

Heroes and Legends: African-American Identity in Graphic Novels and Comic Books

by

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This thesis is an analysis and comparison of three pieces of traditional literature and three graphic narratives to show the ability of the graphic narratives to contribute to the broader discussion of racial identity. While highlighting the similarities between the literary examples, this thesis sheds light on the graphic narrative genre as a staple in the identity of many black Americans.

Heroes and Legends:
African-American Identity in Graphic Novels and Comic Books

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“The Brown Hornet! That’s it- on *The Fat Albert Show* and even thinking that he was cool, though he was just a weird little cartoon superhero. Anyway, they may have all been pretty silly but I thought they were great at the time; they let me see someone like me doing good things, saving people, beating up drug dealers, and not being just a bad guy or a sidekick.”

- Matt, father and comic book reader

Jeffrey A. Brown

Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics and Their Fans

p. 160

Preface

Examining African-Americans and the Comic Book

African-Americans and people of African descent are not strangers to the comic format. As subjects and creators, black people and comics have a long, tangled history. I am going to examine the representation of the African-American identity by comparing the traditional novel to the graphic novel and comic book while demonstrating the utility of the latter expressions in teaching the ethnic-American experience. More specifically, I will use the short stories of Richard Wright in *Uncle Tom's Children* and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and discuss their similarities with Rep. John Lewis and Andrew Ayden's graphic novel March: Book I, Max Brooks's Harlem Hellfighters, and Dwayne McDuffie's comic book collections "Icon: Mothership Connection" and "Icon: A Hero's Welcome." Despite using varied techniques, each piece of literature being compared contributes to the discussion of African-American identity and retells common stories in a manner that is adapted for different audiences and timeframes, without compromising the integrity of the situations or characters. To validate the identities presented in the graphic novels and comic books, I will employ the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) as presented by Robert M. Sellers, Mia A. Smith and J. Nicole Shelton, Stephanie A. J. Rowley, and Tabbye M. Chavous. The MMRI provides a framework for understanding the significance of race in African-American self-concept and the qualitative meanings attributed to being black. It also outlines how individuals appraise situations and behaviors in relation to race. The MMRI assumes that identities are situationally influenced while simultaneously being stable properties of a person. The model also asserts that individuals have several identities that are hierarchically ordered, and a people's perception of their racial identity is the most valid indicator of their identity (23-4). There are

four dimensions of the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity – (1) racial salience, (2) racial centrality, (3) racial regard, and (4) racial ideology– that work together to elucidate the significance and qualitative meaning of race in self-concept for African-Americans. The vitality and usefulness of the MMRI comes from its “attempts to combine the strengths of both the mainstream and underground approaches to studying African-American racial identity” to provide an integrated framework that allows for the full investigation of the structure and properties of the “functioning African-American racial identity within its own unique historical and cultural experience” (Sellers, 31). The model provides a more textured view of what it means to be black because it was developed within the context of the unique experiences associated with African-American history. But, before we delve into our literary comparisons and apply the MMRI, let’s examine comics as a medium.

Chapter 1

Comics and The Stories They Tell

Comics have an extended history that dates back thousands of years. One of the earliest comics, “Tiger’s Claw”, was discovered in 1519 by Cortes. The pre-Columbian picture manuscript is 36 ft. long and depicts the military and political figure 8-Deer. Then there’s the Bayeux Tapestry in France, a 230 ft. long tapestry that details the Norman Conquest and dates back to 1066. But what makes these extensive drawings ancient predecessors to comics? According to Scott McCloud in “Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art”, “Tiger’s Claw” and the Bayeux Tapestry both depict events in chronological order, making them forerunners to what we now consider comics (12).

Comic books and graphic novels use the same format to tell stories. Usually, a page is broken down into several panels that work together to tell a larger narrative. The panels act “as a sort of general indicator that time or space is being divided” (McCloud 99). The panels can come in a variety of shapes, and sizes, but generally they are square or rectangular. The space between panels is called the gutter and this is where the readers’ imagination steps in and creates a single idea out of individual images. Clearly defined panels are common, but some creative teams may use the entire page or a portion of it as a panel, or panels may spill off of the page. The action contained within the panel influences the panel’s shape but does not cement a specific shape for specific action. Since the panels work together to tell a story, it is important that the panels be read in a particular order for the story to make sense and for the reader to pick up other contextual clues.

Another key component of the graphic novel and comic book is the word balloon. Word balloons contain dialogue from characters. The contents of the word balloon can be used to tell the story beyond just providing dialogue. The dialogue can be written simply to convey a conversation, or the style it is written in can be used to emphasize what's being said by being in a different color, varied size or font. Word boxes can work in tandem with word balloons to progress the story by providing important information to help readers understand the action, including identifying the location and its place in time, a character's inner thoughts or internal dialogue, and identify new characters. The style of the comic book or graphic novel will affect the placement of the word boxes on the page as well as the content. In some cases, the expository content often contained in word boxes will not be confined to a visible box, but will just appear to float on the page.

Lastly, audio cues may appear on the page near their source. For example, a ringing phone within a panel has "Ring! Ring!" appearing near it, or if the phone is not in the panel the words "Ring! Ring!" may appear to one side of the panel to indicate that the ringing phone is out of the view of the reader, but close enough to be heard by the characters.

In many cases, panels can be read from left to right then down the page. There are instances, however, when this is not the norm and the reader has to figure out the correct order in which to read the page. There is no art to reading comic book and graphic novel pages. It takes practice and patience to read pages correctly. After reading a few pages, audiences can pick up on the flow of the writing and artwork, making it much easier to read the rest of the work.

As for a textbook definition, McCloud defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic

response in the viewer” (9). This isn’t what comes to mind when many people contemplate comics, but this is a sound definition that describes what comics are and how they function. You may be wondering where or how Egyptian hieroglyphics fall into the historic timeline. Interestingly enough, they don’t. McCloud explains that hieroglyphics represent sounds not events, making them more like what we know as words than what we know to be comics. As McCloud further explains, the beauty of this definition is that it does not limit or exclude any schools of art, philosophies, movements, or ways of seeing things, allowing it to simply define the medium and not potential content.

Rodolphe Töpffer is regarded by many as the father of the modern comic. Beginning in the mid-1800s, Töpffer used “cartooning and panel borders to tell a story, and featured the first independent combination of words and pictures in Europe” (McCloud, 17). Töpffer illustrated story progression through panel-to-panel transitions.

Comic Book Transitions

There are five types of panel-to-panel transitions in comics (McCloud, 70-2). Moment-to-moment transitions require little imagination from the reader as they illustrate one moment to the next with no major action in between. A transition that depicts one specific subject doing one thing then another is called action-to-action. An action-to-action transition, for example, would show a drink being poured in one panel, someone drinking the drink in the next panel, and the person burping in the final panel.

When subsequent panels stick with a particular scene or idea it’s referred to as subject-to-subject. Subject-to-subject progressions require involvement from the reader to connect the two images and give them meaning. An example of subject-to-subject transition is one panel with a

person crossing a finish line and the next with someone stopping a stopwatch. The reader has to infer from the two subsequent images that the person crossed the finish line then an official nearby stopped the stopwatch.

Scene-to-scene transitions require deductive reasoning skills to draw meaning from subsequent panels and can transport readers through time and space. An example of a scene-to-scene transition is one panel with a man consoling a woman whose husband is said to have died in a plane crash, followed by a panel of the husband sitting alone on a deserted island.

The fifth type of transition is aspect-to-aspect, a transition that sets the reader's eye on different aspects of a scene and bypasses time. An example would be one panel illustrating a living room decorated for Christmas and the next panel showing a close-up of a Santa Claus figurine on a tabletop, a smaller aspect of the larger scene. Lastly, the sixth transition type is non-sequitur, where sequential panels have no relationship to one another.

The six types of transitions link the panels together to create a larger story. McCloud believes each panel is a "general indicator that time or space is being divided" (99). The duration of that time is defined by the contents of the panels. Two panels may work together to indicate that a decade has passed or two days. It is also important to stress that time and space are one and the same in comic books and graphic novels. Unless otherwise indicated, each panel is happening in the present and readers are experiencing the now of the characters. The size and shape of the panels can work to underscore the amount or passage of time by manipulating the reader's perception of time to extend or shorten it to fit the narrative.

Better understanding the aesthetic and literary components of comic books and graphic novels helps to bridge the divide between the traditional novel and these two mediums by

illustrating their similarities in storytelling and use of literary devices. Yes, comic books and graphic novels have been looked upon as subordinate to traditional literature, but they are not without their advantages. Traditional literature is more dependent on the reader's imagination to bring characters, settings and events to life, while comic books and graphic novels allow the reader to revel in the story because the visual elements are provided in eloquent detail. The reader participation in graphic novels and comic books links together the panels of a page to understand the narrative, and is consistent with the participation needed when consuming traditional literature. One medium is not better than another, but both appeal to readers in different ways. As we examine The Harlem Hellfighters, March: Book I, "Icon: Mothership Connection" and "Icon" A Hero's Welcome" we will elucidate the power of the image in storytelling and the viability of these works in the discussion of African-American identity in literature.

To illustrate the utility of graphic novels in discussions of identity and set the stage for our discussion of African-American identity in comics and graphic novels, we will briefly discuss Maus by Art Spiegelman and how it used an underestimated medium to tell a compelling story.

A Graphic History

Maus by Art Spiegelman tells the story of Vladek Spiegelman, a Jewish man who survived the Holocaust and Nazi-occupied Europe. Art, Vladek's son, is a cartoonist who uses his medium to come to terms with his father's harrowing story of survival and loss. The two part work, Maus I: My Father Bleeds History and Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began, is done in stark black and white images, and the characters are depicted as animals - the Jewish characters

are mice, the Nazi characters are cats, and Nazi sympathizers are pigs. In the *New York Times* Review of Books article “Why Mice?” written by Art Spiegelman, there’s an excerpt from his book MetaMaus that explains why mice were used to depict the Jewish people in his graphic novels. Spiegelman explained that the decision to use mice started when he tried drawing black people in 1971 for a comic book called “Funny Animals”. He visited an introduction to cinema class taught by a friend and saw the racist depictions of African-Americans and came up with the notion that “I could do a strip about the black experience in America, using an animated cartoon style. I could draw Ku Klux Kats ...” until he realized how it could be perceived. It was as he contemplated this format that he realized “this cat-mouse metaphor of oppression could actually apply to my more immediate experience” and began researching how Jewish people had been depicted. While watching the 1940 German propaganda film *The Eternal Jew*, Art Spiegelman saw Jewish people depicted as rats and being referred to as the “vermin of mankind”, which was similar to the dehumanizing portrayals of African-Americans when they were depicted as being like monkeys. Through further research, Spiegelman discovered that the Jewish person being characterized as a rat was most widespread around the 1940s. Similar to the ploys of African-Americans who attempt to take the sting out of the word “nigger,” Spiegelman sought to use a remnant of unbridled hate to tell his father’s remarkable story.

Throughout the story, readers follow mice renditions of Vladek and Anja as they run and hide from Nazis. They are seen scurrying about, hiding in attics and holes in the ground, and other activities that make them mouse-like even without the obvious depiction. There is power in Art’s acknowledgement of this racial stereotype, its role in the lives of his parents, and how the treatment by the Nazis made his parents, and other Jewish people, less than human.

Spiegelman acknowledged that if he used more realistic drawings of his characters, it would be harder for audiences to digest the highly emotional content. Art Spiegelman's decision to use animals instead of people in his graphic novels can be criticized, especially with reference to his using an image that was used by Nazis to oppress his people. But this is not uncommon. Artists have been known to use existing racist stereotypes to gain acclaim in various industries. Some stereotypes have been embraced by African-American writers who create multi-dimensional characters to show the depth of the black experience instead of re-creating one-dimensional caricatures. Spike Lee did this with stereotypical characters in *Do The Right Thing* as well as Tyler Perry with characters in his *Medea* series.

Fredrik Strömberg examines the way blacks are depicted in comics in his book, *Black Images in the Comics*. Dr. Charles Johnson sets the tone in the foreword by pointing out that, historically, black characters in comics only reflected the ways that others perceived them, and when they were part of the story, black characters were often shallow and only present for the sake of diversity with no regard to authenticity. Johnson explains "that even these more realistically written and drawn comics are still reactive, self-consciously fighting against 'cartoon coon' images from the period of Jim Crow segregation, struggling to correct old, apartheid era wrongs and not yet fully and creatively *free*," (Strömberg 16). I partially agree with Dr. Johnson, acknowledging that some black characters are simply pawns making way for more creative and original black characters who are not fighting previously held ideas or caricatures. Some characters that are written to fight these stereotypes end up reinforcing them by being flat, chocolate dipped versions of white characters, and in their attempts to break free of stereotypes consequentially create new caricatures. Strömberg explains that comics are "a medium of extremes" that tend to "simplify and stereotype their subjects" while also serving to "highlight

their surrounding societies' trends and attitudes, making them easily available for observations and study" (23). Despite their extreme nature, comics and graphic novels can be used to tell authentic stories without being a bastion of racist attitudes and beliefs. Applying Strömberg's comments to Spiegelman's use of mice to depict Jewish people in his series, Spiegelman's decision makes more sense within the medium and aligns with the idea that simplification of such subject matter is ideal. Essentially, Spiegelman uses the medium to his advantage to share the very personal stories of his father's survival of the Holocaust. Spiegelman's decision to use mice aligns with Dr. Johnson's belief that African-American characters are being used to fight old stereotypes instead of being new and innovative. And as much as African-Americans have tried to take the sting out of the word "nigger" by using it colloquially, Spiegelman attempts to reclaim the mouse image of the Jew to re-humanize them while illustrating the dehumanizing nature of their treatment and conditions.

Why Draw Stereotypes?

African-American comic book and graphic novel characters are not completely free of their visual heritage, including characters created by African-Americans. Strömberg explains why some groups are depicted in what can be considered racist and stereotypical ways, by extrapolating that artists have a difficult time depicting people of races and ethnicities other than their own. These artists choose to take a shortcut and depict people who are different in a stereotypical fashion. He argues that, in some cases, it is not racism on the part of the artist, but laziness that births these distortions.

Frantz Fanon provides tremendous insight on being black in the land of colonizers, including how they portray the colonized. In his book *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon tells the

story of Jean Veneuse, a black Antillean man who spent many years living in Bordeaux, making him a black European, an oddity to a society that didn't know how to acknowledge him. Veneuse explains that "the Europeans, in general, and the French in particular, do not merely ignore the Negro from their colonies but also haven't a clue about the black man they have shaped in their image" (Fanon, 46), echoing Mr. Strömberg's insistence on the ignorance of colonizers. Some comic book writers have even admitted that they do not know how to write a black character. Early black characters support this sentiment, with many serving as sidekicks or pieces of the scenery. The best way to present more accurate portrayals is to have people from the misrepresented groups tell their own stories, create characters and write for them.

Historically, when African-Americans were depicted in the media, including being illustrated in comics, they were limited to seven stereotypes: (1) the native, who is shown as a child savage, both silly and dangerous, (2) the Tom, who is an eternally servile, humble and forgiving soul who never questions the superiority of whites, (3) the coon, a roguish, comedic figure known for mischievous pranks and an idiosyncratic approach to language, (4) the piccaninny, a younger version of the coon, who is prone to leaps of imagination and "comical" bursts of overenthusiasm, (5) the tragic mulatto, who is usually a female who is sexually torn between black and white worlds, her sensual nature making her an "acceptable" object for white desire even as her black legacy dooms her to tragedy, (6) the mammy, a feminine Tom with a large and ungainly asexual physique and unwavering loyalty to the white household in which she works, and lastly (7) the buck, a strong, violent and rebellious "bad Negro" most often functioning as a cautionary character (Strömberg, 29). These seven types of characters were the mainstream portrayals of African-Americans for many years.

