in the interests of National Periodical Publications [The original name of DC Comics]...to retain the elements which made Batman popular."²⁷² Phrased another way, those elements of the character that might drive away business, especially that of conservative-minded white parents, had to be dealt with delicately. Still, the character stands balanced on a fascinating precipice. Like Mickey Mouse, Oswald the Rabbit, and Krazy Kat before him, Batman represented an androgynous undertaking by illustrator and writer alike. If we look closely enough the thread of racialized allegory is expertly woven through each successive epoch of the dark knight's travels. This essay will be devoted to expounding on how these various

²⁷² Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc. 2005), 36.

permutations of blackness impart themselves throughout the series run, to understanding what influences might have possessed a young, white, Jewish kid from the Bronx to craft such a representation of Otherness, and to investigate from a narrative level what rewards Bruce Wayne stood to gain from accepting this acculturated version of blackness into his daily life. But first, it may be helpful to look back at some of the research that has inspired these conclusions to better define just how fragile the psyche of our child orphan hero is. Moreover, to remark on the malleability of identity formation in a man who dresses as a bat.

By critically analyzing the cultural processes that surrounded his creation, I present strong evidence that Batman is in fact the first black superhero in comic book history. This interpretation would have him pre-dating the first appearances of The Black Panther and The Falcon by almost thirty years. Other scholars have already established a psychological dislocation between Bruce Wayne and Batman. I build on that research by suggesting that the break also manifests as a difference in racial identification.

I track the caped crusader through many of his most legendary storylines to create a historical narrative of his presentation that compliments perceptions of black culture. We see several of the stereotypes played out in other mediums (TV, film) replicated in the pages of the Batman comic book. He is allowed to be much more ruthless and hyper-masculine during the 1940s as efforts are made to enlist blacks into the military. During the height of the Civil Rights movement he is emasculated to prevent the comic from appearing too threatening. Within each decade there are alterations made to the character that seem to mirror the shifting ideologies of mainstream America on the question of racial equality

Batman's Split Personality

A large body of literature already exists corroborating the notion that Batman operates as a psychologically separate identity from his obviously Caucasian alter-ego.²⁷³ By juxtaposing the exploits of the Batman against the shifting milieu of social unrest besetting African Americans in America at crucial moments along their simultaneous chronologies, it should be possible to draw the necessary parallels between the depictions of the dark knight and the many invisible men for whom his brand of justice spoke in especially poignant ways.

Previous researchers have postulated on the cathartic possibilities lent to the reader through superhero fictions. Referring to what he called the “*tabla rasa*” effect, Danny Fingeroth notes in *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* that without the omnipresent glare of a parent's failures imposing its restrictions on the child's sense of self, an orphan is free to believe that he/she is capable of anything.²⁷⁴ The audience immerses itself into the shoes of Batman or Robin, constantly empowering their self-image through a belief that put in the same situation, with the same skills; they would find the inner strength to persevere. Fingeroth summarizes this projection as “to know that you are not who people think you are.”²⁷⁵ The intensity of this effect might better be described as knowing that you are *more* than what people think you are. And if indeed the reader is permitted to extend past what Derrida might describe as the naturalized condition of one's life, then why should the

²⁷³ Orr, “The Anoeidipal Mythos of Batman and Catwoman.” *Journal of Popular Culture*. Vol. 27:4, (1994), p 169. and Terrill, E. R., “Put on a Happy Face: Batman as Schizophrenic Savior.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Vol. 79, (1993), 319.

²⁷⁴ Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes really Tell Us About Ourselves and our Society* (New York: *Continuum*, 2004), 69.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 69.

characters stimulating that fantasy not possess symbolism above and beyond their explicitly scripted selves? Moreover, this condition would have been especially enviable for many young Blacks during Batman's formative years as sociological conditions prevented them from receiving fair treatment in their day-to-day lives. As a specialized audience for this text, they would have been in a unique position to appreciate the heightened reality embodied by the Batman character and fostered naturally by the superhero narrative as described in post-modernist thought.

Michael Brody continues this notion of deconstruction, albeit not in expressly ethnic terms by more closely examining Bruce Wayne's "death guilt" trauma.²⁷⁶ He explains that often survivors of cataclysmic scenarios will blame themselves for the deaths of those who perished in the encounter. This guilt slowly begins to suffuse the "dream-state and waking hours of the survivor's lives."²⁷⁷ For children, a sense of extreme emotional turmoil can surround the events. The wholesome curtain of a Rockwellian existence has been forcibly ripped from their mind's eye. Brody suspects that Bruce amounts his survival to a matter of consequence. If there had been enough time to kill all the Waynes, surely the robber would have done so, but Bruce Wayne lives because of "the time used to murder his parents."²⁷⁸ I would suggest that this contributes to his disillusionment with white justice.

The Batsuit itself is a kind of psychic albatross vigilantly reminding both character and reader of Bruce's fractured emotional state. The author postulates that the famous horned mask of the Batman is specifically designed as a reaction to the young

²⁷⁶ Michael Brody, "Batman: Psychic Trauma and Its Solution," *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 28(4), (1993), 173.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 173.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 173.

boy's grief. "Bruce may want to cover his eyes," Brody conjectures, explaining the vacant, hollow space that fills the eye sockets of the character in the comic book. Black makeup was even utilized during the filming of the 1989 movie adaptation to obscure actor Michael Keaton's eyes while in costume.

Brody elaborates on this split identity theory by examining the film. He notes that when beautiful socialite Viki Vale approaches Wayne at a party he is throwing at his mansion, he refuses to reveal himself as the wealthy millionaire. Some might take this as merely a coy act of self-deprecation or embarrassment. The author instead claims that Bruce Wayne chooses not to identify himself because he is no longer sure if he *is* Bruce Wayne.²⁷⁹ This essay contends that this can be attributed to Bruce struggling to fully come to terms with his expressions of racial Otherness.

Robert E. Terrill extends this victimization onto the entire population of Gotham City. In Jungian terms, Terrill sees Gotham as a city obsessed with the superficiality of its own consciousness. Tim Burton's vision of Gotham has reprioritized this image into an essential construction by which the city and its residents judge their worth. The ostentatious architecture that pervades their streets speaks to the necessity to be seen as affluent and urbane. The criminals of the city become nightmarish figures that authorities have chosen to push to the level of the collective unconscious.²⁸⁰

Thus, Batman becomes the perfect choice for a defender to the city of Gotham. He too suffers from the disparity between his semi-conscious personas. He is the only person fit to save Gotham from itself because he can manifest himself into a formidable representation of the shadow world without being swallowed by the deviancy of the

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 175.

²⁸⁰ Robert E. Terrill, "Put on a Happy Face: Batman as Schizophrenic Savior," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 79, (1993), 323.

collective unconscious. He is “the city’s savior” from itself.²⁸¹ Even the insignia on his chest is a symbol of “extreme psychic unbalance”, a dichotomy of light and dark, a brilliant yellow cast against the jet black silhouette of a bat.²⁸² The strength of this psychological division would seem to suggest that the more vivid separation of self that is the subject of this essay could be realized within the realm of the Batman. If Superman is a character defined by his refusal to compromise his specific set of values, then Batman is notable for his chameleon-like ability to engineer an ethnicity as separate as the man is from the bat. But, what of the creator of Batman? What possesses a Jewish youth to unleash such a nuanced, racially challenged character on the world?

Developing a Narrative Perspective: Bob Kane’s Early Life

Reflecting on Bob Kane’s childhood provides a critical opportunity for audiences to understand the influences that played upon his imagination as he developed not only the look and personality of the Batman character, but the ideology, the base facts of the character that later writers would return to time and again as guidance in their own rehashing of the narrative. From a post-modernist perspective, these are the years in which Batman develops from another white avenger to the first costumed black hero in comic history.

Bob Kane had spent much of his early life receiving first hand exposure to the seedier side of the American dream. In his autobiography, the artist vividly describes his life and death encounters in the “tough part of the Bronx” he and his family called home.²⁸³ Fearing his illustrative prowess might not be enough to ensure his safety, Kane

²⁸¹ Ibid, 325.

²⁸² Ibid, 330.

²⁸³ Bob Kane and Tom Andre, *Batman and Me* (Foretsville, CA: Eclipse Books, 1989), 1.

joined a neighborhood gang just to “survive.”²⁸⁴ Punctuating the severity of his misadventures, Kane notes how “miraculous” it is he lived through their various “rumbles” to see his fifteenth birthday.²⁸⁵ On one particularly alarming occasion, he found himself ambushed by a rival gang (The Vultures) returning home from violin lessons. Speaking to the expectations of the “melting pot” atmosphere he found himself in, Kane states only two kinds of individuals were thought to carry violin cases in those days: “sissies...[and]...gangsters”.²⁸⁶ Unfortunately for the man nicknamed “Doodler” by his neighborhood cohorts, there was no tommy-gun tucked inside his case. Instead, he found himself with a broken right arm and a mangled hand. Kane claims the beating left him unable to fully turn his right wrist affecting his drawing abilities for much of his professional career.

It is within this turbulent environment we begin to see the first visages of inspiration that will eventually spawn the character of Batman. Here lies the architecture for a character cloaked as much in racial allegory as darkness of night. The would-be hoodlums with whom Kane cavorted as a youth christened their band of ner-do-wells the “Zorros” upon the insistence of the precocious and apparently pugnacious artist. Kane admits to harboring an obsessive fascination with the character then most famously portrayed by Douglas Fairbanks in the movie serials of the 1920s. Recounting the influence of Fairbanks’ antics on his own caped crusader, Kane later wrote that he was the “greatest swashbuckler of them all” and “my idol.”²⁸⁷ Zorro’s “acrobatics” became the inspiration for Batman’s terrestrial rather than cosmological powers and the masked

²⁸⁴ Ibid, 1.

²⁸⁵ Ibid, 4.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 7

²⁸⁷ Ibid, 1.

man's underground headquarters acts as a precursor to Wayne's own cavernous hideaway²⁸⁸. But more crucial to this study than such an artificial homage is the early racial encoding provided by the Zorro narratives on the fertile mind of Batman's creator.

Above all else, the story of Zorro is based in the results of ethnic unrest. Like Bruce Wayne, Zorro's alter-ego is a wealthy fop, Don Diego Vega who could easily live out his life in splendor as part of the Spanish aristocracy. Yet, as he sees the suffering of his people from afar, he decides that he must take justice into his own hands by donning not just a costume but an exoskeleton that befit his shifting personality. If Don Diego Vega was the acculturation of quasi-American ethics,²⁸⁹ than Zorro became a tactile embrace of the Spanish heritage as a vehicle to understanding more acutely their dilemma. So too could Batman be seen as Wayne's attempt to perform blackness as a means of cleaning up the streets of Gotham.

This notion of appropriating a new racial self around which this sort of heroism (and the thesis for this essay) is built existed long before Fairbanks ever slashed a Z into a wall or Batman responded to the ominous silhouette that announced the need for his services, however. Gayle Ward alludes to equally socially constructed, if slightly less philanthropic, identity formation in the realm of popular music. He contends that white artists in the early 1920s such as Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow managed to ascertain the cultural capital associated with an African heritage (in this case, a more authentic musicality) through his "worshipful and enthusiastic devotion" and immersion in negro culture essentially resulting in his "physically turn[ing] black."²⁹⁰ The story of Mezzrow

²⁸⁸ Ibid, 38.

²⁸⁹ He made his home in California.

²⁹⁰ Gayle Ward, "Mezz Mezzrow and the Voluntary Negro Blues", in *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, eds. Harry Stecopoulos et. al, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 116.

provides evidence for two essential points that are contained at both a production and a narrativistic level in the Batman mythos: (1) that racial identity transformation may be “grounded in a cultural, rather than a biological...essentialism”²⁹¹ and (2) that there might exist legitimate cause for a W.A.S.P. to desire to be black; what this study will hence forth refer to as Intentional Negroism.²⁹²

Critical Race theorists have long supported such interpretations. Mezzrow and Batman embody the central logic that race can be learned and performed. It would further agree that it is through the signs exhibited in this performance that society comes to a consensus in its categorization of race. It is also worth noting that Bob Kane’s creation also aligns with CRT’s understanding of white interpretations of racial otherness. Critical Race Theory is designed to “allow... researchers to examine race by acknowledging the inherent privilege of ‘whiteness’ and analyzing race from a perspective that recognizes that privilege.”²⁹³ By examining the representational structure of Batman we uncover how white writers and artists understood blackness. This viewpoint also serves as a guiding logic in accepting the regressive turn that the comic took in its portrayals in later years.

Kane’s first exposure to the racial images that would underscore the Batman seem to have appeared for the first time at age fourteen when he recalls having seen the film *The Bat Whispers*. Kane credits the titular character with having inspired the design of the Batman costume, but I would suggest that the striking, even disturbing imagery

²⁹¹ Ibid, 118.

²⁹² This phrasing is cribbed from Ward’s own account which he calls “Voluntary Negroism.” I have adjusted the terminology as “voluntary” carries with it an expectation of failure or at the very least, undesirability whereas “intentional” more objectively states the nature of the decision making process.

²⁹³ Christopher Campbell and Kimberly LeDuff, “Recording New Orleans: News, Race, and Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*,” University of Southern Mississippi, 7.

captured in this film planted far deeper roots in the dark knight's ethos. In the film, a private eye is hired to search the city for the "mysterious Bat" a serial killer stalking members of the bourgeois.²⁹⁴ In a cruel twist, it is revealed that the detective and the Bat are the same person. His fiendish disguise is shown to consist of a dark black robe tied at the waist by a bit of twine and a ghoulish bat mask that Kane refers to as "very ominous" and a horrific creation he could "never forget."²⁹⁵ But, the bat costume represents more than a means of concealing one's identity. The detective is metaphorically transforming his body by donning the suit. He must become (not imitate but *become*) this monstrous bat in order to find the psychological release of murder not available to him in his more human guise. Here then is one of the first examples presented to Kane of "open rebellion" through the transmogrification of racial identity.

A more persistent influence entered Kane's life in the halls of Dewitt Clinton High School where he first met and competed against Will Eisner, a fellow cartoonist for the school paper. Eisner had a naturally dark tone to his artistic work and seemed fascinated with making social pariahs the stars of his various tales. Eisner's most important influence on Kane was passing on his churlish and often repulsive vision of race as a comedic trope. He created Ebony White, a part-time cab driver and unofficial sidekick to Eisner's most famous creation the super-heroesque Spirit. Eisner drew White as a crude attempt to interject humor into the otherwise drab world of his masked detective. The name and exaggerated facial features and speech patterns spoke to Eisner's interpretation of racial imagery at this early stage of his career. Kane's own Hiram Hick, an ignorant hill person, drawn for *WOW: What a Magazine* in the late 1930s includes

²⁹⁴ Kane and Andre, *Batman and Me*, 38.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

similar illusions to late-nineteenth century interpretations of racial humor. In the final panel from a September 1936 story titled “Hiram Hick in New York,” the hillbilly is invited to attend a costume ball by some of the wealthier tenants in the hotel where he is staying. Hick wins the “funniest costume of the evening” award despite having not dressed up for the affair.²⁹⁶ As he stands on stage sheepishly accepting his golden trophy, Eisner’s influence is more readily felt. Just off to the side of the stage stands a man dressed in traditional black face makeup consistent with what one might expect to find in a minstrel show.

What Makes a Man Become a Bat?: Bruce Wayne’s Narrative Motivation

But these assertions only serve to partially explain the motivation behind Batman’s racial roots. While they shed light onto the various forces molding Bob Kane’s conception of ethnic relationships, one is left to wonder what fulfillment there could be for Bruce Wayne in rejecting his own whiteness. Gotham’s resident playboy by all outward appearances has managed to wield his social and financial influence to scale the ladders of personal achievement. Yet, doubt in one’s self surely plays a key role in the desire to adopt a new identity. So we are left to surmise that to understand why Bruce Wayne would want to be black we must first confront the fallacies he found in being white.

Richard Brookhiser, a prominent scholar in the field of white studies, provides some clues. Brookhiser identifies several qualities that typify the “basic WASP character.”²⁹⁷ The fracturing or diluting of any of these principles within the WASPs mind could thus threaten that individual’s sense of self and indeed their very racial

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 22.

²⁹⁷ Richard Brookhiser, “The Way of the WASP” in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, eds. Richard Degado and Jean Stefanic, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997), 16.

coding. The injured character of the WASP might then seek solace in the form of a new personality.

Among the traits ascribed by Brookhiser, “industry” seems most congruous to the Wayne persona. Indeed, it might be argued that Bruce Wayne’s entire presence in the comic could be subsumed into two fundamental truths: (1) his exceptional wealth and (2) his traumatic childhood experiences. Brookhiser contends that Protestants, and specifically Calvinists created capitalism as a means of retrieving some of the control over their world lost to them by their theological precepts. The Tayloristic virtues of efficiency and exactitude permeating their manmade assembly line dreams are painted as a “nervous ritual, almost a reaction formation” against the indefensibility of predestination.²⁹⁸ But when Wayne’s ceaseless fortune fails to grease the wheels of justice via the channels of philanthropy and science, any imagined control is shaken irrevocably. His millions cannot prove enough on their own to prevent the Joker, the Penguin, or any of the other criminal masterminds of Gotham from ransacking the city on countless occasions. Here then the first blow dealt to Wayne’s racial identity. His whiteness, even at its apex of strength proves incapable of symbolically providing him closure for the deaths of his parents.

This industrial failing ties closely to the trait of “civic-mindedness.” Although the goals of these two virtues intermingle, the focus shifts in civic-minded behavior towards a redistribution of wealth. Wayne is pragmatic enough to realize that he alone can not hope to facilitate the wide-spread social changes needed in a city like Gotham. Instead, his contributions to society must be seen as an example to be followed by other culturally conscious opinion leaders. It would appear however, that the city’s most brilliant minds

²⁹⁸ Ibid, 17.

are skewed towards a more self-serving mentality. Harvey Dent, for example, represents the next most recognizable face of social reform in Gotham opposite Wayne/Batman. But, his commitment to re-imagining Gotham as a civic utopia is interrupted by a series of physiological and psychological attacks on his character by the men he sought to disarm as a district attorney. It would not be going too far to state that Wayne and Dent equally personify the “loner – the vigilante...who...takes the law into his own hands” as a by-product of the inefficiency of the dominant system.²⁹⁹ Certainly, one must conclude that as other pillars of the community began to slip into darkness, Wayne became jaded over a bureaucracy that refused to serve “everybody, not just supermen.”³⁰⁰

Implicit in failings of these traits is a dislocation from Wayne’s sense of performative whiteness. Charles A. Gallagher hints at the racelessness of white existence in modern America with the results of a set of long form interviews conducted at an unnamed³⁰¹ college campus. Herein he spoke at length with white students about the nature of their racial and cultural conceptions of identity. His findings indicate that white urbanites suffer from a “lack of ethnic identity” that “has created an emptiness” waiting to be filled.³⁰² Like the students in Gallagher’s survey, Wayne likely found himself incapable of positioning his heritage into a historical epoch. Instead, as is typified by his extreme isolationism in the comic including an inability to carve out meaningful romantic relationships; Wayne very likely viewed himself as a racial “mutt or [as] nothing” at all, one whose “ethnicity was in name only” and even then a “fuzzy” one at best.³⁰³ This may

²⁹⁹ Ibid, 19.

