Truth, Justice and the African-American Way

Kamal W. Fox

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Communication Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 2006

Canada

ABSTRACT

Truth, Justice and the African-American Way

Kamal W. Fox

This study is a close analysis of the historicity and affectivity of selected African-American comic book superheroes. These superheroes, with names like 'Black Lightning' and 'Black Panther', indicate the status of these black characters in mainstream comics; they are forever labeled as 'black' supermen. Making their debut in the 70s, most of these characters shared the traits of Blaxploitation film heroes (angry rebels, hypersexual vigilantes, etc.). Although these early representations were highly stereotypical, this thesis is not interested in finding the 'authentic' black superhero. Rather, it seeks to understand representations of 'blackness' in the superhero genre beyond notions of reflection theory. What this thesis seeks is a more sophisticated way of looking at black superheroes by using reading formation to examine how fictional stories articulated with a "sense of the past". Combining theories of representation and textuality, this thesis examines the black superman as a configuration of many different historical influences that dynamically produce a reading formation that allows the black superman to operate as what some theorists call counter-memory

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

What's Wrong with This Picture?

A striking document for the study of black superheroes is an ad from the 1970s produced by the Black Owned Communications Alliance (BOCA). The ad consists of a photo depicting a young black boy with a towel tied around his neck, his chest puffed out and his hands posted on his hips. This familiar posture, found on the pages of countless comic books, marks the boy's stance as he stares at himself the bathroom mirror. However, the reflection in the mirror is not his own; staring back at him is the face of a generic white costumed hero. The text beneath this picture reads: "What's wrong with this picture?" This advertisement answers its own question, stating "A child dreams of being the latest superhero [...]" but much is wrong with the scenario "if the child is black and can't even imagine a hero the same color as he or she is" (quoted in Brown 2001, 3). While many are quick to dismiss comic book superhero stories as frivolous or puerile, this ad gravely assigns a formative or developmental function to superhero narratives.

Indeed, part of the gravity surrounding comic book reading is this formative function—i.e., childhood 'formation' through role-play and the consumption of comics as juvenile literature.[1] One useful way to explain comic books' formative role is in terms of a theory of identification. "Identification," Stuart Hall writes, is "a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and

---

[1] There are many studies on the role of superhero play in child development (see Brown 1997; Weston 1999; Parsons 2003). Particularly of interest is Jesse Walker's dissertation *The Impact of Superheroes on Self-Esteem* (2003), which specifically connects superheroes to the development of self-esteem in children of color in inner city schools in America.

allegiance established on this foundation" (Hall 1996b, 16). Reading the adventures of comic book superheroes foments identification in the form of hero worship; this, in turn, serves young boys as a masculine ideal suitable for their impressionable minds to model. In this sense, it is directly related to identity formation. Presumably, young boys read superhero stories and model their own behaviors on these archetypes.[2] The complaint of the BOCA ad suggests that heroes should be an appropriate source of identification, i.e., mirroring the 'reality' of the black reader, presumably including representations of race in accordance with some sort of lived experience.

According to O'Sullivan et al., this kind of reflection theory media critique asserts "that media representations and discourses reflect an already-existing and self-evident reality that exists independently of its representations and discourses including those of the media" (O'Sullivan 1994, 262). In the case of the BOCA ad, it claims that the absence of black faces in the media is merely a reflection of a social reality. Therefore, it would seem that the way to remedy this situation is simply to put more black faces in the media, or in this case create more black superheroes. This in turn will presumably aid in young black children a sense of significance in American society.

---

[2] See Gerard Jones's *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence* (2002) and Norma Pecora's "Superman/Superboys/Supermen" (1992).

What's wrong with this picture?

Fig. 1.1: Black Owned Communication Alliance Advertisement (early 1970s).

Identification is vital to the efficacy of the BOCA ad. When I look at it, I am affected by its message, interpolated by its rhetoric. I observe the 'false' identification as meaningful, but I also identify with the boy with the towel around his neck. I can easily see this ad as anamnesis, reminding me of my own childhood experience. The ad's criticism potently attacks my nostalgic desires. I cannot really ignore that I am feeling nostalgic for a falsehood (or at least false in the sense that every identification is just that—seeing yourself in something that you are not), when I look at the boy in the bath towel. Certainly, I did the same thing when I was a child, but now I am jarred by this stunning realization, and I want to replace the face in the mirror with a black face, one like mine. But whose face will it be? My father's? Richard Roundtree's? Michael Jordan's?

There are so many choices today. Perhaps this question couldn't be asked in the early 1970s when the BOCA ad was produced. The ad appeared on the heels of the sixties' civil rights movement—a social movement that found strength in group identity politics. As such, there was only one black man, and he was powerless and disenfranchised. However, as a power block, he and his brothers were able to effect change. Or at least this is how the civil rights movement is often remembered by popular black history.

Perhaps this inconsistency between the historical record and popular memory of black history is because the very concept of black history is so new, and therefore it seeks to reconstruct an absent tradition. In many ways, it this absent tradition, displaced by the rupture of colonialism and slavery, which has left the peoples of the African Diaspora with a desire and need to authenticate their

experiences.3 But what does this really mean? Painter believes that "After the end of legalized segregation, [...] the need to define what constituted authentic—as opposed to inauthentic—blackness related to the increasing visible diversity among people considering themselves African American" (Painter 2006, 321). She also figures that a preoccupation with authentic blackness marks the increasing difficulty of characterizing African Americans as a whole (Painter 2006, 343).

An important step in this direction is to re-examine origin stories. Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) is a good example history and fiction blended into a single document with the purpose of authenticating the African-American experience. Having grown up listening to stories of his ancestors from his grandmother, an ex-slave, Haley traced his family tree back to a figure know to him as "the African", later dubbed Kunta Kinte. After twelve years of research, Haley produced a colorful family history. Just before his death in 1992, Haley gave a talk in Washington, DC promoting his book *Queen*. The Washington Post reporter covering the event had this to say of Haley: "He connected with people, displaying wit, and charm, giving all of us a family anecdote that could become our own" (Trescott 1992). Despite charges of plagiarism (which may be inevitable for a story that attempts to speak for so many), *Roots* and the ABC TV miniseries based upon it (1977) have come to stand in for the histories of so many African Americans whose genealogies and points of origin are otherwise obscured by time and oppression; it has become their own, as Trescott notes, an 'authentic' history that they never had. The texts of *Roots*

---

3 By this I mean 'authenticate' in two senses: to verify and to legitimize.

are significant because they give African Americans a starting point upon which

to build other stories, traditions and 'histories'.[4]

From 'starting points' like Roots, it becomes possible to set memories and

ideas of the past in accordance with contemporary sensibilities and inscribe a

new history, i.e., a new origin, over the old one—a black face for a white one. As

Nell Irvin Painter observes in *Creating Black Americans*, "When you think about

how much happens—in individual lives, in the lives of peoples and nations—you

realize that in order to make sense of what is important from all the other trivial

things that happened in the past [a selection process must occur]. At any given

point, this selection takes place in the present" (Painter 2006, ix). This present-

day need for starting points characterizes some superhero storytelling today. For

example, *Truth: Red, White and Black* (2003) reveals the 'real' origins of Captain

America. It posits that Steve Rogers, the scrawny white blonde-haired, blue-eyed

American enlistee who gained superhuman strength by a super soldier serum

developed by the military to aid them in their war effort, is a fraud. Rogers was

not the first super soldier. Before the perfected serum was used on a white

soldier, it was first tested on a group of black army enlistees, only one of whom

developed superhuman strength. This story is a grim allusion to the Tuskegee

experiments[5], as well as taking the well-worn comic book trope of the 'secret

---

[4] All this despite charges of plagiarism launched against Haley claiming that large parts of *Roots* were copied.

[5] For forty years between 1932 and 1972, the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) conducted an experiment on 399 black men in the late stages of syphilis. These men, for the most part illiterate sharecroppers from one of the poorest counties in Alabama, were never told what disease they were suffering from or of its seriousness. Informed that they were being treated for "bad blood," their doctors had no intention of curing them of syphilis at all. The data for the experiment was to be collected from autopsies of the men, and they were thus deliberately left to degenerate under the ravages of tertiary syphilis—which can include tumors, heart disease, paralysis, blindness,

origins' story of superhero narratives and reworking it. Likewise, in *DC: The New Frontier* (2004), a nostalgic reading of the Silver Age (a period of rebirth for superhero comic books) is both encouraged and undermined at the same time. Its aesthetics are firmly planted in the era of yesteryear, specifically the late fifties. However, its politics expose the bleaker realities of a decade often upheld as a time of great American achievement. In particular, one subplot details the life of a masked vigilante, called John Henry (the name is hardly insignificant), who fights the Ku Klux Klan—and loses. His story is supposedly another tale that the traditional superhero history has overlooked or ignored. In these sorts of ways, particularly in regard to black superheroes, the tradition of storytelling established between the 1940s and the 1980s is being overwritten by a new tradition.

This talk about tradition is really a discussion about texts, their uses and the consumption of them. This thesis asserts that texts are not reflections of social reality but rather they are encapsulations of various influences: social, economic, political, etc. This being the case, comic book text examined in this thesis does not exult an authentic black superhero—the proper object of veneration that the BOCA ad seeks—instead, it characterizes the struggle to understand 'blackness' as a concept that has been encapsulated in so many texts of American popular culture. In this sense, all the discussions and arguments about authenticity are really debates about an X-factor, an unknown value or perhaps, as I would argue, a polysemy. It is my view that notions of authenticity can only go so far, and a

---

insanity, and death. For more on this see: Jones, James H. 1981. *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment*. New York, NY: Free Press.

media theory of reflection is hampered by the idea that there is an isomorphic relationship between texts and readers. This thesis focuses on the intermediary steps (inter-texts and textual activations) that form the relationship between texts and readers. So in short, this thesis is not solely an argument about how black superheroes are represented in mainstream comic books; it is more about how those representations came to be in the first place and how these are significant to the creation of a retroactive tradition of comic book history and storytelling in contemporary comic book texts.

When I talk about this retroactive 'tradition', I am invoking a number of influences. Stuart Hall, in his deconstruction of popular culture, has observed that "tradition is a vital element in culture; but it has little to do with the mere persistence of old forms. It has much more to do with the way elements have been linked together and articulated" (Hall 1981, 236). Hall's assertion, that "the elements of 'tradition' [can] be rearranged, so that they articulate with different practices and positions, taking on new meaning and relevance" (Hall 1981, 236), is reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's argument in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1932); however, Hall adds this distinction: "It is often the case that cultural struggle arises in its sharpest form just at the point where different, opposed traditions meet, intersect" (Hall 1981, 236).

Likewise, Raymond Williams's analysis of cultural activity, found in *Marxism and Literature*, proposes the categories 'dominant,' 'residual' and 'emergent',

which seem appropriate in charting the nuances of this context.[6] As a part of his further refinement of his concept "structure of feeling", Williams combats the idea that cultural processes spontaneously appear, reach their peak and then fade away, by suggesting that the facets of active culture, that is, the residual (an element "formed in the past, but [...] still active in the cultural process [...] as an effective element of the present") and the emergent ("new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships" (Williams 1977, 122-23) have degrees of variability. Therefore, they may be partially evident in "dominant culture" but are not fully articulated within it. According to Williams, cultural processes rely upon the interplay, recycling and borrowing of past cultural processes.

It is important to stress that I link these thinkers together because of their common interest in rethinking the way in which people engage with texts as informed by some notion of 'pastness' and its relation to contemporary culture. The Marxist critiques of Hall and Williams, Eliot's conservative critique and Lionel Trilling liberal one are all dissimilar in many ways; my two goals in gathering them here is to illustrate the multiple approaches to a similar problem in the study of culture and how this applies to studying comic books. For example, Richard Reynolds, in his assertion that comic books are modern mythology, employs Eliot's notions of canon formation to describe comic book continuity:

> [w]hat happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the

---

[6] For Williams, the dominant, residual and emergent are part of his 'cultural process' thesis, a method for understanding hegemony, but these categories are certainly not limited to this function alone.

introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered [...] (cited in Reynolds 1992, 43).

For Reynolds, Eliot's 'tradition' explains the structure of a system of myth. Trilling, on the other hand, interprets 'tradition' to be a practice of readership. He uses Eliot's descriptions to underscore his argument that "literature is historical in the sense that it is necessarily aware of its own past." From this standpoint, readers of literature come to understand not only a canon of works but a tradition of interpretation as well. As Trilling puts it: "In the existence of every work of literature of the past, its historicity, its *pastness* is a factor of great importance." This "sense of the past," as he calls it, changes our readings of present works as well as their antecedents; it is not just a hierarchical re-arrangement of the canon. Trilling further explains his reading of Eliot's work, emphasizing the significance of how works are read, rather than their relative import within a certain tradition: "Each new age makes the pattern over again, forgetting what was once dominant, finding new affinities; we read any work within a kaleidoscope of historical elements" (Trilling 1950, 179).

These thinkers, while quite divergent in the particulars—Hall, Williams, Eliot and Trilling—all concur, in their own way, with one point: there are no authentic and absolute traditions, no sacrosanct canons, no classics—or rather classics and canons become a part of historically variable forces. There is only an articulated series of discourses, and that is what we might call 'tradition'. Within this "kaleidoscope of historical elements", being able to create a tradition is a very

advantageous position indeed. I agree with Reynolds that comic books are just such a tradition, and that they perform important cultural work.

This important cultural work is the same work performed by *Roots* and other texts that generate invented traditions. While the history of comic books has been extensively documented and studied, the idea of comic book narrative as history has been examined much less so, especially when considering its contribution to invented tradition.[7] Contemporary comic books have taken a keen interest in the relationship between comic book story and history. My conjecture here is that superheroes, operating within the mythic story structures and traditions of comics, help readers engage with history via popular conceptions of the past. In the case of black superheroes the situation is more acute because we are not dealing with an established tradition or idea of the past, but rather an absent tradition. Therefore, contemporary comic book stories that deal with the origins and histories of black supermen are composed from small remnants—like Haley's *Roots*—from 1970s comic books. The 'building blocks' found in this comics aren't exactly flattering, but they can be recast.

For instance, superheroes with names like 'Black Lightning' and 'Black Panther' demonstrate the status given to black characters in mainstream comics in the 70s; they were labeled as bringing 'blackness' upon any super-heroic quality they possess. Although these early representations were highly stereotypical, this thesis is not interested in finding the 'authentic' black

---

[7] For more specific analysis of comic books as history, see: Geis, Deborah R. 2003. *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust.* Tuscaloosa, AB & London: University of Alabama Press. As well, see: Witek, Joseph. 1989. *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar.* Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

superhero—as the BOCA ad would have it—authenticity is only discussed here as a discursive element—something that people talk about and perform. Instead, this thesis seeks to understand the ways blackness plays out within the superhero genre as a function of this "sense of the past" that Trilling observes. I plan to accomplish this by examining three series of contemporary comic book stories that articulate the idea of 'pastness' with black masculinity and the conventions of the superhero genre. Combining the theories of Stuart Hall (articulation) and Raymond Williams (structure of feeling) with theories of representation and textuality, I will briefly chronicle the first appearances of certain black superheroes in mainstream American comic books so that I can properly demonstrate how some contemporary comic book stories use a retrospective gaze calling upon these 'origin stories' as primary resources for their storytelling. These retrospective, 'historiographic' tales place the black superhero in the maelstrom of 'historical' (re: continuity) revision in comic book storytelling; these rewritings rely in part on readers' memories of comic books and popular history to produce their narrative efficacy. Finally, from this vantage point, I will speculate about the black superman as a configuration of what certain theorists call "counter-memory" (Lipsitz 1990; Spigel 1995) and the potential pleasures and/or allayed anxieties readers may glean from this type of diachronic reading, particularly as they encounter the conflicting masculinities associated not only with superheroes in general (e.g., Clark Kent/Superman dichotomy), but black superheroes specifically (the search for the 'authentic' black [super]man).

There is indeed a great deal at stake with stories about black superheroes: identification, tradition, and a sense of history through popular culture. The little

black kid with the bath towel around his neck represents a site of tensions surrounding critiques and investigations into popular forms of history and memory. But whose history are we talking about? As we know, the authors of histories are often those in power who wish to perpetuate their own interpretations of the past. For example, George Lipsitz cites documents produced during the Reagan era blaming poorly written textbooks and unprofessional teachers for the lack of historical knowledge among American students from kindergarten to college. Lipsitz is quick to observe that this seemingly noble gesture belies the pursuit of a very specific version of historical knowledge that complements a neo-conservative agenda by "compelling children to memorize and recite the proper phrases." Lipsitz also notes that neo-conservative critiques "ignore the suppressions of memory fostered by the public relations arms of totalitarian states [...], the dizzying pace of change engendered by technological change and social dislocation, and the 'crisis of representation' affecting not just history, but all of the humanities and social sciences" (Lipsitz 1990, 23).

But what does this high stakes politicking have to do with the kid in the bath towel? In addition to neo-con lamentations about the loss of history, Lipsitz also cites Lynne Cheney, Reagan's director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and describes how in 1987 Cheney proposed that students in the US needed textbooks resembling those of "the early decades of this century," which she characterized as "filled with stories—the magic of myths, fables, and other tales of heroes" (cited in Lipsitz 1990, 24). Cheney and her cadre, invoked "heroic stories told from one point of view that make the power hierarchies of the present

appear natural and inevitable." Lipsitz also quotes the public intellectual Allan Bloom who argues, "the contempt for the heroic is only an extension of the perversion of the democratic principle that denies greatness and wants everyone to feel comfortable in his skin without having to suffer any unpleasant comparisons" (also cited in Lipsitz 1990, 24).

The BOCA advert speaks to this issue about "contempt for the heroic". The conservative argument would have us believe that launching a critique of the heroic in the national imaginary is an attempt at creating a 'leveling' democracy, a society that seeks to have all its citizens living in mediocrity. The BOCA ad, on the other hand, quite explicitly values the notion of the heroic, yet it also argues that the real problem with the heroic in America is that there is only one version, one that is steeped in whiteness. Some conservatives take the rather hypocritical position that everyone can be a part of this singular American mythology. Cheney, for example, contends, "our history and literature give us symbols to share; they help us all, no matter how diverse our background, feel part of a common undertaking" (quoted in Lipsitz 1988, 25). While everyone is a part of this common undertaking called America, few actually have a say in directing its movement. Heroic literatures are part of the rhetoric that foments this undertaking, and this is why so much is at stake in them, whether they be *Beowulf* or *Superman*.

In this way, the mythic qualities of (super)heroes are both substantial and substantive. Heroes and heroic stories are also the portals into constitutive meta-narratives that form ideas of nation, community and identity. It is this realization, I suspect, that in part fuels the desire to replace the white hero's face

in the mirror with a black one. This is what is at stake: a place in the common

history, a voice in the conversation of American identity, and the right to look

upon oneself as a hero, regardless of race. It is my contention that counter-

memory provides potential strategy for achieving this goal.

In this thesis, I apply Lipsitz's use of counter-memory to Umberto Eco's

ruminations on "aspects of myth and aspects of history" in superhero comic

books in order to derive a working theory of counter-memory in those texts.

Lipsitz writes,

> Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from
> dominant narratives. But unlike myths that seek to detach events and actions
> from the fabric of any larger history, counter-memory forces revision of
> existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past. Counter-
> memory embodies aspects of myth and aspects of history, but it retains an
> enduring suspicion of both categories (Lipsitz 1990, 213).

Eco makes similar claims in "The Myth of Superman" (1972), where he asserts

that comic book superheroes, specifically Superman, operate outside of causal

narrative time within an "oneiric climate" that "embodies aspects of myth and

aspects of history" as Lipsitz puts it. The oneiric climate eliminates the

development of characters by maintaining the *status quo* of storytelling.[8] Thus,

Eco postulates that the character, Superman, exists somewhere between mythical

and novelistic narratives:

> Superman comes off as a myth only if the reader loses control of the temporal
> relationships and renounces the need to reason on their basis, thereby give
> himself up to the uncontrollable flux of the stories which are accessible to him
> and, at the same time, holding on to the illusion of a continuous present.
> Since the myth is not isolated exemplarily in a dimension of eternity, but, in
> order to be assimilated, must enter into the flux of the story in question, this

---

[8] "The stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate—of which the reader is not aware at all—where
what has happened before and what has happened after appear extremely hazy. The narrator
picks up the strand of the event again and again, as if he had forgotten to say something and
wanted to add details to what had already been said" (Eco 1979, 114).

same story is refuted as flux and seen instead as an immobile present (Eco 1979, 16).

It is within this "immobile present" that the ideological work of comic books occurs, Eco claims. "Superman is a product by which we consume virtue", Ian Gordon proposes, and "Eco's explanation of Superman's status remains convincing because it explains the popularity of different versions of Superman and it touches on the character's position as a consumer durable" (Gordon 2001, 180).

Since superhero comic books have an official 'history' of their own, what readers sometimes call 'continuity', it seems to me that any superhero narrative that disrupts this narrative 'history'—i.e., intruding on the oneiric climate by using 'historiographical' techniques to lend authenticity to fantastical stories—correspond with the type of counter-memory that Lipsitz describes. For this reason, a whole vocabulary of "counter-memory" exists among comic book readers: retcon, reboot, retread, etc. Incorporating some facets of myth (Eco 1978; Reynolds 1992) while also mining (in)famous moments of American history (the Second World War in Captain America comics and 9/11 as remembered in *Ex Machina*), some comic book superhero stories operate as counter-memories that present alternate versions not only the fantastic world of the comics, but our own quotidian world as well. This type of storytelling is not new *per se*; comic books have always folded real world stories with fantastical elements. One telling example of this collision of history and fiction is the obscure fictional clash between Superman and Muhammad Ali (a.k.a. the 'Black Superman') published by DC Comics in 1979. This story demonstrates comic

book flirtations with notions of history, placing a contemporary celebrity into an

entirely fictional world. The political charge of this tale ('Black Superman' vs.

'White Superman') indicates how this story operates as counter-memory. We all

know that Muhammad Ali never fought Superman in any of his recorded

matches, and comic book readers know that Ali is not in the roster of Superman's

usual opponents. Ali's conspicuous presence in the comics mirrors the presence

of the other black supermen who were appearing in comics of the seventies—not

only was it surprising to see them at all, but they also seemed in some ways at

odds with the white heroes.

Jive-talkin' Muhammad Ali and a very square Superman 'talking trash' before their legendary
fight in *Superman Vs. Muhammad Ali* (1979).

Muhammad Ali pummels Superman on a planet with a red sun in *Superman Vs. Muhammad Ali* (1979).

Fig. 1.2: Panels from *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali* (1979) published by DC Comics.

What separates recent comic book writing from this sort of 'what if' scenario is a metafictive quality of counter-memory. Indeed, superhero comics have always been comprised of veritable and fictional elements; however circa 1986, they have been invested in questioning their own history, traditions and established facts. The revisions that mark recent superhero storytelling suggest new perspectives and excavate lost fictional histories. Some of them draw attention to the conspicuousness of the counter-memory of black superheroes; several of these particular stories accomplish this by reworking the origins of black superheroes in several decades, from 1950 to 2005. This process is worth discussing here.

Most of the black superheroes that came to prominence in the seventies were the result of an articulation of two genres: the comic book superhero (embodying the lofty ideals of "truth, justice and the American way") and Blaxploitation action film (the archetypal angry black rebels, hypersexual vigilantes), and tended to more closely resemble the latter archetype, rather than the former. While film critics, past and present, have inveighed upon Blaxploitation (Michener 1972; Rhines 1996; Bogle 2001; Guerrero 2001; Massood 2003), questioning its representations of urban blacks, the themes, aesthetics and affective appeals of these films still retain some cultural currency. All the while, they now exist as part of a popular memory in the form of recuperation and parody and have succeeded in re-entering the cultural flow through cultural icons like black comic book superheroes, especially those derived from Blaxploitation mainstays, such as *Shaft*. In many ways, the appearance of black superheroes in the 1970s is consonant with the general super-heroic themes of masculinity, an

ideology of action and an emphasis on vigilante activity. These blend well with Blaxploitation sensibilities to produce black supermen.

This kind of superhero also arises from a movement within comic books during the seventies to produce texts that were socially relevant by touching on the social problems of the day (Wright 2001, 233). As racism, urban crime and poverty were important social issues, comic book writers quickly found that the white superheroes (by virtue of their whiteness or else by virtue of the idea that these problems were coupled with black people and the urban poor) were ill-suited protagonists in these sorts of 'relevant' stories. As a remedy for this situation, black heroes appeared in the pages of the comics, some with their own monthly titles, others within ensemble titles. They operated mainly in the ghetto, and with few exceptions they were of 'the streets'.

Consistent with well-established superhero tropes, the already hyper-masculine genre of superhero comic books is augmented by the addition of blackness to its storytelling hoard. According to Brown, the two mixed together result in a supersaturated form of masculinity that threatens to be violent, destructive and uncontrollable (Brown 2001, 178)—the supposed signifiers of black masculinity as put forward by both Blaxploitation and superhero stories.

