

2014

Flying in Place: Black Superheroes and Their Origin Stories

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**Flying in Place:
Black Superheroes and Their Origin Stories**

An Honors Thesis

Presented by

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to

The Departments of Literatures in English

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Honors in the Major Field

Connecticut College

New London, CT

May 2014

Acknowledgements

To everyone that believed I could fly even when my wings seemed to be clipped.

Abstract

In recent years, the black superhero has received more attention from scholars. With this surge of interest, comes a wealth of uncharted territory. My paper examined the origin stories of black superheroes, some of which have not yet been critically analyzed. The basis for my analysis is the overwhelming repetition of an urban black narrative that serves as the template for black superhero origin stories. It has proven to be narratively restricting and highly dependent on stereotypes.

Throughout this paper, I offer close readings of black superheroes that are informed by criticism of black masculinity. While the superhero narrative is dependent upon relatability and its closeness to the human experience, black superheroes seem to repackage and reimagine the marginalized black male experience in America. My analysis will reveal how the racial realism of comic books is useful when examining superhero storytelling as a means of reinforcing an American ideological power narrative.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
Chapter I: Golden Age Under Fire.....	18
Chapter II: Disillusionment of the Ideal.....	32
Chapter III: Exodus to Egypt.....	45
Chapter IV: Reuse, Recycle.....	70
Conclusion.....	80
Images.....	81
Works Cited.....	88

Introduction

“We love our superheroes because they refuse to give up on us. We can analyze them out of existence, kill them, ban them, mock them, and still they return, patiently reminding us of who we are and what we wish we could be.”

-Grant Morrison, *Supergods*

It would be difficult for anyone to deny the significance of comic books to the American cultural lexicon. However, the legitimacy of comic books as literature worthy enough to be included in the academic criticism is quite a different story. Within the past decade, scholars of all disciplines have been taking the comic book medium more seriously, identifying its ability to engage the imagination unlike any other literary avenue. Although comic books have become a collectible commodity, their historical imprint on the literary world is undeniable, as they have produced some of the most classic and unforgettable stories. Comic books expand what we might consider to be “reading”, stretching our understanding of how narrative works through storytelling, and causing us to reconsider the possibility of redefining the implications of the form a narrative is packaged in. According to author and American cartoonist Will Eisner, “Comics deal with two fundamental communicating devices: words and images. Admittedly this is an arbitrary separation. But, since in the modern world of communication they are treated as independent disciplines, it seems valid. Actually, they are derivatives of a single origin and in the skillful employment of words and images lies the expressive potential of the medium” (Comics and Sequential Art). It is precisely the interdisciplinary relationship between these two communicative disciplines that validates their academic scholarship, in as much as they reflect the human experience, where communication is simultaneously an interchange between the literary and the visual.

Although this paper does not seek to prove the academic validity of comic books--rather, it is guided by the assumption that comic books are useful literary tools precisely because of their cultural merit--I would argue that the narrative complexity of the comic book medium is useful in exploring how the literary world is influenced by/influences the real world.

I will focus specifically on the superhero genre, for I believe it to be one of the most powerful and resonating narrative concepts in the literature. Though they are often compared to mythic figures, superheroes are a uniquely American construction of heroism, one that does not aim to put heroism out of reach, but instead to bring it closer. What makes these stories so trademark and resonant with Americanness is that, as Jason Dittmer asserts, “comic books are [a] medium through which national identity and geopolitical scripts are narrated” (Dittmer 626). American national identity is at the core of the superhero narrative, especially embodied in characters like Superman (DC Comics 1938) and Captain America (Marvel Comics 1941). Through superheroes, America’s abstract ideals can be isolated and explored to their imaginative boundaries, often in heightened context. Yet, with such American ideals come the falsities of America’s historical dedication to those values, mainly the issue of racism. Through the critical lense of literary studies and race, my thesis examines more closely the limitations of narrative, the usefulness of storytelling and how superhero comics engage and often times disengage with racial discourse.

In comic books, superheroes are close enough to gods with their superpowers, so that we believe they can save the world, but human enough to see ourselves in. Since the dawning of the superhero genre, superheroes have been infused with political implications and social causalities, creating a re-imagined American story world. In this story world, American ideology is projected onto the superhero narrative, providing the context and confines of its vastness. Whether it be the

inclusion of historical events or overtly racialized scenarios, the superhero narrative contains Americanness in a way that only it can. Comic books are able to do so because of their visually stimulating nature, a marriage between the literary and the visual, thus making it what I understand to be visual literature.

The narrative complexity that arises stems from the blending of the written word and visual images. The superhero narrative provides visual images that in many ways hinders the imagination of the readership because they do not have to do the same sort of imaginative work as they would be able to in a novel. Yet, with this image comes an expectation that the narrative content and dialogue are to reflect that image accurately. This is why race matters to comic books, because readers are able to see who they are engaged with and therefore have a set of assumptions/ expectations that they bring with them to the reading experience. As I mentioned before, this type of reading experience reflects the lived experience because the literary and the visual are always occurring simultaneously. Furthermore, comic books, because of the strong visual component, are read differently from literary texts, therefore they are interpreted differently by a range of readers.

Essentially, comic books provide more than just words to read, in fact, a reader may go through a comic book and never read a single word, but the visual aspect is arguably the most important feature. As literary scholar Marc Singer argues, “comics rely upon visually codified representations in which characters are continually reduced to their appearances.” (Singer 107) This idea places superheroes in a racialized American context where whiteness means power and blackness means inadequacy. In this way, comic books are a form of art that actively “normaliz[es] racist standards through repetition” (Singer 108).

My thesis is concerned with how Black superheroes function in that story world and how certain tropes associated with Black masculinity (e.g. hypermasculinity, rage, incompetence etc.) suffocate the expansiveness of the narrative. Undoubtedly, the superhero narrative illustrates just how difficult of a project writing a Black superhero is. The tension that arises comes from the inability of language to adequately define Blackness. As South African scholar Remy Ngamije asserts, there is no “single Black consciousness” (Ngamije). Because of the geographical displacement and cultural fragmentation of Black bodies, there is no concrete understanding of what it means, creating a hierarchy of Blackness that pins black people against one another, claiming their legitimacy. Blackness lacks a unifying experience, through which it can be classified in a positive light. Unlike European immigrants, Black people of America did not blend in with the master culture, they were never given the opportunity to view themselves as purely American, rather they viewed themselves distinct from whiteness and from other forms of Blackness. This reality makes creating a Black superhero all the more difficult, requiring that one Black superpowered body be a representative for an entire people that do not view themselves as part of a defined whole. The complexity of the Black superhero combined with the lack of a single Black consciousness is juxtaposed with an “easily digestible whiteness embodied by Superman.” (Ngamije) American whiteness is much easier to read and define, which makes the epitomized white superhero an easier feat.

I will focus specifically on the origin story as the basis for my analysis because of the longevity of the superhero genre, which means that characters are often featured for multiple issues after they are first introduced. The origin story is the point in the narrative where the superhero is their most defined and settled into the story. In comic book terminology, an origin story is an account or back-story revealing how a character their superpowers and/or the

circumstances under which they became superheroes or supervillains. For this thesis I will expand it to be defined as the biography of a character to account for other narrative features that are relevant to the exploration of superhero storytelling.

My interest in these origin stories has developed in relation to the emerging scholarship of Black superheroes, where there has been little attention given to the specifics of the origin story as a literary space for the restriction of Black superheroes to narrative bondage. Black superhero origin stories are unique in that, a large portion of them are written as, what I would like to call, shadow narratives, which would then make Black heroes shadow heroes. Most Black superheroes are introduced as minor characters in another series, often requiring that their origin story be condensed. They do have their own origin story, but it is often presented as an intertwined subplot to a white hero's narrative, resulting in the Black hero becoming a sidekick figure. Consequently, they are never able to escape that shadow of narrative association, which makes their story dependent on the white hero. In this dependent narrative relationship, black heroes are in turn presented as being a substandard spin-off of epitomized white figures.

The origin story not only gives us context for the superhero, but it deeply engages in what anthropologist Michael Jackson calls the "politics of storytelling" (12). Jackson applies this terminology with an understanding that stories are not just enjoyable, but they are tools for creating narratives that groups use to define themselves and others by. Comic book superheroes can be viewed as America's ideological mythology because, like the gods of Greek myth, superheroes embody the morality, politics and beliefs of the American culture that they are created in. American Ideological mythology engages in storytelling, using the superhero narrative as a way of creating a reimagined American story world in order to navigate and promote Americanness. Yet, in this context, the American experience is a projection of white

master culture onto the genre, making its universality false and its intentionality geared towards a specific readership.

I would argue that these narratives are driven by power relations that, as Jackson says, “do violence to the lived experience” (11). In other words, the power struggle for narrative agency is often accompanied by tangible, political ammunition that is used to violate and alter the story of the lived experience. Storytelling is used as a means of preservation, mainly the preservation of a power narrative, that can monopolize historical discourse. In other words, what the dominant culture wishes to preserve is their dominance and they are able to do so through storytelling, creating narratives of power that they own. This thesis will show that the violence done to the lived experience is made a reality by the trivialization of the Black experience, producing superficially racialized superhero narratives, in which black superheroes, despite their powers, are depicted as only being able to be the hero of their neighborhood, as if humanity does not need them. This begs the question, is this the best the black superhero can hope for? My thesis will attempt to answer that question by showing where this narrative comes from and how much racial discourse influences it.

However, without understanding that the origin story as a narrative construct is already limited, it would understate the detrimental conditions under which black superheroes are created. The origin story has a fine number of story skeletons, from which superheroes are written and those place limitations on the expansiveness of the origin story.

Superhero origins tend to fall into four categories:

- I. The Chosen One: Given powers by a higher power/wise being, with a specific mandate
- II. Non-Human Hero: Powers possessed in another world, usually from outer space
- III. The Freak Accident: Whether it be in a science lab or in an abandoned building, these

malfunctions transform the lives of regular people and give them superhuman abilities

IV. The Inventor: A scientist/engineer who makes themselves gadgets and becomes a hero.

It can be seen that, although there are few narrative paths for the origin story, there have been thousands of superheroes created since the beginning of the genre. This is made possible by the use of narrative variation, reordering and restructuring, and rearranging the order of events.

Conceptually, my analysis draws from the methodology advanced from Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, in which Propp critically analyzes the Russian folktale's narrative structure, functionality and story pathways. Propp demonstrates the limitedness of the narrative options within folklore, showing the developmental progression of the fairy tale as though it were an equation to calculate an narrative endpoint. Though he focuses specifically on Russian fairy tales, I see his argument and terminology having a universal application in storytelling as it challenges the notion of narrative as a cultural practice.

Like Propp, Joseph Campbell focuses on the universal elements of storytelling, but his interest is primarily the hero narrative, which has a framework that corresponds with the superhero origin story. Joseph Campbell's "call to adventure" (*A Hero With A Thousand Faces*) is a useful way to explore the narrative power of the superhero origin story as a cultural currency (i.e. stories that provide a culture with its self definition, as well as setting it apart from others) . In his exegesis of mythological narrative, Campbell identifies a major theme, referred to as the "hero's journey", that echos scripture and cultural storytelling. The superhero narrative follows some of the same patterns of the hero's journey, but packaged in an reimagined American story world.

Although the superhero does not encompass all that the hero's journey entails, mainly because of the episodic incongruity and undefined final resolution, the central themes of the

superhero narrative are complemented by the notion of the “call to adventure”. The hero’s journey requires that the hero leave their place of comfort to discover who they really are and on that journey, they experience adversity from which they realize they are called to a greater purpose. In the bible, it was Moses at the burning bush, in the Odyssey it was the Trojan war. These moments signify “a refusal to give up what one takes to be one's own interest” and the acceptance of a new mantle (Campbell 46). Quite often, these events “reveal an unsuspected world” that ushers the individual into a “relationship with forces that are not rightly understood” (Campbell 47). The events seem arbitrary and operate like a “blunder”, when in fact they are a manifestation of the “suppressed desires and conflict” that are the “opening to a destiny” (Campbell 54).

The superhero origin story functions in the way the hero’s journey does, because it depicts the superhero uprooted from the familiar and embarking on a journey towards their purpose. It’s what takes Clark Kent away from the farm in Smallville to Metropolis and Batman from Wayne Manor to the streets of Gotham. Superheroes aren’t defined by their superpowers, they are validated by their cause. Their origin stories direct readers towards a clear understanding of what it means to be a hero. As we will see in the case of Superman, superheroes are defined by who they fight for and what they believe in. In contrast, Black superheroes experience the hero’s journey within their familiar space, resulting in a deformed superhero narrative, one that implies restriction and spatial limitations. Their origin story does not necessarily give black superheroes a clear cause that is free from racial burdens, it often means that they continue struggling to survive where they are, never leaving the familiar place to embark on a new journey.

Both Propp and Campbell introduce terms and concepts that allow me to critically

position narrative and storytelling in isolation, thereby showing the limited language of comic book storytelling. While Propp provides the tools to understand narrative routes and the language that guides it, Campbell supplies a coherent hero-narrative construct through which the origin story can be interpreted. Although Propp and Campbell are not directly critiquing storytelling and narrative, their analyses show the limitations of narrative (i.e. that stories are determined by a finite number of narrative options) that will be at the crux of my argument. Those limitations are restrictive because of the narrative's dependency on preconceived notions and beliefs (e.g. In my argument, the realities of the urban ghetto and Black masculinity). What I mean by this is that, the culture of storytelling is guided by the known experiences and understanding of a societal structure. This is what makes Russian folklore different from American superheroes, the cultural and historical context that sets the parameters for the story is specific to those cultural experiences.