³⁰⁰ Ibid, 19.

³⁰¹ Referred to in the text as “Urban University”.

³⁰² Charles A. Gallagher, ‘White Racial Formation: Into the Twenty-First Century’ in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, eds. Richard Degado and Jean Stefanicic, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997), 7.

³⁰³ Ibid, 8.

well be the root of one of Batman's vigilante qualities: an implied selfishness. He cleans the streets of the city of crime not merely for the betterment of Gotham, but as a mechanism to constantly refill the void left by the death of his parents and perhaps the death of the naive optimism usually bound up in white racial roles. Further still, this deep "yearning for a usable past"³⁰⁴ may have aided in pushing Wayne to "violate the rules of whiteness in ways that can have a social impact."³⁰⁵ This apathetic attitude toward racial connectivity almost certainly played a role in Batman becoming what Noel Ignatiev would describe as a "white traitor": an individual so discouraged by the actions of the dominant class that he effuses a "willingness to go beyond socially acceptable limits of protest" in response to them.³⁰⁶ In the case of Batman, that protestation manifested itself in the form of cape and cowl.

While this elucidates Wayne's decision making process to adopt a more recognizable racial identity, it still falls short of defining the nature of that identity. That is to say, why did Batman have to be black? Wouldn't it stand to reason that Kane would have imbued his creation with a more openly Latino personality a la the Douglas Fairbanks films of his youth? What necessitated an African American identification over this other, more logical continuation of Kane's childhood fantasies? The answer very well may be found in what author Richard Majors refers to as the "cool pose."³⁰⁷

Majors defines cool pose as a set of "unique, expressive, and conspicuous styles of demeanor, speech, gesture, clothing, hairstyle, walk, stance and handshake" utilized by

³⁰⁴ Ibid, 8.

³⁰⁵ Noel Ignatiev, "How to Be a Race Traitor: Six Ways to Fight Being White," in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, eds. Richard Degado and Jean Stefanic, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press,, 1997), 613.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 613.

³⁰⁷ Richard Majors, "Cool Pose: Black Masculinity and Sports." in *African Americans in Sport*, ed. Gary A. Sailes, (Transaction Publishers, 1998), 15.

black males as an outlet to combat social invisibility.³⁰⁸ It is argued that black men have developed cool pose as a subtle rebuking of the patriarchal franchise that would seek to ignore or diminish them. More importantly, it is an expression of pride in their biological lot in this world. More specifically for the purposes of this essay, however, cool pose dares to recast the image of desirability, to “carve out an alternative path to achieve the goals of dominant masculinity.”³⁰⁹

Intentional Negroism thus appeals to Wayne as a clearly defined set of defiant, antithetical solutions to both his personal dilemma of self and his more holistic function of social reform. Interestingly, because Wayne is fabricating his version of cool pose through the filter of a colonial imagination, it is possible to view his transformation into Batman as an act intended to maintain the social hegemony more than to disturb it. That is, his socially constructed black self offers the opportunity to absorb only those traits of cool pose that most directly serves his purpose and even then on a temporary basis. What’s more, as has been stated his goals are not so much revolutionary as they are reformatory. Whereas he may share certain sympathies with the disenfranchised denizens of Gotham’s back streets as a consequence of his appropriation of racial identity, he is not (and most likely would not want to be) bound physiologically in the manner that a true African American male is to this limited set of social responses.

Majors identifies these acts of protest within the milieu of professional sports. He points to the raised fists of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics and the bourgeoisie mannerisms of Muhammad Ali as the personifications of the cool pose phenomenon in contemporary American society. In an effort to be more relevant to the

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 17.

³⁰⁹ Ibid, 17.

historical moment of the comic's creation, the antics of Joe Louis could easily be substituted for either of these incidents, but I would suggest that where these men integrated cool pose techniques to lampoon social commentary, Wayne's interpretation is a more savage reading. Wayne's interest lies in manipulating the theatricality of cool pose into a mimetic performance of intimidation.

Christopher Lobby provides evidence that such a contradiction between admiration for and fear of African American qualities existed long before Bob Kane ever began sketching his first Batman drafts. Lobby recounts the impressions of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the white regiment leader for the First South Carolina Volunteers of the Union Army, from diary entries made as he prepared the largely black outfit for battle. Higginson, like most white men of the era had little occasion to encounter such a formidable cadre of black males in confined quarters. His reaction, even as an abolitionist minister, is one of awe and trepidation.

The commanding officer speaks to the intimidating nature of such an assembly stating that when at attention "I can hardly tell whether the men are stand steadily or not; black is every hand which moves in ready cadence as I vociferate."³¹⁰ President Lincoln reiterates Higginson's fetishism over such an imposing force noting in a letter to Andrew Johnson, "The bare sight of 50,000 armed and drilled black soldiers upon the banks of the Mississippi would end the rebellion at once." Johnson replied, "The very fact of color in this case would be more terrible than powder and [cannon] balls."³¹¹

³¹⁰ Christopher Lobby, "As Thoroughly Black as the Most Faithful Philanthropist Could Desire: Erotics of Race in Higginson's *Army Life in a Black Regiment*," in *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, eds. Harry Stecopoulos et. al, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 84.

³¹¹ Ibid, 74.

Wayne embodies this same logic in the creation (rather the adoption) of the Batman persona. When sitting in his study the night the idea of the Batman finally crystallizes in his mind, he muses, “criminals are a superstitious cowardly lot.”³¹² The very basis of his success in the form of this new racial identity therefore is predicated on the ability of an appropriately designed version of black masculinity to stir up those same emotions felt in the barracks of the Civil War (a pre-cool pose). He is relying on a magnification of the stereotypical visages of the African American male as predator.

He seeks to use race as his weapon of vengeance, to find retribution by becoming “fearsomely Other, [indeed] fearsome *because* Other...[capable of] terroristic force.”³¹³ It is for this reason that the “creature of the night” Wayne is determined to become must be both “black...[and]...terrible,” because in the eyes of his peers, they are inextricable, something no other nationality could have claimed with nearly as potent a fervor.

Batman in the 1940s

The preceding pages have been spent establishing Batman’s true racial self, the Intentional Negro. But, to end the discussion there would only serve to feed into the ideological stance of the scholars who insist on an oversimplification of race in comics. As Will Brooker states in *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*, “Batman’s survival...can be attributed to his ability to adapt and change.”³¹⁴ Unlike Superman who appeared frozen within a philosophical moment, the caped crusader proved his endurance through an embrace of the political and social tempests that rose up around him. By more closely inspecting each of the decades through which this dark avenger has survived I

³¹² Bob Kane. ‘Batman’, in *Detective Comics #1*, (New York: DC Comics, 1940), 1.

³¹³ Lobby, *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, 73.

³¹⁴ Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*, 33.

argue it is possible to trace the shifting stances on race in America through the eyes of one of the twentieth century's favorite detectives.

Robin, Batman's teenaged sidekick, was introduced within the first year of the Batman comic series. According to creator Bob Kane, the boy wonder was inserted into the narrative to "lighten up...the entire tone of the Batman stories" and a cursory examination of those initial issues indicates plenty of cause for a redressing of the character aimed at children.³¹⁵ These first capers produced a Batman gleeful in the abandon of his newly donned identity. His actions were as yet unencumbered by publishers and editors that would begin a hand-wringing campaign after only a few issues over the wanton display of violence and the lack of mercy found in the character.

An example of this heightened physicality can be found in a story taken from the first issue of Batman's official comic in 1940 titled "Professor Hugo Strange and the Monsters." In the tale, the scientist of the issue's namesake breaks out of prison only to rob an insane asylum on its wards. He uses them as guinea pigs for an experimental chemical compound which proves to turn its victims into huge, lumbering giants with slavish minds. Seeking to end his troubles with Batman once and for all, the professor traps him intending to inject him with the same formula.

After escaping his capturers, Batman sends Strange hurtling to his apparent death from a blow to the head. As he watches the body of Strange crash against rocks on the embankment below his watchtower hideout, Batman muses "I wonder if this really is the end of Hugo Strange?...Meanwhile, time is flying."³¹⁶ This flippancy over the killing of individuals, even villainous ones seems to reflect the writers' presumptions on the nature

³¹⁵ Kane and Andre, *Batman and Me*, 46.

³¹⁶ Bob Kane, "Professor Hugo Strange and the Monsters" from *Batman #1* (New York: DC Comics, 1940), 32

of the black male. Indeed, it would have been consistent with the perpetuation of stereotypical imagery envisioned by the so-called jungle comics of the 1930s wherein African savages were all but feral in their rational and motivations. We see the incident replayed with yet more gruesome irony on the following page.

Batman secures the Batplane to track down the marauding monster created by the late Dr. Strange. He finds him being hauled in the back of a moving van by thugs in the employ of Strange. They have instructions to use the monster as a distraction while they rob a local bank. Upon his skyward approach Batman comments “Much as I hate to take human life, I’m afraid this time its necessary” and proceeds to shoot the driver and his passenger with a machine gun mounted on his plane. The monster stumbles out of the vehicle only to have a noose dropped from the plane and placed around his neck. Batman then ascends with the monster’s body in tow watching it struggle to breathe until death overcomes it. To this he remarks “He’s probably better off this way” as the lifeless body of the giant hangs against the moonlight. This is precisely the kind of clever dialogue utilized by comics to envelop race as part of it social agenda. Here, Kane manages to comment not only on the biological brutality of black machismo, but on the dominant axioms with regard to the value of the life of the social Other, black or otherwise.

One is left to wonder how such a strapping, visceral image of the innate power held in black masculinity could survive amid the tumultuous social climate of Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan reaching the zenith of its strength on American soil. Why were children, their parents, or social critics like Fredric Wertham³¹⁷ not more threatened by the racially violent canvas of an early Gotham City? I would suggest that a confluence of

³¹⁷ Wertham was not without his criticisms of the dark knight, but these almost exclusively centered around a proposed homosexual overtone he read into the relationship between Wayne and Dick Grayson the alter-ego of Robin.

factors both social and political in nature had congealed into the public consciousness at the time of Batman's unveiling so as to inadvertently dampen any racial misgivings.

Chief among these was the seeming inability of black males to form or commit to a clearly defined political constituency prior to the end of World War II. Black nationalist leaders such as Marcus Garvey had emerged as early as the 1930s, but had failed to devise a method that could synergize black concerns or maintain the interests of black voters long enough to cause sufficient disquiet among white ranks nationally. In the case of Garvey, his Universal Negro Improvement Association suffered from an isolationist rhetoric that split black sympathies by declaring "the blacker a person's skin, the better he was; unless he were of unmixed Negro blood, he was not a Negro."³¹⁸

Organizations like the Commission on Interracial Cooperation attempted with limited success advocacy campaigns geared toward the dissolution of separatist and supremacist doctrines, but their influence remained regional in scope. Socialists led mainly in America by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen could not find an engaging appeal within their "economic rather than racial" manifesto.³¹⁹ Even Communists who went as far in the 1930s as endorsing the formation of "a separate Negro republic within the United States" were barely able to excite response from blacks at the polls.³²⁰ A muted voice at all levels of government thus left the black male as little more than a nuisance in the mind's eye of many white officials making such a seemingly powerful representation relatively unimposing.

The African American's place in society was further marginalized by the pseudo-scientific creed of eugenics and its sister ideology streamlining. While some scholars

³¹⁸ Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America* (London: Collier Books, 1969), 196.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 205.

would argue that popular opinion for eugenic theory waned following the collapse of the stock market in 1929,³²¹ there does exist evidence to suggest that its demise took considerably longer to ripple through the collective imagination of America. To this point, Christina Cogdell explores the eugenic principles that informed many of the exhibits at the 1933 Century of Progress International Exhibition World's Fair held in Chicago.

Among the “planners” of the event she lists Vernon Kellogg “a strong supporter of...eugenics.”³²² Fairgoers were encouraged to submit themselves for genetic cataloging by the Eugenics Record Office in collaboration with Harvard University at one exhibit. Elsewhere on the main floor were artifacts from Deutsche Hygiene Museum where the planning committee had commissioned \$25,000 to secure the services of Dr. Bruno Gebhard one of the facility's main proponents of “race hygiene” in setting up several displays.³²³ In all, the ERO spearheaded at least six major exhibits at the event including one “amid displays of biology, physics, and chemistry created by respected American corporations and universities titled ‘What Eugenics is All About.’³²⁴ Nor did patrons skirt past these supposedly arcane demonstrations. Harry Laughlin, a representative for the ERO at the fair wired to the organization's headquarters informing them of the need for more pamphlets and flyers to be printed as he was unable to keep enough in stock to satisfy the “high number of requests” he received for copies.³²⁵

³²¹ For more discussion of this opinion see William H. Tucker, *The Science and Politics of Racial Research*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, IL, 1994, and Donald K. Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, TN, 1968.

³²² Christina Cogdell, *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 85.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 87.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

The pervasiveness and popularity of these images on such a national stage would seem to imply that the logic of eugenics remained a potent underling philosophy for the average American long after the literati had cast it off as invalid or unethical. This is not terribly surprising when one considers that eugenics is essentially built on a platform of propaganda and unfounded sensationalism, two of the most fundamental courses in the American popular culture diet throughout the past century. It stands to reason then that consumers of the Batman comic in the late 1930s and early 1940s would have dismissed any racialized trappings to the character no matter how hypermasculinized as inconsequential based on a silent majority opinion that saw such feats as scientifically insignificant.

Again Kane's progressive racial fantasy was sanitized through a consumer filter outside his immediate sphere of control. In fact, when recounting the knuckle-wrapping he and artist Bill Finger received for the aforementioned Dr. Strange storyline, Kane notes that Whit Ellsworth's [DC's editor] only objection was, "Never let us have Batman carry a gun again."³²⁶ The two remaining murders committed in the issue (the shove out of a window and the practical lynching by Batplane) were not mentioned at all.

Like most comics characters, Batman was not immune to the call to serve his country upon the United States entry into World War II. Will Brooker insists that the dark knight's contribution to the war effort amounted to little more than lip service: "There are propaganda messages within Batman comics of the war years, but these are almost entirely along the lines of war bond appeals rather than militaristic or anti-Japanese content, and furthermore are in the great majority of cases restricted to cover images."³²⁷

³²⁶ Kane and Andre, *Batman and Me*, 45.

³²⁷ Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*, 35.

Yet, what Brooker fails to account for are the numerous appearances of the caped crusader in ancillary tales of daring. By 1943, Batman's star had risen to such a level that editors were scrambling to insert him into less popular or start-up comics to give them a much needed sales boost. It was during this period that Batman was enlisted as a principle member of the Justice League of America, originally conceived as an anti-Axis militia to protect American soil from the dastardly plots of Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese. These sideline adventures saw Batman assisting in the saving of President Roosevelt from an attempted assassination.³²⁸

The patriotic zeal carried over to the theaters where in 1943 Columbia Pictures purchased the rights to make short fifteen to twenty-minute programs starring the dynamic duo. Like the side-bar comic series, these serials made no attempt to hide Batman's new agenda. The serials claimed Batman and Robin had been held out of the frontlines by the U.S. government to protect against domestic assaults. This device was common among other superhero acts at the time, including Superman, as comic writers had to find a way of explaining the heroes' refusal to use their super powers to end the conflict immediately without casting them as traitorous.

The opening salvo of the theatrical adventures states “[Batman and Robin] represent American youth who love their country and are glad to fight for it...And in this very hour when the Axis criminals are spreading their evil over the world, even within our own land, Batman and Robin stand ready to fight them to the death.”³²⁹ The plot to this particular episode titled “The Electric Brain” in Bob Kane's own words was “one of

³²⁸David W. Stepp, “JSA Members: Batman,” in *Fact File: The Justice League of America 1940-2000*, 1996, accessed on July 10, 2010. <http://my.execpc.com/~icicle/BATMAN.html>.

³²⁹Lambert Hillyer, “The Electric Brain”, produced by Columbia Pictures and Rudolph C. Flothow, screen play by Victor McLeod, Leslie Swabacker, and Harry Frasier, 1943.

those typical propaganda vehicles for bolstering up the war effort and portrayed [Dr.] Daka as the diabolical leader of a fifth columnist ring who was using his genius to transform Americans into zombies in order to aid the Axis powers.”³³⁰

This concession of lethal force in the face of national enemies allowed the grim vigilantism of the early Batman stories to continue practically unchecked. In the 1942 issue, “North Pole Crime,” Batman and Robin follow a group of gangsters all the way to the North Pole where they have fled to loot prospectors free from the vengeful hand of the Batman. The duo is called in according to Police Commissioner Gordon because “The F.B.I. is busy these days running down spies and saboteurs.”³³¹ Batman calmly responds “I understand...they can’t be interrupted in their fine work.”³³²

In so doing, the Batman has addressed the racial issue on dual fronts. His acquiescence to be sent to exotic locales, fighting criminals outside his jurisdiction is in accordance with the large black presence utilized in World War II. As more and more African Americans signed up for duty, even the most conservative states were forced to curb their social criticisms. Batman’s tacit approval of the rounding up of foreign enemies (Others) thus helps reposition the black male archetype into a considerably less dangerous position in the minds of whites.

This newly apportioned leniency then allows Batman to embrace his dark masculine nature without fear of reprisal. In this particular issue, Batman watches as a gangster falls through a crack in the ice, “and grinding death dooms” the fallen criminal.³³³ A nonchalant Batman chides him as he drowns “That was one angle [he]

³³⁰ Kane and Andre, *Batman and Me*, 127.

³³¹ Bob Kane, “North Pole Crimes”, in *World’s Finest Comics* #7 (New York: DC Comics, Fall 1942), 4.

³³² *Ibid*, 4.

³³³ *Ibid*, 13.

didn't figure on."³³⁴ The patriotic vigor of the movie serials is reiterated in the comic when Batman and Robin agree to pose for a photograph of the two men placing an American flag atop a mountain in the north pole, a photograph the comic claims "appear[ed] in every paper of the country."³³⁵

Batman in the 1950s

As the war drew to a victorious close, however, the pool of German and Japanese villains that could be mutilated as a matter of national pride dried up. The hyper-masculine Batman image might have survived this cultural adjustment had the 1950s not also brought such a hailstorm of criticism surrounding the violence and moral decay of comics. The turning point came in 1954 when psychologist Dr. Fredric Wertham published his seven year study of adolescents' emotional reactions to readings of the pulp papers. Wertham argued that the magazines were a deadly breeding ground for "juvenile delinquency."³³⁶ His specific charge against Batman and Robin stemmed from the accusation of a homosexual relationship. Wertham contended "At home they lead an idyllic life...like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together."³³⁷

Regardless of whether this claim held any validity, it would change the face of the Batman comic series for nearly two decades. Following Wertham's testimony in front of Congress, publishers were advised to self-regulate to avoid government intervention. Their response was the Comics Code Authority first assembled on October 26, 1954.