But the texts of Blaxploitation only show one kind of black male hero (a highly stereotypical one at that) that has been asserted as the 'natural' form of black masculinity by racists. Moreover, this version of black masculinity has been internalized by black men themselves. The realities of what it means to be a black man is complicated, diverse and not at all consistent with the stereotypes. Stuart Hall, Marlon Riggs, Michele Wallace and Mark A. Reid are a few of the scholars

that have critiqued the authority of the 'naturalized' ideas of black masculinity. Stuart Hall's "Minimal Selves" (1982) interrogates the category 'black': "the fact is 'black' has never been just there either. It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found" (Hall 1988, 45). Marlon Riggs in "Black Macho Revisited", in response to restrictive notions of black masculinity claims, "I am a negro faggot [...]. Because of my sexuality, I cannot be black. A strong, proud, 'Afrocentric' black man is resolutely heterosexual, not *even* bisexual. Hence I remain a Negro" (2001, 471). Michele Wallace, from a black feminist perspective, says of the black man: "Whether he is cast as America's latest sex object, king of virility and violence, master of the ghetto art of cool, or a Mickey Mouse copy of a white capitalist, she pities him. [...] She sees only the myth. In fact, what most people see when they look at the black man is the myth" (1978, 17). Similarly, Mark A. Reid critiques foundational narratives of blackness such as negritude. He proposes an alternative to these restrictive black masculinities: "[T]he fragmentation of monolithic forms of Negritude results in an inclusive form of Negritude. This form embraces marginal identities that blacks may share with non-blacks. I call this inclusive form of black subjectivity 'postNegritude'" (1997, 53).

If, as these thinkers claim, notions of black masculinity are discursive constructions, then it appears that these constructed histories are formed and disseminated through the consumption of popular texts (like comic books) and through appeals to past time (senses of the past), articulations of various influences (structures of feeling) and texts (inter-text). The overall purpose of this

thesis is to examine the reinvention of the past, as it is constituted by a retrospective, backward-looking gaze upon comic book constructions of the past and present. Current black supermen in comic books are bellwethers, as it were, emphasizing how source texts can be re-imagined and reinvented to make appeals to readership sensibilities and social relevance. Since black supermen will be examined particularly as manifestations of 'pastness', a harkening back to a past that may never have really existed but is nevertheless potent, it should be emphasized that the status and meanings of black male bodies with be shifting just as much as the historical narratives that are spun in the pages of comics.

Approaches & Methodology

This thesis is, in part, about examining a set of contemporary texts that re-imagine previous periods of the twentieth century, viz. those encompassed by the term "Golden Age" of comics (1940-50s). When I talk about the connection between history and heroic literatures, such as superhero narratives, it should be made clear that I am not talking about history proper, but rather some other sort of historical influence. I am drawing on the work of theorists such as Raymond Williams, Lionel Trilling and others, who, in their cultural investigations attempt not only to historicize their objects of study, but to also demonstrate how ideas about history affect those very objects of study (i.e., periodization, nostalgia, canonization, emergent practices, etc.). It is with this in mind that I have attempted to derive a methodology that addresses this 'pastness'. Of course, this is by no means a new approach to popular texts. Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott, in *Bond and Beyond*, attempt to trace the various meanings ascribed

to James Bond narratives, and this provides a valuable model to follow,

particularly in their concept of reading formation.

A reading formation, Bennett and Woollacott claim,

is the product of definite social and ideological relations of reading composed in the main of those apparatuses—school, the press, critical reviews, fanzines—within which and between which the socially dominant forms for the superintendence of meaning are both constructed and contested (quoted in Tulloch and Jenkins, 127).

They use this post-structural insight to rethink Bond films as not just containers

for codes or for ideology. They want to investigate the textuality itself, the

processes of making sense, of signifying (not just representation) that runs in and

through Bond films, novels and other Bond-related artifacts. They are able to do

this partly because they observe the production in "the press, critical reviews,

fanzines," etc. What I wish to do in this thesis is adapt this approach to reading

formation to address certain issues regarding Black superheroes. Unlike Bennett

and Woollacott, I am not interested in a specific hero, but rather a specific kind of

hero as part of a "cultural phenomenon" (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 1). What I

wish to examine is the formation of a "fictional tradition" that constitutes "a

region of ideology" (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 3). According to Bennett and

Woollacott, these formations create 'movement' by transporting readers from an

implicitly dominant ideological position to a "new set of ideological coordinates",

thereby "articulating the relations between a series of ideologies (subordinate as

well as dominant), overlapping them onto one another so as to bring about

certain movements and reformations of subjectivity" (Bennett and Woollacott

1987, 5). Following their framework, what is specific to the case of black

superheroes is that "the conditions of existence of popular heroes are

intertextual" [....] "this necessitates taking account of the shifting cultural and ideological currency of the figure of the popular hero which floats between and connects such texts into related sets" (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 6).

Therefore, as a 'dataset', I have chosen three recent comic book stories for specific reasons. I have chosen *Truth: Black, White and Red* (2003), *DC: The New Frontier* (2004) and *The American Way* (2006) as exemplars. These stories all have common elements. They all take place during or make reference to the so-called Golden Age of comics, wartime and post-bellum, decades synonymous as periods of American prosperity and vigor. Each storyline attempts to position black superheroes within the pantheon of superheroes by drawing direct comparisons between specific black superheroes and their white counterparts (Captain America, Superman and Iron Man) in order to make political/social commentary. Each of these presents a re-imagining of past time through fiction, and then inserts a black superhero into these re-imagined timescapes.

Before detailing the specifics of the argument structure, I'll offer here a brief discussion of the type of close reading I will perform in chapter 3: the academic study of comics is dominated by two interpretive approaches that for the most part are mutually exclusive. The 'textual' approach, taken up by more literary scholars (Eco, Reynolds, Berger, Ong, Klock) considers comics as primarily written texts, narratives or stories. Literary scholars who read comics tend to characterize them as myths, serials or forms of pulp fiction. They emphasize the significance of plot, character, allegory and mythic structure. The 'visual' approach, influenced by art criticism and art history, emphasizes the visual power of comics, treats them as visual texts, icons and or elaborated triptychs.

Scholars using this approach of aesthetic formalism (Scott McCloud being the foremost in this group) see comics as predominantly visual, not literary, texts; comics are accordingly 'sequential art' not story, per se. Visual analyses focus on symbolic representation in comics, tradition and 'schools' or comic art (i.e., the Will Eisner school, Jack Kirby's influence, Jim Lee-style) or panel-by-panel semiotic breakdowns of comic book pages.

Certainly, each approach has its merits and disadvantages, but neither approach treats the comic book artifact as *sui generis*—a unique medium that is neither book nor painting. Too much emphasis on formal aestheticism misrepresents the ways that comics are consumed and talked about as serialized narratives. Just as soap opera viewers talk about their favorite characters or plotlines, superhero comic readers too discuss comics in terms of their favorite heroes or villains and plot twists. Likewise, just as it is rare to hear a soap opera viewer talk about the effective use of a certain camera angle in a particular episode, it is also unusual to hear a comic book reader talk about the appropriateness of a particular page layout. This is not to say that these elements aren't at work in these respective texts, or that the consumers don't enjoy these formal elements, but rather formal elements are so integral to the reading comic book texts that appreciation of these 'seamless' elements is often left to scholars and creative producers.

A literary approach understands comic books as myth, allegory and narrative, and tends to wholly ignore the visual presentation of all of these categories. To the literary imagination, comics are merely a specialized form of reading and aren't that different from novels and epics. No attempt is really made to consider

comics as a graphic medium with a texture, color scheme and visual dynamic that is just as meaningful as narration elements. Part of the reason for this may be that the literary analysis of comics, influenced by apologists for popular forms of culture, has the implicit goal of demonstrating how comic books 'act' like the high-culture literary forms of the Western canon.

My goal in this thesis is to create a methodological apparatus for the study of comic books that is appropriate for Media Studies. The tension between comics *qua* myth and comics *qua* icon can certainly be addressed in a Media Studies context, which looks at the form of media as influenced by its content (and *vice versa*). Therefore my approach here is to amalgamate the two as much as possible in my close reading of comics by describing the literary tropes and themes of the comics while also taking account of the visual structure in a deliberate, panel-by-panel breakdown. I will elaborate on this in chapter 1.

This first chapter introduces the context of the problem, defines key terms, presents the central areas of the argument and defines the key texts. As well, it presents a literature review of theory: cultural studies and comics, representation, structural (narratological) analysis, reading between and among texts. The Cultural Studies focus of this review looks at articulation, the theories of Raymond Williams's "structure of feeling" and reading formations. All these are in turn connected to themes of masculinity, representation and traditions of interpretation (viz. superhero readership). The thesis' methodology is treated here in detail, too.

Chapter 2 puts forward descriptive study of the appearance of the black superheroes, emphasizing appeals to authenticity and especially as constituted

through social relevance—audience, industry, political, sociological, etc. Focusing on the 1970s, a period that demarcates the historic origins of black superheroes, it also lays the foundation upon which subsequent arguments will be built. For instance, this chapter looks at the seventies as a watershed, describing a 'before', and will later serve as a contrastive element when examining the more recent 'metafiction'.

Using theory from chapter 1 and the contextual information from chapter 2, the third chapter analyzes, assimilates and relates this body of literature to specific comic books about black superheroes, emphasizing representations of blackness, the conventions of the genre and representations of black masculinity. The chapter concludes by briefly making a case for a study linking the 'apparent' stability of representation along with a demonstration of the multiple affectivities of the shifting figures to the possibilities of counter-memory.

Finally, I make concluding remarks about the observations of this thesis and discuss their overall significance. The thesis also speculates further about the black superhero as an agent of historical revision through popular memory, and more specifically, counter-memory.

All this is in consideration of the little black boy in the bath towel, who is a figure of the imagination imbued with all sorts of desires and anxieties about the place of black maleness in American society. The following chapters of this work will consider how such a deeply rhetorical and nostalgic figure sits at the heart of racial representation in American culture.

CHAPTER I:

Double Consciousness and Secret Identities

The main goal of this chapter is to describe and synthesize the theoretical resources I will draw upon to create subsequent arguments about the significance of the appearance of black superheroes in the seventies (chapter 2) and the relationship between comic book storytelling and reading formation (chapter 3), thereby demonstrating the overall connection of these theoretical approaches to black superheroes in mainstream American comic books and ideas of history. To accomplish this, I will first examine the general themes found in various Cultural Studies approaches to race and representation in popular culture, paying particular attention to critiques around notions of 'spectatorship' and black masculinity. From here, I will relate these common themes to the methodology of this thesis and also define a working terminology to be employed later. With the methodological apparatus in place, I will then delve into the specific scholarly works on comic books and complete this survey with a critique of the dominant analyses of black superheroes, while also considering the limitations of these studies. Finally, this chapter concludes with a statement of purpose designed to address some of limits of the previous scholarship.

Race and Representation in Cultural Studies

According to O'Sullivan et al., the term 'race' is generally seen as "a social category of people who are supposedly distinguished by inherent and invariable characteristics" (O'Sullivan et al. 1994, 255). Their scholarly critique of race asserts that within this seemingly pragmatic definition is an assumption

grounded in a hidden agenda about the 'nature' of a certain group. Therefore, racist ideologies make essentialist claims about the genetic and psychological characteristics of a certain group, usually by means of stereotype (O'Sullivan et al. 1994, 255).

According to Gen Doy, most scholars agree that the concept of 'race' has "no genetic or scientific validity as a means of differentiating between groups of human beings. The form 'race' therefore indicates a historically, socially and culturally constructed notion, not a fact of material existence" (Doy 2000, 4). Even as a construct, 'race' is a concept that remains "[...] powerfully charged with ideological significance, used in both approving and disapproving ways to differentiate between human beings" based upon so-called 'natural' qualities (Doy 2000, 4-5). Dismissing 'race' is not a sufficient critique since 'race' is a significant social category in many societies. In its critiques of 'race' and social power, Cultural Studies provide a critical vocabulary for discussions about 'race', a vocabulary that can engage with 'race' as a social phenomenon, not a biological fact. What follows is a brief look at 'race' in Cultural Studies with particular attention to key terms and the recurrent themes around 'race'. Particular attention is given to the visual—viz. how these conjunctions of spectatorship and racial identities inform ideas of a racialized masculinity.

At the center of both American and British black cultural studies is the problem of 'seeing', that is, the problem of how blacks are seen by Euro-American culture and how they see themselves or "How one is seen (as black) and, therefore, what one sees (in a white world) is always already crucial to one's existence as an Afro-American" (Wallace 1990, 40). This seeing-and-being-seen

is crucial to black intellectual thought. Foundational statements dealing with seeing and black subjectivity can be found in the works of such thinkers as Franz Fanon, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Ralph Ellison.

The most important contribution of Fanon's critical investigations into colonialism, race politics and liberation movements is the understanding of the "convergence of the problematic of colonialism with that of subject-formation" (Gates as quoted in Hall 1996a, 17). Stuart Hall's reading of how Fanon's work has been taken up by Cultural Studies focuses on Fanon's psychoanalytic approach, characterized in *Black Skins/White Masks*, is powerful because of "the association it establishes between racism and what has come to be called the scopic drive—the eroticization of the pleasure in looking [...]" (Hall 1996a, 16). Fanon calls the effect of this gaze "the internalization—or better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority" or as Stuart Hall describes it, "the inscription of race on the skin" (Hall 1996a, 16). Illustrating the effects of epidermalization, Fanon states, "[...] the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has to place himself...For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (cited in Hall 1996a, 18).

A similar sentiment exists in the writings of Du Bois, particularly in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Writing in the context of post-bellum, twentieth-century America, Du Bois sought to improve the station of blacks in America without a full-fledged revolt. For him, blacks in America were a part of that country, but at the same time they were foreigners.

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his

two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 1903, 5).

For both Fanon and Du Bois, how blacks are seen and how they see themselves in relation to whites is deeply psychological in nature, affecting their very 'souls'. If it is possible to conflate Du Bois's 'soul' with Fanon's black psyche, then the resulting synthesis is clear: whiteness is always already the standard by which blackness is measured and evaluated. As such, 'seeing' is always by 'the whites of their eyes' as it were.

There is another aspect to this double-consciousness, depicted by Ellison's word for the experience: "invisibility." Like Fanon and Du Bois, Ralph Ellison's novel, *The Invisible Man* (1952), also speaks to the dual nature of blackness in America. Through fictional narrative the book describes an invisibility that is not physical, but rather sociological. The main character is not recognized—or more accurately—unperceived by the world around him. Compounded by the fact that he is constantly trying to be someone else, someone other than himself, the main character suffers a loss of identity; he becomes, in essence, 'soulless'.

These ideas around spectatorship have laid the foundation for much of the cultural study of blackness in Western societies, particularly the United States, and intersect with critiques about the representation of black masculinity in popular forms. Film scholar, Edward Guerrero, observes: "film critics, media scholars, and cultural historians have frequently commented on this paradoxical fascination with the Black male image in all of its incarnations from urban criminal to gangsta rapper to multi-millionaire entertainment or sports icon...and beyond" (Guerrero 2001, 270). According to Guerrero, the spectacle of black men

is often portrayed on screen as a paradox: "While Black men have consistently been held in the lowest social esteem and relentlessly stereo-typed as a group, a few have been simultaneously elevated as 'exceptions' and worshiped as accomplished individuals, movie stars, and sports icons" (Guerrero 2001, 271). This observation prompts him to revisit "Du Bois's enduring question on Black men, 'How does it feel to be a problem?'" (Guerrero 2001, 270).

In this context, the problem is not a simple matter of representation, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. confirms when he complicates the paradox of the black American male by chronicling the reactions to the verdict of O.J. Simpson trial, another on-screen spectacle. Simpson, a celebrity and sports icon, came to represent every African-American male who faced the American judicial system, despite the privileges his fame afforded him. Upon the announcement of the verdict, Gates recounts, "blacks exulted at Simpson's acquittal, horrified whites had a fleeting sense that this race thing was knottier than they'd ever supposed—that when all the pieties were cleared away, blacks really *were* strangers in their midst" (Gates 2001, 237). The African-American point of view is summed up by Spike Lee's observation, "A lot of black folks said, 'Man, O.J. is bad, you know. This is the first brother in the history of the world who got away with the murder of white folks, and a blond, blue-eyed woman at that'" (quoted in Gates 2001, 243).

This last comment draws attention to another key issue of black masculinity: sexuality. Cornel West asserts that black sexuality is a taboo subject in both white and black America. It is an aspect of blackness that remains ironically 'invisible' simply because it is not spoken of; however, it is omnipresent. According to West, blacks in the dominant mythology are either "creatures who have the potential

for sexual power of whites", thus making them dangerous (hence inviolate taboo of miscegenation), or "desexed underlings of white culture"(West 2001, 301). This is particularly noticeable in the differences between black male and black female sexualities, the former having to develop strategies for acquiring power within the patriarchal structures of white America. A key strategy in this struggle is the development of machismo or 'cool' posture. As West describes it,

> To be 'bad' is good not simply because it subverts the language of the dominant white culture but also because it imposes a unique kind of order for young black men on their own distinctive chaos and solicits an attention that makes others pull back with some trepidation (West 2001, 305).

West argues that this black machismo style actually reinforces the myth of black male sexual prowess and the dangers associated with that. As well, black machismo does violence to black men themselves, particularly those who reject this posturing. West calls this violence "a black tragedy of major proportions" when referring to "the refusal of white and black America to entertain seriously new stylistic options for black men caught in the deadly game of rejecting black machismo identities" (West 2001, 306). Here, he is referring to black gay men, who are often the brunt of jokes by black comedians, such as Eddie Murphy and Damon Wayans.

It seems that what black men in America need the most, at present, are means for developing new styles of identity that allow for the plurality of experiences of black men. Or to put it more plainly, they need a new way of seeing themselves— not as a problem, but rather as a solution. All of this seems to suggest that the place to begin is with an engagement with the so-called Western dominance of the eye.

Michele Wallace suggests that African-American visual artworks may hold some potential because they not only draw attention to this Western bias of the eye, by presenting a different perspective or way of seeing, but also reveal how a reflexive gaze might operate—i.e., how these works of art might inform this different perspective. She has observed that the place of blacks in visual culture has been deficient: "[...] if the positive scene of instruction between Africans and Europeans in the U.S. is located in what is now triumphantly called the "tradition" of Afro-American music, the negative scene of instruction is in its visual tradition" (Wallace 1990, 40-41). Moreover, Wallace states, drawing on Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature*, "hegemony is a process that relies upon the mechanisms of traditions and canons of Old Masters in order to waylay the utopian desires that are potentially embodied in cultural production. The underlying structure of the very concept of 'tradition' lies in wait behind contemporary variations on 'tradition'—whether they are named feminist, Afro-American or Eskimo—in that they are inevitably radically selective in favor of maintaining the dominance of a brutal status quo despite their best intentions to subvert it" (Wallace 1990, 42-43).

Wallace's interpretation of Williams's statement, "What we have to see is not just 'a tradition' but a *selective tradition*: an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of a social and cultural definition and identification" (Williams 1977, 115), is deeply cynical. She neglects the potential use of the past among 'invisibles' to make themselves seen, and instead focuses on how "[t]he so-called discovery of tribal objects by Modernism is analogous to an equally dubious discovery of the

new world by European colonization" (Wallace1990, 48). Williams's understanding of the relationship between history and counter-hegemony is more open-ended: "It is significant that much of the most accessible and influential work of the counter-hegemony is historical: the recovery of discarded areas, or the redress of selective or reductive interpretations" (Williams 1977, 116). This lends credence to historical interventions like Fanon's conviction that the colonial person "ought to use the past with the intention of opening up the future" (quoted in Hall 1996, 14). This is especially so, in light of Williams's provision that counter-hegemony "has little effect unless the lines to the present, in the actual process of the selective tradition, are clearly and actively traced" (Williams 1977, 116).

Raymond Williams's ideas about structures of feeling, formation and hegemony are crucial for developing the potentials of tradition so that it can indeed be harnessed and used, as Fanon suggests, to open the future. One needs to consider the processes by which this can happen, without such efforts being completely subsumed by the dominant culture, as Wallace fears. It is my contention that Williams's ideas can be adapted to produce an engaging analysis of black superheroes in American comic books that takes into account not only the narrative elements of the fiction, but also the determinant factors that also contribute to the production of the stories.

In order to create a critical apparatus for studying these comic book texts, I have attempted to synthesize various cultural studies methodologies that deal with 'formation'—particularly Raymond Williams's ideas surrounding structures of feeling, as they developed over the course of his intellectual career, and his

cultural processes thesis in *Marxism and Literature*, Stuart Hall's analysis of tradition and articulation in "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'", Bennett and Woollacott's reading formations in *Bond and Beyond*, and Peter Rabinowitz's discussion of literary competence in *Before Reading*. With this apparatus, I will test the hypothesis that the creation of a tradition results from appealing to a sense of the past while rearticulating a set of (usually canonical) texts toward the radical reinsertion/re-imagination of race into the popular memory of the readership.

Methodology & Defining Terms—Structures of Feeling, Articulation, Formations

Structures of feeling, generally speaking, are Williams's evolving attempt to describe an engagement with the historical past. Much like Trilling's "sense of the past", Williams's term articulates many factors—historic, economic, political aesthetic—in order to formulate an approximation, not a definitive recreation, of a bygone era and the experiences (hence 'feeling') of those who lived within that period. Structures of feeling assume that there is a homologous relationship between cultural artifacts and the particular cultural mores of a specific place and time. Williams claims, in *The Long Revolution*, that structures of feeling are "a particular sense of life, a particular community of experience hardly needing expression, through which the characteristics of our way of life [...] are in some way passed, giving them a particular and characteristic color [...] a particular and native style [...] it is as firm as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and less tangible parts of our activity" (Williams 1961, 48). The key idea is that structures of feeling allow cultural analysts to make meaningful

connections between the determinant forces of culture and history and the quotidian realm of lived experience.

Articulating determinant factors produces the efficacy of structures of feeling. Articulation, as developed by Stuart Hall, is a method for examining how particular ideas, discourses, and practices are linked—or articulated—to particular conjunctures in the social formation (i.e., a specific context). Articulation theory seeks to define a reading of linkages and how they articulate at specific times and places, interests, subjectivities, and social forces. Jennifer Daryl Slack has noted that articulation is useful for considering the problem of 'context' within communication and cultural studies,[1] and this emphasis on the contextual problems of cultural analysis is central to the development of Williams's ideas. Trying to get beyond orthodox Marxist analyses of culture using the superstructure and base model, Williams's structure of feeling articulates determinant forces and formations in order to interpret cultural processes.

When using 'formation', I am taking this from Williams, as well. He describes formation as "a mode of specialized practice" (Williams 1977, 119). He goes on to say that formations "are most recognizable as conscious movements and tendencies (literary, artistic, philosophical or scientific) which can usually be readily discerned after their formative productions" (Williams 1977, 119). The significance of Williams's critical offering can be found in his idea that cultures

---

[1] According to Slack, "The unities forged and broken in this expanded universe are not simply physical objects, such as trucks, but complex connections of elements that are themselves articulations. These elements or identities might be social practices, discursive statements, ideological positions, social forces, or social groups. [...] The unities they form can be made up of any combination of elements. So for example, we might examine the specific connections between theory and practice, religion and politics or technology and gender" (Slack 1989, 331).

consist of dominant, residual and emergent forms (discourses and practices), allowing us to think about the ways in which change always contains a sort of continuity (in some ways akin to Trilling's "sense of the past").

Another way to think about the interplay of these historical elements (residual, emergent, etc.) is to consider them within a reticulum of inter-textual relations. For example, what Bennett and Woollacott refer to as "reading formation" in *Bond and Beyond* (1987), a post-structuralist analysis of the James Bond phenomenon, shares some commonalities with Eliot's tradition in as far as it examines related texts in a network; however, it is distinct in its interest in the construction social meaning (rather than simply tracking level of influence, as Eliot does). A reading formation, Bennett and Woollacott say,

> is the product of definite social and ideological relations of reading composed in the main of those apparatuses—school, the press, critical reviews, fanzines—within which and between which the socially dominant forms for the superintendence of meaning are both constructed and contested (quoted in Tulloch and Jenkins 1995, 127).

Clearly, on one level, reading formation incorporates a reader response theory akin to the "literary competence" that Peter Rabinowitz describes as the general, historical, cultural and genre specific knowledge that an author assumes that the audience will employ to make sense of the work, such as plot, character and other elements of the fabula (Rabinowitz 1998, 999-1002). However, this is just one part of the inter-textual relation—Bennett and Woollacott want to discover how these competencies are developed among readerships (i.e., 'activation') and what sort of significance these competencies have for social relations.

Furthermore, Bennett and Woollacott do not see the determinant factors of reading formation as simply modes of production, as a Marxist would, but rather,

they consider these factors as part of a hierarchy of determination, thus moving

away from a strict superstructure/base model. According to Bennett and

Woollacott's post-structural insights, reconsidering James Bond films and novels

beyond a Marxist analysis means abandoning the idea that the texts of Bond are

merely containers for codes or for ideology. "Reading formation", then,

> refers, specifically, to context, thereby activating a given body of texts by
> ordering the relations between them in a specific way such that their reading
> is always-already cued in specific directions that are not given by those 'texts
> themselves' as entities separable from such relations (Bennett and Woollacott
> 1987, 64).