Fanon delves into what it means to be a black person in a world dominated by white people, including discussions of the role that dynamic plays on representation, perception, and internalization. Strömberg offers that some writers are too lazy to properly research black people in order to write compelling characters. Fanon argues that “the black man has to be portrayed a certain way” and directs readers to “look at children’s comic books: all the Blacks are mouthing the ritual ‘yes, boss!’ (17).” The purpose of this stereotype, Fanon hypothesizes, is to imprison the black man “as the eternal victim of his own presence, of a *visible appearance* for which he is not responsible” (18). This type of ongoing public degradation makes it “easy to understand why the first reaction of the black man is to say *no* to those who endeavor to define him” (19), especially when he is assessed by how well he’s assimilated into the dominant culture. When others have the absolute authority to define the parameters of another group’s identity, the group being defined will always be at a loss, questioning their place and trying to reconcile how they’ve been defined with who they actually are, and particularly with how that image relates to the larger society. With the overarching idea of the foreign being inferior, Europeans could not be expected to depict people of other ethnic groups realistically or authentically. Here is where a reliance on stereotypes and caricatures fills in the gaps, as Strömberg suggests, leaving offensive mockeries in their wake. Why such distortions? In addition to being foreign to the dominant culture, the black man “must be black in relation to the white man” (Fanon, 90) and the worse the black man looks in comparison, the higher the bar of white civility, which is a further justification for white superiority.

Moving Beyond the Stereotypical

The main characters in the comic books and graphic novels being discussed here are not confined to the seven categories outlined by Strömberg. Rep. John Lewis and his peers in

March: Book 1 and the courageous soldiers in The Harlem Hellfighters are not imagined characters brought to life on the page, but rather real people whose stories are repackaged for a new audience. The protagonists of “Icon”, Icon/Augustus Freeman and Rocket/Raquel Ervin, however, are partial stereotypes. Icon is among the most imposing figures in comic books. With muscles upon muscles and a stern look on his face, at first glance Icon is the buck, strong and rebellious, physically imposing and able to induce fear. His sidekick, Rocket, is more of a modern stereotype. While there are seven main categories for black male characters, there is a different set of categories for black women. The mammy character persists and is accompanied by (1) the Sapphire, a domineering woman who emasculates black men, (2) the Jezebel, a promiscuous, immoral black woman whose sexual appetite rivals that of men, and (3) the Teen Mother, the young woman who as a result of multiple sexual encounters, or one, becomes pregnant and is forced to raise her child alone when the father abdicates his responsibilities. Raquel falls into this last category. After using sex to prove to her boyfriend Noble that she loved him, Raquel becomes pregnant and has to traverse the difficult path of single motherhood as a high school student. On the surface, both Raquel and Icon embody stereotypes, but there is a method to the madness.

(A) Milestone (In) Comics

Milestone Media is the brainchild of four African-American men – Dwayne McDuffie, Michael Davis, Derek T. Dingle and Denys Cowan – who were intimately versed in the comic book universe. Davis is an experienced comic book artist. Dingle brought a publisher’s sensibility to Milestone Media. McDuffie served as a writer and editor for both DC and Marvel Comics before becoming the main writer for Milestone. Cowan is known as one of the best illustrators in the industry. They worked together to revolutionize the comic book industry by

illustrating that there is an audience eager to consume stories about diverse superheroes, if those stories are executed properly, and have the aid of major company distribution and promotion. According to “Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans” by Jeffrey A. Brown, Milestone launched in 1993 as part of a partnership with DC Comics “guaranteeing that their books would be printed in a quality format and would be fully distributed at an international level along with DC’s own books” (27) to ensure that their stories and characters had the widest audience possible, while also having an immediate presence in the comic world. This partnership gave Milestone Media the footing it needed to be competitive in a comic landscape that is dominated by two companies. When the four men conceptualized Milestone’s characters, they knew that “they wanted their comic books to reflect people from a variety of cultural backgrounds” (28) and to this end, when negotiating their contract with DC Comics, Milestone Media creators insisted on three points: “that they would retain total creative control; that they would retain all copyrights for characters created under the Milestone banner; and that they would have the final say on all merchandising and licensing deals pertaining to their properties” (30). When the founders of Milestone Media took to the drawing board for characters and stories, they knew that their work had to be entertainment first with any political relevance coming in second. The creators knew that making politics center stage meant potentially alienating the “core audience of comic book readers,” which would prevent Milestone and its body of work from being able to “affect cultural change” (32). McDuffie explained that Milestone’s “major job is to entertain people, because even if you want to send a message you need to recognize that the best propaganda is the kind people don’t notice. Nobody wants to sit through a lecture” (32).

Since Milestone was creating superheroes, it still had to abide by the superhero aesthetic: muscle bound men and women in tights with physiques to be envied and emulated. In reaching a more broad audience, the physical component could not be ignored or overlooked, but had to be integrated into the characters so they would not be dismissed before audiences had a chance to enter their worlds. Creating diverse characters that comfortably fit within the superhero genre was prerequisite to the impact that Milestone wanted to have on the comic book industry. The physicality of the characters meant that they embodied previous stereotypes, but it also meant that Milestone characters would reach the broad audience it needed to test if fans were open to more diverse characters.

Dwayne McDuffie is the first name that comes to mind for many comic book readers who are familiar with Milestone Media and its superhero pantheon. McDuffie served as Milestone's editor in chief and was among its most popular and copious writers. Prior to founding Milestone Media, McDuffie was an editor and writer for DC, Harvey, and Marvel Comics. It was during his time with Marvel that he wrote for most of the characters in the company's superhero pantheon. McDuffie had extensive success writing for the characters Spider-Man and Deathlok. Later in his career, McDuffie served as a writer of the Cartoon Network series *Justice League* and *Justice League: Unlimited*, where existing minority characters in the DC universe were exposed to a new audience and given depth and dimensions that secondary characters tend to lack. It is because of his extensive career as an editor and writer that McDuffie understood the importance of creating minority characters. Jeffrey Brown cites an interview in the fan magazine *Comics Journal*, where McDuffie explained that:

Writing a black character in either the Marvel or DC universe is that he is not a man. He is a symbol. Like Wonder Woman- if you write Wonder Woman, she is

all women. You can't do a character. ... (Luke) Cage is all black people. Deathlok is all black people. It limits the complexity and the roundedness of the characters. ... If Milestone had done just one book, whoever that character was would have been limited to being like what Sidney Poitier was in the 1950s movies. But we present a range of characters, guys who are all different from each other, as different as all of us are from each other. (Brown 31)

Jeffrey Brown elaborates on the function of Milestone superheroes, explaining that they serve “as a focal point for interpreting revisionist notions of African-American characters in comparison to more mainstream comic book ideals” while facilitating a more contemporary interpretation of black masculinity that combines intelligence and physicality. This combination is apparent in Icon/Augustus Freeman, who is a successful mixture of earthly intelligence and physical strength that re-imagines the Buck stereotype. There is not a lot of room to divert from the Buck stereotype in superhero comic books, but there is room to add dimensions.

A Divine Archetype

Despite McDuffie and Milestone's characters' ability to dismantle stereotypes, as superheroes the characters still had to adhere to the “quintessential images of heroism” (Brown, 2) including height, physique, and attractiveness to be credible and to compete within the superhero genre. The creators of Milestone Media understood that in order to generate change within the comic book system, they must adhere to its visual standards. This adherence allowed McDuffie and his peers to provide heroic role models that comic book readers of various ethnic backgrounds could directly identify with. In Kenneth Ghee's article “Will the ‘Real’ Black Superheroes Please Stand Up?!” Ghee points out that superheroes and other mythological

characters “serve a major role in the developmental learning process by transmitting cultural values and allegories and as social icons and role models (225).” Ghee also extrapolates on the importance of having a variety of heroes for readers of varying ethnicities to pull from and relate to. These characters are not just foes on the page. They also convey the ideals and attributes that a society values. When the villains are overwhelmingly ethnic and the heroes of European descent, young ethnic readers can interpret this to mean that people like them aren’t heroes but are the people that others are saved from. Ghee adds that “these media driven icons help to guide implicit assumptions and beliefs about what it means to be a male or female, Black or White, and what it means to be a good or moral citizen in a community and culture” (Howard, 225). Even though ethnic superheroes may look like their white counterparts, they are filling a void that McDuffie and Milestone Media sought to change.

The Way We Were

It’s not that Marvel and DC did not attempt to create black superheroes prior to Milestone. They actually created quite a few. Both companies failed at long-term success because their characters “were too closely identified with the limited stereotypes commonly found in blaxploitation films” (Brown, 4) of the 1970s. Blaxploitation films of the 1970s were pivotal in exposing black audiences to their type of superhero, the super bad, wise-cracking, sexually charged hero/heroine who would sport an afro and bellbottom pants as commonly as his/her viewers. The heroes of blaxploitation films used dialogue that was common in African-American communities of the 1970s across the U.S. and, in many cases, rendered an authentic black experience on the big screen. John Shaft, Foxy Brown, Dolemite, Black Gun, and their peers were the everyday heroes in the black community. They successfully navigated a world much like their audience’s world and created a space in which black audiences could see

themselves. Adilifu Nama, professor and chair of the African American Studies department at Loyola Marymount University, points out that it was the popularity of blaxploitation characters in the black community that made them ripe for imitation when it came to creating black superheroes. Nama clarifies that “the black superheroes of DC and Marvel comics drew much from the blaxploitation film genre, but not because they were inspired by blaxploitation film characters. The unmistakable commonality between the two exists because blaxploitation film characters *were* black superheroes” (37). Additionally, these early black characters “were crafted in creative and artistic ways that symbolized the racial climate” (Nama 36) and were not independently created. Black comic book superheroes were not created in a vacuum, but with current social and political climates in mind. This is most obviously reflected in the drug dealer and street criminal villains that early black superheroes faced in ghettos. While their white peers bravely faced intergalactic foes to save the world, black superheroes were more like vigilantes cleaning up their own neighborhoods. Being a more localized hero was a double-edged sword. It often stifled character development, but showed that these characters were connected to black communities. Limiting early black superhero villains to those ripped from headlines implied that the heroes were not equipped to handle situations beyond their neighborhoods, reinforcing existing notions of black inferiority. However, a black superhero addressing problems at home may have been what was needed at the time. Black communities across the country have suffered disproportionately from the ills of drugs, violence, and crime, leaving many to feel that they have to defend themselves. A black superhero coming to the rescue of a community illustrates to readers that people within the community have the power to bring about positive change and can serve as role models for those who feel limited because of their circumstances. Ghee discusses the black superhero in relation to the black community and

the disconnect it created when these characters were solely humanists. He explains that “too many Black comic book heroes and their stories have little or no explicit reference points for psychological relevance to Black youth or the Black community as cultural bound heroes” and that historically, these same characters operate almost exclusively within a Eurocentric context, “no Black family, no Black lover, no connection to community or culture; he/she is isolated and separated from any relevant African American cultural context” (Howard, 232). While the limited battles of black heroes had their disadvantages, particularly as these relate to widespread and genre-specific appeal, there was utility in having these characters work within their communities.

These criticisms feed the larger discussion of black identity and what it means for superheroes. Despite its work towards diversity and representation in comic books, Milestone Media was criticized by Ania, a black independent publishing company, for creating characters that were black in appearance only and lacked the cultural depth and awareness that would make them authentically black (Brown, 52). This is where the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity comes into our analysis. The MMRI was first introduced in 1998 and combines the strengths of several existing identity theories that are sensitive to cultural experiences to ensure that it effectively examines black identity. Applying this model to our comic book and graphic novels characters will exhibit their ethnic relevance as authentic black characters.

Success is the New Black

One of the successful characters born out of this era of racial tension was Black Panther. Black Panther is T'Challa, prince of Wakanda, a technologically advanced African nation that blends tradition with futurist sensibility. Black Panther debuted in Marvel's *Fantastic Fourin*

July 1966 when he lures the team into his kingdom to test their ability to help him against his biggest enemy, Klaw. Klaw killed Black Panther's father to gain control of the kingdom's deposits of vibranium, a stronger-than-steel extraterrestrial mineral, to make weapons.

Adilifu Nama argues that Black Panther “not only symbolized a politically provocative and wildly imaginative convergence of African tradition with advanced technology, but he also stood as a progressive racial symbol and anti-colonialist critique of the economic exploitation of Africa” (43). Despite Black Panther's noble background and storyline, he was created by a white creative team and is African, not African-American, making him admirable yet foreign, and still a continent removed from readers. He can also be perceived as representing more than himself as he works to preserve his kingdom's way of life, culture and prosperity. It is not until later in his comic book life that Black Panther faces more of the obstacles that black Americans face. For example, in the *Jungle Action* series from 1972 to 1976, Black Panther takes on the Ku Klux Klan and speaks to the growing social and political relevance found in superhero comics. The confrontation with the Klan “signaled how the age of innocence in the American superhero comic was clearly a sentiment from the Silver Age of comic books” (Nama, 44). Even with his more socially relevant fodder, Black Panther is still separated from his black American counterparts when he returns to his kingdom in Africa. It is further in Black Panther's evolution as a character that he becomes more complex, dynamic, and a “racially aware figure navigating the highways, byways, and backstreets of black urban America like a cultural flâneur” (Nama, 51), making him more relatable to black Americans. When Black Panther is not allowed to take center stage as a hero, his power seems fake “and over time [his] felt more like a token appointment to appease the times, not a real addition to the comic book landscape” (Howard, 68). This perceived tokenism undercut any pride that readers may have had while reading Black

Panther. The next major black superhero is DC Comics' Black Lightning, the company's first black character to get his own title series.

Black Lightning is Jefferson Pierce, a former Olympic athlete and a teacher in one of Metropolis's toughest areas. Initially, Black Lightning was more of an extension of the blaxploitation era, with an afro wig as part of his original costume. Part of what makes Black Lightning unique is that he resides in the same city as Superman, but chooses to fight the "rampant crime, drugs, and delinquency that threaten to take over his neighborhood" (Nama, 25) that Superman does not confront. Black Lightning can't help but symbolize black self-determination, or be a reminder of racial tokenism, as he combats villains who symbolize white oppression. Situating Superman and Black Lightning in the same city illustrates the insider and outsider existence that many black Americans endure. While they are part of the larger city of Metropolis and are part of the collective citizenry that is saved by Superman, the black citizens of Metropolis have to depend on Black Lightning to save them from mundane forces that stand against them in their neighborhoods, like crime and drugs. It is Black Lightning's direct interaction with his peers that keeps him connected to his neighborhood and establishes his cultural and political relevance.

While both of these characters have since enjoyed more widespread success, they were both limited in their representations of blackness: Black Panther because he is African and Black Lightning because he only fights the villains of his neighborhood. Unlike their other super peers, these two characters fight a very finite range of villains that appear to be dictated by their blackness: Black Lightning fights criminals and drug dealers, primarily; and Black Panther battles those who threaten his kingdom and their way of life. Additionally, many early black superheroes "were often given a heavy-handed stigma that immediately marked them as the

‘racial’ character, especially with their names” (Howard, 68) as with Black Panther, Black Lightning, Black Goliath, Brother Voodoo, The Black Racer, Black Vulcan, and others. These characters were trapped by their race and left many black readers unsatisfied and unfulfilled. The landscape of comic books and graphic novels was open to more than just superheroes. Its extensive use of images makes it a strong medium for retelling historical events.

Drawing History

Maus by Art Spiegelman illustrated the inhuman behavior and suffering that is known as the Holocaust. Persopolis by Marjane Satrapi gave a first-hand account of the Islamic Revolution. Recounting history and retelling familiar stories for a new audience are characteristics of the graphic novel. The long form of graphic novels allows writers to explore more complex ideas and subject matter while utilizing the imagery that has made comic books notorious. Prior to reading Maus, Marjane Satrapi admitted that “the idea I had was that comics were for adolescents. But then you read Maus and realize comics are a just medium for expressing yourself and it was a revelation ... you see it’s possible to make that” (Cavna). Satrapi understands the expressive capabilities of graphic novels and comic books and believes the format allows stories to reach larger audiences. “Because of the images,” Satrapi said, “You see a picture and you understand perfectly, immediately, the basic thing that’s happening. It’s probably more accessible because we are in a culture of images now. People are used to seeing stories that way. They understand looking at pictures” (Bearman).