On the other hand, with Black superheroes, the options of narratives that move towards superheroism become even more narrow and more specific because of the limiting of narrative options to accommodate and represent white attitudes towards blacks, and the assumptions that construct a pseudo authentic Black experience. The pseudo authentic black experience will be defined and explored as a default narrative, one that perpetuates a stereotypical Black experience without exploring the intricacies of what that Black experience may look like. Thus, producing an incomplete narrative that places all Black superheroes on the same origin story track with little variation. The pseudo-authentic Black experience is presented as though it is an all-encompassing Black narrative, without actually accounting for the range of Black experiences in the context of America. This proves to be a limitation for both white and Black writers of comics, who are dependent on mainstream portrayals of Blackness in order to depict a hero that

wears a skin color that is undefinable. My thesis will examine how early representations of Black superheroes were dependent on this default narrative, reading it as a form of exploitation and engaging with negative stereotypes, as well as how Black writers addressed this concern, often relying just as much on the pseudo-authentic as their predecessors.

My investigations will focus on the black male superhero specifically and how the stereotypes of black masculinity function in the black superhero narrative. The reason for my focus on Black masculinity is, that like Robert Staples, I believe that there isn't a "more controversial role in American society than that of the Black male" (Staples 1). Throughout the course of American history, the Black male figure has been scrutinized, deconstructed, abused, psychoanalyzed, and abandoned. The Black male experience in America is a narrative entrenched in the notion of confusion, social wandering and displacement. Black men have never been able to settle into place, constantly being redefined by white master culture while simultaneously trying to reconcile their individuality in the clutter of Black identity. Much of the Black male experience in America has been dictated by racism, involving that he be denied "autonomy over and mastery of [his] environment", consequently "socially castrat[ing]" him, making him "insecure in [his] male identity and lacking in positive self-concept" (Staples 2,8). Black men have thus been defined by their resistance of "white institutional practices" and against the backdrop of white superiority (Alexander 75). Because Black superheroes are narratively engaged with these same struggles, mainly whiteness as a controlling factor in the "definition, pace and style of Black progress" (Cones 43), I believe that the discourse of Black masculinity studies can be applied to my readings of superhero narratives.

My thesis will engage in close readings with the origin stories of multiple black superheroes because the black superhero origin stories are reflective of black men in America.

By doing so, the patterns of the Black masculine stereotype will be alarmingly evident in the origin story. The stereotypes that are the basis for Black hero origin stories are drawn from the caricaturization by white master culture of Black men. For the sake of specificity, the heroes I have chosen were created by Marvel Comics, DC Comics and Milestone Comics, the three most well-known corporations in the industry. The reason being, that their character base is extensive and has been culturally impactful for decades. Examining these heroes will aid me in showing the limitedness of the Black superhero origin story, its dependence on the pseudo-authentic black experience that is based on only a fraction of the experience, moreover on stereotypical projections from that experience.

The first chapter, “Golden Age Under Fire”, will start with an analysis of the narrative and cultural significance of Superman, the first superhero. In this chapter, I will show how his origin story and character embody white American masculine ideals, and the American story world framework that makes his whiteness a sign of purity and inviolability. His historical entrance to the world came at a crucial time for America. He is used as the vessel through which America is able to reaffirm its status as a democratic superpower. Through this analysis, I will construct a narrative that positions Superman as the unattainable perfection that black superheroes will be distanced from, the figure that signifies oppressiveness and a narrative that excludes race from its discourse. By doing so, it will be evident how drastically different the black superhero origin story is.

In the second chapter, “Disillusionment of the Ideal”, I will show how Black Superheroes were introduced and the historical basis for their appearance, that is deeply rooted in a resistance to include Black people in a power narrative. I will be essentially following how they are woven into the superhero narrative as a subgenre, where skin color is interpreted as a

weakness. They are made legible through the pseudo authentic Black experience, which will be made clear in my application of journalist and comic book expert Hannibal Tabu's "Black Superhero Origin Algorithm". Here, the origin story is the vehicle through which white attitudes of Black masculinity are projected onto the story world, creating an environment that produces rogue Black superheroes. Like Campbell and Propp, Tabu's analysis demonstrates the limitedness of the narrative language of superheroes.

The third chapter, "Exodus to Egypt", will explore the restrictiveness of the Black superhero origin story in the sense that it narratively constrains Black superheroes to a particular demographic, enslaving them to a one dimensional story. This chapter will take the general framework provided by the previous chapter and delve into more specifics, mainly the Black superhero origin stories themselves. In this chapter I will look at the setting, geographical placement and environments that make up the Black superhero origin story. I will pay close attention to the narrative patterns that are often repetitive and have the same implications in various origin stories. This analysis will include a critical outlook on what I believe are the true enemies of the black superhero that are established in the origin story,,: mainly how the white savior narrative is written into the black superhero origin story.

The fourth chapter, "Reuse, Recycle", investigates how the origin story is affected when a white superhero's name and mandate are passed down to a Black superhero. While much of these creative decisions are made by comic book executives for the sake of marketability, this paper will focus on the narrative implications of such decisions, how the Black replacement is depicted and how the origin story reflects the difference between the new Black hero and his white predecessor.

Much of this paper will point to the deception and unreliability of narrative stories, how often they can reveal mistruths and point us in the wrong direction. That is not to say that those narratives are not useful, but their value is heightened by an informed critical lense that is able to expose the underlying racist narrative that is written as though it were natural. The origin story in particular is a useful way of exploring how a collection of mistruths can produce a disjointed collection of black superheroes that follow repetitive narratives. I see this as being problematic because it limits the narrative, but it also suggests that there is a clear and authentic Black experience that can be summed up in a few superheroes. This thesis argues that, while white superheroes (i.e. Superman) are representations of white aspiration and idealism, showing all that whiteness can be, the Black superhero is just everything that the Black man already is, the ceiling and epitome of his shortcomings.

I. Golden Age Under Fire

This chapter examines Superman (1938) in the context of his origin story in a way that will guide our understanding of the superhero archetype which is disrupted when Black superheroes are written into the genre. The chapter will piece together a narrative that positions Superman as a representation of overbearing American whiteness possessed of perfection and moral superiority. I analyze this representation by exploring the multiple layers of his origin story that historically contextualize his evolution as a character as well as his relation to racial tension.

Before Superman, comic books were already in existence, used as a medium for leisure and political propaganda. When he is introduced, the superhero genre quickly took off, starting what author Richard Lupoff recognized as the “Golden Age.” From the late 1930s to the early 1940s, some of the most iconic superheroes were introduced to American culture, producing what we may consider to be the figureheads of the American pop-cultural Mount Olympus. These Superheroes include: Batman and Robin, Wonder Woman, The Flash, Green Lantern, the Atom, Hawkman, and Aquaman. Although Superman is exclusively a part of the DC comics universe, I argue that he is the embodiment and epitome of superhero masculinity and a personification of American whiteness in the superhero genre. In this reading, his cultural value poses a threat to the legitimacy of the black superhero as a hero.

It would be critically unjust to begin this exposition of Superman without first acknowledging his prehistory. Thomas Andrae’s revelatory essay, “From Menace to Messiah: The Prehistory of Superman in Science Fiction Literature,” offers insight on how the Man of Steel evolved into an American cultural icon, but as Andrae argues, the hero was not always the

“avatar of Americanism”. Andrae affirms that Superman has become “apotheosized into a folk hero” and “canoniz[ed] as an archetypal representative of the nation’s highest ideals.” However, the initial narrative of Superman did not reflect such ideals (84).

The Superman we recognize as the cultural icon today was once depicted as an aggressive strongman, one who did not think twice about taking the life of an evil doer. In 1940, comic book editor Whitney Ellsworth made an effort to soften the character by establishing a code of conduct for superheroess. This required that Superman be made the emblem for moral purity, which meant that he did not kill and his sense of justice was informed by a greater dedication to the preservation of humanity. Andrae credits the New Deal as the political shift from individualistic ideology to a national unification rooted in American idealism. Thus, Superman became a hero for the people. This is the Superman that I will be examining throughout this chapter and for the rest of this paper. While I am aware of his prehistory, his modification into a white American idealist hero is not only the most contemporary, but the most influential on the superhero genre.

Much of this chapter will engage in a close reading of Superman’s origin story that is informed by a loose application of a totalitarian narrative that presents him as the controlling standard of Americanness. Superman, as a social and political role model, is dictated by moral absolutism, thus making him a perfect aspiration, which means that anything that contradicts or opposes him is, by default, subversive.

Adam in Tights

When the land of opportunity became desolate and the American Dream had turned into a vicious economical nightmare, it was not a bird, it was not a plane, it was Superman who came

to save the day, at least figuratively. Bursting onto the comic book scene in June 1938 (Action Comics #1), Superman is a son of white American power. He represents America's ascension to the world throne after an economic lowpoint. Created by Jewish-American writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster, we see that his appearance is timely but curious. 1930s America saw the Great Depression and the beginning of World War II and Superman was created at the border of those two major events in American history. He was introduced as a American political icon, a modern mythic hero, one for America to claim as its own. He was a way of flexing American democratic authority, to increase the morality of the American people and to remind them of the greatness the country still held in spite of the circumstances.

Superman, because of his cultural and historical landmark, is the Adam of superhero creation. He is the archetype, the superhero that every other superhero is based on and compared to. He is the role model that is relatable despite his perfection. Although he wasn't born on earth, he carries human qualities and traits, making him the "perfect person." (Cates 833) The humanity of his character makes him an adequate representation for white, American maleness. His "virtue is humanized and his powers are the extreme realization of natural endowments such as astuteness, swiftness, fighting ability, logical faculties and observation", all of which have been presented as being naturally possessed by white men (Eco 14).

Dennis Dooley and Gary D. Engle, in their book, *Superman at Fifty: Persistence of a Legend*, argue that he is the "20th century archetype of mankind at its finest" because "he is courage and humanity steadfastness and decency, responsibility and ethic", which makes him "our universal longing for perfection, for wisdom and power used in the service of the human race" (Davenport). In this way, Superman represents idealism, but not solely because of his

mental and physical superiority, instead the aspect of “service [to] the human race” places his character on an iconic level of human aspiration.

Undoubtedly, the superhero narrative is constructed around morality, showing how a strong moral code differentiates the good from the evil and how it is the benchmark for superheroism. In order for the Superman narrative to work, there has to be a persistent battle between good and evil, where evil exists as a persistent enemy. Superman comes to save the day just when the world seems to be crumbling or there is a violent threat to morality. As Isaac Cates notes, there is a “morality of the Superman stories” in which “heroic action must and [successfully] does prevent the world from breaking” (“On the Literary Use of Superheroes” 833). Superman is perfectly moral, he understands justice, and truth is embedded in his character. There is a pervasive binary between good and evil, which produces a moral simplicity in the superhero narrative that is created by Superman.

From the very start of his story, we discover that Superman is good, possessing no internal flaw, which helps us then understand why the bad guys he faces are morally corrupt: they aren’t like him. American democratic idealism is made legible through Superman and morality is comprehensible because of the obvious corruption of the villain. In this way, Superman’s code of ethics is perfect, his moral code is never misguided and his execution of justice is without blemish.

Superman is effectively presented as the anchor for mankind, the interpreter of an absolute moral code, which places him in the position of being the hero for humanity. He has everyone’s best interest at heart and he knows what to do. However, he can only be the aspiration of the white male reader. Because of his white skin, Superman is a white power

fantasy in which the white man can fly above everyone and be the savior of the people he walks among. He is the epitome of the white savior.

As we will see in his origin story, Superman's whiteness is specifically an all-American masculinity that makes him an inscription of the American Dream and white masculine empowerment. Aside from his powers, Superman was made to reflect the white American working middle class male experience, glorifying it by packaging it in the fantastical. Superman is able to appeal to an expansive readership because his whiteness has an invisible quality. Richard Dyer, an English academic film specialist, comments on hegemonic whiteness as being invisible:

Whites are everywhere in representation. Yet precisely because of this and their placing as norm they seem not to be represented to themselves as whites but as people who are variously gendered, classed, sexualised and abled. At the level of racial representation, in other words, whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race. (3)

Dyer is describing a culture in which white is the norm. Therefore, in the present context, Superman's whiteness makes him the perfect selection as the savior of humanity because the invisibility of whiteness is assumed color of the human race. Superman is "clearly pictured as white and his ability to assume certain standards of masculinity depends on his whiteness", ultimately making his skin color a determinant of his dominance in the superhero narrative (Bennett, Jackson *Graphic Whiteness and the Lessons of Chris Ware's Jimmy Corrigan*). Although Superman is never explicitly called white, it is evident through his ability to blend in

with the master culture, that his whiteness is what allows him to endorse fluidly American idealism and the superiority associated with democracy and white masculinity.

With Love, Sincerely Krypton or From a Lost World to a Lost World

Looking more closely at the origin story of Superman, we are able to see that the American idealism that he represents is ingrained throughout his narrative. His origin story glorifies the rural white man, the all-American who comes from a hardworking background to the big city to fulfill a greater purpose for the greater population. Dooley and Eagle describe the origin story in this way:

the starchild placed by his parents into a tiny rocket ship on the eve of the planet Krypton's destruction and hurled, the only survivor of a wonderful race, across millions of miles of interstellar space ... to Earth; of how the helpless babe was found in a cornfield by a gentle couple, the Kents, who raised the lad as their own son; and of the miraculous powers young Clark Kent discovered himself to possess - tremendous strength and X-ray vision, the gift of flight - powers he vowed at his dying foster father's bedside to use only for the good of humankind and the deliverance of the oppressed; to which purposes he hid his true identity behind the bland exterior of timid Kent, the newspaper reporter ... Only the occasional stray fragment of the lost world of his infancy, the dreaded kryptonite, could render the Man of Steel helpless as a babe again ... until some passing mortal or sudden stroke of grace delivered him once more from the hands of his enemies. (Dooley 1987, 20)

Reading this passage more closely, we see that although the “starchild” is the “only survivor of a wonderful race” that is millions of miles away from Earth, he is able to be raised by the Kents and there is no question of his legitimacy as human until he discovers his “miraculous powers”. The Kryptonian survivor comes to earth in a “tiny rocket ship” and he is already white. He fits into the hegemonic white culture, where American idealism can become a part of his social DNA. It is fitting that his ship lands in a cornfield, that he is found by a couple who live in the middle of nowhere, because it puts him away from the city and the corruption it harvests. On that farm Clark can learn hard work, good ethics and grow up in the American way.