My goal in this thesis is to adapt this approach to reading formation to address

certain issues regarding black superheroes. Bennett and Woollacott correctly

demonstrate that the source of literary competence is a reading formation around

key texts. In the case of superhero comics, reviews, previews, fanzines and other

comic books help determine the reading formation, but also the comic book

industry and the history of comic book publishing America. There have been

many successful analyses of reading formations in the study of comics.[2] But these

have often been very specific, focusing on Batman or Superman exclusively. I am

not very interested in a specific hero, but rather a specific kind of hero, as part of

a cultural phenomenon. My reading of superhero comics imagines race as

relevant, current and bestowing nuance to otherwise archetypal superhero

characters. I am particularly intrigued by Bennett and Woollacott's assertion that

the texts of Bond are "texts-in-use". Therefore, I wish to examine the utility of

---

[2] The most notable of these focus on the Batman, as found in the collection of essays in *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media* (1991), edited by Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio and *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (2000), by Will Brooker. As well as Michael Brody's "Batman: Psychic Trauma and Its Solution." *Journal of Popular Culture* (Spring 1995).

comic book texts, i.e., the formation of a "fictional tradition" that constitutes "a region of ideology" that in turn "fosters fictional forms that relate to and connect with popular experience" (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 3).

So far, I have suggested that race is a social concept without a biological basis. As such, race, racism and racialized identities are constructed. I also suggested that tradition is one way that this construction of race has occurred. Taking a page from T.S. Eliot, I treat tradition as an articulation of key texts, but this approach ignores the extra-textual factors that determine tradition. To remedy this, I have enlisted the work of Raymond Williams, particularly his thoughts on formations and structures of feeling in order to better account for other processes that affect the interpretation of key texts. Key texts are, for me, as Bennett and Woollacott put it "texts-in-use", that is, texts whose significance is bound up in their utility. This is important because as texts are put to use, traditions are reconfigured. As Stuart Hall contends, "It is also often the case that cultural struggle arises in its sharpest form just at the point where different traditions meet, intersect" (Hall 1981, 236). To apply this to the superhero comic book tradition will require four things: demonstrating how determinant forces affect the reading formation, illustrating how reading formations affect the interpretation of the texts by the readership, and determining how structures of feeling are used as a tool for reconfiguring established traditions and formations by means of inter-textual references, appeals to bygone eras, and repetition of established forms. These issues are discussed in detail in the following section. The fourth involves deriving a method of analysis that is appropriate for the specific medium of comic books. As I've stated already, there are two established

approaches to the study of comics, the literal and the visual. Reading and interpreting comic books involves both of these practices. But scholars tend to choose one or the other according to their own disciplinary biases. It is my intention to combine these two approaches in my close reading of selected comics.

It is in Marshall McLuhan's reflections on *Mad* magazine that I find a clue toward achieving this. McLuhan connects the development with comics with Charles Dickens, of all people, because Dickens "began as a provider of copy for a popular cartoonist." McLuhan observes that the culture shift after print makes us look to so many media forms and "fix attention upon the persistent print-like, and even crude woodcut, characteristics of our twentieth-century comics" (McLuhan 1964, 150-151). However, he is not satisfied with this characterization and goes on to suggest that comic and cartoon have more in common with watching TV than reading books and viewing paintings. McLuhan instead suggests that we study the influences between the media:

> Our need now is to understand the formal character of print, comic and
> cartoon, both as challenging and changing the consumer-culture of film,
> photo and press. There is no single approach to this task, and no single
> observation or idea that can solve so complex a problem in changing human
> perception (McLuhan 1964, 155).

With the superhero genre in particular this observation holds true since superhero stories are not bound to any particular medium.[3] That being said, these comics require an analytical method that will do them justice.

---

[3] For instance, Superman and Batman have existed in multiple forms: comic book, radio serial, TV show, animated cartoons, films, novels, and more recently video games. When analyzing superheroes, this plethora of media forms suggests there is no reason to assume that the medium itself determines the form of the story. The stories I've chosen to study in this thesis, for example, exist only as comics for the time being. Who knows how they will reemerge in the future.

For this, I turn to Mario Saraceni's *The Language of Comics*. Saraceni's approach treats comics as essentially linguistic and semiotic in nature. Sidestepping the literary and visual aesthetics of comics, Saraceni uses pragmatics as a means of analyzing comics as meaningful texts. This linguistic approach is fruitful because it incorporates analyses that are germane to both literary and visual studies. Saraceni's definition of comics is simple: the key characteristics of comics are the "employment of both words and pictures" and "texts organized into sequential units, graphically separated from each other" (Saraceni 2003, 5). He asserts that the relationship between words and pictures in comics can be considered as one of two things—either a blend or a collaboration (Saraceni 2003, 33). Using linguistic concepts like cohesion, semantic field, and deictic markers to illustrate his "blend and collaboration" thesis, Saraceni presents a method for studying comics as discursive without ever relying exclusively on words or pictures. I will be using the methods of analysis outlined in *The Language of Comics* to do my close readings of selected texts, since this linguistic/discursive approach will allow me to consider comic books as unique artifacts, not simple pictures with words or dialogues with storyboarding.

Historical Periodization and the Comic Book Industry

In a book chapter entitled, "Comics and Cultural Studies: Sites for Struggle", in *Reading Comics* (2000), Mila Bongco and Jan Philipzig give an exhaustive overview of the trends and critical attention that cultural studies has given to comic strips and comic books, both mainstream and underground, since the fifties. It is not my goal to reproduce this review, but rather highlight some of its

discussions about superhero comics specifically and illustrate how these selected

topics pertain to my overall argument about how tradition, interpretation and

race operate in superhero stories. Two factors I'll examine closely are how

superheroes act as cultural 'myths' and how this affects black superhero

characters.

Before discussing superheroes as myth, I want to say a few words about the

operation of time in comics. Time in comic books has some special properties.

Like much storytelling, comic book time does not conform to traditional

Aristotelian models of narration. There are flashbacks, changes in storytelling

perspective and so on. But time in comics has an unusual property that makes it

akin to most popular serials, such as soap operas. Comic book time appears to be

progressive and cyclical at the same time; it avoids resolution as much as

possible.

As previously mentioned, Umberto Eco's "Myth of Superman" (1972) asserts

that comic book superheroes operate outside of a causal narrative time within an

"oneiric climate" that eliminates the development of characters by maintaining

the *status quo* of storytelling.

> The stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate—of which the reader is not
> aware at all—where what has happened before and what has happened after
> appears extremely hazy. The narrator picks up the strand of the event again
> and again, as if he had forgotten to say something and wanted to add details
> to what had already been said (Eco 1979, 114).

Thus, Eco postulates that Superman, as a character, exists somewhere between

mythical and the novelistic narratives:

> Superman comes off as a myth only if the reader loses control of the temporal
> relationships and renounces the need to reason on their basis, thereby giving
> himself up to the uncontrollable flux of the stories which are accessible to him

and, at the same time, holding on to the illusion of a continuous present. Since the myth is not isolated exemplarily in a dimension of eternity, but, in order to be assimilated, must enter into the flux of the story in question, this same story is refuted as flux and seen instead as an immobile present (Eco 1979, 16).

One key feature of Eco's characterization of the oneiric climate is that it goes relatively undetected by the reader, thus making it an ideal ideological vehicle. However, he also implies that the oneiric climate is permanent; however, at times the dreamer stirs in his slumber.

Over the past sixty-plus years, Superman has existed in various forms: comic books, cartoons, TV shows, films, toys, etc. Readers' access to these various texts of Superman both inform and conflict with the overall oneiric climate of Superman mythos. These myriad 'Supermen' in the consumer marketplace force readers to read Superman phenomena both synchronically and diachronically, both within and exterior to history. As a result, Superman is a marketable intellectual property—one that must be sold anew to each successive generation. "Eco's explanation of Superman's status," Ian Gordon proposes, "remains convincing because it explains the popularity of different versions of Superman and it touches on the character's position as a consumer durable." He also adds, "Here it is also worth keeping in mind Claude Levi-Strauss's notion that myth recycles earlier versions of the myth as part of its status" (Gordon 2001, 180).

Even though, as Eco claims, comic book superheroes possess mythic qualities, they are not myths proper, because they are also circumscribed by publishers' profit-driven imperatives. In this sense, superheroes are demi-myths, owned by corporations. As myth, they have a timeless and universal appeal, and comic book

publishers realize the value of maintaining their character property investments.[4]

The maintenance of these characters involves updating and revising superheroes

periodically (usually every ten years or so). For this reason, there are many

different variations of certain heroes (as their readers grow old, superheroes

remain young). In order to differentiate between these different dated texts of

Superman, comic book scholars (following in the footsteps of classicists) have

separated the history of comic book publishing into periods.[5] According to Geoff

Klock, "Superhero comics books are traditionally thought to have at least two

distinct periods, at least two major waves of creativity: the golden age and the

silver age" (Klock 2002, 2), and everything comic book related after 1968 is

deeply contentious (See Appendix A for more details).

There is no clean-cut way to categorize superhero comic book publishing.

While almost all accounts mark significant trends and events by encompassing

them in "Ages", the distinction between these periods is as blurry as the

distinction between any movements in the history of literature and art (Klock

2002, 2). Even the nomenclature used is a matter of argument among scholars,

fans and industry producers alike. A myriad of factors and markers have been

employed to demarcate the beginnings and ends of notable periods of comic book

history—notable issues of certain comics,[6] socio-economic factors affecting the

---

[4] For more on the development of the character property, see: Harris, Neil. 1985. Who Owns Our Myths? Heroism and Copyright in the Age of Mass Culture. *Social Research* 52 (2): 241-267.

[5] While there is no consensus on how many comic book ages there are, or when they occurred, Ken Quattro in "The New Ages: Rethinking Comic Book History" (2004) has created a well-considered discussion of comics terminology and suggests useful alternatives that I will use in this thesis. However, one problem with this set of terms is that it does not take into account the various cultural and media forms of superheroes beyond the comic book medium, such as film, television and radio.

[6] Traditionally, the Golden Age begins with *Action Comics* #1 in 1938 (the first appearance of Superman), the Silver Age starts with *Showcase* #4 in 1954 (the first appearance of the Silver Age

industry, and even cover price. Yet, despite the variation among the commentary on these periods, they furnish us with shorthand for describing the historical loci of heroes within and without the comic book fabula.

Having said this, the key events of superhero comic book history might be presented as follows[7]: In the early 1930s, savvy publishers realized that they could make money by reprinting the highly popular newspaper strips in omnibus, and since most of these strips were comedic, the books came to be known as 'comics'. In 1938, National Allied Comics, the publishing company that became Detective Comics, Inc. (even later DC Comics), took a chance on a new type of character, a superhuman strongman called Superman (McCue & Bloom 1993, 17-22; Wright 2001, 1-15); the comic was an instant success and spawned several other kinds of superheroes over the following decade. This period, from about 1938-1949 is often called the Golden Age of comics. However, after WWII, the popularity of comics decreased due to conservative paranoia that linked comics with juvenile delinquency and the rising popularity of television viewing as a leisure activity (McCue & Bloom 1993, 29-34; Wright 2001, 86-108, 154-179). In an attempt to counteract falling sales, DC's editor-in-chief Julius Schwartz began revising and republishing Golden Age heroes in a new guise. The first of these was the Flash, who was revised and re-released in 1954. Other less popular heroes also got a makeover, such as Green Lantern. These up-to-date versions of

---

Flash, Barry Allen) or Fantastic Four #1 (Marvel's take on the Nuclear Family). After that, things fall apart. Some say *Amazing Spider-Man* #121 (1973, featuring the death of Gwen Stacey, Spidey's girlfriend) is the beginning of the bronze age of comics others say that nothing really happens in comics until 1986 with *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and the magnum opus of comics *Watchmen* (also in 1986).

[7] Adapted from an on-line discussion entitled "Comic Book Ages: The Discussion Continues" (10 Oct. 2003) at <http://scoop.diamondgalleries.com/scoop_article.asp?ai=3601&si=124>.

old classics only sold moderately well. This remaking of characters marks the beginning of the Silver Age of comics (from about the mid-fifties to the late seventies) (McCue & Bloom 1993, 35-39; Wright 2001, 183). The most potent innovation in the Silver age came from Marvel. Stan Lee and others created a truly new type of superhero character. They gave their creations human failings as well as superpowers. This proved to be a very bold and popular move with comic book readers, which gave Marvel a prominent place in the market (McCue & Bloom 1993, 39-45; Wright 2001, 201-223). One persistent issue that would come to a head in the early nineties, when comic books creators took a stand for their rights. They felt that the big comic book companies did not respect their creative efforts and did not compensate them for creating profitable characters and stories. Artists and writers had done this in the past with varying degrees of success, but this time they left the big companies like Marvel and DC and started their own publishing companies to produce their work (Dean 2000). Of these, Image Comics, where creators could publish their material without giving up the copyrights to the characters they created, was the most prominent and by 1997 garnered a large part of the comics market share (17%) from the two industry giants, Marvel (33%)and DC (28%) (McAllister 2001, 19). This X-odus, as it was called,[8] spawned other independent companies that catered to specialty markets, such as Milestone Media Inc, which created comic books featuring African Americans. At present, the future of comic books looks dismal as sales continue to drop. However, the popularity of the characters has never been greater and comic book companies like Marvel and DC are still profitable because they license

---

[8] A majority of the artists who left Marvel were working on titles featuring the X-Men.

their characters for films, TV show, lunchboxes, underwear and a whole assortment of products (Mason 2004; McAllister 2001, 27-33; Steinberg 2006). We might call this the Late Bronze Age of comics "the Character Property Era". All of these factors are pivotal moments in comic book history, and their influences have given us economic determinations and reading formations that exist today.

Furthermore, this periodization not only provides a convenient nomenclature for cataloguing movements and trends in the comic book industry, it also provides a way for comic book writers to access the structures of feeling of yesteryear's comics. For example, "Golden Age Superman" mostly refers to Superman as he appeared from approximately 1938 to 1949, the so-called Golden Age of comics. Influenced by wartime politics and New Deal social policy, Superman of the Golden Age was very different from what he is today; only his costume is immediately familiar.[9] But the descriptor 'Golden Age' has another meaning. Golden Age Superman also refers to a Superman that is imbued with a "sense of the past", an object of nostalgia that is almost purely metonymic, standing in for yesteryear. This nostalgic Superman can also be a character in contemporary comic book stories. It is not impossible, through time-travel or some other device, for both Golden Age Superman and Contemporary Superman to join forces to defeat a common foe. This may seem confusing, but to comic

---

[9] For more on Golden Age Superman and his significance within American culture, see: Lang, Jeffrey S., and Trimble, Patrick. 1988. Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow? An Examination of the American Monomyth and the Comic Book Superhero. *Journal of Popular Culture* 22 (3): 157-173, and also: Gordon, Ian. 2001. Nostalgia, Myth, and Ideology: Visions of Superman at the End of the "American Century." In *Comics and Ideology*, ed. Matthew P. McAllister, et al., 177-193. NY: Peter Lang.

book readers, it's standard fare.[10] Jeffrey S. Lang and Patrick Trimble claim, "[...]
the Lone Ranger, the Shadow, Batman, Doc Savage, the Flash, Green Lantern,
Plastic Man and many more [...]" are always falling in and out of favor. "As a
culture, we have outgrown some of these figures and no longer find anything in
the details of their myths that reassure or instruct us; and yet occasionally, old
myths are brushed off and refolded into the needs of modern society" (Lang and
Trimble 1988, 162). Ian Gordon argues "that Superman connects a wistful
nostalgia—nostalgia as homesickness if you will—to a commodity, and in this
fashion subjects both longings for the past and the past itself, to the ideology of
the market in which everything can be commodified and sold" (Gordon 2001,
177-178). In this way, Golden Age Superman's appearance in a comic book story
signals an appeal to another time; however, he is also a metonym for that past
time, giving his appearance that much more narrative clout. Superman can
therefore speak trans-historically in a certain sense.[11]

Another determinant factor in the production and consumption of superhero
comics is pressure put on the industry from government, parents and from the
industry itself. The two most influential industry factors that affected comic book
storytelling and publishing were the rise of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in

---

[10] Irascible comic book fans tend to be annoyed by these 'impossible' meetings of Supermen, but
they also take pleasure in imagining ways that these stories could be plausible and therefore not
disrupt their limited notions of serial continuity.

[11] It is important to keep in mind that superheroes are profitable because they can be licensed. A
reviewer for Harper's magazine has observed, "[...] on television, when we're not watching the
youthful adventures of Clark Kent in *Smallville*, we can expect to find his adult, animated form
doing shtick with Jerry Seinfeld as they shill for American Express, while Batman pimps for
OnStar" (Mason 2004, 77). Superheroes are so integral to popular culture that they are instantly
recognizable, and since they are commonly linked to virtuous behavior, there can be no better
celebrity spokesperson for the products of late capitalism. (Incidentally, when was the last time
you saw a black superhero shilling for corporations? We'll come back to this question later.)

the late fifties and the direct marketing of comics by the major publishers (Marvel

and DC) in the late seventies and eighties. Without going into too much detail,

the CCA was a sanction imposed voluntarily by the comic book industry itself in

response to the heavy criticism that comics were receiving from the US senate.

The provocative and influential book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), by Fredric

Wertham, attacked "American comic books indiscriminately as inherently

sensational, trivial and illiterate, depicting too much sex, violence and anarchy."

Moreover, Wertham asserted, "the practice of reading comic books led to juvenile

delinquency" (Bongco and Philipzig 2000, 2). The US senate set up hearings to

establish possible links between comics and juvenile delinquency. These hearings

resulted in no laws banning comics; however, after a decade of pressure,

significant damage had been done to the industry by way of the self-censorship of

the CCA. Ironically the criticism of comics as 'juvenile' literature is responsible

for the continuation of superhero comics beyond the fifties if only because heavy-

handed, moralistic censorship eradicated the other thriving genres of comics—

horror, romance, sci-fi and police/crime. The superhero genre of comics began to

change as all these 'moribund' comic book genres were subsumed as sub-genres

within the superhero formula, in an attempt to capture the lost market share

(Quattro 2004).

Direct marketing, a response to the decimation of the comic book industry by

the CCA, sought to rebuild the comic book market by giving comics their own

retailers, distributors and a devoted fan base. Bongco and Philipzig observe, "By

1981, an interesting and most welcome phenomenon occurred in the distribution,

marketing, and selling of comic books. A network of several hundred specialty

comic book stores, selling almost exclusively comic and comic-related items, had spread out across the United States and Canada" (2000, 130). These comic book stores opened up the world of comics to consumers who may not have had easy access to them otherwise. For creators too, this new sales and marketing system was a boon and many independent comics producers saw their small print runs of a few hundred copies skyrocket into the thousands as sales increased (Bongco and Philipzig 2000, 132-133).

This system, catering to fans and collectors, worked fairly well for decades. In the early nineties, despite a plethora of comic book companies, there were three major players: DC Comics, Marvel and newcomer Image. In 1992, DC and Marvel had 56% of the market share of comic book sales. In 1993, Marvel and DC concentrated on the collector market. They published special issues and inadvertently saturated the collector market, which consequently collapsed (McAllister 2001, 20). By the summer of 1993, multiple separate companies began to try their hands at creating entirely new super-hero titles. Dark Horse Comics, long time producer of non-superhero comics, launched sixteen superhero titles. Malibu Comics introduced its Ultraverse, an attempt to build a creator-controlled superhero universe, with a mixture of new and veteran talent. Also, there was Milestone Media, a latecomer, which launched in late February of 1994. Milestone was an autonomous company, but was distributed through a licensing agreement with industry giant DC Comics. Headed by Dwayne McDuffie, Denys Cowan, Derek Dingle and Michael Davis, Milestone's comic book universe was truly 'multicultural'. Unlike most of the DC and Marvel universes, there wasn't a single white face in its superhero line up.

With the exception of Dark Horse Comics, all these comic book companies that appear in the 90s disappeared by the turn of the millennium. Milestone is noteworthy here because of its distribution deal with DC and because of its obvious political agenda. But if you look at the scholarship about the political economy of comic books in the nineties, Milestone Media is always curiously missing from the accounts. Jeffrey A. Brown is the only scholar to give any sustained analysis to this unusual experiment in superhero comics.

Cultural Studies Scholarship on Black Superheroes

Jeffrey Brown's book, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics and Their Fans* (2001) is the keystone in the small cadre of academic works about black superheroes. This book both chronicles and critiques black superheroes, especially those produced by short-lived comics publisher Milestone Media, Inc., a comic book company that produced comics that solely featured black characters and was owned and operated by black creators. Brown provides careful analysis of "how fans relate to the stories and the new black superheroes according to [...] fundamentally interconnected principles and points of comparison" (Brown 2001, 1). Of these principles, Brown's interest in fans' "awareness of the debate between Milestone and other African-American comic book creators regarding the authenticity of creating black characters" (Brown 2001, 1-2) is paramount and similar to the ways that other scholars (such as Christian Davenport (1998), Marc Singer (2002) and Anita McDaniel (2000)) address the issues of racism, tokenism and stereotype in comic books, while simultaneously attempting to

move beyond this critique in order to find more productive ways of understanding the relationship of blackness to readership and to genre.

Within this triad of blackness, genre and readership, one issue appears repeatedly: the figure of Superman-in-blackface. Brown, for instance, devotes an entire chapter of his book to discussing fans' perception of the racial validity of Icon, a black Superman analogue that is regularly criticized by black comic book producers as a "super-Oreo" (Brown 2001, 157). As well, Davenport's analysis of Steel, another black Superman analogue,[12] delves into how the character's race is constantly a product of what DuBois calls the "two-sidedness of African-American life" (Davenport 1998). Writing for *Newsweek*, reporter Harry F. Waters documented the fight over the 'new heroes'; he focused particularly on Milestone's black Superman figure called Icon.

> Dedicated to promoting middle-class values, Icon tosses little Limbaugh-esque lectures at the hoods he nabs. "Your behavior," he scolds some black burglars, "reflects poorly on our people and on yourselves" (Waters 1993, 58).

Waters neglects to notice that this sort of paternalistic attitude has been integral to Superman stories since the 1930s.[13] While this sort of conservative paternalism is acceptable for Superman, Icon—when pushing his conservative views—is seen as a sell-out. This puts characters like Icon in a real bind: as much as they supposedly present an alternative to the 'potentially threatening' hyper-masculine representations of black men, they fail (supposedly) to create a narrative world that is textured and complicated.

---

[12] Steel (cf. Man of Steel) is a Superman analogue in name only. His powers are not alien, and he resembles Iron Man more than Superman.
[13] Some would argue that Superman is a kind of super-sell-out.

Water's article also describes how Black creators of black superheroes argue about what constitutes a 'real' black hero; they can't agree on what qualities are 'black enough'. The problem arises that if you retain the structure of spectatorship and remove its totalizing whiteness, there is a temptation to replace that with a totalizing blackness, something just as tyrannical in the end. For example, like Milestone, another consortium of black publishers called ANIA (Swahili for "protect and defend") started producing its own line of heroes in the early 1990s. ANIA produced heroes that, from their perspective, best reflected African-American consciousness, yet another notion of authenticity. According to ANIA's creators, "We need to develop our own space. The brothers who criticize Jack Kirby's Black Panther need to bite the bullet and deliver a product more authentic" (Winbush quoted in Waters 1993, 58). It is difficult to see how ANIA's "Zawana: Son of Zulu" qualifies as more 'authentic' than Kirby's Black Panther, except on the level of having been written by a black man as opposed to one of the most seasoned purveyors of the genre who was also white. "When your hero is a black Republican," Nabile Hage of ANIA complained about Milestone's *Icon*, "that just doesn't work for inner-city kids. Our stories are straight from the streets" (quoted in Waters 1993, 58). This gesture toward authenticity (hence the invocation of 'the streets'), a legitimate black experience, seems to be the crux of the matter. While Water's article argues that *Icon* comics are a failure, his report does not offer much in terms of alternatives, other than the stereotypical views of other black comic book creators about black masculinity and heroism.

These issues of what constitutes an authentic black superhero are compounded when considering the immense 'sameness' of characters within the

genre.[14] Brown feels that black superheroes are not frauds. Instead, they simply

represent yet another permutation of a larger superhero myth. Using the example

of *Icon*, a monthly comic featuring a black superhero published by Milestone,

Brown claims, "[...] by literally inserting the ethnically diverse Milestone heroes

in these classic scenes originally dominated by white-only superheroes [...]

Milestone characters represent a fundamental reworking of even the most basic

time-honored conventions of the genre" (Brown 2000, 155-156). While this is a

viable interpretation of the phenomenon, that addresses the fallacy of legitimacy

with great agility, it also has the negative consequence of reducing the black

superhero's blackness to an arbitrary sign of difference. This semiotic approach

removes the political significance of the character and treats the blackness as if it

doesn't really matter.

While it is possible to interpret the black superhero as Brown does, others feel

that despite this structural symmetry, black superheroes often live in the shadow

of the legacy of their white counterparts. Christian Davenport rejects outright

that black superheroes are mere copies of white counterparts because he feels

that there isn't enough common ground for comparison. Davenport demonstrates

how the character Steel (another black Superman analogue), for example, fits

uneasily into the Superman family of heroes, but never quite lives up to the

mantle of his inspiration, the "Man of Steel". He notes,

> [W]hen DC Comics announced that it was going to introduce an African-American Superman, there was much to rejoice about in both black and white America. With this action, another barrier had be surpassed, a super—no *the* super—barrier had been overcome. The icon would finally be shared with one

---

[14] "No new heroes, only new costumes" (Brown 2001, 148): Marvel has Hawkeye and DC has Green Arrow, likewise with Iron Man/Rocket Red, Valkyrie/Wonder Woman, Doctor Strange/Doctor Fate, Namor the Sub-Mariner/Aquaman, etc.

of America's most visible and historically mistreated ethnic minorities (Davenport 1998).