The Civil Rights Movement is a seminal period in American history that changed the nation’s trajectory and set the stage for future struggles for equal rights and battles against discrimination. The era has been recorded in various formats, including the comic book and

graphic novel. “Martin Luther King and The Montgomery Story” was produced by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and published in 1957. The 16-page comic book focused on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the organization of bus boycotts in the American South. “It was about the way of love. We were beaten and arrested ... and that comic book inspired me to make trouble. But it was the good kind of trouble” Rep. John Lewis said of the comic book (Cavna). “The Montgomery Story” uses elementary language and images to depict some of the most tumultuous times in our history, but the essence of those advocating for change is captured. Unbeknownst to anyone at the time, “Martin Luther King and The Montgomery Story” was the catalyst for one of our nation’s most visible advocates for civil rights, Rep. John Lewis.

March: Book 1 recounts Rep. Lewis’s childhood and how he became involved in the Civil Rights Movement. One of Rep. Lewis’s staffers, Andrew Aydin, admired the dedication and self-sacrifice his representative had shown and wanted to help him share his story with a new generation. When Aydin talked to others about telling Rep. Lewis’s story via a graphic novel, people laughed, but Rep. Lewis was quick to come to Aydin’s defense. “And I just said, ‘you shouldn’t laugh. At another time in another period there was a comic book called The Montgomery Story – Martin Luther King Jr. and The Montgomery Story – that inspired me,” Rep. Lewis said to naysayers, even though he still had his doubts about a graphic novel recounting his story (Dirks). During his early discussions with Aydin about a graphic novel depicting his life, Rep. Lewis said, “I do remember reading “The Montgomery Story” comic book, and I said ‘yes, if you (Andrew Aydin) would do it with me.’ And it’s been a labor of love” (Dirks). It was his own personal testimonial to the format and its potential that removed Rep. Lewis’s doubts. “It’s another way for somebody to understand what it was like and what we tried to do. And I want young children to *feel* it. Almost *taste* it. To make it real ... It’s not

just the words but the action and the drama and the movement that bring it alive” (Cavna). Aydin and Nate Powell, the illustrator for March, came to this project well equipped, professionally and socially, to make sure that Rep. Lewis’s story was as authentic and candid as the representative wanted. Aydin said that he believes “comic books can change the world. I believe that. We’ve seen it happen” (Blake) and went into this project understanding the impact of the format. He also saw March as a campaign to help spread the message of non-violence to a new generation. Award winning artist Nate Powell was challenged with balancing accuracy and expression. Powell’s experience with comic books and graphic novels proved vital. In retelling Rep. Lewis’s story of oppression and struggle, Powell pulled from his exposure to Chris Claremont’s work with Marvel’s *X-Men*, explaining that it “radically shaped my perception of oppression. It made me much more aware of racism, [and also] sexism and homophobia and xenophobia for the first time, all through the guise of these superhero narratives” (Blake). As he worked on the project, Powell showed some completed panels to Rep. Lewis, who said, “it almost made me cry. It was so real, it was so real. It was like reliving my childhood all over again” (Blake).

It’s All in the Story

The ability of comic books and graphic novels to use images to tell stories brings together the best of both worlds, images and the written word. This format has images that can lure in younger readers, while also having text and dialogue that is captivating for adults. Because of their format, graphic novels and comic books are in the natural progression from traditional novels to motion pictures, and demonstrate the graphic nature of storytelling. As Marjane Satrapi explained, with images, the audience is given everything they need to understand the story, but enough open space is left, through the use of gutters and image progression, to allow

the audience to use their imagination to create a cohesive story, much like reading a traditional novel. Even though more is given in comic book and graphic novel formats, in terms of images and actions, readers still have to utilize their imaginations to bring the stories to life and get the most from the text. A disadvantage of this more illustrative format is that readers are limited as to how much of their imagination they can use. A traditional novel allows readers to create their own vision of described events, situations, and environments, while a comic book or graphic novel dictates this vision to readers.

Graphic novels and comic books allow readers to use their imaginations differently, to fill in gaps left by gutters between panels and to integrate themselves into the visual world provided by illustrators and colorists. Traditional books are dependent on reader imagination in a much different way. They ask readers to trust that the author will provide enough description of the elements of a story for readers to properly recreate them, without being bogged down by too many details. In this regard, readers are asked to use their imaginations to create and integrate themselves into the story. However, this dual act on behalf of traditional novel readers does not mean that comics and graphic novels do not pull their readers into stories just as deeply. The action in some graphic novels and comic books makes them very similar to action films and keeps readers on the edge of their seats.

Beyond the use of images, the three formats are more similar than they are different. Each allows readers to progress at their own pace to digest the information. Readers are required to employ their imaginations to pull the stories together and create proper pacing. All three formats provide back story, flashbacks, foreshadowing, and other literary devices to create a compelling storytelling experience. As an avid reader of traditional novels, graphic novels, and comic books, I can attest that the similarities of all three formats outweigh their differences. I

can also attest that all three formats contribute to literature as a whole, and should be given the same level of respect, analysis, study, and academic discourse. All of the formats being discussed are dependent on one thing, great storytelling. A great story tells itself and lends itself to any format.

Comic books and graphic novels are not new to the literary scene. As they've matured comic books and graphic novels have been used to breathe new life into history and storytelling. African-Americans were initially treated as outsiders in these graphic media, much like there were in traditional literature. Early comics and graphic novel storytellers may not have been racist, but they were lazy in their depictions of African-Americans, depending on narrow stereotypes to create characters. Companies like Milestone Media balanced authentic ethnic characters who were true to the superhero genre with being true to their characters' ethnic identities. Borrowing from the success of the Blaxploitation era, characters like Black Panther and Black Lightning challenged the characterization of black heroes while demonstrating the impact and popularity of culturally relevant heroes.

Chapter 2

Depictions of the Black Man

Depictions of the black male are as varied as the black man. He is as influenced by his decisions as he is by his environment and the people in his daily life. Representations of the black man range from shallow stereotypical caricatures to dynamic, authentic reflections. In *Black Males, Social Imagery, and the Disruption of Pathological Identities: Implications for Research and Teaching*, Tyrone C. Howard, Terry K. Flenbaugh and Clarence L. Terry, Sr. explain that representations dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries cast the black man as “physically strong, mentally inept, hyper-sexed brutes who were well suited for slavery, and deemed to be subhuman” (89). These portrayals led to the minstrel characters like Sambo before the black man’s image evolved to being untrustworthy and unworthy of equal treatment, warranting their marginalized status. These unsavory characters included pimps, thugs, hustlers and other law-breaking slicksters. The depictions kept up with the times, maintained their negative implications and “contributed to the development of an image that perpetuates widespread disdain for Black men” (89). Howard, Flenbaugh and Terry discuss G.C. Loury’s “racial stigma” and its role in the development of a black man’s sense of self. Loury explained that outsider perspectives, “which are shaped by historical and contemporary circumstances and realities, are the equivalent to a social marker” that’s difficult to alter. Because the social marker cannot be readily transformed, “the individual has to be increasingly conscious of how that perspective influences behavior” (93). Even as black men work to counteract the way they are portrayed in the media, they are always cognizant of how others perceive them because of century old social markers. The social markers also play a role in how the black man defines himself: he is working to counteract negative imagery or embody it. The characters in *March: Book One*, “The Ethics of Jim Crow,” “Fire and Cloud,” and Icon: exist in a world where these

images dominate the social landscape. It is amid these unjust expectations that the characters evolve into heroes, villains, and anti-heroes.

In “The Positive Psychology of Superheroes,” Christopher Peterson and Nansook Park appraise comic books in terms of psychology. The duo suggests that “superheroes allow us to see ourselves in stark and entertaining ways and to dream of what we might be” (6). Dreaming of what might be has dictated the reality of many African-Americans. Surviving slavery to later endure the sanctioned injustice and discrimination of Jim Crow, many black Americans were left dreaming of a brighter future. In this social context, it’s easy to see why superheroes would appeal to the African-American community, yet difficult to explain the lack of viable black superheroes. Caped crusaders have an over-riding mission to serve and protect the world and possess character strengths “to such a degree that we can describe them as paragons of one virtue or another” (9). These characteristics can be seen in our traditional literature, comic book and graphic novels. Rep. John Lewis set out to save the world when he joined the fight for civil rights and is known for his courage. Wright worked to save the world with his writings that detailed the horrors of the black American experience and can be characterized by his cunning. Rev. Taylor worked on behalf of his town and is known for being a diplomat. None of these men have super strength or can fly, but they are everyday heroes. Who cares if Superman saves the world if you don’t know where your next meal is coming from or if you’ll survive a traffic stop? In their essay “Is There A Superhero In All of Us,” Peter A. Hancock and Gabriella M. Hancock reinforce this idea. They say that our literature has included superheroes for those “individuals who feel somewhat powerless and weak in the face of the larger natural and social forces that dictate their lives.” While all Americans confront social frustrations, ethnic-Americans are forced to confront race-based frustrations that are beyond their control. It is these

frustrations that make the superhero appealing. It is the world of the superhero that “represents our liberation from these oppressive forces” (114).

Similar to *Maus*, these three selections utilize historical stereotypes to tell compelling stories. Flat characters are given dimensions they often lack, and readers are given insight into their logic. Aspects of the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) are illustrated by our characters, while comic and literary qualities are also present. Since we’re comparing graphic novels, comic books and traditional literature, let’s begin by drawing the setting.

It’s the mid-1900s in the United States. Slavery has ended and black Americans are working to firmly establish their place in a society that craves their contributions but detests their presence. Domestic terrorism against black Americans is commonplace, and in some cases legislated. Intimidation and discrimination are as routine as the rising sun, forcing blacks to choose between an ongoing battle for civil rights or a prostrated existence with an uncertain future. Black Americans live in a world much like Gotham City, where lawlessness reigned supreme before the arrival of Batman. From this backdrop, our three protagonists emerge: a young Rep. John Lewis, a young Richard Wright, and the Reverend Dan Taylor. Each character plays a key role and represents a different depiction of the black man. We’ll begin with our hero: Rep. John Lewis.

Rep. Lewis’s eyes are opened to the struggle for equal rights after reading a comic book, “Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story.” Rep. Lewis is a hero in training as he goes against parental advice to “stay out of trouble” and not “get in white people’s way” because “growing up in rural Alabama, my parents knew it could be **dangerous** to make any waves” (36). His parents chose to find a comfortable space and live their lives, like many residents of

Gotham City. Rep. Lewis exhibited early on his propensity to be part of the arsenal, acting on behalf of the people. He uses “racial stigma” to define his actions and himself as a budding Civil Rights leader. While Rep. Lewis could not escape the way the world viewed him, he controlled his response and the role he would play in ensuring equal rights for all black Americans.

The MMRI defines this use of race in defining one’s self-concept at a particular time as racial salience. Because of when and where he existed as a child and young adult, Rep. Lewis’s actions and forging of self are heavily influenced by his race. He does not, however, allow prevailing notions of black manhood dictate who he is. Rep. Lewis was an avid reader as a child and often skipped fieldwork for the comfort of a classroom or library. As he pursued his goals of working for equal rights, Rep. Lewis actively countered extant depictions of black men and provided an example of the depth of character black men could represent.

While heroes are widely celebrated, often less popular but equally as effective in a narrative, is the anti-hero. The anti-hero is the character who is neither good nor bad exclusively, but walks on whichever side of the line best serves his or her interests. In one story the anti-hero has teamed up with the superheroes, but in another is the member of a villainous super team. This character goes where the wind blows and only answers to him or herself. Of our literary examples, Richard Wright is the anti-hero in his biographical piece, “The Ethics of Jim Crow.”

Wright does what he has to do to survive and does not go out of his way to save others. Wright explains, “Negroes who had lived in the South know the dread of being caught alone upon the streets in white neighborhoods after the sun had set” (10). Living in his own Gotham, Wright “learned to lie, to steal, to dissemble” (13) to survive. Unable to check books out from

the library in his own name, Wright convinces a co-worker to let him check out books in his name. In another incident Wright boards an elevator wearing his hat and arms full of packages. He pretends the cargo is falling to get around issuing an unwelcomed show of gratitude to a white man who removed his hat for him. Wright witnessed the brutality of white people and, like Brer Rabbit, he found clever ways to keep interactions, and chances for altercations, to a minimum. Wright isn't a thug, a minstrel character or an over-sexed brute, a fact reinforced by his actions. In many instances, Wright behaves like a child in the presence of white people. Frantz Fanon described the perpetual childhood of black men interacting with white people in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon said white people talk to blacks with the "simpering, murmuring, fussing and coddling" often reserved for a child. Treating black people in such a manner, Fanon explains, is insulting. That behavior "this offhand manner; this casualness; and the ease with which they classify him, imprison him at an uncivilized and primitive level" (15) implies that the black person is not capable of higher thought or respect. Wright battled this assertion by whites when he worked as a bellboy at a hotel and a porter for a clothing store.

The integrity of his manhood is tested, however, and its parameters stretched to survive. Wright recounts walking home with a young maid one night when a white police officer slaps her on the buttocks. When Wright turns around in amazement at the brazen action, the officer asks, "nigger, don't yuh like it" (13). His manhood has to include accepting such indignities with unrivaled heartiness just to survive. Wright exhibits the centrality dimension of the MMRI. Racial centrality is the extent a person normatively defines him or herself with regards to race. Wright's identity as black supersedes his identity as a man routinely. Actions that reflect his sexuality or gender are overwritten by his race, as in the example of walking home with the young maid. His manhood takes a backseat to his blackness.

In “Fire and Cloud” Rev. Taylor does what he believes is necessary to advocate for his congregation and the people of his town. Rev. Taylor has relationships with both the “good guys” and “bad guys,” and works to keep the peace while meeting the needs on both sides. In the short story, Rev. Taylor works to get food for his town during the Great Depression. As his peers starve and beg for food, the whites who run the town say they have no food to share. Widespread hunger leads to a Communist-led protest with Rev. Taylor leading the pack. In *Richard Wright’s Freedom: The Existentialism of Uncle Tom’s Children*, James R. Jaye discusses how the tale is essentially a struggle between will and determinism. The reverend’s manhood is called into question when he insists on a sign from God before taking any action or lending his name to a protest. Communist organizer Hadley tells the reverend that the white leaders want him to feel like any protest is an act of war. “What kind of leaders are black people to have if the white folks pick them and tell them what to do” (176) Hadley asks Rev. Taylor. The pastor receives similar “encouragement” from the town’s white leaders. During a meeting with the police chief, mayor, and Mr. Lowe, the pastor concedes that “whutyuh white folks say is right. N Ah ergrees wid yuh. But Ah ain foolin wid nobody thas tryin t stir up race hate; naw, suh! Ah aun never done nothing like tha n Ah never will” (182-83). Rev. Taylor has a change of heart after he is kidnapped and beaten the night before the protest. He realizes that he had spent his life on his knees, “a-begging n a-pleadin wid the white folks. N all they gimme wuz crumbs! All they did wuz kick me! N then they come wida gun n ast me t give mah own soul” (209). Jaye said that from this point, Rev. Taylor reconciles his will with his obedience to God and fearlessly leads the people in protest (218).