³³⁴ Ibid, 13.

³³⁵ Ibid, 13.

³³⁶ Jamie Coville, "The Comic Book Villain, Dr. Fredric Wertham, M.D.," in *Seduction of the Innocents and the Attack on Comic Books*, 2008, accessed on June 11, 2010, http://www.psu.edu/dept/inart10_110/inart10/cmbk4cca.html.

³³⁷ Fredric Wertham. *Seduction of the Innocent*. (New York: Amereon Ltd, 1954). 189.

This board of scientists, psychologists, and child professionals established a set of guidelines for decent comic material that closely mirrored the Hayes Code amendments forced upon Hollywood. To combat this homosexual interpretation of Batman, writers soon began pairing him up with female love interests. By 1956, the mysterious Kathy Kane arrived on the scene as a suitor for Bruce Wayne only to be revealed as the Batwoman “a circus performer and motorcycle stunt rider who decided to follow in Batman's footsteps as a costumed crime fighter and began to intrude on his territory.”³³⁸ She soon found rivals for Batman’s affections in the form of Selina Kyle (the alter-ego of the nefarious Catwoman) and socialite Vickie Vale (who appeared in the first Batman film in 1989).

This attempt to remake the Batman as a cosmopolitan character left huge repercussions for his racial portrayal. All three of Batman’s major love interests throughout the 1950s were white, upper-class females. They possessed fragile, Victorian intellects and social sensibilities. As Cosmo Felton reports in his extensive work on female representations in comics of the time, “During this period, the idea of a strong, self-sufficient woman became almost abhorrent, and the term ‘feminism’ was treated like a dirty word.”³³⁹ It would have therefore been seen as contradictory to the conciliatory message of WASP male domination to have allowed these women to swoon and jostle for the romantic attention of a strong, black character. Batman had to be dressed down not only psychologically, but physically

³³⁸ Cosmo Felton, “No Place for a Girl: Batman Comics in the 1950s” in *Lonely Gods: Social Minorities in American Superhero Comic Books*, 2006 accessed on August 1, 2010, <http://www.lonelygods.com/w/bat2.html>.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*

His cape and cowl which were routinely shrouded in shadows making them appear almost entirely black throughout the 1940s suddenly received a splash of bright blue. Only a small area around the front of the hood to the bat mask retained its pure black exterior. This could be read as a reaction to the increasingly hostile ruminations over appropriation of black culture echoing out of every corner of society. Even in the relatively innocuous area of popular culture pundits from both sides of the racial divide. The NAACP with the support of Martin Luther King Jr. declared rock music, coming into its own in the mid-1950s as “savage, degrading and contributing to delinquency.”³⁴⁰ White audiences clearly agreed. On April 10, 1956, Nat King Cole was assaulted on stage when he performed at the Municipal Auditorium in Birmingham, Alabama. The pop star was just beginning his third song of the evening when four Jim Crow advocates shouted “Let’s get the coon” and “vaulted over the footlights” leaving Cole with a bruised face and a “wrenched back.”³⁴¹

The popularity of Elvis Presley as a cultural signifier of “racial duality” that challenged the notion of black inferiority placed a much more scrutinizing eye all areas of pop culture production to effuse a more lily white view of the world. And while Batman’s voice could not imitate that of Presley, his mannerisms could be construed as sexualized contortions. His finely honed body masquerading as black could stir the same emotions Ed Sullivan sought to quell by removing the singer’s swiveling hips from the view of the camera when he appeared on the variety program in 1956.

This effeminizing of the character is perhaps best represented by the 1957 issue, *The Career of Batman Jones*. The tale rewrites Batman mythology slightly, allowing

³⁴⁰ Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 101.

³⁴¹ Brian Ward, “Racial Politics, Culture and the Cole Incident of 1956,” in eds. Melvyn Stokes and Rick Halpern, *Race and Class in the American South Since 1890*, (Providence, RI: Berg Publishers, 1994), 184.

Batman to save a young family near the start of his crime fighting days from a fatal automobile crash. To honor the man who saved them, the family agrees to name their newly born son after the dark knight. Where the vigilante of the 1940s might have rebuked such an offer, this gentler version of Batman is seen in subsequent panels building a bat-themed bassinet for the child, posing for pictures with the baby for the press and sending him Batman paraphernalia through the years. The child, Batman Jones decides to repay Batman for his generosity by accompanying him on escapades at around the age of ten.

Batman writers used this as an opportunity to moralize their stories and protect themselves from intervention by the CCA. Batman firmly explains to the youth that “you’re too young for this sort of thing” and advises that he should “run out and play with the other boys.”³⁴² A clear separation is being made between Robin, who could not be more than fifteen himself, and the presumably younger reading public that Bob Kane imagined. Jones weasels his way into a field trip to the Bat Cave, however, where many of the caped crusader’s efforts to impart the danger of a crime fighting lifestyle are stunted by Jones’ alacrity with the tools of the trade. He successfully disarms many of the deadly gadgets Batman exposes him to leaving the Gotham defender to exclaim “Robin, this lad is smarter than I thought!”³⁴³ The mental faculties of Batman are thus being reduced to a more appropriate level for his racialized self. The intrepid crime fighter of the 1940s is reduced to a comic foil capable of being outwitted by a child. Further

³⁴² Bob Kane, “The Career of Batman Jones” in *Batman the Greatest Stories Ever Told: Volume Two*, (New York: DC Comics, June 1957), 41.

³⁴³ *Ibid*, 45.

emasculating his image, Batman is eventually forced to drive to Jones' home and request that his mother "restrain little Batman's enthusiasm."³⁴⁴

Batman in the 1960s

If the 1950s retrofitted Batman's racial identity, then the social upheaval of the 1960s all but buried it underground. Noted historian Benjamin Quarles points out that "in the 1960s, as never before, the Negro became an object of nationwide attention" whose freedoms were granted new "scope and urgency" on a global scale.³⁴⁵ More than ever organizations sprung up in support of equal rights legislation. C.O.R.E., SNICK, the S.C.L.C., The Urban League and the N.A.A.C.P. all boasted memberships in the tens of thousands bankrolling hundreds of thousands if not millions of dollars in revenue. What's more, these groups managed to set aside turf war mentalities over political territory in sight of larger goals. As Quarles states, "recognizing that their aims were identical and that their task was urgent, many-sided, and formidable, the groups tended to work together more and more."³⁴⁶

Here was the political cohesiveness that had proven so elusive to black voters and advocates of change in decades past. That unity owed some measurable debt to the conflux of charismatic, resourceful, and magnetic leadership that arose in this critical hour. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. who rose to national fame during the Alabama bus boycotts became the galvanizing figure of the entire civil rights movement following his orchestration of the March on Washington in 1963 a moment that served as "a climax and a beginning."³⁴⁷

³⁴⁴ Ibid, 46.

³⁴⁵ Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America*, 260.

³⁴⁶ Ibid, 254.

³⁴⁷ Ibid, 265.

But this was far from the only nationally recognized protest of the separate but equal doctrine. Sit-in demonstrations most notably in Greensboro, North Carolina became a constant source of non-violent heckling of the establishment. High profile cases such as *Gomillion vs. Lightfoot* which declared gerrymandering to eliminate black voting power illegal pushed forward the obdurate stone of racial progress. The culmination of these efforts was felt in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawing discrimination in public venues including schools and its successor the Fair Housing Act of 1968 which ended the process of denying home ownership “by the color of [one’s] skin” which had since the 1920s been a “universal fact of Negro life.”³⁴⁸

The Batman narrative had already reacted to the pressures of the 1950s climate by introducing a whiter version of the dark knight. But, with the social unrest of the 1960s reaching unprecedented levels, with the issue of race bubbling so close to the surface, even more drastic steps needed to be taken to ensure white readers (or rather their parents) did not grow indignant over the Otherness of the man under the hood. Now, Wayne would have to be absolved of his blackness. It needed to become more clearly a performance instead of a consciousness, something to be discarded at will. The borders separating the lives of Batman and Wayne had to lose their opaque character for a more translucent condition, one in which Wayne’s fears and trepidations were free to assault the armor of Batman’s blackness. In short, Batman became a comic version of minstrelsy. This plays on the concept of intersectionality. In this case, there is an active attempt to suppress the racial voice from the narrative. While Batman very clearly must continue to live two lives, denying him one simple central identity, the authors efforts to control the expression of those identities has become far more nuanced.

³⁴⁸ Ibid, 257.

In his award winning study on the history of blackface culture in America, Eric Lott defines the minstrel show as comprised of “knee-slapping musical numbers punctuated by comic dialogues, bad puns, and petit-bourgeois ribaldry.”³⁴⁹ While Batman aficionados may find themselves more comfortable with the term camp than blackface per say, the comic tone betraying any true sense of danger best exhibited by the hokey sixties television series starring Adam West as our titular hero is awash in the trappings of minstrelsy.

Much like his comic book counterpart, West’s costume appears to mimic the blackface stage paint of nineteenth century white performers. The disguise that had once acted as a second skin for the crime fighter is reduced to a sloppy “blacking of greasepaint or burnt cork” clouding the top half of his face.³⁵⁰ This point is highlighted in Batman #153, *Prisoners of Three Worlds* in which the audience is privy for the first time³⁵¹ to Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson standing in the Bat Cave with their costumes on but their masks removed. In the single cell, we see Batman’s cowl hanging loosely off his clearly white shoulders, the black empty eye sockets staring back blankly.³⁵² The message is clearly sent, Batman has become a disposable personality to the millionaire whose personality has begun to dominate the decision making.

Lott paints a more compelling picture of minstrelsy than simple abject racism, however. He ably argues that there exists a juxtaposed critique in the vaudevillian abandon, one equally as possessed with “racial aversion...[as with] panic, anxiety, terror,

³⁴⁹ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface, Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.

³⁵⁰ Ibid, 5.

³⁵¹ To this author’s knowledge.

³⁵² Bob Kane, “Prisoners of Three Worlds,” in *Batman the Greatest Stories Ever Told: Volume Two* (New York: DC Comics, June 1957), 49.

and pleasure.”³⁵³ A fascination if not in fact an envy for the portrayed blackness undercuts each performance then adding a layer of complexity to the utility of such a tactic. There is as Lott points out a particular “sexual danger” etched into the performances, a thinly contained eroticism manifested in the appreciation of the perceived naturally powerful black body and sex drive. These characters manifested themselves on the blackface stage and I will argue in the Batman comic in the form of “ridiculous blustering...plantation rustics...[and]...urban dandies...of exaggerated strength and overwhelming power.”³⁵⁴

Strangely by this definition it became acceptable for Batman to maintain his exquisite physique so long as it was not accompanied by the power of a traditionally scientific brain or to withhold his mental faculties as long as his physical prowess was removed (i.e., Bruce Wayne wearing a Batman suit as opposed to the true characterization). In this sense, it was less threatening for Batman to have a black penis than a black mind. We see this process played out in *Robin Dies at Dawn*, which originally appeared on newspaper stands in 1963. Batman is mysteriously transported to an alien world where although his physical strength remains intact, he wanders aimlessly amid the cavernous desert admitting to himself “I’ve never felt so alone in all my life.”³⁵⁵ The white male ego is appeased by a blackface reaction that emulates a fear and uncertainty that destabilizes the ferociousness of the Other. The imagined strength of the organized black masses are deflected by the humility of one of their (latent) cultural symbols.

³⁵³ Ibid, 6.

³⁵⁴ Ibid, 23.

³⁵⁵ Bob Kane, “Robin Dies at Dawn,” in *The Greatest Batman Stories Ever Told* (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 132.

This message is reiterated throughout the story. Batman is nearly strangled to death by a sentient form of alien plant life before frantically calling out “If only Robin were here to help me! Robin! Where are you, Robin?”³⁵⁶ This is a reversal of the power dynamic in the series. Robin’s place as a sidekick was well-established by the mid-1960s. Kane had always envisioned him as a vicarious vehicle through which children (presumably white) could participate in Batman’s adventures. Unlike the caped crusader, the boy wonder’s tights only just covered enough of his lanky frame to hide his identity from criminals and civilians. His racial self was never compromised by his clandestine occupation. Furthermore, his status in the comics as a child made his rescuing of Batman an ever greater metaphor on the rebalancing of the racial scales in the DC universe.

Batman in the 1970s

As DC entered into the Bronze Age³⁵⁷ (1970-1979), white citizens across America were being inundated with images of new, more militant conceptualization of black nationalism on their nightly newscasts. To viewers, these men bore little resemblance to the peaceful pleas of Martin Luther King Jr. As William L. Van DeBurg notes they were greeted instead with a vociferous “new and insidious criminal element” led by the orations of men like Stokely Carmichael.³⁵⁸ One would imagine that this sort of response from a disenfranchised body politic should have petrified middle-class white America.

³⁵⁶ Ibid, 133.

³⁵⁷ These “Ages” are the classically accepted epochs in comic history. They are usually bookmarked by the introduction of important new authors or artists. The following is a list of the eras as they are presently devised: The Platinum Age: 1897 – 1932, The Golden Age: 1933 – 1945, The Atomic Age: 1946 – 1956, The Silver Age: September, 1956 – 1969, The Bronze Age: 1970 – 1979, The Modern Age: 1980 – Present. This information was taken from <http://www.goldenagebatman.com/gabathistory.html>.

³⁵⁸ William L. Van DeBurg, , *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 12.

Now, more than ever, black strength should have become an object of ridicule and suspicion in the eyes of the dominant society. Yet, DeBurg argues that sensationalized coverage from the mass media, both from black and white press organs did much to neuter the reorganizing of class consciousness this effort had hoped to engender.

Reporters were only interested in black militancy as far as it could validate preconceptions of irrationality and stand as evidence for a growing frustration over the tardiness of progress begot from the civil rights victories of the early 1960s. The press lampooned the black power movement into a prop to re-fortify the boundaries of racial separatism. To this end, DeBurg claims reporters not only resorted to “name-calling and misquotation” but “even staged disruptive events, coaxing black youths to throw rocks and interrupt traffic for the cameras.”³⁵⁹ Thusly, an uprising of extreme proportions was “trivialized,” comodified into a fad, salacious dinner theater.³⁶⁰ DeBurg accuses this reportage of exacting two fatal blows to the movement’s long-term power, forcing white America to “treat [the movement] as part of a violent era’s politics” (in other words, to make it transitory) and to present it as “an aberrant, directionless expression of rage...incapable of making lasting contributions to black life.”³⁶¹

This sensationalized interpretation of race relations found popular expression in blaxploitation cinema. Narratives in which black characters had the full thrust of their Otherness returned to them (often by black writers and directors), but with a new caveat which implicitly stated the futility of their rampages and eruptions. The black male archetype was recast as a tiger chasing its own tail, deadly and yet bound in some undeterminable way to redact the effectiveness of his own actions. Gary Morris writing

³⁵⁹ Ibid, 13.

³⁶⁰ Ibid, 13.

³⁶¹ Ibid, 15.

for the *Bright Lights Film Journal* identifies the typical black male protagonist of the blaxploitation era as “the stories of [a charismatic black community leader] at a crisis point, caught between the needs of his people (black nationalism) and sellout pressure from The Man.”³⁶²

We see this dichotomy played out in the stories of Batman from the 1970s. A group of grade school children of various ethnicities are taken on a camping trip by Bruce Wayne in *The Batman Nobody Knows*. While there, the youths get into a heated argument over the aesthetic particulars of the Batman. The white youth relates a story of a demon-like creature, more animal than man who stalks his prey with superhuman capabilities. “He’s so big he covers all o’ Gotham...He’s got x-ray eyes...bullets zip right thru him...[and he has] fists of iron” implores the boy.³⁶³ This might well be said to represent the then-current understanding of black cultural dissonance as experienced by the white reader. One could easily envision a white youth overwhelmed with the scowling visage of a Black Panther, teeth glaring from a protest sign transmuting into a broader image the black hand holding it aloft.

More interesting still for the purposes of this essay is the first (and perhaps only) time the audience is treated to a young black character’s vision of the Batman. Our pre-teen black narrator tosses aside his friend’s argument countering “That ol’ Batman is a real live dude. Nothin’ spooky ‘bout him...’cept how he comes on.”³⁶⁴ Like his cultural contemporaries in *Shaft*, *Dolomite*, or *Sweet Sweetback*, this child can see past the bombast to the philosophical rhetoric underneath. His mental image is over a black,

³⁶² Gary Morris, “Blaxploitation: A Sketch”, from *Bright Lights Film Journal* Issue 18, (March 1997), accessed on June 3, 2010, http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/18/18_blax.html.

³⁶³ Frank Robbins, “The Batman Nobody Knows”, in *The Greatest Batman Stories Ever Told* (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 208.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 210.

afroed Batman who has subverted white technology into tools of retribution. He muses that “[Batman] is loaded with trick-gadgets! Got shiny plastic wings run by motors --- jet propelled by tiny rockets!...He...sniffs out trouble...using one o’ them electronic sniffin’ gizmos.”³⁶⁵

When Bruce Wayne questions him on the subject of whether the boy, Ronnie, “see[s] the Batman as a super-mod crime fighter” Ronnie calmly responds that Batman is “one down-to-earth...dude...[he] is Muhammed Ali --- Jim Brown --- Shaft --- an’ Superfly all rolled into one.”³⁶⁶ This absolutely marks a turning point in the Batman mythos. Not only has he reunited with his black roots, DC has publicly acknowledged a racialized cultural tradition into which he fits. The Batman of Ronnie’s dream sequence might well be thought of as the ideal version of Bruce Wayne’s other self, for he need not wear a mask to accommodate his blackness. He stands tall knocking down countless villains with one strike of his hand, his determined black face fully visible to the world at large.

This reclamation of power for Batman is hampered however by the writer’s insistence on encapsulating him into a limiting milieu. The tone of the Batman tales had not yet caught back up to its 1940s roots. To balance the admission of power in the hands of this black icon, his influence indeed the urgency of his missions were often disregarded by the end of an issue. Writers in the 1970s seemed to revel in placing Batman against unbeatable odds, supernatural odds, only to deflate their enigmatic qualities upon Batman’s perceived success. In the story *Man-Bat Over Vegas* for example, the caped crusader is forced to tangle with what he believes to be a gigantic

³⁶⁵ Ibid, 210.

³⁶⁶ Ibid, 210.

vampire bat terrorizing the city of Las Vegas. Once he has captured the creature though, it turns out to be simply a female scientist who by way of “reckless experiments” managed to undergo a unique form of lycanthropy transforming her into the vampire bat.³⁶⁷

Where the vigilante of the forties would have put the woman out of her misery so as to protect the citizenry, this Batman finds his ruthlessness jeopardized by the victimization of the female. The confines of his oath to white justice leave him pulled against his natural inclinations. He settles instead on taking the woman to the hospital to have a blood transfusion to prevent her from being effected by the moon’s phases. One senses his recognition of this so-called sell-out mentality commenting “I hope and pray [I’m doing the right thing].”³⁶⁸ Like the characters in blaxploitation fiction, he is left at an uneasy crossroads and must eventually chose the path of least resistance.