However, as Steel's monthly series continued, the readership discovered "[...] that what was most disappointing about the story was the reality of a black superhero caught within the shadow of the weighty myth of the white Superman legacy" (Davenport 1998). According to Davenport, there appeared to be no way that Steel could ever be considered as a superhero in his own right—he was always already a facsimile of the 'true' Man of Steel. Davenport attributes this subordinate position to the ultimate cancellation of *Steel* monthly comics by DC.

If these black characters are not economically viable, as demonstrated by the cancellation of all of Milestones comics, *Steel, Black Panther, Hero for Hire* and *Green Lantern: Mosaic* (featuring the Green Lantern, John Stewart, DC's first black superhero), then why do comic book writers keep creating black characters? Or to put it another way, if they don't serve a commercial function, what is it that they do? It seems that there are more fundamental questions to ask, suggests Anita McDaniel in her short essay "Why is This Character Black?" For McDaniel, the issue is what sort of social and cultural space is inhabited by 'blackness' in America's mainstream media representations. She wants to know what rhetorical space white creators have allegorically placed black superheroes into. "Is this space claimed space or assigned space?" she asks. She also observes that "the popular charge arising from this perception is that white creators of popular culture routinely place everything associated with 'being black' in assigned space" (McDaniel 2000). McDaniel takes issue with this perception and controversially suggests "some creators of popular culture use assigned space to

reconfigure our social and cultural landscape" (McDaniel 2000). Citing Gitlin

(1982), she notes, "popular culture does not manufacture ideology; it relays and

reproduces and reprocesses and packages and focuses ideology that is constantly

arising both from social elites and from active social groups and movements

throughout the society" (quoted in McDaniel 2000). Here, McDaniel provides a

clue to figuring out what position black superheroes hold in comic books and

popular culture. Although all supermen are ideological, black supermen seem

particularly so due to their positioning within texts.

Marc Singer agrees that positioning is key. He feels that "some comics

creators have demonstrated that the superhero genre's own conventions can

invite more nuanced depictions of minority identity" and that contemporary

comics "show complex consideration of identity" (Singer 2002, 107). However, he

still feels that the potential for superficiality and stereotyping is dangerously high

in contemporary comics because of the type of codification that Brown and

Davenport describe. He states,

> Comics rely upon visually codified representations in which characters are
> continually reduced to their appearances, and this reductionism is especially
> prevalent in the superhero comics, whose characters are wholly externalized
> into their heroic costumes and aliases. This system of visual typology
> combines with the superhero genre's long history of excluding, trivializing or
> 'tokenizing' minorities to create numerous minority superheroes who are
> marked purely for their race: "Black Lightning', 'Black Panther', and so forth
> (Singer 2002, 107).

Tokenism and stereotype are Singer's main concern. While his interest in the

ideological powers of comic book stereotypes brings up some important issues,

they seem to ignore the prevalence and importance of stock forms and tokens in

the comic book genre as a whole. As well, like Davenport, Singer has a 'once a

token, always a token' reading of black superheroes. He does not acknowledge

that writer and readers can reconsider characters over time. For example, Singer

presents a reading of DC's *Legion of Super-Heroes* (*LSH*), and while his reading

of this comic books series is acceptable, it misses one important detail. This

particular series, *LSH*, which has existed in multiple forms since 1958, has never

really been a unified and complete narrative. Instead, it has existed in at least

four different incarnations over the years. Treating these many stories as a

homogenous whole is fine when discussing the overall mythic structure of

superhero comics, but it is a little misguided in any discussion about the

ideological thrust this series may possess.

LSH has ostensibly been 'reinvented' anew several times during its history.

Each 'version' of the *Legion* speaks to its own cultural context, but as well, it also

speaks to contexts of the past as it inter-textually references *Legion*s that have

come before. Singer criticizes the early *Legion* comics 1960s liberal humanist

pluralism, which establishes whiteness as the norm and aligns otherness with

alien characters. This is a completely valid critique of *LSH* at the time, yet when

read over its entirety, as inter-text, the *LSH* provides several examples of how

this 1960s liberal humanist pluralism is reconfigured and rearticulated.

When the Legion was restarted, yet again, in 1992, many characters were

introduced who were ethnic minorities (most notably a character called Kid

Quantum). Also, in the current incarnation of *LSH*, re-started in February 2005,

the character Starboy, who in previous version of the Legion had been white, is

now black. This practice of transforming the race of a white superhero did not

start with *LSH*—a black Green Lantern was created in 1972 and a black Iron Man

in 1979. What is significant about the case of the *LSH* 'reboot' (the term used by fans) is that the writers treated these black characters *as if they had always existed*. In this way, comic book creators were asking readers to remember and forget at the same time. Readers are expected to remember the powers and origins of these heroes, but they are required to forget that the character wasn't always black. This may seems strange, but it demonstrates how race can operate in comic books as something other than tokenism or stereotype. It presents a means of revising and re-presenting key texts in a contemporary context.

Black superheroes do not break the mold as Brown suggests. Rather, there are some differences in terms of motivation, etc. but not much else goes against the genre conventions. We might say that the differences are paradigmatic not syntagmatic. Brown sets up other mainstream comic books in the 90s as straw opponents over which he can extol the virtues of Milestone comics. He argues that the books published by Milestone are significant because they present another image of masculinity that advocates a brains-over-brawn approach to problem solving. While this is a very novel form of storytelling in comic book form, it was by no means unique only to Milestone's line of superhero comic books.

For example, Superman is god-like in his abilities as well as his moral certainty. Writers of Superman comics realized early on that since Superman can do anything, writing stories about Superman taking action becomes tedious; a more interesting story asks the question, "What makes Superman *not* act?"[15] In

---

[15] In the 40s, it was suggested that Superman alone could defeat the Axis powers and perhaps that should be depicted in the comics.

these sorts of stories, Superman must solve a problem without using his god-like power.

There are examples of this among black superheroes as well. In the 90s, John Stewart, the Green Lantern, was put in charge of policing the planet Oa, a mosaic world, a planet where hundreds of alien communities (and a few human ones) had been transplanted and force to coexist cheek-to-jowl, as a social experiment. After only a few days on the job, Green Lantern realizes that his power ring will not be a useful weapon in quelling the inevitable unrest among the citizens of the mosaic. Instead, interpersonal communication and urban planning were the tools used to create commensurability and social harmony. Brown doesn't take the time to do an assessment of the state of comic book writing for the period that he studies, and thus he does not consider these examples that I've provided here. Instead, his analysis is somewhat biased toward his own goal as an apologist for Milestone Media.[16] Wanting to avoid falling into the same trap, I will take some time to review the state of comic book writing circa 1970 onward and reiterate that the current use of black superheroes is not necessarily new, but rather another example of trends and tropes in the superhero genre.

With these issues in mind, the second chapter of this thesis will look at the determinant forces—social, economic and aesthetic—that brought about the black superhero in the 1970s. Particularly, it will examine the conjunction of Blaxploitation cinema, the representations of urbanism in America and superhero mythology. Chapter 3 will then take these factors and consider them as

---

[16] This is especially evident is Brown's failure to explain the ultimate demise of Milestone Media when the comic book publishing boom ended in the mid-nineties, perhaps because such a discussion would undermine his overall, deeply slanted, argument.

a structure of feeling, one that has been co-opted in contemporary comic book writing in order to reconfigure and revise the position of the black superman in the super-heroic tradition of writing and reading.

Fig. 2.1: Comic book covers featuring 'revised' black superheroes. *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* #87 (January 1972), showing both the black and white Green Lanterns. *Legion of Super-Heroes* #2 (March 2005), featuring Shadow Lass and the revised, black Starboy. *JSA* #68 (April 2005), depicting the black and white Mr. Terrifics, Michael Holt and Terry Sloane, respectively.

CHAPTER II:

Secret and Not So Secret Origins

This chapter puts forward a descriptive study of the appearance of black superheroes. I will consider these through the lenses of social relevance, audience, industry and politics. While focusing on the 1970s, a period that demarcates the historic origins of black superheroes, the description will also lay the foundation upon which subsequent arguments will be built about more recent comics featuring black superheroes. As such, this chapter looks at the seventies as a preliminary stage that I will later contrast with more recent projects in comic books writing.

In 1990, when a young staff editor at DC Comics asked then editorial director Dick Giordano why virtually all of the DC superheroes were white, Giordano replied, "Because they were created in the 1940s by Jews and Italians who wrote and drew what they knew" (Misiroglu 2004, 4). At first glance, this comment suggests that there is a correlation between the racial/ethnic make up of DC's writing and editorial staff and the types of characters created. However, we know that a lack of blacks in the industry did not prevent black characters from appearing during the seventies. Moreover, one could counter argue that a character like Martian Manhunter should not exist because there were no Martians working at DC Comics back in the 1940s. Clearly, thinking about the formations of the American comic book industry and its representations of raced characters requires a more nuanced and thoughtful approach. Here, I have chosen to do a historical survey and supplement this with commentary about

some of the social and political factors that gave rise to African-American superheroes.

According to several commentators Wright (2001), Fuchs and Reitberger (1972), Misiroglu (2004) and Hogan (2004), when African Americans appeared in the early comics, "they were abhorrently stereotyped with wide eyes and exaggerated pink lips, portrayed as easily frightened to elicit a chuckle from the white reader, and characterized as utterly dependent upon their Caucasian benefactors" (Misiroglu 2004, 4). This is when they actually were represented in comics. For the most part, blacks and other 'undesirable' minorities were absent from the pages of comic books:

> Not only blacks, but also poor whites, Puerto Ricans and the most neglected of all minorities, the Red Indians, were shamefully under-represented in comic strips; all those who did not fit into the ideal conception of an All-American USA never because protagonists in American comics (Fuchs and Reitberger 1972, 148).

Instead, minorities were always presented in a subordinate manner in comics before the 1960s.

For example, David A. Andelman reports in *The New York Times* (1970), "American children have watched Tarzan alternately bamboozle and bedevil the black cannibals who cavort through the jungles on the comic pages of the nation's newspapers" (Andelman 1970, C47). It seems that Tarzan's sole purpose in the jungles of Africa was to represent white colonial dominance over the 'natives'. The cover of *The Spirit* #1 (1944), Misiroglu observes, had "promised 'action, thrill and laughs', the latter provided by black sidekick Ebony White, nervously tiptoeing through a graveyard while sticking close to his protective mentor, the white Spirit" (Misiroglu 2004, 5). She also scrutinizes Timely Comics' (later

Marvel Comics) *Young Allies,* a team of youngsters "that included an African-American teen named Whitewash Jones—the 'comic relief' equivalent of Buckwheat from the *Our Gang* theatrical shorts—who was frequently rescued by white heroes Bucky and Toro", as well as the comic book hero Midnight's sidekick Gabby, a talking monkey drawn to resemble a chimp-sized black person with a tail" (Misiroglu 2004, 5).

Other portrayals of people of color depicted them in subservience. In the newspaper strips, by 1970 *Tarzan of the Apes* had changed. "No longer are the black men cannibals or innocent children," Andelman asserts, "thanks to Tarzan's latest creator, they have become equal partners" (Andelman 1970, C47). Of course by the standards of early 1970s, "equal partners" meant that Tarzan's African buddies would aide him by untying the Lord of the Apes when he was captured by adversaries. Likewise, Lothar, the black manservant of Mandrake the Magician, "served for many years as the dumb, faithful factotum of the intelligent white man [...] This black man, dressed in a lion skin and wearing a fez, could be trusted at first to perform only the simplest of tasks for the intellectual Mandrake" (Fuchs and Reitberger 1972, 151).[1] These sorts of characters, of whom *The Lone Ranger*'s Tonto is perhaps the most famous example, are visual representations of colonial power.

Sidekicks and servants aside, the integration of white and black Americans was mostly avoided during comics' Golden Age. DC Comics, however, published

---

[1] As a sign of social change, many of these subservient or comic relief black characters were ameliorated years later when attitudes toward blacks were changing. Comic book journalist Erik Hogan writes, "Even once marginalized characters were upgraded: Lothar began speaking proper English and ditched the bare-chested loincloth look, while Ebony White returned to the pages of the *Spirit* as the mayor of Central City" (Hogan 2004).

at least two stories in the later Golden age that included attempts at enlightenment. *World's Finest Comics* #17 (1945) shows African-American World War II servicemen on leave being denied service in a 'white-only' restaurant, and in *Batman* #57 (1950), the hero stops a fight between a white man and a black man. But instances such as these were rare. African Americans remained in the background, if seen at all, in comic books of the late 40s and 50s, although a handful of titles specifically targeted a black audience: *All-Negro Comics* (1947), *Negro Heroes* (1947-1948), and *Negro Romance* (1950) (Misiroglu 2004, 4). Fuchs and Reitberger claim that these comics were not commercial successes because whites wouldn't by them and their intended audience, black readers, were disinterested because the stories present black Americans "as dark-skinned whites" (Fuchs and Reitberger 1972, 243).

The question to ask at this point is "what changed?" Racism certainly didn't disappear during the 1960s. Moreover, by their very nature, "super-heroes re-establish the rule of order: at the end of each story the status quo is once again the same as it was before the threatened danger appeared" (Fuchs and Reitberger 1972, 151). How could they possibly reflect or foment some kind of social change? With these problems in mind, it became clear that there must have been several factors (with sufficient power to overcome systemic racism in comic book production) that contributed to the creation of black superheroes in the late 60s.

During the early Silver Age (1956-69), African Americans were non-existent in DC's flagship superhero series *Superman, The Flash* and *Green Lantern*. Bradford Wright remarks in *Comic Book Nation*, "Handsome superheroes resided in clean, green suburbs and modern, ever futuristic cities with

shimmering glass skyscrapers, no slums and populations of well-dressed white

people" (quoted in Misiroglu 2004, 4). The burgeoning Marvel universe, on the

other hand, was slightly more progressive, occasionally depicting a token person

of color amid urban crowd scenes (Wright 2001, 219; Fuchs and Reitberger 1972,

243), or in an urban school class with Peter Parker, a.k.a. Spider-Man (Wright

2001, 236-237). By 1965, there were war comics with black soldiers. Fuchs and

Reitberger provide the example of Jackie Johnson (from DC's *Our Army at*

War), a black WWII G.I. repeatedly confronted with racism from both Nazis and

American soldiers (Fuchs and Reitbeger 1972, 148-149). Also there was Gabriel

Jones from Marvel's *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* valiantly fighting

alongside whites in stories set during World War II (Misiroglu 2004, 5).[2]

However, Marvel Comics made history by introducing the Black Panther in

Fantastic Four #52 (1966). It is not surprising that Marvel was the first major

comic book publisher to an African-American Superhero. With sales slumping in

the entire post-war comic book market, all the major producers were suffering. In

order to save Marvel, Editor-in-Chief Stan Lee promoted his comic book line with

hip, youthful marketing. He "cultivated an image of Marvel Comics as a maverick

within the comic book field" throughout the sixties (Wright 2001, 217). Lee

ensured that Marvel heroes were associated with the counterculture at the time—

---

[2]Fuchs and Reitberger are quick to point out that the presence of blacks in WWII comics of the
1960s was a mixed blessing: according to the comic book portrayal, important battalions were
thoroughly integrated. "*Our Army at War* (DC) and the Howling Commandos in *Sgt. Fury*
(Marvel) included all possible ethnic minorities in their ranks" (Fuchs and Reitberger 1972, 149):
a Negro, an Italian, a Jew, an Irishman, and Englishman and a German. There was even a Native
American soldier in *Lt. Savage and His Rebel Raiders*. In the actual war, the possibility of all
these soldiers serving together in an un-segregated manner was nonexistent.

they were troubled outsiders, like the Hulk, or wisecracking youths like Spider-man; most importantly, they had human failings.

However, it was more than just marketing and social events that caused Marvel to initiate publishing black superheroes titles. Unlike DC, Marvel had lost a significant piece of the comics market share by the end of the fifties. Marvel's position in market was so poor that, in order to save money, publisher Martin Goodman shut down Marvel's distribution operation and surprisingly signed a deal with Marvel's chief competitor DC to distribute Marvels eight major titles (Wright 2001, 201). With a situation like this, Marvel had two choices: innovate or shut down everything. When the 'racial problem' and the freedom movement had become part of the American national consciousness, the time was ripe to offer black superheroes in comics. Always the opportunist, Stan Lee seized the moment and used civil rights as a vehicle for selling comics.

Whether the character's creators Stan Lee and Jack Kirby intentionally named the hero after the militant civil rights group, the Black Panthers, is uncertain. When questioned on this point, Lee claimed "that he didn't have the civil rights movement in mind, just diversity." Lee innocuously stated, "I had a lot of friends who were black and we had artists who were black [...]. So it occurred to me ... why aren't there any black heroes?" (Houston 1999). However, keeping in mind Lee's strategy of aligning Marvel's heroes with the counterculture, this explanation seems unlikely.

The Black Panther—a.k.a. Prince T'Challa, monarch of a fictional affluent, industrialized African nation called Wakanda—was highly educated, extremely noble and amazingly lithe. He also became a colleague of the Fantastic Four's

resident super-genius, Reed Richards (a.k.a. Mr. Fantastic), and was treated—

going against convention—as Richards' intellectual equal. Portrayed as an

admirable role model for readers of any race, a very unconventional and novel

black character indeed, the Black Panther broke the color barrier for African

Americans in the world of superheroes. The impact of his introduction, however,

was not apparent from an examination of the cover of *Fantastic Four* #52—the

Black Panther's black bodysuit and full facemask completely obfuscated his race

(Misiroglu 2004, 5-6).[3] From 1966 to 1970, Marvel's Black Panther was the only

African American superhero in mainstream American comics.

Later on, Marvel introduced the Falcon, a flying black hero, into the pages of

Captain America #117 (1969). Behind the Falcon's feathered costume was Sam

Wilson, a Harlem social worker, who had previously guest-starred with Marvel's

"Star-Spangled Sentinel" before actually becoming his teammate. These two

heroes surprisingly shared cover co-billing. Noteworthy as well is the fact that

Captain America, the super-heroic embodiment of American ideals, was the first

white superhero to partner with a black superhero (Misiroglu 2004, 6).

DC comics throughout the late 60s and early 70s remained just as white as

they were in the previous two decades. According to comic book scholar Bradford

Wright, during the period from 1968-1979, the mainstream media took hold of

'relevance' as a keyword describing the American comic book industry. According

to Wright,

> Relevance was hardly a new development in comic books, which had, of
> course, always related closely to the events and concerns of their times. What
> the media actually noticed as "relevance" was a proliferation of self-

---

[3] Perhaps Marvel wished to dupe its readership.

consciously leftist comic book explorations of political and social issues (Wright 2001, 233).

This 'relevance period' was characterized by a desire among comic book creators to create social and political verisimilitude within the superhero genre, with the expressed end of making superhero comic books 'relevant' to the contemporary socio-political scene of the 1970s. Race conflict, class warfare, poverty, the war on drugs and global politics found their way into the pages of comic books. While writers of this era had a distinct political agenda, it seems, in retrospect, that often they did not ask for whom these politicized stories would be relevant.

Comic book historians (Wright 2001; Fuchs and Reitberger 1972) attribute this shift in comic book writing in the 70s to the social upheaval brought by movements of the previous decade, such as women's liberation, civil rights and anti-war demonstrations, and public disillusionment caused by the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War. While arguing for the concession that "popular memory has exaggerated the extent of the 1960s social revolt," Wright claims that American popular culture was more suspicious of authority (Wright 2001, 229). Coeval superhero comic books, in a modest way, reflected this change in popular public opinion. One particular comic series, *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, teamed-up hip and leftist Green Arrow (a.k.a. Oliver Queen) with square and moderately conservative Green Lantern (a.k.a. Hal Jordan) and "immersed its superheroes in the social and political issues of the times: racism, poverty, political corruption, the "generation gap," the plight of Native Americans, pollution, overpopulation, and religious cults" (Wright 2001, 227). Young comics writer Dennis O'Neil was brought on board to make *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*

"hip" and appealing to an readership that was no longer interested in conforming to social norms. O'Neil and artist Neal Adams created a super heroic "odd couple" for the social milieu of the 1970s by downplaying the typical "Space Crusader" storylines of the previous decade. The new stories chronicled Green Lantern's political and social re-awakening, which often took the form of hyper-liberal Green Arrow berating Green Lantern for his conservative, outmoded politics.

A provocative scene from the same issue of *Green Lantern* brings this point home. An elderly black man righteously confronts a sheepish Green Lantern (see fig.2.1).

Fig. 3.1: An irate elderly black man confronts Green Lantern (Hal Jordan) in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* #76 (1970).

O'Neil implicates Hal Jordan's race as an impediment to his pledge to protect

earth and its people; he is limited not by his will but rather by his own prejudice

and indifference. In short, dire situations and disadvantaged people remain

unaided and vulnerable because Green Lantern's white, middle class maleness

get in the way. It was no wonder that within this political context that black

superheroes, for the first time ever, appeared in mainstream American comic

books. Starting with Black Panther in 1966 and the Falcon (1969), others soon

followed: Luke Cage (a.k.a. Power Man) and John Stewart (a.k.a. Green Lantern)

(1972), Black Goliath (1975) and Black Lightning (1977).[4]

There is another factor that influenced the creation of black superheroes. The

economic situation of the comic book industry forced the innovation of

introducing black characters into comics, and the socio-political 'relevance'

storytelling trend presented a setting for new black-centered stories to transpire,

however the aesthetics of seventies Afro-American superhero comics came

predominantly from Blaxploitation films. The name Blaxploitation (a term not

without irony) usually denotes the sixty-odd Hollywood films "that centered on

black narratives, featured black casts playing out various action-adventures in the

ghetto, and were released roughly between 1969 and 1974" (Guerrero 1993, 69).

Ed Guerrero states that observers in the 1960s realized that Blaxploitation films

"were made possible by the rising political and social consciousness of black

people" influenced by the growing momentum of the civil rights movement and

Black Nationalist movements. This in turn created an audience of eager black

---

[4] Of all these heroes, Black Lighting was the only one primarily conceived by an Afro-American.

cinemagoers who wanted to "see their full humanity depicted on the commercial cinema screen" (Guerrero 1993, 69).

These events also coincided with the near collapse of the Hollywood film industry at the end of the 1960s (Guerrero 1993, 70). Guerrero maintains that Blaxploitation's roots begin in 1967 with black audiences' dissatisfaction with Sidney Poitier's star image and its association with integrationist film narrative, as exampled by *In the Heat of the Night, To Sir with Love* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (Guerrero 1993, 70, 72). Paula J. Massood agrees, "the portrait of the African American male painted by the problem pictures was asexual, middle-class, and more rural or suburban than urban" (Massood 2003, 80). This dissatisfaction, according to Guerrero, gave rise to more assertive 'macho' black film heroes like athletes Jim Brown and Fred Williamson. This new protagonist, says Massood, "was an African American screen hero who was male, urban, sexually and socially virile and often problematic for his middle class critics—both African American and white" (Massood 2003, 81). Jesse Algernon Rhines agrees that these film were contentious: "[Blaxploitation films] were released during the height of the civil rights/Black liberation movement, yet their subject matter of sex, violence and 'super-cool' individualism was the antithesis of what contemporaneous black political organizations, like SNCC, the NAACP or SCLC supported for Black people; hence the name 'blaxploitation,' [...]" (Rhines 1996, 46). Thus, the popularity of this film trend also resulted in exclusively black-focused narratives like *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970, adapted from a book by black crime novelist Chester Himes) and *The Watermelon Man* (1970) that were black and unabashedly urban. However, it was in 1971 with the release

of Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* that the formula for

the Blaxploitation genre solidified for subsequent genre exemplars such as *Shaft*

and *Superfly* (Guerrero 1993, 70-71).

This formula revolved around the figure of the 'bad nigger' "who challenges

the oppressive white system and wins, thus articulating the main feature of the

Blaxploitation formula" (Guerrero 1993, 86). The appeal of this sort of character

is obvious, and also has many historical antecedents.[5] It is not surprising that the

'bad nigger' appeared in other media. Always looking to cash in on a fad, Marvel

comics in 1972 produced its first comic book series starring a black superhero.

Luke Cage: Hero for Hire #1 depicted the secret origin of Lucas a streetwise

black man unjustly incarcerated for a crime he didn't commit. The story is a solid

derivative of Blaxploitation film, setting up an antagonism between the

protagonist, Lucas, and the dominant white power structure. However, there is

one important difference.

> Framed, sent to prison and abused by sadistic white guards, Cage is subjected
> to a secret government chemical experiment that unexpectedly endows him
> with superhuman strength and invulnerability. He uses his new powers to
> break out of prison, clear his name and begin a career as a "hero for hire,"
> willing to work within or outside the law for a price (Wright 2001, 247).