Superman’s origin story is drenched in an American nationalist ethos of the American way. American Jewish writer and scholar Will Herberg says this of the American way of life:

The American Way of life is individualistic, dynamic, and pragmatic. It affirms the supreme value and dignity of the individual; it stresses incessant activity on his part, for he is never to rest but is always to be striving to "get ahead"; it defines an ethic of self-reliance, merit, and character, and judges by achievement: "deeds, not creeds" are what count. The "American Way of Life" is humanitarian, "forward-looking", optimistic. Americans are easily the most generous and philanthropic people in the world, in terms of their ready and unstinting response to suffering anywhere on the globe. The American believes in progress, in self-improvement, and quite fanatically in education. But above all, the American is idealistic. Americans cannot go on making money or achieving worldly success simply on its own merits; such "materialistic" things must, in the American mind, be justified in "higher" terms, in terms of "service" or "stewardship" or "general welfare"... And because they are so idealistic, Americans tend to be

moralistic; they are inclined to see all issues as plain and simple, black and white, issues of morality (Herberg 55).

Superman embodies the notion of the American way, serving as the ultimate humanitarian, who is still self-reliant. The world needs Superman, not the other way around. Superman is the epitome of American character, which qualifies him as a global citizen, ready and able to help anyone no matter where they are. He abides by the notion of justified “higher terms” which enables him to perfectly execute justice on morally absolute terms.

Superman’s origin story geographically places him in the rural and idealized pastoral landscape where such values can be woven into his mental framework. Just as Herberg notes, Superman sees issues as “plain and simple, black and white”, which can be attributed to the moral simplicity of the superhero narrative. The American way and its notion of moral purity has been apart of the national ethos since the revolution, and even with the the 20th century notion of “Republican Motherhood,” which is the term used to describe women who were educated for the purpose of raising patriotic sons (Scarpino 1). I would argue that the combination of these two things, the notion of republican motherhood and the American way of life, effectively defines white American ideology, which permeates Superman’s origin story. Superman is the epitome of the values that Herberg mentions, thus making him an inscription of Americanness.

From his origin story we learn that everything Clark does comes from a pure place. He is perfectly selfless and he is motivated by the goodness within him . Once he learns of his powers he “vow[s] to use [them] only for the good of humankind and the deliverance of the oppressed”, demonstrating his moral superiority and perfection. He knows what to do, he understands how it must be done and his role in all of it. Much like the hero’s journey, as described by Campbell, Clark’s life in Smallville, Kansas is temporary. It represents the familiar and the roots that must

be severed in order for the hero to follow their true purpose. Clark doesn't need to leave the space, he can remain in the pastoral setting, but because of his moral superiority, he has no other choice but to leave and embark on a journey to Metropolis.

Clark's "call to action" draws him to Metropolis, a space that represents the world, the global hub. Metropolis looks very much like New York City. Yet, in this space full of wealth and power, Clark denies those pleasures in order to maintain a secret identity as a reporter. Metropolis, also referred to as the "Big Apricot", is the capitalist haven and the homebase for Clark. In Metropolis, Superman often operates during the daytime, in the light and for all the world to see. Although there is crime, the setting is bright and colorful, which takes away from the dark quality of evil. Playing with evil in the daylight makes it seem less threatening. The origin story makes it clear that Metropolis is Superman's city, where evil is exposed by the light. As I will address later, the addition of Slum City to the myth of Metropolis will show that there are much darker and grittier parts of Metropolis which Superman never explores.

Another important reading of Superman's origin story is the notion of service to the oppressed and the underrepresented, which further explains the connection between Superman and Herberg's American way. Superman is innately good, but what is often overlooked is that his whiteness still has privilege. While it is idealized that because of moral purity he not only knows to use his powers for good, but he also knows who to use them for. He maintains a secret identity as a working reporter, but it is not something that he needs to do. He doesn't need to work or do anything for the sake of humanity, but because he has the privilege of blending in when he wants to and standing out when he wants to--a result of his white skin--readers come away with the false notion that he is the representative of the oppressed, the white savior in fact.

While he hides himself behind a “bland exterior”, Superman is the furthest from bland. Action Comics #1 (1938), Superman’s first appearance (and where a large portion of his origin story is found), contains images and content that depict him as physically and mentally superior when in his Superman costume. For the sake of his identity, he conceals that perfectness when he presents himself as Clark Kent. However, when we examine his powers, there is nothing that Superman cannot do. His completeness suggests that American idealism is nearly flawless in both physicality and intellect, making him a figure to be emulated by a white masculine audience.

In the course of the origin story, we learn that the radioactive element from Superman's home planet Krypton, known as kryptonite, is the only weakness that can “render the Man of Steel a helpless babe again”. How should we make sense of an external weakness of the Man of Steel? I would like to offer a reading of kryptonite that portrays his Americanness, and to a certain extent his humanness, as a performative and artificial project that demonstrates the paradoxical nature of his otherness. Kryptonite is not only residue from his lost home planet, but it is green. I would argue that Superman is weakened when he is near kryptonite because it represents color, a tainting of his American whiteness, therefore racializing him. It serves as a reminder that he is the ultimate immigrant, not purely American, but raised to be an embodiment of white Americanness. Kryptonite represents a return back to the lost world and the alienness that he tries to divorce himself from.

Given the gift of super-*everything*, Superman’s opposition must challenge his power in some way and pose a real threat to humanity. Initially, Superman is shown taking down criminals, fighting Nazi Germans, saving helpless pedestrians and restoring order after crime gets out of hand, but as his narrative evolves from his origin story, Superman’s enemies become

supernatural forces, monsters and other major threats to the city and to the world. It removes him from working solely on the ground level and puts him beyond the limitations of political/judicial action.

What Can One Icon Do?

Superman's origin story is the foundation of his character. He is "one of the pedagogic instruments of [American] society" representing and reframing American idealism and recontextualizing whiteness (Eco 19). The ideology produced by the origin story of Superman is affirmative of the social, socioeconomic, gender and racial realities of American. The nature of his origins forges a connection between the superhero narrative and the American narrative. What happens in the comic is a direct application of present American ideology, mainly the romanticized white masculine ideal. As Umberto Eco argues, "[Superman] is an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations which renders him easily recognizable" (15). I would argue that the "certain collective aspirations" are those of the white masculine ideal: self sufficiency, moral absolutism and resistance to adversity (impenetrable skin). Superman's whiteness is interpreted by many as a default color, while I believe that his white skin has cultural implications that translate as dominant and superior race narrative.

The deception is that, as a figure, Superman can represent all of humanity and that by his power the whole world can have someone to look to, when in fact, his whiteness places him above the most severely oppressed people: the Black community.

Superman is one of the most consistent characters in the superhero genre, remaining loyal to the core American values of his genesis. There is very little change to the core of his character and his origin story is consistent. Superman just gets stronger, more powerful and more

victorious. His muscles expand, he can fly faster and his ability to do the impossible increases significantly. Yet, what remains the most devastatingly consistent is the ignorance of race and racial tensions in America at work in his narratives.

To transition from the idealistic nature of Superman towards a close examination of how the Black superhero origin story contrasts with it, I would like to introduce an instance of Superman's "white guilt" that will show his disconnection from not only the Black community, but from the Black superhero narrative. In *Superman v2*, #179, (August 2002), Superman encounters the self-proclaimed "protector of Harlem", Muhammad X, a hero inspired by Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X. The temporal distance between Superman #179 and Action Comics #1 is huge, but the relevance of this issue to my examination of Superman is poignant. By the early 2000s we see a Superman that is still holding on to the American values according to which he was created. He doesn't age and his ideological perspective only experiences a slight shift. His conversation with Muhammad X shows us his evolution from a racially oblivious white savior to a post-racial protector of humanity.

During this encounter, Muhammad X verbally attacks Superman, accusing him of neglecting Harlem and he is rather upset that Superman decides to come there for the first time, which causes Superman to question his place as a role model. Lois Lane consoles him by telling him that he's the "most color blind person she knows", but Superman, still processing the conversation from earlier, tells Lois that Muhammad X said "Blacks should look up to Black heroes and by being white, [Superman] is hurting them". Lois then suggests that Superman talk with Steel, another black superhero, to gain perspective. The issue ends with Muhammad X and Superman in another confrontational situation, but this time Superman is prepared with a response. Superman tells Muhammad X that, "...[he] can't change the color of my skin... what

[he] tries to do is something far more difficult... to be a human being. And hopefully, someday, we'll see each other *only* in that way". To which Muhammad X responds, "Yeah, well I guess that helps you sleep at night".

The importance of this interaction is that it encompasses a discrepancy within the superhero universe, in which the divide is not by superpowers or planet of origin, but by the color of a hero's skin. Black and white still have the same consequences in the comic book story world that they do in America. Superman's final response echoes the post-racial claims of the 21st century: America has become/is becoming a nation where race is no longer a relevant basis for discrimination, resulting in Americanness that embraces the notion of color-blindness. In this way, Superman is able to mask his guilt and only temporarily defuses the problem of race.

Muhammad X's claim against Superman is valid, acknowledging that there is uncharted territory in black neighborhoods where racism and violence are the main evils. The following chapters will explore how such evils are influenced by history, culture and white attitudes towards Black men. The archetype of Superman will prove to be oppressive in that, while his origin story epitomizes the American experience, the Black superhero origin story will be missing many of those core elements in a way that puts the Black superhero at a disadvantage because he is Black in the first place.

II. Disillusionment of the Ideal

"Ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have." -
James Baldwin

The emergence of Black superheroes came nearly three decades after the creation of Superman. Why is there such a gap in between? What circumstances dictated that they be excluded from the superhero narrative for that long? The answer to these questions can be summed up in two words: racial exclusivity. The superhero genre was created as a power narrative, one that reinforced Americanism, empowering the white masculine ideal in a forceful way. To allow Black people to be apart of that kind of narrative would be an acknowledgment of their equality, implying that that they too could have ownership of the superhero narrative. The superhero genre was a racially exclusive entity controlled by a hegemonic white culture that believed black people, especially black men, to be inadequate by nature.

Adilifu Nama, in his book *Super Black*, identifies the black superhero as a project of “reimagining Black identity” in an Afrofuturistic context (4). Afrofuturism, meaning the exploration of what blackness looks like in a futuristic/science fiction setting, is relevant when considering the narrative depth of black superheroes, because Afrofuturism engages both a literary and historical salvaging of black culture in a way that solidifies it for an envisioning of the future. The term was coined by Mark Dery in his essay, “Black to the Future”, in which he addresses the question of whether or not a “community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have been subsequently consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?” (180) Dery draws attention to the lack of inclusion of black people in science fiction, but he also demonstrates how Afrofuturism is way in which black people are able to continue connecting history with imaginative literature.

Similarly, Mark Bould's essay "The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF", explores the white American resistance to Afrofuturistic depictions that essentially marked them invisible in the genre. This included the superhero narrative, which left the topic of race unresolved and ultimately ignored by the genre. As Bould puts it, "[science fiction's] color-blind future was concocted by whites and excluded people of color as full subjects" within the historical framework containing American "particularities" that have suppressed blackness under a hierarchy of racial representation (177). Black superheroes were not considered to be a possibility, largely because of the belief that a black man with superpowers was somehow incoherent and unfit to be a part of the superhero narrative.

At this level, legibility becomes a restricting factor to a genre that is built upon heightened fantasy. What I mean by this is that cultural perceptions of Black people in America is so negative, that when placed in the context of a fantasy genre, they seem to have no place in the story world. Black heroes, unlike Superman, are made to be an invalid consideration because they are not believable. Anything is possible for the white superhero narrative, but Black superheroes have a strict narrative range. Comic book artist, curator and educator John Jennings sees the issue of believability as a valid one, as he says, "you [meaning the predominantly white reader] have to believe that a black man can save you". Jennings's statement does not come without a historically informed precursor. He is not just saying that black men are unbelievable superheroes, but he is also identifying that it is precisely because of the ideological defilement of black masculine images in America, that the black superhero is illegible. Therefore, we can deduce that a Black superhero's Blackness is a visual signifier that can trigger disbelief, mainly because of the mainstream discourse of Black representation in popular media.

Though not usually included in the Black superhero historical timeline, I believe that we must take into consideration the earliest images of Black heroism in comics that are the predecessors to Black superheroes. Prior to 1966, there were no black superheroes in mainstream comics. Marvel's Gabe Jones (1963) and Jackie Johnson from DC's "Easy Company" (November 1952) are, what I would argue to be, the closest there was to having black heroic representation. Gabe Jones and Jackie Johnson are heroes without the superpowers. Both stories set the characters in WWII era and much of their narrative content is centered around their war achievements. Johnson is a former heavyweight boxing champion, whose character is a combination of Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis. Gabe Jones is the fictional first African American soldier to serve in an integrated unit (*Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos* #1 May 1963). Jones is a close companion to Nick Fury, the founder of the fictional superhero team the Avengers. He accompanies Fury on multiple missions throughout his appearances and is considerably heroic and patriotic. Nevertheless, both Jones and Johnson are untouched by the supernatural, they aren't superheroes.

Now, as I've established, the political implications of the superhero narrative give an ideological currency that is grounded in the notion of power. Black political agency in America experienced the most attention during the civil rights movement of the late 1950s through the 1960s and during the Black Power movement of the 1970s. The struggle for equality and the narrative of Black progress found its way into the superhero narrative. I would argue that the civil rights and Black Power movements were highly influential in the creation of Black superheroes, but they also provided the flesh for the Black superhero skeleton, in narrative content as well as context to framing Black representation.

The rhetorical influence of the Black Power movement is undoubtedly present, specifically its intersection with the civil rights movement. Black radicals like Robert F. Williams are credited by scholars of the movement, like Peniel Joseph, as being pioneers, who were pivotal in laying the foundation for “reperiodizing the black freedom struggle” and influencing black politics in what is known as the ‘heroic period’ of the civil rights movement (Wendt 145). Scholars of Black Power place its origins deep in the sixties, during the time of Martin Luther King Jr. and other figureheads of the civil rights movement. The rhetoric of both movements individually as well as their rhetorical mingling, uses much of the same language as the superhero genre (i.e. Luke Cage, *Power Man* 1972). Thus, the Black superhero narrative is a reimagining of such a struggle for freedom and equality, where *power* and *heroism* are more than just narrative tools, but the very discourse of black liberation. Black people yearned for heroic figures, leaders and role models that looked like them and believed in the freedom they so hoped for.