Batman in the 1980s

To properly explain the shift in race relations into the 1980s we must observe critically not the goings-on of political figures or military might, but the weekly escapades of Dr. Huxtable on the top rated sitcom of the day, *The Cosby Show*. Writing about the meaning of blackness in the decade of decadence, Henry Louis Gates Jr. concluded, “I want my own children to grow up in the home of intellectuals, but with black middle-class values as common to them as the air they breathe.”³⁶⁹ William F. Buckley so firmly believed that pop culture in the eighties had redefined the nature of race relations, that he pointed to *The Cosby Show*, Eddie Murphy, and Michael Jackson

³⁶⁷ Frank Robbins, “Man-Bat Over Vegas”, in *The Greatest Batman Stories Ever Told* (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 194.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 207.

³⁶⁹ Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Blackness Without Blood”, in *Culture in an Age of Money: The Legacy of the 1980s in America*, ed. Nicolaus Mills, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishers, 1990), 127.

and proclaimed “A nation simply does not idolize members of a race which that nation despises.”³⁷⁰ Although the outright dismissal of racial prejudice might be affording prime time television too much cache in this country, Buckley’s statement hints at a more holistic reevaluation of self in American society occurring during the 1980s. No longer did voting rights, equal wages, or other social reparations hold the type of value they did in the sixties and seventies. The *Cosbys* as well as most depictions of middle-class black life in America on television at the time redefined success in terms of “attractive homes and offices.”³⁷¹ Their suburban lifestyles speak to the desire to swim in the pools of commodification. Country club memberships and Lamborghinis became more than simple objects of wealth. They took on the import of lending access to the owner to the ever elusive “American dream.”³⁷²

As this money obsessed cultural shift permeated black awareness and operated to more demonstrably separate middle-class blacks from their ghetto counterparts, pop culture gained yet more freedom in the representation of blackness. Beyond the picket fence realms of the *Cosbys*, writers need not mask black virtues any longer. The world seemed more prepared for successful, charming, powerful black characters in all facets of popular culture. For Batman this would mean a full-fledged return to his 1940s self. He would finally be allowed to bask in his blackness unhindered by the cultural niceties of the time.

Frank Miller is primarily credited with this reawakening of Batman’s dark spirit. His 1986 tome *The Dark Knight Returns* tells of a older Batman, run down by the ravages

³⁷⁰ Herman Gray, “Television, Black Americans and the American Dream”, in *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 176.

³⁷¹ *Ibid*, 183.

³⁷² *Ibid*, 183.

of age and a life of crime fighting. He has been retired for several years following the death of the latest Robin. Miller outlines the vision he has for the character in a short prologue to the series: “For me, Batman was never funny. Gotham City was cold shafts of concrete lit by cold moonlight and windswept bottomlessness.”³⁷³ As Miller’s vision of hate and fatigue rumbles through the city for the first time in ten years he begins to regain the muscle memory of his true racial self. “This should be agony” he thinks, “I should be a mass of aching muscle --- broken, spent, unable to move and where I an older man, I surely would...but I’m a man of thirty...of twenty again. The rain on my chest is a baptism...I’m born again.”³⁷⁴

For the first time since 1940, Batman wields a gun with reckless abandon once more. He snaps the neck of a thug taking his machine gun away in the process and using to put down a man holding a toddler at gun point. Standing before the leader of the deadly new Mutant gang overrunning the city of Gotham inside an armor plated tank he admits “I can’t think of a single reason to let him live.”³⁷⁵ Batman stops the Mutant scourge by snapping the neck of their leader in front of his followers sending an unmistakable message. He tells the leader just as he prepares to finish him off “You don’t get it boy...this isn’t a mud hole...its an operating table...and I’m the surgeon.”³⁷⁶

Gotham is reclaimed but not from the Mutants, from the ashes of a misremembered past.

Batman in the 1990s

By the late 1990s, DC executives were still hungry for another tale that would captivate audiences the way Frank Miller had with *The Dark Knight Returns*. They still

³⁷³ Frank Miller, “Notes by Frank Miller,” in *The Complete Frank Miller Batman*, (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 99.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 26.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 21.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 45.

wanted their caped crusader to be more vigilante than hero. Archie Goodwin suggested that new scribes Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale use Miller's work as the inspiration for a new year-long Batman classic, *The Long Halloween*. Loeb reiterates the implications of Miller's involvement in the Batman mythos when he states that none besides Bob Kane have managed to leave such an "indelible impression" on the character.³⁷⁷ Loeb's work wasn't just emulating Miller. It was directly continuing his interpretation of the character. The DC editors wanted Loeb to bring back "The Roman" a throw-away mobster character from one of Frank's Batman tales and turn him into a starring villain.

But to say that Loeb's Batman was a carbon copy of Miller's would be unfair. This Batman is still bathed in the violent tones recaptured by Miller but he does not take the explicit joy out of the experience that Miller's Batman did. Police Commissioner Jim Gordon, District Attorney Harvey Dent and Batman stand on the roof of the Gotham Police Station in the first issue of the series. They plot the death of "The Roman." All three imply that common methods will not be enough to see justice done. "In our zeal to bring Falcone (The Roman) to justice" Gordon explains he is willing to "let [Batman] bend the rules" as only he can.³⁷⁸ The comic nor its publics are pressing Batman to shy away from his original intentions any longer. They are encouraging it. Gotham has become so mired in its own criminal element, the need for decorum in exacting punishment has been blurred if not removed altogether. As Gordon and Dent argue over how far they are willing to go to take down "The Roman" Batman ends the conversation stating: "We can all talk around it, but – we know what needs to be done."³⁷⁹

³⁷⁷ Jeph Loeb, *Batman: The Long Halloween* (New York: DC Comics, 1996), 1.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

Loeb's text does not make Batman the defacto savior of this city though. In Miller's vision, not matter how violent his methods Batman was made virtuous by way of the insanity that surrounded him. In a perfectly mad world his violent reactions were logical, reasonable, responsible. This Gotham is more leery of their defender. As Gordon and Batman walk the halls of Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane, Gordon quizzes him "There are so many here. Nearly double from when you first appeared. Not that there's a direct correlation but...do you give it any thought?"³⁸⁰ The argument is familiar racially. Conservative white leaders have long argued that African Americans are responsible for their own difficulties. The system is protected against criticism and replaced by the tropes that have existed since the newspaper comic strip authors of the late 1800s. The fault is not to be found in poor performance from the police department. The noble savage has created a concrete jungle out of what should be an urban utopia. Here we see the social construction of race reiterated. White athority figures are convinced of the false logic that urban violence is the fault of racial minorities. Gordon is insinuating not only that Batman is black but that by being black he is preternaturally responsible for the villainy that surrounds him.

This arc reiterates the futility of white justice. Bruce Wayne recounts memories of his father being called away to the hospital to operate at odd hours of the night. On one occasion, the doorbell rang. A man shoved his way inside Wayne Manor and placed a dying boy on the dining room table. Bruce remembers his father arguing with the man, telling him that this child needed to go to the hospital for proper care. The man is unsatisfied with this arrangement. He demands that the bullets penetrating the boy's chest be removed then and there. Dr. Thomas Wayne reluctantly agrees.

³⁸⁰ Ibid, 87.

Bruce explains that the boy his father saved would grow up to be The Roman. He blames his father for the string of deaths draped over the conscience of Batman. He mutters to himself “for all the good he tried to bring to Gotham City my father’s actions have resulting in my being here.”³⁸¹ Just as city officials have begun to blame Batman for the crime in their city, Batman has begun to blame the ineptitude of the patriarchal structure that holds that city together for forcing him to exist.

Months later Batman finds it necessary to go shake down some of the local thugs in Gotham’s seedier areas for information on a serial killer plaguing the city. He has become desperate at this point. He knows that with each day that passes, another victim will be added to the list. He resorts to meeting these criminals in broad daylight. He walks into their club and demands the information he needs. They are unimpressed. Before brandishing a baseball bat at the intruder, the bartender remarks “I thought you only came out at night.”³⁸² This is more than an idle observation. Batman recognizes all too clearly that part of his costume; part of his persona is the darkness. His image only seems complete when bathed in blackness. He relies on it. He requires it. Batman reasons that this is why they choose to attack him today. Reverberating Kane’s original conception of the character, Batman mutters, “they may be superstitious. They may be cowards. But my appearance has more effect at night.”³⁸³

Batman in the New Millennium

Perhaps the most powerful representation of Batman as an Other can be found in the pages of Grant Morrison’s classic work *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*. The 2004 extended edition of this release delves deeper into the psychology of

³⁸¹ Ibid, 231.

³⁸² Ibid, 279.

³⁸³ Ibid, 280.

Batman's identity than any other text in his sixty plus year history. This is Batman in his darkest incarnation. He is consumed by the violence, the savage instinct that reflected Kane's original skewed perception of African American identity.

Batman is informed that the Joker has taken over Arkham. He is holding many of the doctors and staff there hostage. He demands that Batman meet him at the penitentiary alone. Commissioner Gordon warns Batman that it will almost certainly be a trap. He asks him to reconsider. Surprisingly, for one of the first times in the series illustrious run, we are introduced to a more vulnerable side of the Batman character. He admits to Gordon that he has reservations about taking the case. He tells him he worries that when he enters Arkham, repository for every mad man in Gotham City "It'll be just like coming home."³⁸⁴ The dual identity is beginning to strain him. The performative shell he cast for himself so many years ago is no longer so easily removed. Becoming Bruce Wayne again is ever more challenging. He appears to understand this internal struggle stating "Batman's not afraid of anything. It's me. I'm afraid."³⁸⁵ The "me" in this sentence is his own whiteness. It is Bruce Wayne peeking from underneath the covers for a brief moment. The passage is depressing from a racial standpoint. It could even be called regressive. The implication here is very clearly that no joy can be had in becoming black. It consumes its adherents. It violates them. It is disappointing that with all of his malleability, this is the image of Batman that a generation of children grew up with. This man is not ignorant of his inferiority in the eyes of white society the way the Talk Ink Kid or Sambo was, but he is ashamed of what his heritage is doing to him.

³⁸⁴ Grant Morrison, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House for a Serious Earth* (New York: DC Comics, 2004), 12.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 12.

The reader is given a sense of how detached from Wayne Batman has become when the Joker orders one of the psychiatrists to stay behind and conduct a psych evaluation on the caped crusader. They begin to play a word association game. The text of that conversation follows:

“Doctor: Mother

Batman: Pearl

Doctor: Handle

Batman: Revolver

Doctor: Gun

Batman: Father

Doctor: Father

Batman: Death.”³⁸⁶

This recitation of the Wayne parents’ murder is Batman’s only real link to the life of Bruce Wayne. We saw from the *Long Halloween* arc that Bruce Wayne can remember moments spent with his parents beyond that faithful night. He can recall exchanges they had, conversations that stuck with him. Batman has no such luxury. His sole experience with the Waynes is encapsulated in the moment that gave birth to his necessity. He can only remember this night, a night when he could have made a difference if only he had been there. His parental relationship is not complicated. It does not have layers. It is punctuated by undiluted guilt. That night becomes the moment when Bruce Wayne dies and Batman begins.

Another insight into the devolving nature of Batman’s double self is given to us by the Mad Hatter who he encounters as he roams the corridors of the asylum looking

³⁸⁶ Ibid, 36.

for a way out. The Hatter is not oblivious to his own insanity, but this does not prevent him from establishing a pertinent theory. “Sometimes...I think the asylum is a head” he muses, “We’re inside a huge head that dreams us all into being. Perhaps it’s your head Batman. Arkham is a looking glass and we are you.”³⁸⁷ This goes beyond Gordon’s earlier accusation that crime has been perpetuated in Gotham by Batman’s presence. This theory insists that Batman needs the criminals to survive. There is a symbiotic relationship between them. It is not that one exists because of the other. It is that each needs the other. They are not separate interpretations of reality. They are nearly identical strands of the same reality. Both consumed in darkness. Both propelled by their violence. The regressive trope is echoed here. To be black, to choose blackness is to choose sorrow or insanity.

The larger narrative of this arc also speaks in powerful ways to the Batman as African American mythology. The story constantly reverts between the tale of Batman weaving his way through these halls and the history of Arkham’s construction by its founder Amadeus Arkham. Amadeus had once been a brilliant scientist. He had, we are told, been on par with Carl Jung. But when one of his patients escaped Arkham and brutally murdered his family, it drove Arkham into the darkness, just as Bruce Wayne’s childhood tragedy required the creation of a Batman. This is the greater message of Morrison’s text. Darkness prevails. When presented with the right circumstances light cannot overcome it. As Batman wrestles with one of his lesser known foes Killer Croc in the towers of Arkham, the founder’s diary entries spill over the page. The parallel between the two men’s experiences is complete. It is as if Arkham is speaking on behalf of Batman. The passages from the diary explain the transition ominously “the world

³⁸⁷ Ibid, 62.

explodes. There is nothing to hold onto. No anchor...I run blindly through the madhouse. And I can't even pray. For I have no god."³⁸⁸ It is a dehumanizing vision of blackness. The equation is absolute. Otherness negates hope. It eradicates the possibility of a whole or complete existence. The price for denying one's biological race is devastating. By choosing to be black Batman has not only denied himself peace in this world but forfeited whatever rights he had to happiness in the next.

Much of Miller's influence, his impassioned reinvigoration of the ethereal Batman mythos can still be seen in the comic's latest interpretations. The dark cloud of unadulterated racial Otherness encapsulated in the character has become a hallmark of his modern popularity. The Christopher Nolan films of the new millennium redesigned the Batsuit itself to more properly concede Batman's racial intentionality by stripping the costume of its gray, blue and yellow vestiges, making it pure black. More a suit of armor than a disguise. In one scene from Nolan's 2008 blockbuster *The Dark Knight*, The Joker being played by Heath Ledger taunts Batman telling him "to them [the Police] you're a freak...like me"³⁸⁹. He is not referring here, however, to Batman as a would-be criminal but as an individual consumed by Otherness, which is just as he was always intended to be.

³⁸⁸ Ibid, 75.

³⁸⁹ *The Dark Knight*, DVD, directed by Christopher Nolan (2008, Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2008).

CHAPTER V

PANTHER'S PRIDE: EXAMINING THE DEATH OF THE BLACK SUPERHERO IN
AMERICAN COMIC BOOKS

In many respects, The Black Panther has little in common with his masked peers. Where they are anomalies, often the last or only of their kind, he is the next in a never-ending line of crusaders.³⁹⁰ He explains as much in his second appearance, issue #53 of *The Fantastic Four* published in August 1966.

The fictitious African nation of Wakanda has long been home to a large deposit of (the also fictitious) element, vibranium. The element is incredibly valuable to industrialized countries for its applications in weapons and aeronautical research. The mineral when properly harnessed “absorbs vibrations – you might even say it swallows them” allowing for the intricate manipulation of sound wave energy.³⁹¹

For as many millennia as there has been such extraordinary wealth under the feet of the natives of Wakanda, there has been someone there to protect it. Each generation, one person of royal heritage is selected from the tribe to “undergo rigorous rituals” that culminate with the ingestion of a rare, heart-shaped herb that locals believe is imbued with the mystic powers of the Panther God. In the Black Panther's origin story, Stan Lee notes that “to the male Wakandan, The Black Panther represents a figurative god image, and is considered to be a sacred being – as the cow is venerated in India.”³⁹² If the eater

³⁹⁰ Since T'Challa is only eight years old at the time of his father's passing, the duties of The Black Panther are temporarily assumed by his uncle. T'Challa defeats his uncle in hand to hand combat once he is of age as a part of the proving ritual to take on the moniker himself.

³⁹¹ Stan Lee, “The Way It Began,” *Fantastic Four* #53 (New York: Marvel Comics, August 1966), 5.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 8.

of the herb does not die from its poisonous effects then his “senses and physical attributes [are] enhanced to superhuman levels.”³⁹³

T’Challa, the current Black Panther, underwent this ritual following the death of his father. The High Chieftain, T’Chaka was gunned down by a band of mercenaries who stormed the jungle kingdom in search of vibranium. Devastated by the death of his father, T’Challa swears vengeance: “in that split-second my boyhood ended—as the new chieftain of all the Wakandas was born.”³⁹⁴

The Black Panther had an incredibly poor sales record compared with his super hero peers. Unlike Superman, Batman or even The Fantastic Four with whom he first appears, The Black Panther’s publication history is spotty to say the least. In the 1980s, only four issues of The Black Panther were published for the entire decade.

The character’s solo titles have been cancelled at least six times during his run with Marvel. Even as this dissertation was being written, his latest incarnation has been pulled from production after only twelve issues. It would be simple to track this failure to its logical economic conclusion: sales for Black Panther titles have never been impressive. Many comic analysts would point to low fan interest in the title and consider their work done. Certainly, these writers have a point. In a recent blog post on The Comics Forums, a poster provides support for this view noting “I’ve been getting Black Panther since Civil War [a year long story arc involving the entire Marvel Universe] and I didn’t even notice that [the comic] hadn’t been solicited the last two months.”³⁹⁵

³⁹³ “Black Panther,” Marvel Online Encyclopedia, 2010, accessed on August 13, 2010, http://marvel.com/universe/Black_Panther_%28T%27Challa%29.

³⁹⁴ Lee, *Fantastic Four* #53, 8.

³⁹⁵ DonInAHole, “Black Panther Cancelled?,” *The Comics Forum*, August 2008, accessed on August 12, 2010, <http://www.thecomicforums.com/forum2/index.php?showtopic=139334>.

This explanation fails to address the larger question, however: why has fan interest traditionally remained so low for a character that Marvel has re-invented and re-cast time and time again? Why isn't one of the worlds most successful comic book companies able to get readers to connect with The Panther? The same question could be proposed about a number of other minority characters whose comics have crashed and burned, but I've chosen to focus my attention on The Panther for one very important reason: he came first. He predates the first appearances of every other black Marvel superhero including Bishop,³⁹⁶ Blade,³⁹⁷ Cloak,³⁹⁸ Luke Cage,³⁹⁹ Storm,⁴⁰⁰ and even appeared three years before The Falcon whom the historian Bradford Wright erroneously names "the first African American superhero."⁴⁰¹

This chapter proposes that the issue which has stifled sales and reception for the Black Panther comics is not lack of interest in racial storylines but a lack of authenticity. This problem is not unique to the Panther comic; all racially explicit depictions in comic books suffer from this dilemma. Characters in these tales are caught in a precarious balancing act. They are at once too authentic in their representation of Otherness for white readers to accept them and not nearly authentic enough for many minority readers to see themselves spoken for in the panels. The struggle to overcome this hurdle is made all the more difficult by writing staffs that are almost universally white. This chapter will show how the Panther's inability to find an appealing balance of authenticity has been the deciding factor from decade to decade in his sagging sales figures.

³⁹⁶ First appearance Uncanny X-Men #282 1991.

³⁹⁷ F.A. Tomb of Dracula #10 1973.

³⁹⁸ F.A. Peter Parker, The Spectacular Spider-Man #64 1982.

³⁹⁹ F.A. Hero for Hire #1 1972.

⁴⁰⁰ F.A. Giant Size X-Men Annual #1 1975.