Luke Cage, abused prisoner cum super-powered hustler, illustrates how well the

two genres—super-heroic and Blaxploitation—coalesce into a unique synthesis

while still possessing the foremost elements of both. Unlike the Black Panther,

who was an aristocrat, and the Falcon—a middle-class social worker—Cage, later

dubbed Power Man, was of the streets. The Blaxploitation elements of these early

---

[5] Rhines claims that the 'bad nigger' is an African American folk type, as exampled by Br'er
Rabbit, John Henry and that ilk (Rhines 1996, 43).

black superhero stories blended well with the 'relevance' trend in comic book writing of the time. Power Man and other Blaxploitation-inspired superheroes took comic book narratives out of the clean suburbs and onto 'the streets' where crime and injustice were far more common and dangerous.

The political economies of Blaxploitation film and black superhero comics are dissimilar in some ways but also share interesting symmetries. Many Blaxploitation films were produced with meager budgets and for this reason realized large profits for Hollywood film companies. The independent film *Sweetback* was produced on a $500,000 budget and grossed $10 million through distribution of independent cinemas (Rhines 1996, 43). This showed Hollywood how lucrative black-oriented films could be. For a very small investment, Hollywood film producers could cash in on black audiences desire to see powerful, violent blacks on film. For instance, MGM's hit film *Shaft*, cost $1.2 million to produced but grossed $11 million at the box-office.

Black superhero comics, on the other hand, were produced with the same quality and care as other titles of that time, but were largely unsuccessful as far as sales went. As a result, many titles starring African-American superheroes were cancelled after only a few issues. *Luke Cage: Hero for Hire* lasted for sixteen issues before it was transformed into *Power Man and Iron Fist* (1978), going from gritty Blaxploitation to dynamic-duo camp until cancellation in 1986. Marvel also produced a title called *Black Goliath* (1975, the name says it all), which disappeared shortly after its debut. Black Panther received his own monthly series beginning in *Jungle Action* #5 in 1974; it was cancelled in 1976. 1977 saw the debut of DC's first black superhero with a monthly title in *Black*

Lightning #1, but this series lasted for only eleven issues. John Stewart, the black Green Lantern, introduced in 1972, was rarely seen for the duration of the seventies, after his initial appearance in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* #87.

Interestingly, black superheroes faced the opposite problem of their filmic counterparts in terms of sales to black audiences. As a former editor at Marvel put it, "You could get blacks to buy comics about whites, but it was hard to get whites to buy comics in which the main character was black" (quoted in Wright 2001, 249-250). On first glance, this statement suggests that the black buying power for comics was not as strong as that of cinema. However, I suspect that the profitability of Blaxploitation films came mostly from their small budgets; with such small production costs, the margin for profit was that much higher. Had comic book producers followed this model, instead of simply adopting the aesthetic of Blaxploitation, perhaps they would have seen more sales of black superhero titles.

Two points of symmetry between Blaxploitation film and black superhero comics were their ownership structures and creative staff—both of these were predominantly white. From 1971 to 1974, a quarter of all films in production featured strong and sexy blacks, both male and female (Rhines 1996, 45). However, Rhines notes, "whites were often in control behind the camera reproducing their own point of view." Of all these Blaxploitation films produced during that period, "fewer than one fifth were under African-American control. Even fewer came from black-owned production houses, and fewer still were financed and/or distributed by African Americans" (Rhines 1996, 45).

Comics were no different. For example, Marvel's Black Panther was created

and written by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby initially, and Hero for Hire though

occasionally scripted and drawn by a young African American Billy Graham, was

conceived and written by white creators (Wright 2001, 247). At DC, white writer

Denis O'Neil and white artist Neal Adams created John Stewart, the Green

Lantern, while black comic book artist Tony Isabella, creator of Black Lightning,

complained "even open-minded white writers found it difficult to portray

minority characters in a way that was not offensive or patronizing" (Wright 2001,

249).

I mention all this not to show that Blaxploitation and black superhero comics

are congruent in their development, but rather I wish to illustrate how they were

and still are parts of common cultural movements. It is interesting to note that

the film, *I'm Gonna Get you Sucka* (1988), is considered by MGM a part of the

Blaxploitation genre, hence its inclusion in the Soul Cinema box set. Peculiar as

this seems, this film represents a second wave of Blaxploitation films that critique

the moribund genre by means of parody. In many ways the resurgence of black

superhero comics in the late eighties and nineties was also in this parodic mode,

despite their attempts at serious commentary. The most notable of these are a

four-issue *Black Panther* miniseries that address apartheid (1988), *Green*

Lantern: Mosaic (1992-1993)—in which John Stewart is charged with policing a

multi-cultural 'ghetto in space' and a "graphically shocking" reinterpretation of

Luke Cage (Power Man) entitled simply *Cage* (1992) and a Marvel MAX series in

2002.

Having spent much time now describing the origins of black supermen, I would like to spend some time characterizing these figures and demonstrating some ways in which they differ from white superheroes. The differences between the two are not always obvious because the overall superhero archetype is quite encompassing. Jeffrey Brown's structuralist view, which emphasizes the sameness of heroes like Icon, a black super-powered hero, and Superman, seems to put too much credence in the idea that blackness is simply a marker of difference—it is hard to see how this could be something other than more of the same.

However, Brown's understating of Milestone Media and its publications is more sophisticated than this. While he points out that the differences are paradigmatic, not syntagmatic—i.e., the syntax (superhero conventions and tropes) has remained the same but the vocabulary (white/non-white) is different. Brown also emphasizes that the source of this binary difference was not having a comic book universe full of black heroes, but rather that the perceived 'difference' was how creators and readers understood these black heroes in relation to white heroes. In other words, Brown is interested in how meaning was gleaned from Milestone texts in relation to others within the genre. I agree with this approach and therefore present the following survey of these paradigmatic changes with a description of their significance within not only the syntax of the superhero genre by within other spheres of textual influence.

One thing that all superheroes have in common is some sort of transformation that clearly differentiates the superhuman persona from the mild-mannered, human alter ego. Whether this transformation is achieved by means of

incantation—as with Green Lantern, He-Man and Captain Marvel—or by simply

dawning a costume—Batman, Spider-man, Iron Man—or by employing mystic or

alien devices—Hawkman, Blue Beetle, Dr. Strange—the transformation

establishes the dualism between man and superman.[6]

The events leading up to the first time that this transformation takes place are

important. For example, in the case of Batman, Bruce Wayne's entire psyche is

predicated the night in his childhood that his parents were murdered before him.

Michael Brody has observed in "Batman: Psychic Trauma and Its Solution" that

Bruce Wayne is "a man whose mission has taken over his life" (Brody 1995, 171)

resulting from the childhood trauma described above. The "solution" or

resolution is for Bruce to incorporate this trauma into his life. After taking the

emblem of the bat, a symbol of fear, "Bruce vowed to avenge [his parents'] deaths

with a war on crime. Thus, Batman was born" (Brody 1995, 171). It is also crucial

to note, as Asa Berger does in "Batman and the Archaic Ego: The Aristocrat as

Reformer", that "In a sense [Batman] has the best of both worlds—riches and

esteem as a beneficent millionaire and action and glory as a crime-fighting hero"

(Berger 1973, 168). Bruce Wayne's privilege as a wealthy aristocrat allows him to

make this sort of transformation, not merely an act of pure will.

Likewise, Superman must solve his trauma—survivor syndrome. While his

adoptive home affords him tremendous strength and abilities, Superman's

greatest superpower, as suggested by the infamous character Bill in Quentin

Tarantino's *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, is his ability to be normal, to pass as an everyman:

---

[6] Even Superman underwent a transformation of sorts. Kryptonians have no superpowers on their home planet. It is only earth's sun that provides him with superhuman abilities.

> An essential characteristic of the superhero mythology is, there's the superhero, and there's the alter ego. Batman is actually Bruce Wayne. Spider-Man is actually Peter Parker. When he wakes up in the morning, he's Peter Parker. He has to put on a costume to become Spider-Man. And it is in that characteristic that Superman stands alone. Superman did not become Superman, Superman was born Superman. When Superman wakes up in the morning, he's Superman. His alter ego is Clark Kent. His outfit with the big red "S", that's the blanket he was wrapped in as a baby when the Kents found him. Those are his clothes. What Kent wears, the glasses, the business suit, that's the costume; that's the costume Superman wears to blend in with us. Clark Kent is how Superman views us. And what are the characteristics of Clark Kent? He's weak, he's unsure of himself... he's a coward. Clark Kent is Superman's critique on the whole human race [...].

Superman incorporates the trauma of being perhaps the most unique person in the universe—the Last Son of Krypton—by striving each day to be more and more ordinary. No place is this better revealed than in the fact that Lois Lane is in love with Superman, but that's not good enough for him, he must have her love Clark Kent instead.

Black superheroes, too, must deal with psychic trauma that results in transformation. However, for most black supermen, that trauma results from feeling powerless and/or helpless in American society. For instance, Luke Cage (a.k.a. Power Man, the *nom de guerre* is not insignificant) started life as Carl Lucas, a jive-talkin' street thug. In order to remove Lucas as a romantic rival, Lucas' best friend framed him by planting two kilos of cocaine in his apartment. Carl Lucas went to prison where he was abused by inmates and guards alike. While in prison, the crooked warden offered him a chance at parole, if he volunteered for a secret, dangerous scientific experiment. During the experiment, helpless Lucas is attacked by the warden who had tampered with the controls of the experimental apparatus. There was an explosion and the resulting 'accident' left Lucas with steel hard skin, ultra dense muscles and super strength. He then

uses his new power to escape from prison and moves to New York, changing his name to Lucas Cage, later Power Man. Unlike most characters with powers, Cage is not altruistic and decided to use his powers to make a living working as a 'hero-for-hire'.

Fig. 3.2: Carl Lucas discovers freedom as he escapes from prison with his newfound superpowers in *Hero for Hire* #1 (1972).

A significant scene in this tale occurs directly after Lucas is almost killed in the explosion. Tearing his way out of the burning apparatus, an unharmed Lucas realizes the potential of his new power and declares as he punches a hole in the prison wall, "...with this kind of power, I'm gonna be free!" (Goodwin et al. 1972, 18). This statement, of course, has quite a literal meaning in this context. However, it also echoes the political rhetoric of the Freedom Movement in 1960s America, thus suggesting that the character has finally found some means to overcome oppression from the white establishment. Another noteworthy facet of Power Man is that unlike the aristocratic Batman, whose wealth and social position provide him with the means to fight crime, Cage, as a hero-for-hire uses crime-fighting as a way of gaining material wealth.

This is not true for a black superhero like Michael Holt, known as Mr. Terrific. Holt was an Olympic decathlon gold medal winner from an upper middle class family. He created his own cyber-wear company that he eventually sold to Bruce Wayne. Despite these successes, Holt's life was shattered when his wife, Angela, was killed in a car accident. Falling into a depression, Holt contemplated suicide until the Spectre, the spirit of vengeance and justice, intervened. The Spectre told Holt about Terry Sloane, the original Mr.Terrific, and Holt decided to adopt Sloane's superhero name and his concept of "Fair Play." He uses his extraordinary talents as a superhero in the inner city (Ostrander et al. 1999, 64).

Like Batman, Mr. Terrific is a self-made man—the result of many years of studying and training combined with a prodigal aptitude for almost everything—and money, of course. Like Bruce Wayne, Michael Holt has wealth and status;

however, in many ways he is more like an anti-Superman. Superman is motivated by his desire to be assimilated into society. He works hard not to 'stand out' when he is Clark Kent. Mr. Terrific is the opposite. He is an over-achiever who seems to have taken to heart the folk wisdom that a black man must work ten times harder to be on equal footing with a white man. In the end, this is essentially what "Fair Play" means to Mr. Terrific—a leveling of the playing field for all people, but a leveling that doesn't involve assimilation or servitude to an unattainable ideal. In these ways, black supermen overcome their helplessness and take control of the world around them.

In addition to trauma, another distinctive visual element of a superhero is his costume. It announces him immediately as extraordinary. As well, it plays an important role in the transformation process mentioned previously. For black superheroes, their 'blackness' is encoded into their apparel. For example, Power Man's outfit incorporates broken chains into its design, symbolizing, presumably, the broken shackles of slavery. Black Lightning's costume, which like Power Man's has a disco style, has a mask that is attached to an afro wig, making him a black man disguised as a black man. When Hal Jordan gives John Stewart a Green Lantern costume identical to his own, Stewart joking says that he should be called "Black Lantern" so that people can tell them apart (O'Neil et al. 1972, 6).[7] Eager to separate himself from his white counterpart, Stewart refuses to wear his green mask saying, "I won't wear any mask! This black man lets it all hang out! I've got nothing to hide" (O'Neil et al. 1972, 7). Blackness is always at the

---

[7] This would certainly bring him in line with the nomenclature of other black superheroes. It has always puzzled me why Power Man didn't change his name to 'Black Power Man'. It has a much better ring to it, don't you think?

forefront of their costumed personae, and when it isn't the name says it all. This isn't meant to imply that whiteness isn't predominant trait of characters like Batman, Superman and Mr. Fantastic, rather I want to illustrate that it generally goes unnoticed or unquestioned. There are some exceptions to this: Superman explains to Lois Lane, in *Lois Lane* #106, that he is unaffected by human prejudices, claiming, "I don't even have human skin! It's tougher than steel!" Lois Lane retorts, "But... your skin is the right color!" (Roth & Colletta 1970, 13). This prompts the question: in his quest to be ordinary can Superman be anything other than white?[8]

Superheroes are tremendous moral agents. In the real world, vigilantism is not condoned, but in the pages of superhero comics, the patronizing and morally absolute actions of Superman and others is not only condoned, but it is also commended. The moral sphere of action of superheroes is seemingly limitless. They can apply their moral judgments to all people and places—they can even exercise their authority on other planets. Although there are no limits to where white superheroes can act, they have the luxury of choosing where they will fight the good fight. A recent comic book story tells of a criminal organization operating in the heart of Metropolis right under Superman's nose. They get away with it for years because they do all their dirty dealing in bathrooms. Why bathrooms? The criminal logic is brilliant: Superman is too much of a prude to actually use his x-ray vision to spy on people in the lavatory. It takes a hero of the

---

[8] This is what makes a superhero like Milestone Media's Icon so fascinating, since he is a direct answer to this question.

underground, the Question, to discover what the Man of Steel has repeatedly

overlooked in the name of probity.[9]

Like the Question, black superheroes are often heroes of the underground,

taking on hidden menaces of the inner city. In the seventies, the purview of black

superheroes was the city, or more accurately, the ghetto. Like Blaxploitation

heroes, these superheroes were predominantly urban. Black Lightning was

actually Jefferson Pierce, an inner city schoolteacher by day; the Falcon was a

social worker; Power Man was an ex-con. Even John Stewart, the Green Lantern,

lived in Los Angeles, and later on patrolled a space-ghetto on another planet. This

connection to the urban experience lends these characters to a certain type of

storytelling. In superhero comics, as with other cultural forms such as hip-hop,

blackness is aligned with the urbane. This is not a problem in itself, especially

since we've already seen how superheroes' whiteness can constrain them. It's fine

for Batman to take down black criminals, but the issue is a little bit more

complicated for black superheroes. Davenport points out how Steel's actions are

construed as black on black violence by those he apprehends. In *Steel* #37 (1997),

a black criminal in Steel's clutches berates the hero: "You put on that armor...

You were that symbol... You demanded my attention. Made me wanna flex a

little—see what kinda brother you are. That is assuming you're a brother at all.

Wearing that white man's symbol..." (quoted in Davenport 1998). Here, it is

implied that by aligning himself with Superman, Steel is a sell-out, another dupe

of the white man. This puts the black superhero in a precarious situation. Like

---

[9] All this occurs in Veitch & Edwards's *The Question* #1-6 (Jan-June 2004) published by DC Comics.

Shaft in the film of the same name, he must work hard to uphold his sense of justice while at the same time not losing his credibility as a black man. This feat cannot always be executed smoothly.

In this chapter, I have attempted to characterize the key traits and origins of black superheroes in mainstream American comic books. I have tried to illustrate that black superheroes appear in the 1970s for very specific social, political and economic reasons—it was not a fluke. I have also shown how these black characters differ from their white counterparts and what this means for them as figures of a masculine ideal and as representations of black men in general. In the next chapter, I will show how more contemporary comic books have engaged with these themes and tropes, incorporating various characteristics of the black superhero story into their narration while at the same time complicating and critiquing, examining retrospectively from the vantage point of the present, the fortunes and follies of black supermen.

CHAPTER III

Reading Formations: Origins, Tradition, Time

This chapter describes particular trends concerning race in comic book storytelling and indicates how the history of the superhero genre, as well as other antecedents, formations, etc., informs three selected texts about black superheroes and history. These trends in superhero comics, namely the cooption and recuperation of senses of the past and historical revision, not only augments received historical knowledge, I will argue, but also informs a critical reading of comic book history itself. It is important to note that these texts are part of the mainstream, marketed to a large audience of millions. Therefore, these revisions and augmentations represent major shifts in a cultural industry as it re-orients itself in relation to notions of history, potential and standard markets, and a particular tradition of comic book history that is over seventy years old at this point.

In three sections, each focusing on a different superhero story, this chapter endeavors to show how conceptions of time, traditions of canonicity and debates over authenticity intermingle to produce the reading formation of contemporary superhero comics. The African-American superhero is a critical player as a site of historical contention—for reasons presented in the previous chapter. The significance of the black superman, it will be argued, is his unusual position in comics and other media as a potential figure of counter-memory. The basic premise is this: Since the black man has been 'absent' from history, it is meaningful to insert him into traditional historical narratives at strategic points. This is evident from much post-colonial and historiographic meta-fictional

writing.[1] The texts I've selected for analysis all speak directly to our notions of 'official history'. Moreover, even though they were all produced in the past three years, they are all meant to seem as if they were made before 1970. Of course they were not; the 'official' history tells us that there were no black superheroes before 1966. But the fictional history argues, rather compellingly, for the contrary. These three texts take elements from the established comic book history of black superheroes, which peaks in the seventies, and then use these elements to transform our understanding of the 40s, 50s and 60s. What follows are the textual analyses that lead me to make this claim.

What's Old Is New

In *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture*, Shelton Waldrep observes that the nineties were a decade deeply steeped in aesthetic remembrances of the seventies. Films by Martin Scorsese, Quentin Tarantino and P.T. Anderson take a retrospective look at the seventies from the vantage point of the nineties. They used the past, in this case the seventies, as a means of discussing contemporary concerns. Movie distributors have realized that our contemporary affinity with the seventies can be transformed into profit. For example, MGM has recently purchased the rights to American International Pictures (AIP)'s entire Blaxploitation catalogue. AIP produced such memorable Blaxploitation films such as *Coffy* (1973, starring Pam Grier), *Foxy Brown* (1974, also starring Grier) and *Black Caesar* (1973, starring Fred Williamson). With this acquisition, MGM now owns the largest collection of Blaxploitation films, which

---

[1] Particularly in the works by authors such as Toni Morrison, for example.

it has re-mastered and released on DVD under the auspice of its "Soul Cinema" line (Cogswell 2000). MGM seems to have made the most of a resurgence of interest in Blaxploitation film and the seventies, partially due to the success of films by directors like Quentin Tarantino. Tarantino himself has suggested that the continued popularity of these films comes from "a certain American-ness at the center of these films that got lost. Still, through popular genres like hip-hop, they live on, almost in the unconscious" (quoted in Lambert 2003, 17). Tarantino seems to provide a pithy paraphrase of Raymond Williams's discussion about the cultural uses of the residual. Blaxploitation films and black superhero comics provide key examples of how residual elements of culture are incorporated into emergent and dominant cultural forms; there is always a 'looking back'. This chapter will explore this retrospective action as it applies to superhero comics featuring African-American superheroes.

Waldrep understands this retrospective phenomenon as a significant cultural commentary. He notes, "the seventies have now become a key part of the equation of our millennial anxiety—the place to look for the answer to the question: Who have we become at the century's end?" (Waldrep 2000, 2). This basic question of identity characterizes the essays gathered in *The Seventies*. The various authors, who examine even more diverse subject matters, all "share an approach to performance and performativity that places emphasis on the ways in which the seventies constitute a laboratory for experimenting with self-creation" (Waldrep 2000, 2). According to Waldrep, the laboratory hasn't changed much since 1970, but the methodologies used today—employing the familiar categories

of analysis of "gender, sexuality, race, region and ethnicity"— have been reconstituted and reassembled in our own time in relevant ways.

For examples of this, one might look, as Waldrep does, at the popular American sitcom *That '70's Show*, which, interestingly enough, is marketed to an audience that was barely alive in 1970. He suggests that the appeal of *That '70's Show* and others like it (such as *The Brady Bunch Movie, Austin Powers: Goldmember, Undercover Brother*, etc.) allow the generation that grew up during the seventies "to look back at their youth with some degree of summation." Moreover, the subject of the seventies serves as an "opportunity to experiment with writing that allows them to use their own history and memory as material" (Waldrep 2000, 3). I will be making the argument here that this sort of reconstitution of the past, as described by Waldrep et al., is important to understanding superhero characters in general and black superheroes specifically. This mining of the past for storylines is nothing new to the superhero genre, but what is interesting about its application to black superheroes is how it is applied to 'formative events' in history. However, this isn't just about the seventies; it can be applied to many different historical periods, as we shall see.

The recent comics I'll be examining incorporate this kind of resurrection of the past—the residual elements of the past are incorporated into contemporary texts, providing both a means for discussing the past while at the same time considering it from the vantage point of our own historical moment. These texts build whole structures of feeling about past periods of time, such as the 1970s, WWII era and the 'Red Scare' paranoia in the 1950s, and recast these historical moments showing how the political and social factors of the time affected African

Americans. Of course, stories about black superheroes provide a unique site where this sort of 'historiography' can be studied in detail because, as already stated, for the most part black Americans are absent from the official historical record. In this sense, 'Black History' is always already revisionist history. The comics that I will be looking at perform a recasting of historical moments that bring American race politics to the forefront.

Before I discuss the casting and recasting of historical moments in comic books, I'd like to return to Eco's notion of oneiric climate in comics in order to illustrate the process by which this recasting occurs in the first place. Eco's observations about 'static time' in comic book storytelling is valid up to the eighties, at that point comic book storytelling takes what might best be characterized as a postmodern turn—a turn that would change the operations of the oneiric climate. One particular comic book story that worked to change all this was called *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1986). In summary, *Crisis* inadvertently attacked the very notion of unchanging narrative continuity in comic books by taking the multiple universe model—upon which the whole of DC's comic book stories occurred—and collapsed this multi-verse (as it came to be called) into a single storytelling universe. Pre-*Crisis* the Golden Age heroes lived substantive lives in another universe all their own. By passing into another universe (a very common storytelling trope), Golden Age heroes could team up with their contemporary counterparts. In the post-*Crisis* continuity, the Golden Age more or less ceased to exist. Golden age Batman and Superman only existed in the minds of the readers and on the pages of back issues. With the annihilation of the Golden Age, comic book fans lamented the loss of their childhoods—only to

discover later on, through cruel post-modern irony, that their childhoods had never existed in the first place. However, *Crisis* is significant as a comic book text because it inadvertently allowed for further revelation and deconstruction of the genre's limitations—for instance, the white, masculinist biases of superhero narratives.

With the disturbance of the cosmology or "universe" in which these stories occurred, it was consequently possible to thoroughly deconstruct the superhero genre like never before—nothing was sacrosanct any more. The deconstruction of the superhero genre began with a questioning of the category "superhero" in depth, as seen in such works as *Watchmen* (1986) and *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). The 'deconstruction' comics taught us that everything that we took for granted about certain superheroes might not be true. *Green Lantern: Emerald Dawn* (1989) reveals that Hal Jordan, the Green Lantern, a man without fear was an incredible coward whose fear was removed by his power ring. The account in *Batman: Year One* (1986) shows that young Bruce Wayne in his first year as Batman was incompetent and inexperienced. According to *Watchmen* (1986), the Golden Age heroes that we revered so much as perfect examples of the American heroic ideal were alcoholics, homosexuals and rapists. While these deconstructions of the super-heroic ideal do not necessarily disprove Eco's oneiric climate, they suggest that the influence of static development in comics has a limited scope. Regardless of how one characterizes this turn in storytelling, today the consequences of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* are germane to superhero tales. One of the things I wish to propose here is that this change, which occurs in

superhero comic book storytelling by means of authors re-rendering traditions, has consequences for how superhero stories are told, marketed and consumed.

These factors contribute to reading formations "which concretely and historically structure the interaction between texts and readers" (Bennett 1982, 222). These reading formations are a set of intersecting discourses which productively activate a given body of texts and the relations between them in a specific way, "during what is traditionally, and inadequately, thought of as the process of their consumption or reception" (Bennett 1982, 214). Bennett claims that reading formations are determined by "productive activation", which doesn't involve an individual interacting with a single text, but rather posits the interaction of an individual with many interrelated texts (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 64). These individual interactions with interrelated texts can be used to understand how certain popular figures come to reside in various parts of popular culture. Bennett and Woollacott argue that James Bond is such a figure, which they call a popular hero. But Bond is not a static figure, and just as Bennett and Woollacott spend a great deal of time discussing the transformation of the Bond novels into films as a way of illustrating reading formation (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, Chapter 5), I'd like to talk about the transformation of the seventies Blaxploitation-style superhero into what I'm calling an agent of counter-memory. To do this, I'll be focusing on what Bennett and Woollacott call the resolutions of "imbricated narrative tensions" (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 141).