Rev. Taylor uses his own moral compass to do what is best for his followers. He realizes that working with those who possess questionable morals is ultimately an exercise in futility,

even if there appear to be short-term results. In “Fire and Cloud,” the MMRI’s racial regard is in play. Racial regard is the extent to which a person feels positively or negatively about his or her own race. This dimension is broken down into public and private regard. Rev. Taylor illustrates private regard when he talks about how he sees his people suffering and his role in their lives. The white officials and Communist leader Hadley exhibit public regard, how others view African-Americans. Hadley sees the pastor as the leader the people need, if only he will step up to the mantle. The white officials see Rev. Taylor in the same way but try to convince him that it’s in the pastor and the town’s black people’s best interest to sit quietly as they’ve always done and wait. Throughout the story, readers follow Rev. Taylor as he works to define his identity in regards to the suffering of his people. Rev. Taylor also struggles to define himself as a man of God outside of the church. As the pastor lies on his bed, beaten and battered after his kidnapping, he laments to his son that it “seems like Gawds done lef me! Ahd die fer mah people ef Ah only knowed how ...” (Wright, 208). He then asks, “how come Ah can’t never do nothing? All mah life Ah done tried n cant do nothing! *Nothin*” (Wright, 209).

Frantz Fanon discusses black men like Rev. Taylor who are told who they are and not allowed to define themselves. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Mr. Fanon states that “it is easy to understand why the first reaction of the black man is to say *no* to those who endeavor to define him” (19) like the pastor did with Hadley. Rev. Taylor is beginning to question the identities being assigned to him in favor of an image he crafts. “It is understandable that the black man’s first action is a reaction, and since he is assessed with regard to his degree of assimilation” (19) Rev. Taylor responds the way he does to the white town officials. Rev. Taylor exhibits early signs of awakening from colonization. The reverend routinely concedes and offers eager agreement to the white town officials to show that he is worthy of their respect because he is

willing to assimilate. For years, Rev. Taylor redesigns his manhood to fit within ever-changing parameters. His kidnapping and beating is the turning point that opens the pastor's eyes to the reality that his assimilation is not aiding his people.

Lastly, is Icon. Also known as Augustus Freeman. Also known as Arnus of Terminus. A man with multiple identities. As one of his names suggest, Icon was a free man. He came to earth as an adult who adopted an identity without knowing its social baggage. To an extent, he was like many black people: without roots. This intergalactic superhero is several black men rolled into one: a buck, a black conservative, a wise and magical black person, and part of W.E.B. DuBois's Talented Tenth.

One look at the image of Icon and there is no denying that he embodies the Buck stereotype, a tall, muscular build that immediately commands attention and in some, inspires fear. Icon is a superhero and in traditional comic book fashion, he must look the part. Rarely, if ever, is the male superhero anything less than the perfect specimen of agility, strength, and power. While Milestone Media worked to dismantle stereotypes and deliver dynamic characters, it had to abide by some inalienable rules. The image of the black male as a buck speaks to his physicality as much as to the fear other's have of it. Icon does not use his size to scare others, but as a weapon for justice and peace. When entangled in violent encounters, Icon employs diplomacy before force, making his physique like a sheathed sword that's only used when absolutely necessary. Creating the hero in such a fashion implies that just because a black man looks intimidating does not mean that he intends to be intimidating. His mere existence should not warrant baseless fear and efforts to corral him.

As the relationship between Augustus and Raquel develops, he tells her that he is a believer in Booker T. Washington's philosophy that people should pull themselves up by their bootstraps and not make excuses for their positions in life. In contemporary times, Augustus is a black conservative. Categorized with the likes of Dr. Ben Carson and Herman Cain, Augustus believes in self-help before handouts. Ray L. Waters extrapolates on the rise of the black conservative in "The African-American Conservative in Neo-Politics." American social programs like the war on drugs and Reaganomics had unforeseen consequences, Waters explains, including the rise of the black middle and under classes. Waters explains that "as some blacks took full advantage of the gains attributable to the civil rights movement and subsequent legislation, consequently entering the middle-class, poverty and unemployment among blacks actually grew during the late 1970s and early 1980s" (164). Augustus lived through these programs and their consequences. Having arrived on earth during slavery, he survived the harsh institution of forced labor based on nationality, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow. In his eyes, anyone who does not advance can only blame him or herself.

When Augustus confronts Raquel and her friends for breaking into his home, he instructs the teens to "comport yourselves like citizens, not common thugs" (McDuffie AHW 21), demonstrating the fourth dimension of the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity, ideology. The ideology dimension of the MMRI is made up of an individual's beliefs, opinions and attitudes with respect to the way he or she feels members of the race should act. Augustus believes the teens should carry themselves in a more respectable manner. He does not imply a nationalist or oppressed minority ideology, but rather more of an assimilationist ideology. Augustus looks more at the similarities between blacks and the rest of society instead of differences. He also employs a humanist ideology, emphasizing the similarities between all

humans. He also tells them to earn money to buy the things they can't afford and that their behavior "reflects poorly on our people" as well as themselves. But it was Augustus's actions prior to confronting them - deflecting bullets, crumbling a gun like used paper, and flying - that influence Raquel the most. This representation of a black man opens Raquel's eyes to the possibility of a life beyond the confines of poverty and Paris Island.

While the other teens went through the house to steal expensive electronics and money, Raquel stood in awe of the library and the knowledge it represents. Raquel's inner monologue reflects the impact of seeing Augustus fly. She thinks to herself, "When you can fly, there's no burden you can't bear. When you can fly ... you can do anything" (McDuffie AHW, 20). Raquel admits to Augustus that "seeing him opened up a whole new world of possibilities for me ... how I thought he could help lots of people, if only they could see what he can do" (23). Augustus adheres to his conservative views that "people don't need any example, child. If you aren't doing well, you haven't tried hard enough". He continues, noting that instead of looking for examples of a better life, people should pull themselves up by their bootstraps and make it happen. It's not until Augustus travels to Paris Island, where Raquel lives, that he begins to question his conservative views. Freeman admits that he "pretended that those who suffer under such conditions must have brought them upon themselves" (26), and while they lived without hope, he lived a lie.

The next scenes appear to be ripped straight from headlines. Augustus Freeman and Raquel Irvin transform into the superheroes, Icon and Rocket, and venture downtown to assist with a hostage situation at city hall. Icon lends assistance to the lead officer and is met with "well you can help me most by putting your hands above your head, **PRONTO**" (29). The lead officer is white. Police officers in full riot gear with weapons drawn surround the pair. Only the

area around the officers' eyes are visible. The standoff is eerily reminiscent of news broadcast coverage in Ferguson, Missouri, Baltimore Maryland, and Compton, California, where the public and law enforcement clashed violently after citizens die following an encounter with police.

Icon and Rocket's encounter with the Dakota City PD is in the issue called "Police Action," first published in 1993. In 1991, Rodney King was beaten by several Los Angeles Police Department officers during a traffic stop. A year later, riots broke out in response to the acquittal of the officers involved. The scripted encounter between our two heroes and police did not occur in a vacuum. There are many who believe complying with police requests is the best way to avoid confrontation. Icon complies while Rocket says, "I ain't no criminal. And I ain't complying with squat" (35). When Rocket does not comply but does present herself as an imminent threat, the lead officer backhand slaps her. Luckily, the inertia belt she is wearing absorbs the force of the attack. This confrontation has parallels to the case of Sandra Bland, who during a traffic stop for failing to signal does not prostrate herself to the officer. Cell phone footage from the incident shows Ms. Bland on the ground with her hands behind her back and the officer's knee holding her in place. If only Ms. Bland were wearing an inertia belt.

While Rocket stands her ground with an officer, Icon continues to hold his hands behind his head, hoping for a quiet resolution based on compliance. When the officers attack Rocket, they also attack Icon, hitting him in the back of the head with the butt of a rifle. Here, readers are shown that the difference between compliance and non-compliance is a delayed attack. Neither hero was safe once the officers categorized them as threats. Interestingly enough, Icon does not come to Rocket's aid when she is attacked by the officer. He continues to comply. Icon's willingness to let his female sidekick fend for herself in the face of danger reinforces his belief in the idea of people taking care of themselves and that Rocket was in the situation

because of her own doing. We have to remember that Icon's blackness is subjective. He chooses to be black. He also chooses to believe that his race does not impact situations.

For Icon, the MMRI's racial salience component (the extent one's race is relevant to his or her self-concept in a particular moment or situation) is at work. Icon does not believe his race is relevant to his situation, even though it is. Additionally, the model's racial centrality component (extent to which a person normatively defined him or herself with regard to race) is absent. Icon does not define himself by his race, despite having witnessed the consequences of being black in America.

As the encounter with the Dakota City PD continues, there is an image of Rocket with a gun's scope on her forehead as she says, "we came here to help you" (A Hero's Welcome 43). This imagery parallels recent protests in Baltimore where residents involved in the protests were targets for tear gas and gunfire as they worked to soothe agitated crowds. Icon allows himself to be arrested by the police. Like Freddie Gray, he is flanked by officers as he is handcuffed and put into the back of a police van for transport. Prostrating himself to the level of a black, American man, Icon learns the hardships that accompany race. As the situations change and the level of information fluctuates, Icon is given insight into the people he so readily condemned to their own complacent fate.

Everyday heroes serve as examples for their peers through heroic actions, their use of intellect over physical conflict, and their conviction to do what's right even when it's not popular. Heroism comes in many forms. Various media have explored what it means to others to be a black man, and in so doing, positioned them as relatable, unlikely heroes.

Chapter 3

Generational Analysis: Transformation, Growth and Development

Part of the appeal of some comic book heroes and villains is knowing that they were once regular people. Through various trials, obstacles, losses and gains, they were transformed into the characters we've grown to love and hate. The transformations are as much psychological as they are physical, and can sometimes take place over generations. The growth and development of characters is vital to their futures. One-dimensional characters who aren't impacted by events in their lives aren't as successful as their more dynamic counterparts. This is especially true for comic book and graphic novel formats. In comic books, characters engage in longer stories that depend on their continual involvement and growth to propel the story forward and maintain audience interest. The same is true for graphic novels and their dependence on telling a longer, more complex story, almost dictating character growth and development over time. We will perform a comparative generational analysis focusing on the growth and development of Grange and Brownfield Copeland in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and Augustus Freeman/Icon and Raquel Ervin/Rocket *Icon: Mothership Connection* and *Icon: A Hero's Welcome*.

Superheroes and villains shed one identity for another like mythological, muscle-bound butterflies. Peter A. Hancock and Gabriella M. Hancock believe that the world of superheroes represents liberation from day-to-day frustrations. Part of that liberation includes keeping super powers under wraps and the creation of the infamous alter ego. In "Is There A Superhero In All of Us" the Hancocks suggest that alter egos are shy or mild-mannered because they mirror society. They pull from Bill in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill 2* who explains that "Clark Kent is how Superman views us. And what are the characteristics of Clark Kent? He's weak.... He's unsure of himself... He's a coward. Clark Kent is Superman's critique on the whole human

race” (114). The second identity that heroes create is born out of necessity and is a direct representation of what they encounter. This type of double consciousness is discussed by W.E.B DuBois.

The physical and psychological transformations of heroes and villains are similar to those of our traditional literary characters - Grange and Brownfield Copeland. Along with comic book superhero Augustus Freeman, they all exhibit the generational impact of trauma. We'll begin with the first generation: Grange Copeland and Augustus Freeman.

Grange Copeland does not realize the far-reaching effects of his actions and inactions until his monster leaves a path of destruction. In his first life, Grange had a strained relationship with his son, Brownfield. Alice Walker paints a dark picture of Grange the father in his first incarnation. Walker explains that when Brownfield was a child working in the cotton fields with his father that Grange “never looked at him or acknowledged him in any way, except to lift his sack of cotton to the back of the truck when it arrived” (8). When Grange drank, he told Brownfield “I ought to throw you down the goddamn well” (11). Grange only spoke to his son when company came to visit. Grange viewed his son as a field hand and didn't show any affection or affirmation to the young Brownfield. Grange limited his approval of Brownfield to Brownfield's productivity. This behavior planted the seeds for a monster. Also part of this generation is the first life of Augustus Freeman. Augustus is new to Earth. To adapt, he takes the form of the first person he encounters, a slave woman named Miriam. Augustus endures the hardships of slavery, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement without using his super strength or flight to make his life easier. It is this upbringing and series of experiences that turn Augustus into a self-made man who believes that those who do not find socioeconomic success have not because of their own inaction. This logic turns him into a man who aligns himself with

those like him and does not feel any responsibility for those not seeking the services of his law firm. Augustus tells Raquel that “people don’t need any example, child. If you aren’t doing well, you haven’t tried hard enough. If you want a better life, don’t look for examples, do what I did: pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” (A Hero’s Welcome 24). Instead of Augustus being like Grange and planting a seed with Raquel, Raquel plants a seed with him: “It’s a lot easier to pull yourself up by your bootstraps, Mr. Man ... if you already know how to fly” (A Hero’s Welcome 24) she says to the lawyer.

Brownfield was never meant to grow, as indicated by his name. He started out the son of a poor sharecropper and ended up being a poor sharecropper himself. Brownfield learned what it meant to be a man from his father who was physically present, but mentally absent. Walker recalls Grange coming home drunk on Saturday nights “threatening to kill his wife and Brownfield, stumbling and shooting off his shotgun” (14). Brownfield watched his father and his friends take “pride only in their own bigness” and exhibit “the same disregard for smallness” (9). Conversely, Brownfield’s mother was submissive to Grange while he was jealous of her speaking to other men. When his father wasn’t drunk and ignoring Brownfield, he was “devoid of any emotion” (15). This combustible combination germinates inside Brownfield. Despite his hopeless home life, Brownfield dreams of a bright future. He meets and falls in love with a young, beautiful schoolteacher named Mem. The two are wed and begin their life together as sharecroppers. It was “three years later when he was working the same farm and in debt up to his hatbrim” (66) that Brownfield reminded himself of why he loved his wife despite their meager lives. He began to drink excessively, abuse Mem, and cheat on his wife with Josie, the woman who owned the Dew Drop Inn. As “his indebtedness depressed him,” “he thought of suicide.” As he “prayed for help,” Brownfield accused Mem of being unfaithful, “of being used

by white men, his oppressors” (72) and the monster in him emerged. Brownfield was “determined at times to treat her like a nigger and a whore, which he knew she was not.” The man who once worshipped his wife and adored her for loving him despite his shortcomings began to drag her down. Her knowledge “reflected badly on a husband who could scarcely read and write,” and his rage at himself and his life “made him beat her for an imaginary attraction she aroused in other men, crackers, although she was no party to any of it” (73). As Mem continued to submit to her husband’s monstrous transformation, Brownfield saw her as a snare and pitfall and set out to destroy her. Mem’s destruction at Brownfield’s hands was a process. He criticized her speech, embarrassed her in front of company, burned her books and beat her mercilessly. Brownfield “changed her to something he did not want, could not want, and that made it easier for him to treat her in the way he felt she deserved” (76).

Mem’s transformation was dramatic, as Walker explains it. Mem grew gaunt. Her “wonderful breasts dried up and shrank; her hair fell out” and she became a shell of her previous self. Moving her three daughters from one shack to another, Mem’s “mildness became stupor; then her stupor became horror, desolation, and, at last, hatred” (78) for her husband. Mem was the battleground for all of her husband’s misdirected rage, despair and hatred. If Brownfield is the Hulk, Mem is Mesa Verde, New Mexico, ground zero when the Hulk was unleashed.

Before he was the Incredible Hulk, Bruce Banner lived through a childhood that was as traumatic as Brownfield’s. Bruce grew up in an abusive home where he and his mother were subjected to his father’s violent outbursts. Brian, Bruce’s father, routinely called him a monster and terrorized him. Unable to cope, Bruce developed a multiple personality disorder, repressing growing negative emotions. Brian murdered Bruce’s mother in a fit of rage and Bruce was sent to live with relatives. When Bruce was exposed to gamma radiation, it unlocked the negative

emotions he had suppressed, contributing to his monstrous Hulk persona. Brownfield's "gamma bomb" was Mem's undying drive to provide for her family. When Mem told Brownfield she and the girls were not moving into another shack, he beat her into submission. When Mem found a nice home for the family and a job for her husband, Brownfield sabotaged it, forcing the family back to a sharecropping lifestyle. Brownfield, like the Hulk, "could not see beyond his emotion" (135).