Nama also places the creation of black superheroes into this historical context, and he argues that many black superheroes were products of specific political and cultural trends within the larger national and international movement for full equality and civil rights. I agree with his argument, mainly because the origin stories of black superheroes can be read as carriers of the ideology of the national minority movement for equality (e.g. as we will see in Luke Cage, Black Lightning and Rage). Nama’s assertion of superheroes as “symboliz[ing] the racial climate” is consistent with what he considers to be a “new wave of black representation” that is informed by American race relations, specifically the projection of inadequacy onto blacks by whites (35).

With Marvel’s “Black Panther” (1966), it is apparent that the social movements and ideas of the time were highly influential in the narrative content of the superhero. Black Panther

(*Fantastic Four* #52, July 1966) is considered the first Black superhero in mainstream comics. He is "a super-intelligent and highly skilled hunter-fighter superhero..." from a technologically advanced imaginary African Nation known as Wakanda. Instead of dealing right away with blackness in America, Marvel creator, Stan Lee gave the superhero world an African king, who didn't have superpowers, but was exceptionally intelligent. Nama reads this as the realization of an alternative African narrative that presents a "critique of white supremacy and western geopolitics". Panther is African nobility in a nation that is "symbolically untouched by colonialism", which offers a "hypothetical narrative of what Africa would look like had it not been colonized" (Nama). However, Nama proceeds to argue that because Panther is, symbolically, "an idealized composite of third-world black revolutionaries and anti-colonialist movement of the 1950's that they represent", he can be read as an "imaginary hero" (43).

The notion of an imaginary hero is not to be understood as make believe, but as a project of self image and definition, through which a historical reality can be altered to redefine a black identity that had been lost during colonization and slavery. In the case of Black Panther, not only does his fictive space of Wakanda not exist, but within the context of colonization, he would not exist either. Black Panther then functions as a displacement project, one that is speculative and distanced from the black man's experience in America, therefore Panther is not the hero for the Black community to claim as their own. What comes as a result is a longing for African American representation in the superhero genre, not a Blackness that is placed in the homeland of the ancestral history. Black superheroes needed to be placed in American context, addressing race in its appropriate political placement.

Although historical movements give context to Black superheroes, the most important aspect that contributes to the origin story is the expanding ideology of America, mainly how

Black men were viewed and represented in the context of the reimagined American story world. This ideology can be described as an evolution of a racial hierarchy, where racism is reinforced by politics as well as the media in ways that are not always as overt as hate-crimes or bigotry, rather it is manifested in the subtle attacks against black male identity.

This chapter explores the framework for the creation of black superheroes, mainly how their origin stories are made legible through the pseudo-authentic Black experience, which dominates comic book narrative language. This chapter will identify the terms and conditions needed to effectively understanding how the origin story presents more limitations for Black superheroes, confining them to stereotypes of Black masculinity which undermine their heroism.

While Superman is born good, raised by the Kents, Black superheroes are raised in the concrete jungles of the ghetto where they aren't guaranteed their next breath. Black superheroes make race a relevant issue, it is a feature of their origin story and much of who they are is based on racist overtones in the text that are guided by visual expectations of white readers, who see Black and expect the Blackness of inaccurate stereotypes. However, it would be facile to proceed with the assumption that the dynamics of the relationship between the readership and the comics can be that simplified. I am providing one lense of reading, which also takes into account the function of the Black hero as being more than just a hero for a white audience to read. What makes the project of the Black superhero so complex to read is that the intentionality of the authors very often differed from the interpretation of the diverse readership. Early Black heroes served a dual function in the superhero narrative, on one end as Black representation for a Black audience, but spoonfed by white creators, and on the other end, as characters that white audiences read as affirmative figures that embodied the blackness they were exposed to by the media. {REWORK}

The Great Derivative

Black superheroes are reimagined black men plagued by the negative tropes associated with black masculinity. There are traces of their inadequacy written throughout their narrative, as their blackness is read as a disadvantage. Before black heroes came into the picture, the superhero genre was able to ignore race relations and by default, ignore the lack of Black representations in the narrative. When they are introduced, Black heroes are written as reckless, impulsive and roguish in their performance.

They have proved to be problematic because they are derivative of white superheroes, requiring that their narrative structure mold them into an already established white genre. Writers had to extend beyond the means of the narrative language used for white heroes and make adjustments based on the cultural differences of Black people that would require that a hero from that community look and act a different way. Because the genre had existed long before they were introduced, Black superheroes were written in as a sub-genre to the Superman archetype. They are written with inadequacies in their character, but I would argue that their main weakness is their blackness, for it is what denies them access to the iconic status of Superman. This is not to say that Black superheroes are a dead-end project, but the way in which they are narratively confined to the white hero narrative is a result of their exclusion from the superhero genre for as long as they were.

Superman's origin story represents an idealized experience that is historicized in American nationalism. In contrast, Black superheroes have a more dissonant narrative, full of moral complexity and a certain level of estrangement to the white audience. Black superheroes are unable to be the aspiration for humanity, inadequacy is written into their characters and their story world is narratively constructed in a way that disables them from being the ideal superhero.

Instead they are constantly battling the tropes of blackness that assume that they are in opposition of whiteness. Their blackness is read also as a disability, impeding their ability to be just and moral. They usually need a white savior or white assistant to guide them in the direction of goodness and service to humanity.

Initially their moral complexity is a bad thing, it diminishes their power by making them more humanized than an ideal hero. Later, however, their moral complexity is exactly what makes a more compelling narrative, for it is closer to the human experience, as opposed to the blankness of Superman. Black superheroes are more concrete in this way: they come from specific places, they reflect a specific people, while Superman evolves into a figure that represents an abstract meaningless ideal of humanity. He is so much of a generalization that he can become a source of disconnect, presenting such a purity of whiteness that it is exaggerated and boring. Solidifying the black hero in cultural roots can also be a generalizing presentation, in which, the black hero is the gateway to understanding the experience of the black community.

As Dwayne McDuffie said, Black superheroes “can't be interesting because everything they do has to represent an entire block of people”. McDuffie introduces the Black superhero's burden of representation, which leads to the generalization of a people and a particular experience, in this case it is the generalization of Black masculinity.

This can be most effectively seen through the lense of Hannibal Tabu's “Black Hero Origin Algorithm”. As I mentioned before, the Algorithm is a useful tool to explore and exploit the limiting narrative language of Black superhero origin stories. Tabu, like Propp and Campbell, discusses the narrative options that have been allocated for Black superheroes. The result is a confining structure, one that is dependent upon negative stereotypes and unresolved racial

conflicts in America. The criteria for the Algorithm provides the criteria for the Black hero origin story:

- They were raised in poverty
- They have been in the Olympics
- They have a criminal background
- They have been inspired by white heroes

The Algorithm stems from the pseudo-authentic black experience that is positioned within the overarching white power fantasy, dictating the narrative, consequently reaffirming white superiority. As I argued earlier, the pseudo-authentic black experience is a white authorial construction that deeply engages with the social and historical narrative of race relations in America. It is indicative of the narrow understanding of what the black experience may entail, but more importantly, it implies that there is such a formulaic experience to understand blackness. I am not suggesting that the pseudo-authentic black experience is any sort of propaganda on the part of comic book writers, but what I am suggesting is that the pseudo-authentic black experience is a usage of black masculine tropes to construct an explicit black narrative. By doing so, white writers put themselves in the position of being helpful, essentially opening up the door of opportunity for black people to be represented as heroic figures as well as for white people to engage in a world that they had not necessarily experienced firsthand.

Comic book writers like Stan Lee, Gene Colan and Tony Isabella drew much of their inspiration for black superheroes from the already mainstream and popular presentations of black masculinity seen in sports and entertainment, writing their characters as usually athletic and aggressive. They utilized the notion of an urbanized “rags to riches” narrative, which is portrayed as an escape from an impoverished neighborhood to finding salvation in white-controlled

industries that exploit the black man for his talents.

Depictions of Black leadership and role models evolved from social leaders to gifted athletes. Writers of Black superheroes applied their perception of the Black role model by creating who they thought to be accurate representations of the other based on who seemed to be a prevalent figure in the Black community.

New Ground

Now, to take a slight diversion from the superhero is necessary in order to give pretext to the Algorithm in a historical lense, so that we may be able to fully understand why DC and Marvel relied so heavily on what they saw as the real Black experience that would be identifiable by readers. Black America has a distinct evolutionary experience, it differs from European and Asian immigrant experiences in a way that has dislocated the cultural core of Blackness. Meaning, that the Black community is uncertain of what to hold onto as their identity when the oppressive experience has distorted their view of the Black self. There are harsh realities of the historical dent that white America put in the Black community. From slavery to the Civil Rights movement, white America not only put a moral gash in the Black community, but the political reinforcement of the racial hierarchy, geographically and economically displaced them in, what I consider to be, the after effects of what Ngugi wa Thiong'o calls a "cultural bomb".

Black America developed differently than the rest of the country, different from European immigrants, who were able to integrate into the dominant white culture after some time, becoming a blended and invisible people. Therefore, Black America emerged as a distinct cultural people, built on an anxiety to retain their distorted history and desire to survive in the hostile American landscape. Allan Spear's provocative and informative essay, entitled, "The

Origins of the Urban Ghetto, 1870-1915” accurately insists that the methods of racism and discrimination were by no means static throughout the course of American history, but as the country made advancements, so did the discourse of racial oppression. As he argues, “despite the pervasiveness of white racial hostility, there have been changes over the years in the manifestations of racism” (158). The manifestation of those changes progressively isolated the Black community.

More specifically the Black male experience in America has been categorized as historically exclusive, in the sense that Black men were excluded from the white world in many ways. As Spear puts it: “[t]he Afro-American, unlike white ethnic minorities, lived constantly in the shadow of racial discrimination. Regardless of his economic status, regardless of his cultural preferences, he was isolated from whites in the Northern city” (157). Clearly, the theme of isolation is ingrained in the historical narrative of Black men, which is why it makes its way into the superhero narrative.

The consequence of such isolation is conflict with how to respond to racism towards the Black community. The “black response to white racism in America has fluctuated between ad-vocacy of integration and support of several varieties of nationalism and separatism” (Spear 164). The result of the fluctuation that Spear describes, is a hybridization of cultures that effectively isolates the Black community from dominant white culture. Thus, the mainstream interpretation of the so-called Black experience is driven by a desire to mask the role of white agency in the creation of the disconnect. Instead it is interpreted as the fault of Black inadequacy and the flaws that are inherent to their being.

Give ‘Em What They Love

Therefore, “images of Black leadership” had to be “consistent with their (white) philosophy of gradualism and tokenism” (White, Cones 44). Superheroes are role models and because of their cultural weight, they can be considered leaders. What Cones and White introduce is the notion of the regulation of representation. White comic book creators not only dictated the Black superhero narrative, but the rate at which those narratives were made accessible and the number of narratives created. And as Cones and White assert, “language and visual images are powerful tools for shaping public opinion” (34). I would add that not only do language and visual images shape public opinion, but in the case of Black superheroes, they affirm public opinion, rather white public opinion. Cones and White argue that such affirmations can be made because “most Euro-Americans do not have close personal relationships with African American males, they are vulnerable to being influenced by images of Black masculinity in the popular media” (77). This would then mean that Black superheroes are a “manipulation of distorted Black male images” because they are birthed from a distance. The pseudo authentic experience can then be characterized as a distancing project because it is dependent on a removed interpretation of Black masculinity.

The Black superhero origin story is a direct manifestation of a white desire to see the images of Black masculinity that are consistent with images that dominate popular media. This does not necessarily have to come from a place of ill will or intentionality, but it comes from a place of ignorance brought about by distance. White creators were often writing these origin stories from a distance, based solely on what they knew from magazines and their Black friends. Because of this, Black superhero origin stories are narratively constructed to empower the white audience and the white characters in the stories. They present the Black hero as coming from

dissonance, needing to be guided by a white figure. The origin story is the vehicle to project a white perspective of Black masculinity, serving as a way of navigating through how the presence of Black men changes the American landscape.

Black hero origin stories have the same motivations and intentions as the Superman origin story, to establish the backstory for the superhero and to build a framework for a hero's longevity in the genre. Even so, the skin color of the Black superhero puts them at a disadvantage in their pursuit of heroism and moral purity. The next chapter will examine how these ideas play out in the origin stories of various Black superheroes. I will make use of the Algorithm as a basis for understanding how to identify the patterns of Black masculine tropes and offer a reading that will make narrative restrictions comprehensible, showing that the limited narrative language of Black superheroes comes from the limited narrative language of Black men.

III. Exodus to Egypt

“Black superheroes, in America, might not have the luxury to simply be superheroes devoid of ethnic complexities”--Christian Davenport

While the introduction of black heroes was a landmark for black representation, it also signaled new narrative restrictions for black superheroes. DC and Marvel made strides to be racially conscious, giving the black community access to the promised land of the power narrative, but instead many of their characters ushered the black superhero narrative into an Egypt known as the ghetto. With the framework provided by the black hero algorithm and the previous chapters, this chapter is dedicated to a direct examination of the origin stories of multiple black superheroes. While many white authors believed themselves to be progressive figures, allowing black people access to the power narrative, to a new promised land as it were, their heavy reliance on stereotypes actually enslaved black superheroes into narrative limitation, a narrative that has proven to be virtually inescapable.

Instead of conducting a series of character studies, I have chosen to dissect the origin story into what I believe are its core elements. Through this lens I will engage the tropes of black masculinity present in the pseudo-authentic black experience, showing how they narratively constrain black superheroes to a particular demographic.