A Black Man Was the First

I'd like to begin by looking at the determinant forces in the comic book industry that produced a story like *Truth: Red, White & Black* before I get into examining the story and its ideological trajectory. In 2003, Marvel was in trouble; the company was bankrupt, directionless and creatively stagnant. Bill Jemas, was brought on as Marvels CEO. He managed the company well, reducing its debts. He also made Marvel superheroes household names by invigorating such Marvel staple titles such as *New X-Men, Daredevil* and *The Amazing Spider-Man*, most of which were suffering a massive drop in sales. Also, early in his tenure at Marvel, Jemas hired Joe Quesada as editor-in-chief. Quesada, an artist who had run his own smaller imprint, fomented in a new era of creativity in Marvel's moribund writing department. Quesada commissioned innovative projects and lured big-name writers and artists from DC Comics, independent publishing and Hollywood.[2] Quesada then gave these talented individuals latitude to tell the stories they wanted, with little editorial interference. The team of Jemas and Quesada was the driving force behind Marvel's Ultimate line (entry level comics for newcomers introduced to Marvel comics via the success of Marvel's film projects), which created a new, streamlined Marvel Universe populated with modern versions of the company's characters. The popularity of the Ultimate line was extraordinary—soon *Ultimate Spider-Man* and *Ultimate X-Men* were outselling their old-school counterparts *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *The Uncanny X-Men*. Jemas also reinvigorated Marvel's trade-paperback program

---

[2] Among them were J. Michael Straczynski *Babylon 5*, Brian Michael Bendis *Powers* and Grant Morrison *The Invisibles*.

and pushed graphic novels into bookstores. He sensed the rise in popularity of Japanese comics and purposely launched titles that adopted Japanese methods of storytelling as well as publishing format (Harris 2003).

It was in this sort of climate that *Truth* was produced. The idea had been tossed around at the Marvel offices for quite some time in various guises early on in the Bill Jemas/Joe Quesada era. At first, it was thought that Captain America in the Ultimate line was going to be black—but then another character, Nick Fury, was 'recast' as black instead, and the idea of a black Captain America faded. Matt Brady writes, "[Jemas] later brought up the idea of a black Captain America at a dinner with writers and editors as a possibility for the Ultimate line. According to Jemas' rationale, World War II era America wasn't the most PC place in the world, and, given the reality of the Tuskegee, if the government had a super-soldier serum to test on someone; blacks were going to play a role somewhere." (Brady 2003). Morales and Alonso, writer and artist (respectively) of *Truth*, were present for this dinner conversation, and it sparked their ideas for a very unusual Captain America story. The premise was compelling and somewhat controversial: black soldiers were used as human guinea pigs in order to produce the super-soldier serum that turned runty (but white) Steve Rogers into Captain America. While most comic book fans were intrigued, many were angered by this story—it ran contrary to the fictional history that had been passed on to them by previous generations of comic book fans—it was impossible for Captain America to be black.

Such hostilities toward historical revision along racial lines are not unheard of. J.A. Rogers, a notable advocate of the Afro-centric view of history, maintained

that Ludwig Van Beethoven was black or at least of Afro-European heritage, and

popularized the idea that Beethoven's mother was a moor thereby making one of

Europe's foremost musical geniuses of African decent in his book *One Hundred*

Amazing Facts about the Negro with Complete Proof (1957).[3] While Rogers

provides nothing more than spurious anecdotal evidence from Beethoven's

contemporaries to substantiate the claim (apparently a few historical figures

described Beethoven as 'swarthy' and commented on his wide nose and thick

lips) (Rogers 1957, 123,178), a vigorous debate has ensued. As in all debates of

origin, there is a great deal at stake. From the point of view of the Africanized

Beethoven supporters, a black Beethoven would be a boon in proving the debt

that Western music and culture owe to the cultures of Africa. Whereas advocates

of the purely European Beethoven were either unwilling to admit to a falsehood

or not willing to concede that one of the pillars of Western culture had any

association at all with the 'dark continent.' There is so much at stake that

proponents of both sides of the debate have entirely bypassed the skepticism that

the body of evidence demands and have allowed the whole thing to take on an

emblematic significance in terms of race relations in America.

For example, conservative critic Jared Taylor, in *Paved with Good Intentions:*

The Failure of Race Relations in Contemporary America, chronicles an incident

at Stanford University that began with a debate between two students (one black,

the other white) about the Beethoven race question. Unfortunately, the conflict

escalated when someone tacked a poster of Beethoven in blackface on the black

---

[3] Of course, not a people called moors at the time were from the African continent, which makes this association rather spurious.

student's dorm room door. From here, Taylor observes, the incendiary 'poster incident' became a national issue. "The Beethoven poster incident took on a life of its own. Local newspapers referred to it repeatedly, as did *The New York Times*. Seven months after the fact, *The Times* was still dragging it out as the decisive example of white bigotry at Stanford. [...] It refused to die" (Taylor 1992, 54). Taylor, who is an apologist for "whites' rights", characterizes the whole affair as an unwarranted media frenzy. His critique of the 'liberal media' suggests that, in the fury of the press coverage, no one really took the time to evaluate the validity of the Beethoven controversy. *The New York Times*, for instance, he claims, presented the whole incident as a censorship issue and chided leftists for hypocritically suppressing the First Amendment rights of their opponents (Dembart 1989, A35). Of course, this evaluation largely obfuscates other underlying issues—intimidation, stereotyping, and a historically specific idea of identity politics, not to mention the authority of canons of traditional and received knowledge, as well as the rights of others to challenge these canons.

A similar occurrence arose when Marvel Comics announced that it was going to publish a seven-part mini-series that would reveal the secret origins of Captain America. This in itself was not important, since Captain America's secret origin is one of the worst kept secrets in the world. This new story, entitled *Truth: Red, White and Black* (2003), would alter the Captain America mythos by making it clear that Captain America was originally black. When this news hit the message boards and fan websites, many fans and readers were shocked; others were excited and curious, while a certain segment upon hearing the news were incensed and strident.

Matt Brady, an administrator of a popular comics-related website, explains

the invective leveled against Robert Morales and Kyle Baker, the writers of *Truth*:

> The news hit a segment of fans like a ton of bricks, with many claiming
> that this could never have happened as it didn't appear or wasn't
> mentioned in any previous issue of Captain America, and some accusing
> Marvel of trying to "PC-up" Captain America. Message boards were choked
> with posts about what an outrage it was, and that, as claimed in extreme
> cases, it was an affront to everything that Captain America stood for
> (Brady 2002).

Unlike Beethoven, a historical figure, Captain America is purely the stuff of pulp

fiction and fantasy. So there is no real reason why Captain America couldn't be

black. However, the same kinds of arguments used to defend the white European

Beethoven were also employed to uphold the validity of the white Captain

America. In the case of Beethoven, appeals are made to the absence of evidence in

the historical record to support Beethoven's African connection. The same goes

for Captain America's defenders, who appeal to the absence of a Negro Captain

America in the continuity or back issues (the equivalent of the historical record

for comic books). Also, in both cases, what is at stake is not so much a notion of

historical accuracy, but rather the affair becomes a political battle over cultural

icons, legitimacy and the mythic engines of the national imaginary. This is

another point where the two cases should differ. After all, historical accuracy is

important for an actual person such as Beethoven, not a fictional character like

Captain America. And yet, this is not the case. Many comic book fans treat

Captain America as if he were a real person or historical figure.

Part of the reaction to *Truth* seems to be fueled by a post-9/11 climate of

patriotism. Morales claims that although he'd been writing the story since April

2000, "[...] nothing really started to happen until after 9/11, and that kind of

changed the character of everything" (quoted in Brady 2000). After 9/11, there was an obsession in America with heroes, both fictional and real. Americans rallied around patriotic symbols of manhood (as seen in the veneration of New York's firefighters and police officers).

This sort of behavior was hardly new. Chris Murray, in his study of the connections between superheroes and WWII propaganda, observes that as the American war effort progressed, "popular culture became a crucial means by which political messages were disseminated" (Murray 2000, 141). This occurred, he claims, mainly because "[p]opular culture borrowed from official discourse and propaganda" so much so that Murray maintains "it becomes misleading and meaningless to distinguish between them as separate categories" (Murray 2000, 142). From here, Murray concludes that this fusion of propaganda and popular culture produced a political myth (in the sense used by Roland Barthes), i.e., substituting complex political values for simple, commonsensical meanings (Murray 2000, 142). Therefore, the appeal and mass popularity of superhero comics in the 1940s (among children and soldiers alike) arises in part from these cultural artifacts' resonance with dominant myths, viz. the basic idea of the superhero: an ordinary man who dawns a uniform to battle an evil villain bent on world conquest. This was deeply appealing during wartime (Murray 2000, 142-143). Thus, superheroes like Superman and Captain America soon became emblems of America. Some commentators say that they "were America" (Murray 2000, 143).

"The question we have to ask," Murray asserts, "is whose America were superheroes?" He notes:

By and large, they weren't an America for women, or for African Americans, or indeed for any minority or disempowered group. Where were the homosexual heroes, the black Batmans or the Captain Conscientious Objectors? Far from representing America as it was, superhero hero comics a view of America that was constructed by and within the ideology of the dominant power structures and institutions" (Murray 2000, 143).

If Golden Age superheroes indeed 'represented' America and this alignment of the two, superhero and nation, has resulted in another type of patriotic iconography, that the elements of America that were and to a great extent still are excluded from this facet of the national imaginary are significant to this thesis and its assessment of the operations of "race" in superhero comics.

Murray argues that during the Second World War, the superhero genre and war propaganda are two centers of culture that mingle when productively activated with certain discourses, especially those dominant during the 1940s. The response to the 9/11 attacks was treated like a time of war. It is not surprising then that many looked to comic book heroes, like Superman for instance, for solace. Here again, superheroes were productively activated as propaganda in the so-called War on Terrorism. Gregory McNeill, a Superman fan, posted his views on a web discussion forum devoted to the Man of Steel:

> Since that tragic day, Americans saw first hand what really makes a hero. The real world heroics of the Police, Firemen/women, Ambulance workers, and ordinary people who helped the victims of the terrorist attacks and even sacrificed their own lives in the process to save others. [...] They've been heroes all along and we knew it... we just hadn't acknowledged it in a while. [...] our concept of what a hero is has changed. Living with the fear of future terrorist attacks and uncertainty has made us ask, "Where's Superman?" The truth is he does exist. It's not the powers nor costume that defines Superman, it's the morals. Superman has evolved from the embodiment of America to what we as human beings can strive to become if we can constructively use our talents and potential in a positive light. [...] We now live in a time of uncertainty and fear. We need positive images and reinforcement to help us keep our faith in the best of

> humanity. If we allow what the terrorists did take away our beliefs and
> positive nature, then the terrorists win (McNeill 2002).

Post 9/11, superheroes and especially Superman became even more embodiments

of American ideals and patriotism. Figure 3.1 illustrates how DC heroes took on

the burden of American. What's good for Superman is good for America, but that

also means that what's bad for America is also bad for Superman. This visually

compelling fan artwork is rife with meaning. In the foreground we see Superman,

injured, struggling to uphold the American flag.[4] In the background, though still

ominously prominent is the World Trade Center, engulfed in flames. It didn't

seem to matter that superheroes are fictional characters—they filled a need in the

cultural zeitgeist, as they had in previous decades. The artwork's visual rhetoric

seems ambivalent about truth and justice; however its statement about the

American way is unequivocal—we are injured but we are not defeated.

The situation on the Marvel side of the superhero realm was far more

complicated. Many of Marvel's popular heroes actually reside in New York,

fictitiously rendered; therefore the publisher had no choice but to directly discuss

the aftermath of 9/11 and why its heroes were powerless to prevent it. A famous

example of Marvel's reaction to 9/11 is the removal of movie trailers for the

much-hyped film *Spiderman* (2002) because they had many scenes showing the

Twin Towers. Entertainment reporter Kit Bowen explains, "At this point, almost

every fan of the comic book *Spider-Man* has seen the ultra-cool trailer to the

highly anticipated big screen adaptation—marveling at how Spider-Man weaves a

giant web between two skyscrapers. The twin towers of the World Trade

---

[4] It is reminiscent of the iconic photograph *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* (1945).

Fig. 4.1: "Superman on September 11, 2001", artwork created by Ted Hernandez (2002).

Center, to be exact." (Bowen 2001). A year later when the film was released in

theatres, the twin towers appear—obliquely in the film. At that time, many

reviewers commented on who the film brought joy back to the skyline of New

York. Susan Wloszczyna, reporting for *USA Today*, interviewed *Spider-Man*

director Sam Rami and discovered that he purposely refrained from removing the

World Trade Center from the film release of the film,

> After the September tragedy [...] Raimi decided "to give something to the city"
> and pay tribute to its spirit by having one of the avenging locals declare, "You
> mess with one of us, you mess with all of us." It's a sentiment that is bound to
> resonate with residents of Anytown, USA, as well. Little wonder the film ends
> with the Stars and Stripes complementing Spider-Man's blue and red suit
> (Wloszczyna April 18 2002).

Unlike DC, Marvel could not ignore the events of 9/11 (or create some fictional

equivalent), instead it had to use discretion and good judgment to mobilize the

"blue and red" of its heroes. In the wake of 9/11, Captain America, the

embodiment of the American spirit, became a natural spokesperson for the

frustration and anger of the nation. Therefore, many considered it an affront to

American patriotism for an imposter, a fake Captain America, a black man trying

to exploit the legacy of a hero and patriot, to appear just when America needed its

symbolic hero most. It was like Uncle Sam in blackface.

Indeed, it is arguable that Captain America in *Truth* is black-washed, but in

actuality *Truth* presents various figures of Captain America dispersed throughout

the text, and the overall goal of the story is to reconcile these very different

figures—nostalgic Golden Age, traditional contemporaneous and counter-

memory—and the various meanings and ideologies associated with these figures.

Essentially, this results in a transformation and/or augmentation of what the

signifier "Captain America" means—i.e., the various discourses making up its current reading formation.

The story of *Truth* is an exercise in creative historiography and marketing. From the industry side of things, *Truth* met the Jemas's mandates for Marvel in several ways. It was a serial mini-series, which meant that it could easily be reprinted as a trade paperback for the new graphic novel buying public. It also invigorated a classic, yet fading character that wasn't selling very well. But best of all, its political thrust would generate a lot of buzz and get Marvel's name back in the media for something other than its financial woes. In terms of historiography, *Truth*, taken from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, was written as an expose of Jim Crow policies during the Second World War; it also examines how comic books played a role in the lives of soldiers abroad, both black and white. A *New York Times* article that covered the launch of *Truth* by Marvel in 2004 had the headline "Reliving World War II with a Captain America of a Different Color." The article describes Jim Crow procedures in the US armed forces during the war as well as the reaction by *Truth*'s detractors. Reporter Brent Staples claims that Jim Crow during the war era "has been marginalized in books and largely omitted from movies." Staples also confirms that *Truth* was poorly received by some: "The series [...] has been derisively described as 'politically correct' and attacked by people who do not believe that the country ever experienced an era like the one depicted in the comics." Because of this contention around WWII as it exists in popular memory, Staples notes that *Truth* has an important role to play in memorializing that era: "As the embodiment of patriotism and a propaganda tool during the war, Captain America is a perfect point of departure for a re-

examination of the World War II experience" (Staples 2002, C8). As the title of this *Times* article suggests, these comic book texts are important documents because they allow for a 'reliving' of history that sets the record straight.

Morales, writer of *Truth*, spent a great deal of time researching the actions of black soldiers during WWII and also sought to uncover what daily life was like for African Americans at that time. As a result, the series depicts black soldiers demoralized repeatedly as they simply try to perform their duties. Enlistee Isaiah Bradley and his wife Faith are hassled by whites at the New York World's Fair, ironically during the fair's Negro Week. In the army, hundreds of black soldiers are used as guinea pigs in a secret Tuskegee-style experiment that leaves all but five soldiers dead. The five surviving black soldiers gain superpowers and are sent on secret missions within the theatre of conflict.

In the story of *Truth*, a figure of Captain America appears frequently as a propaganda tool of the nation state. This Captain America is aligned with the Golden Age or nostalgic figure of Captain America that appears in Timely Comics publications in the forties and in the popular historical memories of readers. This "nostalgic" use of Captain America mirrors the actual propaganda function of such wartime comic book heroes in real life. For example, *Truth* makes it quite clear that the government and the military carefully orchestrate everything about Captain America. Isaiah Bradley, while stationed abroad after taking the super-soldier serum, trades some chocolate for a comic book. He is surprised to discover that the comic, entitled Captain America, depicts the ordeal that he has just been through: the experiments, the serum, even the secret missions against the Axis—it's all there; the only missing feature is Bradley and the other black

super-soldiers. In their stead is a blonde, square-jawed white man named Steve Rogers. Even more shocking for Bradley is the comic book was published over a year ago, while he and the others have been in action for only a few months. They come fact-to-face with the 'truth,' as it were.

Sgt. Lucas Evans, another black super-soldier, is far from surprised. He tells Bradley, wryly, "Comic books aren't real. This is a war. And in war, the army decides everything is Government Issue. [...] If the army determines they need a Steve Rogers, they're going to move heaven and hell to get one [...]" (Morales 2003, 14). Anyone can be Steve Rogers since that role is entirely fungible, and this is part of the appeal of superheroes. Unlike Hercules or Sampson, superheroes, like us, are part of the military-industrial complex. Presumably they spend more time being human than super. However, this episode from *Truth* reveals the hypocrisy of that belief. The Captain America comic book that Isaiah holds in his hands makes it clear that he and his cohort of super-soldiers can never take on the role of Steve Rogers. Instead, they are written out of history (only to reemerge as counter-memory).

This is an ironic twist that renders the remembered and revered Captain America fraudulent, an imposter who stole the legacy of true heroes. In this case, the secret origins story really is a secret. When it becomes clear to Bradley that he and the other black soldiers are just canon fodder, whose accomplishments will be attributed to Steve Rogers, he makes a bold move. Isaiah Bradley steals the Captain America costume intended for Rogers and parachutes into enemy territory, destroying a concentration camp and a Nazi human experimentation

laboratory. Unfortunately, the Germans capture him and bring him before Hitler himself.

I'd like to take a step back and analyze the specific pages depicting the plot events that I've just described because it is important to understand how these story elements are represented visually, because much of the meaning-making in comics is part of visual system of signification. A key concept in understanding the visual production of meaning in comics is semantic field. Mario Saraceni has suggested in his book, *The Language of Comics* (2003), that comics have a language of their own and that categories used in formal discourse analysis can also be used to understand the discourses of comics. Borrowing the term from discourse analysts and linguists, he describes semantic field as "a group of words that are related in meaning, normally as a result of being connected with a particular context of use (Saraceni 2003, 109).[5] This term when applied to comics provides a way of describing how various visual elements are arranged on a page to work together to produce certain meanings. These elements can be the type of typeface used for the dialogue, deictic markers, point of view, width of gutters or even color scheme. I will use this concept of semantic field to examine pages 11-14 and pages 18-20 of issue *Truth* #5 (May 2003).

Unlike the Captain America comics of the 1940s, the violence in *Truth* is more graphic and grotesque; this is achieved primary by a well established semantic field containing visual elements that helps us reconstruct the horrors of the Holocaust, by means of visual cohesion. Cohesion, another term from discourse

---

[5] "For example, 'chop', 'simmer', 'boil' and 'herbs' are all connected with the semantic field of cookery" (Saraceni 2003, 109).

analysis, describes "the patterns of language created within a text, mainly within and across sentence boundaries, and which collectively make up the organization of larger units of the text such as paragraphs" (Saraceni 2003, 107). In this case, it is lexical cohesion, chains of words or images that of related meaning linking across sentences. For instance, when Isaiah parachutes in to enemy territory, we, the readers, don't know where he is exactly. However, the cohesive action of the visual cues soon reveals his location. Modern comics resemble storyboards for motion pictures, what directors would call camera angle is prevalent in today's comic books. This positioning of the eye corresponds to the term 'deictics' in discourse analysis, i.e., cues that "extra-textually serve to situate the speaker or reader in relation to what is said" (Saraceni 2003, 107). When Isaiah fights Nazi soldiers, the deictic positioning of the viewer is right in the middle of the action, as if we ourselves are a part of the fight. This allows for a certain kind of identification as we share Isaiah's fury as he strangles and crushes the skulls of the Nazis; likewise we share the fear of the German soldiers as they are set upon by a behemoth wearing red, white and blue.

On page 12, Isaiah enters the Nazis' lab. The following page is a full-page panel depicting what Bradley sees after he enters the next room. Vanishing point perspective suggests a warehouse-like autopsy room. Almost an entire page, presented in a wide-angle view, shows the full scale of the Nazi operation. Hundreds of tables with mutilated bodies appear before us as we see the entire morbid vista from Isaiah Bradley's viewpoint. Each corpse on the table has a shaven head, like the decapitations in the jars from the previous panels. Since we cannot see his face from the first person perspective, Isaiah Bradley appears in a

panel in the top left corner of the page. The main image has a greenish hue, but this top left panel—a close-up of the expression of shock and terror on Bradley's face—has a background hue of orange, to further contrast the two panels. All these images aid in establishing the semantic field of the setting and plot. Readers take all this visual information and infer that Isaiah Bradley's secret suicide mission is to take out a Nazi human experimentation facility. All of the bodies we see are those of dead Jews. This discovery is accentuated by the cohesion created by the repeated images of corpses with shaven heads. The final appearance of this image on page 18 solidifies the significance of this repeating motif.

Attempting to escape German soldiers pursuing him, Bradley inadvertently enters one of the gas chambers. Page 18 is divided into thirds, depicting either Bradley's point of view or the viewpoint of the dozens of naked Jewish women, each with their heads shaved, trapped in the gas chamber with him. They are both equally shocked at the other's presence in the room. On page 19, poisonous gas (colored green in the comic book, although the real thing would have been colorless) begins to fill the room. The page is divided into fourths—each quarter depicting the confused struggle between Isaiah and the women, alternating between various points of view. As the gas fills the room, the visual cohesion fully takes hold as readers then realize the full extent of the Nazi system. The bald women in the gas chamber will soon become the dissected corpses on tables or heads in jars. In the midst of the readers' realizations, Isaiah, who is himself coming to the same conclusion, succumbs to the gas and passes out. He is then taken to Hitler.

The pages I've just described create a semantic field (through words and images) of a concentration camp and the atrocities found within it. Furthermore, it also reasserts to a certain extent a popular version of WWII history that emphasizes the utter helplessness of the Jews, the complete inhumanity of the Germans, and the diction of American soldiers as saviors. The semantic field certainly activates these sorts of readings by linking the various facets into a common context. However, the one dissonant figure in all this not the superhero; this is after all a comic book story. The dissonant factor is the superhero's blackness, and this is where the counter-memory discourse enters the reading formation.

In the Captain America comics of the 1940s, Hitler was a *de facto* nemesis of Captain America. In fact, the cover of *Captain America* #1 (March 1941) depicts Captain America bursting into the Nazi headquarters and socking Hitler right in the jaw. This and other scenes like it inform the fateful meeting between Isaiah Bradley, now Captain America, and Adolph Hitler. However, instead of a violent clash between the two, Hitler speaks to Bradley mellifluously. Hitler, fictionally rendered in the comic, tells Bradley that Germany is not at war with *his* people; they are fighting the Americans. Hitler attempts to strike a bargain, "I know something of your history, how brutally the Americans have treated you, enslaved you [...] If you stand with us, we will help free your people when the time comes [...]" (Morales 2003, 11). Having waded through the piles of dead Jewish bodies in the camp, Bradley knows the true value of this wager and declines.

This part of the story reinserts black soldiers into the popular remembrance of the Second World War. WWII, according to Lizabeth Cohen, was a time when

black GI fought against the bigotry of the Axis Powers with the hope that their

actions would have some effect on their lives back at home in America. Cohen

points to an account of a black veteran published in the *Washington Post* in 1946.

After fighting in Europe, this GI returned home "to find myself what I was

before—a second class citizen. What's more, the fact that I was not a veteran,

instead of buttressing my wartime hopes, actually was held against me. Now that

I was a veteran, I was considered to be not only a negro, but a cocky one to boot.

[...] My color bars me from most decent jobs, and if, instead of accepting menial

work, I collect my $20 a week readjustment allowance, I am classified as a 'lazy

nigger'" (quoted in Cohen 2003, 170). This is an important moment in

establishing the validity of Isaiah Bradley as Captain America in that he would

rather face the gas chamber than sell out America to the Germans, establishing

that a black man can be just as patriotic as a white man, even when the country

that he fights for has treated him and his kind unjustly for generations. However,

the difference being that there is no reward for Isaiah Bradley fidelity. Though it

is certainly possible to read this as a mere hegemonic resolution of racial

tension—an attempt at showing, after years of silence, the contribution of African

Americans to the war effort. The story ends with Isaiah Bradley's escape from the

Nazis and his transformation into a living legend among African-Americans. His

story is relatively unknown and only reemerges when it is 'discovered' by the

second Captain America, Steve Rogers. It is from Rogers that Isaiah Bradley

finally receives official 'recognition'. This recognition is important but troubling.