⁴⁰¹ F.A. Captain America #117 1969. Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 272.

This point deserves some special consideration before moving on. I have suggested in previous chapters of this dissertation that white writers and artists were perfectly capable of accessing (even if not consciously) and delivering messages of Otherness through characters that appeared on the surface to be white but were not. How then can I suggest that being white would interfere with the ability of these producers to create quality content for a character that is openly an Other? If anything it would seem that this would make their jobs easier. No more having to squeeze racial and ethnic meanings between layers of subtext. So what makes writing and drawing black characters different than say white characters that act black? 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.

This chapter explores the cultural factors that result in minority led comics historically performing so poorly at newsstands. The Black Panther has been chosen because he is the very first black superhero that Marvel ever included in one of their publications. I track his evolution from his early days as a side kick for the Fantastic Four, an Avenger and eventually as the star of his own comic book title. The reader begins to see a pattern of representation from one author of the series to the next.

I pin his lackluster sales to issues of authenticity. As a black character he has constantly been forced to live up to standards of blackness set by minority leaders of each successive generation. As (mostly white) writers struggle to frame him as a strong, confident, independent black man, the complexity of his story is smothered by a complex web of competing racial identities. 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. I show through detailed examples of comics from each decade of his career how these two conditions persist simultaneously. The chapter ends by arguing that race is most effective in comic books when the character is white because it allows the reader to draw their own racial coding into the shell created by the writer and artist. The Black Panther fails because that choice has been stripped from the reader by the time the issue is published.

Determining Blackness: Early Definitions of Race

The difficulty becomes determining what exactly makes someone authentically black. A number of definitions have persisted over the years, some of more usefulness than others. F. James Davis provides one of the earliest definitions used legally in the United States to identify persons of black ancestry. The so-called one-drop rule was formulated in agricultural bastions in the Deep South. It postulated that “a single drop of ‘black blood’ makes a person black.”⁴⁰² In those cases where the courts were presented with someone claiming dominant race credentials thanks to a white mother or father the hypo-decent rule was enforced. This regulation stated, “racially mixed persons are

⁴⁰² F. James Davis, *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), 5.

assigned the status of the subordinate class.”⁴⁰³ Thus, even if a person turned out to be fifty percent Caucasian they would enjoy zero percent of the benefits. These definitions were useful to white Americans during the plantation era. As white landowners began to have sexual or miscegenationous relationships with black slaves, laws that “made it possible for white males to have interracial sexual contacts but to remain in total control of the slaves” became preferable.⁴⁰⁴

W.E.B. Du Bois presents a more complicated racial definition. He stated in 1940 that a black person is one “who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia.”⁴⁰⁵ Du Bois commentary expands the definition of blackness from the biological to the social. He has insinuated here that the actions one takes along prescribed lines of racial conduct are the best identifiers of one’s racial heritage. Author Algernon Austin agrees with this sentiment, classifying race as “a sociohistorical phenomenon.”⁴⁰⁶ This further complicates the methodology of racial profiling. The comment suggests that racial norms are not absolute. They change based on the factors that comprise a historical moment. While Austin admits that some of these values are ascribed to individuals based on their presumed racial lineage, he also claims that one can achieve racial identification through “proper performance of the normative expectations of the racial category.”⁴⁰⁷

What makes this assertion particularly interesting for this study is that whites are not given exclusive province over determining what these normative qualities should consist of. Put simply: “Blacks...have norms for black people.”⁴⁰⁸ This has created a

⁴⁰³ Ibid, 5.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid, 48.

⁴⁰⁵ Algernon Austin, *Achieving Blackness: Race, Black Nationalism and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 47.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid, 48.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid, 48.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid, 49.

system in which blacks have been able to formulate “ideas about ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ blackness.”⁴⁰⁹ Traditionally the values that have been lumped under the title of incorrect blackness are those which give the appearance of assimilation into white culture. Blacks that have been seen as participating in white activities have alternately been labeled as Uncle Toms, Negros, and house slaves. That a dramatic shift in the relationship of these terms to the black community coincides with the historical moment in which the Black Panther comic is released cannot be taken for granted.

The Birth of the Panther: Early Publication History

This comic book character had the unfortunate distinction of sharing a name with the leading voice in a new, militant black power movement. There does not appear to have been any malicious intent on the part of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the creators of the Panther in christening him with such a volatile namesake. His first appearance as a comic character pre-dates the formation of the Black Panther Party by four months.⁴¹⁰ In fact, his original name was even going to be The Coal Tiger according to preliminary sketches and test artwork done by Jack Kirby. No precise reason is given for the last minute name change, only a note from Editor Ian Hannin that the sketches provide insight into the “kind of visual preparations and character attitudes [that] are considered before one of our scintillating heroes burst full blown into comic book reality.”⁴¹¹

The Panther’s publication history leads one to question just how full blown his burst onto the scene was. Nevertheless, in the turbulent years that would follow his initial appearance the Marvel team had to consider how the black community would respond to

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid, 49.

⁴¹⁰ First appearance of The Black Panther July 1966, First appearance of the Black Panther Party October 1966.

⁴¹¹ Ian Hannin, *Marvel Essentials: The Fantastic Four Vol. 3*, (New York: Marvel Comics, 2007).

this new character. Algernon highlights the extent to which such racial behavior was scrutinized. During the black power movement one black student who deeply loved theatre avoided university productions for fear that appearing among mostly white crowds would be “risking [his] blackness.”⁴¹² Another college student was informed in his first few weeks of higher education that consorting with white students in any fashion would result in him becoming a “D.B. [dead brother].”⁴¹³ Implications don’t come much clearer than that. They also show how embracing a comic book that did not rigorously adhere to social standards of blackness could be not only imprudent but metaphorically fatal.

Defining Blackness: What it Meant to be a Black Panther

So what does the black power movement consider as authentically black attributes? Among the largest is the notion of “black machismo.”⁴¹⁴ This trait isn’t simply about physical prowess. It requires a mental toughness. Black power advocates claim that they have been “emasculated” by white dominance and must find ways of taking that power back.⁴¹⁵ The Nation of Islam for example spent much of its energy relegating black women to the proper place in a black man’s life. Austin argues that this position reflects the larger gender politics that have been denied black males. Years of being legally required to defer to the needs of white women has endangered the essential manliness of their character. They must subjugate their own women in an effort to regain what has been lost. Under black power doctrine “Abortion and homosexuality were both

⁴¹² Ibid, 50.

⁴¹³ Ibid, 50.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid, 51.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid, 51.

viewed as sins.”⁴¹⁶ For black women not to acquiesce to these demands was tantamount to their betrayal of their race and a sign that they were “unsympathetic to black men.”⁴¹⁷

Definitions were further complicated by the fractionalization of the movement’s adherents. Yet within the movement’s many nooks and crannies one could easily find political, cultural, and even religious ideological strains tethered precariously to the central concept of black pride. Austin explains that for many blacks who were disheartened by the seemingly snail-like progress of the civil rights movement, the term “Afrikan” began to be used in place of Negro or black “to indicate an authentic black identity.”⁴¹⁸ Cultural nationalists are often lumped into a rather finite area of black revolutionary thought that centers around the creation and display of pop culture artifacts (literature, clothing, hair styles, etc.). Austin notes that they held a much larger definition of culture that embraced ideas concerning economics and politics. They followed the practices and teachings of Maulana Karenga who saw culture as the first step towards “being free from European influence.”⁴¹⁹ Karenga defines this core value as “a return to the past because one cannot deal with the present and refuses to face the future.”⁴²⁰ Cultural nationalists believed that the mother continent had produced fully formed socialist civilizations that could be re-claimed if they could purge themselves of European influence. The clothing and poetry were merely the means by which they connected back to that tradition.

Pan-Africanists took this mantra and developed a production-oriented approach. When The Council of Independent Black Institutions formed in the wake of *Brown v.*

⁴¹⁶ Ibid, 51.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid, 54.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid, 59.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid, 89.

⁴²⁰ Ibid, p 90-91.

Board of Education, these black leaders helped set up primary schools that would explicitly focus on presenting an Africanized curriculum. They encouraged a shared fate ideology in which teachers and students referred to each other in patently familial terminology. Teachers were required to call students their children; students called teachers their parents and students called each other brother and sister. They taught African history and students memorized the Weusi Alfabeti or African alphabet. These institutions were not free from political rhetoric, however. They hoped to provide students the tools to continue the militant black resistance to white dominance for generations to come. Austin states, “for many CIBI educators, education was explicitly meant to create activists.”⁴²¹ Students were taught martial arts and lobbying techniques. Even the alphabet smacked of revolution. An excerpt from the text reads “N is for our Nation, O is for organize and then we nationalize.”⁴²²

Influencing both of these splinter groups was the Nation of Islam. While Malcolm X certainly gained exposure by arguing against the non-violent resistance tactics employed by Martin Luther King Jr., the Nation was at its heart a religious affair. Local headquarters were called “temples” and later “mosques.”⁴²³ The Nation rejected Christianity and God as “self-hate for blacks.”⁴²⁴ Their economic model was also eerily reminiscent of Christian tithing. They encouraged “Black Capitalism” which amounted to giving money to the Nation to dole out to black business ventures as it saw fit. Austin

⁴²¹ Ibid, 103.

⁴²² Ibid, 102.

⁴²³ Ibid, 63.

⁴²⁴ Ibid, 63.

questions the motivation of this aspect of the Nation's dogma noting "it is not clear whether these ventures ever benefited anyone other than the Nation's leadership."⁴²⁵

Each of these definitions of race helps us to put into historical perspective the expectations an authentically black character would have been expected to live up to. But the Panther is not trapped in a historical vacuum. He is still a regular feature in many comic titles. When modern readers immerse themselves in the Panther's adventures they will not be judging him based on antiquated notions of racial identification. A more universal set of standards is therefore needed to assess the qualities of blackness presented in the Panther comic.

Paul M. Sniderman and Thomas Piazza provide us with just such a set of contemporary definitions. They have created a set of principles that seem to be consistently tied to measures of black pride across generations. They identify early in their study what they see as a limitation. The authors claim that many of these factors work so closely as "companion notions...that it is easy to argue that either one is the cause of the other."⁴²⁶ While this does make empirically testing results difficult, it supports qualitative examinations such as this one. This sort of statement removes the need to try and determine which traits the Black Panther does and does not exhibit. Instead, we can presume that he experiences all of them. The only question becomes which ones he chooses to act on and how those actions affect the performative nature of his achieved status as a black icon.

In a questionnaire presented to 676 black men and women in the Chicago area, Sniderman and Piazza uncovered empirical evidence to support a host of common values

⁴²⁵ Ibid, 66.

⁴²⁶ Sniderman and Piazza, *Black Pride and Black Prejudice*, 13.

that indicate a strong racial identification for black individuals. The first of these traits was as sense of shared fate. They note that “you should feel that what happens to other members of the group has a bearing on what happens to you”⁴²⁷. Over two thirds of the respondents indicated that they felt their actions had larger societal consequences beyond the scope of their individual lives.

Recalling the dictates of black power, the authors claim black autonomy, particularly economic autonomy as another fact of racial identification. They note “given the history of American racism,...it would be surprising...if black Americans did not wish to have a larger say in the directions that their lives will take.”⁴²⁸ Two important notes about the desire for economic independence for African Americans: (1) They crave economic freedom for the entire race, not a single person, (2) They do not desire “absolute independence, but...a greater measure of it.”⁴²⁹ Once again we begin to see how these traits overlap creating more complex visions of black identity.

The authors also tested measures of Afrocentrism in their respondents. While numbers ran rather low for the extremist views expressed by some on the black community (i.e., that Greek philosophers had stolen ideas from black thinkers in Egypt) over 75% agreed that “African wise men who lived hundreds of years ago do not get enough credit for their contributions to modern science.”⁴³⁰ Under this definition of the Afrocentrism concept, the focus is less concerned with returning to African roots as it is with exposing lies perpetrated by Europeans who have minimized the significance of

⁴²⁷ Ibid, 15.

⁴²⁸ Ibid, 18.

⁴²⁹ Ibid, 18.

⁴³⁰ Ibid, 23.

black intellectuals historically. The authors read this finding as a sign of festering “intolerance” in the black community for white oppression.⁴³¹

But where does this intolerance come from? According to these authors, conspiratorial thinking. They asked respondents a set of loaded questions that proposed there were “forces, operating on a vast scale, rooted in the very center of American society, and proceeding with the explicit authorization of the government itself, that are bent on the destruction of black people.”⁴³² Specifically, they asked if respondents believed that government agencies were keeping inner city crime rates high on purpose and if white doctors had developed the AIDS virus as a way of killing off the black race. Over 46% believed them to be either “strongly” true or “somewhat” true.⁴³³ The vivid and violent nature of these beliefs would appear to indicate that the chasm between white and black America, even in the 21st Century is remarkably wide. This type of extreme hatred and fear makes the present study all the more relevant some forty years after the Black Panther first hit Marvel newsstands.

Black Panther in the 1960s

The 1960s were one of the most disorganized and indecisive periods in the Black Panther’s publication history. Lee and Kirby clearly had not come to a consensus on how far they were willing to take their experiment. This reluctance plays out as a series of confounding and contradictory choices from T’Challa in the early issues featuring the Black Panther. Readers are introduced to a ruthless, cunning and ferociously independent black man in his debut issue. By the end of his initial arc, however, the writers’ interest in pushing such boundaries has weakened considerably. This makes the 1960s version of

⁴³¹ Ibid, 24.

⁴³² Ibid, 45.

⁴³³ Ibid, 47.

the character a frustrating one to read from a racial standpoint. On the one hand, his debut issue presents one of the most comprehensive realizations of the character's potential. This must be weighed against the almost immediate emasculation of the character. The decade is typified for the character by one angry shout for change followed by a long stream of muttering.

The strained, often confusing relationship to race played out in the pages of the Black Panther's very first appearance. His introduction, as noted earlier, comes in a three-part arc in the *Fantastic Four* in 1966. The issue finds T'Challa summoning the Fantastic Four to his hidden African nation to participate in "the greatest hunt of all time."⁴³⁴ The thrust of the story was cribbed heavily from the short story turned 1932 film *The Most Dangerous Game*.⁴³⁵ The Panther lured the super hero team to his island so that he could use them as prey. He needed a last great test to prove his worth to the Wakandan people as their rightful king and possessor of the Black Panther powers. On the surface, this is the personification of the black machismo aesthetic. A single black man plotting to overwhelm four highly regarded pillars of the white community. Ben Grimm, a member of the FF even appears to provide ample ammunition to black intellectuals who would argue that this hyper-masculinity is required to combat unsophisticated notions of blackness by whites.

Grimm acts as the comic's voice for white ignorance. When presented with the technological sophistication of the Wakandan people, he is always the first to dismiss their achievements. The Panther has sent the FF a magnificent jet built by Wakandans as a gift to entice them to visit his nation. The vehicle is far beyond the technological

⁴³⁴ Stan Lee, "The Black Panther," *Fantastic Four* #52 (New York: Marvel Comics, July 1966), 3.

⁴³⁵ Which was itself an adaptation of a short story by Richard Connell.

capabilities of anything the American government have heretofore been capable of producing. Upon first seeing the vehicle in action, Grimm's only response is "How does some refugee from a Tarzan movie lay his hands on this kinda gimo?"⁴³⁶ This utter disbelief in the technological prowess of an African nation becomes a theme of the issue. It is worth noting that none of the FF are similarly shocked when Dr. Doom, a monarch of the fictional Eastern European nation of Latvaria demonstrates comparable technological achievements. The confounding variable appears to stem directly from the Panther's African roots and Wakanda's rustic appearance.

Once the FF reach Wakandan territory they are shocked to discover a world underneath the lush foliage. A vast labyrinth of steel beams and computer hardware sits just below Wakanda's surface which Lee describes as "a world of sheer wonder."⁴³⁷

Once the hunt begins, the Panther's dominance is unmistakable. The author once again toys with conceptions of black power by having the Panther defeat the FF with his mind not his physique. He traps the Human Torch in a vacuum tube rendering his spontaneously combustible body mute. He zaps the Thing's immense strength by tricking him into injecting "devitalizing water" which allows him to be easily overpowered. He uses his heightened senses to subdue both Mr. Fantastic and Sue Storm by plunging one into total darkness and sniffing the other out even in her invisible cloak. No doubt this must have been difficult for some white readers to sit through. Here were their most beloved heroes being made to look like fools by a strong, confident, and independent black man. The Panther embodied the reincarnation of Jack Johnson.

⁴³⁶ Ibid, 1.

⁴³⁷ Ibid, 9.

But, the FF soon escape the traps that have been carefully laid out for them and instead of continuing to battle, the Panther accepts them as equals. One comic book issue after so viciously pummeling the FF, he throws them a lavish celebration in honor of their new friendship. Clearly the writers were beginning to question the wisdom of introducing their fans to such a powerful model of black behavior. He presents them with several gifts and allows them to rest in his personal mansion. 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. Remembering the temperature of race relations exhibited by the anecdotes of the college students we discussed earlier, it is surprising that the Panther would forfeit his blackness so completely with so little effort. Nor does this respect appear mutual. As the Panther tries to explain the origins of his wealth and power to the FF, Ben Grimm dismisses him almost immediately interrupting the story to interject “Yer talkin’ to a guy who seen every Tarzan movie at least a dozen times! And I can recite ya half’a the Bomba the Jungle Boy books by heart. So yer little bedtime story aint impresin’ me!”⁴³⁸ This may as well be a lesson presented in a Pan-African classroom: kindness to whites is futile for it will not be returned. But these abusive comments have no effect on the Panther’s interest in continuing their new found friendship.

In his final appearance with the Fantastic Four in issue #54, he has allowed for a new level of assimilation in the Wakandan jungle. The opening panel of this issue finds the Panther playing baseball on a makeshift field with the FF. He cheerfully yells out

⁴³⁸ Stan Lee, *Fantastic Four* #53, 6.

from behind the pitcher's mound "This will never replace lion hunting my friends."⁴³⁹ The character has fallen far in terms of his authenticity over the course of only a few issues. He went from the personification of what the black power movement (only months away from hitting its stride in the U.S.) stood for to becoming a pawn in the FF's expanding circle of costumed companions. And as this first chapter in the Panther's tumultuous comic book life ends we see the entirety of his later struggles to be accepted as a regularly published character played out. He exposes us to both extremes of his personality. We see the proud African heritage from which he derives his powers and his willingness to accommodate the West. The words of the Panther as the FF prepare to depart Wakanda, "[I] shall be eternally in your debt," appear to foreshadow a less militarized version of the Panther for future incarnations.⁴⁴⁰ The emasculating power of white influence is on display for all black readers to ponder.

The Black Panther would essentially vanish from the pages of Marvel for the next few years only making rare and often fleeting appearances alongside the Fantastic Four. By 1968, when the company chose to give their first black superhero another shot at stardom it came with a high price. Now the writing team had decided to drag T'Challa out of his jungle home altogether. He would be moved to New York to team with the crime fighting team of the Avengers. The potential for discussion of many of the issues plaguing the black community was thus greatly diminished. As an Avenger the Panther would fade into obscurity, his political agenda obfuscated by a mansion full of white characters.