The subsections of this chapter bring a narrative specificity to the origin story, giving us the chance to explore how each feature of the origin story functions. I believe that the parts that make up the origin story and give the story world the most context are: setting (space), ability (power) and opposition (enemies). These three elements as the skeleton for the Black hero will be useful in the examination of how these storytelling building blocks construct a narrative that is dependent upon historical and cultural realities of race relations in America. The fictive world

reflects the real world in a way that has a profoundly negative effect on black superheroes, because it transfers the negativity associated with black men in America into the superhero narrative, therefore permitting the most constrained and stereotypical stories.

It is also important to note that most black superheroes are introduced as minor characters in another series, often requiring that their origin story be condensed. The heroes examined in this chapter are a mixture of main character heroes and others who are what I see as “shadow heroes”. The notion of the shadow hero is important to not only this chapter, but to the entirety of this paper. A shadow hero is a black hero that has his own origin story, but it is often presented as a subplot to a white hero’s narrative, resulting in the Black hero becoming a sidekick

His Space

Black spaces in Black hero origin stories are always two central locations: the neighborhood and the prison. Black superheroes are bred in these locations, which are, what I would argue to be, the signifier of their difference, for their environment is what shapes their being. The comic book ghetto accentuates and exaggerates the real urban ghetto experience and presents the stereotypes that depict the neighborhood as being unsafe and a place where black superheroes are unlikely to emerge from.

Starting with the urban space, the ghetto, we see that it represents contamination and the destruction of moral code; there are strong undertones of moral deformity and corruption. As Robert Staples asserts, the “black ghetto is nothing more than a microcosm of the entire society.” (61), Yet because violence and crime are highly concentrated in such a secluded area, amongst a group of underprivileged people, it is seen as an abnormality. In this way, the comic books are reflect real-life perceptions and real life statistics. The comic book black ghetto is a setting where

crime is out of control, black-on-black violence is frequent and gangs control the space, often capturing the attention of young black boys needing some guidance and acceptance.

The real Black ghetto of America is mostly used to describe housing developments predominantly inhabited by poorer Black people. In these ghettos, whiteness is an invisible but felt presence: there are no white bodies except those of policemen, sent to patrol the concrete jungle. The root cause of violence and corruption is poverty. The ghetto is a space where resources are scarce and the invisible “man” is the unseen enemy. Black ghettos are neglected spaces where things never change. Furthermore, the ghetto is presented as mentality that leads to a dangerously cyclical lifestyle. This phenomenon has, as I noted before, created a Black culture that thrives on separatism and self-reliance. Staples makes this clear as he says, “children living in these areas that are relatively unprotected by the police, must learn to protect themselves” (61). Consequently, the “highest level of esteem and respect is reserved for the best streetfighter in the neighborhood” (61). Staples shows us the progression of such an alternate society that has developed as a sort of step sister to America, where respect is gained through physicality.

Ghettos dominate the inner city, where there are no white picket fences and the American dream is reserved for those who can escape the bars of the invisible prison. These gang infested areas where young Black youths strive against each other, where violence is naturalized and death is expected, are where many of our Black superheroes come from.

The stereotypes used to create the origin setting is depend on bad press. The media, who infiltrates the ghettos only to give widespread attention to the ugly side of Black men, is responsible for white anxiety of Blackness, portraying it as being threatening and alien. In his book, *Against the Wall: Poor, Young, Black, and Male*, Elijah Anderson illustrates the

detrimental perception of the urban ghetto which deepens the racial divide in America, positioning the Black male as a leech on American society:

Living in areas of concentrated ghetto poverty, still shadowed by the legacy of slavery and second-class citizenship, too many young black men are trapped in a horrific cycle that includes active discrimination, unemployment, poverty, crime, prison, and early death. When they act out violently, or are involved in dramatic crimes that make the news, the repercussions for the general image of the young black male can be far-reaching. Strongly identified with violent criminality by skin color alone, the anonymous young black male in public is often viewed first and foremost with fear and suspicion, his counter-claims to propriety, decency, and law-abidingness notwithstanding.....Aware of his place as an outsider, he may try to turn the tables when he can expressing himself in his own terms, behavior that is viewed, especially in the public as threatening.... (Anderson 3).

Anderson brings into the consideration the reality of a uniquely Black male experience in America, that may not be generic, but is undoubtedly real. However, the exploration of this reality is detrimental when it becomes a generalization, a stereotype. Areas of “ghetto poverty” are viewed as breeding grounds for “violent criminality” that is exemplified in the Black male, creating a narrative that naturalizes the cyclical nature of the Black male destined to be a detriment to a society. This harkens back to visual expectations, where readers (often white) are reading to see the cohesive correlation between skin color and behavioral presentation. For that reason, Black superheroes are extensively based on Black men from the ghetto, because it provides the most exoticized narrative to be reimagined in the fantastical superhero world.

The comic book ghetto takes into consideration the depth of these realities and then uses them as narrative tool to create a Black hero to be a positive presence in the space. This often requires that he remain in his neighborhood, never becoming a savior for humanity. Rapper Ice Cube's 2008 song "Hood Mentality" describes the mentality of Black boys from the ghetto as being a "crippling disease" that is "growth stunting", but his conclusion, which is what I believe to be the core of Black heroes, is that "the hood is where [they] are from, but it's not who [they] are". Essentially, their emerging role as a source of goodness in the urban space is plagued by a duality which puts them in a struggle to be the light in the dark space that created them.

The ghetto can be read as a jungle space, where American core values are distorted and morality is very far from simplicity. The lines between good and evil are blurred together, and justice is based on relativity. For Black superheroes, this space represents a burden and a home they will never really be able to leave. The culture of Black ghetto's has produced stereotypes, many of which are pervasive in the Black hero narrative. The ghetto produces angry Black men that have been misguided by what is understood by outsiders as their barbaric behavior.

Many Black heroes come from places like Harlem, Brooklyn or a fictional place that strongly resembles the New York ghettos. Here, they are often raised to be a part of gang culture, selling drugs and breaking the law for their own gain. The first African American superhero comes from a place like this, a place where racism has planted seeds of discord in the Black community, causing them to essentially eat each other. That hero, is Marvel's Falcon (1969). In his first appearance in *Captain America* #117 (1969) we meet him as Sam Wilson, native of Harlem. Wilson is born in Harlem to a minister, Paul and his wife Darlene Wilson. Throughout his teenage years, Wilson struggles with his parents' theology, not quite certain what to make of Christianity as he sees it being the religion of the oppressors. His parents, striving to guide him

on his spiritual journey, introduce him to other religions and comparative theology. Within the next two years, he loses both of his parents, his father murdered while trying to stop a neighborhood fight and his mother killed by a mugger near their apartment. In spite of their efforts to bring good to their neighborhood, Wilson's parents are still victims of the atrocities of the ghetto. It isn't a safe space, no matter who you are or what you do to make it better.

Outraged and distraught, Wilson moves to Los Angeles and becomes "Snap" Wilson, criminal, pimp and gang member. We see here that Wilson moves from one urban space to another and in doing so, he becomes the very evil that took away his parents from him. He submits to the codes of the street and does what is expected of him as a Black male, he abandons the place of his pain, but he chooses to cope by engaging in the violent culture of the urban space. Much after his conversion to life as a superhero, Wilson returns to Harlem to serve as its protector, affirming the restrictive nature of the urban space. It seems as though he is obligated to return, but not entirely because of his newly understood morality, but more so because of the psychological prison that the urban space is depicted to be.

In the issue, we learn that Falcon gets his name because of his fascination with birds, as he says, "ever since I can remember, I've been nuts about birds!" (*Captain America* #117). He is known for having the largest pigeon coop in Harlem, where he trains them. While stranded on an island, he befriends a Falcon, whom he names Redwing. Falcon's obsession with birds as a Black boy in Harlem is indicative of his desire to fly away from the oppressive urban space. We learn later, that Falcon never gains flight as a superpower, instead he has to use technology to manufacture flight. Though he may have dreamed of flight beyond Harlem, Falcon returns there to be a hero of the neighborhood that took that escape away from him.

In 1977, DC comics released *Black Lightning* #1, featuring the hero of the same name. Before he becomes the hero Black Lightning, Jefferson Pierce is born and raised in a the fictional ghetto of Superman's metropolis called Southside (Suicide Slum). This area is a corrupt urban space controlled by a gang called the 100 and corrupt politicians like Tobias Whale. Pierce leaves after his father is murdered. Later, after he has started his own family, Pierce returns to Southside to become the principal of the high school. During his time there, Pierce strives to clean the school of the drug infestation brought on by the 100. Track and basketball star Earl Clifford, a student at the school, tries to help Pierce, but is murdered doing so. The gang take Clifford's body and hung him from the basketball hoop. Like the urban space of America, Southside is diseased by drugs and gang violence. The space is unsafe and it puts Black men in opposition with one another. The hope of survival and escape is the biggest hope for the community's inhabitants. Yet, much like Wilson, Pierce is never really able to escape the urban atrocities, instead he brings his family back so that he can possibly make a positive impact in the place where his father was taken from him.

Rocket Racer (1977) reveals to us how the origin story makes use of the class disparities that plague the urban space, restricting the upward mobility of young Black youth, consequently pushing them towards crime as a way of diminishing the oppression of poverty. Born in Brooklyn, New York, Robert Farrell assumed the role of guardian to his six younger siblings after his mother died. Farrell was a scientific prodigy, but because he could not afford to pursue his academic passions and support his family, he turned to criminal activity to provide. Farrell, because of the urban space, develops into a self-centered master burglar.

Considered by many scholars and fans of comic books to be the epitome of Black superhero exploitation, Luke Cage (*Hero for Hire* #1 1972) embodies all that is the

Blaxploitation era and the urban space he comes from, is no exception. Also from Harlem, Cage, then known as Carl Lucas, joins a gang called the Rivals. They terrorize the neighborhood and feud with their rival gang the Diablos. Lucas is in and out of juvenile homes, until one day he decides to change his life around for the better. However, when his former friend and soon to be enemy, Willis Stryker frames him by putting heroin in his apartment, Lucas is sent to prison. The Harlem ghetto, like Slum City and Falcon's Harlem, is overwhelmed by drugs and gang violence. Before his reformation, Lucas aspires to be a drug lord, which insinuates that the urban space only provides corrupt role models that expose youth to the drug world and distance them from having a strong moral base.

The comic book starts with Lucas in a prison cell, being taunted by guards, who express their anxiousness to "break [him]" as they open the door to where he is being held in solitary confinement. The prison space is full of white corrupt prison guards, who torment Lucas beyond their mandate, desiring to get a violent reaction out of him. Lucas responds to the guards with insulting words, telling one of them that the "nice thing 'bout being half blind from the dark [is] I don't have to see your face first thing!" However, that is the extent of his response, he refuses to give them a reason to punish him more, keeping his cool in spite of the antagonizing behavior of the guards. The prison space is intriguing because it places Lucas in a grey area. We are not able to fully establish if he is good or truly a criminal, because the guards are clearly overstepping their boundaries and mistreating him. This part of the narrative corresponds with the disparities in the American prison system, which incarcerates Black men more than any other people in the country, often requiring that they receive a greater punishment for a crime that would not normally require as much jail time. In this way, the pseudo-authentic Black experience is applied

to the superhero narrative as a way of telling a reformation story, in which a Black hero is criminalized before he is heroized.

While in prison, Lucas is unsettled, which causes him to give everyone around him a hard time. He is uncontrollable, frequently engaging in fights with other prisoners and being hostile with guards. They transfer him to the fictional Seagate Prison, where he is put under strict supervision. While at Seagate, Lucas and guard Albert “Billy Bob” Rackham get into multiple disputes, many of which are physical. Those altercations lead to Rackham’s demotion and eventual interference with the very experiment that gives Lucas his powers. Here, Rackham serves as the catalyst for Lucas’ transformation into strong man Luke Cage.

Cage’s origin story introduces a specific feature of Black superheroes of the 70s, “values and a code of morality that is distinctly black” (Lendrum 367). This feature removes him from the context of white superheroism and makes him more of what many scholars consider to be an “anti-hero”. Like Blaxploitation protagonists, Cage is “given the same duties”, which are to protect “the black communities and ghetto streets that [he] lives in by fighting crooked white cops, mobsters and other street criminals” (Lendrum 368). This narrative is a rejection of the Superman ideal and an adaptation of the corruption associated with the urban space. The streets of Harlem are drug infested and gang ridden, which prohibits his character from ever developing a strong moral base. He is developed through gang warfare, criminalism and the hustle mentality is ingrained in his character. Cage is stereotyped in a way that excludes him from achieving superheroism in its purest form. He is “equipped with a mouthful of censorship approved jive slang” that further promotes his otherness, making Harlem seem as though it is uncharted territory (Lendrum 368).

For all of these heroes, the urban and prison spaces are restrictive and undoubtedly a recurring narrative route that they all follow. Unlike Superman's farm in Smallville where pure American values are emitted, the urban space is where those values are perverted by Blackness, producing a morality that is misshaped by lawlessness. Yet, it seems as though the urban and prison spaces are necessary tools in creating a narrative for an urban Black hero, for without a deep knowledge of the ghetto, the hero would never be able to adequately exist there as a force of goodness.

Some might argue that you need the cliché and stereotypical tropes of Blackness in the urban space in order to open the door a new world that had not been seen before, to see an experience that may not necessarily be understood. However, I see these stereotypes as being dependent on a small fragment of a larger Black experience. Though it may be understandable that Superman cannot be the hero for the Black community, that his whiteness is what disconnects him from that culture, it is unquestionable that having Black heroes that come from the same types of spaces and experiences is actually a disservice to the depth of the Black experience in America, mainly the diversity of the Black male experience. Not all Black men endured the hardships of the ghetto and not all Black men were involved in the violence of the urban space. By making superheroes that come from a situation that specific sends the message that Black men are manufactured in a ghetto, so their superheroes must be homogenous in that way.