It suggests that it is indeed possible for blacks to receive credit for their

achievements, but that a white man must confer that credit. *Truth: Red, White &*

Black is a story about the struggles in understanding historical veracity. Despite being fiction, it makes us consider how race plays out for historical figures (Beethoven), historical events (the Holocaust) and popular texts. This is an important part of the transformation of black superheroes since the seventies. In the seventies, their presence alone as black men was enough to warrant a story. Today, it is important to make these black superheroes a more coherent part of the superhero mythos, which means linking them to the Golden Age of comics, WWII and the discourses of those days. This appears to be a right of passage, as it were, for these characters—an induction into the pantheon of comic book heroes. However, this is only the first step in this initiation.

'Passing' Tradition

The second step is for black superheroes to 'pass' legitimately as valid supermen. Krin Gabbard in his provocative book, *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African American Culture*, takes a critical look at Hollywood's use of African-American culture. In a chapter entitled "Passing Tones: *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *Pleasantville*", Gabbard examines the racial dynamics of two popular films that allude to our sensibilities of race in the fifties. What he sees as significant about these films is that white characters take on the characteristics and problems that would normally be attributed to African Americans. In essence, Gabbard feels that these films put the African-American experience in whiteface. In these two examples, Gabbard asserts that African Americans are either completely absent or on the fringes.

"In *The Talented Mr. Ripley*," he writes, "Tom Ripley (Matt Damon) is the

subject of a 'passing' narrative that recalls such novels as James Weldon

Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* [...]" (Gabbard 2004, 73). In a

fashion similar to the confidence man who bluffed his way into Manhattan high

society in John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation*, Ripley lies, swindles and

murders his way into the lives of his social superiors Dick and Marge, two

American, ex-patriot socialites who live the Bohemian life in a small town in

southern Italy. *Pleasantville*, on the other hand, "goes even further to stage black

narratives in whiteface, completely excluding African Americans from its cast

while presenting a group of white people as the victims of discrimination based

on color" (Gabbard 2004, 73). In *Pleasantville*, two contemporary teens are

magically transported into the black-and-white world of Pleasantville, a town

modeled on 50s suburban paradise as seen on Nick-at-Nite. However, their

presence in the idyllic town (or more accurately the presence of their modern

habits and attitudes) begins to affect the town in unexpected ways, as the

townspeople become more physically and morally 'colorful'.

The whitewashing in these recent films troubles Gabbard:

> Innocent explanations of racial appropriation and exclusion in these late
> twentieth-century films might reference the free circulation of images typical
> of the postmodern moment. With master narratives no longer congealing as
> they once did, bits and pieces from one story can be moved to another with
> infinite possibilities for recombination, hybridization, inflation, and revision.
> But when patterns begin to emerge in how the elements in a familiar genre—
> such as Hollywood's fish-out-of-water stories—are moved about, ideological
> projects are quickly laid bare. *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *Pleasantville*
> reveal the extent to which African Americans both won and lost the struggles
> of the 1950s and 1960s (Gabbard 2004, 74).

Yet, I wonder if these films do not maliciously remove race from our recollections of the 1950s, but instead attempt to reconstruct the structures of feeling of the time-structures that rendered non-white faces completely invisible in mid-twentieth-century America. In this sense, a film like *Pleasantville* is a faithful homage to the cultural artifacts and traditions that have been passed down to us. I also wonder what such stories would be like if the whitewashed elements were removed, so to speak, and black characters replaced the white characters that have usurped, as Gabbard would have us believe, the stories that are rightfully theirs.

This is one of the questions that *DC: New Frontier*, a six-part series by DC Comics, seeks to answer. In a manner very similar to *Pleasantville* or *Back to the Future, New Frontier*[6] mixes and juxtaposes the idealized world of superhero comics in the late fifties—the transition period that saw the dénouement of the Golden Age of comics and the nascence of the Silver Age—a period characterized by American post-bellum domination, the Cold War and optimism about technological and scientific 'progress' with nostalgic longings for yesteryear.

This concept of yesteryear should be given some consideration. It is the pleasure gained from fantasizing about the past, often associated with nostalgia. Nostalgia, in turn, has been revealed to be a longing for something that never really existed in the first place. In this sense, nostalgia and fiction are well suited for each other, since both only exist in our imaginations. Comics and other forms of serial storytelling are good vehicles for nostalgia because they have trans-

---

[6] The title is an allusion to a speech by John F. Kennedy but also alludes to *Star Trek*, with its vision of a utopian future of racial equality in a technological utopia that looked a whole lot like 1960s America.

generational readers. Pleasure is gained by comprehending some obscure reference to the Bottle City of Kandor in Superman's Fortress of Solitude or to the tragic death of Spider-man's original girlfriend, Gwen Stacey. There are those who know these things through first-hand knowledge and those who have a secondary knowledge of these persons, events and things through secondary knowledge gleaned from inter-textual references.

A highly referential text like *New Frontier*, which depicts the rise of Silver Age heroes (Green Lantern, the Flash, etc.) and the difficult transitions of the Golden Age heroes (Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and the Justice Society of America), is significant because it affords the opportunity to comment on the grim realities of the 1950s by inserting the darker moments of American history into superhero narratives, events that superhero comics may have missed the first time around. In this way, *New Frontier* is a historical revision not only of comic book texts, but also of our cultural understanding that is derived from such fictional texts.

For instance, one additional character in *New Frontier*, who did not exist in the superhero comics of the fifties is John Henry (not the famous steel-drivin' man of the ballad, but someone very similar), a black man from Tennessee, whom superhero comic readers would recognize as an analogue of the contemporary black superhero John Henry Irons, a.k.a. Steel. The story begins at the home of a southern black family, the Wilsons. Their home is ablaze and surrounded by Ku Klux Klansmen. The comic book panels of this particular scene are shown from a bird's-eye-view, or at least it seems that way until we, as readers, realize that the whole horrific scene is from the point-of-view of John

Wilson, the owner of the burning house. Wilson watches from a nearby tree, where the Klansmen have strung him up with a noose.

After the Klansmen leave, the branch of the tree breaks and Wilson hits the ground. Although he is defeated and broken, he tells himself "[...] fate has other plans for me" (Cooke and Stewart May 2004, 15). At that moment, having lived through the trauma of having witnessed the immolation of his home and family, Wilson is transformed.

He stops being John Wilson and becomes John Henry. Wilson's taking on the name of the famous African-American folk hero is resonant with meaning. The author of *New Frontier*, Darwyn Cooke, could have named him Steel, like his contemporary counterpart. However, the decisions to call him John Henry, to give him a hammer and to have him fight against the KKK are bound up in an imagined world of American monomyth. Peter M. Coogan explains:

> Like the Western genre and hero, the superhero genre and figure arose in America and expresses aspects of the American identity. Also, like the Western, the long history of the superhero provides a site to examine American culture, and the changing meaning of the figure give us access to some part of the ongoing construction of the American self" (Coogan 2002, 8-9).

Coogan feels that the American superhero is derived in part from American folk/historical figures such as Daniel Boone, Davy Crocket, etc.—figures that are one-part history, two-parts legend. Thus, Cooke's choice of aligning John Wilson with John Henry is a significant move toward aligning that particular superhero with an African-American heroic tradition. Perhaps no figure of the past is more resonant with African-American struggle than John Henry. He has been the subject of novels, a postage stamp and even animated films. Above all, "John

Henry" is the most well-known and frequently recorded American folk song. In Michigan in 1972, sculptor Charles Cooper complete an eight-foot-tall statue of John Henry which now stands in Memorial Park near Talcott, West Virginia (Wade 2002).

The figure John Henry from the folk song arises from nineteenth-century America. After the Civil War, during the reconstruction period, railroads were constructed across the continental US. Among the men that built the railroads, John Henry stands out. In true mythical fashion, not much can be said about the details of his life. His legacy cannot be solely summed up in the image of a man with a hammer, a former slave representing the strength and drive of a country in the process of re-building itself. The nation-building discourses within John Henry's story established him as a fixture of the American popular imagination.

However, there is another interpretation of the John Henry folktale. Most people think of John Henry's ballad as a song about man vs. machine. However, it is in many ways the story of black man vs. the white power structure. In that sense, we may be saddened when John Henry dies after defeating the steam drill, but the story is uplifting because he passes his hammer on to his wife, Polly Ann who presumably will pass the hammer on to their son, the baby mentioned at the end of the song.

The John Henry of the ballad is a man who refuses to be invisible. He fights against double consciousness by making himself as conspicuous as possible, putting himself in direct conflict with white industrial power. Even though John Henry sacrifices his life to prove that he is worth more than a machine, his indignation is in vain. While he proves his point, his body is destroyed in the

effort. When Darwyn Cooke names his version of Steel "John Henry", he collects the ethos and affect that name evokes and fuses it with a superhero freedom fighter. The resulting figure, the legend/superhero, John Henry of *New Frontier*, represents a crucial step in re-imagining a comic book past by providing an explanation as to why there are no black superheroes until 1969 and what the adventures of a black superman would have been like circa 1955. Sadly, the types of stories for such a hero would not have demonstrated the comic book truism that good always triumphs over evil.

When John Wilson falls from the tree that would have been his death gallows, he is given a new purpose—to avenge his murdered family. Like the Batman, he transforms himself; he makes a costume that incorporates a severed noose, symbolizing his break from white domination (akin to the broken chains of Power Man's costume). Wilson makes a weapon for himself, a sledgehammer, which he forges himself from scrap metal. While undergoing this transformation from man to superman, the John Henry folk song rings through this mind. In his new persona, Wilson seeks out the Klansmen that torched his home. He descends upon them like a hammer strikes an anvil. However, during the struggle, 'John Henry' is injured and forced to retreat. He hides in dark alleys and finally collapses in someone's yard. There, he encounters a small, blonde white girl, and he implores her, "Please, child... help me. Hide me." She looks at him with pensive eyes, then yells at the top of her lungs: "He's here! He's here! The nigger's over here!" (Cooke and Stewart July 2004, 22).

The visual dynamics of John Henry's fight with the KKK are similar to Isaiah Bradley's battle with the Nazis (found in *DC: The New Frontier* #4 July 2004).

The story of John Henry is just one of many stories about superheroes in *New Frontier*. However, it is set apart from the others predominantly by color. All the pages depicting the rise and fall of John Henry use color in the same way: orange background with black silhouettes of the surroundings. The only figures that stand out in the whole visual presentation are the Klansmen in white, John Henry in costume and the little girl at the end. This color scheme is significant because it mirrors the situation that caused John Henry's crusade—the orange hue matches the flames of his home and the silhouettes resemble the tree that serves as his gallows. The omnipresence of the Klansmen, or "triangles" as John Henry calls them, only further accentuates the symmetry.

Whereas the visual imagery in the first incidence is aligned with victimhood and injustice, the subsequent use of that particular color scheme represents empowerment and indignation. Like the Batman, John Henry uses the shadows as a position of power. Page 34 is shown from John Henry's point of view as he waits in the shadows, ready to strike. Page 35, divided into thirds, alternates in perspective for each panel. It begins with a close-up of the Klansmen's sight of a man in a black mask with a noose around his neck. The next panel, from John Henry's viewpoint, shows the frightened and flustered Klansmen. The third panel depicts what may be the Klansmen's last sight: a sledgehammer coming down upon them. Here we see how color is used to juxtapose two different episodes in an overall story, assigning multiple meanings to the visual information and shifting the semantic field over duration of the plot.

The demise of John Henry did not result from an inability to rise to the occasion. Rather, it stems from a failure to 'pass' as a superhero. More accurately,

John Henry is not allowed to attempt such a feat. Superman was born a potentate. Heroism seems natural for a being of such power and strength. He makes it look easy. But for all the others, with neither super-strength nor X-ray vision, there are countless barriers to overcome to win the hearts and minds of those they seek to protect. Superman's life is easy; he must simply pretend to be one of us, a mere human being—frail and small. Having white skin is a real asset for his endeavor. But for a human being to pass as a superman, this takes some fortitude and effort, especially if that human is dark-skinned. Until a black man can come to represent the noblest of human ideals—truth, justice, fairness—no amount of masquerading will convince anyone.

At first, this seems a rather poor note to end an exploration of the fusion of the black folk hero with the black superhero. However, Cooke suggests another way to interpret this subplot in his intricate superhero tale. *New Frontier* ends in 1959, the eve of a new decade. Looking to suggest the American optimism that accompanied the coming of the 1960s, Cooke presents a number of vignettes depicting superheroes and regular folks living and learning in the new era. Instead of dialogue or narration, Cooke inserts John F. Kennedy's famous "A New Frontier" speech (15 July, 1960). In this speech, Kennedy outlined his vision for America in the new decade. When the theme of his speech touches on 'the race question': "A peaceful revolution for human rights—demanding an end to racial discrimination in all parts of our community life—has strained at the leashes impose by timid executive leadership [...]" (quoted in Cooke and Stewart November 2004, 57), the accompanying panel shows a black boy reading a comic book at the grave of John Wilson and his wife. On closer inspection, we can see

that the name written across the back of his sports jersey is "Irons". Here, the author is suggesting that this child may one day grow up to be the superhero Steel (a.k.a. John Henry Irons) and that young Irons, as he reads his superhero comic book, will come to know the legacy that has been passed down to him, a black superhero tradition. Presumably, he will put that tradition into action in the years to come.

A Time for Change

Taking action is not such an easy thing to do, however. *The American Way* features a black superhero that doesn't fight against super-villains as such but instead has a crusade against the indifferent of the white establishment. Like his Blaxploitation ancestors (Luke Cage a.k.a. Power Man, Black Panther, John Stewart the Green Lantern), Jason Fisher, the New American, must not only fight against injustice for his people, but must also prove to his people that he isn't just another black sell-out. At the time of this writing, the miniseries is incomplete, but I would like to discuss its significance regardless because, with its thematic trajectory, *The American Way* is a synthesis of the ideas that I have been identifying and developing in this chapter.

Truth: Red, White & Black deals with race issues in comics of the Golden Age; *DC: The New Frontier* attempts to show the political problems in the transition period from Gold to Silver Age. *The American Way* is firmly planted in the Silver Age and re-characterizes the comic book tropes from that period including social relevance, the race question and the threat of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The American Way is the most blatantly meta-fictive of the three since it is so deeply

dependent upon readers' savvy in order to construct its dark satire of the comic

book industry and the idea of the superhero in the Silver Age.

From the outset, *The American Way* satirizes the optimism that *New*

Frontier venerates. In the story, it is 1961, and the Kennedys (Jack and Bobby)

commission a secret team of superheroes, called the Civil Defense Corps (CDC) in

order to keep the American spirit high during the threat of nuclear annihilation.

The super-powered heroes of the CDC are purposely reminiscent of popular

comic book heroes from the Justice League of America (JLA) such as Superman,

Wonder Woman and the Martian Manhunter. But these heroes are all frauds,

genetically enhanced actors who play out the Cold War ballet like professional

wrestlers. Even the villains, with names like Red Scourge and Southern Cross, are

fakes, all actors paid by the US government to make the population believe that

all is well and America is protected from its enemies.

But one day it all goes wrong: Old Glory, the immortal embodiment of the

American spirit, drops dead from a massive heart attack. The benevolent lie that

is the CDC is at risk of exposure. The civil servants who run the CDC decided to

do exactly what the comic book barons of the Silver Age did when their

established superhero titles weren't selling any more; they re-branded.

Resembling the transformation of the Golden Age Flash into the Silver Age Flash,

the CDC unveils its newest member—the New American, a hero for the atomic

age, complete with space helmet and jetpack, but secretly the man underneath

the costume is a negro. This revelation sets the tenor of the whole story, which

reads like a cross between super-family comic books like *Fantastic Four* or *JLA*

and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. But it doesn't stop there; *The American Way* is also a lesson in American history and 1960s optimism.

A comic book rendering of a documentary style provides *The American Way* with a means of textual activation. This is achieved mainly through juxtaposing the superhero narrative with newsreel-like commentaries. For example, page 12 of *The American Way* #1 depicts a battle between Pharos, the Superman of this world, and a giant, crustaceous alien creature. Using the very common comic book convention of voice-over boxes, the panels are narrated by an unseen reporter, who states a familiar sentiment (See fig. 5.1):

> So all of us looked to the skies we looked to Pharos. We looked to him as we did our new president—young and handsome and energetic—to deliver us from the turbulence of the era. Commies in Cuba. Soviets with the bomb. Race problems between whites and negroes. All of us, everywhere, tilted our heads up with hope. A common whisper on our lips: C'mon, Pharos. Smite this nightmare with a single, mighty blow. That... that was the American way (Ridley et al. 2006, 12).

It's easy to get caught up in this fever pitch of heroism, focusing on Pharos, flying through the air with gritted teeth and clenched fists, dominating almost a third of the page. Or perhaps we dwell on the triptych of awestruck onlookers gazing up into the sky. However, the real rhetorical thrust of this page comes from the composite image found in the top right corner. This comic book rendering of actual historical photographs of an atomic bomb mushroom cloud, Castro and Kruchev embracing, J.F.K. addressing congress and the Nashville lunch counter sit-ins (see fig. 5.2 for actual photos) has a twofold purpose. First, it provides a sense of the past by situating this comic book story around the problems (atomic weapons), tensions (Cuban Missile Crisis) and key personalities (Castro, Kruchev and Kennedy) of a particular historical moment. Second, it creates a structure of

feeling by using these images as a sort of shorthand for the lived experience of early-1960s America. Anyone who was alive during the 1960s in America would have seen these photographs. They can link them quite directly to their lived experience. In *The American Way*, they are also used to activate cultural memories for those who were not alive in the sixties and only know it through mediated images and texts. The writer of this miniseries John Ridley,[7] intentionally wanted to imbue *The American Way* with a sense of history to both entertain and educate his readers. In an interview with Ian Brill of *Publishers Weekly*, Ridley stated,

> [...] by chance, browsing in a bookstore I came upon a book called *The Sixties Chronicles*. It's an absolutely fantastic book that's a day-by-day, year-by-year chronicle of the 1960s. The thing is, I didn't want *The American Way* to become a dry dissertation on the 60s. So the trick was weaving history and fiction. Some of it is fairly well known—the Bay of Pigs and Yuri Gagarin. But other things, like Robert Williams and Radio Free Dixie, are things people might have to Google up. My hope is, of course, that they will (Brill 2006).

Ridley then claims, "I didn't choose the superhero genre to write about propaganda and race as much as I wanted to write a graphic novel series that approached the idea of superheroes from a unique perspective" (Brill 2006). In the end, this unique perspective employs a blending of historical fact and fiction to tell a story about the rise of the black superhero and the early Civil Rights Movement by means of its characterization of the New American.

---

[7] John Ridley is known mostly as a Hollywood screenwriter whose writing credits include *Three Kings, Undercover Brother*, and *Barbershop: The TV Series*.

Fig. 5.1: Page 12 of *The American Way* #1 (April 2006). N.B. composite panel in top right.

Fig. 5.2: Some historical photographs referenced by *The American Way* #1.

After the untimely death of Old Glory, the bureaucrats at the CDC decide that "The next war we fight isn't going to be against the communists. It'll be a civil war between whites and coloreds, progressives and segregationists" (Ridley et al. May 2006, 4). According to Ridley he wrote this in response to his own historical research: "In the 1960s Lyndon Johnson [...] had hoped one of the original seven Astronauts would have been a black guy because he thought that would help quell racial tensions [...] The whole point of the program was to get a man in space— but it was also as positive propaganda to get people to quit fearing Russia and start believing in America" (McLelland 2005).

All they need is a black guinea pig to undergo genetic manipulation. Here, the story begins to read like *Truth*. In fact, Jason Fisher is opposed to undergoing gene therapy and states, "Medical experimentation? This some kind of Tuskegee crap? I look like a black lab rat to you?" (Ridley et al. May 2006, 1). Eventually, the CDC bureaucrats bring him around to the idea by promising him that by becoming a superhero he'll be able to make a change in America for both whites and blacks. Jason Fisher, as a character, is immediately recognizable as a black intellectual militant. Whereas glasses on Clark Kent represent meekness and ineptitude, on Fisher they are indicators of intelligence and perspicacity. Likewise, his goatee and black turtleneck sweater are intended to symbolize that he has been to college (we find out later that he is unemployed even though he holds a master's degree). These markers, of course, are removed when he becomes the new American. In fact, his whole identity as a black man is erased because his costume, like Black Panther's, obscures every inch of his body. As a result, none of his white teammates realize that his is 'colored'.

Or at least this is the case before the New American's helmet breaks during a televised battle. Whereas the CDC had wanted to reveal the New American's racial identity two or three years down the road, circumstances speed up the schedule, and soon the nation is divided on the idea of a super-powered negro. For example, Jason Fisher's brother, who is one the Freedom Riders,[8] asks his brother to 'get on the bus' to the deep south and use his powers and influence to register black voters. Jason, whose politics sympathize with his brother's wishes, knows that doing that sort of thing is going to scare Southern whites and create increased tension below the Mason-Dixon line. He declines the offer, and his brother accuses him of being just another Uncle Tom. However, when his brother ends upon paralyzed after an attack on the Freedom Rider's bus by a super-villain, called Hellbent, Jason becomes a vigilante. He even changes his costume, exchanging his 'spacesuit' for a black leather jacket and a black beret, in order to avenge his brother and the other Freedom Riders.

There's not much more I recount here because the rest of the story hasn't been published at this time. But even with six of eight issues, the thematic development of *The American Way* is clear. Like the other two comic book miniseries I've looked at, *The American Way* engages with the texts of history in very specific ways—it implies speculative questions and answers about why comic books of the past were written as they were (i.e., why was there no black Captain America). It also engages with retrofitting the 1970s black superhero so that he can exist in texts that predate the seventies and thereby create a tradition of black

---

[8] The Freedom Riders were a group of men and women from many different backgrounds and ethnicities who boarded buses, trains and planes headed for the deep South to test the 1960 U.S. Supreme Court ruling outlawing racial segregation in all interstate public facilities.

superheroes that is coeval with the creation (Golden Age) and latter re-creation (Silver Age) of superhero comics. As well, this story confronts the issue of what it really means to be a black superhero and what sorts identity roles are read into and forced upon these characters by virtue of their race. The two 'New Americans', the atomic-age government agent and the Black Panther-esque vigilante, are good examples of this as they represent the two perceived models of black superhero. *The American Way* depicts the inner struggle of a character that must live up to both of these roles at once—something that white superheroes rarely ever must do. With this depiction, *The American Way* asks readers to consider what has produced their readings of superhero comic books and question the textual pleasures they receive from them.

Reading Formations

What I've been trying to establish in this chapter is a good view to the different discourses and imageries that are used in comics that contribute to their reading formations. I've tried to follow the kinds of analyses found in Bennett and Woollacott's *Bond and Beyond* in order to show how history, both actual and fictional, contributes to a sense of the past that is composed of imbricated elements (inter-texts), yet at the same time this history creates a hierarchy of those elements within various contexts. The most important argument that I wish to put forward here is that the processes of identification and reflection, as discussed earlier in this thesis, are not spontaneous and homogenous. According to Bennet and Woollacott, manifold determinations come together to organize the reading of a particular text or set of texts (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 64).

Furthermore, they claim that texts and readers are always already culturally activated (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 64). Thus, any shifts in reading formation are heterogeneous and build up over time through various intermediate processes. I have used reading formation as a means of characterizing the processes of meaning-making as I see them in superhero comics. Specifically, I have sought to demonstrate how the texts "contribute to a reorganization of the inter-textual relations" (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 142) of how early and contemporary comic book story are read. Essentially, I have used reading formation as a way of creating an elaborated description of how retroactive continuity (or retcon as comic book fans call it) operates as a significant ideological, commercial and narrative tool in the superhero genre. To further that end, the concluding chapter of this thesis will speculate the potential of the black superman as a productive figure in popular memory in the context of metafiction, historical revision and counter-memory.

CONCLUSION

Remembering the Black Superman

Throughout this thesis, I have been arguing for a nuanced approach to the representation of race in superhero comic books, trying to move beyond the very basic critique that these representations are inaccurate depictions of, or detrimental to, African-American readers. While I don't want to deny that stereotyping happens in comic book narratives, I would like to forward the idea that raced characters are not always symbols of tokenism or stereotype. Some very radical transformations can and do happen, but they occur incrementally over time through intricate textual practice, shifts in the comic book industry and social development.

In this end, my analysis has focused on the symbols, discourses and narratives that found traditions. These formative elements are not static; rather they can be activated in numerous ways, i.e., disarticulated and re-articulated in different reading formations. I have chosen blackness in superhero comic books as a popular site because I wanted to show the connection between race, history, mythology and propaganda as centers of meaning that have produced a reading formation for contemporary superhero comic books. Additionally, I wanted to demonstrate how this activation of inter-texts allows for the reading of older texts, such as back issues of certain comics like *Captain America* for example, in novel unintended ways. Having done this, what I'd like to do in this concluding chapter is discuss what I see as the overall significance of this thesis, which is my interest in examining the black superhero as an agent of historical revision through popular memory, and more specifically, as fictional counter-memory.