In her essay "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory," Michelle Balaev argues that identity is formed by "the intergenerational transmission of trauma" (149). Balaev defines a trauma novel as a fictitious work "that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels." A defining feature of the trauma novel is "the transformation of the self ignited by an external, often terrifying experience" (150), a transformation that is seen in both Bruce and Brownfield. Trauma theory in literature suggests that trauma is "only known through repetitive flashbacks that literally re-enact the event because the mind cannot represent it otherwise" (151). Bruce's multiple personalities stem from memories of his violent father. Brownfield's abuse of his wife, heavy alcohol consumption, philandering ways, and neglect and abuse of his children stem from memories of his own childhood. The role of memories in identity formation is also seen in Brownfield and Mem's oldest daughter, Daphne. Daphne would tell her sisters how their father used to be a loving, doting father who sang and danced for his daughter and brought her candy. Daphne could recall the better days with her father and witnessed his decline. The sisters' favorite game was to remember Brownfield as Daphne had known him. Daphne's memories became theirs but "the Brownfield they pretended to remember had no relation to the one they knew" (146).

Daphne and Ornette continue on the seemingly dead end path predestined for the Copeland women. Ornette and Daphne are taken North by Mem's father after their mother's murder. The girls are separated from their father, but years of his physical and verbal abuse have planted poisonous seeds in the girls that germinate as they mature. Daphne witnessed years of Brownfield beating Mem and had become jumpy and nervous as a result. "Because she was so jumpy Brownfield teased her and called her names," Walker explains. Brownfield calls his oldest daughter stupid and crazy, and curses at her regularly. He goes as far as to call her "Daffy" and "pinched her sides until they bruised" (147). Daphne was angry because of the way her father treated her mother, and did what she could to lighten her mother's workload. Daphne even becomes a surrogate mother for her sisters, doing what she can to protect them when Mem is away. Ornette is nothing like her older sister. Described as jolly, boisterous, sassy, and full of rebellion, Ornette was the child Brownfield liked the least. "He thought she would grow up to be a plump, easy-going tramp and was telling her so constantly by the time she was eight" (148). Unlike Daphne, Ornette didn't respect Mem. Ornette "thought her a hag and of little account," and that she "had married beneath her" social standing (148). Ornette is like her father in her dislike of her mother. Brownfield saw his mother, Margaret, as a weak woman who was destroyed by Grange, just like Ornette saw Mem annihilated by Brownfield. Margaret went to clubs and partied with Grange until she realized she could not keep up with her husband. After an affair resulted in the birth of an illegitimate child named Star, Grange leaves for a new life in New York City. By the fourth week, "she and her poisoned baby went out into the dark of the clearing and in the morning Brownfield found them there" (26). The Copeland family is cursed to a barren existence. By the time Daphne and Ornette are young women, the seeds planted by their father have firmly taken root. Brownfield tells Ruth that "Daphne's in a crazy house up

North,” and that “Ornette’s *a–a lady of pleasure*” (276). With the exception of Ruth, another generation of Copeland women has withered away.

Balaev refers to Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience* where Caruth discusses traumatic events in terms of infectious pathogens that “wiggle into the mind, take a seat, and cause harm” (151). She continues that trauma is not isolated to an individual but contagious. Contagion theory has critics analyzing traumatic experiences as “transhistorically passed across generational gaps” (152). The trauma experienced by Brownfield as a child is not limited to his childhood. It impacts his life, and later, his children, wife, and everyone he interacts with. All of his interpersonal relationships are built on his traumatic childhood. The same is true for Bruce Banner.

The theory of intergenerational trauma takes race into account when looking at the formation of identity. This theory is especially useful when examining Brownfield. The theory’s use of race as a component brings the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity’s racial regard and centrality components to mind. The theory of intergenerational trauma suggests that identity is “organized around a notion of the intergenerational sharing of loss and suffering because the actual event is transmitted to descendants of the same racial, ethnic, religious or gender group” (153). The destitution that came with sharecropping was not unique to black Americans, but the racial discrimination, lack of socioeconomic mobility, and demeaning nature of sharecropping were unique to the African-American sharecropper. Brownfield saw this with his father and he endured the same existence. The intergenerational trauma theory is consistent with aspects of the MMRI in explaining the impact and reach of trauma.

The MMRI's centrality component involves the extent to which a person normally defines him or herself with regard to race. Brownfield's lack of education and economic instability can be directly linked to his race, and those two areas of his life were prominent in his definition of self. Brownfield went from defining himself despite his surroundings to defining himself by his surroundings. When he felt that Mem's education reflected badly on him, he became a villain and took it from her.

The MMRI's concept of racial regard involves a person's affective and evaluative judgment of his or her race in terms of positive and negative impact as well as public and private perception. Brownfield believes that the life he lives is what he deserved. He internalized the negative regard for blacks and believed other blacks should have lives similar to his. These negative feelings about being black and the way in which Brownfield defined himself by his race are both based in intergenerational trauma. This trauma is even more evident when it comes to Brownfield and Mem's daughters, Daphne, Ornette, and Ruth. The children live in each of the rundown shacks their father drags them to. They endure the trauma of witnessing their father beating and murdering their mother, along with his daily verbal onslaught. He spoke to Ornette "with the language he would use on a whore. And the baby, Ruth, he never touched" (97).

In Bell Hooks' book *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem* the relationship between self-esteem and violence is explored in respect to the black community and can be used to examine Brownfield's maturation into a villain. Hooks suggests that traumatic violence contributes to feeble and shallow self-esteem, and that whether it's emotional violence stemming from abandonment or violence as a consequence of domination, the normalization of violence creates a foundation for "ongoing trauma reenactment" (21). Brownfield exhibits this idea clearly, as the trauma from his childhood translates into the trauma he recreates for his own

family. Brownfield's acceptance of violence to resolve self-imposed conflicts and maintain control of his family is his "endorsement of the very politics of domination that was at the heart of antiblack racial terrorism" (25), and it's what turned him into a shell of a man, like the father he knew.

Brownfield's excessive use of violence has another source. His rage and shame result in a rage addiction. Hooks looks to John Bradshaw's idea that raging can be used to create pseudo self-esteem, with the anger feeding the void in the individual. Brownfield exhibits this rage addiction when he belittles his wife in front of his friends and whenever Mem works to dig the family out of the poverty that threatens to consume them. Hooks said that "while black females may express anger more often in the family, it is black male rage that demolishes the family" (156), and Brownfield demonstrates this.

Even though he is a fictional character, Brownfield effectively demonstrates the short and long-term impact of violence and trauma on an individual's self-esteem, as well as the reasoning behind the behaviors. This character's metamorphosis is just one of many faces of the African-American identity.

Race is an inescapable aspect of people's identity. But what if people could choose their race? What if someone came to Earth and picked a racial identity oblivious to its social consequences and lived a life that didn't emphasize race? Terminus of Arnus does just that. When his ship crash lands on Earth during slavery, Arnus takes on an African-American identity with no information on what it means to be black. Arnus grows up as Augustus Freeman and leads a life where race is influential but not considered a barrier. Of course, during slavery, Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement, and the times in between, Augustus's race was

pivotal to his involvement. Prior to wearing the costumes and becoming Icon, Augustus is a great example of the MMRI's ideology dimension. Ideology is composed of a person's beliefs, opinions, and attitudes with respect to the way he or she feels people of their race should act. This dimension is further broken down into four philosophies (1) nationalist, (2) oppressed minority, (3) assimilation, and (4) humanist. Augustus explained that he adheres to Booker T. Washington's conservative politics and feels that other African-Americans should do more to improve their lots in life. He doesn't seek to show similarities in the plight of African-Americans and other groups of people (the oppressed minority philosophy), nor does Augustus stress the uniqueness of being black (the nationalist philosophy). He does see blacks as just as capable as any group in American society (the assimilationist philosophy) and does not emphasize his race. Augustus also emphasizes the similarities among all humans (the humanist philosophy), which is especially easy since he's an alien from another planet. Augustus doesn't "think in terms of race, gender, class, or other distinguishing characteristics" (Sellers 28), but he is concerned with larger issues facing humans. Augustus brings a unique perspective to our larger discussion on racial identity because, even though he adopted being black and endured the same social struggles, he does not view race as being as much of an obstacle as do many of his black peers. It is this thinking that identifies the first life of Augustus Freeman.

Our second generation for analysis embodies hope, redemption, and growth. It is composed of Icon and Ruth. Ruth is Grange's redemption for his failures with Brownfield. She also serves as her grandfather's hope for a brighter future. Icon grows from Augustus's evolution into a man who realizes there are people who need protecting. Icon also becomes a symbol of hope for the people of Dakota City. Examining Ruth and Icon side by side, we will see how similar they really are and how their impact of black identity develops.

Ruth moves in with her grandfather, Grange, and his wife, Josie, after her father kills her mother. Up until then, Ruth had lived with her parents and sisters, Ornette and Daphne, and had no recollection of her father before he became a monster. Ruth does, however, know her grandfather. After he moved back to Georgia from New York, he visited his son and his family. Alice Walker explains that “Grange felt guilty about his son’s condition and assuaged his guilt by giving food and money to Brownfield’s family” (92). Grange acknowledges his shortcomings as a father and tells his son “ever since I come back, there’s a lot I *done* I didn’t *agree* with. It was the times, I reckon. You could work so hard, for nothing” (93). Grange’s generosity did not assuage his son’s feelings of abandonment, but it did lay a foundation for his relationship with Ruth. The pair became inseparable. Ruth was not sure of her grandfather’s past, “but Grange’s crimes, she believed, were never aimed at anyone but himself, and his total triumph over his life’s failures was the joy in him that drew her to him” (180). Ruth knew that her grandfather gave of himself and she appreciated his passion for life. It was because of Grange that Ruth attended school regularly, had nice clothes, and did not have to live the life of uncertainty that came with her father. Ruth wanted to grow up and leave Georgia and travel. Grange encouraged her to learn as much as she could and he taught her everything he knew. Grange hinged his success as a man on Ruth’s ability to grow into an independent woman who could take care of herself. As Ruth grew into a teenager, she engaged Grange in conversation about current events. The conversations portray Ruth as a personification of innocent hope, Grange as the embodiment of bitter experience, and the dance between these two world views. The two watched protestors and the unfolding of the Civil Rights Movement on television. While Grange had little confidence that songs and marches could change the hearts of white people, Ruth said, “I think I believe like the students. Ain’t nothing wrong with *trying* to change crackers” (293). Grange

emphasized Ruth as hope after he killed Brownfield in the courtroom. When Ruth said they didn't stand a chance, Grange said, "I ain't but you do" (310). He led the police into the woods after him, giving his granddaughter a chance at a better life without the constant threat of her father. Ruth is her grandfather's lotus flower, blooming from a muddy legacy of violence, revenge, hopelessness and despair. Grange made sure Ruth had the opportunity to lead a productive life not riddled with debt, servitude, or guilt.

Michelle Balaev suggests that "the traumatized protagonist in fiction brings into awareness the specificity of individual trauma that is often connected to larger social factors and cultural values or ideologies" (155). In the Copeland family, hope is a flame that fights to survive. Racism and discrimination resulted in Brownfield being transformed into a monster with an insatiable hunger for hope. He destroyed his wife then set out to do the same to Ruth as revenge for how Grange treated him as a child and how white people treated him as an adult. Ruth is Grange's redemption and his hope for the Copeland family.

Like Grange Copeland, Augustus Freeman leads three lives. In Augustus's second life, he becomes Icon. Teenager Raquel Ervin is the catalyst for Augustus's transformation into the caped superhero. After learning of Mr. Freeman's powers, Raquel suggests the attorney become Icon: "it means like an example or an ideal" (*Mothership Connection* 24), for the people of Dakota City. Like Grange's life-changing experience in New York City, Raquel is Augustus's life-changing experience. When the costumed heroes lend their help with a hostage situation at the City Hall, Icon quickly finds out that not everyone accused of a crime is exclusively nefarious and not every hero is solely honorable.

Augustus's identity was not defined with race as a central component. The MMRI's racial centrality dimension looks at the extent a person normally defines him or herself with regard to race. This dimension is stable across situations and exhibited by Augustus and Icon. Initially, Icon is just Augustus in a costume. He has the same conservative beliefs and does not define himself by race. It is law enforcement that reminds Icon he is a physically imposing black man who can fly and has super strength. He is a threat.

Icon makes his way into City Hall to confront Kevin Franklin, a man who transforms into a lizard-like creature known as Payback. During a fight in the mayor's office, Payback says, "this is pointless. I'm here for a confession, not a fistfight" (MSC 62) and leaves. Kevin turns back into a human and explains that his transformation is because of tear gas the mayor had ordered officers to use on the people of Paris Island. "She wanted to prove she was tough on crime. So when she heard about the big bang she ordered the heaviest police strike force in the city's history" (MSC 71) to corral the people back under control. The tear gas, Kevin says, "that's what killed those kids, you know. Not the rioting. And those it didn't kill ... it turned into creatures like me" (MSC 72). Icon learns of the mayor's plot and convinces Kevin to turn himself in instead of fighting to justice his way. Icon is given the key to the city and completes his transformation into an ideal. He tells the cheering crowd that he's set a challenge for himself to be of service to mankind by "being a living example of what's possible. I intend to hold myself to a very high standard. I ask no less of you" (MSC 75). According to the MMRI, Icon is demonstrating the ideology dimension, more specifically a humanist ideology that emphasizes the similarities among all humans, regardless of race. Despite how others see him, Icon works to operate outside of the race he's assumed on earth. In one encounter, Icon learns that some

people, like Kevin Franklin, have good intentions, but the wrong methods. He also learns that everyone with a badge is not honorable.

The third and final generation for analysis is the end of Grange Copeland and the start of a new chapter for Raquel Ervin, and the defense of Earth by our superhero Icon on his home planet Terminus. This final analysis looks at characters whose lives and deaths bring closure to cycles of violence, and restore hope where despair had taken root.

The monster dies. Grange shoots Brownfield in court after he wins custody of Ruth. A showdown was inevitable between Grange and Brownfield. Grange had been preparing for the day that Ruth would be on her own. Grange made sure his granddaughter had a home of her own, an education, and life skills to help her survive – all things he was unable to give his son. In his final life, Grange completes his redemption through Ruth.

Brownfield's death gives birth to hope. With Brownfield out of the way, Ruth does not have to live in fear of her father possessing her. Unfortunately, she loses her grandfather in the process. Ruth is still part of a family legacy of trauma and violence. Grange did what he could to break Ruth out of the “post-traumatic culture” (152) she grew up in and give her the chance his son never had. Michelle Balaev explains that “different types of trauma produce different responses” (154). Ruth encounters her father on her way home from school, and even though she is gripped with fear, she questions his intentions, rewarding her and his treatment of her mother and sisters. Brownfield never questioned his father's treatment of him and his mother, despite its impact on him, but allowed it to become a prototype for his treatment of his family. Simply experiencing an abundant life with Grange exposed Ruth to a world larger than Baker County and larger than the despair her father had tried to entomb her in.

Ruth, as Balaev suggests, is the traumatized protagonist who “brings into awareness the specificity of individual trauma that is often connected to larger social factors and cultural values or ideologies” (155). Readers witness the emergence of a generation breaking free from violence and socioeconomic oppression through exposure, preparation and experience. Ruth’s relationship with Grange illustrates the larger social factors required to break out of the cycle of trauma, including economic stability and education.

Raquel Ervin understood the importance of education, so much so that even when she became pregnant at 15, she did not drop out of high school. Raquel’s mother had had her at a young age, and Raquel followed in her mother’s footsteps. She is one of three generations living in an apartment in the projects of Dakota City, but Raquel represents hope.