His Powers

Superpowers are important to the origin story because it ushers the Black hero into the realm of the fantastical, distinguishing them from everyone else. However, superpowers as a

project of allocation is yet another way the narrative allows for few story avenues. A superhero is defined by their powers, mainly, how many they have and how they got them. Black superheroes, although they possess many powers that white superheroes have, are generally limited to a few powers or are given a superpower that is a commentary that is consistent with the limitedness of the spaces they emerge from.

A regular trait of Black superheroes, as mentioned by Tabu, is their superior athletic ability. In his provocative essay entitled “Cool Pose: Black Masculinity and Sports”, Richard Majors notes that, “sport has become one of the major stages upon which black males express their creativity” (18). Reading Majors’ assertion as indicating the ability of sports to provide escapism from a harsh racist reality is useful when seeing how this trope is included in the Black hero narrative. A significant number of Black heroes start out as olympic athletes, affirming stereotypes of the heightened physicality of Black masculine bodies, in a way that not only sexualizes them, but exoticizes them. Two of the most notable are:

Black Lightning, who after leaving Suicide Slum the first time, becomes a gold medal decathlete, but his real superpower is that he can control electricity.

Amazing Man I, Will Everett (*All-Star Squadron* #23 July 1983), is a promising Olympian, competing in the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, however, his career does not bring him long term success. He is working as a janitor at Dr. Terry Curtis’ laboratory when the accident that gives him the ability to mimic whatever properties he touches.

Historically, Black masculinity has been defined by physicality first and intellect second. Even to this day, the Black athlete is viewed as a cultural superhero. Eldridge Cleaver affirms this stereotypical assertion with a question, “Haven’t you ever wondered why the [W]hite man genuinely applauds a [B]lack man who achieves excellence with his body in the field of sports,

while he hates to see a [B]lack man achieve excellence in his mind?” (151). Such a question is based in longstanding project of depicting Black men as “specimens” to be examined and analysed as a foreign species (Wallace 22). The Black superhero narrative is dependent on this trope, making it so that most Black heroes, because of their experiences in the urban space, are already tough and strong. To give them a superpower is to either maximize their already existent strength or add a few more features to their physicality.

Superstrength is a common superpower given to all superheroes, but in the case of Black heroes, the power is viewed as an intensified version of a trait that is often attributed to Black men because of their stereotypical hypermasculine being. As Jeffrey A. Brown argues, “the Black man has been subjected to the burden of racial stereotypes that place him the symbolic space of being too hard, too physical, too bodily” (“Comic Book Masculinity and the New Black Superhero” 28). Such physicality is seen in heroes like Luke Cage, who, after volunteering for a cell regeneration experiment is accidentally given superhuman strength and durability.

As mentioned before, Luke Cage also falls into the category of the super strong Black man. Through his character we are able to see the beginnings of the dominant mercenary black hero narrative as opposed to the morally sound superhero type personified in Superman. Because of the hypermasculine stereotype projected on Black men whose bodies are “culturally ascribed as a site of hypermasculinity”, heroes with super strength like Cage are usually depicted as domineering, abrasive and self-centered (Brown 34). They can be classified as rogue and immoral because the urban space they come from is dictated by “the code of the streets”, where violence is necessary and every man must watch his own back (White & Cones 229-229). As such, we learn very quickly that Cage’s impetus for superheroism is primarily the fact that it brings in revenue, he is able to make a living off of it. Though he may be concerned with the

well-being of the people, it is clear that it comes as a secondary to the financial benefits, which barely keep him financially stable. So, we must then read Cage's selfishness as being brought on by the poverty of the urban space, as well as his criminal record, which has determined that his chance of employment is unlikely.

Further demonstrating this point, I would like to identify Marvel's *Rage* (1990) as a representation of the extremity of the stereotype of Black physicality. Then twelve year old Brooklyn native, Elvin Daryl Haliday, is exposed to toxic waste, which causes him to experience an abnormal growth spurt, giving him the body of a 30 year old muscular man (*The Avengers* #326 November 1990). *Rage* (Haliday) is a negative reinforcement of such an extremely one dimensional trope that robs him of his childhood, forcing him to physically become a man, while still only a 12 year old. When he is violent and aggressive, his strength and speed increase exponentially. I would advocate that *Rage* is just an extension of a reading in which the Black body, though physically superior, is psychologically equivalent to that of a 12 year old boy.

His name alone suggest that he is the embodiment of uncontrollable anger, further perpetuating the stereotype of the angry Black man. In his first appearance with the Avengers, he shows up to demand to be made a member of the team, as if he is entitled to be initiated immediately. When Captain America asks him what he can do, *Rage* responds by saying, "what can I do? I've got super-human strength...I'm virtually indestructible -- and I believe in truth, justice, and the dignity of man" (*The Avengers* #326). Their conversation does not end quite as *Rage* is expecting, he and Captain America have a confrontational conversation about the lack of Black Avengers and he storms away like the child he really is. *Rage*, because of his immaturity and marginalization as a Black male, is denied access to an elite superhero group.

The very belief system he claims to abide by is the very ideology that restricts him from being seen as a resourceful member of the team, instead he is relegated back to his neighborhood in Brooklyn. Rage's insistence in his belief in "the dignity of man" comes from a contrived rationalization of Americanness, which makes his claim invalid to Captain America and the rest of the team. Their understanding of "dignity" and the notion of "man" is rooted in polarized ideological perspectives. Rage comes from the urban space, where dignity is earned through violence and justice is self-serving, and the Avengers are built upon a deeply American understanding of dignity, which I would equate to the superior morality of whiteness. Rage's "man" that deserves dignity can be easily translated as self-reflexive, because his main concern is himself and his own dignity. Even his approaching of the Avengers in the way that he does is evidence of his concern with himself as primary.

Because of their rhetorical misunderstanding, Rage and Captain America are engaging in two distinct conversations simultaneously, which causes them to clash and eventually part ways with ill feelings. Captain America, not only a stand-in for American patriotism, but also masculinity, is the one who denies Rage access to the Avengers. Rage, though he has the body of a muscular man, is still a young boy. By rejecting Rage, Captain America also rejects Rage from manhood, exposing the falsity of his masculine performance and implicitly deeming it artificial. This means that Rage, in spite of his super-strength, is only worthy of being the hero of his neighborhood. He has nothing, aside from his Blackness, to offer the Avengers. Thus, making his superpower seem less extraordinary and almost typical. Rage's response to the lack of Black heroes resonates with the notion of "emotional scar tissue from the psychological toll of racism" which causes the resistance to "white institutional practices" and a fighting against the white system which Black men are excluded from (White & Cones 85; Alexander 75).

Another problematic aspect of the Black hero origin story is that most Black superheroes do not have a weakness equivalent to Kryptonite. This is what I believe to be influenced by the belief that the Black hero's weakness is his Blackness, because it confines him to a particular space and experience which puts him at a disadvantage. Superman's kryptonite is an external force, while Black superheroes' kryptonite-equal is their Black skin that consumes them inside and out.

His Enemies

Superman has Lex Luthor, Batman has the Joker and Black heroes have uninspiring villains like Bushmaster. The enemies of the Black superhero are often other Black people from similar backgrounds and experiences, constructing what can be viewed as a Black superhero subgenre. The most well-known villains of comic books are not seen fighting against Black heroes and Black villains are only an issue for Black heroes. The urban space is highly influential in the subgenre because it is often the space that produces Black villains. For instance, Luke Cage's first main nemesis is his former best friend Willis Stryker, who takes on the name Diamondback. Many of Cage's enemies have ties to his prison days, further showing the inescapability of the prison and urban spaces. His other enemies included: Gideon Mace, an embittered veteran seeking a U.S. takeover; Chemistro (Curtis Carr), Discus, Stiletto, Shades, and Comanche. They are all criminals, none with spectacular superpowers and they come from the same place that molded him. This makes for a thin line between Black superhero and Black villain, because they are really only distinguishable by the intentions of their cause, but their approach and aggressivity is nearly identical.

For Black Lightning, his enemies are primarily the 100, but as a member of the Justice League and the Outsiders, he fights against bigger name villains, but never on an individual basis. In general, the Black superhero narrative is missing the presence of an authoritative villain, this is mainly because of the shadow narrative nature of the Black hero origin story. Black heroes typically take on the same villains as their white superior, but in the context of the main story, not as an individual expedition.

The enemies of the Black superhero are more than just the villains in the comics. I would venture to argue that the enemies on the pages are much less threatening than the others that I will identify and expand on. Much of the Black hero narrative is constructed by the undertones of a white savior narrative, in which Black heroes are guided by white superheroes or a white sage figure on their journey to morality. While I believe this narrative to have implications outside of the narrative, mainly the act of white authors creating Black superheroes for Black boys to look up to, I will focus specifically on how whiteness is overbearing to the Black hero narrative.

One of the most powerful examples of this relationship of the Black hero to a white savior figure is in the story of Falcon. While stranded on Exile Island, Snap Wilson encounters the Red Skull, Captain America's arch nemesis, who uses the Cosmic Cube to alter reality and rewrite Wilson's memory of his past. Red Skull does this so that he can control Wilson and have him befriend Captain America so that he can betray him. This plan fails and Captain America convinces Wilson to become a symbol to inspire the rebellion of the natives of Exile Island. Thus is the birth of The Falcon. From that point on, Falcon becomes a regular partner of Captain America's, fighting evil by his side. Their relationship is the archetypal shadow narrative. Falcon believes himself to be indebted to Captain America, essentially dedicating his life to be by his

side. Captain America becomes Falcon's white aspiration and it becomes so overbearing that it drives Falcon to feelings of inadequacy.

In *Captain America* v1 #170 (February 1974) Falcon approaches Black Panther to help him become more than a "costumed athlete" because he feels as though his physical limitations make him unworthy to be fighting alongside Captain America. The two design wings for Falcon using Panther's advanced technology. Here, we see the burden of inadequacy invading the psyche of Falcon, making him feel inferior to his white partner/hero. What makes this instance all the more intriguing is that Falcon reaches out to Panther, the king of an African village that is untouched by colonial power, in order to keep up with the emblem of white America. Falcon, the Black American hero, needs Black Panther, the African hero, in order to keep up with Captain America, the American hero.

Reading this relationship between the three as a link between cultures in historical context, I would argue that Falcon's behavior is indicative of the cultural displacement of Black men in America, who are uncertain how to reconcile their desire to be included in America with their anxiety of losing their African roots. Ultimately, Falcon's longing to be an adequate sidekick, can be understood as a yearning for approval from Captain America.

Another relationship worth mentioning is that of Rocket Racer and Spider-Man. Rocket Racer's criminal life comes to an end after he is repeatedly defeated by Spider-Man. In his new role as a good guy, Racer fills the role of sidekick to Spider-Man, following his lead and like Falcon, he dedicates his life to fighting crime alongside his new figure of aspiration. The two do not partner very often, but in the context of Racer's origin story, Spider-Man is the one that saved him from the wrong lifestyle and gave him the opportunity to be hero.

Racer's origin story also introduces a common narrative plot for Black superheroes: their struggle against racism. After turning his life around, with the help of Spider-Man, Racer is able to attend the fictional Empire State University, but his time there is plagued by the consistent attacks of hate-groups on campus.

Peter Gambi, tailor and friend of Black Lightning, is a more subtle version of the white sage/guide to the Black hero. Gambi knows about Lightning's powers when he is younger and advises him not to use them. Years later, after the death of Earl Clifford, it is Gambi who tells Lightning (then Jefferson) that he needs to become a symbol for the city. On the surface, this may seem minor, but it is evident that an underlying narrative guides Jefferson's transition from school teacher to superhero. Gambi is written into the story as the source of wisdom, he tells Lightning when to use his powers, how to use his powers and what his costume should look like. It is almost as if without Gambi there, Lightning would have no idea what to do with his powers, that the thought of becoming a symbol would not even cross his mind. Their dynamic, though not written as a power struggle, functions as though it were. Black Lightning, as well as other Black heroes, are not always shown thinking for themselves, especially when their origin story is introduced as a subplot. They need a white savior or some white figure to prompt them to superheroism and to teach them what morality is. In this way, whiteness attacks Black heroes from both sides, on one end as an oppressive overbearing force that produces feelings of inadequacy and on the other end as forceful racism.

Black superheroes make race relevant not only because of their skin color, but the narrative content frequently deals with race issues. Black Lightning, Falcon, Luke Cage, Rage and Racer all have to face race explicitly in the narrative, sometimes fighting villains like white supremacist Skinhead (*Web of Spider-Man* #56). The enemies of the Black superhero operate on

many levels, ranging from external forces (villains) to psychological forces (whiteness), but these all come into focus when we understand that the Black hero's worst enemy is himself. Black masculine tropes are his weakness and in this way he presented as already being tainted and setback. Therefore, it is because of his Blackness that he needs a white savior and it means that his villains are other Blacks who were not fortunate enough to have an encounter with whiteness that would lead them to reform.

Outliers

While much of my critique thus far has been of Black superheroes that were created by white writers for a particular audience, I would like to shift the conversation and recontextualize the terms of my analysis to examine Black heroes that were introduced to the superhero universe by Black creators, specifically Dwayne McDuffie and Milestone Comics. Milestone, created in 1993 and distributed by DC, reimagined the Black superhero in a way that strategically manipulated tropes associated with Black masculinity to consciously ground the Black hero origin story in an urban experience that corresponds with the realities of the ghetto.

McDuffie and the Milestone team were Black boys from the neighborhoods that their superheroes are set. However, by doing so, they received backlash from the white readership who believed that there would be some sort of Black takeover in comic books where Black heroes would take the spotlight. McDuffie's Blackness influenced this a great deal, as he put it, "well, I think being a writer that the reader knows is black puts a lot of the mainstream I say mainstream, I mean white, readership on edge. I mean, white male readership on edge."

(McDuffie interview---citation needed) McDuffie notes that this tension caused the white readership to look closely for proof that he was pushing a Black agenda.

Black superheroes have been the most under received when they are no longer depicted as marginal. Milestone did something slightly different when they introduced superheroes that were Black, from the ghetto, but they thought for themselves and were empowering figures for the urban Black boy. Unlike the heroes of before, Milestone presented the Black experience as something more emotive than the stereotypical archetype written by white writers who had never come into close contact with the Black community.