If you walk into any comic book store in the country, you'll probably be surprised to discover that there are hardly any children in these stores. In general, it's rare to see a child reading a comic book in public. One thing that puzzles me is that comics and superheroes were an important part of my youth but today I hardly ever see anyone under the age of eighteen reading them. In *Give Our Regards to the Atom Smashers*, a number of life-long comic book readers lovingly recall their youth and the role that superhero comics played in their path to adulthood. I want to contrast this to the attitude that comic book stores are full of freakish man-babies suffering from terminal Peter Pan-ism. Instead, I promote the view that men use comics as a rubric for understanding their boyhoods—sometimes this is nostalgic, sometimes it isn't. Jonathan Letham, for instance, explains in a personal essay in *Atom Smashers*, how his childhood reading of the adventures of the Fantastic Four (a literal nuclear family) became a way of identifying with his parents later on. Moreover, his use of the word 'parents,' implies a tradition that came before him, which includes cultural artifacts like Beatles albums, John Wayne movies and older TV shows like *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*. These themes are carried over into his novel, *The Fortress of Solitude*, but more on that later.

In this concluding chapter, I argue for comic book narratives as sites of collective remembering. So far, I've been presenting comics in accordance with Nora's assertion that "the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists" (Nora 1989, 7). I've illustrated the many intersections between superhero comic book stories and conceptions of history and time. However, I also feel that there is a significant use for embodiments of

memory such as this. I agree with Barbie Zelizer's observation that memory, as a site of cultural production, serves as a means of "graphing the past as it is used for present aims" (Zelizer 1995, 217).

At first, I wanted to partly characterize these types of stories as what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction. I see this kind of fiction happening through counter-memory. There are affinities between the type of writing that Hutcheon describes in *The Poetics of Postmodernism* and these kinds of comic book stories, but with some key differences. Historiographic metafiction, according to Linda Hutcheon, "keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical context, and in doing so problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here—just unresolved contradiction [...]" (Hutcheon 1988, 106). This "unresolved contradiction" turns out to be a very productive space indeed. According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafictional works are "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon 1988, 106). Historiographical metaficition, a quintessentially postmodern art form, relies upon textual play, parody and historical re-conceptualization for its efficacy. It undermines conventional notions of history as a transcendent or wholly definable object of inquiry or representation. Historiographic metafiction engages with history in a necessarily discursive, situational, and above all, textual manner. These visions or 'revisions' to history allow for new perspectives and identities to rise out of culturally marginalized positions. The politics of historiographic

metafiction problematize the maintained categories of essential unity in historical representation.

Unlike novels, superhero comics are serial publications—while they do as Hutcheon suggests, lay claim to historical figures (such as Muhammad Ali) they mostly deal with writing a history of a fictional world. Any 'historical revision" that happens usually only refers of the serialized stories that people come to know over the years. That is to say that Superman has immense historical significance, but not in the same way as George Washington, Helen Keller or Plato. While these latter figures have indeed been idealized and venerated in historical accounts, we can make investigations into the historical record to verify the details of their lives. Superheroes on the other hand, are partially mythic, so their histories read more like a Barthes's structuralist accounts of myth. The story elements that are repeated over the generations become the 'official' accounts, but each successive generation can make innovations or interpret the significance of mythemes differently.

Because of these differences, it occurs to me that many superhero comics that deal with historical themes cannot really be historiographical metafiction in its truest sense. They don't really engage with history proper but instead manipulate affect, texts and nostalgic sensibilities. For example, many comic book scholars consider Alan Moore's *Watchmen* as a postmodern text that deconstructs the so-called Golden and Silver Ages of comic book superheroes. As I have suggested with my analysis of Captain America in the forties, Golden and Silver Age don't so much describe actual historical periods as much as they define reading

formations and specific articulations of cultural influences. Comics don't deal with history, but they do deal with the way history is popularly remembered.

Working in the interstice between comics and historical memory, I have adopted the term counter-memory because it is less grounded in notions of official historical practice and more associated with interpretation and storytelling in a fictive sense. Counter-memory need not necessarily address history proper; its role in culture is instead to act as a marker for contention and strife within the historical dialogue.

Therefore, when considering fictional figures such as black superheroes, their appearance in the seventies and their retroactive installment into comic book continuity creates these 'markers' of contention that may have been overlooked in previous times. This is not to say that counter-memory is a better term than historiographical metafiction, but rather I wish to establish that figure of the black superman in comic books fits somewhere between the two.

A novel like Jonathan Letham's *The Fortress of Solitude* illustrates this point well. Employing strategies similar to those described by Waldrep, *The Fortress of Solitude* is heavily steeped in seventies nostalgia. As the title suggests, alluding to Superman's arctic stronghold, part of this nostalgia is the use of comics in depicting the transformation from boyhood to manhood, in retrospect.

The story of Dylan Ebdus, a young white boy who is the son of New York Bohemians, and Mingus Rude, a black boy and the comic book loving son of a jazz musician is told through Silver Age comic books, particularly Marvel comics of period. In a time when Marvel was changing the comic book industry with its self-proclaimed, *avant-garde* style, New York and specifically the neighborhood

that Dylan moves to is also changing—due to gentrification. The arrival of white

families in a predominantly black and Latino community produces some tension.

Mingus and Dylan's friendship is stressed by this racial tension. Luckily, they can

escape together in the world of superhero comic books.

Mingus initiates Dylan into the order of superhero comics.

> Mingus Rude excavated four comic books from the closet floor: Daredevil #77, Black Panther #4, Doctor Strange #12, The Incredible Hulk #115. They'd been tenderly handled to death, corners rounded, paper browned by hot attentive breath, pages chewed by eyes. MINGUS RUDE was written in slanted ballpoint capitals on each first interior page. Mingus read certain panels aloud, incanting them, shaping Dylan's attention, shaping his own. Dylan felt himself permeated by some ray of attention, moved so that he felt an uncanny warmth in the half of his chest that was turned toward Mingus (Letham 2003, 55-56).

Together the boys shoplift and collect comic books about superheroes. They

admire figures like Spider-man and Luke Cage (surprisingly) who, unlike them,

have the power to conquer injustice and escape from all threats, unharmed. Here,

the novel resembles a *roman à clefs*, since the readers' knowledge of the world of

superhero comics help them decipher the hidden allegories of the story. For

instance, Dylan and Mingus especially admire the Marvel Comics heroes and

have a bias against Superman and other DC Comics characters, which they

consider lame, flat and ineffectual. Superman, living in his "Fortress of Solitude,"

is not unlike Dylan's artist father living in his studio, after his wife—Dylan's

mother—leaves him.

Superhero imagery permeates Letham's novel well beyond the title. When

Aaron X. Doily, a homeless man who can fly—or so he believes—leaps from a

three-story building and injures himself, Dylan who witnesses the whole event

begins to think about Superman as a real person, not just as a comic book

character; he sees Doily as what Superman has become—old, useless, worn out. Dylan eventually acquires Doily's magic ring, and he discovers that if he wears it with a homemade cape, he can fly. He transforms himself into adolescent superhero "Aeroman" and flies in to save Mingus from a group of bullies:

> The flying boy rolls in air, soars down again, leading with his knuckles. His white cape flutter and flaps dramatically at the elbows of his Spirograph-decorated long-sleeve T. He's wearing a sewn white mask too, one tied behind his ears and open at the top to vent his Afro to the air, like Marvel's Black Goliath (Letham 2003, 213).

Eventually, Dylan shares his Green Lantern-like ring with Mingus. Signaling an important alliance.

Generically, it seems as though what we're dealing with here is some sort of superhero magical realism. However, as pleasurable as this mingling of the familiar genres of super-heroic and *bildungs roman* is, I think that Letham's point (as read through the lens of his essay on the Fantastic Four) here is not to show superhero stuff in the everyday world, but rather to reveal the significance of superhero genres in a specific structure of feeling, i.e., that of the gentrification of an ethnic neighborhood in New York during the seventies. But it goes beyond this, too.

This is also a story about race relations in the US, and comic books are merely a descriptive conceit (notice the presence of both Black Panther and Luke Cage in Letham's narration). Other than Mingus wearing the magic ring, there are few references to black superheroes in *The Fortress of Solitude*, but the sharing of the ring, in some ways, suggests the sharing of a tradition—similar to the way that the boys share comic book consumption—an interesting analogue to the rise of black superheroes in the seventies. It is in this that I see a means of considering black

superheroes as a part of counter-memory. Counter-memory, according to Lipsitz,

is constitutive—it draws together a community. Superheroes quell fears about

failed masculinity and loss, this works with counter-memory, giving voice to the

black experience relegated from history. In short, it fulfils a very real

psychological need.

Like others (including Reynolds, Berger, Fuchs and Reitberger), Danny

Fingeroth believes that superhero stories fill specific psychological needs.

> A hero embodies what we believe is best in ourselves. A hero is a standard to
> aspire to as well as an individual to be admired. This is true for those we deem
> heroes in the world around us… and it is true, but in different ways, for the
> *fictional* heroes we encounter in prose, theatre, and on screens of various
> types and sizes (Fingeroth 2004, 14 original emphasis).

Although *The Fortress of Solitude* at times reads like a jeremiad for the lost days

of superhero comic books and boyhood, Fingeroth is confident that the superhero

will live on, even without comics. He claims that although comic books sales are

at an all-time low, almost 75% smaller than in the 1940s, superheroes will live on

in other media such as film, TV, video games, etc. (as they have been thus far)

(Fingeroth 2004, 169).

I don't think that black superheroes are only for black readers. I think that

this is the mistake that the administration at Milestone Media made. When I call

black superheroes markers for counter-memory, I mean that they stand in,

almost metonymically, for contention in the official story of American history.

Here we find a fictional chronicle of America's struggle with civil rights,

multiculturalism and racism.

Back to the little black boy in the bathroom, for he is in many ways the object

of this study. While it may be too much to claim that these stories written about

black superheroes, that attempt to give voice to the marginalized, question our historical assumptions and establish an alternate form of the superman myth, somehow fulfill the expectation of the BOCA ad in its search for viable role models and ideal for black children, contemporary superhero comics seem to be moving in the right direction. Without denying the racist past of the American comic book, they retroactively create a tradition of black superheroes, one steeped in folk history, struggle and the quest for liberation—mainstays of the established rhetoric of the African-American experience. As I have shown in this thesis, this alignment of superhero story and blackness (albeit in a very limited form) produces the beginnings of a more pluralist way of imagining American ideals and people. Giving that black child a few more choices for hero worship (like Captain America, Steel, the New American, Mr. Terrific or Green Lantern) than he had before.

WORKS CITED

Andelman, David A. Comics find Negro Heroes. *New York Times*, Sep. 22, 1970: C47.

Bennett, Tony. 1982. Text, Readers and Reading Formations. *Literature & History* 9(2): 214-225.

Bennett, Tony, and Janet Woollacott. 1987. *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero*. New York: Methuen.

Berger, Arthur Asa. 1973. *The Comic-Stripped American: What Dick Tracy, Blondie, Daddy Warbucks and Charlie Brown Tell Us About Ourselves*. New York: Walker.

Bogle, Donald. 2001. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York: Continuum.

Bongco, Mila, and Jan Philipzig. 2000. *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*. New York & London: Garland Publishing.

Bowen, Kit. 2001. "Spider-Man" Caught in Yet Another Tangled Web. Sep. 12, 2001. *Hollywood.com* [on-line]. Accessed: May 18, 2006. <http://www.hollywood.com/news/detail/id/1091707>.

Brady, Matt. 2003. Postmortem—*Truth: Red, White & Black*. Nov. 19, 2003. *Newsarama.com* [on-line]. Accessed: May 18, 2006. <http://newsarama.com/forums/showthread.php?s=&threadid=6737>.

Brill, Ian. 2006. John Ridley Fights for *The American Way*. April 18, 2006. Publishers Weekly Comics Week [on-line]. Accessed: August 20, 2006. <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6325521.html>.

Brody, Michael. 1995. Batman: Psychic trauma and Its Solution. *Journal of Popular Culture* 28(4): 171-178.

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

Cogswell, Ted. 2000. Foxy Brown Mamas and Bad-Ass Black Daddies. *Tablet: A Cultural Magazine* 2(11) 2000. Accessed: May 18, 2006. <http://www.tabletnewspaper.com/old%20tablet/vol2iss_11/foxybrown.htm>.

Cohen, Lizabeth. 2003. *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Knopf.

Coogan, Peter M. 2002. The Secret Origin of the Superhero: The Origin and Evolution of the Superhero Genre in America. PhD. diss., Michigan State University.

Davenport, Christian. 1998. The Brother Might be Made of Steel, but He Sure Ain't Super... Man. *Other Voices* 1(2). Accessed: May 18, 2006. <http://www.othervoices.org/1.2/cdavenport/steel.html>.

Dean, Michael. 2000. The Image Story. Oct. 25, 2000. *The Comics Journal*. Accessed: July 30, 2006. <http://www.tcj.com/3_online/n_image1.html>.

Dembart, Lee. 1989. At Stanford, Leftists Become Censors. *New York Times*, May 5, 1989: A35.

Doy, Gen. 2000. *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity*. London & New York: I.B. Tauris.

Du Bois, W.E.B. [1903] 1989. *The Souls of Black Folk*. London & New York: Penguin Books.

Eco, Umberto. [1979] 1984. The Myth of Superman. In *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Eliot, T.S. 1965. Tradition and the Individual Talent. In *Modern Poetics*, ed. James Scully. NY: McGraw-Hill, 61-71.

Fingeroth, Danny. 2004. *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society*. NY & London: Continuum.

Fuchs, Wolfgang J., and Reinhold Reitberger. 1972. *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium*. Trans. Nadia Fowler. Boston: Little Brown.

Gabbard, Krin. 2004. *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African-American Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. 2001. Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man. In *Traps: African-American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, eds. Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 236-249.

Gitlin, Todd. 1982. Prime Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment. In *Television: A Critical View*. New York: Oxford University Press, 426-454.

Gordon, Ian. 2001. Nostalgia, Myth, and Ideology: Visions of Superman at the end of the "American Century". In *Comics and Ideology*, eds. Matthew P. McAllister, et al. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 177-193.

Guerrero, Edward. 2001. Black Men in the Movies: How Does it Feel to be a Problem (and an Answer)? In *Traps: African-American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, eds. Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 270-277.

---. 1993. *Framing Blackness: The African-American Image in Film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Hall, Stuart. 1996a. The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why now? Why Black Skin, White Masks? In *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, ed. Alan Read. Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 13-37.

---. 1996b. Who Needs 'Identity'? In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay. London & Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1-17.

---. 1988. Minimal Selves. In *Identity: The Real Me*. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1988.

---. 1981. Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular'. In *Peoples' History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 227-240.

Harris, Franklin. 2003. Marvel Comics' Publisher is Spoiled by Success. Oct. 16, 2003. Pulp Culture On-line. Accessed: August 10, 2006. <http://home.hiwaay.net/~tfharris/pulpculture/columns/031016.shtml>.

Hogan, Erik. 2004. Afros, Icons, and Spandex: A Brief History of the African-American Superhero. *Comic Book Resources* 35. Accessed: May 18, 2006. <http://www.comicbookresources.com/columns/index.cgi?column=oym&article=1835>.

Houston, Frank. 1999. Stan Lee. *Salon.com* [on-line]. Accessed: March 15 2006. <http://www.salon.com/people/bc/1999/08/17/lee>.

Hutcheon, Linda. 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. NY & London: Routledge.

Klein, Kerwin Lee. 2000. On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse. *Representations* 69: 127-150.

Klock, Geoff. 2002. *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*. New York; London: Continuum.

Lambert, Craig. Neither PG Nor P.C.: The Blaxploitation Era. *Harvard Magazine* (Jan/Feb 2003): 16-17.

Lang, Jeffrey S., and Patrick Trimble. 1988. Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow? An Examination of the American Monomyth and the Comic Book Superhero. *Journal of Popular Culture* 22(3): 157-173.

Letham, Jonathan. 2004. The Return of the King, or, Identifying with Your Parents. In *Give Our Regards to the Atom Smashers*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2-23.

---. 2003. *The Fortress of Solitude*. New York, London & Toronto: Doubleday.

Lipsitz, George. 1990. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Mason, Wyatt. 2004. Flying Up and Flying Down: The Rise and Fall of the American Superhero. *Harper's Magazine* (August): 77-83.

Massood, Paula J. 2003. *Black City Cinema: African-American Urban Experiences in Film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

McCue, Greg S. & Clive Bloom. 1993. *Dark Knights: The New Comics in Context*. London & Boulder, CO: Pluto Press.

McAllister, Matthew P. 2001. Ownership Concentration in the U.S. Comic Book Industry. Chap. 2 in *Comics and Ideology*, ed. Matthew P. McAllister, et al. NY: Peter Lang: 15-38.

---.1990. Cultural Argument and Organizational Constraint in the Comic Book Industry. *Journal of Communication* 40(1): 55-71.

McDaniel, Anita. 2000. Why is This Character Black? Some Popular Representations of Black Race and Negotiated Space in American Society. Paper read at San Diego International Comic-con, July 21-23, at the San Diego Convention Center.

McLelland, Ryan. 2005. Ridley on *The American Way*. Dec. 13, 2005. *Newsarama.com* [on-line]. Accessed: August 20, 2006. <http://forum.newsarama.com/showthread.php?threadid=52233>.

McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. Comics: *Mad* Vestibule to TV. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York, NY: Mentor Books: 150-155.

McNeill, Gregory. Superman and Post 9/11 America. 2002. *Superman Homepage* [on-line]. Accessed: May 18, 2006. <http://www.supermanhomepage.com/comics/comics.php?topic=articles/911>.

Misiroglu, Gina, and David A. Roach, eds. 2004. *The Superhero Book: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Comic-book Icons and Hollywood Heroes*. Detroit, MI: Visible Ink Press.

Murray, Chris. 2000. Propaganda: Superhero Comics and Propaganda in World War Two. In *Comics & Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*, eds. Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen. Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 141-156.

Nora, Pierre. 1989. Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*." *Representations* 26: 7-24.

O'Sullivan, Tim, et al., eds. 1994. *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*. 2nd ed. London & New York: Routledge.

Painter, Nell Irvin. 2006. *Creating Black Americans: African-American History and its Meanings, 1619 to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Quattro, Ken. 2006. The New Ages: Rethinking Comic Book History. 2004. *Comicartville.com* [on-line]. Accessed: Feb. 21 2006. <http://www.comicartville.com/newages.htm>.

Rabinowitz, Peter. 1998. From *Before Reading*. In *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. 2nd ed., ed. David H. Richter. New York: St. Martin's Press, 998-1013.

Reid, Mark. 1997. *PostNegritude Visual and Literary Culture*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

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

Rhines, Jesse Algeron. 1996. *Black Film, White Money*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Riggs, Marlon T. 2001. Black Macho Revisited. In *Traps: African-American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, eds. Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Robinson, Bryan. 2004. Why Black Superheroes Succeed—and Fail: What if Spider-man were African American? The Odyssey of Black Superheroes. *ABC News* [on-line]. Accessed: Feb. 21, 2006. <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/print?id=116502>.

Rogers, J.A. 1957. *One Hundred Amazing Facts About the Negro With Complete Proof: A Short Cut to the World History of the Negro*. New York: Futoro.

Saraceni, Mario. 2003. *The Language of Comics*. London & New York: Routledge.

Singer, Marc. 2002. "Black Skins" and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race. *African-American Review* 36(1): 107-119.

Slack, Jennifer Daryl. 1989. Contextualizing Technology. In *Rethinking Communication*, ed. Brenda Dervin New Brunswick, NJ & Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 329-345.

Spigel, Lynn. 1995. From the Dark Ages to the Golden Age: Women's Memories and Television Reruns. *Screen* 36(1): 16-33.

Stapes, Brent. 2002. Reliving World War II with a Captain America of a Different Color. *New York Times*, Dec. 1, 2002: C8.

Steinberg, Brian. 2006. Look—Up in the Sky! Product Placement! 18 April 2006. *The Wall Street Journal On-Line*. Accessed: July 30, 2006. <http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB114532350031828284-2nRn41Kln8fZjCEfoUgXoUlPqy4_20060425.html?mod=blogs>.

Taylor, Jared. 1992. *Paved with Good Intentions: The Failure of Race Relations in Contemporary America*. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers.

Trescott, Jacqueline. 2006. Haley—The Master Storyteller Whose 'Roots' Ran Very Deep. Feb. 11 1992. *The Washington Post*. Accessed: Sep. 19, 2006. <http://www-tech.mit.edu/V112/N4/haley.04w.html>

Trilling, Lionel. 1950. The Sense of the Past. In *The Liberal Imagination*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 176-191.

Tulloch, John, and Henry Jenkins. 1995. *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek*. London & New York: Routledge.

Wade, Stephen. 2002. John Henry. Sep. 2, 2002. *National Public Radio* (NPR) [on-line]. Accessed: May 18, 2006. <http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/johnhenry/index.html>.

Waldrep, Shelton. 2000. *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture*. London: Routledge.

Wallace, Michele. 1990. Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture. In *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson. New York & Cambridge, MA: New Museum of Contemporary Art/MIT Press, 39-50.

---. 1979. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. New York: Dial Press.

Waters, Harry F. 1993. Another Kind of Superhero. *Newsweek* (August 16 1993): 58-59.

Wertham, Fredric. [1954] 1972. *Seduction of the Innocent*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press.

West, Cornel. 2001. Black Sexuality: The Taboo Subject. In *Traps: African-American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, eds. Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 301-307

Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

---. 1961. *The Long Revolution*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Wloszczyna, Susan. 2002. 'Spider-Man' Spins Towering Tribute to New York. April 18, 2002. *USA Today* [on-line]. Accessed: May 18, 2006. <http://www.usatoday.com/life/lphoto.htm>.

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

Zelizer, Barbie. 1995. Reading the Past Against the grain: The Shape of Memory Studies. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12: 204-239.

COMIC BOOKS CITED

Cooke, Darwyn, and Dave Stewart. My Greatest Adventure. *DC: The New Frontier #4* (July 2004). New York: DC Comics.

---. The Brave and the Bold. *DC: The New Frontier #3* (May 2004). New York: DC Comics.

---. Justice League of America. *DC: The New Frontier #6* (Nov. 2004). New York: DC Comics.

Goodwin, Archie, et al. Out of Hell—a Hero. *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire #1* (June 1972). New York: Marvel Comics Group.

Morales, Robert, and Kyle Baker. The Cut. *Truth: Red, White & Black #4* (April 2003). New York: Marvel Comics.

---. The Math. *Truth: Red, White & Black #5* (May 2003). New York: Marvel Comics.

---. The Whitewash. *Truth: Red, White & Black #6* (June 2003). New York: Marvel Comics.

O'Neil, Deny, and Neal Adams et al. Beware My Power. *Green Lantern/Green Arrow #87* (Jan. 1972). New York: DC Comics.

Ostrander, John. *JSA Secret Files and Origins #1* (Aug. 1999). New York: DC Comics.

Ridley, John, and Georges Jeanty et al. Book One: Ask Not... *The American Way #1* (April 2006) New York: Wildstorm.

---. Book Two: A New Generation. *The American Way #2* (May 2006) New York: Wildstorm.

Roth, Werner, and Colletta, Vince et al. I am Curious (Black)! *Lois Lane #106* (Nov. 1970). New York: DC Comics.

APPENDIX A

A Timeline of Factors & Key Texts Affecting Superhero Comics[1]

Nascent Era (1933-1938)
        1934 National Allied Comics founded and publishes reprint comic books
        1937 National Allied Comics becomes Detective Comics, Inc. (later DC)

First Heroic Era (1938-1955)
        Golden Age (1938-1949)
        1938 *Action Comics* # 1 – First Appearance of Superman
        1939 *Detective Comics* #27 – First appearance of Batman
        1940 *All-Star Comics* #3 first appearance of the Justice Society of America
        1939 Founding of Timely Comics – Publishes *Marvel Comics* #1
        1941 *Captain America Comics* #1 – First Appearance and Capt. America
        Genre Age (1950-1958)
        1950 Horror, Crime, Romance comics under attack
        1951 *Seduction of the Innocent* published
        1954 HUAC comic book and delinquency hearings
        1954 Creation of the Comics Code Authority
        1956 EC Comics shuts down

Second Heroic Era (1956-1986)
        Silver Age (1958-1968)
        1956 *Showcase* #4 – Julius Schwartz revamps Golden Age heroes
        1961 Timely Becomes Marvel Comics
        1961 *Fantastic Four* #1 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby
        1966 Black Panther Introduced in *Fantastic Four* #54, 1st black superhero
        1971 *Amazing Spider-Man* #96-98 published without CCA approval
        1970-1972 Relevance Period, *Green Lantern/Green Arrow, Capt. America*

Third Heroic Era (1986-Present)
        Post-Heroic Age [Bronze Age] (1986-Present)
        Early (1986-1991)
        1984 *Secret Wars*
        1986 *Crisis on Infinite Earths*
        1986 *Batman Year One*
        1986 *Dark Knight Returns*
        1986 *Watchmen*
        1989 *Batman* movie directed by Tim Burton
        1990 Beginning of the 2nd comic book boom

        Middle (1991-2000)
        1991 Jim Lee, Rob Leifeld and Todd MacFarlane found Image Comics
        1992-1994 Milestone, Malibu, Darkhorse, Valiant gain prominence

[1] Adapted from "The New Ages: Rethinking Comic Book History" by Ken Quattro.

Late (2000-Present)
1993 End of the comic book boom
1998 *Blade* released in theatres
2000 *X-Men* released in theatres
2002 *Spider-Man* directed by Sam Rami
2003 *Truth: Red White & Black*
2004 *DC: The New Frontier*
2006 *The American Way*