⁴³⁹ Stan Lee, "Whosoever Finds The Evil Eye...!", *Fantastic Four* #54 (New York: Marvel Comics, September 1966), 1.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 8.

Certainly, the traits of authentic blackness discussed above apply to this iteration of the Black Panther, but his induction into the Avengers evoked another historical struggle being played out in the pages of Marvel's comics. The battles over social integration of black and white spaces in America was reaching record highs. Black activists buoyed on one side by the orations of Martin Luther King and on the other by the righteous indignation of Malcolm X were demanding equality at ever-greater levels. Although there are several areas of social reform, which could be applied as evidence in such a case, it seems most pertinent to invoke the desegregation of the schooling system as an appropriate parallel to the integration issues faced by our intrepid superhero. After all, many of his readers would have been either in primary schools or going off to a university while enjoying his many adventures.

While it is true that *Brown v. Board of Education* had been decided by the Supreme Court some fourteen years prior to the Black Panther joining the Avengers, the issues that it aimed to solve were still a sight of consternation in the late sixties. Many schools, especially in the southern states still found loopholes that allowed them to skirt around the regulations imposed by *Brown*. The same year the Black Panther joined the Avengers; the Supreme Court issued an amendment ruling to *Brown* in *Green v. New Kent County School District*. Sometimes referred to as the "root and branch" plan after the decision written by Justice Brennan, this ruling required schools to submit to tests to verify how effectively they had implemented the dictates of *Brown* into their system.⁴⁴¹

Both the *Brown* and *Green* decisions relied heavily on what scholars called the harm and benefit thesis. This philosophy states that desegregation is an essential

⁴⁴¹ David J. Armor, *Forced Justice: School Desegregation and the Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 28.

foundation of education because “segregation is harmful to the social, psychological, and educational development of children.”⁴⁴² The philosophy breaks down the benefits of the plan into four areas: “academic achievement, self-concept and aspirations, race relations and prejudice and long-term educational and vocational attainments.”⁴⁴³ Although the Panther’s narrative isn’t affected by educational attainment or academic achievement, race relations and self-esteem fit well into the previously constructed model of black self-image that we have been working with.

The harm and benefit thesis would insist that black students matriculating at a segregated school would have lower self-esteem than those at desegregated schools. It turns out that the opposite was often true. In a set of meta-analyses of studies conducted from 1963 – 1981, two researchers found out of a total of 63 studies only six schools reported higher black self esteem in desegregated environments. Twenty-one schools reported higher self esteem in segregated classrooms. David J. Armor states that one of the chief explanations for this seemingly contradictory finding has been racism in desegregated schools. He explains, “desegregated black students may...experience racial prejudice or acts of discrimination for the first time.”⁴⁴⁴

As exemplified in the Fantastic Four issues, the Black Panther had experienced discrimination before, but he had never experienced it as a resident of the United States. Returning for a moment to the traits of black authenticity, T’Challa had risked quite a bit of his reputation by joining the Avengers. He had potentially sacrificed the livelihoods of his native people to become a crime fighter for a comic book America in which every panel is lily white. Black men, women and children may roam freely along the confines

⁴⁴² Ibid, 59.

⁴⁴³ Ibid, 61.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, 101.

of Wakanda, but Marvel's titles set in Manhattan were devoid of racial diversity. Some might say he had betrayed the shared fate aspect of his heritage to become something of an "Uncle Tom."

This is where the intersectionality struggles faced by the Panther begin to come to a head. Unlike Superman and Batman he has no secret identity to hide. He uses the Panther moniker more like a royal title than a second persona. Nevertheless, he is faced with a dual set of roles to fulfill. Being shipped off to the United States did irreparable harm to the character. It created at a fetal stage in the mythology a precedent that would define the character's actions for years to come. Previous chapters have shown how Superman and Batman benefited from ambiguous identities. These malleable personas allowed for identification from a wide range of audience members who could read themselves into the action. The Panther would have been much better served by a singular, more focused identity, however. If Marvel's intention was to facilitate a new level of social responsibility by introducing more realistic characters, then they needed to present a much more uncompromising vision of the Panther. As our review of black authenticity has shown, where Superman and Batman represented (on some level) all races, the Panther was the spokesperson for one. Introducing uncertainty over where his commitments lie muddied the ideological position of the character for future incarnations. It could be said that intersectionality helped kill the Panther as marketable character.

His indoctrination into the Avengers occurs in issue # 52. T'Challa arrives to find three of the Avengers, The Wasp, Hawkeye, and Goliath, apparently slain in their own mansion. Before he has time to ascertain whom the culprit behind the murders is, a S.H.I.E.D. agent bursts in and arrests him for the crime. Although he tries several times

to explain his innocence, the all-white police staff will hear nothing of it. The inspector on the case freely hurls insults at the Panther including asking him to unmask at gunpoint (a deep sign of disrespect) and dismissively mispronouncing his name as “T’Charlie.”⁴⁴⁵

The Panther declares his status as African royalty, but the legal assistance this would normally grant him is refused. The officer tosses the point aside stating, “we’ve got just his word on that. I can’t find this Wakanda place on any map!”⁴⁴⁶ When the Panther can stand his false captivity no more, he escapes in search of the real killer. As he sits perched on a ledge near the police station, a crowd of onlookers gathers and taunts him. One civilian yells, “while he’s on the loose nobody’s safe.”⁴⁴⁷ He is clearly referring to his status as a murderer but there is also an inescapable racial connotation couched in this statement. Here we have the first black superhero ever allowed into the all-white club of the Avengers and the first thing he has apparently done is murder his teammates. It is hard if not impossible to avoid the comparisons to country clubs and sports teams, which were in the midst of integration at this time as well.

When T’Challa finally confronts the killer of these three superheroes he provides him a moment of mercy, as the man appears defeated. The criminal Grim Reaper begs him “don’t strike me please.”⁴⁴⁸ The Panther agrees to settle for taking him into custody and clearing the name of T’Challa but this hesitation is leapt on by the Reaper who attempts to land a fatalistic blow. Speaking seemingly to the myriad backlash of racism he has encountered since landing in America, the Panther bellows, “this, then is the worth

⁴⁴⁵ Roy Thomas, “Death Calls for the Arch-Heroes.” *The Mighty Avengers* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1969), 6.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

of a pledge in the place which men call civilized?”⁴⁴⁹ While T’Challa finds the strength to join the Avengers after all, these character attacks create a first chip in the armor that will eventually lead to his self-imposed retirement from the team.

Black Panther in the 1970s

The 1970s was a hopeful era for the Black Panther as a comic and a character. Ironically, as Marvel began to lose faith in the character’s ability to ever draw a substantial audience, it provided an opportunity for the character to undergo a miniature rebirth. The Panther was given to author Don McGregor who, far removed from the scrutiny of a major title, 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. Sadly, the full potential for this version of the Panther was never realized. The series was canceled after only 13 issues for creating too much controversy with its storylines. If the Black Panther of the 1960s failed because he lacked authenticity, the 1970s Panther was too authentic to be allowed to exist.

As we follow the Black Panther into the 1970s, his relationship with the Avengers becomes increasingly strained. Although many of his colleagues support him professionally, little effort is made to know T’Challa the man rather than the Black Panther the crime fighter.

It is in many respects why he ultimately decides to leave their midst. By August of 1974, the Panther was becoming restless with his role as an Avenger. Most of the team was in shambles, bickering over petty arguments that threatened to tear the team apart. A love triangle had developed around The Scarlet Witch and Mantis who both lusted after the newest Avenger member, the Vision. Captain America had returned to the team but was

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid, 15.

having serious doubts as to whether or not he wished to continue being a superhero at all. This splintering had left the Panther deeply alone both physically and emotionally.

In the months leading up to his decision he had been faced with several incidents that had made him question his decision to leave the nation of Wakanda. Poor race relations have plagued the Panther since he set foot in America. We have already seen the accusatory treatment he received from the police upon his arrival. But the lack of support from the black community in New York digs far deeper into the Panther's psyche. A reporter for a local paper stirs up a group of black militant protesters that picket outside the Avengers' mansion. They demand that the Panther return to Africa because he has "sold out to the white establishment."⁴⁵⁰

This direct attack on the Panther's authenticity as a black authority figure shakes his confidence. As he sits by a windowsill of the Avengers mansion we are let in on another troubling development. He has been receiving multiple letters from Wakanda. His generals and councilors are begging for his return. He is torn in his sense of duty declaring, "my people are lost without their prince."⁴⁵¹ 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.

His discontent with living in America is finally pushed to its breaking point when a diplomat of the fictitious nation of Rudyarda pays a visit to the mansion. He is in need

⁴⁵⁰ Marvel Database, Avengers Vol 1 112, Wikia accessed on July 11, 2010, http://marvel.wikia.com/Avengers_Vol_1_112.

⁴⁵¹ Steve Englehart, "All the Sounds and Sights of Death," *The Mighty Avengers #126* (New York: Marvel Comics, August 1974), 5.

of the Avengers assistance. His embassy has been receiving death threats. The diplomat, Mr. Ronald Pershing, is also a staunch white supremacist. When T'Challa answers the door to the mansion, Pershing refuses to shake his hand for he claims, "the touch of a black man is distasteful to me."⁴⁵²

Before the Avengers can make it to their vehicles to assist the diplomat, they are all assaulted by Solaar and Klaw, the man who killed T'Challa's father years earlier. Klaw traps the heroes and their guest in a force field. He reveals that he will kill one of the female Avengers within one hour if the Panther does not abdicate his throne and title to Klaw. Pershing verbally berates T'Challa calling for him to abide by Klaw's wishes. He screams "If I face death...it will be on your head!"⁴⁵³ When T'Challa is unmoved by his pleas, the diplomat turns to the other trapped Avengers and demands, "you surely can't let us die on the whim of a black man."⁴⁵⁴

While the other Avengers rally around T'Challa's right to defend his throne and eventually defeat Klaw, the words of Pershing leave a lasting impact on the African prince. After the battle he announces to the team that he has decided to leave the Avengers to travel back to his homeland. He cites the appearance of Klaw and Pershing as "omen(s)" that he is needed back home.⁴⁵⁵ Note the difference in how the Panther reacts to white isolationist rhetoric. There is little difference in tone between the verbal abuse he suffers here and the chides of Ben Grimm back in Wakanda. Yet, where he shrugged off the ignorance of Grimm, he takes the current accusations much more seriously. This could be written off as a story device to transition the Panther out of the

⁴⁵² Ibid, 6.

⁴⁵³ Ibid, 12.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid, p 15.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid, 19.

Avengers comic, but it could just as well be read as an admission from the writing staff that this sort of vulgar language has consequences. Although they may still be years away from presenting a completely realized black character, the writers at least deserve some credit for using this platform to engender a slightly more tolerant world view.

The conflicting nature of black authenticity is brought to the forefront of the Black Panther's journey once again. He cares about his alliance with the Avengers and admits to himself that he has done some good while a member of their ranks but his responsibility to his people are too strong to allow him to stay away. This also acts as an interesting critique of the autonomy of the black race. The argument is being made that black people are happiest when they are with other black people. Regardless of the money or power one is able to attain in white society, the modern black male is depicted as needing some form of geographic connectivity to his people that prevents him from ever fully establishing himself as an integrated and equal member of white society. The experiment of integration has failed in the comic landscape. The Panther will never again return as a full-time resident of the United States. For the next three decades of his existence, he lives apart from his costumed companions, literally and figuratively and island to himself.

At this point it might have seemed to the average consumer that Marvel was finally putting some weight behind the Black Panther storylines. He was being given his own solo title for the first time. The first black super hero in the company's history appeared to be poised for his turn as one of Marvel's premier heroes. Behind the scenes, however, the scene was somewhat bleaker.

The Panther was made the anchor character of a series called Jungle Action Comics. This was similar to the method DC had used to promote Batman to his own title by making him the face of Detective Comics. The writing reigns for the serial were handed off once again, this time to Don McGregor. According to McGregor who had been hired in 1972 to be a proofreader for Marvel titles, the company was growing weary of their foray into racial literature. Simply put he states that he “had been given [the Black Panther title] to write, because [it was] expected to die.”⁴⁵⁶

He points to the fact that the character was being published in a title called Jungle Action as the first sign of this dismissive sentiment. At the time Marvel, like many other comic book publishers, were drawing on their immense back catalogs to help offset sinking sales of other titles. It was 1973 and Marvel was still publishing a comic filled with reprints of jungle comic characters like Tarzan and Sheena Queen of the Jungle that had first appeared in the 1930s. Every grossly distorted, antiquated view of racial otherness was sprawled out on the pages of these issues like a stubborn time capsule daring young readers to open it. Marvel made no apologies for this transgression. They did not attempt to contextualize these stories for contemporary readers. They simply slapped a new cover on the issue and sent it out to the world as another fine product of the House of Ideas.

What disturbed McGregor was that the Black Panther was expected to survive as a three-dimensional character beside such one-dimensional tales. It would have cost too much to have artists come in and draw the extra pages that populated the backs of each issue so Marvel decided the Panther could have the first 20 or so pages and Sheena or some other such white savage could occupy the garbage space. After eight issues

⁴⁵⁶ Dan McGregor, *Panther's Chronicles* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2010), 2.

McGregor became fed up with the reprints, which he said were “taunting me, stabbing me.”⁴⁵⁷

He called in favors from the art staff. He convinced some of his friends to draw filler material for free if he would write it. This resulted in five or six pages an issue that would be littered with “maps, pinups, story recaps” even a diagram of the Wakandan palace complete with a toilet, anything to keep Tarzan out of work.⁴⁵⁸

This begs the question, why did Marvel turn their back on the Panther just as he appeared to be gaining some support with fans? The answer is slightly less sinister than McGregor’s memoirs imply. Stan Lee broke into the comic book industry in its formative years. He lived through the damages wrought upon the industry by the comic book code and the demoralizing testimonials of men like Fredric Wertham. Although, he is commonly remembered today by comic fans as a paragon of the business, Lee has seen the industry nearly submerge more than once. He was a poor Jewish kid who battled for a spot in comics when they had fallen out of favor with the public and he had a wife and children to support. Stan Lee learned early that the measure of success in the comic business was sales figures and he carried that lesson with him the rest of his life.

In their biography of him, Jordan Raphael and Tom Spurgeon note that the men Lee worked for in the 1940s and 50s were not interested in the “asserted cultural significance” of a comic title, they only cared about “how many units they moved from printing press to spinner rack.”⁴⁵⁹ When Lee returned from military duty in the late forties, he was hired by a company called Timely. They were “hell bent on

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid, 4.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid, 5.

⁴⁵⁹ Jordan Raphael and Tom Spurgeon, *Stan Lee: And The Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003), 50.

maximizing...sales” and they aimed to do it by sniffing out trends and following them to their absolute limit.⁴⁶⁰ Lee helped propel titles like Patsy Walker, Tessie the Typist, Millie the Model and Nellie the Nurse onto newsstands as girl-friendly comics became a temporary rage in the business. The future head of Marvel dove into this profit model and “grabbed every last bit of market share he could with as many conceptual gymnastics as the ‘girls comics’ concept would allow.”⁴⁶¹

Looking back at these formative years, it seems likely that Lee did not give up on the Panther for political reasons. He created the Panther not as social commentary but as a way of filling in a niche audience that he thought might be willing to spend money on comics. When sales figures for titles featuring the Panther sagged, his motivation to continue the comic waned. It is also possible that on some level Lee’s ego may have been bruised by the Panther’s dismal performance. The character was created in the maelstrom of Lee’s greatest spurt of creative genius. In the mid-1960s Lee had helped develop such iconic heroes as Spider-Man, Iron Man, The Fantastic Four, The X-Men and The Hulk all of whom would go on to be gigantic moneymakers for the company. The Panther stands out as one of Lee’s unusual misfires in this period.

Whatever Lee’s motivations might have been, McGregor made sure that the Wakanda that T’Challa returned to was far removed from the one he had left. Upon his return in *Jungle Action* #6, he finds a Wakandan citizen being tortured for information on the activities of the natives. When he rescues the captive, the dying man tells T’Challa “many of the people said you’d never come back...that the Wakandas had lost their

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid, 50.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid, 51.

king...that you would desert us.”⁴⁶² The shared fate motif is presented in its most startling form in this issue. The Panther has come home to find his people in a state of ruin. Even the gigantic metal fortress that had amazed the Fantastic Four years earlier is gone, replaced by straw huts and primitive architecture.

There are two commentaries at work here. The first speaks to the transitory nature of black success. Only a few years ago these men were building some of the most sophisticated machinery known to man. Their experiments with the vibranium deposits had yielded startling results. But in the absence of true leadership, we are shown that all advances in science and education were soon lost. The mystical, deity-like power that one person held over an entire civilization is both troubling and insulting. Here was one of the finest examples in media of what an autonomous African community could aspire to and it was toppled with almost no effort at all.

There is also a much bolder reflection than we have seen before of the individual responsibility impressed upon children of the black pride movement to be cautious in their decision making for it can have consequences that stretch far beyond the life of a single person. When T’Challa returns to his throne room, one of his closest aides tells him that the Black Panther is to blame for the tribal warfare that now threatens to tear Wakanda apart. “Perhaps if you had spent more time here” he demands “you would not have to ask [how things got this bad].”⁴⁶³

It seems that in his absence, a local warlord named Erik Killmonger has been terrorizing the nation with his band of outlaws. T’Challa gets to see this destruction for himself as he and a search party approach a small Wakandan village. McGregor does not

⁴⁶² Don McGregor, “Panther’s Rage,” *Jungle Action Comics #6* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1973), 4.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 6.

mince words in describing the destruction, “it is the scene of a massacre.”⁴⁶⁴ As the Black Panther uses his reflexes to save a woman trapped in one of the burning huts, his chief military councilor scolds him, “a pity it has taken such drastic events to still your obsession with those foreign shores.”⁴⁶⁵

Like so many other issues centered on the Panther this one also includes images of black power at work that would be disconcerting for white audiences. T’Challa has brought a woman he began a romantic relationship with in New York back to the Wakandan jungles. She is an embarrassing blaxploitation stereotype. She barges into a meeting between T’Challa and his council asking “You done playing your jungle lord act?”⁴⁶⁶ Unable to accept her insults, T’Challa slaps her squarely across the face then turns and walks away with no apology or explanation needed. His lover immediately assumes a submissive role in line with the doctrine preached by the Nation of Islam. She cowers from the superhero stammering “T’Challa I...I’m sorry.”⁴⁶⁷ Though T’Challa’s authenticity as a black prince might be in question, his position of authority over the female gender remains solidly intact.

This is another example of the intersectionality that plagues the character coming to the fore. T’Challa is once again torn between two views of his responsibility. As a black prince his primary responsibility should be to his nation. As a superhero however, he feels compelled to share his gifts with the world. Unlike the 1960s examples, McGregor grants T’Challa the power to exert more control over his condition. McGregor attempts to provide a more autonomous version of the Black Panther mythology. This

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid, pl 8.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid, 6.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid, 6.

more confident iteration of T'Challa was clearly becoming troublesome for Marvel, however. The content being discussed in the comics becoming increasingly inflammatory. When McGregor turned his attention to racial injustice in the United States, the comic's days were numbered.