With this in mind, there are still narrative limitations that generalize the Black masculine experience (i.e. the urban space and gang violence). Those limitations in the context of Milestone engage in the same type of discourse surrounding hip hop culture and the notion of cool pose. By presenting a superhero that is Black, from the urban space and confident in that experience, he becomes a hip hop figure, emoting supreme confidence, coming across as a seemingly untouchable character.

Cool pose refers to the presentation of Black men as being tough, emotionally unaffected and intimidating as a way of establishing their masculine identity. Richard Majors argues that it is a “coping mechanism” which serves as an “ego booster” to “hide self doubt, insecurity and inner turmoil” (Majors 5). Black men, after giving up the fight for inclusion in the white master culture, create an identity for themselves that is oppositional to whiteness. Milestone’s Black hero origin stories use cool pose superhero narratives to express a dissatisfaction with the marginalization of Blackness, as a means of commentary about negative assertions of race. Instead of creating Black heroes that fit into the white-created mold of Black superheroism,

Milestone's Black heroes were created with an understanding that the Black hero must be packaged differently than what had been presented before.

Black heroes under the Milestone brand were created in the early nineties, as a part of a dramatic shift in the perception of Black masculinity. Cool pose was prevalent throughout the media, especially gangsta rap culture. Rap and hip hop culture was driven by language that was empowered by the notion that value is determined by authenticity. In the same way, Milestone used the stereotypes as a way to rewrite the Black superhero narrative as something that could be considered more authentic, a more accurate representation of urban Blackness.

Beginning with *Hardware* (*Hardware* #1 February 1993), we have a Black hero that defies and perpetuates stereotypes of Black masculinity simultaneously. He comes from the urban space, but he does not look like a Luke Cage. He is not your "typical" Black, hood rat looking for trouble. Hardware is a Black male with intellect, constrained by a white savior and the urban space. When he uses his intellect to become a fantastical force, it comes across as more cool pose, a way of asserting his agency and advocating his individuality.

Hardware, born Curtis Metcalf, is a genius inventor. At an early age he is discovered by businessman Edwin Alva, who helps Metcalf get enrolled in A Better Chance, which is an organization that is "intended to get minority students into elite prep schools". Metcalf excels, earning his diploma at age 14 and finishing college with six degrees. His entire education is paid for by Alva. From this point on, Metcalf becomes bound to Alva, forever indebted to the man that changed his life. After he graduates, he immediately goes to work for Alva, who makes lots of money off of Metcalf's inventions. Metcalf, unlike Falcon and Rocket Racer, is not oblivious to the bondage of his white savior, but he is no more equipped than they to escape it.

When Metcalf approaches Alva for a share in the profits, Alva responds to him by saying, "Curtis let us dispense with any misconceptions you may be labouring under. You are not *family*. You are an *employee*. Neither are you *heir apparent*. You are a cog in the machine. My machine. You are not *respected*, Curtis. You are merely *useful*. You may go now". Metcalf realizes that he is not even able to quit because he signed a contract with Alva prohibiting him from working for any other competitors; He is trapped.

Alva, the sadistic white savior, is a representation of the institutionalized racism that exploits Black men for their gifts, requiring that they mass produce with little compensation, as though the fact that they are being used should be good enough for them. However, Metcalf doesn't succumb to acceptance, instead he sets out to destroy this evil:

"This doesn't have to continue. I can end it. One final mission. No more endangering the innocent. No more pointless engagement with those who are irrelevant to my cause. Today it ends, with one final descent into this pit of my own elaborate construction. The answer was always there. I just refused to see it. All the evils I battle have one father. And in more ways than one, he's also my father. Kill the source of the corruption, and the corruption dies as well. And as sure as the sunrise, Edwin Alva will die at my hands." (Hardware)

In this excerpt we are able to see that unlike a morally incorruptible Superman, Metcalf is willing to bend the rules and even kill for the sake of what he believes to be the right thing to do. This can be read as a manifestation of a frustration brought on by the racial hierarchy that pins whiteness as the source and the Black man as the resource. We see Metcalf as having no desire to see Alva in that role.

Alva is the figure that removes Metcalf from the urban space, which allows him to be

socialized much differently, however, it is this very socialization that makes Metcalf intellectually superior to Alva, opening his eyes to see the corruption around him. Metcalf uses the inventions he makes for Alva as a weapon against the company and Alva's illegal operations. This is the birth of Hardware, the "High Tech Creature of the Night". Hardware is a combination of intellectual mastery and physical force, yet, much like his predecessors, he struggles with the same tropes of Black masculinity that restrict his narrative to the urban space and the ills that come with it.

Static (1993), the high school superhero born out of the so-called "Big Bang" comes from the gang ridden urban space plagued by crime and drugs. Born Virgil Hawkins, Static gains his powers at a gang showdown in his home city. When the authorities arrive, they release a tear gas that they do not know contains the experimental mutagen known as Quantum Juice. Hawkins and all others exposed to the gas ("Bang Babies") gained superhuman powers. Static has electromagnetic powers, reminiscent of Black Lightning before him.

Arguably the most important hero of the Milestone franchise, Icon (1993) is who I consider to be, the Superman who landed in the wrong field. As an alien baby, Icon is sent to earth in a pod which is programmed to alter the appearance of the passenger to mimic the first conscious being it comes into contact with. In 1839, Icon's ship lands in a cotton field in the American South and he is discovered by a slave woman named Miriam. The narrative not only recalls Superman, but it sets up a reading that would lead us to believe that Icon is a Moses figure, that he will grow up to become the liberator of the enslaved Black community.

Icon takes on the name Augustus Freeman and he does not show signs of aging beyond adulthood. In order to compensate for this, he assumes the identity of his own son throughout his time on Earth. For much of his origin story, his focal point is figuring out how to fix his lifepod

and return to his home planet. He never fully identifies as being a Black male, nor does he want to rescue the Black community. As Augustus Freeman, Icon works as a corporate lawyer, often seen as a white washed Black man. He only takes on the superhero mantle because of his neighbor, Rocket, a single Black mother. She inspires him to use his powers to make Dakota a safer space. Yet, that is the core of Icon's narrative, he does not become the hero of the world and he does not serve as the poster boy for aspiration.

Like Superman, Icon is invincible and he can do everything that Superman can, and in some ways he can do more. Icon is narratively restricted to the urban space of Dakota, fighting street criminals. He is never able to use his powers to transcend the pseudo authentic Black experience, instead he is limited just like every other Black hero. In Icon #16, Icon punches Superman out of the watchtower 50ft into space, and Superman later admits that no one had ever punched him that hard. This calls to the fore the discrepancy of the superhero narrative, which abides by a racial hierarchy. It does not matter how strong or powerful a superhero is, but his skin color dictates the expansiveness of the story routes he can follow. It does not matter that Icon is more powerful than Superman, but because of his Black skin, he is limited to the urban space, destined to protect the neighborhood from low grade criminals.

Though there is a distinction between Black heroes written by white writers and Black writers, I see all Black heroes having similar narrative restrictions, which place them in the corrupted urban space where they are never able to escape from. Their superheroism is presented as rouge because it is constructed by the ideology of the streets, where they have been subject to gangs and drug culture. Their moral compass is consistently pointing in the wrong direction. Black superheroes are a move away from the superhero archetype of Superman, they are positioned as being in opposition to whiteness because they come from a highly specific Black

experience. The next chapter will explore how this functions in a narrative that involves a Black hero taking on the mantle of the white hero who carried the name before. I believe that this will tie together and make more clear, the dissonant narrative relationship between whiteness and Blackness in the superhero genre.

IV. Reuse, Recycle

The epitome of the clash between superhero whiteness and the rawness of the urban Black hero, is when a Black superhero takes on the mantle of an iconic white hero. The most notable is the origin story of Green Lantern, John Stewart. This chapter will examine how changing the race of an iconic white figure alters the narrative and requires that it be made Black in order to sustain the marginalized depiction of the Black superhero. The legacy takes a drastic shift, race becomes the focal point of the story arc and the pseudo-authentic black experience becomes a crucial part of the narrative. In this chapter, I will primarily focus on this occurrence in the Green Lantern franchise, the Captain America franchise and the brief appearance of a black Superman (Steel). While Green Lantern presents race as a subplot, not so much focusing on the negativity of stereotypes, but instead depicting how black masculinity differs from whiteness, the later written black Captain America and Superman stories focus on race as an oppressive classification system.

Though there are other instances of white superheroes being replaced by black superheroes, these three show a range of how race and black masculinity influenced the direction of the narrative in such a way that disrupts not only the story, but the reception by readers. The larger white audience resisted these changes, which required that black superheroes be legitimized and explained to prove their adequacy. The notion of legitimacy is important because many of these comics did not last very long due to the backlash from the white readership. These characters introduce race into stories that had not taken into consideration the implications of race, racism and whiteness as invisible. Therefore, I would argue that these black heroes are also examples of the hip hop nature of black superheroes, who infiltrate white discourse and use what already exists in order to reframe it to fit blackness. All three of these examples depict the

overbearing restraint whiteness has over blackness and how much a hero's skin remixes the narrative.

Beware My Power

Introduced in 1959 by DC Comics, the Green Lantern Corps is a fictional intergalactic military/police force composed of a race of immortals residing on the planet Oa, led by the Guardians. Each Green Lantern is given a power ring, a weapon that gives them incredible abilities that are controlled by the wearer's thoughts. Of those Green Lanterns, the most powerful, is Hal Jordan. Jordan, the first human to be selected by the group, is infamous for his fearlessness and strong willpower, making him nearly unstoppable, however, his toughest assignment was yet to come. In *Green Lantern Vol 2 #87* (December, 1971), Jordan is informed that his back-up Guy Gardner has been severely injured and the Guardians have selected Detroit native and ex-marine John Stewart as his replacement.

Jordan is resistant to their decision, unenthused about working with Stewart, who is notoriously disrespectful to authority. The Guardians rebuke Jordan for his objection to their decision based on his claim that Stewart's Blackness would somehow impair his ability to do the job well, saying that Stewart would "have a chip on his shoulder bigger than the rock of Gibraltar." (*Green Lantern Vol 2 #87*) Jordan's worry is seemingly confirmed when Stewart fails to assist him on their first mission to protect a racist politician. Though the politician is unharmed, Jordan is angry with Stewart for not being there to help. Stewart informs him that he was absent because he was stopping a gunman from shooting at a police officer. He also tells Jordan that the shooting was staged for press and political gain. Pleased with his insight and performance, Jordan approves of his new recruit.

Hal Jordan's anxiety over Stewart's presence as his sidekick is centralized around Stewart's Blackness. Throughout their first mission, Jordan is looking for indications that Stewart is unfit for the position believing that he is unable to be rational and objective, as though the burden of racism drives him more than a moral obligation. Stewart not only exceeds expectations, but he simultaneously disavows Jordan's concerns that his race will be a detrimental addition to the Green Lantern Corps. However, not all of Jordan's worries are alleviated.

Notably, Stewart's rejection of assimilation and disrespect to authority stems from his rough upbringing. Stewart's father, an alcoholic and abusive spouse, instills in him a disdain for a society, which manifests itself as rebelliousness towards white authorities, whom he views as being racist. Before becoming Green Lantern, Stewart is an accomplished architect, however, after eight months of working at an architectural firm, is fired on ambiguous terms, though it is clear that the reason is racism. Combining all of these factors, we understand why Stewart is angry, disgruntled and intolerant towards the racial hierarchy.

Stewart's race never becomes a non-factor, in fact it is always a factor and the core explanation for his behavior. Stewart's Green Lantern is a remix of the franchise, he clings to his power and flaunts it unlike the other Lanterns. He is presented as though he is a distortion of a longstanding tradition, an unsettling of the norm and a re-envisioning of a classic narrative. An important part of this tradition is the Green Lantern oath: "'In brightest day, in blackest night, no evil shall escape my sight. Let those who worship evil's might, beware my power--Green Lantern's light!'" When Jordan teaches this to Stewart, he replies by saying, "man that's pretty corny, except for the part that says, "Beware my power!" Mmm-hmm... I do dig those words!" Here, Stewart is further disfiguring the Green Lantern mandate, instead he decides to make it his

own. He clings to the “beware my power” phrase because it is both empowering and threatening, a means of expressing his authority. As he is given more of a role, Stewart continues to adjust the Green Lantern mantle to fit his own standards and beliefs, very early on rejecting to wear a mask, claiming that “this Black man lets it all hang out! I’ve got nothing to hide”. He is willing to flaunt his Blackness and his masculinity. Like Luke Cage, Green Lantern does not worry about his secret identity because he does not fear the repercussions of any of his actions. John Stewart, very much a black hero of the seventies, has a problem with “the man” and the white systems that diminish his value. He responds by being self-reliant, exuding his masculinity in a way that can be seen as intimidating.

Lost Files

There is no other superhero more explicitly American than Marvel’s Captain America (*Captain America Comics* #1 1941). Shortly before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Marvel created a “hero of the moment” by “replicating the superhero prototype established by the Superman creators”, as they transformed the average Steve Rodgers into “an idealized first citizen” known as Captain America (Wanzo 339). Captain America “fictively stood in for real-world nationalist struggles” and “the abstract ideals of truth, justice and democracy” embodied by his “symbolic perfection.” (Wanzo 340) Much like his DC counterpart, Superman, Captain America is able to “connect the political projects of American nationalism internal order, and foreign policy with the individual, or the body” (Dittmer 627). He does this by “embodying American identity”, serving as a “representative of the idealized American nation” which is dependent on its white hegemonic interpretations of morality (Dittmer 627). Absent from this narrative, as with other white superheroes, is the presence of blackness. Captain America represents a specific type of

Americanness, that is considered to be the dominant discourse of American ideals, which consequently excludes blackness from being under that umbrella of representation.