Augustus, the eternal black conservative, goes against the beliefs of his political party and suggests that Raquel have an abortion. He recollects his wife Estelle’s interspecies pregnancy and abortion, then tells Raquel “I cannot put myself in your place. I cannot tell you what to do. If you need the money, take it. It is a gift. Whatever you decided, I am your friend” (*A Hero’s Welcome* 167). Raquel is offended, slaps the glasses off of Augustus, and reveals to him that despite her fear she wants to keep her baby. She even tells him, “you’re the big rich conservative. You’re supposed to make me keep the baby” (167). Raquel names her son Amistad Augustus, in honor of her intergalactic friend and the slave ship. Her son’s name is meant to inspire hope. Looking at her newborn son, Raquel tells him “Amistad is a good name. As long as you remember it you’ll never forget that whatever the odds, you can always win out” (*Mothership Connection* 130). Amistad’s father, Noble, even lives up to his name and becomes a part of his son’s life.

In *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*, Bell Hooks talks about the role of education in the formation of self-esteem among black people. Hooks says that education is the practice of freedom, and Raquel demonstrates this belief. Raquel knows that the best way for her to become independent and able to provide for her son is education. Raquel's recognition of the impact of education aligns with Hooks' belief that black Americans had to develop basic skills of critical thinking. She said that "during the long period of racial apartheid black folk had to be critically vigilant to be always aware of how the system that was exploiting and oppressing them worked and as aware of what needed to be done to intervene in this system" (70). It is this vigilance that led to Rocket alerting Icon that the police would not welcome their assistance, and to her understanding of the systems in place that hampered minorities in Dakota City.

Icon works with Rocket to make Dakota City safer, but as soon as his ship is repaired, he heads for his home planet, Terminus. This is the third incarnation of the man known on earth as Augustus Freeman and Icon. On his home planet, he is known as Arnus. Arnus testifies about his time on another planet. Arnus now speaks on behalf of the same people he once struggled to understand. Reflecting on World War II, Arnus said many African-Americans participated in the war under the belief that their effort would "translate into a greater level of acceptance at home," particularly since the leader of the enemy forces stood on a platform of racial superiority. Arnus was disappointed with the renewed vigor and re-emergence of the caste system. "But those who opposed the system battled with equal vigor" (166) Arnus said, indicating that his hope had been renewed. Arnus said the passing of his wife, Estelle, allowed him to focus on his work and before he realized it "dozens of years had passed since I was personally confronted by racism of any consequence, even longer since I had mingled with black people of any kind" (175). This isolation separated Arnus from black Americans and allowed him to develop an identity that was

not race centered, despite the influence of race on who he once was. This result of Arnus's isolation can be described by the MMRI's centrality dimension, which refers to the extent a person normally defines him or herself with regard to race. This also led to Arnus's manifestation of the fourth dimension of the MMRI: ideology. Arnus's professional and social isolation led to his adoption of a humanist philosophy, emphasizing the similarities among all humans, unaware of the challenges that minorities face. During his testimony, Arnus admitted "I had forgotten, if not where I came from, at least what I had been through. If I thought about the condition of blacks at all, it was with a resigned disappointment" (176).

Raquel was the catalyst for Arnus's transformation. Raquel made Arnus wonder if he could be doing more and forced him to stop thinking and start feeling. During the funeral service for Buck Wild, the Mercenary Man, Icon speaks of the person chosen to take his place. Buck Wild was given extraordinary powers after subjecting himself to an experiment to shorten his prison time. The procedure affected his brain and left Buck Wild a walking Blaxploitation stereotype with a good heart. During his remarks, Icon suggests his hope for mankind. Icon said Buck Wild's intentions counted as much as his actions. Buck Wild's reality was like that of many others. Icon said Buck Wild "spent his life fighting for what is right, all the while struggling with questions of identity and public perception that we still do not have answers for." Icon recognized Buck Wild as a hero before the black community had heroes, and "were it not for him, we wouldn't be here today" (239). The loss of Buck Wild and Icon's comments can be interpreted as symbolic of the impact and end of the Blaxploitation era along with the rise of new black heroes and their acknowledgement of those who came before them. This eulogy illustrates Icon's growth from a man who was disconnected from his past to someone who publicly embraces a timeframe that is embarrassing to many.

Another aspect of Icon acknowledging the contributions of Buck Wild and opening up to Raquel is his acknowledgement of the unfair treatment of minorities. Hooks said that “if those black folks among us who are fortunate in that they rarely encounter racism or are rarely, if ever, the victims of unjust racist attack refuse to acknowledge that they are lucky and privileged, that they are unique, then they will not be able or willing to join the struggle to end racism” (77). Icon exhibits this. It is not until he sees proof of the tear gas claims made by Mr. Franklin that Icon begins to acknowledge the struggle of others, enabling him to lend assistance. Despite Raquel’s efforts to inform Icon, it’s not until the police turn their guns on them without provocation that Icon begins to believe the claims made by blacks that the police treat them unfairly. The writers of Icon handled this awakening gracefully. Icon does not transition immediately. It does take tangible proof to make the case, but once given evidence, Icon does what he believes to be fair and just. It is amid this changing landscape that Icon prepares to stay on earth a little while longer to help the citizens of Dakota City.

Just as it took Augustus generations to transform into the man willing to become a hero, the Copeland family needed generations for hope to successfully sprout to the surface. Ruth is the only chance for the Copeland family to redeem itself and grow past years of ineptitude. Beginning with Grange and Margaret Copeland, the family battles economic drought, and a flood of violence that results in famine for their offspring. The cycle of deprivation can only be broken by pruning the dead branches from the Copeland family tree. Grange’s growth coupled with Brownfield’s degeneracy equaled Ruth’s opportunity to grow against the familial grain, and blossom into a productive woman.

Chapter 4

Revolution and Violence

Despite non-violent movements, violence traditionally brings about the change that many people seek. Be it continued violence against groups of people or people acting out violently against what they perceive as an unjust system, violence has an undeniable role in creating change. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon examines the relationship between violence and change as it relates to the colonizer and colonized, and the means colonizers use to maintain control versus the means the colonized use to break free of colonial rule. The concepts that Fanon extrapolates can be seen among black and white Americans following the end of slavery and into the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras, both of which were, essentially, products of colonization. Fanon theorizes that decolonization is an encounter between “two congenitally antagonistic forces” that owe their singularity to the colonial situation, particularly that their first encounter was “colored by violence and their cohabitation-or rather the exploitation of the colonized by the colonizer-continued at the point of the bayonet and under cannon fire” (2). The forceful capture of Africans to work plantations in the Americas is the start of the colonial system that gives rise to future liberation movements and the widespread use of force to dismantle the system. Prior to dismantling the system of the colonizer, we must first understand how colonialism forces violence for independence.

According to Fanon, the colonizer’s sector is built to last, while that of the colonized is built to induce ravenous behavior. These differences between the two sectors cause the colonized to become envious and the colonizer to realize “they want to take our place” (5). Along with creating an envious environment, the colonizers limit the physical space of the colonized through instruments of the law as a means to “illustrate the totalitarian nature of

colonial exploitation” (6) and turn the colonized into the epitome of evil. An example of this can be seen with recent rhetoric positioning the Black Lives Matter movement alongside terrorist groups. As citizens come together to draw attention to and stop the deaths of African-Americans at the hands of law enforcement, critics perceive them as spewing anti-law enforcement speech, turning protestors into instigators and a call for accountability into a rally for violence. All of this is done with aggression and violence on the part of the colonizer, who nonetheless asks the colonized to be reasonable. The colonized are taught to remain in their rightful place and not to overstep established boundaries, Fanon explains, generating “muscular dreams, dreams of action, dreams of aggressive vitality” (15) which are used against his own people before they are used against the colonizer. The colonized individual is always presumed guilty and “made to feel inferior, but [is] by no means convinced of his inferiority,” and societal symbols, like the police, “serve not only as inhibitors but also as stimulants” (16) to do the right thing. The colonized are kept in a state of rage that is not allowed to boil over, and “the peasantry is systematically left out of most of the nationalist parties’ propaganda” until “the underprivileged and starving peasant is the exploited who very soon discovers that only violence pays” (23). Additionally, Fanon suggests, the colonizer works to ensure that even dreams of liberty are impossible. It is this institutionalized exclusion and exploitation that gives birth to the notion that the violence that is colonialism only gives in to greater violence. This is demonstrated in Richard Wright’s short story, “Long Black Song.”

In the story, Sarah, the wife of farmer Silas, is raped by a white phonograph salesman while Silas is away. The salesman leaves a phonograph and says he’ll return the next day to get the \$40 – reduced from \$50 because he raped Sarah – for the device. When Silas comes home and shares good news about his financial progress, he discovers the phonograph then the

salesman's hat and pencil in the couple's bedroom. Silas is enraged. Initially he just yells at Sarah, but his next reaction is violent. The next morning, before the sun rises, Silas begins to whip his wife with a horse whip for her infidelity. "Yuh jus as well c mon back n git yo beatin!" (145) he yells at her as she hides outside their home. Sarah sneaks back inside the home to get the baby but goes back to hide on a hillside near their home. As Sarah calms down, she remembers that the white salesman is going to come back for the money for the phonograph. "Dimly she saw in her mind a picture of men killing and being killed. White men killed the black and black men killed the white. White men killed the black men because they could, and the black men killed the white men to keep from being killed" (147). For Silas, Sarah's infidelity is part of a much larger, ongoing insult he has to endure. Silas tells Sarah that "the white folks ain never gimme a chance! They ain never give no black man a chance! There ain nothing in yo whole life yuh kin keep from em! They take yo lan! They take yo freedom! They take yo women! N then they take yo life! (152).

In Joyce Ann Joyce's essay "Richard Wright's 'Long Black Song': A Moral Dilemma," she argued Silas identifies with the material possessions as a means to bring power in a white society. "Silas has just received two hundred and fifty dollars for his cotton, brought ten acres of land, and decided to hire a hand to help with the crops for the coming year" (383) but Sarah's infidelity "forces Silas to accept his oppressed relationship to white society and thus the precarious nature of all his worldly possession, including his life" (384). The durability of the colonizer's sector appeals to the colonized, so the colonized work within an unjust system to acquire material possessions linked to freedom and social superiority. Silas chooses to "be hard like they is! So hep me, Gawd, Ah'm gonna be *hard!*" (152). Moments later, Silas said, "but, Lawd, Ah don wanna be this way! (153), acknowledging that this use of violence is not the way

he wants this to end. When the white man comes back with a friend, Silas shoots one of them and drags his body to the road in front of his house. The remaining man leaves and comes back with several carloads of white men to get revenge on Silas. For those white men, Silas's bravado is their doomsday event. Fanon said that the violence is preceded by the colonized realizing they are as valuable as the colonizers, that "his look can no longer strike fear into me or nail me to the spot and his voice can no longer petrify me," and once the colonizer's presence ceases to bother the colonized, they begin "preparing to waylay him in such a way that soon he will have no other solution but to flee" (10). Silas embodies this belief. When Silas confronted the two white men at his home, they fled in the face of his courage and strength. Silas told Sarah, "ef Ah run erway, Ah ain got nothing. Ef Ah stay n fight, Ah ain got nothing. It don make no difference which way Ah go," (152) so he stayed and fought.

Sarah provides very vivid foreshadowing of the violence on the horizon. She knew that "when killing started it went on, like a red river flowing," and Silas "was following that long river of blood" (153). A gunfight ensued between Silas and the group of white men. Sarah and the baby watch the entire scene unfold from the safety of a nearby hillside. Silas remains in his home throughout the entire bloody encounter. The white men are angered by Silas's unwillingness to meet their justice head on and they decide to "burn the bastard out!" The smoke and flames engulf the home as the white men shoot into the house, hoping to hit Silas. As Fanon said, the colonizer works to maintain his standing. As the white men wait for Silas to emerge from his home, one of them yells, "Yuh think yuhre white now, nigger?" The men were determined to keep Silas beneath them. Silas remains in his home as it burns down around him. Sarah "looked with a tense numbness; she looked, waiting for Silas to scream, or run out," (155) but he doesn't. Readers aren't clear on whether or not Silas dies from the smoke and flames of

the fire, a gun shot from outside the home, or if Silas commits suicide while in the home. Silas said white people took everything from black men. Perhaps Silas took his own life as a way of keeping that from his oppressors or he chose to die in the fire rather than face whatever horrors awaited him at their hands.

The existence of the worlds of the colonized and that of the colonizer is governed by violence. The colonized “are convinced their fate is in the balance” (40) and continuously live in a doomsday atmosphere where nothing can escape them, and there is no room for complacency. It is in and through violence that the colonized man liberates himself, Fanon says, and it is violence that “hoists the people up to the level of the leader”. On the individual level, violence cleanses; “it rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them, and restores their self-confidence” (51), making violence a necessary evil on the road to independence. This idea is demonstrated in the second life of Grange Copeland in Alice Walker’s novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. While living in New York, Grange tried to save a pregnant woman who fell through the ice in Central Park. Grange does not harm the woman. The woman chose to drown in the icy water instead of taking Grange’s hand. In that moment, Grange realized that “to save and preserve life was an instinct, no matter whose life you were trying to save” (201). Grange felt liberated. He “felt in some way repaid for his own unfortunate life” and that “he had stumbled on the necessary act that black men must commit to regain, or to manufacture their manhood, their self-respect. They must kill their oppressors” (202). Grange spent the first quarter of his life as a sharecropper yielding to white farm owners and Southern racism. Grange’s manhood was continually diminished and his sense of self was destroyed. It was a single, inadvertent act of violence that opened Grange’s eye

to the belief that “after freeing your suppressed manhood by killing whatever suppressed it you were then taken with the most passionate desire to live” (202).

Frantz Fanon’s concepts on independence from colonial rule align with the struggle faced by African-Americans who sought to break away from notions of their inferiority and gain ground in the land they helped develop. There were non-violent protests and efforts after the abolition of slavery, but it was incidents of violence that led to more systemic and substantial changes. As Fanon outlines, the colonized have to challenge existing notions of their existence before they can successfully assert themselves in the face of their colonizers and claim what is rightfully theirs. History has witnessed this reclamation of power repeatedly throughout the world as described by Fanon, and violence is always a prominent part of the narrative. Now that we have a working theoretical basis, let’s examine violence and revolution in three works of literature.

World War I and the Red Summer of 1919

One way African-Americans sought to demonstrate their patriotism and commitment to the United States was to serve in the military. According to *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* by Cameron McWhirter, during the Great War, more than 367,000 black men were enlisted in the U.S. military. Of those men, only about 50,000 saw combat; the rest were doing drudgery work and monotonous labor. While W.E.B. DuBois was in France chronicling the military service of the black servicemen, he wrote that black soldiers were segregated to their own units and still subject to racial insults “and accusations of cowardice and licentiousness” (31), despite having been a foundation for the army. From this group rose the 369th New York Regiment, later known as the Harlem Hellfighters. The Harlem

Hellfighters “served more days under continuous fire than any other regiment in the American Expeditionary Force and suffered 40 percent killed and wounded” (31), but they were still routinely disparaged by white soldiers for being lazy and unpatriotic.

The violence of that bloody summer led to Claude McKay’s most famous poem “If We Must Die.” Written in 1919, McKay’s sonnet expresses the shared sense of pride and urgency felt by many black Americans following a series of race riots, and years of discriminatory treatment. The poem brings a political dimension to black expression that had not been seen before. “If we must die –let it not be like hogs/Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,/While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,” (Sherman 70) McKay writes, vividly alluding to the violence black Americans were experiencing. The poem also unofficially marks the emergence and rise of the Harlem Renaissance – a cultural and artistic movement in Harlem’s black community. The Harlem Renaissance is said to have taken place during the 1920s through the mid-1930s. As waves of black Southerners reached Northern shores, artists began to glorify and expand existing African-American traditions. The cultural movement allowed black Americans to create art and literature that authentically expressed the many facets of their reality during a time when they were extremely limited in what they could do. It was the efforts of blacks, like the Harlem Hellfighters, that inspired this creativity and innovation in the arts.