The Panther vs. The Klan story arc as it is affectionately known by fans of the series would be one of the most controversial that Marvel would ever publish. The imagery was stark and unapologetic. The writing pulled no punches. In many ways, it was one of the most profound pieces of literature any comic publisher had dared to release to the public at that time. It also turned out to be too much for many of them to accept. Issue #21 featured a cover that showed T'Challa tied to a burning cross surrounded by Klansmen calling for his demise. Conservative groups across the country were outraged. McGregor says that looking back at it, he believes this is the issue that led to the series cancellation in 1976. He blames the dramatic drop in sales (which even Marvel could not afford to ignore any longer) on lack of support from “people...so afraid of the subject matter, so hostile to my doing it...[to] those in charge...[and treatment from] the outside media.”⁴⁶⁸

The storyline revolved around the apparent suicide of Angela Lynne, the sister of T'Challa's girlfriend. They immediately return to the United States upon hearing of the news. The next several issues revolve around the terrorizing effects of the Klan on the Lynne family in rural Georgia. It seems that Angela had stumbled upon some incriminating land deals being brokered between the Klan and local officials. Had this information gone public it would have been politically devastating to those involved. A local reporter tells the Panther that Angela had agreed to disclose the whole story to him

⁴⁶⁸ Don McGregor, *Panther's Chronicles*, 7.

shortly before her mysterious death. Although not solid proof is ever found connecting the Klan to her, the Lynne family and T'Challa strongly believe that Angela's death was the result of foul play.

Unfortunately, fans of the arc would not get to see it through to a proper conclusion. Marvel became so overwhelmed by the negative press they received when they ran the story, they abruptly cut the magazine from their roster. Issue #22 of *Jungle Action* instead became a kind of epilogue to the Klan storyline. It centered on a tale recounted by Monica Lynne's mother, a story of corruption and deceit.

Tensions were particularly high along racial lines in the United States at this time. Arguments began to erupt over the social construction of race. The exhibition of the treasures of the King Tut tomb at the Met in New York ignited charges of white Americans trying to rob Africans of their proper ancestry. Author Mellani McAllister explains that for these citizens the Tut exhibit became "an extraordinary nexus [where] the politics of masculinity and racial identity...were combined, contested, and revised."⁴⁶⁹

Black leaders across the United States were ashamed and offended by the Europhication of the Egyptian artifacts. They saw the exhibit as an opportunity to reframe their position in the perpetual battle for cultural acknowledgement. They realized that Egypt was identified along with Rome and Greece as a cradle of modern civilization. Thus, they reasoned, "if ancient Egypt was reclaimed as black civilization, then 'civilization' could be claimed for blacks."⁴⁷⁰ The assertion would not go uncontested. White leaders connected to the exhibit modeled it after an art exhibition rather than a

⁴⁶⁹ Mellani McAllister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, & U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 127.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

historical documentary. They attempted to craft a “universalist rhetoric” onto the items on display adopting them as “something too ennobling and too precious...to belong to any one people...or any one nation.”⁴⁷¹

Black publications accused white authorities of purposefully striping the exhibit and its media attention of any relationship to African heritage. African American leaders reacted strongly to the muscling out of any African influence on the Tut treasures. Tom Bradley, then mayor of Los Angeles, California declared February 12, 1978 King Tut Day in defiance. He insisted in a public statement that white leaders were conspiring to rob “black youth” of an important “model of black masculinity.”⁴⁷² White Egyptologists fired back. Herbert Scott-Gibson released a pamphlet in connection with the exhibit titled Tutankhamen and the African Heritage which argued “scientists generally considered Egyptians more ‘caucasoid’ than ‘negroid.’”⁴⁷³ The conflict reached its boiling point when the *New York Amsterdam* ran a story “that complained about the breakdown of the only Harlem Ticketron machine on the day the Tut tickets went on sale.”⁴⁷⁴ The accusation was unmistakable “black people” were actively being kept “out of the Tut show” because they did not match the Eurocentric mythology laid out by white presenters.⁴⁷⁵

It is into this highly charged conspiratorial landscape that our final 1970s offering from the Black Panther series emerges. As the matriarch of the Lynne family weaves her tale of a recently freed slave harassed by the Ku Klux Klan, Monica Lynne fantasizes about how differently things would have turned out if only T’Challa would have been

⁴⁷¹ Ibid, 129.

⁴⁷² Ibid, 141.

⁴⁷³ Ibid, 142.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid, 143.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid, 142.

there to help him. And by extension if the powerful, confident black men of the 1970s would have been there to stand by his side. The issue is an attack on this type of re-appropriation. It turns the tables by allowing Lynne the power to manipulate the image and memory of white oppression. Lynne's demonic visions of the Klan illustrate how valuable control over historical interpretation can be. It's not simply that by being there T'Challa would have saved Caleb's life. It's that as this story would have been passed down, black children would have seen this form of white oppression as surmountable.

After being confronted with the spectral images of the Klan accosting his family, demanding that he revoke many of his newfound privileges, Caleb visits the Freedman's Bureau to seek assistance. We watch as the white politicians cajole him with empty promises; "There's nothing to fear...it's obviously some scamps having a sporting time with you. Get us in office and we'll straighten them out."⁴⁷⁶ The images of the men we are given are not provided by Mother Lynne though. They are the product of Monica's imagination. McGregor invites us into her subconscious: "She molds them out of silent movie villains who stroke their moustaches while foreclosing on the mortgage."⁴⁷⁷ We are treated to the longstanding, unspoken conspiracy to suppress black advancement felt by all corners of black society. We are also reminded of the sheer hopelessness faced by many black families in the wake of such scheming. The story is threatening not because it shows T'Challa defeating the Klan, but because it proposes that the machinations put in place by white society to maintain power are flawed. Like the night riders, they will eventually be defeated.

⁴⁷⁶ Don McGregor, "Death Riders on the Horizon," *Jungle Action Comics* (New York: Marvel, 1976), 295.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 295.

Mother Lynne alludes to this transparency when she explains away the mystical elements the Klansmen's appearance quite scientifically, "those men were dressed up in Civil War uniforms that they'd fired bullets into and smeared the holes with red paint; the skeletal hand [of the leader] pro'bly carved from hickory wood."⁴⁷⁸ But in Monica's mind's eye we see the repulsive magic of their regalia in full bloom. The Soul Strangler is little more than the animated figure of a demonic skeleton.

And while the sophistication of the black power movement as expressed through T'Challa dispenses with the likes of these ignoble savages, it is not without a price. As he rains down a series of blows with his mighty fists to the Soul Strangler, the Black Panther lectures him, "You are indeed a demon Soul Strangler. You have nearly transformed me into as soulless a creature as you. You have made me mirror your images of death."⁴⁷⁹ This is the terror of conspiratorial thinking. It is bred by legitimate fears but if black society is not careful their fight for equality can quickly drag them inexhaustibly into the mire of reflexive racism.

Black Panther in 1990s

When Marvel decided to revisit the series in the 1990s, the wounds of past mistreatments still lingered.⁴⁸⁰ Marvel had decided to trot the African Avenger out for one more run at stardom and on the surface, they were making the right moves to position the character for a better shelf life than he had previously experienced. They brought on Christopher Priest to helm the writing duties. Priest was the most preeminent black comic

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid, 298.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid, 303.

⁴⁸⁰ Only 4 issues of the Black Panther comic were published during the 1980s. Sadly, none of them have been collected into trade paperback or graphic novel form. Due to the disposable nature of comics, especially those that don't sell well, these uncollected issues have become extremely difficult to find. I will continue to search for them to add to this section of the dissertation. For now, however, I respectfully request that the committee allow a brief deviation from my stated methodology.

book author of his time. For the first time in the history of the title, the original black superhero was going to be written by a black man.

But there was a problem. Priest hated the Black Panther. He looked at writing the title as a chore not an opportunity. In the introduction to his collection of Panther issues, Priest very bluntly summarizes his apprehension at taking on the African prince: “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.”⁴⁸¹

That ringing endorsement of the brand landed Priest the job. He would be the next writer to guide readers through the Wakandan jungles. But Priest had a plan and a rather novel one at that. He would keep the Black Panther from being “dull” by removing him from his own comic book. In the five part mini-series that Priest oversaw, it was not uncommon for T’Challa to have “only a handful of lines per issue.”⁴⁸² The star of the new Black Panther comic would instead be a white diplomatic agent for the U.S. government modeled after Chandler Bing from *Friends*. Priest thought this would a relatable “everyman” that might help “deal with reader apathy and resistance to the return of one of Marvel’s least appreciated and dullest characters.”⁴⁸³

More than simply a Frankenstein methodology for breathing new life into a comatose character though, Priest’s plan above all made the Panther safe. This new

⁴⁸¹ Christopher Priest, “The Story Thus Far,” *Black Panther: The Client* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2001), 1.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 2.

Panther had to carve out an existence for himself in a post O.J. world. The site of contestation that Michael Eric Dyson so brilliantly referred to as a “racequake” had reopened many of the racial crevices that threatened the series in the 1970s.⁴⁸⁴ The “black antiheroism” embodied by the black power movement was once again a loathsome quality in many white Americans’ eyes.⁴⁸⁵ What’s worse, Simpson’s atrocious acts implicated even the most affable black characterizations. Simpson’s crime it seemed was less the beating and murder of his ex-wife than the betrayal of legions of whites who had accepted him as one of their own. For a character like T’Challa whose entire identity had been built on his stewardship of a faraway African nation, his Otherness appeared sure to bury sales.

So Priest turned to a black adage, “it’s alright to look black, just don’t act your color” and refined it to its breaking point.⁴⁸⁶ The Black Panther could no longer be trusted to tell his own narrative. The racial divide had shifted so dramatically that his authorial voice had to be stripped from him. He would need to become a signifier without a signified, a word whose definition could be left in the more capable hands of a white male.

That white male’s name was Everett K. Ross, whose name, Priest, identifies as an homage to Alex P. Keaton.⁴⁸⁷ The Office of the Chief of Protocol agent is charged with escorting T’Challa and his colleagues around New York City for the duration of their stay. He is to make sure they are comfortable, well-taken care of. The narrative is framed

⁴⁸⁴ Michael Eric Dyson, “O.J. Simpson and Our Trial by Fire,” in *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 57.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁸⁷ For the benefit of those unfamiliar with the series, Alex Keaton was the main character in a 1980s sitcom called *Family Ties*. The character was a die hard republican whose humor was mostly derived from extraordinarily rigid conservative belief system.

against his recounting of the story to his commanding officer. As a result, we are given no thought bubbles, no inward glimpses into the mind of the African king. We have only the interpretations of his actions by Ross, which we are implicitly asked to accept as truth.

Many of the authentic racial traits expressed in past volumes still manifest themselves here, only now they take on the visage of “racial mystification.”⁴⁸⁸ The racial definitions “mutate, grow, transform...in complex ways” that seem somehow more spectral since their motivations are left to second-hand accounts.⁴⁸⁹

The Panther is still the embodiment of black machismo. He is flanked in the opening issue by two busty female aides that Ross describes as “the king’s concomitants...kind of wives in training.”⁴⁹⁰ The limits of his control over them is immediately clear. They will do anything to please him. Their devotion would make Malcolm X proud. They pleasure him. They fight for him. All of the sexist imagery extolled in black power literature is brought to bear in their exquisite bodies and utterly submissive nature. Although Ross acknowledges that T’Challa’s civilized nature prevents him from fully investing himself in the spoils of his entourage, a snarky comment implies his restraint is aberration not law: “The girls were six feet tall and not quite legal age...Bill Clinton. Bill...?”⁴⁹¹

This first issue gives us a glimpse into the oft-mined territory of T’Challa’s questionable commitment to his native people. Ross calls into question his leadership skills declaring him “an idealist...a noble guy...in other words, he wasn’t much of a

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid, 60.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid, 60.

⁴⁹⁰ Priest, *The Client*, 9.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid, p 8 – 9.

politician.”⁴⁹² The Wakandan government was presently attempting to marry two warring factions of natives into a harmonious relationship. Skirmishes were becoming more pronounced. The plan was not working and it was all a super-powered dictator could do to try and maintain some semblance of peace. Even T’Challa’s stepmother chides him upon his departure for America stating that her advice however well received by him is “not enough to keep you here” in his people’s time of need.⁴⁹³

The second issue exposes another level to this flaw in the blackness of T’Challa’s character. It is what Dyson would call “White Man’s Negro” syndrome.⁴⁹⁴ T’Challa enjoys luxuries that separate him inexorably not only from his fellow tribesmen but his race in general. By buying into the excesses offered by upper-crest white society, he has spurned his racial heritage. He goes out of his way to make whites feel comfortable. He insists on riding in the car Ross has brought to the airport even though he brought along three passengers and the car only seats two because it “would be an insult not to accept your kindness.”⁴⁹⁵ He also takes advantage of his diplomatic status bending the law to his will in ways only blacks who have come to be accepted into the highest echelons of white culture could ever dream. When the Panther and his friends are arrested for their involvement in a fight at a local bar, Ross calmly explains “I diplomatic immunity the assistant district attorney. Got us sprung.”⁴⁹⁶ As Dyson said of O.J., the version of T’Challa that Priest presents could easily be read by black audiences as someone who has made it “painfully clear that black fold are his fallback, not his first choice.”⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹² Ibid, 17.

⁴⁹³ Ibid, 18.

⁴⁹⁴ Dyson, *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader*, 51.

⁴⁹⁵ Christopher Priest, *The Client*, 12.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid, 20.

⁴⁹⁷ Dyson, *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader*, 52.

Issue #3 returns to the trope of the untrustworthy black man. The comic subtly reinforces the perception that when given power and autonomy blacks cannot be trusted. While his father was still in power, the late King of Wakanda had set up a series of operatives to dispense primitive justice on his behalf. The group known as the Dogs of War were relieved of duty by T'Challa when he took office. Ross notes that "the way [T'Challa] explained it to me, the closest analogy would be Wakandan Secret Police. Of course, Wakanda has no secret police. Well, so far as OCP knows anyway. Though I guess, they could be secret."⁴⁹⁸ Would the word of Captain America or Iron Man or Thor be rebuked so quickly? This is a man who served for years as a faithful member of the Avengers while sacrificing his service to the people of Wakanda. Yet, when he assures his American friends that the guerrilla mercenaries that have attacked him are no longer a part of Wakandan national policy, his credibility hangs precariously aloft.

The leader of this faction is a man named Hunter. He confronts T'Challa pledging his assistance in the business that has brought him to New York in exchange for reinstatement as Wakandan nationals. He begs him "let me come home."⁴⁹⁹ Here are poised two polarized views of black heritage. Hunter has been cast out by T'Challa for engaging in actions he found barbaric. He longs to reconnect with his people, to breathe the air of his native land. T'Challa banishes himself from Wakanda on a fairly frequent basis. The Fantastic Four or the Avengers need do little more than supply him a message that he is needed in America for him to run to their aide. Hunter is in fact, what T'Challa might have looked like by the 1990s had Lee and Kirby been more careful with the manner in which they developed his mythology. He is the strong, proud black vision of

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid, p 3.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid, 7.

autonomy that Wakandans have begged T'Challa to be. While likely not an intentional commentary by Priest, this exposes how deeply wounded the character has been by his murky interseccionalidad.

Black Panther in the New Millennium

When the Panther reappears in the New Millennium, his sales are artificially boosted. Stripped of his position as a stand-alone comic book hero, he is relegated to guest appearances and one-offs in larger arching storylines. In short, he has come full circle from his days as an ally to the Fantastic Four. The first major resurfacing of the character occurs as an aside to the Civil War storyline. Marvel was in need of a new gimmick, something to ignite interest in their brand after several of their prime properties had tanked at the box-office. Their solution was to have the American government pass a law stating that all superheroes had to reveal their identities to federal agencies. They were to act as arms of the government, officially contracted as law enforcement representatives. Understandably, some heroes were unwilling to reveal their personal data. Under the dictates of the law, they were now fugitives from justice. Lines were drawn quickly. Many top heroes chose to be ousted by the law, others steadfastly refused. The stage was set for an epic battle that would take one full year to finish.

T'Challa had little interest in the battle itself. He had never hidden his true identity from anyone. The panther suit was symbolic not functional. It was public knowledge that he was King of the Wakandan jungles. He was also not a legal U.S. resident at the time of the bill passing into law. Therefore, he was not compelled to enter into the conflict. 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.

As the invitations were sent out, the stage was set for another classic example of the conflicting racial identities demanding attention in Black Panther comics. Storm, whose real name was Ororo Munroe, was the daughter of an African priestess and the white American G.I. she fell in love with. Although by any account she would be considered black by most comic fans, she possessed several mulato characteristics inherited from her father. The Marvel Online Encyclopedia highlights her “white hair [and] blue eyes” as distinctive physical features.⁵⁰⁰ The Panther’s marriage therefore challenges white reader’s impressions of miscegenation, which has remained a hot button topic especially in Southern states.

Miscegenation is one of the oldest and most controversial tropes of all black/white fiction. Some of the earliest examples of this issue can be found in Hollywood’s early output. Passages in the Production Code forbade any attempts at miscegenation. The problem was the language used in the code was so sweeping that one hardly had to show scenes of interracial sex to draw the ire of the board. Mulatto actors suffered the most for the code interpreted their very presence on screen as an intimation of sexual perversion. As author Linda Williams explains “such characters automatically opened up the vexed question of with whom this...person should mate” and just how was he or she produced in the first place.⁵⁰¹ These definitional problems became so wide spread that even showing mixed race dancing and singing was impermissible. Bill “Bojangles” Robinson,

⁵⁰⁰ Marvel Online Encyclopedia, Storm, accessed on August 20, 2010, <http://marvel.com/universe/Storm>.

⁵⁰¹ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 181.

widely believed to be among the most talented dancers in the world was relegated to servant roles as a result. One of the few times many white audiences likely ever saw him perform was in a few choreographed routines with Shirley Temple. Benshoff and Griffin point out that this sort of partnering was “‘safe’ . . . [since it] did not suggest a romantic relationship between the two.”⁵⁰²

A closer examination of the Hays Code policies in action provides a much more devastating critique of the racist ideology at work. The 1936 film *Showboat* for example, depicted a mulatto woman named Julie that is unmistakably identified as the product of a black/white sexual union. Yet, the Production Code allowed this film into theaters with no alteration to the sexual themes. What made *Show Boat* any different than the numerous other movies being shot down for their miscegenation themes?

Linda Williams observes that the distinction is fiction and reality. She argues that *Show Boat* made it through the censor boards unscathed because the actress playing the mulatto character was in fact white. Thus, audiences would not be led to believe that any actual transgression had occurred. The passing of judgments like this by film censors sends the clear message that “performing as black” is acceptable while being black is not.⁵⁰³

While conditions had certainly improved by the time the Civil War storyline was being unfolded, the issue still weighed heavy on the minds of many Americans. A year after the Panther made his comic book debut, “sixteen states still prohibited interracial

⁵⁰² Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies* (Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 81.