In 2003, Marvel decided to revisit Captain America's origin story by "displacing whitebread Steve Rodgers", instead choosing to tell the "tragic story about the first Captain America" who was "chosen and disavowed because of his race." (Wanzo 340) In this origin story (split into seven issues), the first Captain America is Queens native, Isaiah Bradley. Bradley is one of three black men striving for equality in the United States while war is going on in Europe in the 1940s (*The Truth: Red, White, and Black #1 "The Future"*). The three men come from different experiences, yet it is clear that their blackness is treated as a singularity, causing their white superiors to ignore their individuality. In spite of this, the narrative is told from the perspective of the black soldiers, which enables us to see that there can be no pseudo-authentic black narrative because no one definitive blackness is identifiable. Bradley, who comes from a middle class background, is socially conscious and he wants the best for his wife, Faith and their unborn child, which looks very different from his fellow soldier, the son of an affluent black family from Philadelphia, Maurice Canfield. Needless to say, they are grouped by their blackness, which is viewed by American society as meaning criminal and underprivileged, but most of all, unhuman.

The next issue entitled "*The Basics*" (#2 February) gives us a glimpse into a dark reality about the supersoldier serum that transforms Steve Rodgers. Bradley and the rest of his platoon are placed in Camp Cathcart where they are mistreated and abused by their white commanders, until one night they are told that they must report for a special nighttime mission. While 300 black soldiers are loaded into a truck, the others are killed without warning and without care. Those 300 are taken to be experiments of the formula to make super soldiers, during which many

of them die, as the serum has not yet been perfected (“*The Passage*” #3 March 2003). Bradley and a few others survive the experiment, but their existence is kept secret while they witness Steve Rodgers rising to fame as America’s hero Captain America (“*The Cut*” #4 April 2003).

When Bradley is the only one left, he goes on a mission in Germany, but he is imprisoned by the army because he takes the white Captain America’s suit (“*The Math*” #5 May 2003). In the final two issues (“*The Whitewash*” #6 June 2003, “*The Blackvine*” #7 July 2003), Steve Rodgers discovers the truth behind the super soldier project and its disposal of black bodies. Learning that only Bradley has survived, Rodgers goes in search of him. When the two meet, Bradley is unable to speak, because the side effects of the serum caused him to suffer from severe mental deterioration akin to dementia. When he leaves prison, he has the mental capacity of a six year-old.

Though he is never given the same spotlight as Steve Rodgers, Bradley becomes a legend in the black community, for he represents endurance and an undeniable will to live in the face of oppressive racism. Isaiah Bradley as the black Captain America embodies the conflict that the black community has so often been unable to reconcile: how are we to be American when America has caused us to be culturally emaciated? Bradley endorses the very ideals that are used to suppress him and deny him hero status. The comic is essentially about bodies, black and white bodies and how they relate to Americanness as an exclusively white ideal. In her essay “Wearing Hero-Face: Black Citizens and Melancholic Patriotism in *Truth: Red, White, and Black*” Rebecca Wanzo argues that, “[i]f Rogers’ transformed body represents US democracy’s ability to transform its citizens into ideals, black Captain America Isaiah Bradley epitomizes not only the failure of US democracy to work fully for all citizens but also the ways in which fantasies of US democracy can be built on the backs of those it uses and then discards.” (Wanzo 341) Wanzo’s

claim is based in what I would assert to be, American historical amnesia, in which the success of American ideals and projects of democratic advancement are presented as though they were purely inspired and completed by the white hegemony. Blackness is erased from the narrative, depicting black bodies as if they were inactive.

Wanzo goes further to claim that unlike many black heroes before him, Bradley does not disdain the flag, rather he takes pride in it. In this way, Isaiah Bradley is not the figurehead for black nationalism, rather he symbolizes the yearning for America to be the nation it claims to be. However, she credits this pride as being “inextricably tied to a specific history of black erasure and a general critique of the democratic nation state’s dehumanization of some of its citizens.” (Wanzo 342) This argument explains the historical push from the black community for equality as being more than just a desire to be viewed as equal human beings, showing that Black men have craved Americanness, not in an attempt to achieve masculine whiteness, but to overwrite the belief that Americanness means whiteness. Bradley is a “melancholic patriot” because he associates the flagged costume as superior to the white oppressive force that denies him a voice, he views Americanness as something achievable (Wanzo 341-342). This new narrative of a black Captain America exposes the racial realities that would have been likely during that time period, detailing the journey of a lost black narrative, which ruins the purity of Americanness functioning as a stand in for moral absolutism.

Brother Steel

In October 1992, the last son of Krypton died. Superman, the iconic hero and unstoppable force, was killed by the power villain, Doomsday (“*Doomsday*”). Though he was resurrected shortly after, during his time away, DC decided to introduce a black Superman to take his place.

In issue 500 of “The Adventures of Superman” (June 1993), steelworker, Doctor John Henry Irons stepped forward to help the Man of Steel as he was fighting Doomsday, but was unsuccessful. Seeing that Superman was dead, Irons vowed to stop Doomsday. Shortly after, he was one of three others who stepped up to be the new hero for Metropolis. This is what is referred to as the “Reign of Supermen” story arc, in which the supermen vouch for position as the new savior of Metropolis.

As the Man of Steel, Irons is captivated by the accurate performance of Superman, often chastising the other supermen when they do something that Superman would not do. Aside from his Iron Man-like suit of armor made of steel, Irons strives to be the superhero he witnessed Superman being as he is seen fighting gang members (*The Man of Steel* #23, #25), eliminating gun manufacturers (*The Man of Steel* #24), fighting off robots from taking over Metropolis (*The Man of Steel* #25), and taking down supervillains (*The Man of Steel* #24, #26). Though he seems to be clear about what it means to be Superman, Irons is only able to sustain the position for a short period time as Superman is resurrected. Irons’ inadequacy is a result of the “weighty myth of the white Superman legacy” being too overshadowing. He lacked the longevity and depth of Superman, which made it nearly impossible for the iconic narrative to be remixed by a black hero (Davenport).

Irons lacked the supernatural endowment of power and moral authority that Superman was born with, instead, he was simply a man trying to fill the shoes of a god-like figure. When Superman is resurrected, Irons continues to be a hero, just under the name Steel. The Steel solo series (1994) reveals the origin story of John Henry Irons, his journey from Washington, DC to Metropolis and the problems he left back at home five years ago. Christian Davenport’s essay, “The Brother Might be Made of Steel, But He Sure Ain’t Super...Man”, offers a comparative

analysis of Steel and Superman, in which he critiques the lack of depth to Steel primarily on the basis that he is never truly depicted as a hero against racism, as though it were not a real factor.

What makes Steel problematic is his belief in not only the white Americanness of Superman, but also in capitalism as a means of protection and escapism. Irons sees financial success as a means of fulfillment. Upon graduating, he gets a job designing high tech weapons for Amertek, until one day Irons realizes that his weapons were responsible for killing innocent people. He destroys all of the remaining prototypes before going into hiding, finding a job as a steelworker. After one of his coworkers falls from a high rise, Irons falls to his death, until Superman saves him. From that point forward, Irons believes he is indebted to Superman and it marks the beginning of Iron's desire to emulate him.

In his looking to Superman as a role model, Steel implicitly denies his blackness as he attempts to achieve something more. Davenport believes that, “[b]y not discussing it (his being black), he de facto comes to accept the melting pot thesis, and this must be addressed in some manner in order to make the character credible”, suggesting that his blackness cannot entirely go unnoticed (Davenport). However, in his solo series, Steel has to face the problems of the urban space upon his return home, defending his neighborhood against gang violence and gun violence.

What distinguishes Irons from other black heroes is that while he was raised in the urban space, he was never tainted by it, which results in him being distant from the core problems of the ghetto. As Davenport puts it, “by maintaining a position that removing guns will eliminate violence within inner cities, Steel ignores the motivation/reason for the violence itself”, implying that he is ignorant to the influence of racism on those communities. This results in what Davenport asserts is a depiction of Steel which “ignores the important issues of African-american personality development”, which he argues can be accounted for by Steel's “bear[ing]

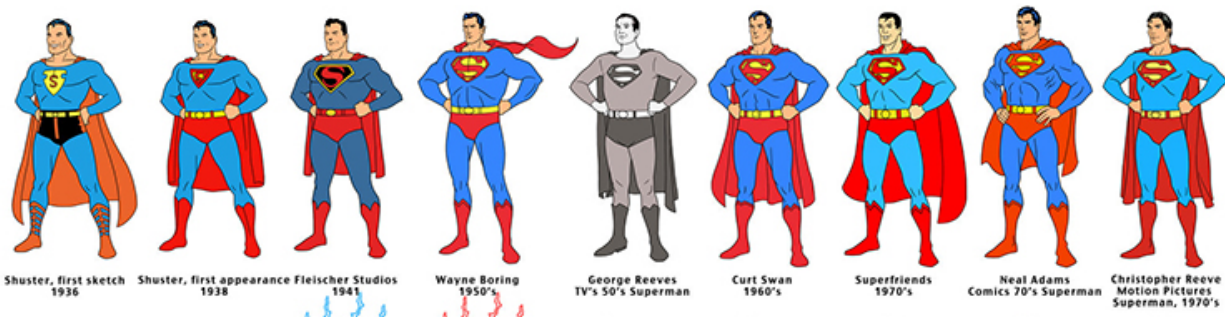
the burden of race as an explanatory device” instead of presenting a “conservative perspective regarding inner city life, and African-American communities.”

Steel, as both a black superhero project and a white superhero replacement project, lacks the narrative depth to suffice as a dynamic imprint into the superhero narrative. His origin story, dilutes his blackness in order to further accentuate Superman’s whiteness, making him appear as though his attempt to match Superman’s whiteness is an impossible feat. Likewise, Steel’s origin story fails as a parallel to the Man of Steel’s, making his attempt to prove himself adequate enough even more of a dead end. While Superman is gifted to the world with supernatural powers, Steel is a man who tries to match the supernatural with technology.

Conclusion

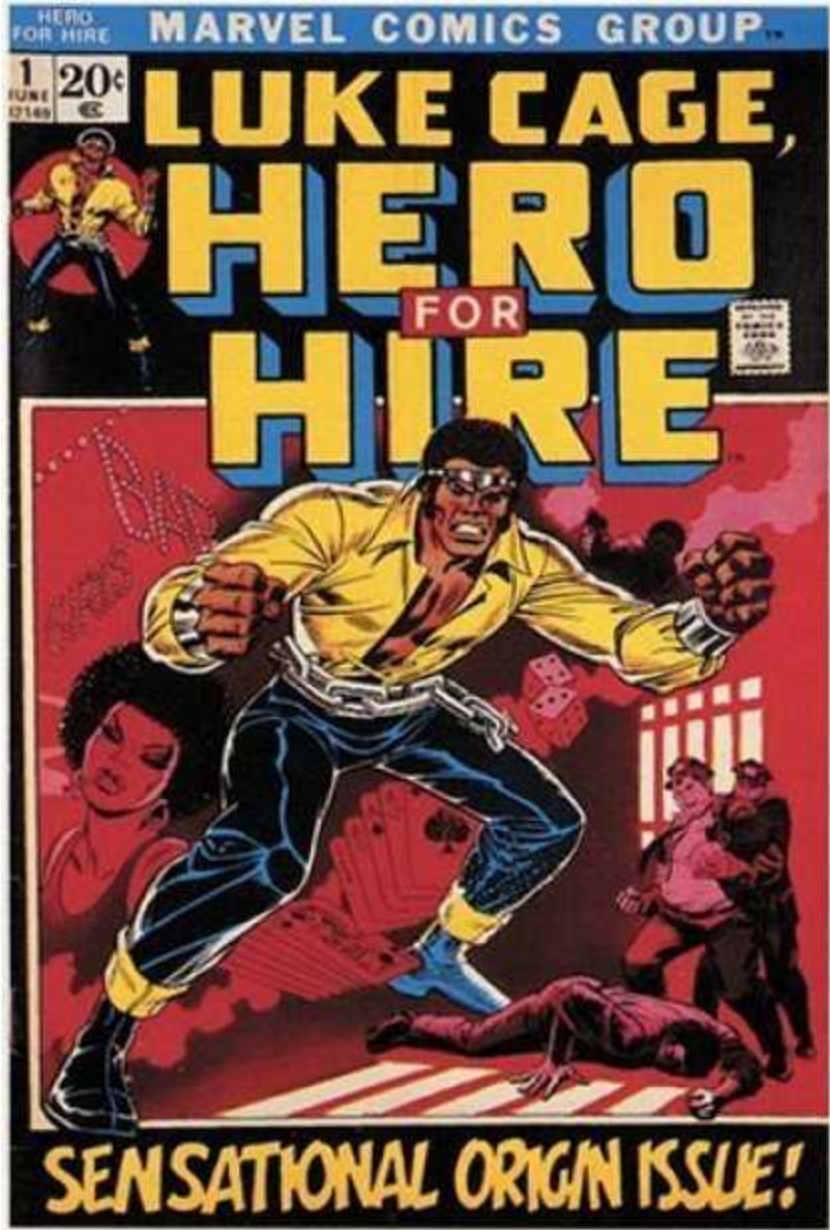
The superhero genre depicts whiteness as an abstract ideal, as opposed to the black experience, which is always a concrete (literally, even, as the concrete urban space) experience. The abstract ideal of whiteness ends up allowing for concrete individuality, while the highly specified and stereotypical black experience becomes generalized to the point of abstraction. Superman and Captain America are not only stand-ins for American nationalism, but they embody American citizenship in a way that presents a model for the American individuality. Black heroes like Falcon, Luke Cage and even Hardware are written from a particular black experience that cannot be read as a model for a wider audience, instead they emphasize the sameness of the black urban hero in a way that presents a repetitive narrative.

The future of the black superhero may be that the pseudo-authentic black experience can be abandoned for a more exploratory narrative which might depict multiple black experience. Rather than presenting black superheroes as being hypermasculine and aggressive, there needs to be black heroes that can be a role model for all types of people without being white-washed. Yes, race must be addressed in the superhero narrative, but it should not be the focal point of a black superhero's story as if that is the only trouble he will ever deal with.













USING ALVA'S
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FOR THE LAST
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HEH! IT'S *SURELY*
HIS PROPERTY...

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