Max Brooks used the story of the Harlem Hellfighters as the basis for his graphic novel of the same title. The Harlem Hellfighters is a fictionalized account of the 369th’s involvement in World War I, bringing to life the day-to-day encounters that characterized the regiments’ involvement in the war. As black soldiers fought a foreign enemy, they were still forced to battle the colonizer and its attempts to maintain control over them. The Harlem Hellfighters takes real-life events and weaves them into a tapestry that displays what it was like to go from being a

regular, African-American man wanting to serve his country to being a soldier who realizes his country still does not love him, despite his putting his life on the line. The story also illustrates dimensions of the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity and how race impacts the identity of the new soldiers. The progression parallels the decolonization that Frantz Fanon describes and reveals another facet of black representation that is rooted in the authentic, black experience. This graphic novel illustrates the role of violence in creating change, and how, sometimes, change has to happen from the inside.

The young men enlist in the Army as a way of proving their worth as American citizens. The men come from all walks of life but their arrival in Harlem to enlist illustrates racial centrality. The MMRI defines racial centrality as the extent to which a person normatively defines him or herself with regard to race. Because of their race, the men were limited as to where they could enlist in the military. Harlem was a haven for many black Americans in the early 1900s and one of the few cities black Americans could exist peacefully.

The black men were allowed to join the Army but soon realized they were far from equal. The black troops trained in their civilian clothes while their white counterparts wore new uniforms. While the white troops trained with new rifles, the black troops trained with broomsticks. The black troops were sent to train in Spartanburg, South Carolina, where residents and law enforcement said there would be trouble if the 369th went there to train. The Mayor of Spartanburg told the *New York Times* he was sorry the men of the 369th had been ordered to his city, “for with their northern ideas about race equality, they will probably expect to be treated like white men” (43). The mayor’s comments demonstrate the racial salience of the soldiers. It is the race of the soldiers that makes their arrival in the Southern town problematic and controversial. Fanon argues that as the colonized deconstruct colonialism they will seek equal

treatment. Here, the mayor anticipates the rising tide. Fanon also argues that the colonizer will remind the colonized of his/her place in society. This is demonstrated with the 369th. In one incident, a black soldier is held by two white men after being punched, berated and spit on. A white soldier tells him, “it ain’t yer fault you don’t know yer place. And like all good Christians, we hate the sin but love the sinner” (49). To add insult to injury, the black soldiers are rescued by a group of white soldiers. One of the soldiers, Edge, explained it best, “I knew they meant well, and I knew I shoulda been grateful. But havin’ to be saved by those white boys made me feel just as low as those other white boys had seen me” (53). Having to be saved by the white troops demoralized the black soldiers and fed an underlying frustration with their treatment. Again, the race of the soldiers is relevant to their self-concept in this situation. Feeding the anger right below the surface is another tactic Fanon discusses. The black soldiers are not allowed to act on their feelings, but are given room to show appreciation to the whites who offer assistance. When the 369th is invited to join the French Army, things temporarily change.

Under the leadership of General Henri Gouraud, the 369th is told that, “while attached to our forces, you will also be treated as equals. Under our fragile skin flows the same red blood. And together we shall spill that blood in defense of our beloved France” (90). In the French trenches, the black soldiers are treated as equals. The men are finally able to be soldiers first and black later. As Fanon predicted, the colonizer has to re-assert control from across a sea. The French Army is ordered by American military officials not to eat or shake hands with the black soldiers, that “negro troops should not be overly praised ... especially in the presence of white Americans, regardless of rank” (162) so as to not “spoil” the black soldiers’ notions of equality. These orders stoke the fire that the colonizer has worked hard to maintain and control. With a look of stern anger on his face while he lays in bed with a white woman, one of the black

soldiers contemplates the orders: “the vices of the negro are a constant menace to the American who has to repress them sternly” (163). As quickly as the men were able to define themselves despite their race, they are reminded that they cannot escape their race and the trappings that come with it.

The victories of the 369th are mocked. The heroes of the 369th are not treated like heroes. For example, when white Southern journalist Irvin S. Cobb writes about Thomas M. Johnson killing a group of German soldiers attacking the base, Johnson believes he is made to look like a gorilla. Johnson was the first American to be awarded the Croix de Guerre, or the Cross of War, for his actions in combat. His heroism does not stop Cobb from depicting him with a knife in hand and bodies at his feet like a ravenous beast. It is through bloody acts like those of Johnson that the shift of power from the colonizer to the colonized begins.

Fanon explains that violence serves as a cleansing force on an individual level. Violence boosts confidence and emboldens the oppressed. This is demonstrated with the soldier known as Wayne. Following a bloody assault with German forces where he kills a young German soldier, Wayne admits he doesn’t want to know anything about the man he has killed. Wayne said the dead man “killed my family. Well, not him, exactly. His people. White people. I knew I would draw their blood some day. But I never thought I would be rewarded for it” (153). In this moment, Wayne and Grange Copeland are in the same boat, floating to self-fulfillment. As Wayne reflects on his symbolic murder, there are a series of images that depict Wayne’s life in panels. The panels illustrate the following: Wayne as a young boy crying and afraid after his village is killed by whites. The young man joins the Army. Wayne is shown killing whites as a member of the military. “White folks paying me to kill other white folks. Glory hallelujah,” (153) he thinks. Wayne’s joy parallels that of Django in the 2012 Quentin Tarantino film

Django Unchained. In the movie Django, a freed slave, violently overthrows a southern plantation owner and frees his captive wife.

This narrative continues as Wayne compares revenge to fire, noting that “it can light the darkest path” but that once that fire has been fed and “when the future you have been living for suddenly becomes your past ... will you surrender to the darkness” (154-5). The images beneath this text are powerful in telling Wayne’s story of loss, anger, revenge, and life after. As he talks about revenge lighting the darkness, a young boy walks away from his burning village. In the next panel, we flash back to the present with Wayne and his comrade sitting having the discussion. The next panel cuts back to a young Wayne, drinking from a bottle with liquid spilling past his lips and onto his face. The same young man is seen hitting another man over the head with the bottle. Thrown into the street, Wayne questions surrendering to the darkness. The imagery combined with the dialogue illustrates the progression of vengeance and the toll it takes on those who pursue it.

In the next panels, Wayne is seen being helped by a man wearing a turban, “another misfit in the white man’s army” (156) carrying a copy of the Quran. This encounter pulls Wayne out of the darkness of revenge and helps him get his life back on track.

In 1919 the Harlem Hellfighters finish their time in France and return to an America that is in worse condition than when they left it. Racial tensions between blacks and whites had intensified, and whites “encountered black men and women transformed by their experiences during the war, whether in European trenches, on the factory floors of northern cities, or in the cotton fields of the South” (14). It was predicted that black soldiers would return home with a broader vision of citizenship and a deeper appreciation of liberty and freedom. According to

Cameron McWhirter, April to November 1919 was the greatest period of racial unrest in American history. During that 8 month period, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People records indicate that there were 25 major riots and mob acts and that at least 52 black people were hung while others were burned to death. In most of these cases, the incidents were incited by white mobs. The celebration that accompanied the return of the Harlem Hellfighters quickly dissipated as “many whites resorted to threats and violence to reassert their old dominance” (14). This racial violence occurred during the convergence of several forces including the rise of Jim Crow, the Great Migration of southern blacks to the industrial north and urbanization, and the economic downturn that resulted when thousands of soldiers sought employment following the war. Amidst all of this, there was a growing fear of radicalism as the existing social order began to crumble. This time period is the setting for Richard Wright’s short stories “Down by the Riverside” and “Bright and Morning Star”.

Rushing flood waters flow as Mann gets his sick and pregnant wife to the hospital in “Down by the Riverside.” In Wright’s short story, readers follow Mann as he uses a boat given to him by a friend to get his wife, Lulu; son, Peewee; and mother-in-law, Grannie, to safety as flood waters rise and threaten to drown them in their home. Unfortunately for Mann, the flood waters are accompanied by suspicion, hatred, and fear. Lulu dies; Peewee and Grannie are taken to higher ground, and Mann is pulled into rescue efforts. It is during Mann’s involvement in rescue efforts and in the events that follow that Richard Wright expresses Frantz Fanon’s ideas on violence and revolution as a necessary aspect of the deconstruction of colonialism.

Fanon explains that the colonized world is divided, with a dividing line of barracks and police stations. This idea is represented in “Down by the Riverside” by the military working to reinforce the governance of the town, including maintaining racial discrimination. In *The*

Wretched of the Earth, Fanon said that the official and legitimate agent of the colonizer and the regime of oppression in the colonies is the police officer and the soldier. Mann is subjected to the orders of the soldiers and officers as these agents of colonization help to “illustrate the totalitarian nature of colonial exploitation” (6). Mann and other black men fill sandbags and rescue trapped citizens while being reminded of their inferiority, by being called “boys” and “niggers.” The protagonist’s name, Mann, is symbolic. His name is spelled with two Ns and his manhood is routinely challenged and redefined throughout the story. Mann’s manhood is eroded with each encounter with soldiers and police, but restored through acts of physical labor.

A pivotal point in the story happens early on, when Mann stops at a house asking for help for his pregnant wife. The house is that of Henry Heartfield. Henry accuses Mann of stealing his boat, then pulls his gun and shoots at the struggling family. Mann pulls his gun, shoots several times, and murders Henry. Mann and his family are carried away by the flood waters, but Mann “felt he was lost because he had shot a white man: he felt there was no use in his rowing any longer” (81) and believes that his “fate is in the balance” (40). Mann’s murder of Henry serves as an undercurrent waiting to make its way to the surface. Fanon predicts Mann’s fate. He outlines that the “colonized subject is always presumed guilty” (16), as Mann was when Henry saw a boat that looked like his. Fanon said that “it is a known fact that under certain emotional circumstances an obstacle actually escalates action” (17), and Mann illustrates this concept. When Henry became an obstacle keeping Mann from getting Lulu to the hospital, Mann does not hesitate to reciprocate the violence Henry directs at him. Mann also illustrates Fanon’s notion that “the underprivileged and starving peasant is the exploited who very soon discovers that only violence pays” (23). For Mann, shooting back at Henry is the only way to move forward.

“The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence” (44), and Mann is momentarily freed from his oppressor when he kills Henry. Mann is given a chance to free himself from the consequences of the murder when he goes back to the Heartfield home as part of a rescue party. With an axe in hand and poised to strike, Mann entertains the notion of freeing himself from his oppressors again. Mann knows that “if he could swing that axe they would never tell on him and the black waters of the flood would cover them forever ... and the whites would never know he had killed a white man” (110) but he chooses obedience to the young white boy’s orders to save his family. Mann was in a situation like Grange Copeland is in Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* when he was faced with the opportunity to save a white life, but knew that saving that life may mean the end of his own. This moment of contemplation also parallels Fanon’s assertion that violence is on everyone’s minds “and the question is not so much responding to violence with more violence but rather how to defuse the crisis” (33). A jolt from debris in the flood waters defuses Mann’s crisis. The end of that white life at black hands would bring with it a liberation and equity that is seemingly impossible. Mann faces consequences for his actions when Henry Heartfield’s son tells the officer at the evacuation camp that Mann stole the family boat and murdered his father. Mann tries to defend himself, but he knows that his fate is sealed when he’s identified and accused. Mann attempts one last act of violence to free himself: he runs to the river. The soldiers shoot him as he makes his final race for freedom on all fours, “crawling to the edge of the slope. Bullets hit his side, his back, his head” before he dies. Soldiers stand over Mann’s dead body saying, “you shouldntve run, nigger” (123). Fanon discusses the role of violence on an individual level, and Mann is another example. Mann chooses violence against himself as a route to freedom from his oppressor. As Mann attempts to restore his self-confidence, the colonizer steps in and reasserts

his role as judge, jury, and executioner. The soldiers take away Mann's last act of freedom that would have restored his self-confidence while still liberating him through violence.

The Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity is also exhibited throughout "Down By the Riverside." Mann and his family's treatment throughout the flood is largely dictated by their race. Racial salience (the extent to which race is a relevant part of a person's self-concept, particularly in a particular event or situation) is demonstrated when Mann reaches the Red Cross field hospital. Mann is directed to take his sick wife to the rear entrance where he is greeted with "what you want" (87) from a white nurse. It is with just as much compassion that the white doctor informs the family that Lulu died, saying "well, boy, shes dead" (87). The racial centrality dimension is seen throughout Mann's entire story. Mann can't help but define himself with a strong regard for race. The social climate Mann endured was one that seemed to force black Americans to define themselves with their race as a central part of their identity. This is best demonstrated after Mann kills Henry. As he's getting help for his family, Mann thinks, "what would they do to a black man who had killed a white man in a flood" (90). It's not a question of one man murdering another in self-defense, but a situation in which race can be substantial evidence of guilt.

In "Only a Man: The Folkloric Subtext of Richard Wright's "Down by the Riverside" George Uba argues that "Mann is too human to survive either physically or psychologically, but too black to be recognized as human" (267). Uba suggests that Mann's increasingly adverse fate is pre-destined. He says that Mann's life "serves as agencies of the god of folklore. It is not enough that black people suffer; they must suffer illogically, disproportionately, preposterously" (263). This extreme suffering is not without meaning. Uba cites Richard Wright's 1937 "Blueprint for Negro Writing" where Wright explains that "the relationship between reality and

the artistic image is not always direct and simple". Wright also says that "the imaginative conception of a historical period will not be a carbon copy of reality" (262). During Wright's life, the suffering of black people was disproportionate. The suffering came to define many of his peers, demanding that they define themselves on the one aspect no one would let them ignore: their race. Uba says Mann's story "investigates the very nature of reality for a black person, what it means to be human-and largely powerless-in a universe whose forces are consistently arrayed against one" (262). This concept of being damned despite one's actions is common in African-American folklore, Uba says, further connecting it to black identity.

"Bright and Morning Star" more clearly aligns with Frantz Fanon's theories on violence and revolution because the characters are organizing local communists to help gain equal rights for citizens, which much more closely parallels the destruction of colonialism. The tactics of the colonizer that Fanon outlines—police as an enforcement arm, presumption of guilt, the creation of underlying violence, and the necessity of violence – are rampant throughout the short story. The graphic nature of the violence mimics that of The Harlem Hellfighters, but accurately depicts the destructive nature of systemic discrimination, and the role violence plays in attaining and maintaining power.

Violence in this story begins when local law enforcement officials visit Sue and ask about her son, Johnny, who is suspected of being involved with the local communist party. The Sheriff and two men burst into Sue's house in the middle of the night looking for Johnny. Again, readers see the officers serving as the border between the colonized and the colonizer, as the enforcement arm of the oppressive regime. The three men are also serving as the watchdogs for the hostile and aggressive environment and work to keep the "colonized in a state of rage, which he prevents from boiling over" (17). The Sheriff calls for Sue to be reasonable, while one of the

other men said, “yuh need somebody t teach yuh how t be a good nigger” (238). When Sue doesn’t deliver the information required, she is physically assaulted by the sheriff. This encounter clearly illustrates the methods Fanon claimed are to be used by those in positions of power to assert and maintain their authority. Sue resists their efforts and treats the men as much like equals as she can. She does not back down when collards are thrown in her face, or when the Sheriff slaps her in attempts to force compliance. As Fanon predicts, Sue acknowledges that her “life is worth as much as the colonist’s, his look can no longer strike fear into me or nail me to the spot and his voice can no longer petrify me. I am no longer uneasy in his presence” (10). Sue’s unwillingness to comply reveals that their tactics are ineffective, and she is “already preparing to waylay him in such a way that soon he will have no other solution but to flee” (10).

The Sheriff and his men are looking for Johnny because he is working to organize a meeting between black and white communists in town. The people realize that racial discrimination is as potent as class discrimination and are willing to come together to fight for justice. In efforts to grow the group, Johnny and other organizers accepted a lot of new members without checking their backgrounds. One of the new white members, Booker, turns out to be a traitor and gives the Sheriff and his men the names of organizers, forcing Sue to use violence to try to save her son. To her own detriment, Sue shoots and kills Booker in front of a white mob that has captured and beaten her son. There is no room to negotiate or use reason with Booker. Sue uses the means at her disposal for the greater good, even if that means she and her son must die. Fanon describes these circumstances in his analysis of violence in relation to colonialism and explains that “colonialism is not a machine capable of thinking, a body endowed with reason. It is naked violence and only gives in when confronted with greater violence” (23). For Sue, violence cleanses her, restores her self-confidence, and momentarily transforms her. She

walks the tightrope that is standing up to an oppressive regime as much as she safely can while protecting her sons, who risk their lives for a greater good. Sue's older son, Sug, set an example that Johnny followed.