⁵⁰³ Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson*, 182.

marriage.”⁵⁰⁴ In Southern states like Alabama and South Carolina “moribund antimiscegenation laws” were not removed “until 1998 and 2000.”⁵⁰⁵ Even with these laws off the books “the United States has the lowest black-white intermarriage rate among Western nations.”⁵⁰⁶

The wedding is covered by BET. Every memorable superhero of the past 50 years (at least in the Marvel cannon) shows up as honored guests. The BET hosts claim that it is the “wedding of the century” due to the couple’s extraordinary levels of wealth, their status as superheroes (who often do not wed one another), and their amazing list of friends that includes “Reed Richards, Tony Stark, Prince Namor, and Captain America” (all white).⁵⁰⁷

What is suspiciously not mentioned is that this marks the first time two black characters of such overwhelming power have ever married one another. Both Storm and T’Challa are literally seen as god figures to their respective African nations.⁵⁰⁸ Yet, it seems that the entirety of BET’s interest in the affair is connected to the couple’s position with white superheroes. They have shown up not to document a historic moment in comic book history but in the hopes that the reception will turn into a bar room brawl worthy of the ten o’clock news.

T’Challa appears to sense the potential for mutiny from his people. He is aware that Ororo may not be fit to act as the wife to the physical manifestation of the Panther God. He may not be using the exact words, but his point is clear, there is a chance that in

⁵⁰⁴ Suzanne W. Jones, *Race Mixing: Southern Fiction Since the Sixties* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 148.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵⁰⁷ Hudlin, “Civil War Ceasefire,” *The Black Panther* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2006), 1.

⁵⁰⁸ Although born in Harlem, Storm grew up in Egypt.

spite of their love for one another, Ororo may not be black enough for him. He warns her before the ceremony begins that she will have to face the judgment of the Panther God himself. She stammers “are you telling me that we could not get married... if the Panther God looks unfavorably on me?”⁵⁰⁹ His answer is yes.

As the couple lies splayed on their bed opening gifts, they come across a letter written to them from Dr. Doom. He is one of the oldest of Marvel’s villains and one of the most dangerous. He presents them with the following argument:

“I am here to give you my hearty congratulations and some humble advice. Today everything changes for you...and for Wakanda. Your blessed union represents and unprecedented step whose currents will be felt by the world community. Traditional geopolitical alliances are shifting radically. Old friendships are crumbling. The world is rapidly becoming a much more...unpredictable place to live. I am here to salute your union and urge that you consider one simple question as you look to the future: If friends aren’t who they used to be...perhaps enemies aren’t either.”⁵¹⁰

The implication is clear. This union could turn those honored white guests against the Panther. He might soon find himself again fighting against the Fantastic Four, only not under his own terms. He confronts Tony Stark and Captain America just before the wedding ceremony is set to begin and warns both of them that this union will mean, “this cancer that is eating away at the soul of your country...has no home here.”⁵¹¹ What he may not have realized is that he no longer has a home in America either.

The Black Panther comics of the New Millennium also manage to be soothing to white audiences. In the wake of continued discussion of affirmative action, the Panther

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid, 6.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid, 39.

⁵¹¹ Ibid, 17.

stands in stark contrast to the ideology that fuels black outrage over the issue. As author John McWhorter notes affirmative action has for many whites created a “cult of victimology” among black students.⁵¹² They are troubled by the implication that black students apparently as a product of their racial heritage rather than their zip code are automatically deemed disadvantaged if they grew up in “anything short of... a mansion.”⁵¹³ They silently detest the “cultural meme” that surrounds differentiated standards of admittance championed by the affirmative action system⁵¹⁴. And they find the “anti-intellectual strain” that floats through most discussion of affirmative action planning disconcerting.⁵¹⁵

T’Challa makes no such concessions. He asks for no such assistance. And it’s not just him. The entire nation of Wakanda is propped up in almost every iteration of the comic as being totally self-sufficient. In Reginald Hudlin’s min-series “Who is the Black Panther” we are treated to a number of historical examples of the Panther’s independence. A flashback to a 19th Century invasion by British noblemen finds the Wakandan’s striking back with technological force. A large mechanized weapon rises from behind the Panther as he stands alone ready to defend his homeland against a throng of invaders. He informs them that if they “leave now...I will let you live.”⁵¹⁶ As the noblemen fire their rifles, each one bursts into flames in their hands.

A meeting at the White House is held to discuss formulating diplomatic relations with the Wakandans. Everett Ross returns from Christopher Priest’s work. Besides their vibranium reserves Ross confirms, “geologists estimate that they have large oil deposits

⁵¹² John McWhorter, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (New York: Perennial, 2000), 166.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁵¹⁶ Reginald Hudlin, *Who is the Black Panther* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2005), 15.

[but] they don't even pump it."⁵¹⁷ They have developed methods of handling every conceivable resource required for day to day living without the need for export or trade relationships of any kind. Even Captain America is revealed to have failed in his attempts to infiltrate Wakandan territory during World War II when he tracked Nazi spies there. As Ross recounts, "he had an extended hand-to-hand battle with the Black Panther...he lost."⁵¹⁸ In answer to the question posed by the military adviser in attendance, "where do those jungle bunnies get off telling us they've got a 'no fly' zone over their thatched huts?"⁵¹⁹ The answer appears to be because they want and expect nothing from anyone but themselves.

We see this self-sufficiency on display once again in two issues of the Black Panther's run with writer Jason Aaron. The Panther is brought in once more as a side story to a larger conflict. Marvel was having what they deemed a Secret Invasion wherein aliens called Skrulls had planted sleeper agents among humans many years ago and were now activating them as a means of taking over Earth. As issue one opens a Skrull ship is preparing to land in Wakanda. It is worth noting that all of these issues utilize the same strategy employed by Priest. The Panther is not the star here. We experience the tale from the perspective of the Skrull commanding officer. We hear his inner monologue not that of T'Challa.

The Skrull reveal that they have sent several sleeper agents to Wakanda, which will make taking over the country a simple matter. So simple that one Skrull asks his leader, "why did command see fit to assign so many of us here to the backwoods."⁵²⁰ He

⁵¹⁷ Ibid, 20.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid, p 21 – 22.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid, 18.

⁵²⁰ Jason Aaron, *Secret Invasion Issue #1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2008), 1.

replies, “you should’ve studied your mission report more thoroughly...throughout their entire history these Wakandans have never been conquered...they will not be enslaved without a bit of a fight.”⁵²¹ Apparently, the strength of the Wakandas is known in multiple galaxies.

After the Panther and his wife Storm have been captured by the Skrull, they are tortured for information. The Skrull leader tires of watching the savagery unfold and retires to the bridge of his ship. He sits down to write a letter to his wife. This was to be his last mission. He promised her as much. But as he struggles to find the words to put in his letter he shows his admiration for the Wakandan spirit. “How do I tell my wife the truth?,” he ponders, “These Wakandan will never give in, no matter what we do to them. We’ll have to take this land village by village street by bloody street.”⁵²² In a world where so much debate was had over how best to accommodate African Americans through affirmative action, Ebonics, and reparations, here was a powerful example of a black narrative that requested no such assistance. It is almost libertarian in its observation of individual accountability.

The Secret Invasion series sold well for Marvel. They tried extending the Black Panther series once more in 2009 following their success with this arc. Sales dropped precipitously though once it became clear that the Panther’s comic would no longer tie directly into the goings-on of the larger Marvel Universe. So why does the Panther fail? Why do readers turn away in droves from his adventures? They don’t lack for quality of writing. He has been drawn by one of the most iconic pens in the history of the business. Is it as simple as Priest suggests? Is the Panther dull?

⁵²¹ Ibid, 1.

⁵²² Jason Aaron, *Secret Invasion #3* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2008), 10.

No. The shackles holding the Panther down are much more profound than this. His adventures, no matter how breath taking, are stuck in a cycle of perpetual betrayal. He betrays black audiences who look to him as a role model by consistently deflecting racial concerns. He betrays white audiences by wallowing in guilt because he cannot bring himself to rise to the challenge of these issues of authenticity. But these dilemmas are not unique to the Panther. Any minority character would go through the same seasons of doubt and recrimination for they have been robbed of an opportunity to connect with audiences before the ink to their origin stories had even dried on the page. Their color stifled them. It prevented the reader from being able to paint themselves into costumes they wore. For all the technological sophistication of the Wakandas, they lacked the one weapon every comic that aspires to serious discussions of race requires; a tabularasa.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: UNTIL NEXT TIME...

On January 14, 2009 issue # 583 of *Amazing Spiderman* made headline news. Marvel had put President Barak Obama on the cover next to the web-slinging hero. Apparently, the President was long-time Spiderman fan. Obama revealed his love of comics in an interview with Entertainment Weekly: “I was always into the Spider-Man/Batman model. The guys who have too many powers--like Superman -- that always made me think they weren't really earning their superhero status.”⁵²³

One of Spiderman’s oldest villains, The Chameleon, disguises himself as the president elect on inauguration day and attempts to sneak onto the podium to be sworn in. Spiderman arrives just in time to block his route to the stage and prevent him from ruining the festivities. Before Spiderman can leave, Obama pulls him to the side and explains “I’ve been a big fan of yours for a long time and before you go I just want to say thanks partner.”⁵²⁴

Undoubtedly this goes a long way towards establishing that minorities read comic books. But other scholars would say it means much more. Many researchers would claim it represents one of the few substantial and positive portrayals of a black character in comics. Given the less-than-egalitarian viewpoint many commentators attribute to the comic book, some questioned the value of including Obama in the issue at all. A reporter for Hot Air a right wing blog affiliated with Town Hall Magazine, dredged up the ugly history of comic’s minority portrayals following the release of the issue: “This from an outfit whose top writers are known for penning alternate realities where Superman is a

⁵²³ Robert K. Elder, “Spidey Swings into Obama’s World,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 8, 2009.

⁵²⁴ Zeb Wells, *Amazing Spiderman #583* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2009).

communist, and which preferred to have Captain America fight the Patriot Act instead of Al Qaeda before summarily offing him.”⁵²⁵

This antagonistic viewpoint on the history of racial representation in comics speaks to a fundamental misunderstanding of the complicated role racial identity has played in the superhero mythology. Each chapter of this dissertation has highlighted a specific struggle encountered in the area of identity formation and maintenance by one of the most iconic superheroes of the past sixty years. These chapters work together to confirm my third hypothesis.

Superman acts out the immigrant assimilation fantasy in the pages of *Action Comics*. Although he is clearly an alien from a far-flung galaxy, he finds comfort and stability in living as a white American. He allows the values of his adoptive Smallville parents to overshadow the lessons left for him by his Kryptonian father Jor-El. Experts in the comic industry tell us that Superman was intended to be a personification of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. In that capacity, he takes on many of the values they ascribed to the comic from their Jewish upbringing. He becomes an ideal immigrant, a model to be followed by young second or third generation Jews looking for ways to fit into mainstream society. He is the Other who wants desperately to be white.

Bruce Wayne is compelled to search for an outlet for his frustrations following the death of his parents. He finds that outlet by assuming a second identity – a black identity. He chooses Otherness as an escape from his pain. Examinations of Bob Kane’s formative years show a strong racial component threading through his work. Hiram Hick, Zorro, and the 1926 horror film *The Bat*, all contributed an essential element into the

⁵²⁵ Allahpundit, “Good News: Spider-Man teaming up with Obama,” accessed on September 11, 2010, Hotair.com,

melting pot of ideas that formed the Batman persona. Crucial to this argument is the realization that Batman and Bruce Wayne are entirely separate people. They have separate (though related) memories. They carry on separate love lives. They use a different set of ethical codes to rationalize their actions. Throughout the series Bruce Wayne remains the foppish billionaire, but Batman becomes the comic book expression of the Black experience in America.

T'Challa is in the most difficult position representing Others who are content in their Otherness. He is the comic book version of the crusading efforts of black activists in the 1960s and 70s. Like those activists, his efforts are well-intentioned but often blockaded. Of these three characters, T'Challa is the hardest one to label with a distinct personality. Even his own writers have called him bland and boring. This monotonous behavior is not T'Challa's fault, however. It is the result of writers who have never been completely comfortable handling an openly Black character.

Let us compare T'Challa to Batman. Both men act as representations of black characters. Both men appear dark and brooding, isolated even from those whom they are closest to in their respective comic worlds. Yet, Batman is one of the most successful comic book characters of all time and The Black Panther is an also-ran whose comic was so mediocre that when it was last cancelled most fans didn't even recognize it had disappeared from their store shelves. So what's the difference between the two? Batman's latent racial identity gives the writers enough freedom to constantly alter his mythology so that it will appeal to new generations of fans. He is allowed to grow with his audience. T'Challa has been stuck as a snapshot of a bygone era for thirty years

because White writers are afraid of offending audiences with drastically different interpretations of the character.

Given the startlingly complex nature of these depictions it seems clear that my first hypothesis is also supported. There is clearly a more nuanced conversation happening in the world of comics on issues of race than the industry has gotten credit for. Perhaps the industry is to blame for this. By indirectly approaching the question of race, no matter how ingeniously, they may have prevented those not especially literate in the comics' vernacular from recognizing the presence of these debates.

The final hypothesis is much more difficult to assess. There have been instances where comic book publishers have shown themselves capable of altering racial texts from issue to issue. Returning to the Batman chapter, DC Comics removed handguns from his arsenal of weapons within the space of a single issue. This appears to be the aberration not the rule, however. While other character traits certainly evolve over the course of the comic's lifespan, these changes seem to be much more organic in nature. With the exception of one off issues like Lois Lane encountering black nationalists in the ghettos of Metropolis or wartime propagandizing like Superman throwing a right cross to Hitler's jaw, the comics industry has been much more tentative with their handling of race.

Still, they deserve some credit for outpacing the film and television industries. Batman was alluding to a much more three-dimensional version of Blackness while African American actors in Hollywood were still being relegated to servile roles. Television screens had been under a decade's long drought for Black actors when the Black Panther made his comic debut. Although far from a perfect conception of racial identity, he stood out against the lily-white background of competing representations.

These insights lead to a partial confirmation of the second hypothesis. Comics did beat film and television to the punch with the complexity of their characters, but this initial sprint almost always turned into lumbering, plodding steps so quickly that it forestalled decades of potential progress.

Significance of Research

The first wave of superheroes in comic books pre-dates the first appearance of Bugs Bunny by five years. They have an almost thirty year head start on the gang from Sesame Street. And they are nearly as old as the mouse that built Walt Disney's empire. Characters like Superman have been thrilling generations of children for over sixty years, yet very little research has been done to understand the messages these texts have had on their readers. Comics represent one of the first mass media experiences that many children will encounter.

There are several studies that have shown primary schools around the country are beginning to introduce comics as a method of promoting reading in children at an early age.⁵²⁶ Yet, too few researchers are asking what sorts of lessons are being taught about the social issues covered in these texts. Comic books may very well be one of the first sources outside of family and friends that they turn to for information on how to react to difference and Otherness in their daily lives. For some children, this may represent one of the few opportunities they have to engage with Otherness in their private lives. Continued

⁵²⁶ For more information on this topic I encourage readers to start with these texts: Rachel Marie-Crane Williams, *Image, Text, and Story: Comics and Graphic Novels in the Classroom*, *Art Education*, 61:6, 2008. Katherine G. Aiken, *Superhero History: Using Comic Books to Teach U.S. History*, *OAH Magazine of History*, 24:2, 2010, Linda Smetana, Darah Odelson, Heidi Burns, Dana L. Grisham, *Using Graphic Novels in the High School Classroom: Engaging Deaf Students With a New Genre*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 53:3, 2009, Allen Ellis, *About Face: Comic Books in Library Literature*, *Serials Review*, 26:2, 2000., David Seelow, *Voice from the Field: The Graphic Novel as Advanced Literacy Tool*, *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 2:1, 2010., Wilona M. Sloan, *No Laughing Matter: Comic Books Have Serious Educational Value*, *Education Update*, 51:10, 2009.

research and analysis in this area should be of interest to anyone who studies the effects of mass media on children.

This dissertation also raises several interesting questions for publishers, creators, writers, and artists of comics. From our discussion of the three characters featured in this study, a pattern is clearly emerging. Race is best integrated into comics when it represents one of several traits that define the values and personality of that character. When race becomes the defining feature of a character, such as was the case with the Black Panther, audiences quickly turn away from the thin storylines and narrowly defined characters.

This is not a call for an end to Black, Hispanic, Asian or Native American superheroes in the pages of comics. It is a wake up call for artists and writers who have relied for too long on lazy interpretations and rehashing of stereotypes when developing openly minority characters. The only way for an openly Black superhero to become as iconic as a Superman or Spider-Man is for creators to stop fixating on the fact that the character is Black. His skin must become a coincidence not a costume.

Limitations

Like all studies, this one is not without its limitations. The strongest of these is related to the methodology. Although examining each superhero in depth provides a new level of insight into the marketing and consumption of comics, there is simply not enough time to review each classic hero or villain that might be of interest to this thread of research. Certainly, there are countless superheroes that exhibit one of the racial identities discussed in this text. I have tried to choose those heroes that most deeply personify these personas. I leave it to others to combat, debate and expound on these foundations.

Suggestions for Future Research

This dissertation is the first step in a long journey. One that needs to be taken by every scholar who claims a serious interest in comics as critical literature. There are thousands of comic book characters who have never been viewed under the microscope of racial identity. Many of the names that are most synonymous with the medium don't have a single word written about their stance on matters of race and ethnicity in any scholarly journal. This hole has to be filled. It is too vital an issue to be left alone or ignored any longer.

Many researchers in the area of feminist studies have done some fantastic work on issues of gender in comics.⁵²⁷ That same level of energy and commitment must now be refocused onto the topic of race and ethnicity. Emerging theoretical principles like Critical Race Theory must be adopted as part of a larger arsenal of academic approaches to understanding and interpreting the myriad of representations of race and ethnicity bound up in trade paperbacks and graphic novels.

This dissertation has presented a model, a map to guide future research efforts in this area. But if more interest in this topic can not be generated then we run the risk of seeing one of the most important topics in the medium go un-mined. The old African American beggar is no longer staring up at the Green Lantern challenging his morality. He is staring at the field of academia and continuing to ask "There are skins you never

⁵²⁷ For more information on this topic I encourage readers to begin here: Mitra C. Emad, Reading Wonder Woman's Body: Mythologies of Gender and Nation, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 39:6, 2006., Fusami Ogi, Beyond *Shoujo*, Blending Gender, A Comic's Studies Reader, Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester [eds.], University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, MS, 2009., Carol A. Stable, "Sweetheart, This Ain't Gender Studies": Sexism and Superheroes, *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies*, 6:1, 2009.

bothered with...! The black skins! I want to know how come?!⁵²⁸ The real question now is, who among us will answer him?

⁵²⁸ Denny O'Neil and Neil Adams, "No Evil Shall Escape My Sight", in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* (New York: DC Comics, April 1970), 4.

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