The name of this short story, "Bright and Morning Star" is a variation of the line "there's a lily in the valley bright as the morning star" from the African-American spiritual "Lily in the Valley." In the song, the lily in the valley is as bright as the morning star, and in this valley are peace, love, and joy. This is the song that Sue sings to herself. Unlike many of the other characters confronted with routine violence, Sue references and relies on religion to help her cope. Fanon offers an analysis on the role of religion in the lives of the colonized. He describes it as "a white man's Church, a foreigners' Church" that does not "call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of the white man, to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor" (7). Sue acknowledges that her religion is the borrowed property of her oppressor and understands how it translates into daily life. Sue explains how "long hours of scrubbing floors for a few cents a day had taught her who Jesus was, what a great boon it was to cling to Him, to be like Him and suffer without a mumbling word" (224). Readers get a glimpse into how religion is used to teach practitioners that suffering inequality and injustice in silence is next to godliness. Sue draws parallels between the local communist party and Jesus as she thinks "the wrongs and sufferings of black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the Cross; the meager beginnings of the party had become another Resurrection" (225), infusing divine nobility into the work of the party. This rationale makes the silent suffering noble and reinforces continued inaction. While Sue sees her inaction as productive action that makes her more divine, it actually leads to the continued suffering of her peers. Conversely, Sue's later actions aren't enough to bring about change, reinforcing George Uba's examination of black folklore that says African-

Americans are unable to escape damnation. In her last moments, Sue listens to the harsh words of the white men as she gives “up as much of her life as she could before they took it from her” (263). Sue dies attempting to regain control of her own life.

In “Bright and Morning Star”, “Down by the Riverside”, “Long Black Song”, and The Harlem Hellfighters, African-American characters fight for the opportunity to determine their own fate. Violence becomes a weapon in their arsenals for acceptance and maintaining their dignity. While the characters work towards different goals in their stories, collectively all of these stories illustrate the centrality of violence to what it means to be black in America.

Conclusion

In his essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” Richard Wright said that white America was surprised that black people could write, and there was no concern with “the role Negro writing should play in American culture” (97). He added that the role black writing had played in American culture “grew out of accident rather than intent or design.” The scarcity of minorities means they lack the handicaps of “false ambition and property,” Wright said, giving them “access to a wide social vision and a deep social consciousness. They display a greater freedom and initiative in pushing their claims upon civilization than even do the petty bourgeoisie” (98). Wright also believed that “the Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility” (102). This speaks to the creation of literature and characters that are authentic to the black experience, characters that are racially salient in varying situations, and whose racial centrality is apparent. The progression of black literature to include comic books and graphic novels aligns with Wright’s belief that, “Negro life may be approached from a thousand angles, with no limit to technical and stylistic freedom” (104). The integration of capes, tights, superheroes, and villains into black expression is just a sampling of the heights yet to be reached.

Black identity is not a monolith. Our in-depth analysis of March: Book One by Rep. John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, Harlem Hellfighters by Max Brooks, and “Icon: Mothership Connection” and “Icon: A Hero’s Welcome” by Dwayne McDuffie has revealed that the African-American characters do not dwell on their race but are not allowed to ignore it thanks to those they interact with. Though they employ more creative or exaggerated storytelling, graphic novels and comic books can depict authentic identity development and evolution.

Readers can turn to these comic book characters to see how people develop an identity from the unlikeliest of sources. These characters also illustrate how an individual's identity can be routinely challenged while they gain insight into another's identity. Icon, Rocket, Rep. John Lewis, and the Harlem Hellfighters are clear examples of black heroism. Through Icon, readers see a foreigner adopting black American culture and coming to terms with the accompanying injustice. Rocket demonstrates the power of determination for a better life and taking care of one's responsibilities. Rep. John Lewis shows the impact of exposure to the broader world and education on a young life. The Harlem Hellfighters validate those who choose a difficult path as a means of creating change. Characters like these replaced the heroes of the Blaxploitation era. They save the world in their own way and do not sacrifice their blackness to do so.

Black characters in comic books and graphic novels are always timely. Art continues to imitate life. Icon and Rocket standing before armed police officers could easily be Black Lives Matter protestors. Any young black male could take a life-changing trip or read one influential book and be the next John Lewis. These characters are relatable in their realness and in their capacity to serve as role models.

As a child I always looked for the character I could most relate to. Usually that meant either a woman or a minority, rarely a combination of the two. When I began to encounter black female characters who were beautiful, intelligent and able to fight just as well as their male counterparts, it empowered me. Not because I could fly or had super strength, but because they showed me that people like me mattered enough to be depicted as heroes. Additionally, those heroines encountered racism and sexism from villains and some super-powered colleagues. Those fictional women gave me an accessible example of intersectionality. Through those

heroines, I learned a different definition of strength and was able to consider a world beyond the familiar.

Moreover, I was able to escape. Comic books and graphic novels provide spaces where bad guys are obvious, the heroes always win, and the world is a better place. Who doesn't want that? Comic books and graphic novels provide an escape, but also address the realities of minorities. Marvel Comics recently passed on the mantle of Captain America from Steve Rogers to Sam Wilson also known as The Falcon, a black hero who served as a sidekick for Steve. While President Barack Obama faced ongoing criticism in his second term leading the nation, the new Captain America faced similar criticism. Sam Wilson goes into his first battles as the new Captain America being compared to Steve Rogers. Much like the criticism leveled at the president, villains remind Sam of who he isn't and tell him that he doesn't compare to the hero before him. Captain America copes with the criticism, publicly, by reminding himself that he was chosen to carry on the legacy because he is good enough. Like most people, behind closed doors, Sam doubts himself and questions if Steve made the right choice. Friends come to Sam's aid and remind him of his worth, while some allies agree that he isn't worthy. Regular people can relate to the new Captain America's struggle. Sam is a man who is part of a legacy that he fears he is unable to live up to. His confidence ebbs and flows, just like that of a regular person. There is power in seeing a character like Sam Wilson endure the same struggles as regular people. If a hero goes through what I go through, I can be a hero.

There are people of color across the world who enjoy comic books and graphic novels. Their enjoyment has extended into adulthood, and the internet and social media have connected them like never before. For many black people, a love of comic books, graphic novels and superheroes is a part of their identity. Their love doesn't stop on the page but continues at

conventions, in articles, and panel discussions. As comics are continually adapted into movies and merchandise, talks of representation continue. One question that keeps coming up is, “what does it mean to be black in the medium.” The racial regard and centrality of black characters play a large part in their authenticity for readers. Readers don’t want a character who is black for the sake of diversity, but black just because. Like black people in the real world, black comic book and graphic novel characters endure being undermined in the workplace, being thought to be a product of Affirmative Action, or being viewed as exotic novelties. The black characters can speak with a certain nuance or portray a little bit of attitude that resonates with black readers and establishes them as more than white characters dipped in chocolate.

The Future of the Illustrated Medium

Graphic novels and comic books are continuing to gain popularity as more and more people turn to them as a non-traditional way of communicating ideas and concepts. University of Wisconsin - Madison Ph.D. student Veronica Berns turned her chemistry dissertation into a comic book, “Atomic Size Matters,” to present her work on quasicrystals after trying to figure out how to describe her research to family and friends. “The Adventures of Moxie Girl” is the creation of Natalie McGriff and her mother, Angela Nixon, after Natalie told her mother she did not like her natural hair or reading. “Moxie Girl” is about a little girl with natural hair whose godmother sends her shampoo that gives her magic powers which allow her to save the local library from a book-eating monster. Walter Dean Myers’s award-winning novel “Monster” is being adapted into a graphic novel as well. “Monster” follows teenager Steve Harmon, who is awaiting trial for robbery and murder. These varied examples show the range of subjects that can be explored through a graphic medium and the range of people who see the medium as a viable storytelling option.

March: Book One has enjoyed so much success that it is now the required reading for incoming freshmen at Michigan State University and Marquette University. It's also being used in Greenwood, Mississippi, at Leflore County High School to help teach civil rights history. More than 500 copies were donated to the high school by the Mississippi Center for Justice. March was the first graphic novel to receive special recognition from the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice, received the Human Rights Book Award, was the 2015 Reddie Reads selection for Arkansas's Henderson State University's Huie Library, and was the 2014 Durham Reads community read for Durham, N.C., as well as for its sister city, Kostroma, Russia. Esther Keller is a middle school librarian in Brooklyn, New York. Keller started her school's graphic novel collection and strongly advocated the use of comic books in the classroom. In a review of March: Book One, Keller said the graphic novel's artwork adds additional layers to the story, that it "captures the intensity of the time", and that "it's worth the reader's time to pause and really study the artwork to gain a deeper understanding of the time period." In Noel Thorne's review of March: Book One on whatculture.com, he explained that he had studied the Civil Rights Movement in school but what this graphic novel does is "show how they (protests) were created and co-ordinated from the perspective of Lewis, who was there, in a way that I'm sure many people who are familiar with these events on a surface level, weren't aware of." Thorne added that it's one thing to read about sit-ins and protests but another to read about it in the comic book format and actually see depictions of how those protests started and played out historically. Westley Ashley's "Art Inspiring Social Change: A review of March: Book One & conversation with illustrator Nate Powell" discusses how the graphic novel could serve as a bridge to connect young Americans to the events and issues surrounding the Civil Rights Movement. The conversation also shows why so many are seemingly "unable to shake off the

injuries acquired during this dynamic period of social change.” Ashley sees March breaking down barriers because of the popularity of graphic novels in the wake of the success of such works as *The Walking Dead*, *Persepolis* and *Watchmen*. March illustrator Nate Powell said he made a focused effort “not to dial back any of the violence, language, brutality, or sheer gravity of any scenes in this trilogy-I recognize that I’m sort of the gatekeeper of visual content here, and feel it’s important not to police any of that by virtue of being aware these are books filling up schools” (Ashley). Powell said he wanted the work to speak for itself, and that March: Book One is “a powerful, deeply personal narrative, and perhaps enough time has passed that a return to a first-person account never before depicted in this manner does in fact reveal new perspectives on these collectively shared cultural memories” (Ashley).

The Harlem Hellfighters by Max Brooks is moving towards a cinematic depiction. The movie rights for the graphic novel have been sold to Sony, with actor Will Smith’s Overbrook Production, to bring the story of the Harlem Hellfighters to a larger audience. A point of contention for critics of Brooks’s graphic novel is the seamless integration of fact and fiction. In an article that appeared in *The Washington Post* by Michael Cavanaugh, Brooks explained that his graphic novel began as a script in the 1990s. Brooks said the script was met with an overwhelming ‘no’ from Hollywood production companies because it was period piece with a potentially all-black cast. Actor LeVar Burton, Brooks said, told Max Brooks that of all the stories of the 369th regiment his came the closest to accurately telling their story. It wasn’t until after Brooks’ success with his books about zombies that he took the Harlem Hellfighters story off the shelf and converted it to a graphic novel. “The core characters would be fictionalized in a way that I would have more artistic freedom, and not have the risk of insulting the [real men’s] families,” Brooks said in the *Washington Post* article. When the graphic novel was published in

2014 by Broadway Books, Brooks said he braced himself for reactions but has been surprised by the level of interest. “I am stunned and grateful for the positive response. Because this is a white guy writing a black story, I never would have begrudged any African American who said: ‘What gives him the right to do this,’” said Brooks. Harvard University professor and African-American intellectual Henry Louis Gates, Jr. offers praise for The Harlem Hellfighters, noting that it is “perhaps the first graphic novel taking as its theme a major episode of African American history, the heroic performance of black men in combat during World War I” (Brooks). Gates points out how Brooks and White work together to tell a story of “individual valor and sacrifice, and collective triumph, showing how combat abroad in war contributed to the large quest for civil rights at home,” and that this graphic novel serves as a historical first and “a major contribution to our understanding of Black History” (Brooks).

Milestone Media’s role in African-American and minority depiction in comic books cannot be denied. Milestone was different because its books were “produced by black publishers and creators who are sensitive to the way minority characters have been portrayed in the past, they represent not a perpetuation of negative stereotypes but a redressing of many of those detrimental images” (17). This new perspective brought with it a comic universe that took into account various aspects of minority identity that many mainstream titles and characters left behind. As shown throughout this paper, Milestone’s characters did not shy away from the realities that marked the ethnic cultures that were a dimension of their overall identities. Milestone set out to reflect people from a variety of cultural backgrounds while reaching the largest audience possible through an expansive system of distribution. It was this dual purpose that set Milestone apart from other independent, minority owned comic book publishers. Other publishing companies that set out to do what Milestone did were unable to generate widespread

success or put their characters before the largest audience possible. The characters presented by Milestone were not created to be measured against existing paradigms or simply to be minority versions of existing white characters. In “Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics and Their Fans”, Jeffrey A. Brown points out that “there is no reason why some audience members should always be required to project their imaginative identification across boundaries of race, gender, or sexuality” (9), and Milestone Media directly addressed this. It was the impact of Milestone Media and the death of its primary founder, Dwayne McDuffie, that has its remaining founders – Denys Cowan, Derek Dingle, and Reggie Hudlin – working to bring back the company that brought engaging diversity to mainstream comic books. In “Milestone Media Rises Again” by David Betancourt, Hudlin said the company will bring back many of its classic characters as well as introduce some new heroes. Initially, Milestone Media partnered with DC Comics. The revival of Milestone may bring with it new business partnerships including different publishers. While there have been major strides in racial and gender diversity, Cowan said that Milestone is necessary because “of the types of characters that we do, and the viewpoint that we come from.” Dingle said one of the new goals of Milestone Media is to mine new talent. “We’re going to find a new group of creators who are knowledgeable and grew up with digital formats,” Dingle said. The team has not said when Milestone will resume publishing.

Black Girl Nerds is a website designed for women of color to express themselves on all things nerdy. In February 2015, Tali Adina posted an article called “I Won’t Back Down: Representation Matters.” In that article, Adina talks about the 2015 Oscars being called the whitest awards ceremony since 1998. She acknowledges the arguments that people of color should not seek affirmation from the Oscars. She even acknowledges the argument that people of color should create their own awards programs. Adina quickly retorts that “representation

matters.” She explains that people of color and those who identify as LGBTQ or disabled “are sick and tired of seeing stereotypical characters in media. They will not accept minimal representation which places them in the background of books, movies, and TV shows.” Ms. Adina extrapolates that Nichelle Nichols, who played Lt. Uhura on Star Trek, was going to quit the show until the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. convinced her otherwise. Dr. King told Nichols that he was a fan of the show and that “she was portraying an important role model for black children and young women across the country.”

Science fiction is still a genre lagging behind in diversity. Many comic books and graphic novels are filled with science fiction, while the bulk of their characters are every color but brown. It wasn't until *The Hobbit* trilogy that brown people are seen in Middle Earth. Black science fiction fans are counting down to the December release of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* because of the black Stormtrooper played by British actor John Boyega. Hashtags like #28DaysofBlackCosplay and #BlackComicsMonth reveal the depth of the devotion of black people to comic books and science fiction. They also prove that representation is vital.

African-American fiction is accepted as an appropriate vehicle for depicting the realities of what it means to be black in America. Graphic novels and comic books should be accepted as well. All three media allow for imaginative freedom while providing a platform for addressing real life issues and concerns. Graphic novels and comic books employ more creative ways to tell traditional stories. Science fiction movies and literature have been used to tackle larger social issues by using other planets as settings or technological advances as catalysts. Graphic novels and comic books work in much the same fashion. Graphic novels and comic books continue their march to the legitimacy of being valued as another means of expressing ideas and concepts.

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